Chapter 7
Cult Wars on the Internet: Virtual Battles and the Challenges of Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the impact of the Worldwide Web on the trajectories of new and controversial religious movements. The research data indicates that the use (misuse?) of the Internet has, paradoxically, facilitated the expansion of minority religions – and yet it has also undermined their quest for social legitimacy. The ways in which different interest groups in the “Cult Wars” (“anticult” organization, Christian “countercult” groups, ex-members support networks, second-generation members, teen chat rooms, and official Websites of NRMs) use the Internet are demonstrated – from evangelism, to “white-washing,” to whistle-blowing, to stigmatizing attacks. The unprecedented challenges to boundary maintenance in communal, utopian, or racialist religions posed by Internet communications are discussed, and the formation of virtual (“dis-embodied”) congregations described. The use of the Internet in the “cult wars,” by human rights and religious freedom activists, for the formation of new interest groups, and for the forging and wielding of new cyber-weapons in these sectarian struggles (e.g. hacking or blocking Websites, promoting conspiracy theories) is discussed, drawing on examples from the Falun Gong, Scientology, the International Raelian Movement, ISKCON, and others.

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INTRODUCTION

New religious movements, better known to the public as “cults”, occupy a highly-contested terrain in our North American society. As “baby religions” they are engaged in an ongoing struggle for survival and social legitimacy. In recent years, furious “cyberspace propaganda wars” have been waged between new, unconventional religions and their cultural opponents. On one side we find the assaults on the credibility and reputations of unconventional spiritual groups by their critics. On the other we find rebuttals from the spokespersons of new religions, and counter-attacks on their enemies.

The influence of the Internet on the fate of new religions is a theme that has been explored by various scholars (see Dawson and Henneby, 1999; Introvigne, 1999; Chryssides, 2000; Mayer, 2000; and Helland, 2002, 2005). The main issues they address are the following:

1. How new religious movements (RMs) have adapted to this new mode of communication.
2. How NRMs have used the Internet to recruit followers and to attempt to gain social legitimacy.
3. How cultural opponents have used the Internet to undermine and attack new religions.

Mayer (2008) and Introvigne (1995) have each examined this fascinating development in what they refer to as the “cult wars”. As Mayer notes, “Many new religions are locked in conflict with those who would define them to the world in very different terms than they see themselves” (Mayer, 2000, 250).

Journalists have worried about the potential of the Internet as a powerful missionary tool that facilitates the expansion of “cults”. But Introvigne (1999) refutes this claim, arguing that the Internet is more damaging to new religious enterprises, due to the attacks of oppositional groups seeking to discredit them, in a strategy he labels “anticult terrorism” (Introvigne, 1995). He identifies two different types of cultural opponents to NRMs, each with their systemic differences and socio-logic: the “anti-cult” groups, whose secular approach focuses on the harm to victims of cults and possible ways to control them; and the “counter-cult” groups, whose concern is with erroneous/heretical beliefs in cults. The mission of religiously-motivated, “countercult” groups, such as the New England Institute of Religious Research (NEIRR); the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry (CARM), and the Watchman Fellowship, is to expose heresies and point out the lack of credentials of “cult leaders” (Introvigne, 1995).

In order to assess the reliability of the data presented to the public, the social-scientist engaged in researching a NRM must be able to identify the websites launched by the different “cult-watching groups” (Barker, 2007), so as to be aware of the agendas of the webmasters. These oppositional groups offer surprisingly disparate “social constructions of reality” (Berger, 1962; Berger and Luckman, 1966).

In this chapter we will look closely at the “cult wars”, as they are waged on the new battlefield of cyberspace, where opposing parties and interest groups are competing to present their various, conflicting versions of reality to the general public. In previous studies, scholars have focussed on how the Internet has shaped public perceptions of new religious movements (NRMs), but in this study I will focus on how these cyber-battles have influenced the internal politics and trajectory of NRMs themselves.
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