

"If you think, think, think,
You'll stink, stink, stink,
And you'll sink, sink, sink."

-Indoctrination chant used by a mind control cult

Ever since the Jonestown mass suicide, cults have been subject to the harsh and sometimes lurid glare of the media spotlight, a spotlight that has generally focussed on the bizarre and violent: everything from a mass wedding ceremony in Madison Square Gardens to police raids, communal sex orgies, and deprogramming techniques.

Cult apologists feel that media coverage smacks of alarmist reporting and manufactured hysteria, while cult observers believe the media picture is often too crude and simplistic. Anti-cult organizations, on the other hand, would like to see more media exposes of what they consider a growing menace. Many are worried the media is being muzzled by the threat of huge lawsuits and intimidation tactics.

Although usually unstated, the media message about cults is quite clear: cults are harmful. The same message is repeated in story after story. The pejorative tone of the media message doesn't lie in the content of a story, however, but in the story itself. The media invariably reports only the aberrant or illicit actions of the cults. The cults rarely get "good press."

Some cults have adopted the tactic of using the media to expose and denounce their critics. One section of the Hill report, called "Dirty Tricks and Enemies," contains the following instructions from the leader of an unnamed cult: "Locate the source of an attack on us . . . Expose it with lurid publicity . . . The way to seize the initiative is to use our own professionals to investigate intensively parts of the society that may attack us . . . If we do this right press, instead of trying to invent reasons to attack us, will start hanging around waiting for our next lurid scoops."

The media is still seen by this cult as an enemy fabricating anti-cult propaganda, but the cult also sees the media as a potential weapon for attacking its enemies. According to the cult's strategy, the media will unwittingly comply if the cults feed it "lurid scoops" like hunks of carrion to a culture.

While a devotee of the Hare Krishna organization, Freedman says members were warned by Krishna officials that "outsiders" would not "understand the Krishna because of the media, which uses derogatory terms like 'cultic organization' and 'brainwashing techniques'."

Freedman recalls that media reporters from newspapers, magazines, and radio frequently came to Krishna headquarters for interviews. "Reporters weren't allowed to speak to us," says Freedman. "Only people with top hierarchical positions were allowed."

It is not surprising, therefore, that the media generally views secretive cults like Hare Krishna with suspicion. Evision of the media glare is generally seen as a sign of guilt,

lifestyle to be followed."

Canadians for the Protection of Religious Liberty (CPRL), a front from the Moonies and other cults formed in 1979, makes similar pleas for "religious tolerance" and religious liberty. Not surprisingly, the cult group charges that COMA is intolerant of the "new religions."

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In a news conference held at the Westbury Hotel in Toronto, CPRL denounced COMA for persecuting "minority religions;" an obvious attempt to use the media a vehicle for attacking COMA, their most outspoken enemy. In this case, however, the tactic backfired: after denying any involvement with the cults, a reporter discovered that a prominent cult had in fact rented the conference room for CPRL.

THE

CULT

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CONTROVERSY

a media perspective

"The underlying message of the media toward the cults is 'stay away, they're no good'," says Jeff Freedman, a York graduate currently researching and lecturing on the cults. "The word 'cult' itself has been loaded with derogatory overtones because of the media."

Whether or not the media deliberately sensationalizes cult stories is debatable. Generally speaking, most cult-related activity is by its very nature sensational and bizarre. In terms of public consumption, bizarre news sells more papers and attracts more viewers. Since the cults are a rich source of outlandish and anti-social behavior, they have naturally become a favorite media freakshow, a hotbed of scandal.

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"The media uses the whole cult theme as a topic of entertainment," says Freedman, who spent three and a half months as a Hare Krishna member. "The media will make an issue worse than it actually is by alleviating certain points and harping on others."

Although media reports are not always honest and scrupulous, neither are the cults themselves, explains Freedman. "Many people get sucked in by their deceptive techniques. I don't think that's a fair game. Their deception is a deception that can change your life."

Not surprisingly, most cults view the media as an enemy. Wesley Wakefield, a bishop-general in The Bible Holiness Movement, says in his critique of *The Study of Mind Development Groups, Sects and Cults in Ontario* by Daniel Hill in 1980, that the prevailing anti-cult sentiment is due to "media hysteria." Wakefield also claims that the media is being used as a repressive tool by anti-cult groups "concerned with social conformity."

and indeed, any organization that shuns media probing is likely to come under scathing criticism.

What concerns a lot of cult observers about the media's coverage is the oversimplified approach it takes in dealing with a complex social issue like the cult phenomenon. And yet the same is true of any complex issue prepackaged in easy-to-swallow formats for public consumption.

"When the media attacks a story, they can only say so much, give a very limited discourse," says Freedman, who has sifted through countless media articles during the course of his research.

However, unlike many media-bashers, Freedman does not fault the media for its lack of precision. "The information the media gives us is accurate, but it's not complete," says Freedman. Media depictions of the cults are not so much distorted as they are incomplete.

Some cult observers feel that the worst type of media oversimplification occurs when all the cults are lumped together. Saul Levine, author of *Radical Departures—Desperate Detours To Growing Up*, says: "To put them (cults) all in the same negative light does the groups and the kids a disservice. But there are groups that are exploitive, almost criminal. I don't want to be seen as an apologist for the groups because I do have very negative feelings."

Ian Haworth, however, a member of the anti-cult Council on Mind Abuse (COMA), doesn't believe there are "good" cults. "You can't be a fence sitter," says Haworth. "Either you're for mind control or you're not."

In order to escape the pejorative tags of "cult" and "mind control," many of the cults now present the image of "new religions." The result has been a war of rhetoric waged through the media in an attempt to win public support. Most Canadians abhor "mind control" and all the connotations surrounding the term preferred by anti-cult organizations. On the other side of the rhetoric war, cults stress their religious nature and make a plea for religious tolerance.

In his critique of the Hill report, Wakefield equates anti-cultists with religious bigots. Wakefield defends cult activity by stating: "It is axiomatic in religious belief that the concept of God and the nature of man determines the



Typical media portrayal of a cult whereby cult members are depicted as walking zombies and the cult leader grows wealthy on the cult's fundraising activities.

It's not altogether clear whether the current anti-cult mood of the public has been nurtured by the media, or whether the media's anti-cult bias is a reflection of public attitude.

Nevertheless, instead of being treated as a serious social phenomenon, the media continues by and large to see the cults as a source of amusement and titillation, as freak-show entertainment for the media audience.