Crossing the boundary:

New Challenges to Authority and Control as a Consequence of Access to the Internet[1]

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It is a whole new world. When I started my research into new religions in the early 1970s, there was no World Wide Web. When, in 1995, Jean-François Mayer and I edited a special issue of *Social Compass* devoted to changes in new religions, there was not a single mention of the Internet or the Web. The nearest approximation to the subject was a chance remark I made about the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) having a sophisticated electronic network that could connect devotees throughout the world (Barker 1995a: 168). Indeed, it was at the ISKCON communications centre in Sweden that I had first set eyes on the Internet, and, although impressed by the medium's capacity to enable instant contact with fellow devotees throughout the world, it was at least a year later before something of the full import of this new phenomenon really began to dawn on me. But it was not until 1997 that I actually wrote something about the difference that electronic communication was making to the new religions (Barker 1998). Now it seems almost impossible to believe that the Internet is such a recent phenomenon.

But although the omnipresent computer has become taken for granted as part of our everyday life (in at least most of the English-speaking developed world), it is clear that the difference that it has made to the functioning of new religions is far from being fully charted. Some excellent work has been done on the battles that are being fought for the attention of non-members by both the movements and their opponents on their respective websites and the various electronic discussion groups that dispute over the achievements – good and/or bad – for which the movements are responsible (Mayer 2000). Less has been written, however, about ways in which the internal functioning of the movements has been affected by the new medium or how it has challenged some of the features of religions that have been associated with the sociological concept of the sect - a type that overlaps in many respects with that of the new religious movement.

In this paper I am not concerned with the *content* of the Internet, let alone with whether or

not the content is accurate. Nor am I concerned with the virtual communities that have come into being as a result of the existence of cyberspace, let alone with whether community life is enhanced or diminished by virtue of its being virtual (Wellman and Gulia). The communities with which I am concerned were already existing at the time the Internet became so widely available, and the authority structures with which I am concerned were originally instituted in real communities of new religions – they are not those imposed by the owners or controllers of websites, BBSs,[2] MUDs[3] or any other Internet group, community or network (Kollock and Smith 1999). What I am concerned with is how one kind of 'real' new religion, with one type of authority structure, finds its authority structure being affected by the arrival of cyberspace.

New Religious Movements (NRMs)

If we want not merely to describe but also to understand how the Internet can affect NRMs, it is first necessary to understand the movements themselves, some of the challenges that they face, and how they have dealt with these. It is, however, of crucial importance to stress from the start that one cannot generalise about new religions. They differ from each other in every conceivable way – in their beliefs,[4] practices,[5] organisation,[6] life style,[7] attitudes,[8] and their relations with the rest of society (Barker 1995c). They certainly differ widely in the extent to which, if at all, they make use of computers and the Internet. In fact, almost the only thing that they are likely to have in common is that they have been called a 'cult', a 'sect' or an 'NRM'. There are, nonetheless, certain features that one can expect to find in a considerable

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[2] Bulletin Board Systems.

[3] Multi-User Domains or Dungeons.

[4] They may, for example, have Judaeo/Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, Shinto, Pagan, Satanic roots or a mixture of these or various other traditions; they may be atheistic, philosophical, or psychological - or in touch with flying saucers and Beings from outer space.

[5] They may, for example, chant, pray, meditate, celebrate mass or indulge in ritual sacrifice via the Internet.

[6] They may, for example, consist of a small commune run according to democratic principles, or be an international organisation, possibly claiming to be a theocracy.

[7] They may, for example, spend their lives witnessing as missionaries, or work as bankers in the city; they may be vegetarians and/or indulge in unusual sexual practices; they may offer courses to develop the god within, and/or they may run a hostel caring for AIDS sufferers – or they may eke out a living off the land, and refuse to pay taxes.

[8] They may, for example, consider women an inferior species without a soul, or revere them as souls who are far more spiritual than men; they may believe children should be allowed to roam free, or that they should be chastised for any minor misdemeanour; they may be right-wing conservatives, or left-wing socialists – or they may eschew anything to do with the rest of the world, let alone politics.

number of the movements *just because they are new*[9] - and it is because of these that the introduction of the Internet has had some consequences that do not apply, at least in so stark a manner, to older, more established religions.

What, then, are these characteristics that might affect a new religion's vulnerability to processes associated with the Internet?[10] First, and almost by definition, the movement's membership will consist of a large proportion of converts. Next, we can expect new religions to change more rapidly than older religions. And then, being new, the movement is likely to be offering its members something novel - an alternative to mainstream society. This can lead to two consequences of relevance to our present concern. Firstly, non-members who do not share its beliefs and/or practices are likely to object and try to convince converts (especially if these are relatives or friends) that their joining the movement was not a good idea. Secondly, although converts are typically enthusiastic about their new religion, their new perspective on life is likely to be more fragile than that of people who have been brought up with a way of looking at things that is shared by most of those with whom they come into daily contact. This means that founders of new religions are likely to feel the need (a) to protect their followers from outside influences and (b) to ensure that, within their movement, the new way of seeing things is being constantly reinforced and, if need be, enforced.

Dichotomisation, demonisation, isolation, formalisation and reporting
It has been suggested that the precariousness of an NRM means that individual members need to be protected from disruptive influences. The information to which they are exposed needs to be carefully regulated, and thus communications that they have with or from sources

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[9] Several movements will say that they are not new because they can trace their theological roots back through hundreds or even thousands of years. ISKCON, for example, traces its roots back to the 16th century monk Lord Chaitanya. From a sociological perspective, however, it is a new organisation that came into being when, in the 1960s, its founder, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada travelled to the United States, attracted some Western hippies to a life of devotion to Krishna, and incorporated his new Society.

[10] It should be stressed that, although the conditions and processes that are being described in this paper are drawn from reality, they are, none the less, to some degree caricatures or ideal typical in the Weberian sense. The features of ideal types rarely, if ever, exist in their 'ideal' form, but can be observed as being more or less present in any particular situation. The types serve as a model that is not more or less true, but more or less useful for recognising some of the structures and processes that are to be found, to a greater or lesser degree, in certain kinds of organisations. Here, the exercise is to assist in the recognition of a number of ways in which some NRMs have sometimes operated in order to promote control over their membership by means of boundary preservation and vertical authority structures.

other than the leadership need to be carefully regulated. This regulation is facilitated if The Truth that the movement proclaims is unambiguous and uncomplicated, with a clear delineation between dichotomies such as good and bad, right and wrong, and true and false. As such a polarized worldview could be endangered by qualifications or questioning, any middle-way option or ambiguity is likely to be demonised as part of the bad, the false and/or the satanic alternative.

Coping with the outside

Throughout history new religions have typically expected a high level of commitment from converts to their movement, and this has frequently involved not only a renunciation of their previous life but also a denunciation of those associated with it.[11] It is certainly not only new religions that will try to restrict the influence that the rest of the world might have on their members,[12] but the tensions that arise from the need to preserve their 'otherness' mean that new religions are likely to introduce censorship to a relatively high degree. This may involve the banning of television, books and various other sources of alternative (to the alternative) worldviews, and, perhaps most importantly, controlling contact with non-believers.

One way of dealing with dangers from without is to intensify their apparent threat by drawing on the dichotomous worldview to create a strong distinction between 'us' (the membership) and 'them' (the rest of the world). This may involve a geographical boundary, the movement living in a closed community having little or no contact with other ways of seeing the world – as was the case when the Peoples Temple moved to Jonestown, Guyana (Hall 1987). More frequently it is a social boundary that defines 'us' as homogeneously godly and good, and 'them' as homogeneously satanic and evil. The movement is seen as a person's principal source of identity – that is, a person is seen, first and foremost, as a member (or not a member) of the group; and if he or she *is* a member, it is the group, rather than the individual,

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[11] Jesus is reported as having said 'If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple' Luke 14:26. See also Matthew 10:35-6.

[12] To take but a few examples, the Vatican issues a list of books that Catholics are enjoined not to read; mainstream Protestants in the United States protect their children from drugs and Darwinism by educating them in Home Schools; Muslim women are frequently expected to refrain from contact with members of the opposite sex who are not close family members.

that is of prime importance.[13]

While *non*-members (including relatives and erstwhile friends) may be portrayed as satanic, the boundary between them and members can be strengthened even further by defining *ex*-members as particularly evil. They are reviled and, frequently, shunned. Stories are circulated about the terrible misfortunes that have befallen those who have renounced The Truth – they have, one hears, contracted cancer, been in an horrendous road accident or, perhaps, committed suicide. They belong unambiguously to the other side of the boundary and any communication with them will be defined as polluting and treacherous. Not that the ex-members themselves are likely to want to make contact with their erstwhile movement when it is clear that 'you are either with us or against us'. Not infrequently they had slipped away in the dead of night or 'escaped' without telling anyone in advance, anxious to avoid the pressure to which they knew they would have been subjected had they voiced the doubts that had led them to depart. The divide can be even more insuperable if the former member has been 'deprogrammed' or counselled by persons who select only negative characteristics of the movements, having themselves a dichotomous world-view so far as new religions or 'cults' are concerned (Barker 2002).

However, complete isolation from potentially disruptive influences is usually impossible without resorting to physical restraint – something that happens only in rare instances.[14] Several movements allow their members to visit friends and family, but have a rule that members should not venture 'outside' without at least one other member accompanying them.[15] Furthermore, new religions are likely to need some sort of communication with the outside world for economic and other reasons, not least of which is a commonly felt

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[13] This may be the case, at least so far as the inner core of the membership is concerned, even in those NRMs that claim to promote the development of the individual – as with the Church of Scientology's Sea Org (Wallis 1976) and the group that was formed around Ma Anand Sheela at Rajneeshpuram (Milne 1986).

[14] There have been reports of members (or their rebellious children) being placed in solitary confinement for varying periods of time – but this has usually been to protect other members from their influence rather than to protect the miscreants, and corrective procedures have been more likely to be of an 'educational' than a physical nature. For an example of extreme methods of controlling members in an isolated community, see Robert Balch's (1985) description of life during one stage of the movement that was later to hit the headlines as 'the suicide cult', Heavens Gate.

[15] This was particularly the case when the practice of deprogramming was prevalent, but it is also justified in movements such as the Cooneyites and The Family with reference to Jesus' sending out his disciples in pairs (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1).

requirement to attract new members.[16] And then, in order to ensure that potential converts have the opportunity to hear the message that the movement has to offer, it may be felt necessary to impose on them a degree of social isolation; they may be urged to visit the movement on its home ground, where they will be 'protected'. The visitors may find themselves constantly surrounded by members, and, should they initiate a discussion with another non-committed visitor (or, if they have just joined, with a fellow noviciate), a senior member will be present to monitor and, if deemed necessary, redirect the conversation. They may even find that a friendly member accompanies them to the bathroom.[17]

Coping with the inside

In many ways it is more difficult to control the day-to-day interactions between members than it is to control outsiders' access to insiders. During its early stages a new movement is likely to have a relatively small membership and primary, face-to-face interaction between the members and the founder/leader is possible. If, however, the movement is successful in attracting more members, communication and authority will have to be mediated through indirect channels. As part of their ideology, sects have frequently claimed that the community has a democratic character with the members being 'a priesthood of all believers' – and, with everyone equal in the sight of God, any organisational structure is neither necessary nor desirable (Wilson 1970: 34). In practice, however, there frequently emerges a patterned structure of relationships which consists of a charismatic leader at the apex transmitting information and commands to trusted lieutenants who, in turn, pass the information down a hierarchical chain of command to grass-roots level. The structure allows for little in the way of horizontal exchange of ideas or information, and any upward communication is likely to take the form of either reporting back or requests to the spiritually superior for elucidation of correct practice and/or The Truth.

Not only are founders of new religions seen as the fount of the new wisdom, their followers frequently accord them a special kind of authority because of what is perceived as their unique, divinely conferred gift of grace (charisma). This results in the leaders being bound by neither rules nor tradition, with their authority extending over all aspects of their followers'

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[16] There is no space to explore the topic here, but a whole book could be written about the difference that the Internet has made to the recruiting practices of new religions (Dawson and Hennerby 1999).

[17] This used to happen during the residential workshops that the Unification Church ran in California in the 1970s.

lives – from, for example, pronouncements about what kind of clothes the followers should wear, and what kind of food they should eat or not eat, to where they should live and whom they should marry. It follows that charismatic leaders are unpredictable and are not accountable to anyone – except, perhaps, to God. While all kinds of authority figures can frequently persuade others to perform actions that they would not otherwise perform,[18] God's seal of approval being stamped on the charismatic leader adds an extra dimension to the authority s/he wields. One does not question such authority.[19]

The hierarchical authority structure helps to formalise relationships between those above and those below. Members are expected to obey those above them, and are unlikely to demean themselves by confiding in those below, whom they are expected to monitor on a constant basis. Obedience to the leadership is supposed to be unquestioning to the extent that there is (as in the military) an ethic that loyalty is expected even if the immediate leader (officer) is wrong. If, the argument goes, everyone were to do whatever they as individuals felt was right then nothing but chaos would result. Much better to let God (or someone in a position of top command) correct the person making the mistake and keep the strength of the group intact.

Divide and rule

One of the more hazardous challenges for the leadership comes from the potential development of strong social bonds between members of the same horizontal level in the hierarchy. A familiar method of preventing the formation of dissident small groups is to 'divide and rule'. This may involve regular transfers between centres or even countries, thereby breaking up groups that seem to be exhibiting a degree of independence that threatens to disrupt the smooth implementation of the leader's wishes.

Couples may be prevented from developing too close a relationship at the expense of loyalty to the leadership or the group as a whole. One way is to ensure that unmarried members of the opposite sex cannot be in each other's company without the presence of a chaperone,

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[18] As Stanley Milgram (1974) and others have illustrated, there are some people who are particularly prone to obey those in positions of authority, whatever the consequences might be – even, on occasion, when they are told to do something that involves threatening an innocent person's life.

[19] It is, however, important to recognise that authority (that is, power which is accepted as legitimate) relies on a two-way relationship. Unless followers perceive and acknowledge their charisma, such leaders can achieve nothing (Barker 1993).

another is to send one partner in a marriage away on a mission.[20] In some groups there is a strict enforcement of celibacy.[21] Another ploy is the constant exchange of partners, whether this be wife swapping or regular mass orgies.[22] Sometimes a leader has instituted divorce and remarriage to a more reliable partner;[23] sometimes the leader has chosen partners who do not even speak the same language and/or who have little, apart from their devotion to the leader, in common;[24] sometimes marriage partners have been encouraged to fantasise about their relationship as being really with the leader or even with Jesus, thus minimizing the dyadic focus of a relationship by transforming it into a vehicle which reinforces the leader's authority.

A variation on the practice of separation between sexual partners is the promotion of a worldview in which women are not expected to have opinions about ideological or political matters, let alone voice any thoughts they may have on the way in which the movement operates. Or, to take a slightly different approach, children may be taken away from their parents either altogether or for much of their socialisation, thereby reducing the likelihood of the growth of strong family ties or of the transmission of alternative worldviews to the next generation but, rather, fostering the growth of strong community loyalty.[25]

Even when a friendship is struck up between members, the friends may have to be very careful about what they confide to each other. It is not only those who are in positions of authority who contribute to the control of the movement through reporting disruptive elements to the leadership. It may be part of the ethos that each member is expected to ensure that their peers are not undermining the integrity of the movement by straying from the official beliefs or not behaving according to the expected norms – and this, it is maintained, is for the sake of the miscreant as much as for the group itself. Occasionally, as in

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[20] Both these methods were employed by the Unification Church in the 1970s.

[21] This applies to the Brahma Kumaris, and in ISKCON sex is not meant to take place except for the procreation of children within a marriage, so couples who do not want children are expected not to consummate their marriage.

[22] Synanon provided an example of the former, the Rajneeshees (later Osho lovers) of the latter.

[23] A practice that is reported to have occurred in Sahaja Yoga.

[24] Again the Unification Church provided an example with the 'Matching Ceremonies' arranged by Sun Myung Moon in preparation for the Blessings or mass weddings – a practice that has been replaced by more familiar forms of arranged marriages involving the parents of prospective couples.

[25] See Palmer (1994) for some of the ways women are treated in NRMs and Palmer and Hardman (1999) for some of the ways children are raised in the movements.

Rajneeshpuram, electronic surveillance has been introduced to enable the policing of even casual comments passed between members (Milne 1986).

None of this is to suggest that individual members do not question the authority of their movements – they clearly do, which is one reason why there are so many ways in which the leaders try to control any questioning. But there can be little doubt that one of the most effective ways in which the movements operate control is through peer pressure. Experiments by Solomon Asch (1959) have shown how people can come to doubt the experience of their own senses when everyone else in a particular situation appears to 'see' something different from them. How much more can this be the case when it is not the relative length of a straight line (as in an Asch experiment) but the correctness of a theological tenet which is at issue? However, as Asch also shows, it only needs one other person to 'see' what the subject sees for the latter to be given the courage to admit to seeing the same as that other one person – which explains why the formation of partners and friendships can be seen to pose such a threat to group solidarity.[26]

When members of a movement find themselves in a situation in which they have doubts about the truth of a belief or the correctness of an action, and it appears that these doubts are not shared by any other members, there are various possible outcomes. As we have seen, one is that the doubter reaches the conclusion that he or she is wrong and the group right. Another is to suppress the feeling or to put it in a 'pending tray' to be taken out and examined at some future (probably unspecified) time. Yet another response is to move to the margins of the movement where, while remaining protected from the demonised Babylon that lies beyond the boundary, the doubter can escape the intensity of total involvement – it is, after all, possible that he or she still accepts other aspects of the movement's beliefs or practices, and/or perhaps the doubter has developed a dependence on the movement through fear or gratitude or a complicated combination of emotions, experiences and friendships.

It is also possible that the doubter will, sooner or later, decide to make a complete break with the movement and return to the outside world, perhaps without discussing his or her doubts with any of the other members. However, so long as individual doubters decide to stay in a new religion with a dichotomous worldview and a strong authority structure, they are likely

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[26] Wright (1986:149), in a small-scale study of the Unification Church, ISKCON and the Children of God suggests the dyad may evoke a stronger commitment than the group.

to remain silent or continue to pay lip service to what is communicated from the top of the hierarchy, and thus to reinforce the peer pressure on others (who may be harbouring similar concerns) to appear to accept The Truth and to go along with the movement's practices.

None the less, there have been doubters who have been courageous enough to test the waters by voicing their opinion – perhaps setting up a small resistance movement, which might even publish its own underground periodical. Such moves have, however, tended to result in repression in one form or another – and possibly the expulsion (and demonisation) of the ringleaders and others who refuse to return to the fold. Occasionally this has led to schisms when dissidents have left *en masse* to form their own new group.

It should, however, be stressed once more that control of information is never complete and all manner of new challenges are likely to surface,[27] making it necessary for the leadership continually to reassess the situation and, when necessary, introduce new measures to reinforce its authority – or, eventually, to decide to accommodate to the changing membership and/or outside society.[28]

The new challenge of the Internet
As already intimated, the arrival of the Internet has introduced a multitude of changes in the life of most religions in the West and elsewhere around the world. It might be thought that the advantages for new religions that want to disseminate their alternative worldviews would be considerable, and indeed, there certainly are advantages. But these same advantages extend not only to their competitors, but also to their opponents – and while the movements can present outsiders with the information that they wish others to know about them, the rest of the world can introduce not only non-members but also the movement's members to alternative sources of information about the movement and its leadership.[29]

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[27] One such challenge has been the arrival of social scientists researching the movements (Barker 1995b).

[28] This is especially likely to occur with the arrival of second and subsequent generations being born into the movement (Barker 1995a).

[29] No attempt is being made in this paper to distinguish between the accuracy or inaccuracy of the content of any knowledge/information available to members. The relevant distinction for the present purpose is between knowledge/information that the leadership wants and that which it does not want the membership to receive. The distinction between knowledge and information is one of degree, information being more particular while knowledge extends to a general perspective or understanding of social reality.

The rest of this paper is concerned with the challenges posed to those features of new religions (as I have outlined them in ideal typical form) in so far as the Internet enables members to obtain alternative information, both from the outside world and from unofficial sources within the movements themselves.

Assuming that members have access to a computer connected to the Internet, there are several ways in which they can access new knowledge. It may be by looking at the range of non-interactive information presented on websites, including the 'anti-cult' and 'counter-cult' sites that attack the practices and beliefs of NRMs.[30] It may be by participating in or lurking[31] on a message board or in a chat room where a discussion is being conducted about the NRM. It may be by subscribing to an email list or simply through one-to-one communication by email.

Undermining the plausibility structure

First, and most obviously, the Internet offers a new *content* to the available knowledge, or (to use the language of Berger and Luckmann (1967)), new additions to 'everything that passes for knowledge' in the social reality that confronts the individual – including not only new information that claims to be of a factual nature, but also opinions, values and, perhaps most importantly of all, questions. This new information can alter the general perspective of the members in much the same way that turning a kaleidoscope can introduce a new patterning that alters the entire gestalt of the picture one perceives. By doing so, the 'plausibility structure' or social base required for maintaining the 'esoteric enclave' or 'sub-universe' that the movement offers its members is undermined (ibid: 104-5; Berger 1967: 45).

Next, the new *medium* by which the information is communicated can introduce a radical

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[30] Of course, religions vary in the number of sites (if any) that they maintain, and the degrees of sophistication of these sites, which differ in such details as how user-friendly they are and in their use of menus, graphics, their incorporation of sound, video, different languages, personal websites and so on. They also vary in the degree to which they cater for members and/or for non-members, the openness of their sites and extent and method of control of access by non-members. Some offer interactive learning; some offer on-line services, including ritual participation. Some can be picked up through numerous key words on numerous search engines; others are hard to find if one does not know what one is looking for. Some of the religions' opponents may be successful in getting their own sites higher on a search engine's lists than the religion itself. Some feature in scholarly sites, others do not. Some respond to negative claims that are made about them on other web sites; others treat their opponents with a lofty disdain.

[31] That is, observing without making one's presence known.

restructuring of the internal functioning of the movement.[32] On the one hand, the medium can permeate and thus weaken the boundary between the movement and the outside world, thereby blurring the distinction between 'them' and 'us'. On the other hand, information that is communicated directly within a horizontal network of members, rather than being channelled down the vertical hierarchy, poses a radical challenge to the restrictive control imposed by the leadership.

Most of the controversial NRMs that have been attacked in the media have provided responses for their members to many of the accusations that have been made against them. It is unlikely, however, that all the members will have been prepared for all the skeletons that the movement will have locked up in its cupboards but which their opponents provocatively dangle on a hostile website. Such information need not by itself result in an individual member doing anything that would undermine the movement as a whole. S/he may react, on the one hand, by assuming the information was false, or, on the other hand, by deciding to leave the movement. But once the information is *spread* (and is known to have spread) among several members, the situation can change quite dramatically. For this reason, it is the interactive aspects of the Internet that can pose the greatest threat to a movement's status quo.

In other words, a shift in the position of individuals is of interest to the undermining of a social plausibility structure only to the extent that it involves and/or leads to shifts in relationships. It is then that one can observe the movement, rather than particular individuals, undergoing a radical change.[33]

Horizontal interaction

Access to email is not always easy, but it provides a safer means of communication between separated friends than letters, which can be intercepted, or telephone calls when someone else might be at the other end and, perhaps, monitoring what is being said – quite apart from their being an expensive method of contacting people in another country. The individual member may obtain, say, a Hotmail address employing a pseudonym and either visit an Internet Café

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[32] There are ways in which this discussion might be approached along the lines of Marshall McLuhan's (1964) aphorism that the medium *is* the message, but I not wish to go so far as to suggest that what is communicated is of less importance and of less power that the media themselves.

[33] Of course, a movement exists only in so far as it consists of individuals, but a social group has properties that are not reducible to the properties of the constituent individuals, and it is such features of the social group in which the sociologist is interested.

or use a private computer when no one is watching, carefully deleting the evidence. In this way, private contacts can be maintained with geographical distance no longer the barrier it was to confidential exchanges.

What has then frequently happened is that snippets of information and/or opinions have been forwarded to other trusted friends and, eventually, a network has been built up in which gossip is exchanged, ideas thought through, and opinions tested. Then, once a critical number of members are communicating with each other in this way, a more formal email list or discussion group on which the exchanges can continue might be created.

There are numerous variations of the scenario in which horizontal networks form and develop at the margins of the movement. One such variation involves communication between young people who have grown up together in the movement.[34] They will have learned who are the likely 'moles' and who can be trusted to keep the secrets of their own 'peer-group sub-sub universe'. Thus, in some ways, the second generation may have developed a protective barrier against the stringent controls to which their parents will have been subjected[35] – they, unlike the converts, will have a ready-made *group* constituency, rather than being a *category* of isolates with, merely, the potential for group formation.

Permeating the boundary

Some chat rooms and message boards are carefully monitored; in others, there appear to be no restrictions on what anyone can say – and anyone can say it. Some are restricted to current members, and these may include or exclude those in the hierarchy and/or from different cohorts. Others are open to (perhaps founded by) former members. Yet others embrace complete outsiders.[36] Sometimes access is possible only with a secret password; in other situations anyone who manages to discover the electronic address can join in.

In these electronic networks there is no preordained status distinguishing participants and deciding who can say what. Pseudonyms can be used and new personalities assumed – neither sex nor age need be revealed. Even the boundary between 'them' and 'us' may be

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[34] Children, unlike converts, cannot be expelled if they question beliefs or practices.

[35] There are, of course, various other ways in which one might see second-generation members as being more easily 'socialised' into the movement's worldview. That, however, is not the subject of this paper.

[36] It is by no means rare nowadays for social scientists to lurk in front of their computer screens as part of (or even all of) their 'field work'.

ignored. It is here that, rather than merely receiving The Truth in the form of wisdom and instructions, there is a genuine possibility for there to be a community of equals. Tentative innuendos can be picked up and elaborated, gossip can flow around the world in no time at all to be denied or confirmed – or both, but the criterion for assessing its truth is no longer an official pronouncement from above – it can be an assertion from the member who was there, or the confession of the former member who was involved in the plot, provided a false alibi, or was asked to fudge the accounts.

While the occasional underground newspaper in the past has criticised second-level leadership,[37] it was unlikely to question the charismatic leader. On electronic discussion groups, however, exposés, and even the ridiculing of leaders is not uncommon.[38] Scandal once it is on the net is difficult to contain - whether it concerns the sexual proclivities of Sai Baba or Roman Catholic priests, the accusation can spread like wildfire - no longer a hushed whisper but a literal broadcast.

Discussion can swerve in almost any direction. Anxieties may be taken out of the 'pending tray' – possibly by someone else bringing up the repressed topic, but also by the individual who has longed to ask but never dared, fearing possible punishment for being so stupid, doubting or disloyal. No longer need doubting individuals feel that they are the only ones with questions to ask; no longer need they feel afraid to risk exploring misgivings or disaffection. The woman who has felt guilt at her resentment that men are given the credit for the work she does finds other women who have been harbouring similar feelings. The teenager who was sexually assaulted and never dared admit it, finds that others have undergone similar ordeals.

Of course, not all members will be affected in the same way. Those who had already some concerns are likely to have these confirmed by what they find on the Internet. Others, who do not accept the gossip at the time, may, none the less, have the seeds of doubt planted in their minds and become more open to questioning and alternative views in the future. While some

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[37] For example, one such periodical, *The Round Table,* circulated within the Unification Church for a short time, but although the actions of second-level leaders were questioned, I never read any criticism of Moon himself.

[38] Stories about the Moon family and the sexual exploits of Moon himself have been discussed at length by Unificationists on both closed and open discussion groups – and there have been graphic descriptions of the sexual practices of the late David Berg by former members of The Family.

will air their doubts, without identifying themselves,[39] others 'come out of the closet' and openly contribute to the new 'universe of discourse'. The very variety of positions one can find will, in and of itself, undermine the homogeneity of the group that the leadership has been so anxious to preserve.

Former members

While it is true that some of those who have left an NRM have been deprogrammed, sought refuge in and/or contributed to the so-called anti-cult movement, many, indeed the vast majority of former members, have not done so. Some, especially those who had not been in the movement for long have just slipped back into 'normal society', but others have had more difficulty in adjusting to life on the outside and may miss much of the idealism or friendship that they encountered in the movement.

The communication between the two 'sides' that has been facilitated by the Internet is far more subtle and effective in eroding the 'them/us' boundary than the heated exchanges that take place between members and their opponents, when each side is reinforcing a dichotomous world view. Old friends can continue their friendships and recognise that each may have a point of view to express, and, even if there is not total agreement, there can be agreement on some matters and agreement to disagree on others. The electronic discussions enable members to communicate with people who are familiar with the beliefs and practices of the movement, and who have shared, and perhaps still share, the same ideals, hopes, values and fears that they themselves hold. The former members have, however, concluded for reasons that they are eager to share with the members, that the NRM has not got all the answers and may even be counterproductive in bringing God's Kingdom on earth – or whatever the stated goal of the movement might be. The fact they have not experienced some terrible punishment provides just one more piece of evidence that the picture built up by the leadership may not be entirely reliable. Indeed, the former members may seem not all that different from the members themselves – they are merely people with similar interests on the other side of the divide.

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[39] I have spoken to several members who have confessed that they had 'lurked' for a long time without revealing their presence on critical discussion groups, but continued to feel isolated from other members or their 'real' (as opposed to virtual) community – one such informant told me 'the computer was my only friend'.

One of the reasons that members have not left the more closed new religions is that they have feared that, having broken ties with the outside society, they have literally nowhere they can turn. Such fears can be experienced even more deeply if members have been born into the movement and know no one on the outside. If, however, it is possible to have contact with former members over a wide geographical area, then leaving the movement appears less of a jump into an unknown satanic wilderness, and the perceived difficulties of life outside the movement can appear less daunting. Former members may offer practical advice about how to succeed in the 'outside' society. Such advice might include suggestions about where to live (perhaps an offer to doss down on an erstwhile fellow-member's sofa for a short period); on how to get social security or work; on how to procure further education; or on how to take out a bank account.

On the other hand, members may no longer feel the need to leave as they may feel far more comfortable at the margins of the movement, knowing that there are other members asking similar questions and experiencing similar doubts. And, moreover, that they have a means of communicating with like-minded friends on *both* sides of the watered down boundary between the movement and the rest of the world.

Controlling the Internet

As one might expect, leaders who want to preserve the culture and structure of their NRM are not going be unaware of the problems that the Internet can add to their maintaining the invincibility of the movement's beliefs and practices, and various tactics have been employed in attempts to curtail the disruptive influences of the Web.

Just as some movements have placed an outright ban on radio and television, so has the use of computers been banned, sometimes being defined as 'of the devil'. As ever, however, attempts at censorship have on occasion increased the attractions of the forbidden for the curious. Other attempts to control potential damage are made by limiting the length of time that members can spend on a computer, or restricting what they can look at – either by fiat or by introducing special software that acts as a 'net nanny' and monitors and/or filters or denies access to particular sites or discussion groups.[40] Another method, especially when children

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[40] This can be more successful in some situations than in others - all the Japanese participants dropped out of one group's restricted discussion group overnight, but members from the same movement in other countries continued to communicate on the list.

are involved, is to allow use of the computer only when someone else in authority is present and can observe what is being accessed.

Then, of course, control can lead to counter control, and if the pressure becomes too great on a discussion group web-masters can introduce new passwords that are distributed only to trusted participants so that lurking leaders or tittle-tattlers are excluded from further discussion.

Other consequences

It would, however, be wrong to give the impression that the effects of the Internet are all in one direction. There is, indeed, a mirror-image version of the situation I have been presenting in this essay, for the Internet can be used to reinforce or even as the principal component in achieving an 'old-style' top-bottom control by the leadership. The fact that information can be transmitted instantly around the globe facilitates the reporting of intelligence to, and the receipt of directives from, leaders, who can thereby assemble an overview of the situation and not have to rely on lower-level locals making decisions based on partial information (of the situation) or understanding (of the movement's beliefs and goals). Although the advantages of a local understanding may well be lost in the process, the directness of the Internet bypasses the potential dangers of intermediaries adjusting the message through a form of 'Chinese whispers'.

Use of the Internet to exert control in a manner that might otherwise have been impossible can be illustrated by the 'cult career' of one young man who became involved with what has been termed an abusive, high-control religious group. James (not his real name) was a committed Christian who was studying linguistics at an Ivy League university, having decided to devote his life to translating the Bible to enable the Scriptures to be available to 'unreached people groups'. Then his brother introduced him to Tariq, a Pakistani evangelist who was recruiting students at Wheaton, a Bible-based college. James continued with his studies, but for the next two months he would join Tariq and others on the Internet on an instant messaging programme in a prayer service from 5.30 to 9.30 every morning and whenever he was not eating, at classes, or engaged in some other activity permitted by his new spiritual teacher.

On graduating, James went to live with the group, and soon he, his brother and a couple

of other members were sent to Pakistan on a two-month prayer journey.[41] Each morning they would email Tariq to tell him what they had been doing the previous day and to receive further instructions. The general exchanges were conducted with all four members gathered round the computer, but then Tariq would ask one of them to leave, or would address them on a one-to-one basis, finding out what the others had been doing and giving instructions for extracting forced confessions and administering punishments – which would include severe beatings as well as periods of fasting and/or isolation in the bathroom.

The remarkable thing was that the four never communicated to each other on a horizontal level - beyond discussing mundane matters - and some of them would even go beyond the dictates of their leader by, for example, suggesting that they did not need to stop their prayer vigil for lunch because God/Tariq would not want them to. None of the others would risk showing their lack of commitment by mentioning that they were hungry or did not feel that it was necessary. Even when not logged on, it would seem that the electronic medium created and preserved the image of the Big Brother omniscience and omnipotence of Tariq despite the fact that, physically speaking, he was literally half way round the world.

Of course, the effects of the Internet for NRMs are not confined to strengthening or weakening authority and communication structures. As already mentioned, the Web can provide a useful means of advertising the movements' wares. Internally, it has been used selectively to enhance home schooling, and to enable purchases to be made without going to (worldly) shops. One function that is of growing importance is the Internet's use as a medium for dating. Children brought up together in a communal situation tend to see each other as siblings. The Web provides a means of contacting a potential spouse elsewhere within the movement, thus lowering the risk that young people will leave altogether in order to find a partner. The Family is particularly interesting in the uses it has made of the Internet. Apart from the fact that their children all learn to use it at an early age for educational purposes, several of them have developed professional abilities in skills such as creating and maintaining websites. The movement also provides one of the most comprehensive electronic

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[41] The belief being that by praying for eight or so hours a day, the spiritual atmosphere of the surrounding area would be enhanced.

religious news services.[42]

Furthermore, it should be stressed that, while the Internet may help to separate sheep from goats,[43] if the movement has reached a certain level of development the Internet can provide a push in the direction of denominationalisation.[44] Not all horizontal communication is necessarily disruptive, it can be perceived as integrative and leading to an enrichment rather than a fragmentation of a movement's culture (Horsfall 1999: 177). The Internet can enable the leadership to have access to a more honest appraisal of developments in which the movement is likely to flounder and those in which it might have the opportunity to flourish. Some of the leadership have started issuing responses to critical attacks on the Internet not merely through denial and/or suppression, but also by acknowledging mistakes and incorporating new approaches to the movement's beliefs and practices.[45] New structures have been introduced, allowing a greater degree of autonomy at the local level, and diversity of approaches have been celebrated rather than repressed – up to a point. There is always the danger of an excessively 'anything goes' *laissez faire* resulting in the original *raison d'être* being lost, which can result in schisms or an exodus from the liberalising movement.

Concluding remarks

This paper has attempted to indicate some of the ways in which new religions tend to face certain challenges that are not so pressing in older religions, and how the Internet can undermine some of the responses that they (the new religions) have traditionally used to maintain their alternative beliefs and practices. More specifically, it has suggested that a strong vertical authority structure, which controls the content of the culture from the top, and which encourages a dichotomous world view that includes a sharp delineation between members and non-members, can be undermined by processes enabled by the Internet. Furthermore, the Internet can provide an alternative source of information to that

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[42] See www.wwrn.org

[43] Several movements have periodic 'purges' when questioning members are expelled or requested to move to a less involved level of membership – the International Churches of Christ provides an example of the former, The Family of the latter.

[44] That is, it will loose some of its sectarian characteristics of 'separateness' and exclusivity (Martin 1962).

[45] Although they have not always been accepted, letters (responding to accusations and disruptive questioning) distributed by its current leaders, Maria and Peter, to members of The Family provide an example of such a move.

disseminated by the movements' leaders, and enable this to be communicated through horizontal networks that can both operate within the normal confines of the movement and cut across the boundary between the movement and the rest of society.

It has not been claimed that the changes which have been described would not occur anyway. And it has certainly not been suggested that the Internet has been the only factor in promoting such processes. But it has been argued that the Internet can make a significant contribution to the undermining of a single, unquestionable means of control. At the same time, it has also been suggested that leaders can make effective use of the facilities offered by the Internet to strengthen their control over the membership – or they may change the nature of the control so that it is more diffuse and, thus, less brittle.

One final comment might be added. In this study, the influence of the Internet has been observed in movements that were founded before the arrival of the Internet – they had already faced the challenges of being a new, alternative movement without its presence. How *new* new religions will deal with this new electronic environment remains to be seen. What is, however, clear is that any student of religion – or, indeed, of contemporary society – will ignore this new variable at his or her peril.

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