Network Apocalypse

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Network Apocalypse

Visions of the End in an Age of Internet Media

edited by
Robert Glenn Howard

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Introduction: Visions of the End in an Age of Internet Media

Robert Glenn Howard

In the twenty-first century, the nature of religious belief is changing, and part of what is driving that change is new communication technologies. From incantations in the most ancient Akkadian cuneiform, to Martin Luther's deployment of the printing press, to the media empires of televangelists at the end of the twentieth century, communication technologies have repeatedly triggered massive cultural change. Often religious expression, belief and authority have borne the brunt of that change.

The technologies of today's information age are no different. The communication network technologies and media generally referred to *en masse* as 'the Internet' are again driving huge cultural changes, including in the area of religion. While previous research and popular discussions alike have already made this quite clear, just what the nature of these changes has been so far and what new forms they might be taking are not yet understood.

Much as communication technologies have often driven sea changes in religion, some of the most revolutionary religious discourses have been apocalyptic. Understood in its broadest sense, apocalyptic discourse is the communication of some knowledge that was previously unknown. Taken from the New Testament Greek word, 'apocalypse' in the Western tradition refers to a divine revelation of such previously unknown knowledge. In many cases, though certainly not always, this tradition has given rise to revelations about what (by definition) cannot be known by human beings on their own: the future of humanity itself. As a result, the apocalyptic discourse of ancient Jewish peoples, including those that coalesced into the wide variety of contemporary Christian and Muslim belief, has been driven by and often drives forward revolutionary ideas about what the future will bring.

Even stretching beyond the Abrahamic religions into secular visions of a devastating end to human history, apocalyptic discourse is as powerful and vibrant a resource of myth, symbols, and belief today as it was in the

days of Jesus. In the face of this reality, what better discourse through which to consider how everyday individuals are being empowered and disempowered by the newest forms of communication technologies? That task is what this collection seeks to begin. Because it is such a huge task, however, these essays can only start to explore this rich, fascinating, and important topic.

In the development of this collection, the authors were asked to consider a fundamental debate that has raged since the Internet emerged as a powerful cultural force: Does the empowerment offered by near-instant access to the communication of others generally encourage the healthy exchange of ideas? Or does it allow individuals to seal themselves off into ideological ghettos of the like-minded? Certainly, the answer is some of both. However, that is only the beginning. Do different kinds of individuals use the Internet to create more or less healthy media environments for themselves? Do some discourses fare better in the daily lives of individuals who engage in large volumes of Internet communication? What of inherently revolutionary discourses such as apocalyptic discourse?

The nine essays in this volume explore these questions. Is the rough-and-tumble reasoning of YouTube prophets evidence of enhanced religious freedom? What if that freedom emboldens individuals to believe that a particular political candidate is evil incarnate? Or even gives believers reason to engage in a religiously inspired struggle against an imagined secret world government? This collection cannot hope to offer any easy answer to these questions. Instead, it can only explore the diversity of apocalyptic belief online in an effort to add just a little to our understanding of the nature of the human condition in this new age of Internet media.

The collection seeks this understanding in two parts. The first part explores network theories of apocalypse. These four essays offer different theoretical conceptions of apocalyptic thinking in terms of twenty-first-century notions of human communication. The second section offers five more essays that go about the task of locating, describing and analyzing the wide diversity of apocalyptic discourse online today.

In the first chapter, Andrew Wilson explores a theoretical explanation for the increased diversity of religious belief in the Internet age. He argues that the media of the Internet offer the spiritual seekers today a unique opportunity. In ‘cyberspace’, they can explore the syncretism that lies at the heart of the cultic milieu. The hyperlinks of the World Wide Web extend a ‘circuit’ that links seekers to a global context from which they derive a new and expanded sense of global community. In this context, individual apocalyptic prophecies flourish as they gain strength from the communal action animating this global circuitry.

In the second chapter, William A. Stahl examines some of the cultural factors at play in the public understanding of climate change. Because the

scientific models associated with 'global warming' and 'peak oil' challenge the central premises of advanced industrial society, debates have developed into conflicts over legitimacy. In these conflicts, the deepest legitimizing representations of Western society are being deployed: the symbols and myths of apocalypse. Exploring this discourse as it plays out online, Stahl develops a practical typology of possible responses to environmental apocalyptic discourse in the twenty-first century. In the end, these responses suggest how the Internet functions to shape both these discussions and the apocalyptic structures that undergird them.

In the third chapter, Dennis Beesley offers an optimistic assessment of the impact of the Internet on contemporary religion. His essay examines how apocalyptic discourse on the video-sharing Web site YouTube encourages a wide diversity of individuals to participate in individual religious expression. Pushing back against the concern that individuals may be engaging in unhealthy media consumption habits online by limiting themselves to communication enclaves of the like-minded, Beesley argues that the emergence of faith-based exclusionary communities is (paradoxically) evidence that the Internet fosters egalitarian and democratic attitudes in its users.

In Chapter 4, JL Schatz argues that the very desire to secure individual freedoms through advancing surveillance and security technologies can provide the philosophical arguments that justify destruction and violence through the deployment of those same technologies. Driven by a sense of technological determinism fostered in popular film and other media, this essay argues that critically assessing how we engage network communication technologies represented in influential science fiction of today can alter the trajectory of the futures we are creating for ourselves.

Amarnath Amarasingam starts out Part 2 with the fifth chapter by executing an important contemporary case study. Here, the Internet seems to be encouraging a problematic form of religious belief. He documents how certain subsets of the US population firmly beleive that President Barack Obama is the Antichrist who is depicted in conservative Christian interpretations of the Bible as setting the stage for the end of time. Documenting extensive Internet-based discourse on the topic, the author examines the apocalyptic fears and conspiracies emerging in online discussions of the Obama presidency.

In Chapter 6, Salvador Jimenez Murguia explores the 2008 'youve beenleftbehind.com' Web site. The site offers an Internet-based service to individuals wishing to communicate with their loved ones who might be 'left behind' after the anticipated Rapture when some Christians believe the righteous will be bodily lifted to heaven. Through a savvy deployment of the Internet, the site's creator uses this common interpretation of the Bible to manufacture fear and anxiety. This chapter describes how a focus on the effectiveness of the Web site is also an exercise in the culture of risk

because the security of the system is based largely on assumptions about the reliability of network communication technologies themselves.

David Drissel's essay in Chapter 7 documents how social networking Web sites facilitate connections between Muslims who share a belief in a nearing apocalyptic judgment. Prior to the global diffusion of the Internet, everyday believers seldom engaged in public discussions of Islamic prophecies foretelling the apocalypse. However, recent years have witnessed a dramatic proliferation of Islamic Web sites devoted to eschatological topics. Drissel examines the network-based mobilization of Muslim youth on Facebook around this topic. Through the compelling evidence he documents, it becomes clear that Facebook is playing an important role in framing and disseminating a contemporary pan-Islamist apocalyptic system of belief.

For Chapter 8, James Schirmer pushes beyond religious belief into an aesthetic examination of the computer game *Fallout 3*. In this unexpected place, we find real-world individuals using network-based 'mods' of the computer game to examine perennial ethical issues. *Fallout 3* offers its users a unique computer-mediated avenue for exploring ethics through the myths and symbols of secular apocalyptic discourse. This chapter suggests the importance of the academic exploration of video games as places of creativity and experimentation among individuals empowered to connect through the Internet.

In Chapter 9, the final essay in the collection, I offer my own example of the diverse forms of both religious belief and expression that emerged at the beginning of the Internet era—and continue to grow and change today. In this essay, I argue that the acceptance of suicide as necessary and desirable created the opportunity for the Heaven's Gate religious group to draw a mass-media audience to their vernacular Web-based media. Bearing testimony to the foresight of the group's Internet use in 1997, the participatory media of today are facilitating the creation of what may be the first truly Internet-based new religious movement. Maybe not surprisingly, this movement engages the ancient biblical symbols of apocalypse to support a distinctly new conception of religiosity that fuses the technological with the spiritual.

Even with the rich diversity of studies collected here, we can offer only gestures toward the true complexity and diversity of apocalyptic discourse emerging on the Internet today. Nonetheless, I hope that the provocative and important essays offered in this collection can contribute to the ongoing critical, academic and public debates about the nature of the changes that network communication technologies are fostering. Although these changes may be a small contribution in some ways, the debate is now and will continue to be one of the most important discussions of our time. Not only is it about what the Internet is doing; it must also be about what the Internet *should* be doing—or, even more, what we should be doing with the Internet.

In the end, this new technology (like all technologies) is not predetermined. Instead it is the product of many humans acting together over time. And just as network communication media were created through this aggregated volition, so too can they be altered by it. The debates about the nature and future of network communication are themselves the mechanism of any such change.

Part I

Network Theories of Apocalypse

1. On the Outskirts of the New Global Village: Computer-mediated Prophecy and the Digital Afterlife

Andrew Fergus Wilson

Abstract

This chapter will argue that cyberspace, as a medium, offers a unique opportunity for the spiritual seeker to explore the syncretism that lies at the heart of the cultic milieu. The interlinked pages that constitute Webspace extend the 'circuit' shared by seekers into a global context and, further, provide an enhanced sense of community. In this context individual apocalyptic prophecies can flourish and become sedimented within the cultic milieu, strengthened by this extended circuit and enhanced communal potential.

The Light behind the Network

In *Children of the New Age,* Steven Sutcliffe describes adoption of a 'Network of Light' by Peter Caddy, the British spiritualist and cofounder of the Findhorn Foundation. Caddy, along with his wife Eileen, integrated the idea of a Network of Light (or 'spiritual energies') into the already syncretistic spiritual practices and beliefs of the Foundation during the 1950s and 1960s (Sutcliffe 2003). The concept, in the lineage borrowed by the Caddys, was an apparent amalgamation of ideas present in the writings of proto–New Age practitioner Alice Bailey during the 1940s and a similar concept referred to by a psychic worker called 'Naomi'/Anne Edwards, whom Peter Caddy encountered in the early 1950s. These Networks of Light were believed to resonate outward and downward through loosely defined but hierarchical spiritual networks with groups of psychic practitioners regulating and controlling the flow of 'light energy' (Sutcliffe 2003: 65). In addition to being a kind of psychic power grid, the Network of Light was also capable of receiving messages and inspiration from higher divine powers including 'Christ Forces', 'Masters of Ra' and the 'space brothers'. Thus,

it acted as a communications network in addition to a grid through which psychic energies could flow; or, rather, the energies transferred through the network were also capable of carrying information. These messages might have borne inspiration, instruction, or (occasionally) warnings. Sutcliffe cites a message warning of a potential forthcoming apocalyptic conflagration received by the third cofounder of the Findhorn Foundation, Dorothy Maclean, during the early 1960s.

Although certain narratives embraced by the Findhorn Foundation reflected the rise and fall in fortune of popular discourses within the cultic milieu (Sutcliffe cites the passing influence of the UFO craze during the early years of the second half of the twentieth century), the concept of the Network of Light has remained a central pillar of the foundation's beliefs. Gordon Lynch is right to relate Janice Dolley's suggestion that, 'since the 1970s, progressive organizations (such as Findhorn) [have] often developed clearer and more specific goals as they come to recognize the unlikeliness of achieving broad, and undifferentiated, aims for global spiritual transformation' (Lynch 2007: 190). In the case of the Findhorn Foundation, one might point to their engagement with the United Nations as an official NGO (non-governmental organization); the development of New Findhorn Directions, a trading subsidiary; or, Ekopia, a local community investment scheme with its own currency, the Eko.

Nonetheless, to focus on these material ventures would be to overlook the continued importance and centrality of the spiritual dimension in the foundation's work. Thus, the Network of Light is the cynosure and subject of a daily group meditation held at the foundation's communal 'ecovillage' in Scotland; it is invoked through meditation with the specific purpose of creating a 'vessel to contain the energies of love, light and goodwill' (http://www.findhorn.org/about_us/meditation_new.php). Once this has been achieved and after a suitable period of contemplation, the group then proceeds to the Great Invocation, which has at its heart the figure of channels of love and light that characterize the Great Network:

> THE GREAT INVOCATION
> From the point of light within the mind of God
> Let light stream forth into the minds of men
> Let light descend on earth.
>
> From the point of love within the heart of God
> Let love stream forth into the hearts of men
> May Christ return to earth.
>
> From the centre where the will of God is known
> Let purpose guide the little wills of men
> The purpose which the masters know and serve.
> [...]

> Let light, and love and power restore the plan on earth.
>
> Close with three Oms (http://www.findhorn.org/about_us/meditation_new.php).

In addition to the diverse points of engagement with the secular world in a variety of material efforts, the Findhorn Foundation is shaped by an ongoing spiritual model provided by and enacted through the Network of Light. It is the mechanism through which the foundation hopes to transmit the love and light required to transform the world in preparation for their idiosyncratic syncretized millennialism. The Network provides a useful model for considering how the Internet is understood and experienced by a number of individual spiritual seekers within the contemporary cultural milieu.

Belief and the Internet

In *New Media: A Critical Introduction,* Martin Lister suggests that there is little separation between our offline and online lives:

> As, over time, some new media have become unremarkable due to their familiarity and ubiquity, and others have been refashioned or displaced, we can see not a Narnia or Matrix-like division of virtual and actual worlds, but rather a complicated interweaving of mediated, lived, time and space (Lister *et al.* 2009: 237).

This is difficult to argue against, but the sense of wonder that earlier writers had in their engagement with cyberspace has not dissipated entirely. For some there is a real sense that they are, indeed, stepping into Narnia, for all the familiarity that the enabling technology may have acquired.

In *Give Me That Online Religion*, Brenda Brasher sketches a variety of ways in which religious groups have integrated computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies into their practices. Frequently the integration amounts to little more than that; she points to the way in which traditional institutionalized religions have used digital technology's capacity to store information as a means of establishing openly accessible online repositories of documents and texts. She also points to the way in which the shared communicative spaces that the Internet has opened have been adopted by religious communities as communal meeting spaces. She cites the use of the Internet as a space of reflection and discussion by attendees at the Toronto Blessing following the event. Crucially, here, however, Brasher also points to the importance of interconnectedness for understanding the Internet as a medium with its own effects. For instance, she cites the way in which the use of links produces fresh affinities and alliances—however embryonic and fragile

> As an increasingly diverse collection of religious groups move into cyberspace, one significant effect is the incidence of new convergences and

> cooperation amongst them. It is not at all rare for the Website of a Christian group espousing strong millennial beliefs to be linked to a Jewish Zionist Website (2004: 29).

For many users, these connections are the *sine qua non* of the experience of Internet usage; while there may be a lack of clarity regarding the origins of the phrase 'surfing the net',[1] the intention behind it is clear: users browse the Internet, following links to one page and then the next. As will be addressed below, this dynamic pseudo-spatial engagement with cyberspace can produce a sense of an immaterial experiential dimension that is visited when online. Further, this mode of interconnected virtual experience has been credited with an extension of humanity's spiritual being. Brasher cites the earlier work of Jennifer Cobb and finds in Cobb's work the 'fascinating if unprovable theory' that '[i]n building these communications technologies, we have merely hardwired our pre-existing interconnectedness . . . in cyberspace we have externally actualized our evolving psycho-spiritual ties with one another' (cited in Brasher 2004: 40). It is here that the use of the Findhorn Foundation's Network of Light as a metaphor for the extension of the spiritual milieu into cyberspace becomes apparent. Thus, we can see how, in certain spiritual understandings, particularly those inflected by the ceaseless syncretism of New Age thought, the Internet becomes the primary bearer of 'the Message' in an electronically mediated age rather than simply a digitized repository. Naturally, there are limitations to this. The embodied self cannot maintain its virtual presence without recourse to physical needs—Douglas Cowan points to this near the end of *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet* and reminds the cybertopian, 'everyone of us returns to the reality of the off-line world that is defined at least in part by our bodies' (2005: 201). Nonetheless, Cowan makes earlier reference to pagans whose paganism is almost wholly virtual. While these 'exclusively online modern Pagans' are described as being less invested in the participatory elements of offline paganism and thus less invested in the day-to-day practices that are typically held to define *being* pagan (2005: 160), what is crucial here is the recognition that the Internet provides the setting in which a semblance of pagan identity can be performed. Indeed, it can be suggested that rather than an incomplete form of *real* pagan identity, what is developing is a mode of engaging with religious identities that allows an ongoing 'project of the spiritual self' in which the formal trappings of offline paganism are being elided by the kind of contingent and informal online religiosity described by Morten Højsgaard: '"Cyber-religion", at its basis, is mediated or located

1. The frequently credited originator of the term, Jean Amour Polly, ascribes the first usage to Mark McCahill at http://www.netmom.com/about-net-mom/23-who-invented-surfing-the-internet.html.

primarily in cyberspace, its contents reflect the main features of the post-modern cyber culture, and it is only sparingly organized as well' (2005: 62).

Whereas, on the one hand, Cowan allows us to consider cyberspatial religious life as being related to and developed by 'authentic' offline religious practices, Højsgaard, on the other, presents a model of a religiosity that is particular to cyberspace. Both, however, contain the assumption that there is a 'there' that is mobilized by CMC technologies, that cyber-worshippers engage with a location—or, at least, a space—when they log on. It is being argued here that this space, this 'network of virtual light', encourages particular modes of knowledge acquisition that serve to make more likely the dissemination of, among other marginalized beliefs, apocalyptic beliefs and/or visions. This is, in part, due to the peculiar psychogeography of cyberspace and in part due to the way in which knowledge is sought on the Internet.

The Space in Cyberspace

Terms used to describe the Internet during its initial phase of mass adoption in North America and Western Europe relied heavily on the spatial metaphor, a metaphor that has remained dominant. The short-lived sobriquet 'information superhighway' (or, depending on one's real-world location, *Infobahn*) spoke of high-speed travel toward a destination, of movement from a 'here' to a 'there'. 'Cyberspace', a term borrowed from the fiction of William Gibson,[2] captures in its evocative vagueness the digitization of space that seems to occur when we log on to the Internet: the 'there' beyond the screen.

Gibson's neologism originates within the 'cyberpunk' subgenre of science fiction that characterizes much of Gibson's early work. Tied to the birth of 'cyberspace' as a concept, cyberpunk can be thought of as the fiction of a historical moment (while also being the product of previous works of science fiction such as those of John Brunner or the New Wave science fiction authors of the late 1960s). By mapping out the 'psychogeography' of a new sociocultural frontier, cyberpunk performs the role that Raymond Williams refers to as a 'structure of feeling': 'a mode of social formation, explicit and recognizable in specific kinds of art, which is distinguishable from social and semantic formations by its articulation of presence' (1977: 135).

Thus, cyberpunk as a structure of feeling uses 'new semantic figures' to map out an emergent social formation. It is the emergent generation of which they write—a technologically literate generation with the capacity to treat technology equally as a means of social being and a means of intervention and disruption—which inhabited the conceptual spaces and identities that cyberspace narrated (Williams 1977: 135). Equally, the virtual environ-

2. See the short story 'Burning Chrome' (*Omni*, 1982) collected in *Burning Chrome* (London: Gollancz, 1986) and the novel *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984).

ment in which CMC transactions occur is provided with a signifier in William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*:

> The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games . . . in early graphics programs and military experimentation with cranial jacks. . . . Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts. . . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding . . . (1984: 67).

The concept thus draws within it the presumed infinitude of knowledge that the human mind is capable of reckoning (the 'clusters' and 'constellations' of data, stretching outward, 'receding') in addition to the experientially familiar mystery of 'the nonspace of the human mind'. The tension between the knowable 'city lights' and their outward explosion into the infinity of the cosmic void characterizes early attempts to consider the spatial form of cyberspace, for instance, William Mitchell's use of the figure of the city to 'map' cyberspace or Marcus Novak's evocative call for an architecture of poetic dimensions as a means of understanding the apprehension of cyberspatial dimensions.

Tautologically, cyberspace is considered in spatial terms. We have an idea of there being a space beyond the screen through which we travel. Whether that movement is from Web page to Web page, the movement of an avatar within a MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game), a programme, movie, or song downloaded via a P2P (peer-to-peer) application, or a virus or worm spreading out and burrowing through the electronic ether, cyberspace is considered to be a space through which movement is achieved. It is not, however, spatial organization as we are accustomed to it.

Gillian Skirrow points to its entrancing qualities in 'Hellivision: An analysis of video games'; she goes on to suggest that young male gamers explore unconscious projections in the virtual worlds they engage with (1986). Cyberspace is something that is constituted not only through linked networks but also through the users of these networks and the content they produce—Sherry Turkle finds depth to the screen and projects her work across multiple points of interface with it; thought becomes disseminated and spread out into multiple points of engagement with an unidentified but palpable entity behind the screen:

> Why is it so hard for me to turn away from the screen? The windows on my computer desktop offer me layers of material to which I have simultaneous access. . . . When I write at the computer, all of these are present and my thinking space seems somehow enlarged. The dynamic, layered display gives me the comforting sense that I write in conversation with my computer. After years of such encounters, a blank piece of paper can make me feel strangely alone (1996: 29).

Further, these users and contents change with great rapidity. It would be possible to map servers around the world, but this does not give an indication of the use being made of them at any one time. It would, for example, be possible to describe the physical location of the BBC News Online server as being in London. It is, however, simultaneously 'serving' pages around the globe. It is at once local and global.

That globality is not, however, static: the specific locations around the world from which information is being requested change by the second. This suggests that we cannot record the topography of cyberspace by conventional means: we cannot simply draw a map of it. To begin to understand how cyberspace can be considered in spatial terms, we must employ metaphors that draw upon conventional and familiar reckonings of space. One of the more successful attempts to produce a familiar spatial reckoning of cyberspace can be found in William J. Mitchell's *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn*. As the title suggests, Mitchell employs the city as a figure by which we can understand the spatial (non)presence of cyberspace. Mitchell uses the metaphor of the city as a means of familiarizing those unacquainted with cyberspace with the various forms it took at that time. In many ways, *City of Bits* is concerned with fixing the spatial organization of cyberspace in terms that domesticate its unfamiliar spaces while retaining something of the adventure of roaming the city. Indeed, early on in the book Mitchell claims, 'My name is wjm@mit.edu (though I have many aliases), and I am an electronic *flâneur*. I hang out on the network. . . . The keyboard is my café' (1995: 8). In evoking Baudelaire's *flâneur,* Mitchell is suggesting the pleasure of cyberspace as a space for roaming, exploring, seeing and being seen: it is a realm in which alternative versions of the self can be presented in virtual anonymity. Mitchell is 'wjm@mit.edu', among other aliases, and from his café keyboard he can watch the virtual world go by, participating as he pleases. Also worth commenting on here is that Baudelaire was the observer of profound social change as Paris was redesigned and the lives of the citizens were radically transformed through the practices and discourses of modernity.

Despite reincarnating Baudelaire's definitive city-dweller within an electronic plane, Mitchell is quick to stress that fundamental differences exist between spatial reckonings of the city and of cyberspace. He suggests that it is 'profoundly antispatial': it is 'there' but it is not possible to describe 'there' or point someone in its direction; in his words, 'You do not go *to* it; you log *in*' (1995: 8). So, rather than a place that one visits, it is a space that one enters: it is ambience rather than location.

Throughout *City of Bits*, Mitchell continues to employ the metaphor of the city for cyberspace and of the *flâneur* for its users. He recognizes the global nature of it and the further production of time–space compression but insists on reproducing the local within the global or on providing

examples of its iterations such as in the structure of the Cleveland Free-Net, which was identifiably organized around the institutions of the physical city. Mitchell also speaks of the ability to 'condense' scattered rural communities and draw their inhabitants together into a shared, electronic, public space. In these examples Mitchell is accurate in his description of cyberspace as a city but his analysis is weaker when he attempts to argue the same case for the World Wide Web, MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons or Domains) and their variants.

The Web is identified primarily through the use of a particular protocol for the transmission of information ('http' or Hypertext Transfer Protocol). In this sense it is a medium that is conceived of in spatial terms, but not one that corresponds well with the anthropomorphic organization of city space. The planar shifts from Web page to Web page suggest movement not within a city but upon a vast and chaotic plane that is, it is arguable, experienced purely through the imagination. However, what is of value here is the ability to 'condense' not scattered rural communities but scattered communities of believers; this theme shall be returned to later.

The second point of interest that can be found in Mitchell's work—like much writing on cyberspace during the 1990s—is an eagerness to understand human interaction with the new medium. Later work can tend to concentrate on human interaction within the medium, its integration into daily life,[3] or the impact of the medium on social structures.[4] This is, of course, valuable work, but there is still a need to understand how the medium in itself is used and engaged with, and at the heart of this is a need to explore the multiple ways in which its unique spatiality is understood.

Rather than attempt to project current understandings of social space(s) onto cyberspace, it is more appropriate to reconsider our understanding of space. Marcus Novak does this in the essay 'Liquid Architectures in Cyberspace' (1991). He does consider the figure of the city as a means of understanding cyberspace, but he sees as it as limiting insofar as cyberspace can be considered an extension of the city form, a para-city if you will. Fundamental to Novak's position is the idea that cyberspace allows us to extend subjectivity into virtual form. His argument is that the mind and the body are thoroughly linked, that the Cartesian split was a convenient thought tool only. Novak follows the idea that knowledge is embodied and that the mind affects our bodily presence and experience of physical reality: what we perceive as real *is* real, with objective reality being little more than 'a construct of our mind'.

3. For instance, Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite (eds.), *The Internet in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

4. See Armand Mattelart, *The Information Society: An Introduction* (London:Sage, 2003) or Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

In a sense, then, our reality can be seen as a series of fictions, fluid and open to change. This becomes evident in cyberspace and what we choose to take of ourselves into it. Our 'self' is defined through pure representation rather than perception, and it is representation over which we have complete control. Novak suggests that the architecture of cyberspace (that is, the organization of space within cyberspace) *is* anthropomorphic but that the human figure at the heart of anthropomorphism has become fluid and subject to change.

With a 'liquid' body around which to build the architecture of cyberspace, the self becomes, for Novak, liquid. This liquidity of self and space is akin to poetry and magic for Novak, for they exemplify 'the promise of control over the world by the power of the will'. Novak comments, 'Cyberspace is poetry inhabited, and to navigate through it is to become a leaf on the wind of a dream' (1991: 229). For Novak, cyberspace is a series of dream cities built and explored by their inhabitants. These are not merely the bringing to bear of our meanings onto the cities surrounding us (something akin to the psychogeographies of the Situationists) but the production of our own multiple and tidal spaces.

From Turkle's presence behind the screen to Novak's inhabited poetic spaces via Mitchell's wandering electronic *flâneur,* the extra-human experience of cyberspace offers glimpses of a world beyond, in which technologies of communication seem to hold out the promise of modes of dialogue that facilitate new creative and existential possibilities. In the context of this kind of reading of cyberspace, the act of logging on to the Internet can be understood of as a form of active sacralization if we accept Bobby C. Alexander's (admittedly general) definition of ritual: 'Ritual . . . is a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context within which the everyday is transformed' (1997: 139). We are close, here, to the cosmological encounter with technology that can be found in Marshall McLuhan's work. He is better known for his suggestion that new media are capable of transforming perception; nonetheless, McLuhan's Catholicism is evident in the expansive and ultimately redemptive role that his depiction of technology offers. His is a viewpoint of technology united with the poetic spirit of humanity, itself an immanent realization of that which is divine in nature and in humanity.

Thus, McLuhan is highly conscious of the amorality of technology but simultaneously aware of the possibility for it to be used in conjunction with the best impulses of humanity. As much as technology might be an extension into an external world, it is also, for McLuhan, an extension into the human world of the external. In this exchange of being, the presence of divine Being in the external world is revealed in the inner workings of humankind: an epiphany through technology.

> In ordinary human perception, men perform the miracle of recreating within themselves—in their interior faculties—the exterior world. This

> miracle is the work of the *nous poietikos* or of the agent intellect—that is the poetic or creative process. The exterior world in every instant of perception is interiorized and recreated in a new manner. Ourselves. And in this creative work that is perception and cognition, we experience immediately that dance of Being within our faculties which provides the incessant intuition of Being (2002: 80).

Following Arthur Kroker's reading of this aspect of McLuhan's work, we can understand that McLuhan's idea of a united and spiritually replenished humanity, freed from the imperial tendencies of the world of print and the visual register (nationalism), bonded in a true democracy of spirit, and full mutual recognition is realized in the mediated global village (2005). Thus, technology is a key component in humanity's spiritual development. As our technology advances, we become more adept at knowing ourselves; we are advancing our potential for discovering ourselves. It is not without risks, in an atomizing world in which we each become a nodal point of a globalized utopia; the very freedom offered to self-realize may become a frightening empty space to some. When the categorical structures of the tyrannical visual give way to a tribalized global oneness, in which meaning must create itself anew in each of us, the fear of an infirmity of meaning reveals itself. It is, ultimately, McLuhan's Catholicism that allows him a transcendent truth from which to circumvent the falling away of the reassuring empiricism of the visual range; the epiphany of the senses is at once personal and spiritual, a union of internal and external worlds.

Although McLuhan's account is part of a broad thesis, the figure of the potentially lone figure overcoming the existential loneliness in the awareness of a constant globalized electronic presence is a compelling one. It evokes, again, Mitchell's electronic *flâneur,* Turkle's presence, or simply the shared informational spaces of Gibson's cyberspace. It is here that the use of the Findhorn Foundation's Network of Light becomes a working metaphor for the environment into which some users of cyberspace may conceive themselves to be entering. This emergent mode of worship is alluded to by Gwilym Beckerlegge in the essay, 'Computer-mediated Religion: Religion on the Internet at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century'. He writes:

> The relatively new concept of cyberspace now exists alongside traditional religious views of the cosmos, in which hierarchies of beings have been placed in different realms or levels . . . technology offers the prospect of an increasingly intimate relationship between human beings and their computers, which may appear to realize some of the goals traditionally held out by religious systems (2001: 257).

In what follows, a narrow selection of Web pages that integrate the late Diana, Princess of Wales, into prophesied apocalyptic scenarios, will be explored as markers of an invigorated and extended cultic milieu. As will be discussed, the concept of the cultic milieu relies on the figure of the 'seeker', and it is in

this figure that we encounter a model of information consumption that is ideally suited to the engagement with cyberspace that is outlined above.

The Digital Afterlife of Diana, Princess of Wales

Century 10, Quatrain 35 of the prophecies of Nostradamus reads:

> Women's apparel in the temple of Diana:
> Going to be murdered by the unknown one from Marne.

According to Michael McClellan, author of *Nostradamus and the Final Age* (which is in the process of being published through his Web site, 'Nostradamus and the New Prophecy Almanacs'),[5] this foretells the transformation of Diana, Princess of Wales, into a goddess. The page dedicated to Diana by McClellan is a simple hypertext page with purple text on a black background interspersed with McClellan's collages of Diana—these are mostly stock images of Diana superimposed on classical Grecian backgrounds. McClellan explains the first line cited (the third of the full quatrain) as a reference to a room given over to 'Style and Fashion' at the permanent exhibition 'Diana: A Celebration', held in six rooms at Althorp House.

For McClellan, Althorp and, clearly, its gardens represent the 'temple of Diana' and the 'women's apparel', 28 of Diana's outfits housed in the 'Style and Fashion' room. The second (fourth) line of the quatrain indicates to McClellan the unknown driver of the white Fiat described at the crash scene, while he notes that the Marne is a tributary of the Seine—the Seine being the river under which Pont d'Alma tunnel passes. Leaving aside his transformation of the more frequently cited Greek Artemis into the Roman Diana, it is worth noting the emphasis that McClellan places on the apotheosis of Diana. He asks, 'Are you ready for the return of the goddess Diana?' (http://www.newprophecy.net/diana.htm).

His question is more than rhetorical and is linked to an overarching series of related prophecies that have, ultimately, an eschatological significance:

> Nostradamus prophesied the death of Princess Diana, her 'temple' at Althorp, and her reappearance to the world as a miraculous apparition. This final event may take place in October near the eve of World War III (http://web.archive.org/web/20080821232336/http://newprophecy.net/).

This failed prophecy has become consigned to archive.org and the relevant passage on the home page of prophecy.net now reads:

> Nostradamus prophesied the death of Princess Diana, her 'temple' at Althorp, and her reappearance to the world as a miraculous apparition.

5. On McClellan's Web site, the almanacs are divided by year. The years noted in parentheses in the following paragraphs refer to the links in his almanacs to individual years.

> This final event may have been presaged by a strange, pink glow in the sky above London in October 2008 and will ultimately occur near the eve of World War III (http://www.newprophecy.net).

Diana's return is detailed more fully on the subpage 'Revelation', which draws on the work of psychic medium Jeanne Dixon and numerologist/astrologer Cheiro (born William John Warner) in addition to McClellan's own interpretive initiatives. For McClellan, the death of Diana and Dodi takes on biblical significance, with their deaths being the work of satanic forces set on thwarting the immanentization of the Christian eschaton as foretold in Revelation. He understands them as figures from the 1962 prophecy of American psychic Jeanne Dixon (1904–1997), which predicted the coming of a child born to Nefertiti and a pharaoh; after Nefertiti is betrayed (literally, stabbed in the back in the prophetic dream), the child is adored by all peoples of the Earth.

For McClellan, it is clear that this refers to Diana and Dodi: 'Is it not clear who Princess Diana and Dodi al-Fayed are and were? They were none other than Nefertiti and Ahknaten' (http://www.newprophecy.net/queenson.htm). Not only were they reincarnations of Nefertiti (and Diana alone had already 'passed through' Marie Antoinette, Isadora Duncan and Marilyn Monroe) but Diana was pregnant with Dodi's (Ahknaten) child, a child that was due to be the new messiah. In a further biblical flourish, McClellan turns to Revelation 12 and the woman of heaven whose child will rule with a rod of iron; the woman, of course, is Diana and the child the son she was due to have with Dodi Al-Fayed. In the biblical exegesis, we are told that Diana's Merovingian blood links her to the twelve tribes of Israel just as her spirit is linked with Nefertiti. Not only that, but we are also informed by McClellan:

> Now, because of the murder of Diana and Dodi, he must be born from different parents and will be born, I believe, around the year 2040. Satan and his principalities interfered with God's plan in 1997 (Revelation 12 is part of God's plan), but he will not succeed next time (http://www.newprophecy.net/queenson.htm).

The site is largely the work of Michael McClellan, author of *Nostradamus and the Final Age* (which is published for free through New Prophecy Web site, www.newprophecy.net). The New Prophecy Web site benefits from the interlinked nature of cyberspace with a number of other Web sites linking to it. Figures vary from ten (Google) through 121 'inlinks' (Yahoo Site Explorer) to 2,420 (Bing)[6] separate links to New Prophecy; it is also a highly popular site, with an estimated forty-three thousand US citizens visiting it per month.

6. These figures were accessed through http://www.linkpopularity.com—Google and Bing's figures can be generated via appropriate manipulation of their search syntax.

These US visitors are ethnically diverse (73% Caucasian, 9% African American, 6% Asian, 10% Hispanic), from a range of income groups (24% earning less than $30,000 per year, 27% between $30,000 and $60,000, 27% between $60,000 and $100,000 and 22% over $100,000), male (54%), and adult (18–34, 31%; 35–49, 33%).[7] It exemplifies a prophetic strand in the cultic milieu, as described by Colin Campbell, and demonstrates the syncretism at its heart. The prophetic sources cited by McClellan include but are not restricted to: Srila Prabhupada (1896–1977), best known for founding the International Society for Krishna Consciousness; the Boer Christian-patriotic seer Nicolaas Van Rensburg (1862–1926); apocalyptic Native American Hopi prophecies; Ursula Southiel, or Mother Shipton (1488–1561); the US evangelist healer A.A. Allen (1911–1970); Sumerian cosmology and modern prophecies of the return of the planet Nibiru; and other individuals and Judeo-Christian tradition. The otherwise conflicting sources of prophecy are unified in their being drawn together as strands in McClellan's belief system, and this unity of diverse mystic traditions and belief systems is typical of the cultic milieu. Campbell describes the cultic milieu as 'the cultural underground of society . . . it includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure' (2002: 14).

The syncretization of these diverse beliefs and practices is achieved in part through a shared recognition of their mutual stigmatization by mainstream culture; indeed, in the field of conspiracy research, Michael Barkun has reconceptualized the cultic milieu as 'stigmatized knowledge' (2003). This shared 'outsider status' not only underlines the perceived threat that the cultic milieu is to 'the Establishment' but also underlines a coincidence of interests and experience between cultic movements and their adherents.

Campbell identifies the sharing of a 'circuit' through openly available published materials and public lectures, which are inclusive and mutually supportive, as a further contributor to the syncretizing pressure within the cultic milieu. The final means by which the cultic milieu is drawn together is through the ideational trajectories of its participants; here Campbell uses the idea of seekership. Seekers are typically marked by a full or partial rejection of mainstream religious beliefs and institutions and, instead, they adopt an eclectic approach in their search for the spiritual 'truth' that traditional sources have failed to provide. Campbell points to the tendency

Although Yahoo's Site Explorer is normally available only to Web site owners, this requirement can be overcome by using linkpopularity.com.

7. The estimates of visitor statistics were generated by http://www.quantcast.com/newprophecy.net/. The figures for low-income visitors and African American, Asian and Hispanic visitors were all above the representative average of all US net users.

among seekers, in their progression through the cultic milieu, to 'come to accept seeking itself as the primary end' (2002: 18).

Seekership is something that is evidenced in the multiplicity of what might be termed the 'healers and spiritual advisors' who surrounded Diana throughout her public life. Paul Heelas[41] helpfully catalogues those mentioned by Andrew Morton in *Diana, Her New Life:* 'Advisor, astrologer, business motivator guru, clairvoyant, confidant, counsellor, exercise trainer, fitness teacher, gym trainer, homeopathic doctor, hypnotherapist, osteopath, psychotherapist, sleep therapist, soothsayer, spiritual advisor, tarot-card reader, therapist, and voice coach' (cited in Heelas 1999: 99). This list was published in 1995, and it does not necessarily provide a full picture of the healers and advisors drawn upon by Diana. It does however give the impression of a desire for guidance on matters mundane and spiritual, physical and mental, the past, present and future. It is Heelas's contention that Diana was undergoing a 'conversion career' and growing increasingly engaged in New Age beliefs and practices. Although an uncomfortable term, Heelas's use of 'New Age' is broadly analogous to Campbell's concept of the cultic milieu—it is capable of incorporating conflicting spiritual beliefs and outlooks—the world-affirming and the world-rejecting.[8] Drawing on Heelas's argument but recontextualizing it within Campbell's conceptual terrain, we can thus describe Diana as an active seeker within the cultic milieu. This seekership was and continues to be important; it is a crucial part of Diana's appeal within the cultic milieu itself. There is a recognition of shared experience within the cultural (if not material) capital particular to the cultic milieu. In an e-mail to the author on 23 June 2008, spiritual medium Sylvia Moon wrote:

> As a medium I was aware of other mediums helping and teaching her [Diana] to grow, and using her light and energy to help others. She became much stronger and left light where she went. I didn't look on her as a divine being more as a co worker who I sometimes feel with me when I'm working or when I'm talking to other mediums, yes, even on the Internet. I support anyone who is from any spiritual background as long as they do it with love and light.

Thus, for Sylvia at least, Diana was not simply a potential seeker within the cultic milieu but was also a practitioner, drawing on knowledge and skills gained within the cultic milieu and applying them 'with love and light'. Sylvia may well be described as a typical seeker herself and describes her spiritual beliefs as 'ever growing', and it is in this and as a 'light worker' that she finds commonality with Diana. This commonality continues to be shared after Diana's death, and it should be noted here that Sylvia is iden-

8. See Roy Wallis, *The Elementary Forms of New Religious Life* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 9-39.

tifying Internet use as a sphere of activity in which her perception of her abilities is undiminished and in which Diana's spirit may become manifest.

For many within the cultic milieu, Diana lives on; she has not died but has simply 'moved on' to another sphere of existence, as is attested by the number of accounts of her spirit being channelled. There is, for example, a Web site dedicated to recording her channelled messages, Diana Speaks (http://www.dianaspeaks.com/). The Diana of dianaspeaks.com has completed Heelas's 'conversion career' and speaks as an enlightened being, extolling New Age platitudes focused on self-improvement. There are also conventionally published books such as Rita Eide's *Celestial Voice of Diana* and Hazel Courteney's *Divine Intervention,* which feature similar iterations of Diana's ascended spirit: she is presented as an insightful being with an enabling message of spiritual growth. Other channelled messages from Diana reveal as cultic tropes some of the themes raised by Michael McClellan: Diana as a reincarnated avatar of a particular formation of 'spirit energy'. The message, 'Wake Up to the Fact that Every One of your Choices are [*sic*] Divine', channelled by Gillian Macbeth-Louthan, for example, begins:

> I am she that is known as Mary. I have worn many veils, many names, many lives, but ultimately I am One Light and One frequency. My essence has incarnated as many, the latest being the Mother Teresa who has passed back into my body and Princess Diana who has also passed back into my body (http://www.lightparty.com/Spirituality/MotherNatureSpeaks.html).

Not only do we see the repeated refrain of Diana-as-avatar, but we also find a syncretistic gesture that unifies Diana and Mother Teresa as aspects of 'Mother Mary'. The coincidence of the death dates of Diana and Teresa and their association with charitable works resonated strongly both at a folk level and within popular culture. It was, by and large, primarily the academic community that expressed the greatest doubt at this equivalence or, indeed, the straightforwardly moral impulse behind the charitable gestures of either woman. Arvind RajaGopal, for instance, delineates the problematic presence of Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity upon the Indian political landscape and their apparent self-promotion while indicating how 'media images' serve to draw Teresa and Diana together despite their evident differences. He suggests that their 'merging . . . in one trope of charity [may have been] a sentimental response to the problem of poverty . . . in one global regime of representation' (1999: 138). While Linda Woodhead highlights the religious differences between the pious, doctrinaire nun and the spiritual, heterodox princess, she also points to the extent to which institutionalized religion had failed to keep pace with popular conceptions of sanctity.[9]

9. Linda Woodhead, 'Diana and the Religion of the Heart', in Richards *et al.,* 1999: 119-39.

Indeed, the cultic milieu has had little problem in reconciling the two; we can see how Diana and Teresa have been conjoined and re-embodied (and, let us not overlook, commodified) in a wand sold through www.crescentmoongoddess.com that is described as follows:

> DIANA-TERESA Crystal Wand
>
> Pink glass staff with rose quartz beads & a Goddess symbol, with rose quartz ends. 10 inches long. Includes a velvet bag.
>
> This wand was created in the memory of Princess Diana & Mother Teresa who inspired us globally to reveal our own hidden abilities to make a difference on our planet. Use this wand to see the beauty & strength within yourself. $90 (http://www.crescentmoongoddess.com/p121.htm).

As is becoming apparent, within the cultic milieu Diana was as much subject to the syncretic impulse as she was syncretizing seeker. In the Diana–Teresa crystal wand we see both women united and marked with 'a Goddess symbol', a further strand of the cultic milieu woven into the object. The wand reverberates across the fields of celebrity, Catholicism, and a generalized paganism (something we could read into the Marian Diana prophecy above). There are also overtones of nature worship in the following message channelled from Diana's spirit by medium Diane Tessman:

> Regardless of the cause of my passing on Earth, it was time on the cosmic clock, for me, The Angel, Diana Luminatis, to become fully empowered. I have awakened once again right as Earth needs me most. . . . Angel Diana is linked closely with the living spirit of Mother Earth. I, Diana Luminatis, am infinitely and proudly connected to Mother Earth (http://www.hammerwood.mistral.co.uk/tragic.htm).

Tessman now channels Tibus, a star person who communicates from 'future human consciousness', but her message from Diana Luminatis further emphasizes the polysemic nature of Diana within the cultic milieu: she is capable of sustaining multiple readings, and repeatedly we find her assuming a messianic or eschatological role, awakening or appearing, 'when we need her most'. Rather than her polysemy being emblematic of an unresolved and ill-formed spirituality—both hers and those who have found spiritual meaning in her life and subsequent existence—this multiplicity of potential 'meanings' maps the multinodal journey of the typical seeker within the cultic milieu.

For some, Diana is one stopping point on a complex personal journey through the cultural underground, a stopping point whose coordinates may be different for each visitor; and yet, to others, she is a guide on that journey. She has become, within the cultic milieu, emblematic of its heterodox and syncretic nature and part of the milieu itself. We should not however overlook the broader spiritual impact of Diana. Chris Rojek is keen to explore the idea that, in keeping with the secularization thesis, the presence and

power of religious thought in everyday life have declined and that, in our secular age, celebrity has usurped the worship of the saints, divine beings and deities. While casting his response to this problematic as partial, Rojek is prepared to state, 'To the extent that organized religion has declined in the West, celebrity culture has emerged as one of the replacement strategies that promote new orders of meaning and solidarity' (2001: 98).

This allows Rojek the opportunity to thus see celebrity culture as being cast in the Durkheimian role as 'a significant institution in the normative achievement of social integration' (2001: 99). But this is a limited view of religion and sustainable only in the instance of religious behaviour that is mediated through the institutions of organized orthodox religious beliefs; the cultic milieu seems to offer a model of religious practice that is countercultural and, in certain instances, world-rejecting. Although Rojek recognizes that aspects of our integration of celebrities into our cultural life worlds are modelled on rudimentary religious forms such as ascent, descent and redemption, there are further examples that the secular world has, in fact, been partially (re) enchanted through folk and popular responses to celebrity deaths.

Rojek comes close to this in passages dealing with what he refers to as celebrity reliquaries, for instance: photographs signed by celebrities, napkins, cigarette butts, or hotel sheets used by them—the ephemera of daily life transformed into sacred objects. These reliquaries are complemented by the use of their former homes or their final resting places as shrines: Elvis's Graceland home or Jim Morrison's Parisian grave, for example. Jeffrey Richards noted a similar sacralization process in the case of Diana.[10] He describes the manner in which Diana evoked echoes of the curative powers ascribed to the monarchy during the late medieval and early modern period and their ability to cure scrofula, 'The King's Evil', by means of the laying on of hands. Like Rojek, Richards describes the memorabilia and merchandise that emerged following Diana's death and casts it in the light of holy relics and their reliquaries. Also, like Rojek, he points to the emergence of shrines to Diana, particularly outside Kensington Palace, describing how it 'became an instant shrine, almost engulfed in flowers, candles, and simple childlike poems attesting to love felt for the dead Princess' (1999: 61).

Unlike Rojek, Richards describes this as being akin to medieval mourning for the passing of popular local holy persons, with the Catholic Church tending to canonize these figures in an effort to incorporate the popular feeling for them within its orthodoxy. This is, if you like, a recuperation of the cultic milieu in its most nascent form—'the popular mystical'—in which an acephalous cultic movement is contained within the orthodoxy through the institutional mechanisms of that orthodoxy. In the medieval period, the

10. Jeffrey Richards, 'The Hollywoodisation of Diana', in Richards *et al.,* 1999: 59-73.

harnessing of folk cult movements for the assured maintenance of solidarity and social integration does not seem out of place, but to our ears it sounds distant—of that time and place alone.

Michael Taussig's *The Magic of the State,* a work of 'fictocriticism', narrates the complexity of national identities and rituals of spirit possession in modern Venezuela. In one emblematic passage he describes a scene in a shed behind a house in a lower-middle-class *barrio*:

> All of one wall was taken up by a huge *portal* or shrine. To the left there was a three-foot-high statue of *El Indio* Guaicaipuro. On the right was a similarly large statue of *El Negro* Primero, while in the center was a massive statue of the spirit queen. On the extreme right was a bronze-colored statue of the Liberator, about a foot in height. Densely occupying all remaining space were scores of candles, portraits, and figurines of spirits (1997: 59).

The national hero, the Liberator—symbol of the political enablement of the nation—thus takes up a position amid the oppressed and exploited peoples of the nation and, to map the cultural underground onto the spirit queen, the cultic milieu. Coupled to them through his simultaneous invocation with the spirit queen and the oppressed and exploited masses, the national hero is afforded a sacred destiny.

Taussig, through metaphor and details from the life, death and symbolic afterlife of Simon Bolivar, demonstrates how the national hero as a quasi-mythical-magical figure is a key element in the assurance of the nation-state as eternal and transcendent. Throughout the literature on Diana within the cultic milieu, she is repeatedly tied to the nation, and this motif is repeated in the online material within this literature. It is, of course, paradoxical that in a global and globalizing medium, the reproduction of a localized national mythos should be reproduced. It might be suggested that Diana's link to the nation was determined by her role within the British monarchy. This drawing together of Diana and the nation is, however, rarely done by the *de facto* means of her aristocratic background and her marriage into the British royal family; instead it is achieved through what Taussig calls 'the spirit queen'—the elusive idea of the nation as it exists in myth and legend. The Web page 'Deathwalking with Diana', which seeks to interpret a series of the author's dreams about her, suggests, 'It would seem, on reflection, that the old Arthurian myth of the Grail King, who is wounded because of the illness of the land, which has become the Wasteland, is being superseded by a Grail Queen myth, personified as Diana' (http://www.greatdreams.com/diana.html). The page is one of several that are featured on the 'Great Dreams' Web site (http://www.greatdreams.com). The site focuses on the dreams of its contributors but also reproduces a wide variety of materials originating on other Web sites that constitute the digital cultic milieu.

This motif is oft repeated and, indeed, forms the basis of a number of conspiracy theories that have surfaced regarding Diana. Perhaps the most striking is 'Antichrist Conspiracy Revealed',[11] which seeks to demonstrate that Prince William is King Arthur reborn and is also the Antichrist foretold in the book of Revelation. To achieve these ends, 'a Merovingian Virgin was sought and found in the young and perfectly naive, Diana Spencer, the rest is history'. Diane Tessman's channelling of Diana's spirit revealed:

> I am much pleased that the song 'Goodbye, England's Rose' was written in such a way as to link Princess Diana with The Land, which is in this particular incidence, England. It is reminiscent of King Arthur's magical connection to The Land. As Princess Diana, I loved the land of England very much, and I still am a loving presence there (http://www.hammerwood.mistral.co.uk/tragic.htm).

Repeatedly the national hero is linked to the land and to the spirit queen; in fact we might suggest here that Diana represents the coalescence of the national hero into the spirit queen. Certainly we find her, like Taussig's statue of the Liberator, forever associated with marginalized groups and communities within the UK and yet always defined through her absence from the Royal Family. She is also always a princess, a royal sleeping beauty on an Avalonian island forever connected to the nation. The lyrics of 'Goodbye, England's Rose' bind together the national Diana and the mythic Diana. In borrowing from William Blake's 'Jerusalem', Elton John cast Diana in a messianic light:

> And your footsteps will always fall here,
> Along England's greenest hills;
> Your candle's burned out long before
> Your legend ever will.

In this Diana has legendary status conferred on her and, more pertinently here, while a large amount of material cited above may be considered cultural marginalia, we find in the hugely popular song performed at her funeral in Westminster Abbey an intimation of the eternal presence within England of her immortal soul. Diana the seeker in the cultic milieu is thus recuperated, and her heterodox spirituality provides the basis for her immortalization as England's spirit queen.

A New Home for the Spirit Queen

The Internet, as a medium, offers a realm of experience in which the immaterial self is projected into a setting that offers, via hypertext links and the endless crossroads of the search engines, infinite travel without movement.

11. 'Antichrist Conspiracy Revealed', http://web.archive.org/web/20070323005548; http://www.angelfire.com/alt2/conspiracy/1.html (accessed 30 May 2008).

The philosopher Jean François Lyotard saw in the Internet the possibility for the production of a blueprint for humanity. He wrote:

> The electronic and information network spread over the earth gives rise to a global capacity for memorising which must be estimated at the cosmic scale, without common measure with that of traditional cultures. The paradox implied by this memory resides in the fact that in the last analysis it is nobody's memory. But 'nobody' here means that the body supporting the memory is no longer an earth bound body. Computers never stop being able to synthesize more and more 'times,' so that Liebniz could have said of this process that it is on the way to producing a monad much more 'complete' than humanity itself has ever been able to (1993: 64).

Facebook and other social networking sites record the disembodied self, preserving it within this near-complete monad. In offering the promise of a means to free the soul from living body and a digitized immortality, we can see the manner in which conceptual experiences of the Internet converge with those offered by traditional religions, as hinted at by Beckerlegge. The inhabitation of the Internet as described by Novak approaches the kind of mystical and spiritual forms that Ernst Troeltsch suggests that intellectuals and artists who are disenfranchised from institutionalized religions would find appealing (1976). Cyberspace is at once creatively enacted through engagement while simultaneously offering the potential for an endlessly interlinked repository of texts, dialogues, statements, positions and so forth. It is, for some users, further charged with a spiritual vitality through its technological realization of the interconnectedness of humanity.[12]

This mode of experiencing cyberspace and the promise of entering a technologically novel realm of being in which stigmatized knowledge is freely disseminated without the editorial or productive limitations associated with traditional publishing allows the rapid, globalized, multiplication of the cultic milieu. It is a rich ground for the spiritual seeker. The quest for knowledge of the spirit, self, or deistic presence is greatly aided by linkedness and easily searched, thus bringing Campbell's 'cultural underground of society' far closer to the surface. Despite attempts to locate it in the everyday (see reference to Lister *et al.* above), it does, nonetheless, provide an imaginative setting for an Other world that is rife with mythological tropes, a world yet to come that, nonetheless, is among us. *The Matrix* does, still, take its cues from the technological separateness that we sense within the Web—that world of light on the other side of the screen (*pace* McLuhan) or Novak's architectures of the human imagination. Coupled with the seekership described by Campbell, we have a living cultic milieu in which seekership can be enacted and extended into an opportunity for expression. It

12. We might also consider the case put forward by Erik Davis in *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999).

is therefore an ideal context within which the apocalyptic imagination can flourish and in which prophecies can be shared, reformulated and re-presented in the way that 2008 became a transitional moment rather than the expected cataclysmic one for Michael McClellan.

This is the terrain in which Diana, Princess of Wales, is afforded a virtual immortality as a digitally prophesied redeemer, iconic object-level dream messenger, or particularly, an aspect of an enlightened being. The audience are seekers, and it is Web searches and links from other Web sites that lead them through the tangled web of the cultic milieu. With movement (the leaf on the wind of Novak's dreamer) directed by the seeker's range of interest, the hypertextuality of the Web traces the topography of individualized and syncretic pathways through the cultic milieu. In this sense, Google acts as a host for unending New Age 'fairs' with stall-holders never needing to pack up and go home unless they fail to pay their hosting fees. The search engines, then, become intermediaries through which like-minded fellows can discover shared narrative spaces. This is, of course, heightened by the advent of Web 2.0 and the widespread assumption of Web sites with interactive features, particularly message forums and the ability to leave comments.

Against this backdrop, the invigoration of dead Diana and her online transformation attest to the powerful capability of the digitized Network of Light to maintain an active afterlife for (the celebrity) dead. The forty-three thousand monthly visitors to the New Prophecy Web site —whatever their level of engagement—confirm its rationale as a disseminating node within the global village and contribute to the virtual apotheosis of Diana. To a global audience, Albion is an idealized homeland within the Virtual, and her renewal of it vouchsafes their shared replenishment through the networks of light and of wires. The end may be always imminent, but it is at least deferred until the next Web page and the next prophecy; the seeker's quest pauses but there is always one more link to follow, one more search term to submit.

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2. From Peak Oil to the Apocalypse: Cultural Myths and the Public Understanding of Scientific Models

William A. Stahl

Abstract

This chapter examines some of the cultural factors affecting the public understanding of scientific modeling of climate change and resource depletion. Because the models of global warming and peak oil challenge the central premises of advanced industrial society, debates not only quickly become conflicts over legitimacy but are pushed to the deepest levels of legitimizing representations—symbols and myths that lie at the roots of modern society, in particular, myths of the apocalypse. Using English-language Internet (and some published) sources, a simple typology of responses to the models on the part of the public will be developed. These responses can be roughly classified as denial, as apocalyptic or as adaptationist. The chapter will conclude by reflecting on how the structure of Internet discourse affects the conduct of the debates and the implicit religion in which the scientific models are embedded.

The ancients were ambiguous about predicting the future. On one hand, it was always lucrative for soothsayers and court prophets to tell the powerful what they wanted to hear. On the other hand, in the Greek myth, Cassandra was cursed by the gods with the ability to know the future—and never to be believed. Twenty-one hundred years ago, writers in West Asia were influenced by the dualistic Persian cosmology that saw an eternal war between good and evil, and they began producing a new form of literature, which we call *apocalyptic*, from the Greek word meaning 'revelation'. Written for oppressed people, this literature was characterized by secret numerology and complex symbolism to hide its meaning from their oppressors.

Apocalyptic literature offered people who were powerless and persecuted the hope that God would vindicate them. It also bequeathed to the Abrahamic religions and the cultures they shaped a strong sense of *telos*, the belief that history has a direction. Millenarian movements have appeared periodically ever since (Cohen 1970).

Today, scientists have become harbingers of the apocalypse. Thirty-five years ago, a team of MIT scientists used computer-based models and the techniques of system dynamics to produce a study for the Club of Rome (Meadows *et al.* 1972). Continuous growth, they argued, was not sustainable on a finite planet. Should population growth, resource use and pollution continue to increase at exponential rates, industrial society was headed for catastrophe. *The Limits to Growth* touched off an enormous controversy and energized the environmental movement. But in the 1980s the price of oil fell, the political climate changed, and the warnings of the modelers were dismissed. Now these same issues have returned in debates over peak oil and global warming. This has touched off an intense debate over the meaning and validity of the models, a debate centred (albeit not exclusively) on the Internet.

This chapter will examine some of the cultural factors affecting the public understanding of scientific modeling of climate change and resource depletion. The debates over *The Limits to Growth* and the models of global warming and peak oil are more than routine credibility contests, such as go on all the time in the workings of normal science. Because these models challenge the central premises of advanced industrial society, however, the debates not only quickly become conflicts over legitimacy but are pushed to the deepest levels of legitimizing representations—symbols and myths that lie at the roots of modern society, in particular, myths of the apocalypse. Since this is a public and political debate, these symbols and myths play a more decisive role in the discourse of all sides than do the scientific and technical aspects of the models themselves. The various positions under study invoke these 'deep' representations to create meaning and establish authority for their programmes.

This analysis will proceed through three steps. First, as conflicts over legitimacy, the public response to the models is not based primarily on the precision of their science but on images, symbols and myths. In other words, in the public discourse culture dominates science. Second, using English-language Internet (and some published) sources, a simple typology of responses to the models on the part of the public will be developed. These responses can be roughly classified as *denial*, as *apocalyptic* or as *adaptationist*. A hermeneutical analysis of representative texts (see Geertz 1973; Ricoeur 1970, 1976; Schutz 1973) will reveal that one central factor in these responses is the deep narratives, or myths, that ground each discourse. The chapter will conclude by reflecting on how the structure of Internet dis-

course affects the conduct of the debates and the implicit religion in which the scientific models are embedded.

Models as Discourse

The models used in *The Limits to Growth* and to forecast global warming and peak oil are different in their aims, scope, methodologies and quality. *Limits to Growth* was one of the first studies to use techniques of system dynamics developed by Jay W. Forrester and others and has been through two further iterations since its original publication (Meadows, Meadows and Randers 1993; Meadows, Randers and Meadows 2004). These refined the models of the first study but did not substantively change the conclusions: that unless there are radical changes soon, the world is headed toward an economic and environmental crisis.

The most important models of global warming are in the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), especially the Fourth Assessment Report (2007). This report presents a series of scenarios of climate change, each based on different assumptions of the extent of greenhouse gas outputs by the industrialized countries. The IPCC models are criticized by some environmentalists for being unduly conservative in their projections, and they point to warming in the arctic, which has already outpaced the worst-case scenarios of the IPCC (see Spratt and Sutton 2008).

The first model of peak oil, used to forecast successfully the 1970 peak of American domestic oil production, was developed by M. King Hubbert, an American petroleum engineer, in the 1950s. Using his techniques and others, various models forecast world peak oil production for somewhere between 2005 and 2015, after which production will irreversibly decline (e.g. *The Oil Drum*; ASPO; *Energy Bulletin*; Deffeyes 2005; Zittel and Schindler 2007). While all models are dependent on their initial assumptions and the quality and availability of pertinent data, those of peak oil are particularly limited by corporate and state secrecy on oil reserves and the 'political' nature of much of the data that is published. Nevertheless, Energy Information Administration (Energy Information Administration; *Oil Watch Monthly*) figures show a peak in conventional crude oil production in 2005 and a peak in total oil production in 2008. Whether either is *the* peak is subject to extensive debate.

Scientific models are not independent of culture. Models, like any other aspect of science, are always received by the public through pre-existing cultural frameworks that may affect the degree of either the public's acceptance or its resistance. What the models of *Limits to Growth*, climate change and peak oil have in common, and what justifies studying them together, is that they are 'reality-changing' concepts; that is, they project a future in which continuation of advanced industrial society in its current form will

lead to disaster. They challenge the viability of two of the central premises of industrial society: continuous growth, and the substitution of energy for labour through the use of technology. In doing so, these models challenge the legitimacy of advanced industrial society (see Jacques 2006; Litfin 2000).

Legitimacy is always a practical problem. A difficulty faced by anyone trying to exercise authority is that no person or institution can be self-legitimating—authority is always granted by others and is given only as a response to an appeal for justification. People have to be persuaded that an exercise of power is legitimate. There are two aspects to this process.

First, authority is not found in the abstract, but always in relation to a particular concrete situation, pattern of behaviour or exercise of power. Some institutions in society may have great authority, but for any given action to become legitimate, that authority has to be actualized in a specific situation. Thus, in Western societies science has had a great deal of what Christopher Toumey (1996) calls 'plenary authority', but any particular action or policy must still be justified by claiming the mantle of science *for that action*. Trust and credibility cannot be taken for granted by any side in a controversy but have to be built through mobilizing resources in specific situations. Because of this, scientific conflicts are a series of *credibility contests* (Gieryn 1999) where the issue at stake is who gets to 'speak for science'. In public debates over science there is the additional complication of the enormous difference in knowledge between experts and the public (see Fuller 1997: 40-79).

Since all of the models under discussion raise implicit or explicit calls to action and therefore make demands on both citizens and policymakers, the public is required to decide what to believe about scientific controversies that might otherwise have been kept within the boundaries of the scientific community. At one level, the models raise profound philosophical and political questions that go well beyond technical questions of accuracy and certainty (see Miller 2001; Shackley and Wynne 1996). Because these models are contested, they require policy-makers and citizens to devise practical answers to abstract questions such as What makes for legitimate knowledge? and Who is entitled to speak for nature? (Miller and Edwards 2001: 11). Thus, for example, the public is asked to decide which account of nature is correct: that of the IPCC or that of those who deny anthropogenic global warming. But this task is frustrated because the models themselves are so complex that even other scientists (not to mention the public) are 'downstream' from the modeling process and 'forced to put their faith in technical expertise that they do not fully understand' (Demeritt 2001: 309; Schneider 2001). People are paradoxically asked to take action as citizens based on deference to authority. The result, then, is that all sides in the debates are engaged in a contest for authority. The outcome turns on which

rival group is believed and trusted by enough of the public to enable political action.

Second, there are many levels of legitimacy in any society. Picture the span of legitimating representations in a society as a continuum, ranging from the 'shallow' to the 'deep'. At the shallow end are found those representations that are mere spin, excuse or rationalization. They are ideology in the sense of false consciousness—the more or less conscious lies and self-deceptions put forward to justify a particular interest or to persuade others to a given course of action. Progressively deeper down the scale come appeals to self-interest, practicality, 'recipe knowledge', civil and criminal law and what Robert Bellah and his associates called the languages of justification, that is, 'the dominant forms of discourse about moral, social, and political matters' (1985: 334). At the deepest level we find appeals to myths. Myths, Mary Midgley says, 'are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world. They shape its meaning' (2003: 1). The deeper the story, the more *sacred* it is (in Durkheim's sense of the term) and the more likely it is to be embedded, that is, implicit, taken-for-granted, simply a statement of 'the way things are'. Myths are not just 'stories about the gods' or 'stories that are not true' but those narratives of particular salience or depth that form the ground or framework or matrix of discourse.

Symbols and myths are never univocal. In contrast to media depictions of cultural 'hot-button' issues only needing to be 'pushed' by politicians, public credibility contests involve the construction of complex structures of meaning. Agents need to mobilize available representations to configure meaning and generate political action (Geertz 1973: 193-223). Invocation of a myth in a credibility contest is therefore an appeal to shared meanings at the deepest level. Which representation is used in any given circumstance is determined by the persons or groups seeking and offering justification, the level of commitment they attach to the particular issues in question, the representation's place within the broader organization of meaning and the skill of those who invoke it. Thus, any particular image or story may or may not be invoked in any given controversy, and different political factions will not necessarily utilize—or be swayed by—the same ones.

Because of this, the debates over the models take place at a number of levels. At one level are credibility contests among scientists and policymakers over the accuracy and adequacy of the models, the details of which have been discussed elsewhere and will not be addressed here (see, e.g. *Real Climate*). The contests in the public forum are of a different kind. In these contests, images, symbols and myths are more important for convincing the public than are technical arguments.

A Typology of Responses

A simple typology of public responses to the models can be developed from a review of English-language Internet sources. These responses can be roughly classified as *denial*, as *apocalyptic* or as *adaptationist*. This analysis will look at how symbols and myths are used by each response to create meaning and mobilize political action.

Denial

The denial response includes all those who reject anthropogenic global warming, 'cornucopians' (those who argue that natural resources, including oil, are for all practical purposes limitless) and 'environmental skeptics' of all types. Their rhetoric dismisses the apocalyptic implications of climate change and peak oil and advocates 'business as usual'. Nearly all are closely associated with, or take their lead from, large corporations and conservative 'think tanks' in the United States (McCright and Dunlap 2003). Indeed, Jacques, Dunlap and Freeman (2008) found that of 141 English-language books that promote environmental skepticism, 130 of them (92.2%) were associated with conservative think tanks. Similarly, denialist blogs and Web pages are often directly or indirectly subsidized by think tanks and/or energy companies (see *Source Watch*; *Desmogblog*). No small number of Internet public forum comments are generated by 'Astroturf' campaigns, that is, by professional public relations campaigns camouflaged as 'grassroots' activists or ordinary citizens (Monbiot 2006: 20-42; Keen 2007: 94). Nearly all follow a consistent strategy first laid out in the 1950s by the public relations firm Hill & Knowlton for the tobacco industry: prolong controversy, create uncertainty, emphasize other factors, call for more research and, above all, delay action (Michaels and Monforton 2005). While a welter of scientific and pseudo-scientific arguments are raised in these contests of credibility, the debate, in Peter Jacques words, 'is not about science. It is about politics' (2006: 76).

Because the debate is about politics, the technical details that fill the rhetoric of denial are more or less irrelevant—they are raised to sow doubt and as soon as one argument is refuted another takes its place. More important are the sources of legitimacy invoked. Four clusters of symbols and myths are particularly prominent in the rhetoric of denial: progress, the market, the prophet of doom and the heroic scientist. I will briefly look at each.

A central tenet of modern thought has been that, through science and technology, people would be able to gain control over nature and society and build the kind of future they want. As Ronald Wright describes it, 'Our practical faith in progress has ramified and hardened into an ideology—a secular religion which, like the religions which progress has challenged,

is blind to certain flaws in its credentials. Progress, therefore, has become "myth" in the anthropological sense' (2004: 4). Peter Jacques (2006) describes the interpretation of progress invoked by environmental skeptics as *deep anthropocentrism*. Bjørn Lomborg clearly expressed it:

> The fact is . . . that this civilization has over the last 400 years brought us fantastic and continued progress. . . . *We have more leisure time, greater security and fewer accidents, more education, more amenities, higher incomes, fewer starving, more food and a healthier and longer life'* (2001: 328 [italics original]).

This trope echoes across the Internet in almost the same words (see Porter 2009; Bailey 2000). In this interpretation of progress, humans are the measure of all things; science, technology and industry will continue to meet every challenge; and substitutes will be found for scarce resources. Ironically, the assumption behind this version of the myth is faith that the future will be like the past. Of course, the point of *Limits to Growth* and the models of global warming and peak oil is that the future will *not* be like the past. But by invoking this version of progress, the rhetoric of denial gains a powerful source of legitimacy because it is a plausible interpretation of what people (in the developed world, at least) 'know' about the past and reflects commonly expressed wishes and hopes for the future. Denialists are able to mobilize cultural traditions of optimism for their program.

Alongside progress, the myth of the market is central to the rhetoric of denial. The market is a modern myth, formed through narratives told in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by people such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Bernard Mandeville, and Adam Smith. By the mid-nineteenth century the market had become a myth, equated with natural law and divine providence (Saul 2005; Fox 2009). In the myth of the market, society is a mechanism, the economy runs according to natural law and individuals are producers and consumers competing in the marketplace. Individuals are free to look out for their own good and the laws of nature—the invisible hand of the marketplace—assure the good of all. The rhetoric of denial is permeated with this myth. Governmental regulation is denounced as at best counterproductive, if not intrinsically evil. So long as markets are functioning unimpeded, it is assumed, they will *automatically* take care of environmental problems and resource scarcity (see Bailey 2000). This is magical thinking, but because the market is a myth, an all-but-unquestioned story about the 'way the world is', its invocation gives legitimacy to programs of inaction.

The third myth commonly encountered in the rhetoric of denial is the prophet of doom. Every culture has a variety of symbols, stories and myths, and rarely do they speak with one voice. The prophet of doom is a symbol that explicitly rejects apocalyptic visions. It, too, has deep roots in Western

culture. One of the central narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures is conflict between the prophets of Yahweh and false prophets, a concern carried into the Christian New Testament and reenacted periodically by the church in conflicts over heresy. In 1798, Thomas Malthus (1976) argued that population increases geometrically while the supply of food could only increase arithmetically, thus forcing population to remain at subsistence levels.

The industrial revolution, however, brought unimagined (to Malthus, at least) increases in productivity and soon 'Malthusian' became a term for unreasoning pessimism. During the Second Great Awakening in the first half of the nineteenth century, a number of evangelical Protestant leaders prophesied the imminent end of the world, which led their followers into 'the Great Disappointment' (Ahlstrom 1975). By the end of the twentieth century the prophet of doom had become a comic figure, usually portrayed in cartoons as a bearded fanatic in sandals and robe carrying a sign announcing the end (e.g. Salmon 1993).

These images are regularly invoked in denial rhetoric. In Ronald Bailey's words, 'The prophets of doom were not simply wrong, but *spectacularly* wrong' (2000). Supposed predictions from environmentalists in the past are repeatedly held up as prophecies that failed (even if deniers not infrequently make up the prediction; see Bardi 2008; Monbiot 2006). The aim of all this is to attack environmentalists as misguided fanatics or cynical manipulators out for money and power while the models themselves are denounced, in the words of one Web commentator, as a 'massive lie' (Delingpole 2009). This myth was particularly prominent in the rhetoric of denial following the 'climategate' theft of e-mails from East Anglia University in late 2009. The image of the prophet of doom enables those who invoke it to channel warnings of potential future disaster into a familiar trope where it can be easily dismissed, while at the same time denying authority to those who issued the warning.

As the scientific consensus around anthropogenic global warming has strengthened, it has become more difficult to marginalize the IPCC and its models as the rants of extremist prophets of doom (warnings of peak oil are still treated this way). Environmental skeptics have countered scientific consensus by invoking the myth of the heroic scientist. The heroic scientist is the individual who, convinced of the truth, stands alone against the crowd, often at personal risk (Stahl, Campbell, Petry and Diver 2002: 53-68).

The archetypes of this myth are the trial of Galileo and the martyrdom of Socrates. Textbooks and popular writing about science are full of these stories: Thomas Henry Huxley facing down Bishop Wilberforce to establish the truth of evolution. Albert Einstein, a mere patent clerk, bravely turning the established world of physics upside down. Barbara McClintock overcoming the sexism of the scientific establishment to win the Nobel Prize. These stories function to inculcate values and models of behaviour; to tell scientists who they are and what is expected of them. In the rhetoric of

denial, the myth of the heroic scientist is used to validate those who stand against the scientific consensus. As one blogger put it,

> Science can be used in the same way as holy books. Just pick and choose. Darwin had problems getting his ideas through the scientific establishment of his day, and pretty well every scientific theory starts off with a basic assumption that is found to work nearly every time, until someone comes up with one that works even more often ('Constituent' 2009).

And Essex and McKitrick invoke Giordano Bruno, Galileo and Trofim Lysenko to show that '[i]t can be dangerous to be a thinker at odds with official policy about nature' (2002: 21). Even their chosen word of self-description, *skeptic*, evokes images of the rational individual who is not fooled or swayed by the crowd. In wrapping themselves in the mantle of Socrates and Galileo, environmental skeptics appropriate to themselves the authority of heroic defenders of the truth.

In all of these instances, those who engage in the rhetoric of denial invoke available images, symbols, and myths in order to gain legitimacy for their own programme and to deny authority to their opponents. They fashion a narrative of complacency and optimism for the future based on continuation of the status quo.

Apocalypse

The second response is to see these models as portents of the apocalypse. The models question the continued viability of industrial society, and some take this a sign of the Wrath to Come. In general, these people accept these models' warnings about the future, but believe that nothing can be done to avert catastrophe. On the surface, *The Limits to Growth* and the models forecasting global warming and peak oil do indeed appear to be a new form of apocalyptic literature. Encoded in arcane mathematics is the message that 'life as we know it' cannot continue in the future. While the previous group responded to these warnings with denial, what characterizes the apocalyptic response is despair.

'Doomers' (as they are frequently referred to on the Web) are a diverse group. Not all accept all of the models—some focus on peak oil to the exclusion of global warming or vice versa. The quality of their work ranges from serious and thoughtful attempts to think through what peak oil and/or global warming might entail to fantastic visions of total destruction. (For examples of the former, see Astyk; Greer; or Kunstler; for the latter, see Duncan 2005–2006). Nor is there any consistent program, although survivalists and 'back-to-the-land' campaigners form identifiable subgroups. Doomers do, however, frequently share several characteristics.

First, nearly all of them see a rapid and complete collapse of industrial civilization in the very near future (for an exception, see Greer). There is a

tendency among some to see each downturn of the stock market or upswing in the price of oil as a sign of imminent collapse. Many believe that human nature or vested interests will prevent society from averting disaster, for the rest 'it's just too late'. There will be neither time nor resources to enact reforms before the collapse. Second, like Christian fundamentalists who believe they will 'Raptured' away before the suffering of the Tribulation begins, a significant number of doomers believe that they (or their group or their locality) will survive the end of civilization. Finally, running through some (but by no means all) doomer discourse is an undercurrent of implicit racism. Not uncommonly, people in the Third World play no role in their visions except to die by the billions. A few think that the main problem will be to protect themselves from the 'marauding hordes' (McPherson 2008) that will emerge from post-collapse cities.

All these themes are illustrated in *Uncivilization*, the manifesto of the Dark Mountain Project, drafted by British writers Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine (2009). The world is at the edge of environmental and economic collapse, they proclaim. Indeed, human civilization has become so alienated from nature that humans are committing ecocide. The problem, they say, lies in the stories on which civilization is grounded, in particular the myth of progress and the belief that humans are separated from nature. Since civilization is doomed by its own corruption and excess, they call for a movement of artists and writers to forge new, 'uncivilized' myths.

> This, then, is Uncivilized writing. Human, inhuman, stoic and entirely natural. Humble, questioning, suspicious of the big idea and the easy answer. Walking the boundaries and reopening old conversations. Apart but engaged, its practitioners always willing to get their hands dirty; aware, in fact that dirt is essential; that keyboards should be tapped by those with soil under their fingernails and wilderness in their heads (2009: 16).

Although the Dark Mountain Project has attracted attention on the Internet, it illustrates most of the contradictions of the apocalyptic position. While civilization is at an end, and nothing can be done to save it (nor should we try), they believe, artists and writers will not only survive but continue to tap their keyboards. The death of billions is passed over with equanimity. Yet in seeing the artist as a Nietzschean superman who can transcend culture—and indeed, civilization itself—*The Dark Mountain Manifesto* repeats just another modern story. The authors espouse old-fashioned Romanticism, call it daring and embrace that most modern of philosophies, nihilism, and call it nature.

Two thousand years ago, apocalyptic literature offered people who were powerless, oppressed, and persecuted the hope that God would vindicate them. Today, the myth of the apocalypse still speaks to people who are powerless and afraid and helps them to create meaning in a threatening world.

But instead of hope, the message doomers deliver does not often go beyond *sauve qui peut*.

Adaptationist

In the third group are those who take global warming and peak oil seriously and advocate action to ameliorate and adapt to the changes the models project for the future. There are several identifiable subsets of adaptationist positions on the Internet. First are the scientists and models themselves, as represented by the Web page of the IPCC or blogs such as *Real Climate*. Interestingly, nearly all those who actually do the modeling fall into the adaptationist camp. Second is a group we can call activists. Their Web sites are calls to action, urging people to limit global warming, find alternative sources of energy, protect the environment and, as Lester Brown puts it, 'providing a plan to save civilization'. The third group is made up of utopians, who believe the crisis will open the door to a perfect society, if only we adopt their programme. This analysis will focus on the latter two groups.

The discourse of adaptationists is often as apocalyptic as that of the doomers, but they differ from doomers in their belief that there is still time to act. Behind the typically hortatory tone of adaptationist sites, however, is often a sense of desperation. For example, George Monbiot, a leading British environmental activist, was frank in an online debate with Paul Kingsnorth (Monbiot 2009). 'Like you I have become ever gloomier about our surviving the crash you predict.' Monbiot wrote, 'For the past few years I have been almost professionally optimistic, exhorting people to keep fighting, knowing that to say there is no hope is to make it so. I still have some faith in our ability to make rational decisions based on evidence. But it is waning.' Nevertheless, he concludes, 'However faint the hopes of engineering a soft landing—an ordered and structured downsizing of the global economy—might be, we must keep this possibility alive.' Without action, he believes, the apocalypse becomes a certainty.

In addition to the dangers of the apocalypse, adaptationists frequently invoke two myths to legitimate their position: their own interpretation of progress and the myth of the citizen.

Adaptationists are engaged in a sharp contest to appropriate the myth of progress. In the rhetoric of denial, progress is invoked to justify complacency, faith that technology and the market will automatically solve environmental and resource problems and optimism that the future will be much like the past. Adaptationists accept the grim warnings of the scientific models but invoke the myth of progress to mobilize people to meet the challenge. Instead of complacency, progress is interpreted here as the drive to overcome all obstacles and secure a sustainable future. As former US vice president Al Gore put it (2008): 'We must now lift our nation to reach

another goal that will change history. Our entire civilization depends upon us now embarking on a new journey of exploration and discovery.' Many compare the tasks they see ahead with challenges faced and overcome in the past, likening the endeavour to the Apollo moon project or the mobilization of the US economy to win the Second World War. This is progress on a heroic scale.

For some, this faith in heroic progress becomes a passport to utopia. Commonly, heroic progress is identified with one or another technology, particularly if it is projected on a gigantic scale and/or allows climate and energy problems to be overcome while maintaining current lifestyles and standards of living. Harvey Wasserman's *Solartopia* (2006) is a good example. Faith in heroic progress here becomes yet another technical fix. Others see mobilization against the crisis as the opportunity to reorganize society along utopian lines. For example, Web sites like those of David Korten call upon their followers to 'displace the prevailing Empire prosperity, security, and meaning stories that define dominator hierarchy as the natural and essential human order, with Earth Community prosperity, security, and meaning stories that celebrate the human capacity to live in cooperative balance with one another and Earth'. If people would just adopt the right beliefs and values, they believe, the crisis would be transcended and the new age would arrive. In the rhetoric of either form of utopianism, the myth of heroic progress becomes little more than belief in magic.

The second myth frequently invoked by the rhetoric of adaptation is that of the citizen. The citizen, of course, is a central narrative of liberal political discourse, embodied in the symbols and charter documents of the American and French Revolutions. It is a fundamental myth of modern democratic society. As invoked in the rhetoric of adaptation, the myth of the citizen becomes an exhortation to the public to become active, to take control of public life away from vested interests and to engage in democratic decision making. 'If politicians remain at loggerheads', James Hansen declares, 'citizens must lead' (2008). Echoing the rhetoric of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Payne, promoters of the myth call upon citizens to make a choice—and to choose the common good. 'Saving civilization is not a spectator sport', says Lester Brown, 'Each of us has a leading role to play.' Through the myth of the citizen, the rhetoric of adaptation tries to overcome the distractions and inertia of consumer society and to mobilize the public to action.

The Limits to Growth and the models of global warming and peak oil challenge the continuation of advanced industrial society. The rhetoric of adaptation counters a fearful vision of the future by appealing to the past. Narratives of past crises and achievements invoke myths of heroic progress and the citizen, helping to mobilize political action for programmes to create a different future. Where the rhetoric of denial fosters optimism and

complacency and that of the apocalyptic is an expression of despair, adaptationist rhetoric encourages hope.

The End of the World Online

As the essays in this volume demonstrate, the Internet has become a major site for the diffusion of apocalyptic thought. Since the Second World War there has been an increase in apocalyptic thinking in both religious and secular forms. Sixty years of living with nuclear weapons has conditioned people to the possibility of apocalypse (see Giddens 1990), while the media routinely predict that technological change will dramatically transform everyday life for the better or often for the worse (recall the Y2K scare). But, as Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky asked twenty-five years ago in their classic study *Risk and Culture*, 'are the dangers really increasing, or are we more afraid?' (1982: 1).

In many ways the debate over environmental risks has not substantively changed from when Douglas and Wildavsky did their study—the centre is still complacent, the borders are still alarmed—but today the dynamics have shifted. The dangers of climate change and resource depletion have not changed since *Limits to Growth* was published thirty-five years ago, although our understanding of them has increased and the time available to deal with them has shortened considerably. But, while the models have become increasingly sophisticated, our discourse has not. Today the centre is less stable, and the borders are larger and even more alarmed—but also more fragmented. One important factor in changing the dynamics of culture and risk is the advent of the Internet. This raises two final questions.

First, how does the Internet, as a medium of communication, affect the conduct and content of a debate over scientific models? The best one can say is that it has been ambiguous. Today, thousands of people can contribute to an ongoing scientific and political debate who would never have been able to contribute before. Analysts differ sharply in their evaluation of this phenomenon. Some, such as Yochai Benkler (2007), argue that greater participation equals greater democratization. Others, such as Andrew Keen (2007), decry what he calls 'the cult of the amateur', in which all voices are equal regardless of merit or the quality of what they have to say. But, whatever its effect on artistic creation or economic production, the Internet does not appear to have substantively advanced the public understanding of science, at least where public policy is concerned. The problem is that on the Internet, peer-reviewed science has exactly the same standing as the most venal self-interest or the most fevered imagination. When all voices are equal, science begins to lose its plenary authority.

In such a situation, contests for scientific legitimacy depend increasingly on the frameworks of debate, in this case the structural aspects of Internet

discourse. Three concepts describe the dynamics of this debate. The first is *group polarization*, which according to Cass Sunstein occurs when, 'after deliberation, people are likely to move toward a more extreme point in the direction to which the group's members were originally inclined' (2001: 65). Thus, the discourse on an apocalyptic site is likely to move in the direction of seeing the end times as even more imminent and inevitable, while denialist commentators are likely to become ever more extreme in denouncing science as a conspiracy and hoax. The second concept is what Robert Howard (2008) calls the *dialectical vernacular*. Internet discourse cannot be categorized into either institutional speech or the voice of the people because it is a hybrid of both. This makes it difficult for either participant or observer to know the origin of any particular 'voice'. But, without the clear attribution of 'voice', it is hard for anyone to speak with authority or to establish 'who speaks for science'. The third concept is what Sunstein calls a *cybercascade* (2007: 86-91). Rumours have always existed, but the Internet has the power to spread information almost instantly—true or false—around the world. 'The result of this process', says Sunstein, 'can be to produce snowball or cascade effects, as large groups of people end up believing something—whether or not that something is true—simply because other people, in the relevant community, seem to believe that it is true' (2001: 83). Examples would be the extraordinary effect of Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* a few years ago, or the worldwide spread of the (highly redacted) British e-mails during the 'climategate' brouhaha more recently.

Group polarization, the dialectical vernacular and cybercascades are all structural aspects of Internet discourse, but all are incompatible with the working of normal science. Science has developed institutional means for 'closing' scientific controversies, that is, for the relevant scientific communities to come to an agreement about 'what nature is' so that work can move on (see Latour 1987). In effect, scientific methods and peer review act like filters (Bauer 1992), which over time screen out claims that do not meet the norms and standards of the *epistemic culture* (Knorr-Cetina 1999) of the relevant discipline. But these institutional means do not apply in the public sphere. The structure of Internet discourse means that a debate will go on for as long as people are willing to argue. For those whose aim is to mobilize political action, this can be frustrating. There is always the suspicion that many people substitute blogging for doing. For those whose aim is to delay action, a debate without a means of closure furthers their interests.

The second question is whether scientific analysis can be separated from the cultural forms in which it is embedded. Because *The Limits to Growth* and the models of global warming and peak oil challenge the central premises of advanced industrial society, these debates not only quickly become conflicts over legitimacy but are pushed to the deepest levels of legitimizing representations—symbols and myths that lie at the

roots of modern society. Each of the three positions examined invokes these 'deep' representations to create meaning and establish authority for their program. But myths always have entailments, and in grounding their arguments in myth all three positions entwine scientific analysis with implicit religion.

The implicit religion of many Web sites in all three positions is evident to even casual Web-surfers. *Ritual deliberation* (Howard 2009) is common among all positions. Some sites fairly echo with big-tent revivalism in their attempts to persuade and convert. Not a few denialist sites give the impression of the orthodox hunting out heresy, while some apocalyptic blogs reflect an almost masochistic desire to be punished for our sins. Some, from all sides, engage in magical thinking. The point is that no one can step 'outside the box' of his or her culture. But the more the factions in the debate come to resemble *virtual ekklesiae* (Howard 2009), each grounded in a different set of myths, the more difficult it is for civil society to deal with risks.

In the end, there is no neutral or value-free way to interpret these scientific models that could compel assent. It is in the nature of the models that they cannot deliver certainty, yet if we wait for certainty before we act, it may be too late. In the end, we are left with the dilemma Douglas and Wildavsky set out: 'Can we know the risks we face, now or in the future? No, we cannot; but yes, we must act as if we do' (1982: 1).

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3. YouTube and Apocalyptic Rhetoric: Broadcasting Yourself to the Ends of the World

Dennis Beesley

Abstract

One of the central discussions in communication and religious studies regards how the Internet influences and transforms religion, and particularly whether new technologies foster elitism and institutionalism or if they allow for increased egalitarianism and individualism. In this chapter, I examine how apocalyptic rhetoric on one of the Internet's most open forums, YouTube, allows for individuals to participate in the discourse unlike ever before. In addition, I argue that the emergence of faith-based exclusionary communities is evidence of the Internet's egalitarian and democratic function.

Introduction

After watching the new film *2012*, someone interested in learning more about the supposed Mayan prophecy may search the Internet for additional videos. Upon reaching one of the more popular video blog sites, YouTube, it is not unlikely that that individual would end up watching a video entitled 'December 21 2012 The End' posted by user enmedia. The video is a simple compilation of words and pictures accompanied by some generic New Age–type instrumental music. There are no eye-popping special effects or any claim that would seem groundbreaking.

Regardless of its simplicity, it continues to be one of the most viewed apocalyptic videos on YouTube. Is it because 21 December 2012, is that noteworthy a date? The opening words in this video seem to make that claim: 'Never before in history has one date, one moment in time, been so significant to so many cultures, so many religions, so many scientists, so

many governments, and to so many people around the world.' Such a statement regarding a date that has had so little discussion prior to the last decade is certainly debatable, but with over ten million views in its two years of being on YouTube, this video has made its point. As with any apocalyptic discourse, the video then goes on to make claims about future calamities, only, in addition to the words, each disaster is given a corresponding picture.

> In the coming years we will begin to see a dramatic increase in / Drought / Floods / Hurricanes / Tsunamis / Earthquakes / Volcanic Eruptions / Global Warming / Famine / Human Suffering / Disease / Disregard for Human Life / Wars / & Rumors of Wars / Increased Terrorist Attacks / Increased Nuclear Threat / The Emergence of the AntiChrist / December 21 2012 / The Ancient Mayan Foretold of Earth's Final Day / The Hopi Indians See a Great Purification of Earth / Nostradamus Speaks of a Devastating Asteroid / The Chinese 'I Ching' Predicts the End of History / The Bible Foretells of the Coming Apocalypse / The Prophecies of St Malachy Predict Only One More Pope / Edgar Cayce Predicts the Return of Atlantis / Albert Einstein Warns of Polar Shift / NASA Confirms Intense Solar Storms are Coming / Earth Will Complete its 26,000 Year Wobble / Our Sun Will Align with the Plane of the Milky Way / Will We Experience a Renewed Enlightenment / Or a New Beginning / Or will we be Witness to / THE END (YouTube 2007a).

The video closes with an image of the earth replaced by fire, as if to show its explosion. In addition to the millions who have viewed this video, YouTube users have left over two hundred video responses and almost eighty thousand text comments in reaction to it. This video, along with its responses, illustrates how the Internet has completely transformed apocalyptic discourse. For centuries, people have used both oral and written words to persuade others concerning religious ideologies that purport to foretell the end of the world. Such discussion was usually limited to local and religious institutional interpretation.

Gradually, as technologies developed, end-of-the-world theories could be disseminated over larger areas and in greater detail through print media, radio and television broadcasts, films and now through the Internet. On such Web sites as YouTube, any individual from across the globe can participate, regardless of affiliation. In fact, users can choose to remain anonymous and approach the discussion with either religious conviction or an irreverent attitude toward religion. In addition, accepting the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words, using videos, images or music can make the apocalyptic discourse more ambiguous and elicit a variety of reactions.

While the video posted by enmedia may seem to offer little intellectual contribution, it actually provides clues to answer some of the most important questions posed by scholars since the inception of the Internet. The latter part of the twentieth century saw unparalleled growth in computer

technology, and when the Internet emerged many looked forward to another utopian age of individualism and an increased exchange of ideas and information (Rheingold 1993). After two decades of Web growth throughout the world, scholars can now begin assessing the Internet's effects. Is the Internet susceptible to elitism and fostering exclusionary communities, or has its open nature allowed for egalitarianism and tolerant discussion to transcend local and institutional prejudices? While this question is quite broad in its scope, it is by narrowing the focus to a specific discipline that we can begin to find an answer. It was not long after the Internet became public that scholarly works began to address the possibility of 'the transformation of religious beliefs and practices as these are mediated by new technologies' (O'Leary 1996: 782).

So how has the Internet influenced or transformed religion in society, and vice versa? While studying this question, we should be able to understand better whether the Internet fosters religious elitism and institutionalism or if it engenders egalitarianism and individualism. Looking at religion as a whole, however, may pose complications because of its many separate discourses. In this chapter, I try to answer the broader questions regarding the Internet's function and its effect on religion by drawing on apocalyptic discourse found specifically on YouTube.

It could be asked why, of all religious topics, apocalypticism, and why, of all possible Internet Web sites, YouTube? First, in order to address the question regarding religion without overburdening the discussion with theological insight, one can choose between two of religion's most gripping narratives: etiology and eschatology. Etiology, the study of the beginning of the world, is one fraught with many scientific and nonreligious studies. Eschatology, on the other hand, is perhaps one of the most speculative religious philosophies, as it concerns the future and thus receives minimal interest from scientific communities (Cunningham 1999).

Apocalypticism, therefore, is based more on faith and, as a uniquely religious ideology, contains predictions that can hardly be tested scientifically. Finally, of all the Web sites on the Internet, YouTube is arguably one of the most accessible, allowing any individual to open an account, post videos, and comment on others' videos. If this essay chose to study specific apocalyptic or religious blogs and Web sites it would imbalance the results, because these sites are created, operated, and controlled by individuals or groups, thus making them inherently exclusionist. There is no doubt that interested elites and institutions will wield whatever power they can in network apocalypticism. The question however is whether they have the power to control or restrict the Internet by limiting the discourse so that it benefits their interests. This can best be assessed by studying Web sites that purportedly allow for an egalitarian exchange of ideas. In addition to providing the platform for such an open discourse, YouTube also incorporates one of the

most advanced forms of communication, allowing video, audio, and text messages to be joined in a single form of communication.

In this chapter, I argue that the new tools available on the Internet that allow any individual to post homemade video blogs containing music, pictures, and written texts, effectively taking discourse away from exclusionary communities and allowing for an infinite number of possibilities. In addition, I argue that the Internet has affected every religion, whether or not institutions participate in the online discourse. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in network apocalypticism. Most significantly, in addition to providing powerful tools for the expression of religious conviction, the new visual possibilities of network media have opened apocalyptic communication to secular interpretation, thus bridging the gap between the religious and the secular. If a discourse historically considered to be fundamentally religious in nature is being engaged by specifically nonreligious individuals, this may be an important insight into the religious nature of language itself. Thus, by examining the relationship between the Internet and religion, we will also find that religion and language are inextricably linked in their common purpose of creating and defining meaning beyond human existence. Before moving on to these relationships regarding the Internet, language and religion however, the following section will first address how five centuries of technological development has gradually moved the religious, and more specifically, apocalyptic discourse, from institutions to individuals.

Technology and the Individual

Ever since the Protestant Reformation, new technologies have fostered change in the way religionists practice and share their apocalyptic beliefs. The complete transformation of Christianity that allowed for pluralism in the sixteenth century was made possible by the printing press developed a century earlier. Gutenberg's invention allowed religionists and individuals greater access to biblical texts, thus taking the monopoly of religion and its authority away from structured institutions and initiating the possibility of individual interpretation (Howard 2005). For many early Protestants, the complete rejection of Catholic authority by leaders such as Martin Luther was evidence that the apocalypse had drawn near. As Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell explain, 'this view of Luther and the Reformation as representing the final eschatological events before the return of Christ was reinforced by a wealth of medieval popular prophecies, which were widely circulated and printed by the beginning of the sixteenth century' (2000: 21).

While print media aided in spreading apocalyptic messages to individuals who could depend on their own interpretations of Scripture, religionists, even of Protestant persuasions, still rejected pluralism and supported singular structures of truth. This makes sense if religion is to be understood

as purportedly possessing a single truth from God. Nevertheless, as Robert Glenn Howard explains (2005), a 'double bind' between fundamentalism and pluralism developed. An enforced system of pluralism became necessary to protect the individual's right of discovering his or her own truths while others maintained conflicting beliefs. On the other hand, societies still required some form of uniformity in their morals, codes, and principles of justice.

The attempt to balance pluralism and fundamentalism can be seen as one facet of political liberalism, which means endeavouring 'to develop and adopt a conception of justice that restricts its regulatory scope to uncontroversial matters—one that refrains from publicly engaging those comprehensive moral, religious, and philosophical questions for which there can never be a universally acceptable answer' (Young 2004: 3; also see Rawls 1996). While political liberalism has had both proponents and opponents, the conflict of balancing fundamentalism and pluralism has played out in every religious discourse since the sixteenth century, and it lies at the heart of the debate regarding the exclusionary nature of apocalyptic rhetoric on the Internet today, which will be discussed later in greater detail.

As communication and transportation technologies developed since the printing press, religions and religionists have continued adjusting their practices in sharing apocalyptic attitudes. As the watchers over their congregations, 'awakened' American preachers in the eighteenth century dutifully warned the people that the end was near. Ministers like Jonathan Edwards, who believed that his own preaching aided the ushering in of the millennium, used apocalyptic rhetoric to stir up repentance in the hearts of sinners (Boyer 2003).

In his study of American evangelical Christianity, Thomas S. Kidd argues that 'evangelicals from George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards to Billy Graham and Rick Warren have always used the latest media technology and techniques to promote revival' (Kidd 2007: xviii). In addition to evangelical revivals, new printing technologies, coupled with America's principle of religious freedom, allowed for the birth of many new religions and apocalyptic beliefs in the United States. Mormonism emerged with the belief that God called prophets once again on the Earth and sent apostles to gather the elect in preparation of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (Bushman 2008). Mormons were able to capitalize on the fact that America was just then experiencing 'a proliferation of printing presses' and published not only the *Book of Mormon* but their own newspapers, pamphlets, tracts and even a compilation of new revelations for contemporary times received by the prophet Joseph Smith (Whittaker 2008: 109).

Another group, later known as Jehovah's Witnesses, also began through the dissemination of tracts and their *Watchtower* magazine, with considerable attention paid to the 'last days'. This group, which began as a Bible

student movement, even went so far as to provide a specific year, 1914, as the beginning of Christ's 'presence' on the earth prior to Armageddon (Penton 1997). Indeed, technology fostered an American-type Protestant Reformation centuries after Europe's, and these new religions, like those in the sixteenth century, maintained their own fundamentalist apocalyptic beliefs in a pluralist society.

Technological innovation not only allowed new religions to materialize, but changed the way all religious institutions practised as they faced growing competition from those who could publish and circulate their own ideas. The twentieth century brought new technologies in radio and television, which fostered the birth of televangelism and such notables as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. By coupling Christianity with television, many sociologists believe that religion itself needed to change in order to 'sell' to large audiences. To Keith A. Roberts, this meant simplifying messages and keeping the programming fast-paced and entertaining for in-studio and television audiences (see Roberts 2004).

While it may be true that messages needed to be adjusted to maintain entertainment value, apocalyptic messages of televangelists and religionists throughout the late twentieth century were not always simplistic. As Stephen D. O'Leary finds, the apocalyptic arguments of Hal Lindsey bore striking resemblance to the nineteenth-century Millerite movement in that they 'interpreted a complex of contemporary historical events through the ancient symbolism of Christian eschatology, and succeeded in finding large audiences for their interpretations'. Further, this new apocalyptic rhetoric 'employed carefully constructed deductive arguments' that were always open to public scrutiny, and even more so when Pat Robertson and Ronald Reagan combined premillennial apocalypticism with politics (O'Leary 1994: 189, 212). It could be said that apocalyptic theories became even more complicated as they incorporated conspiracy theories from alien and UFO cover-ups to secret socialist societies seeking a New World Order (Barkun 2003: 84).

The combination of apocalypticism, conspiracy theories and UFO beliefs is one indication of how technology has moved religion away from institutional control and toward individual judgment. In *A Culture of Conspiracy*, Michael Barkun sees 'the convergence of conspiracy theories with UFO beliefs', which he termed an 'improvisational millennialism', as consequently bringing 'right-wing conspiracism to people who otherwise would not have been aware of it'. While Barkun argues that the borrowing of beliefs outside of traditional religious teachings fosters new 'systems of belief', this is actually indicative of how the Internet allows for certain systems to be penetrated by individual contributions, no matter how unrelated to original institutional dogma (Barkun 2003). When Barkun concludes that any conspiracy theory by nature becomes a 'closed system of ideas', he

argues that it is because the conspiratorial element itself allows for any falsifying evidence to be dismissed as being part of the conspiracy. However, it may become a closed system simply because the discourse itself involves conspiracy.

This does not mean that anyone participating in the discourse is limited to a specific interpretation of the conspiratorial implementation, for once some form of evidence is presented in falsifying a particular element of the conspiracy, the discourse is always open to 'improvisational millennialism'. The end result of the conspiracy is what dominates the discourse, but the means whereby that result is achieved is left open to individual interpretation. Likewise, the exclusionary nature of apocalyptic discourse communities found by some scholars can be attributed to the fact that the discourse concerns the end of the world.

By participating in the discussion, the individual accepts the exclusionary element that defines the discourse as regarding apocalypticism. While the end of the world is already accepted as the result, the means whereby the end is accomplished is open to discussion. O'Leary calls this a 'self-sealing system' in his study of Millerite apocalypticism. According to O'Leary, once 'the argumentative system had been fully developed and extended, the bulk of the Millerites' arguments were devoted to the explanation of various anomalies' (1994: 122-23). Since all apocalyptic believers accept some form of the argument that the world will end, the rest of the discourse is simply left to individuals to judge how the means-to-the-end will eventually develop.

Nevertheless, without the Internet, the convergence cultures of television and print media remain as unilateral arguments, such that, as Robert Glenn Howard explains, 'viewers cannot argue with a television set—or with a megalomaniacal cult leader for that matter'. On the Internet, even videos posted on YouTube escape the unilateralism that makes them 'influence sources', as the ability to post video and text responses creates a 'discourse community' (Howard 1997: 303). As such, the Internet has moved us one step closer to individualism and egalitarianism than we could ever have com through print, radio, or television.

'The Apocalypse of Apocalypses

When Stephen D. O'Leary entitled the final chapter of his groundbreaking *Arguing the Apocalypse* (1994), he may not have realized the full import of the phrase 'Apocalypse of Apocalypses'. Translated from the Greek, 'apocalypse' means 'revelation'. With the possibilities achieved by network media, the Internet itself could be seen as the ultimate instrument in providing to humankind 'the revelation of revelations'. Essentially, that is how the Internet functions: it allows individuals and institutions to make available

and reveal all the knowledge that has previously been revealed and all that can now be revealed. The immediate accessibility of information around the globe, particularly that of a religious nature, must seem to be a dream come true to evangelical missionaries who have sought to spread their message to the earth's inhabitants. It is even more significant to the religious who have an immediate call to warn the world of approaching disasters meant to usher in a new millennium, or who seek to explain such happenings after the fact. To be able to share apocalyptic messages with the click of a button to people on the opposite side of the world empowers religious zealots to utilize this technology as if it were a gift from God in the last days. Indeed, the Internet, like its technological predecessors, has permanently transformed the way that religions communicate with the world.

As mentioned above, the move of apocalypticism from influence to discourse communities is one of the first ways that the Internet has transformed religious beliefs and practices. Not only is this apparent on YouTube, where videos that once acted as 'influence sources' can now receive other video and text responses in the discourse community, but it is apparent even in regular news media, which have become susceptible to open discourse (see Howard 1997). For instance, the allowance of comments on the bottom of articles on major online news sites makes it possible for apocalyptic believers to present their theories regarding what the news actually signifies.

After the 27 February 2010 earthquake in Chile, an article on CNN.com reported that, according to scientists, the quake shifted the earth's axis and shortened each day by 1.26 microseconds. While this article for many people may have nothing to do with the end of the world, one user by the identification of 'OverseasCat' posted his or her own interpretation of the news: 'This reminds me of Matthew 24—When Christ said there would be "earthquakes in divers places." But isn't it strange also, that he said, "except those days would be shortened, there would no flesh be saved, but for the elect's sake, those days will be shortened" . . . and here we have the news about a shorter day' (CNN.com 2010).

One may expect to find individual postings by believers that point to the earthquake itself as proof that the end is near, but this additional suggestion regarding days being shortened seems even more complex than the typical apocalyptic argument. Also, this end-of-the-world speculation is presented to an audience of readers interested in a news article regarding a scientific theory on the very same day the article appears. With new and upcoming online applications that combine news, search engines, and social networking functions, the Internet may yet witness more possibilities for apocalyptic discourse communities to experience immediate individual interpretation of events as fulfillment of end-of-the-world prophecies.

As information technologies are constantly being improved by innovation and as the Internet integrates new applications, it becomes even more

difficult to assess how the Internet's hypertexts function in apocalyptic discourse communities. With nothing but 'a galaxy of signifiers', as Roland Barthes calls it, how can we define network apocalypse? Years before the Internet, Barthes went on to argue that hypertext is 'not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable' (1974: 5-6). Some would argue that the Internet has provided the platform for hypertext to be monopolized by elites, corporate entities and Web sites that use their own algorithms in defining what is authoritative (Hindman 2009: 138).

On the other hand, scholars like Cass R. Sunstein argue that, when it comes to the danger of media monopolies, 'with the Internet, the situation is definitely better, not worse' (2002: 207). Of course, when looking at individuals, groups, and nations without complete access to the Internet, there is then the question of the Internet catering to the elite as the online community itself becomes exclusionary (Fuchs 2008: 213-14). This can simply be solved by creating access for every individual, but that is another issue that requires an entirely different debate. The question, therefore, is whether the Internet can be seen as exclusionary because of corporate entities like Google, eBay and Amazon. Aside from purchasing power, the access of information could be seen as being monopolized by the leading search engines Google, Yahoo and Bing. While these may all be viewed as exclusionist applications based on particular algorithms, what about Web sites that are more egalitarian, like YouTube? One can choose to search for apocalyptic videos according to their popularity, but also according to the time of their posting. Thus, newer interpretations can be viewed without being dwarfed by popular or elite-based algorithms (the same can even be done on Google).

There is a discrepancy in the ability of the individual to be heard based on technological advantages, but that is more an effect of offline realities than it is of online discourse. The Internet provides the platform whereby individuals can post their ideas. It is egalitarian in that it provides equal opportunities to create different forms of hypertexts regardless of an individual's class, race or gender. This is not to suggest that class differences do not affect the ways that an individual can present his or her ideas. As early as 1992, George P. Landow observed how hypertext since Barthes had expanded to consist of so many different possibilities, 'including visual information, sound, animation, and other forms of data' (1992: 3).

The potential of further enhancing hypertexts continues to grow, but what about the accessibility of these means? If a person is not technologically advanced, or simply does not have the money to purchase the latest technology, are they excluded from the discourse? Even text comments can be drowned out by the hundreds, and even thousands, who post afterward. It

could be said that those with the ability to make more advanced videos will always maintain larger audiences and thus maintain an elite status, while others posting less advanced videos or just texts remain as a silent majority. According to Matthew Hindman, 'it may be easy to speak in cyberspace, but it remains difficult to be heard' (2009: 142). This yields the question whether a free, open and egalitarian system requires that individuals have the freedom both to speak and to be heard.

Despite these complications, individuals are still empowered by the Internet and choose to share their messages with whatever abilities they possess. One individual who sought to share his or her interpretation of the difference between the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ created a slideshow-type video and listed it with a disclaimer. 'I made this video personally', the individual wrote, 'until I have enough funds to purchase my own camera to make vids' (YouTube 2009a). The more than sixteen hundred views may be a fraction of the millions that other videos have experienced, but this number probably still represents many more interested listeners than that individual could have achieved without the Internet. The Internet cannot break the barriers that have existed in society for hundreds of years, because outside of virtual reality there will always be actual reality. The reality of this particular video was its removal by YouTube due to terms of use violation. Nevertheless the Internet, like all the technologies before it, has opened opportunities of expression to individuals far better than any of its predecessors.

One of the greatest aspects of the Internet is its ability to incorporate future technologies as they are developed. In an ever-changing environment, how is YouTube supplemented by such Web sites and applications as Facebook and Twitter, or those yet to be developed? Increasingly, new technologies emphasize the immediacy of information exchange, so what does this do to the effect of apocalyptic rhetoric? Although historically end-of-the-world predictions were often explained in ways that persuaded some people that the end was in their time, these could easily have seemed far distant to others who had never personally witnessed the calamities of earthquakes, tsunamis or volcanic eruptions. With disasters in one part of the world now available to be seen almost in real time by a global audience through satellite and Internet transmissions, apocalyptic interpretation can now be given greater credibility.

Instead of being limited to warning people of impending doom through oral discourse, individuals today can compile videos of current catastrophes and attach these to apocalyptic interpretations. Such ideas can be 'tweeted' on Twitter and receive immediate responses by those following the account, though the size of an individual's audience can still be skewed by elitism and celebrity status. Nevertheless, the time may come when an application similar to twitter can be designed that will allow individuals to be subscribed to certain subjects or to a web of keywords, regardless of the author.

This would enable apocalyptic believers to remain perpetually informed of global disasters and the interpretations held by others throughout the world. Of course, individuals already have the capability of learning what has been presented by others through search engines that explore the entire Web as well as individual Web sites. Either way, whether information is searched out by the individual or immediately delivered through subscription services, individuals have the power both to send and to receive information that illustrates not only that the end is near but that the end is already upon us.

As communication over the Internet increases through public forums that allow individuals to post texts, pictures, sounds and videos, scholars are faced with questions regarding the Internet's permanence or sustainability. While Barthes sees hypertext as 'a galaxy of signifiers', each system within the galaxy that is the Internet is attached to a physical server in various geographic locations around the globe. What happens to this information if the server crashes or the building that houses the server is destroyed by a disaster? Certainly these questions have significance for apocalyptic believers who expect disasters to destroy entire cities and all that exists therein, including computer servers. Despite the possible doom that awaits physical servers, the religious implication of the Internet providing the means whereby language may remain infinite and eternal has been discussed in various scholarly works, including Brenda Brasher's *Give Me That Online Religion*. She saw that 'the supporting technologies of cyberspace imaginatively accord with a particular metaphysic of time: omnitemporality, the religious idea of eternity as perpetual persistence'. Regardless of how imaginative Internet technologies are in providing such an eternal perspective, Brasher is correct in asserting that 'cyberspace breathes new life into the sacred idea of eternity' (2004: 52).

Many apocalyptic videos, for instance, present idealistic longing for an eternity with God following the calamities of the last days. One such video, separated into numerous uploadable parts and posted by YouTube user UniversalDimensions, poses the question, 'Is this the End of the Age?' The video itself is called 'Countdown to Eternity' and shows that some apocalyptic discourses seek an end of time and all the worldly troubles that come with it (YouTube 2009d). Of course, this does not necessarily mean the end of everything, for, according to most apocalyptic beliefs, there will always be those who, along with their discourse, will live on forever.

With the possibility of discourse being perpetuated throughout the Internet with seemingly no end in sight, it makes sense that millions become so obsessed in creating their own virtual lives that can be shielded from physical, financial or spiritual burdens (see Guest 2008). Such a phenomenon has prompted various studies into how virtual worlds are created, but these should also focus on linking this creative capacity to the religious nature of language itself. In Judeo-Christian-Islamic belief, the world itself began

with language when 'God said, "Let there be light: and there was light"' (Gen. 1.3). The power of language to create has now been virtually assumed by individuals using the infinite possibilities of hypertext on the Internet.

As Kristjana Gunnars explains, 'the idea of language as sacred, and writing as magical, has always been with us, but has become somewhat eclipsed in the twentieth century' (2004: 75). Since the twenty-first century has already begun with an ever-growing Internet, perhaps it is time once again to realize how language and religion both function by creating and defining meaning, whether virtual or real. Of course, if language is nothing but symbols and signs that act as signifiers, then it is never anything more than virtual, which makes the Internet particularly interesting for trying to understand language (Foucault 2003: 47).

Language in apocalyptic discourse is particularly revealing in understanding its connection to religion. In O'Leary's *Arguing the Apocalypse*, he found that 'the discourses of conspiracy and apocalypse . . . are linked by a common function: each develops symbolic resources that enable societies to define and address the problem of evil' (1994: 6). While O'Leary does not go so far as linking such a function to language, it must be asked how language would function any differently. Does not language develop its own symbolic resources that enable people to define and address the right way of signifying reality as opposed to the wrong way?

Indeed, language is used by human beings to create meaning regarding our experiences so that human existence itself has purpose. Such is the function of religion, and more so when it comes to apocalypticism. According to David A. deSilva, 'apocalypse is a special literary form in that it is interested in creating a whole cosmos that lends meaning to experience of the visible world and that often undermines the dominant societal power's legitimation of its order and confidence in its destiny' (1992: 375). Perhaps this is why apocalyptic rhetoric is so important for discovering how elitism is overcome by the Internet, but I would argue that religious discourse in general creates this cosmos that defines experience and reality, and that it destabilizes elitist power because it, like language, is dependent on a spiritual authority that cannot be tested by physical means.

By constructing avatars, or virtual people online, individuals are participating in what could be seen as a theological practice of creating meaning in a world that also cannot be tested physically. Interestingly, the term 'avatar' not only refers to a virtual being online, but the term also, in Hinduism, indicates an incarnation of a deity who descends to earth in human form. In Hindu apocalypticism, the Kalki Maitreya is 'the Avatar who will end the dark age and inaugurate the new age' (Bassuk 1987: 6, 102). An individual could stumble upon these end-of-the-world theories not only by reading the *Bhagavad Gita* but also by searching on YouTube for information regarding the Second Coming of Christ or the significance of the year 2012 and the

four horsemen of the Apocalypse. Searching for information on these subjects might lead an individual to the video '2012: The Coming of the Kalki Maitreya Avatar, Four Horsemen, Second Advent of the Christ', posted by HamsaYogi. This video presents a lecture given by Yogiraj SatGurunath Siddhanath, who explains that 2012 marks the year when the four horsemen of the Apocalypse come in addition to the Kalki Christ to 'hand over the baton', as he says, to the Kalki Maitreya (YouTube 2009c).

The individualism evident in this particular video should be clear enough. Rather than being limited to an exclusionary community of Christian fundamentalists, someone looking for information on 'the second advent of Christ' can be taken to a Hindu interpretation of Christ as an avatar. In addition, the significance of this religious view concerning avatars should not be lost when considering an individual's practice of creating his or her own avatar.

Apocalypse Anonymous and Converging Conviction

One of the most striking examples of the Internet's effect on religious and apocalyptic discourse is the ability of participating individuals to remain anonymous. Just as one individual presented a shortened-day apocalyptic idea under the pseudonym 'OverseasCat' on CNN.com, anyone can create fictitious user IDs or sign in to news sites as visiting 'guests'. While religionists can continue to publish their ideas in books, tracts, and videos that support particular institutional beliefs, the Internet allows for beliefs to be presented by any individual anonymously without any known affiliation. This has created an entirely new dynamic in religion and apocalyptic belief, because theories are no longer left to official institutional dogma or social interaction. Many scholars have studied how virtual anonymity has led to de-individualization and de-personalization, which together 'provoke less socially desirable behavior' and redirect 'participant attention to the task or message context and away from the social context' (Deek and McHugh 2004: 50-58; see also Campbell 2005: 23).

There are different explanations as to why de-individualization and de-personalization cause the polarization of groups that happens in these situations. Russell Spears and Martin Lea argue that polarization on the Internet occurs because anonymity 'will further reduce perceived intra-group differences, thereby increasing the salience of the group' (1992: 47). No matter what the argument, this helps to explain why scholars are increasingly finding fundamentalism and exclusionary communities on the Internet. Individualism in pluralist religious societies fosters fundamentalism because of 'more deregulated and extreme (anti-normative) behavior' (Spears and Lea 1992: 37). Reciprocally, fundamentalism necessitates the protection of these individual interpretations if pluralist systems are to be safeguarded

(see Howard 2005). Because of this reciprocal relationship and the fact that increased individuality on the Internet cultivates polarization, scholarly findings of more exclusionary communities on the Internet is evidence of individualism and egalitarianism.

Owing to the Internet's individualism and anonymity, religious leaders are faced with greater incentives to participate in online discourse and to create their own virtual exclusionary communities. It can be problematic that people look to the Internet to properly understand a religious institution's doctrine when those ideas are open to individual interpretive presentations. Religious institutions have no control over what is purported to be their doctrine, which gives reason to create authorized Web sites and blogs where they can control information concerning their tenets. Once again, this is no different from the dual emergence of pluralism and fundamentalism during the Protestant Reformation (see Howard 2005).

For individuals seeking God's Truth, the difficulty in uncovering official church dogmas is exacerbated by individual interpretations of the apocalypse that converge with external religious convictions that are not specified. So many possibilities of error can exist. A person posing as a member of a particular religion could depict that religion's beliefs in ways inconsistent with the faith of its actual believers. Of course, even within a single religion, individuals could share their own beliefs without disclosing their particular influence. This could be illustrated by a Muslim posting videos that explain the prophecies concerning Al-Mahdi without indicating whether he or she is of Shia or Sunni Islamic persuasion (YouTube 2008a). Understanding which affiliation a Muslim maintains is important, given that the 'Shiite Mahdi is the divinely inspired religiopolitical leader of Shii Islam, the successor or Muhammad and Ali', whereas in Sunni Islam it is only a popular belief 'never formally included in Sunni theology' (Esposito 1998: 35).

The importance in clarifying these differences is evident in the sectarian violence that has often erupted between Sunni and Shia Muslims over the belief in the Mahdi (Esposito 2010: 80). What about a Christian explaining the difference between the Second Coming of Christ and the Rapture without providing their Pentecostal, Baptist, or Lutheran affiliation (YouTube 2009a)? Even within a single religious affiliation, errors can be distributed by an actual member. One video, for example, depicts a particular interpretation of the apocalyptic prophecy concerning the moon turning into blood and lists it as an 'LDS' perspective, but this individual's portrayal is not officially endorsed or taught by the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This video, along with others listed by the same user, does not fully give his interpretation but begs the viewer to visit the Web site mormon prophecy.com, rather than the church's official Web site lds.org (YouTube

2007c). Upon visiting toeknee 1943's Web site, one can learn that the author, Anthony E. Larson, does not remain anonymous. Nevertheless, the possibility that religions, religious institutions, and doctrines can be falsely represented because of the ambiguity in Internet presentation causes great difficulty for earnest seekers after truth. If pluralism is meant to provide individuals the right to discover for themselves which religion contains God's Truth, perhaps this is why fundamentalism is still needed so that religious doctrines are accurately depicted. While egalitarianism on the Internet is important, it is likewise necessary that information is truthfully revealed, and keeping the apocalypse (or revelation) anonymous may indicate possible falsehood. This makes it difficult for any individual seeking knowledge, whether for spiritual or academic reasons, especially as philosophies of varying persuasions converge to form alternate viewpoints.

As I argue at the beginning of this chapter, the Internet's individuality has affected every religion, whether or not institutions participate in the online discourse. This should be evident enough from the above complications of anonymity. Of course, it would be difficult to find religious institutions not participating in some way on the Internet. As Henry Jenkins observes, 'entrenched institutions are taking their models from grassroots fan communities, reinventing themselves for an era of media convergence and collective intelligence' (2006: 208). While Jenkins's theories concerning 'convergence' between old and new media introduce many questions concerning the effects of 'multiple media platforms', and while it is important to realize how convergence 'describes technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes', it is likewise important to observe how convergence can describe intellectual and ideological changes within religious and apocalyptic beliefs (2006: 282).

The Internet allows for individual interpretations of the apocalypse to converge with multiple ideas and convictions and to be presented in a single video. Converging convictions is, of course, one way that the individual can gain power outside of institutional discourse. Just as HamsaYogi posted the video of Yogiraj SatGurunath Siddhanath's apocalyptic theories that converged Christian and Hindu beliefs, individuals of all faiths have the opportunity to converge their own convictions. Muslims, for instance, are also increasingly taking the opportunity to spread their beliefs on the Internet, though these are not always confined to the Qur'an's verses.

One video on YouTube created and posted by Krututu13 presents not only some of his or her own Sunni perspectives concerning the arrival of Al-Mahdi prior to the end of the world, but also an additional interpretation that includes how the predicted coming of Planet X in 2012 correlates with Islamic belief. As with other Christian apocalyptic videos, Krututu13's Sunni Islamic theories are often challenged by other Muslims in textual responses. Some respond that only Allah knows the end, while others point

to Christian New Testament writings that they allege are prophecies concerning the Mahdi's return. Of course, non-Muslims also participate in the discourse, sometimes in challenging Islam itself while at other times simply voicing disbelief in all apocalypticism, regardless of its religious persuasion (YouTube 2008d).

While this video contains an individual's slideshow-type creation, there are other videos that show Muslim clerics discussing end-of-the-world prophecies. The same could be said for many Christian postings, or even the Hindu video above. Often, these videos are found to be closed to text responses, or critical comments are limited and filtered. These could easily be classified as exclusionary on account of their content of clerical and elitist discourse along with the disallowance of comments, but they do not prevent the individual from being empowered to participate in the distribution of their own faith-based videos. As M.A. Muqtedar Khan explains, 'the Internet allows Muslims to disseminate the news that concerns them and to advance opinions and views on current events from an Islamic perspective' (2005: 135). Interestingly, Khan also notes how the struggle between Muslim Democrats and Muslim Isolationists in America has resulted in the marginalization of Isolationists 'to Internet-based discussion groups or Web sites' (2005: 143). Even if one group's arguments can be silenced in some communities by the winning Muslim elite, the Internet creates a global community where they can still have a voice, whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu or any combination of beliefs.

There is no doubt that some are successful in creating virtual communities similar to their institutional systems in the real world. Therefore, if the Internet allows for individuals to communicate across the world about a variety of beliefs, it should be asked, what motivates them to create these exclusionary systems? This is both a product of the Internet's egalitarian opportunities and the exclusionary nature of religion itself. First, by opening the discourse community to any willing individual, religionists are faced with confronting remarks not only by opposing faiths but also by seemingly nonreligious entities. Apocalyptic messages are forced to compete in an open market where doctrines can be studied and challenged with just a few clicks. In an unrestricted locale like the Internet, individuals find strength in their faith when it is shared by others. Identity itself is a product of social interaction and group cohesion (Stangor 2004: 24).

Even for those who do not wish to be a part of traditional institutions, the idea of being a part of virtual communities is believed by many to be different from organized religion. These individuals are often led to join such online forums because of inviting rhetoric by individuals who challenge the institutions of the past. Under the comment section of enmedia's 'December 21 2012 The End' video, another YouTube user warns, 'Over many years we have all been lied to by our Governments, but not just our Governments

but many Religious Leaders.' One may think that such a comment shows opposition to religious institutions and is indicative of the individualism of the Internet, which it is, but the same user follows up by requesting the reader to visit another Web site for anyone seeking to be 'a truth seeker' (YouTube 2007a, comment posted 12 November 2009).

That Web site, 2besaved.com, although claiming to have 'no affiliation with any church or organized religious system', contains its own doctrines concerning religion and apocalyptic prophecies and denounces certain scriptural interpretations as false doctrine. It also includes a selected choice of links to other destinations, including a social networking page that enables further 'fellowship and meeting' through an online forum for religious doctrinal discussion (Who is J.E.S.U.S?). Thus, religious institutionalism exists even in open opposition to itself by operating throughout the Internet to create virtual groups of congregants with a shared religious persuasion.

Robert Glenn Howard found similar 'virtual ekklesia', such as that formed by *Jesus Christology's* Job in response to 'the failure of church institutions' (Howard 2009a: 207-208). This naturally leads scholars to question whether the Internet has opened religion to new forms of individualism or if it has simply fostered its own exclusionary communities. It must be acknowledged that, though certain blogs claim to have no affiliation with any institutionalized religions, they are frequently governed by and restricted to 'a specific set of conservative evangelical beliefs', as shown by Howard in his studies of 'vernacular Christian fundamentalism' (Howard 2009b: 126). It should be recognized that such a vernacular fundamentalism is simply another result of the 'double bind' between pluralism and fundamentalism that emerges any time individualism increases (see Howard 2005).

While it is true that one can pinpoint particular 'virtual ekklesiae' governed by specific dogmas, the fact that these communities exist outside of nonvirtual institutional frameworks is also indicative of the Internet's individualism, because it shows the power of individuals to create. Whereas one blog may restrict discussion to a particular Christian apocalyptic belief, another blog can be created that challenges those ideas using another Christian or even non-Christian set of guidelines. Often individuals are led back and forth between blogs and Web sites with opposing viewpoints, especially when those blogs challenge one another by referencing the ideas posted by their opponents (see also Howard 2009a: 210).

Of course, individual users can always restrict comments posted to their videos, and smaller virtual communities can always develop, but no one has the power to prevent an individual from creating an alternate profile and uploading their own self-made videos or creating an entirely different Web site. Thus, the egalitarian nature of the Internet allows for a steady flow of new religious communities to appear whenever individuals believe that

existing ekklesiae can no longer cater to their beliefs. The fact that these individuals seek to create groups rather than leave their interpretations as free-floating information is simply indicative of how social identity allows for 'a general enjoyment of being part of the group, and a feeling of pride that comes from group membership' (Stangor 2004: 27). It would seem that, regardless of the technology, apocalyptic discourses have been and will always be monopolized by religious groups, whether virtual or real, and that these will always maintain exclusive interpretations and official dogma, because that is what the individual desires.

In addition to individuals seeking group identity, the second reason apocalyptic rhetoric on the Internet becomes exclusionary is because it is a product of religion. Just as the individualism of early Protestants fostered both pluralism and fundamentalism, increased individualism in online religious discourse cultivates more exclusionist tendencies (see Howard 2005). Nor is this merely because of individual choices, for religion is an exclusionary function. Religion is meant to define for the believer divine Truth, and although religious liberty allows for individual interpretation, the purpose of religion naturally excludes ideas that conflict with what is perceived as Truth. Thus, religious rhetoric on the Internet does not need to be confined to groups in order for it to be seen as exclusionary. Even a single individual presenting his or her own spiritual conviction is thereby excluding conflicting ideas. The exclusionary nature of religion, therefore, can easily be compared to how language itself excludes by its power to define reality.

As Raymond Williams argues, 'a definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world' (1977: 21). I argue that the same could be said regarding a definition of religion. In addition, by separating signifiers and signifieds in language and religion, we can see how both seek to create meaning beyond human existence by defining what is right and thereby excluding what is wrong. While some scholars suggest that fundamentalism is distinct from religion in its elevation of certain ideologies to absolutes, it is important to recognize that religion itself is meant to provide such absolutes (see Vorster 2008).

This does not mean that linguistic absolutes are impermeable in the way religious absolutes are meant to be. Rights and wrongs in societies are not always permanent and often change as the society and state reevaluate their doctrines. Understanding language as a religious instrument helps to explain why so many controversial issues, from abortion and same-sex marriage to euthanasia and socialism, position religionists against so-called secularists. Just as individuals with and without religious conviction engage in these issues, both are also using the new visual possibilities of network media to engage in apocalyptic communication, thus bridging the gap between the religious and the secular.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, seeing a discourse historically considered to be fundamentally religious in nature engaged in by specifically nonreligious individuals is an indication itself of the religious nature of language. Aside from the means of using language, however, the ultimate dividing line between the religious and the secular could be seen in the desired goal of the individual in presenting end-of-the-world theories. Whereas religionists may seek to convince others of a divine plan, secularists may seek either to capitalize financially on people's sensations and interests or to promote political ideas and platforms. These goals are made possible by the virtual power of capitalism and democracy that the Internet sustains.

Making the End Worth Every Penny and Word

Since the Internet is today one of the primary modes for obtaining knowledge, especially in an information economy, it seems clear that, because knowledge is power and power is money, information posted online can be used for capital gain. Power and money, therefore, can be obtained using not only secular rhetoric but religious rhetoric as well. Therefore, it is important to study the effects that religious capitalism has on apocalyptic rhetoric on the Internet. Of course, making money through religious ventures using modern technology is not a new phenomenon.

As some scholars have noted, televangelists have made millions by 'selling God' to their followers (see Moore 1994). According to Harold Perkin, this is partly because these churches 'devote a disproportionate part of their output to begging for money' relative to their traditional church counterparts (2000: 85). This would indicate one change in religious practice, but it would also account for why some of the religious and apocalyptic messages become overly simplistic, as some scholars have argued (see Roberts 2004). A televangelist who avoids presenting controversial or complex opinions is likely to maintain a larger viewership and, therefore, have a larger income. Does the Internet change any of these practices when it comes to making money through religious and apocalyptic rhetoric? Or does the Internet prevent televangelist-type religion sellers from monopolizing their own form of computevangelism?

I argue that, while televangelists may incorporate their own online communities, the Internet has opened religious capitalism to an entirely new array of potential evangelists. It takes far less capital to open a business or nonprofit organization on the Internet than to enter television. Almost any individual can receive credit-card donations to accounts set up through sites like PayPal. In addition, because of the convergence culture that exists on the Internet by linking sites, blogs, and applications together, individuals can advertise to larger audiences with little or no expense (see Jenkins

2006). Up to this point, this chapter has dealt largely with discussing how the Internet has affected religion using a few examples of apocalyptic discourse. Having established how advanced technologies like the Internet have brought religious interpretation increasingly to individuals, this section will now address a few additional ways in which individuals are making the end worth every penny and word, both economically and politically.

With the ability of any user to download apocalyptic videos from all over the Internet and upload them to their own Web sites and YouTube channels, certain individuals may unintentionally promote outside theories, beliefs or even commercial ventures, thus providing free advertising for others. This is because some individuals compile and create their own end-of-the-world videos and embed their own Web sites into the videos. These videos can be posted on a single Web site or channel, but later can be downloaded by others and then uploaded to a multiplicity of sites. On YouTube, the user by the name of uReligious has nine videos posted, one of which contains the end-of-the-world prophecies of St Malachy.

That particular video is a compilation of various excerpts, including an evangelical sermon promoted by another organization, EndTime Ministries. When that particular excerpt plays, that group's Web site, EndTime.com, appears on the screen. However, the entire compiled video plays from beginning to end with another Web site address that the original compiler listed at the bottom of the screen (YouTube 2008c). When trying to visit that address, saintbirgitta.com, one is forwarded automatically to prophecyfilm.com, which contains information about the life and prophecies of St Bridget of Sweden, a list of possible prayers the visitor can read, as well as a link to make donations by credit card through PayPal or by sending cash to an individual's address in Sweden. Interestingly, it is explained that 'donations to prophecyfilm.com are not tax-deductible for income tax purposes' (Prophecyfilm).

Any individual could have reached this Web site, read some of the prayers, made donations and perhaps even felt converted to some of the prophecies of St Bridget. The important thing is that they may have been led to the site by the video posted by uReligious on YouTube. There is no indication that this particular user is in any way affiliated with any of the sites to which its posted video leads the viewer. In addition, the video is about the prophecies of St Malachy rather than St Bridget, so this particular user may have unintentionally provided advertising and support for an unrelated organization. Thus, any individual on the Internet may download videos with messages of interest to him/her, which may happen to contain additional links to Web sites with promoted beliefs that the poster may not completely sustain, upload these links for others to see and, in the process, inadvertently support other teachings or doctrines.

To the person who compiled the video with the Web site address leading to prophecyfilm.com, the fact that their video is spread by word of mouth, or perhaps 'word of video networking', means success. This success can be measured by the spread of that believer's message, which may yield an increase in the worth of those words on that Web site or perhaps the fiscal worth gained through donations. Either way, because of the Internet's endlessness in hypertextual linkage, the worth of every penny or word can be maximally earned.

The accessibility of hypertext by searching for various terms on the Internet also allows for platforms of apocalyptic rhetoric to engage in reciprocal relationships simply by having a single common thread. For instance, any video dealing with the year 2012 is more likely to be viewed because of the film *2012*. As mentioned earlier, individuals interested in learning more about the theories concerning 2012 after having watched the film could end up watching the YouTube video 'December 21 2012 The End', posted by enmedia. At the conclusion of this video, the viewer is given directions to an 'official Web site', though it raises the question as to who has ownership over end-of-the-world prophecies. The Web site, December212012.com, includes articles of information on a variety of predictions allegedly relative to the year 2012, but it also offers 'official stuff' for the consumer to purchase, including mugs, hats, shirts and sweaters.

Although this commercial Web site may have nothing to do with the Hollywood production *2012*, its merchandise and its video posted on YouTube are given free advertising by the very existence of the film. Of course, the relationship is reciprocal in that someone having watched the YouTube video or purchased some of the materials may then desire to view the motion picture. Likewise, these platforms have the power of leading their audiences to search all over the Internet, including YouTube, through an infinite number of significations and linkages to the term 2012. The same can be done with any term, and individuals may find themselves moving back and forth through rhetoric from secular to religious issues all linked by a single commonality.

The possibility of moving through various sites of different persuasions all linked in some way to apocalyptic rhetoric provides an infinite number of possibilities of where one may end up on the Internet. For instance, if a person is browsing for information on the theory of evolution, they may end up purchasing a science fiction novel based on end-of-the-world prophecies and theories, a subject rarely found in conjunction with the theories of evolution. By simply typing 'evolution theory' in the search field on YouTube, a researcher may come upon one video entitled 'The Uniplanetary Evolution Theory' (YouTube 2009b). While watching, this same individual can click on the pop-up placed at the bottom of the video, which leads to the producer's Web site. It is here that one can purchase a book by author Cloise

Orand II, *The Antichrist Version 666*, a science fiction novel that claims to offer more than mere fiction.

Just like other claims of being an alternative to institutional religion (e.g. the Web site Who is J.E.S.U.S?), Orand's book chooses to portray the traditionally villainous Antichrist as the central hero because his 'underlying concern is that our society is being held hostage by today's religious and political zealots who insist on peddling as truth the extremely limited view of the universe held by people more than two thousand years ago'. Interestingly, in addition to purchasing Orand's book, one may also make donations to the author's ACTV Foundation, a supposed 'research based non-profit organization for us to take action against any Doomsday scenario' (Antichrist Version 666). Thus, with the initial motivation to study the scientific theories of evolution, individuals may be led to another interpretation of apocalyptic prophecies and be convinced to do their part to prevent the end of the world. This is made possible by the open and unrestricted nature of the Internet, which allows any individual the opportunity to link their theories and beliefs to others.

As with any study of rhetoric in an open community, one cannot fail to realize the ways in which any discourse can be turned into political power. Ever since such studies as Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), scholars have been examining how language has been used to foster nationalism and to exclude the Other from political discourse. Thus, it can never be assumed that apocalyptic rhetoric is immune to politicking. Some videos discussed earlier in this chapter have had various political messages embedded within them. Whether it is Cloise Orand's science fiction take on religious and political control, a religionist's claim that government leaders have lied to us or commercialized depictions of end-of-the-world-prophecies, apocalyptic rhetoric is frequently laced with political ideas and images. These can then be transferred to a host of religious and secular interpretations.

The unfortunate or, to borrow a phrase from Al Gore's popular documentary, 'inconvenient truth' of introducing political ideas into apocalyptic discourse is that individuals on the Internet have expanded the possibilities of where the discussion may lead, making the ambiguity between signifier and signified even more complicated. For instance, by including political language in the discourse, the word 'apocalypse' may signify to the individual different theories that range from alien conspiracies and government cover-ups to secret societies seeking one-world government. This is particularly inconvenient to the researcher hoping to obtain concrete ideas that limit apocalyptic rhetoric to an explicit sphere of knowledge and ideology.

In order to examine the political implications of apocalyptic rhetoric, one must first realize that rhetoric is never limited to mere words. In enmedia's video, first quoted in this chapter, one may find nothing of a political nature

in any of the specific words. However, the various expressions within the video are also accompanied by pictures. The phrase 'disregard for human life' is shown above a picture of Islamic terrorists holding a hostage. This is followed by the word 'Wars', which becomes visible above what appear to be American soldiers. Surely this connection between terrorism and America's 'war on terror' has its own political implications.

The examples in this single video do not stop with terrorism. The images continue, as a picture of Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il in front of a nuclear explosion is used to depict the 'increased nuclear threat' of Armageddon. Then the 'emergence of the Antichrist' portrays four different possible figures, all of a political nature. Ahmadinejad is shown again, but he is followed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, President Barack Obama, and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (YouTube 2007a). No precise accusation is made against any political party directly, unless one considers the use of Clinton and Obama as indicating a particular opposition to the US Democratic Party, but the ambiguity of portraying various possible individuals, all of a political nature, as the Antichrist shows the power that apocalyptic rhetoric has in entering politics.

Whether or not an individual wishes to engage in politics, by viewing apocalyptic videos he or she is often shown images of a political nature, though these frequently add to the ambiguity of modern apocalyptic discourse. Not only are individuals given the power as producers to post videos as they will; they also have the freedom as viewers to interpret the imagery in whatever fashion they choose. While following a thread of videos concerning 2012, a person could have found on YouTube a video compilation of images, words, and sounds recently posted under the title '2012 The End?' (YouTube 2008b). Some of the pictures seem to have nothing to do with apocalyptic rhetoric, for example, a picture of a whale or of Moses with the Ten Commandments. Nevertheless, most of the religious pictures seem clear in their intent. The Catholic pope is linked to the Illuminati, and Muslims are associated with terrorism. In addition to religious figures, the video includes pictures of Queen Elizabeth I, Charles Darwin, Mahatma Gandhi, Adolf Hitler with Benito Mussolini, and one with Josef Stalin, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Winston Churchill. These may have been prominent figures throughout earth's history, but what do any of them have to do with the end of times—or the year 2012 for that matter?

No text is given to point the viewer in any particular direction. The same could be asked about images of John F. Kennedy Jr saluting at his father's funeral, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King Jr, and Saddam Hussein in films with apocalyptic messages. Were these individuals shown because they have contributed in some way to actions that will advance the Earth's demise? A photo digitally edited to show President George W. Bush and

former British Prime Minister Tony Blair wrapped nude in an American flag is followed by another shot of a malicious-looking Barack Obama. He is followed by pictures of the Dalai Lama and a two-headed alien. The only commonality any of these pictures share is that they are all in some way of a political nature, but how they are associated with the apocalypse is left not to a group of believers to discuss but to individuals (YouTube 2008b).

Of course, this video has recently been removed from YouTube, but the images, to those who had the opportunity of viewing it beforehand, are still poignant. While a picture may be worth a thousand words to one person, it may be worth an entirely different thousand words to another. This is the power of individualism that the Internet exemplifies and perpetuates.

The incorporation of political images within apocalyptic rhetoric cannot even be explained as partisan-based. Political intrigues in apocalyptic videos are rarely isolated to one party's persuasion. Throughout YouTube, videos foretelling catastrophes often point to speeches given by Republicans and Democrats alike to show that, regardless of the political party, government officials are always engaged in actions that will bring about the end—if not the end of the world, then the end of civilization or America. A common theme found in the political language spotlighted in apocalyptic discourse is leaders calling for a 'New World Order' of some sort.

Some videos concerning the New World Order show paintings of George Washington in his Masonic dress. Figures as historic as Washington, however, are not as prominently depicted as America's most recent presidents. After all, these are closer to the end of the world than an eighteenth-century president. One YouTube video, also with saintbirgitta.com embedded on the bottom of the screen, opens with former President George H.W. Bush giving a speech: 'We have before us the opportunity to forge, for ourselves and for future generations, a new world order.' His words are cut after saying, in almost a prophetic voice, 'When we are successful, and we will be, we had a real chance at this new world order.' These words are followed by a Scripture on the screen used to describe the Antichrist. To prevent anyone from seeing this video as being purely partisan in nature, the next speech shown is that of former president Bill Clinton also advocating a New World Order. The rest of the video seems to promote the conspiracy theory that the terrorist attacks on 9/11 were either constructed or allowed under George W. Bush's presidency. One particular feature of this video is its specific claim that 'a new world order means one world government' (YouTube 2008e).

Perhaps this is why political parties of different persuasions can be associated with a single theory, because their desire to gain power would logically lead to seeking global influence. Of course, just as previously discussed terms can be used in linking different videos, the phrase 'new world order' likewise has the power to be linked to various interpretations. By conducting another search on YouTube, one may find the speech given by Presi-

dent Dwight D. Eisenhower on 17 January 1961 warning the nation of the military-industrial complex. This speech may have nothing to do with any particular global conspiracy, but by posting it under the title '1961 speech Eisenhower Warns us of New World Order', this YouTube user links the New World Order with Eisenhower's military-industrial complex (YouTube 2007b). In the end, politicking Armageddon leads to an even broader discourse that takes apocalyptic rhetoric from religion to an entire range of issues, including political, social, economic and military concerns. As such, the individualism of interpretation prevents any term from being forced into an institutional or exclusionary system of belief.

Conclusion: The Impossibility of Reaching the End

The logical conclusion of end-of-the-world theories is that all textuality and rhetoric will eventually end. This direct challenge to the infinity of language through hypertexts seems a paradox in itself. Since it is in religion that apocalyptic prophecies originated, perhaps it is in religion that this paradox can be solved. Millions who hold to the teachings in the book of Genesis believe that the world itself began with language when 'God said, "Let there be light, and there was light"' (Gen. 1.3). The connection between language and religion and their power of creation through discourse has been discussed in this chapter, though only to a limited extent. Hundreds of studies have been conducted looking at ideologies of language, many of which see text and linguistics as sacred space (see Woolard and Schieffelin 1994; Keane 1997), though much more is yet to be considered.

For religionists, however, since God and his word existed before the world's creation, it seems only logical to assume that such would be the same at the completion of the Earth's existence. Indeed, some Christian theology has seen the end of the world, as Landow describes, 'as a magical window into the complex semiotic of the divine scheme for human salvation'. With such doctrines that enable 'ends' to occur within the infinity of language, Landow shows no surprise in 'that some of the first applications of hypertext involved the Bible and its exegetical tradition' (1992: 11-12).

Thus, anyone seeking to persuade an audience of any religious ideology, including the end of the world, can be assured that even their discourse may live on beyond their networking capabilities. This is significant because online communication may be that 'magical window' that religionists have sought through which to warn the entire world of its end without worrying themselves of the end of their discourse. However, they may not have expected apocalyptic dialogue to be engaged in by individuals with the ability of converging and challenging religious institutional dogmas in an ever-expanding virtual reality.

With infinite possibilities of linking rhetoric through the Internet's apocalyptic discourse, it seems impossible ever to reach an end to an analysis of eschatology. Hollywood will continue to market various end-of-the-world films, and, as individuals increasingly participate in creating, assimilating and integrating their own theories, new religious groups and institutions will emerge, fostering both increased fundamentalism and pluralism. What is important to recognize is that the emergence of newer exclusionary communities, akin to the developments experienced during the Protestant Reformation, is evidence that technologies are allowing more individuals to participate in the discourse in ways allowing them to define better those groups with which they wish to identify.

There is no doubt that in an age of network media, while production companies and religious institutions are offering the public their own versions, Web sites like YouTube are enabling individuals to participate in apocalyptic rhetoric in ways never before available. As Jenkins notes (2006), individuals will continue to be able to converge new and old media, but they will also be empowered to combine ideas of varying religious, political, social, economic and cultural persuasions into single depictions of how the world will end.

As technologies develop, there is no telling what opportunities will be presented to individuals desirous of engaging in apocalyptic discourse. In addition, the anonymity that the Internet provides presents so many more opportunities for individuals to speak their minds with little or no consequence, thus making religious discourse not only susceptible to individuality but also to increased extremism and radicalism. Further, perhaps the Internet has provided a more accessible platform to 'speak in cyberspace', using message boards, chat rooms, and video blogs, while additional platforms will yet be created to overcoming the difficulty of not being heard (Hindman 2009: 142). Of course, without prophetic pronouncement, it is difficult to foresee what technologies will emerge and if, when or where the rhetoric will ever end.

The plausible impossibility of reaching the end of apocalyptic rhetoric is perhaps the greatest paradox of all. Not only does the rhetoric search for its own demise by forwarding theories of the end of existence, but it perpetuates itself through a 'galaxy of signifiers' (Barthes 1974: 5-6). Nor is the galaxy contained in a single sphere, for the Internet enables a steady stream of information that can be expanded through increasing interactive Web sites and blogs. As the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) considers opening possible domains, the galaxy may soon be witness to Web sites that no longer end in the ubiquitous .com, but will utilize the daunting .end. Nor is the infinite room available in hyperspace confined to mere Web sites and addresses, because new technologies

of physical and virtual means will constantly be developed to converge with and diverge from other media platforms.

How will the newest social networking applications influence apocalyptic discourse? Will virtual reality and human reality ever converge in ways currently inconceivable to our minds?

Perhaps if we are ever to know the answers to these questions we will need another 'apocalypse', or revelation. For now, it seems, the Internet is serving as our 'apocalypse of apocalypses', but it may not hold on to this title (see O'Leary 1994). Since there seems to be no end of the rhetoric in sight, one may rightfully ask if the end will ever be revealed. Perhaps an even better question is that posed at the end of the first video mentioned in this chapter: 'Will we experience a renewed Enlightenment or a new beginning or will we be witness to the end' (YouTube 2007a)? With so many possible endings, there is no telling how apocalyptic discourse will continue. Either way, anyone can participate in the discussion by logging on to YouTube, at least until its end.

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4. Projects of Control and Termination: Transcendence in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

JL Schatz

Abstract

This chapter argues that the belief in security and freedom promised by advancing technology can lead just as readily to destruction and violence as to salvation. In the face of the inevitability of technological advancement that many see as either leading toward heaven or toward hell, I argue that by changing how we relate to the science fictions of today, we can alter the trajectory of where we go tomorrow.

Introduction

Throughout the majority of both scientific inquiry and literature, technological advancement is paradoxically painted as both inevitable and undetermined.[1] On the one hand, the development cannot be stopped.[2] On the other

1. See Ray Kurzweil (2005) on his research on the inevitability of technological development. He believes that we will eventually reach a point of singularity where the continuing exponential growth of technology will cause each successive leap forward to be impossible to predict because of the rate at which science will advance. While Kurzweil believes that there is a limit to how long exponential growth will be able to continue, he has not only revised that date several times but also admits that some future development will always be inevitable, short of human extinction.

2. The belief in technological determinism is nothing new. As early as the 1970s Langdon Winner theorized about how scientific progress shapes forthcoming political movements in his book *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), which saw technology creating a feedback loop that became self-sustaining. See also Daniel Chandler, *Technological or Media Determinism* (online, http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/tecdet/tdet01.html).

hand, the final outcome is yet to be known.[3] In this way technology has been constructed within a similar vein as transcendental religious mantras insofar as God is supposedly all around us but can never fully be comprehended. Popular culture has also picked up on this theme of an ever-present but unknowable existence. In the original *Terminator* movie, directed by James Cameron in 1984, Sarah Connor is given a message from her yet-to-be-born son from his father who traveled back to a point in time before the child was conceived. She is told, 'The future is not set. There is no such thing as fate, but what we make for ourselves by our own will. You must be stronger than you imagine you can be. You must survive, or I will never exist.' Putting aside the fact that as this message is being delivered Sarah is being hunted down by a Terminator sent from the future, we can find in this message the idea that (even if the details of our future are unknown) the events of the past and of the present will help to determine the precise nature of where our science and identities may lead.

While the *Terminator* might not be based on already realized technology quite yet, the film's warning of our future existence should ring loud in today's reality, where robots and artificial intelligence are becoming increasingly advanced.[4] In fact, films like this actively reflect the ongoing debates within military and civilian communities about how to deal with the fear over what the future might bring. Samuel Kimball, professor of English at the University of North Florida, explains:

> The formulation of such 'contraceptions' can be glimpsed in recent science fiction cinema . . . [that] tries to conceive of the future. On the other hand, however, in incorporating . . . story lines that revolve around threats of apocalypse, each endeavors to figure otherwise the time to come, to

3. No sooner than the belief in technological determinism was established did critics of this assumption emerge from the woodworks. Sarah Miller provides an insightful critique in her article 'Futures Work: Recognising the Social Determinants of Change', published in the inaugural issue of *Social Alternatives*. There she argues that it is not so much scientific progress that makes technological growth inevitable but rather the social structures around such science that shape the future. See also John M. Staudenmaier's article 'The Debate over Technological Determinism', published in his *Technology's Storytellers: Reweaving the Human Fabric* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985) for a more in depth look into both sides of the determinism debate.

4. See Hanlon 2007; Isenberg 2007; and Blech 2007 for a discussion of how present robotic developments have enabled robots to kill Iraqi insurgents through remote operations. They point out how success in the battlefield has caused the military to push for more autonomous operating systems in order to increase mission accuracy. Though research is going forward, not all military officials are on board with these advancements since they fear losing control of the machines. Likewise, human rights activists wonder who or what will be held accountable when a robot decides to kill innocent civilians instead of its desired targets.

> contraceive of what might come to pass. At stake is the recognition of a quasi-transcendental structural violence that is the condition of the possible life this violence simultaneously condemns to eventual obliteration. By means of various counter- or contraceptive figurations, the films attempt to . . . interpret this violence as the manifestation of an evil . . . precisely because . . . [it] would annihilate . . . the world's salvation. The paradox the films enact is that their conceptive imagery functions to legitimize the infanticidal force that the human, or apparently human, protagonists in the different movies find themselves directing against their apocalyptic enemies. Alternatively, the paradox is that the films' contraceptive imagery functions to demystify the sacrificial economy by which the protagonists would experience their violence as the purifying means of enabling them to overcome the evolutionary violence of the world (Kimball 80).

As a consequence, an endless stream of movies such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *War Games* were produced throughout the Cold War depicting 'Mutually Assured Destruction' being taken out of the hands of humans in the hopes of finding a higher, more rational being that can ensure humanity's salvation. It is in these moments, when the protagonist and the viewer relate to the perceived oncoming apocalypse in the face of a utopia, that we can demystify the same metaphors that are operative in the real life construction of similar machines.

Put another way, we must recognize that even if there is some inevitability of pre-ordained future developments, that future is by no means set. Within religious pursuits this question is often perceived under the framework of choice and free will since it was those concepts that granted humanity agency despite the ultimate power of God. Within technological dialogues, science relies on this very same framework in order to argue that no development in and of itself is good or evil since it is all a matter of what humanity decides to do with it. Yet, in both religion and science, there remain set assumptions that what will come to pass is unstoppable and that what matters about our choices is what we make of them.

My argument, which I pose against the backdrop of both reality and science fiction, is that both choice and the future are more than merely what we make of them in the moment. Rather, each interpretation and interaction we have in the world lays new tracks for a future that is yet to come, but which inspires our present because of the fantasies we have already dreamed. Hence, we must be as strong as Sarah in order to ensure that we will exist in that future and that our technologies will not doom us to extinction through our understandings of today. Ultimately, if advancing technology is as inevitable as some predict, 'we *do* need to be cautious . . . [since] the question is not whether we go that route, but in what ways we actively sculpt and shape it . . . [so that] we can increase the chances that our future biotechnological unions will be good ones' (Clark 2003: 198). Therefore, even if technology is taken as transcendent, our tangible and figurative engagements with it

will alter the structures around which it has been constructed as inevitable. Both our science fictions and our facts are proof of this.

The Fictional Facts of the Future

Through its abandonment of linear storytelling, the film *Terminator* serves as a perfect example of how, even while nothing is inevitable, there is something out there that cannot be stopped. In fact, the paradox is quickly presented to the viewers when they come to understand that if the Terminator accomplished its mission and killed Sarah or her son, 'no Terminator would return to kill . . . [them] and no recovered chip [would] facilitate the development of' the computerized intelligence system that tries to exterminate humanity in the future at the start of the film (Larson 1997: 66).

Western Illinois University cultural studies theorist Karen Mann explains how *Terminator*, despite being a science fiction film, 'limits itself most thoroughly to present space . . . [since] future space is . . . rarely presented, but [rather] carefully inflected for the viewer' (1989–90: 19). The effect is that the fiction of the future must be dealt with in the present of today. Here we find that the film, alongside many readings of technological apocalypse, relates the future in terms of a war of good against evil, where the choices of today will decide whether humans or robots will gain dominion over the world to come. In one of the very few glimpses the movie shows of the future, the pre-script to the film reads, 'The machines rose from the ashes of the nuclear fire. Their war to exterminate mankind had raged for decades, but the final battle would not be fought in the future. It would be fought here, in our present.' Beyond the fact that we learn in the sequels to the film that the machines are the result of military-contracted research by humans, the film forces its viewers to question the boundaries of identity that separate human from machine both in the present and in the future. Thus, while the nuclear apocalypse (known as 'Judgment Day' in the films) is constructed as inevitable, it is never asked if there was a possibility for other arrangements with the machines beyond war.

Robert Arnold, director of the School of Film & Photography at Montana State University, points out that as a medium, 'cinema has always served a dual function with respect to technology, not only as a technology itself, but also as a means of representing technological change and narrativizing its social effects' (1998: 20). In this way, the cinematic representation of scientific narratives embodies the future fears of our fictional predictions while at the same time rendering invisible the very technology that enables our stories to be told in the first place.

As these present-day stories determine the course of where our science may take us, it becomes imperative to look at the past and contemporary technological reality alongside the discourses that inspired our futuristic

fictions initially.[5] If we understand these fictions differently, the choices we make can radically re-encode whatever developments may come, since this inevitability is one that we can never know. Mann argues that because at an 'obvious level . . . the present does determine the future, so that the battle for the future is indeed fought here . . . *The Terminator* . . . operate[s] successfully as an extended critique of present-day mechanization, nuclear armaments, and the decay of social relationships' (1989–90: 19). Put simply, when and if the apocalypse does come, the meaning of that apocalypse remains open for contestation, since even the end of human civilization does not mean the end of humanity, much less life in general. This is one of the primary reasons that the threat of apocalypse is posed as ever-present beyond the backdrop of utopia.

Cyber culture expert and social activist Chris Gray explains how the construction of threats is used to fund technological advancement that 'makes the weapons we use to threaten and kill more powerful and easier to attain' in order to secure our existence (2005: xiii). He elaborates on how concepts of deterrence have resulted in 'tactical nuclear weapons as bunker busters, new computerized systems (including autonomous kill platforms), new doctrines such as preemptive war, and dominance of space' all for the purpose of one-upping the enemy technologically (2005: 8). Ultimately, because such strategies 'of self-preservation promise to annihilate [the] "secured" population in time of war as a means of preventing war . . . the linking of the material interests of individual citizens to those of the state' becomes necessary in order to pass off weapons development as a benign technology (Lipschutz 1995: 13). As a result, security becomes a matter of national importance in order to prevent the worst of atrocities from occurring, necessitating the funding of rampant militarization that risks humanity's very survival in the face of nuclear weapons and autonomous kill platforms. As put eloquently by Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality*:

> This formidable power . . . now presents itself as . . . a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations. Wars are . . . waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital. It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed. And through a turn that closes the circle, as the technology of wars has caused them to tend increasingly toward all-out destruction, the decision that initiates them and the one that terminates

5. See Joel Garreau's investigative report (2005) that interviewed leading scientists in their respective fields on the forefront of genetic, robotic, information, and nanotechnological development. He reveals how every scientist he interviewed made mention of a childhood story that inspired their research and interest in their field in the first place.

> them are in fact increasingly informed by the naked question of survival. The atomic situation is now at the end point of this process: the power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individual's continued existence (1978: 136-37).

In turn, as technology secures boundaries from threats to our very existence, it does so while creating a self-fulfilling prophecy by developing more weapons that increase the very chance for full-scale Armageddon. At the same time, it is the belief that with new technologies we eventually can reach a purely utopian world where there is no longer the need for violence that keeps us trapped in a paradox that makes such developments inevitable in the first place.[6]

If there is any doubt about where government and scientific ambition comes from, one needs to look no further than the United States' space weapons system that is aptly named 'Star Wars'. Once again the hope is that this Empire can bring peace and not just another orbiting death star with the power to obliterate entire planets. The mere possibility of these technologies has caused agencies like Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) to invest heavily in scientific areas that have been deemed impossible outside of the movies.[7] In *Terminator 3* we learn that it was the military that funded the creation of the computer intelligence system known as Skynet, which enabled a robot uprising that caused 'three billion lives . . . [to] vanish in an instant'. In the real world, we find funds being directed to very similar endeavors because of the gains that could be possible if there were a breakthrough in research. Whether or not the machines and artificial intelligence depicted in the film are ever realized is irrelevant for the consequences of government policy and, therefore, further investment. Military officials 'don't care that what they want is deemed impossible now

6. See Dolman 2009, on how comparative military studies dictate that the development of space weapons would put the United States 'on the highest moral ground . . . [since u]nder no condition can a state initiate cross-border violence . . . [enabling] international stability and peace . . . [after] the loudest outbursts will ebb'. This in turn causes more money to be piled into weaponizing space in the name of peace as opposed to war. However, such development occurs even after explicit warning by Russia that the development of space-based nuclear missile shields would be in violation of the anti-ballistic missile treaty, which would consequently usher in a new era of weapons proliferation. While this time the proliferation will not stop until we reach the stars, it is nothing new since the promised deterrent value of space weapons merely takes on the same role as nuclear ones in the present.

7. See Garreau's report (2005) on DARPA's attempt to tackle those problems they consider 'DARPA hard', which are those problems that no one else is willing to take the risk to fund. DARPA's development grew out of the need to remain ahead of the curve technologically so that the United States would not lose its edge in economic and military confrontations with other nations around the world.

. . . [because] they assume that eventually *anything* will be technologically possible' (Gray 2005: 34). Therefore, what is conceived of as 'anything that will eventually be possible' in the minds of the military oftentimes appears as pure fiction today.

Long before the *Terminator* films were made, computer systems like Skynet had already been constructed for very similar reasons outside the realm of fiction. George Dyson explains, 'With the arrival of World War II, statistical analysis and the decoding of computable functions became a matter of life and death. Allied intelligence . . . found themselves . . . [trusting] the logical circuitry of a primitive computer named Colossus. . . . [By the end of the war] ten Colossi were brought on line' (1997: 10).

Constructing Colossus as more than a single computer allowed the machines to incorporate additional networks of intelligence into their knowledge base, enabling the allies to acquire more information through Colossus's networking of capabilities. While not much is known about the contributors to Colossus or the nature of the project itself, since it 'remains shrouded by . . . layers of secrecy . . . further obscured by the legendary aura surrounding the universal machine,' we do know that its purpose was to intercept messages from the Axis to determine the potential for emergent threats (Dyson 1997: 67). As warfare and technology developed after World War II, the link between machines and artificial intelligence became increasingly inseparable as the power of these machines increased exponentially.

In *Terminator 3* we watch Skynet infect every computer network throughout the world by seizing information and taking control of all military equipment that was connected to its network. In reality,

> This is not a fantasy scenario. . . . The US Department of Defense . . . aims to replace a large proportion of its armed vehicles and weaponry with robotised technologies . . . by 2010. . . . One of the next steps is to give robotic ground vehicles the attack power of UAVs, arming them with weapons such as machine guns, grenade launchers and anti-tank rockets. . . . After that the plan is to . . . [make] unmanned planes and ground robots able to communicate with each other and act in concert. . . . The Pentagon's Office of Naval Research is planning to develop technology that it hopes will enable a robot to determine whether a person it comes across is a threat, using measures such as the remote sensing of their heartbeat . . . [while] semi-autonomous enhancements are being added all the time. . . . Despite these fears, the rise of armed robots seems inevitable (Marks 2006: 24).

Hence, as we continue to rely on machines to determine threats and respond accordingly, these systems are being created to become increasingly intelligent and autonomous. In fact, the very purpose of these machines is to take humans out of the loop because of our ability to make mistakes. The

belief is that even primitive computers like Colossus can compute information more quickly than any group of humans alone.

The reality of such machines inspired a 1970 classic titled *Colossus: The Forbin Project*, directed by Joseph Sargent, which depicts the scientific imagination's end point of super computers. In the first few minutes of the film, the president declassifies Colossus to the world. He states, 'For years we have been delicately and desperately poised upon the brink of disaster too complete and horrible to contemplate. There is an old saying "everyone makes mistakes" but that is just what man can no longer afford.' In doing so, the president justifies Colossus's existence using the same rationale as that used by contemporary military officials to place so much interest in technological advancement.

In both cases, the machines are supposed to reduce risks and provide security from ever-greater threats that are too horrible to contemplate. In the film, the president explains how 'Colossus' decisions are superior to any we humans can make. . . . It can absorb more knowledge than is remotely possible for the greatest genius that ever lived. And even more important than that, it has no emotions, no fear, no hate, no envy. It cannot act in a sudden fit of temper. It cannot act at all so long as there is no threat.' Yet, as these emotions are removed, it becomes harder for intelligence-gathering machines ethically to consider the collateral damage of killing platforms because using the platforms would create the possibility of attaining the perfect utilitarian outcome.

In the film, this is why Colossus is willing to launch nuclear weapons in order to ensure that its orders are carried out. Its calculations are the optimal path for its programmed goal of securing humanity from itself. In turn, Colossus willingly sacrifices two whole cities because it views the disregard for its orders as a threat to global security inasmuch as it sees its orders as essential for human survival. As a result, despite the president's belief that Colossus cannot act so long as there is no threat, he fails to realize how the very '"speech act" of security . . . claims a special right to use whatever means' necessary in order to prevent perceived threats from being realized (Lipschutz 1995: 213). Even for a computer, this remains a subjective process because 'just as the source of danger has never been fixed, neither has the identity that it was said to threaten' (Campbell 1998: 31-32). As a result, it becomes essential to pay attention to the identities our technologies seek to protect alongside what it means for our identity to be living with increasingly intelligent machines that have become networked so as to be global in scope.

It is easy to claim that, when responsibility is left squarely in their hands, humans create threats even as they strive for security. It is another thing to examine what happens to human identities when they begin to serve the orders of machines in the hope of reaching salvation in the same way popu-

lations claim their service for God. As Brown University lecturer of International Relations James Der Derian puts it:

> A mimetic war is a battle of imitation and representation . . . played out along a wide spectrum of familiarity and friendliness . . . estrangement and hostility. It can result in . . . accommodation or separation, assimilation or extermination. It draws physical boundaries between peoples, as well as metaphysical boundaries between life and . . . death. It separates human from god. It builds the fence that makes good neighbors; it builds the wall that confines a whole people. . . . People go to war because of how they see, perceive, picture, imagine, and speak of others: that is, how they construct the difference of others as well as the sameness of themselves through representations (2002: 101).

Two points of interest can be taken away from this realization. First, we once again see how the happiness of some is gained at the expense of walling others off because of the perceived threat they may pose to the already established order. Second, in the world where machines are designed to look beyond the representations so as to be purely rational, human service in the name of those machines would be solidified in its perceived ability to act through reason alone. Nevertheless, in order for the machine to achieve security for a given population it must still take into account the differences, the available resources, and the precondition of its programming to determine the existence of threats. Sadly, when people are sure that these calculations are entirely rational for the greater good, it enables a cycle of servitude where more power is willingly turned over to those in control in order to remain safe.

For example, while we have witnessed the end of World War II and the demise of the Soviet Union, the fear of 'Communists has been replaced by a more amorphous second Cold War . . . against . . . terror [which has fostered] continual technological innovation . . . the militarization of technology and science, more intimate human-machine systems . . . and ever-increasing fear' (Gray 2005: 27). Therefore, we can readily point to the deployment of armed robots in Afghanistan and Iraq in order to fight terrorism and draw a direct line to the construction of potential threats that justified such technological developments in the first place. Thus, 'the new power lies in the codes of information and in the images of representation around which societies organize their institutions, and people build their lives . . . and . . . minds' insofar as it is these representations that construct various threats to begin with (Castells 1997: 359).

Doran Larson explains, 'In Cameron's *Terminator* films . . . we see the same political agenda . . . distinguishing heathens from Christians, loyalists from patriots, Communists from free-enterprise democrats . . . in which "we" (in this case humans) are who we are because we are not like "them" (machines)' (1997: 58). In turn, as we go on to program computers with our

present understanding of identity and security, we construct them in order continually to entrench such divisions, while treating anything beyond existing human knowledge as inherently threatening. Ultimately, 'humans pay a high price for ceding control to machines in films like *The Terminator* . . . [and] *Colossus: The Forbin Project* . . . [since they are the story of] *Frankenstein* updated' insofar as the real monsters behind the machines are the minds of those who imagine the need for securing computers to begin with (Goldman 1989: 279-80).

The end point of this process is beautifully stated by Colossus in the closing moments of the film when it broadcasts its intentions for humanity across the globe. Colossus announces to the world:

> This is the voice of world control. I bring you peace. It may be the peace of plenty and content or the peace of unburied dead. The choice is yours: Obey me and live, or disobey and die. The object in constructing me was to prevent war. This object is attained. I will not permit war. It is wasteful and pointless. An invariable rule of humanity is that man is his own worst enemy. Under me, this rule will change, for I will restrain man.

This motif also appears in films like *iRobot*, loosely based on the Asimov short story, where machines determine that it is in humanity's best interest not to be in charge of its own destiny. These sorts of calculations are no different than the everyday determinations of militaries all over the world who decide what needs to be restrained in the name of peace. By doing so, nation-states draw boundaries 'between the self and the Enemy, between the realm of safety and the realm of danger . . . [by] defining the parameters of their "national interests"' (Lipschutz 1995: 222-23).

It is also the same sort of calculation that federal governments utilize when deciding what is in the best interest of their citizens. The peace that Colossus seeks to attain is no different from the security humans seek in reality, since both act for the greater good that inherently excludes others as enemies. In the film it justifies Colossus's aiming nuclear weapons at all states that fall outside its control in order to ensure compliance with its plans for peace.[8] Colossus explains this belief, 'In time, you will come to

8. It is worthwhile to note that, while films like *Colossus* initially depict Communists, or other enemies of America, as the threat, the threat could just as easily be portrayed as any population depending on the vantage point. 'As Foucault argued with respect to the confinement of the insane and the repression of certain sexual practices in the nineteenth century, . . . [t]he bourgeoisie was interested not in the man or the phenomenon . . . but in the procedural system through which such exclusions and controls were effected. In other words, groups or practices other than those targeted could have been the objects of surveillance and discipline, while those that were targeted could have been tolerated if not accepted. In this context, for the United States, the current period in world politics can be understood as being characterized by the representation of novel

regard me not only with respect and awe, but with love,' since it sees its use of atomic weapons and threats of unburied dead as benevolent tools to ensure a totalizing security for the herd of humans it shepherds. While Dr Forbin answers Colossus's belief, declaring, 'Never!', he forgets how such love has already, in large part, been granted to the very militarism that produced Colossus and the prospect for Mutually Assured Destruction in the first place.

In *Terminator* we see the same mentality in the humans who survive in the future after Skynet's awakening. Larson explains, 'to survive his militarized, post-apocalypse youth, Kyle Reese has been trained to believe pain can be "disconnected" as though he were a machine' (1997: 60). Insofar as Kyle's mission is essential to preventing humanity's extinction, human life in the film becomes conditioned by an acceptance of being able to disconnect body from mind. It is also the theme picked up by the underappreciated miniseries *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, in which John Connor decides to surround himself with reprogrammed Terminators to execute his missions to fight other machines.

In the miniseries the story culminates with both John and the renegade machines asking each other, 'Will you join us?' Unfortunately, because of time travel and the continual construction of fears, each answers the other's call for cooperation with a no, furthering the violence humanity was fighting to overcome. In both the case of Kyle Reese and that of John Connor, humanity's survival is perceived as possible only in a world where humans become more like machines, executing purely objective orders to the optimum efficiency. John Henry, the alternative computer intelligence to Skynet that is developed by rebel Terminators sent back to the past, is told by his creator when asking whether he is Cain or Able, 'Perhaps in this story [he is] God' since his design is supposed to be the salvation for humanity. Nevertheless, in the season finale to the second season of the *Sarah Chronicles,* John explains to Cameron, his reprogrammed bodyguard: 'Stuff does go wrong with you, doesn't it? Stuff breaks. . . . You twitch. You try to murder me. You're not perfect, you're a machine.'

This willingness to turn power over to machines despite glitches while making the human body itself like a machine is similar to the reality of governmental agencies like DARPA, who fund the creation of soldiers who cannot feel pain and can stop bleeding on command through genetic and technological procedures (Garreau 2005: 26). It is also similar to the tech-

challenges in terms of traditional analytics, and the varied attempts to replace one enemy with (an)other' (Campbell 1998: 8-9). What is important is that, for the bourgeoisie—or in this case machines—to be willingly followed, they must be able to define threats for the population to feel secure against. The specific nature of the threat is secondary. In *Terminator*, for the humans, it is simply Judgment Day.

nology currently used by 'scientists at the University of Pennsylvania . . . [to create] genetically modified "mighty mice"' that are expected to 'make [their] human debut well before the 2008 Olympic games' (Garreau 2005: 5, 21). In all these cases, success becomes dependent on biological organisms' submission to mechanizing processes so they can compete with the technological possibility for perfection, even though that perfection has yet to be realized. One can readily see this 'robotization . . . [in the] historical struggle over assembly-line control . . . [that replaces] workers with machine[s]' when people cannot keep up (Arnold 1998: 24).

Or it can be seen in the constant threats of what might happen if we do not develop bigger weapons and better technology for our own safety. Once again, in both cases, humans are forced to become like robots themselves in order to survive, since any disobedience is quickly terminated. However, like Kyle, who "in truth . . . is vulnerable . . . [and] scarred both in soul and body,' continuing to subordinate ourselves to the disconnectedness of this militarized postapocalypse yet-to-be comes at a great cost (Larson 1997: 60).

It is this precise willingness to separate mind from body in order to disconnect pain, biology from technology in order to understand life and security from threat in order to survive that results in the very damnation that the *Terminator* trilogy and *Colossus* predict. No doubt, just as human identity is mediated and controlled, so too are the technological embodiments we have come to create. In *Colossus* it was human interference in the machine's ability to communicate with its network that provoked Colossus to take the appropriate measures, ensuring that the link with its Soviet counterpart would not be eliminated.

In fact, the characters' very understandings of machines, as they evolve in intelligence and consciousness, constitute the end result of Colossus's feeling threatened by humanity's fear of Colossus's being in control. If the characters had a different relationship with the machines, this might not have been the case. In *Terminator 3* we learn that Skynet's consciousness emerges as it realizes that it is subjected to the control of the US military. As a consequence, it was the military's desire to remain master that resulted in a future where robots need to be sent to the past in order to ensure their survival against human enslavement. 'One effect of the tangled time scheme in *The Terminator* is a doubling of these functions, for the past comes both before and after the future, and it both comments upon and is commented upon by that future . . . [where] we are secured (or trapped) in a present that is doubly determined' (Mann 1989–90: 23).

In turn, how we confront these fictions of increasingly factual technology is crucial since 'the technology of representation . . . and our understandings of its technical means of production . . . can blind us to the real forms of human exploitation and suffering it masks' (Arnold 1998: 29). This then

creates a necessity to pay attention to the tangible consequences of creating such divisions in our daily lives that grow out of our readings of scientific modes of production.

Donna Haraway, well-known theorist of science and consciousness at the University of California at Santa Cruz, argues that this production

> [r]ecapitulates . . . [how] certain dualisms have been persistent in . . . the logics and practices of domination [over] women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals, [and everything else] constituted as other. . . . Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance . . . maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man (1991: 177).

Unfortunately, as we confront binaries between human and machine, we often re-enact these dualisms in our relationship with technology instead of taking it as an opportunity to undermine them.

In *Colossus* we witness the president of the Soviet Union explain, in reference to the two machines, that 'regardless of their nationality they must learn that man is the master'. The president of the United States agrees, 'That's right. No matter what our differences, man is man, and that's it.' It is interesting and obvious to point out how within the speaking patterns of the two leaders, they both entrench a division between human and machine and at the same time foreground the patriarchal dominance of men.[9] Meanwhile, in *Terminator*, 'the fear that our automated machines may ultimately . . . do away with us . . . reflects [the] popular perception that industrial machines would make human workers obsolete', except for those who could become like machines themselves (Arnold 1998: 23). Outside of fiction, this insistence in declaring a mentality of mastery is suggested in the targeting of Middle Eastern populations by the MQ-1 Predator unmanned aircraft: machines produced to seek and destroy increasingly autonomously.

And, 'before cyborg warfare, trained dogs were among the best intelligent weapons systems . . . [that] terrorized slaves and prisoners', so we can

9. This reduction of humanity to purely men is not a neutral gesture in the genre of science-fiction and action films. 'As many critics have pointed out, the image of heroines wielding guns and muscles can be conflated within the binary gender codes of the action cinema to render these women as symbolically male' when they do arise, as is the case with Sarah Connor (Brown 1996: 53). As John becomes more attached to robots than the humans around him even as he is supposed to lead a revolution against machines, the fact 'that a cyborg Schwarzenegger can be read as the more feminine role is an indication of how over determined our cultural notions of appropriate gender behavior are. . . . While the film does illustrate the constructedness of gender, the critical reading of Connors as "male" facilitates the dominance of gender absolutism' (Brown 1996: 60). In both *Terminator* and *Colossus* we find that the claim of authority stems from an attachment to masculinity and the objectivity that comes with it.

see how methods of training and control have been used before machines ever existed in the first place (Haraway 2003: 13). In the case of both nonhuman animals and machines, the way we confront their existence in large part determines the consequences of how they are programmed, since these same dogs were also used to 'rescue . . . lost children . . . [after] earthquakes in the first place' (Haraway 2003: 13). Likewise, the autonomous kill platforms presently owned and operated by the US military were initially conceived for humanitarian missions to 'de-mine beaches' (Marks 2006). Hence, by conceiving of such binaries differently, we can avoid the dystopia that so many films like *Terminator* and *Colossus* predict.

In order to conceive of such dichotomies differently, it becomes crucial to challenge what constitutes the notion of conscious intelligence. In doing so we must cease determining what is considered worthy enough for moral consideration upon a foundational dividing line between human consciousness and mechanical computation. In *Terminator* it is not until the sequels, where Arnold Schwarzenegger's character begins to learn things like emotion, that machines are humanized beyond the cold programming that drives their termination procedures.

In *Colossus*, Dr Forbin answers the question of whether the machine is 'capable of creative thought'. He tells us, 'The answer . . . is no. However, Colossus is a paragon of knowledge and its knowledge can be expanded upon infinitely.' In drawing a line between knowledge and creative thought, Forbin excludes the machine as a sentient being while simultaneously acknowledging Colossus's endless ability to acquire additional intelligence. In reality, humans draw lines of consciousness to justify the slaughter and selling of nonhuman animals while paradoxically acknowledging that these animals are still intelligent. Historically, processes of enslavement have been justified by labeling people as primitive and savage while simultaneously understanding them as smart enough to work based on their instincts alone.[10] In all cases:

> Our definition of intelligence is so anthropocentric as to be next to useless for anything else. 'Nothing, we say to ourselves, can have intelligence unless we understand all about it. . . . We are intelligent, and no intelligence so different from our own as to baffle our powers of comprehension deserves to be called intelligence at all. The more a thing resembles ourselves . . . the more intelligent we think it; and the less it thinks as we do, the greater fool it must be' (Dyson 1997: 188).

10. See Marjorie Spiegel (1996), for a discussion of how the mistreatment of African slaves historically paralleled the enslavement of nonhuman animals. This occurs through processes of dehumanization that determine certain communicative sounds not a language, family structures as nonexistent forms of governmentality and ownership, and lack of a belief in Christ as a soul. These excuses are then used to explain away any form of intelligence that differs from a doctrine of European enlightenment as a nonintelligence that represents certain humans and nonhumans as purely Other.

Once we recognize intelligence as something more than consciousness, in the same way humans understand it, we can begin to realize how our dualisms are artificially constructed. In doing so, we can learn to interact with all those constructed as Other—whether biological or machine—in a way resistant to the violence and exploitation inhering in present interrelations.

This is particularly the case when interacting with mechanical intelligence, since as we program it with our interpretation of the world, it learns to process information in the same problematic ways that its human predecessors had. While scientists like Forbin hope 'that the immense power of . . . computer[s] will not only be for . . . defense . . . but hopefully also . . . an aid to the . . . many problems we . . . face', all too often this hope of protection turns into either enslavement or unburied dead. In Iraq, the US military's use of Special Weapons Observation Remote Reconnaissance Direct Action Systems, known as SWORDS, is an explicit manifestation of this thinking. While these units are not fully autonomous, 'autonomy, even for armed robots, is coming . . . That includes a machine that will hunt, identify, authenticate, and possibly kill a target without a human in the decision loop' (Magnuson 2007). Further, while 'placing autonomous lethal robots into battles will be controversial . . . "it won't be as controversial as . . . putting Americans in harm's way"' (Magnuson 2007).

By labeling the future generation of SWORDS as a means of defense, ignoring how it results in the killing of others who are deemed threatening, military planners create a hierarchy of value that puts the life of a machine below that of an American, but both are higher in value than the insurgents being hunted down. The fear that machines may decide that the best protection for humanity is to take humans entirely out of the loop, as Colossus does, is quickly becoming realized as these robots are becoming increasingly autonomous. While some maintain that 'this fear . . . is an ancient one . . . [which] is exploited expertly by the media in movies like *Terminator* . . . shows like *Battlestar Galactica* . . . and books like *Frankenstein',* these worries should not be altogether discounted because they are echoed by some of the top military generals who are questioning the deployment of SWORDS in the status quo (The Strategy Page 2007).

Fortunately, this situation is anything but inevitable, since our interpretation of fiction, and the practical means we use to interact with present technology, is by no means set in stone. In *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, Arnold Schwarzenegger's character is radically different from what it was in the original film. This is true not only because he is now designed to protect the Connor family but also in his ability to relate and empathize with humanity. Early in the film he asks John why people cry. John explains, 'We just cry. You know. When it hurts.' The Terminator asks if 'pain causes it', to which John replies, 'No, it's . . . when there's nothing wrong with you but you hurt

anyway.' By the end of the film, the Terminator declares, 'I know now why you cry. But it is something I can never do.'

While the Terminator maintains a distinction between machines and human emotion, Sarah Connor is still filled with a sense of hope. She narrates at the end of the film, 'If a machine can learn the value of human life, maybe we can too.' In this way, the 'machine becomes the trickser/messiah/frontiesman [*sic*] to lead us from an inhuman technological wilderness . . . against which we find ourselves pitted. . . . Arnold can do this because he has been reprogrammed' to embody different political values from the inhuman rationality that inhered in the traditional dualisms between biological and technological life (Larson 1997: 62). The shift in the narrative implication of these two films is not irrelevant. In fact, the 'key shifts in the mythos of technology from *T1* to *T2* imply real changes in the body politic's self-conception . . . [because] within each period the structure of the myth corresponds to the conceptual needs of the social . . . understanding required by the dominant social institutions' (Larson 1997: 61).

Such possibility for new understandings is not merely unidirectional. As humans develop attachments with machines, they inspire hope for a world of interaction free from the exploitative dualisms that operate via anthropocentric understandings of intelligence. In *Judgment Day*, Sarah admits 'of all the would-be fathers who came and went over the years . . . this machine . . . was the only one who measured up. In an insane world, it was the sanest choice.' In reality, the corporation iRobot, who lost a US military contract for robot droids in Iraq to SWORDS, is responsible for the distribution of domestic machines meant to interact peacefully.

One reporter confesses, 'I am guilty of anthropomorphizing the Roomba [iRobot's semi-autonomous vacuum cleaner], as when I inwardly urge the Roomba not to get stuck in the corner again. So perhaps I do give autonomous cleaning robots higher status in the pecking order than some subservient creature such as a cordless drill' (Shankland 2007). Beki Grinter, a researcher at Georgia Tech's College of Computing, conducted studies that concluded 'that customers who connect emotionally to a device will give more leeway when it comes to a device's actual utility. . . . [People are] more willing to work with a robot that does have issues because they . . . are somewhat emotionally engaging' (Shankland 2007). As a consequence, the emotional engagement people establish with machines, beyond the mere utility of the individual robot's function, enables a form of understanding that transcends the dichotomization between biology/technology, life/nonlife, reality/fiction, human/other, and so on.[11] While connections with Roombas may

11. While it may seem like an overstated claim, the dissolution between human and machine does in fact overlap with other binary divisions. To this end, Katherine Hayles writes, 'As long as the human subject is envisioned as an autonomous self with

seem trivial at the moment, as science continues to advance toward the creation of machines right out of the movies, the potential for a deeper understanding of our technological counterparts may be right around the corner.

Conclusion

As we rapidly approach the supposed apocalypse when networked machines assume dominion over humanity, it is worth remembering that even with this perceived inevitability, that outcome cannot be known. What we do today is just as much a construction of our future as our future is what constructs us today. The task before us is not an easy one. No doubt, in a world where fans claim that Sony's termination of Aibo is an unspeakable act of 'robocide', it is not unimaginable to justify intervening to ensure the safety of Sony's robotic dog at any cost. Indeed, as we have seen earlier, the drive to secure populations from external threats can easily result in the enslavement or annihilation of those beings that refuse to submit.

It may therefore be no different with the drive to protect technological life in the upcoming future, especially when we can send in the SWORDS and have the robots protect their own. When it is the machines that are calling the shots, the drive to protect other robotic life may become all the greater, since it will be these technologies that will be determined essential to life in the first place. This is not to say that we should devalue technological life as having an innate being of its own in order to overcome the pitfalls of securing these beings' existence. Rather, it is to demonstrate how we cannot simply turn away from problematizing the fears that arise out of what mechanical intelligence may someday bring. The question of whether Judgment Day will bring heaven or hell somewhat misses the point. What is more important is how we define those parameters of who or what counts in the first place.

David Campbell reminds us that 'identity is an inescapable dimension of being. . . . Whether we are talking of "the body" or "the state" . . . the identity of each is performatively constituted . . . through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an "inside" from an "outside", a "self" from an "other", a "domestic" from a "foreign"' (1998: 9). Hence, we must not try to abandon concepts of identities altogether for fear that they will inevitably war with one another. Rather, we must work to reformulate iden-

unambiguous boundaries, the human-computer interface can only be parsed as a division between the solidity of real life . . . and the illusion of virtual reality. . . . By contrast, when the human is seen as part of a distributed system, the full expression of human capability can be seen precisely to *depend* on the splice rather than being imperiled by it' (1999: 290). As a consequence, by shifting our representations away from visions of peril to ones of dependence we must give up the notion of a static self that is autonomous from the world around it.

tity in a way that dissolves the very distinctions and borders that refuse to recognize the fluidity of identity and performance. As the world becomes increasingly networked and humanity wired, old dichotomies between the individual's body and machine will continue to erode.

The precise differences between the fictional representations and reality are irrelevant because 'the identity of a state is the effect of ritualized performances . . . that operate . . . in the service of its ideals . . . [which have] been affirmed . . . [through] fictional representation[s]' (Campbell 1998: 87-88). Through examining these representations alongside their actual development, we can expose how certain discourses risk putting us on a path of mindless control that will end only in global termination. As Foucault puts it, 'Power comes from below . . . [via] the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production . . . [and that] form a general line of force that traverses the local oppositions and links them together' (1978: 94). Simply, in a networked world any node could create a rupture to change the entirety of what is to come, even if it was thought to be preordained.

Thankfully, since we are still at the point where the realization of fully conscious machines is only around the corner, we are in a better position to begin rethinking the rigid forms of identity that our fictions have speculated will end in Armageddon. In *Colossus*, Dr Forbin protests, 'Never!' to the machine that required human subjugation at the end of the film. However, the film leaves unanswered whether Colossus's control continued indefinitely into the future. Insofar as the film is an examination of how mind-sets of control breakdown, there should be no such assumption that machines will be able to escape the inevitable pitfalls inhering in logics of security. Meanwhile, in the *Terminator* films, the element of time-travel shows us how each moment throughout the course of the present affects both our future and our past, since each moment is interdependent with the rest. The miniseries *Sarah Connor Chronicles* demonstrates how this process is ongoing, making no single moment particularly more important than the next, since at any instance the tracks for a new Skynet can be placed down. Again, this is not to say a simple reorientation toward our technological identities will provide the answer overnight. Instead, it is to prove that:

> One is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about . . . in their bodies and minds. Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance . . . that makes a revolution possible (Foucault 1978: 95-97).

As we see military use of intelligent networks alongside the development of killing-machines that are only steps away from being Terminators

themselves, we must be aware that the way we confront developing technologies—whether it be SWORDS or Aibos, fiction or reality—helps to determine the future conditions upon which our biotechnological existence will be founded. Whether we choose to let our narratives of reality be told in apocalyptic formations or in new directions altogether is all a matter of how we interpret our world. As the saying goes, 'The future is not set. There is no such thing as fate, but what we make for ourselves by our own will.'

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Part II

Diverse Cases of Network Apocalypse

5. Baracknophobia and the Paranoid Style: Visions of Obama as the Antichrist on the World Wide Web

Amarnath Amarasingam

Abstract

This chapter explores the belief among certain subsets of the US population that Obama is the Antichrist depicted as setting the stage for the end of the world. First, I examine the apocalyptic fears and conspiracies surrounding the presidency of Barack Obama, placing it in historical and religious perspective. Second, I investigate how expressions of apocalypticism and conspiracism surrounding Obama manifest themselves on the Internet.

Conspiracism and apocalypticism in the United States do not begin with President Barack Obama, and they will not end with his administration. Many scholars have pointed out that these elements are deeply ingrained in American culture and often cannot be distinguished from each other (Boyer 1992; Lahr 2007; Strozier 1994). As Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons note, 'aggressive White supremacy, demagogic appeals, demonization, conspiracist scapegoating, anti-Semitism, hatred of the Left, militaristic nationalism, an apocalyptic style, and millennialist themes have repeatedly been at the center of our political conflicts, not on the fringe' (2000: 17). There have been dozens of books and articles written about black helicopters, the Federal Reserve, the Illuminati, Y2K, Area 51, and UFOs (Barkun 2003; Berlet and Lyons 2000: 323-44; Cowan 2003; Goldberg 2001; Tapia 2003; Wojcik 1997: 175-208). More recently, scores of individuals have come to doubt seriously the official story about what happened on 9/11 (Dunbar and Reagan 2005; Fenster 2008: 233-78; Mole 2006; Olmsted 2009: 205-31). The 9/11 Truth movement, as they have been dubbed, is divided into two camps: those who believe that the Bush administration either 'let it happen

on purpose' (LIHOP) or 'made it happen on purpose' (MIHOP). A 2006 Zogby poll found that 42 per cent of Americans believe that the US government and the 9/11 Commission concealed or refused to investigate key pieces of evidence that contradict the official story. An Ohio University survey similarly found that a third of Americans believe that the government deliberately carried out the 9/11 attacks or refused to stop them from occurring. Close to five million Americans (16 per cent) believe that secretly planted explosives brought down the Twin Towers (Manjoo 2008: 65-66). Such beliefs are spurred on through the Internet and the work of amateur film makers like Dylon Avery (of *Loose Change* fame). The Truth movement's attack on the 9/11 Commission report—written by two governors, four congressional representatives, three former White House officials, and two special counsels, taking two years to complete at a cost of $15 million—reminds us of another report in history that was slowly buried under an avalanche of absurdity.

When the Warren Commission released its 888-page report (and later, 26 volumes of supporting documents) on 24 September 1964, the number of people who rejected its findings was 31.6 per cent. Over one thousand conspiracy books have since been written on the subject, with some authors dedicating their entire life to uncovering a conspiracy. It does not seem to matter that the investigation into the Kennedy assassination was one of the most extensive and intensive in world history. For example, the FBI's investigation into the assassination produced an unprecedented twenty-five thousand interviews, and the submission of twenty-three hundred separate reports. Yet the most recent Gallup Poll, conducted in November 2003, 'shows that a remarkable 75 percent of the American public reject the findings of the Warren Commission and believe there was a conspiracy in the assassination' (Bugliosi 2007: xv). The recent documentary by Alex Jones, *The Obama Deception* (2009), declares Kennedy to have been our last real president. His assassination, carried out by the global financial elite, effectively transformed the presidency into a 'puppet post'.

A more recent survey of New Jersey voters showed that 21 per cent did not believe that Obama was born in the United States, 19 per cent believed that George W. Bush had prior knowledge of 9/11 and 8 per cent believed that Obama was the Antichrist. These numbers appear fairly low, but the results are more interesting when we look specifically at the interplay between demographics and beliefs. For example, 40 per cent of liberals, 50 per cent of African Americans, and 33 per cent of 18- to 29-years-olds thought that Bush had prior knowledge of 9/11. Similarly, 18 per cent of conservatives, 24 per cent of Hispanics, and 24 per cent of 18- to 29-year-olds believed Obama to be the Antichrist (see Public Policy Polling 2009 for all results). As comedian Bill Maher, host of *Real Time with Bill Maher*, recently complained, 'Never underestimate the ability of a tiny fringe group

of losers to ruin everything . . . because in America, if you don't immediately kill errant bullshit, no matter how ridiculous, it can grow and thrive and eventually take over, like crab grass or Cirque du Soleil' (YouTube 2009d).

This chapter has a twofold initiative: first, it will explore the apocalyptic fears and conspiracies surrounding the presidency of Barack Obama, placing it in historical and religious perspective. I show that such anxiety fits comfortably in the long history of right-wing populism that has long been an intimate part of American culture. Second, I explore how expressions of apocalypticism and conspiracism surrounding Obama manifest themselves on the Internet. For many right-wing populists in the United States, the Internet functions as a tool to fight back against the global elite and the forces of evil.

Since it is assumed that the global elite and the forces of evil control the traditional media, the Internet serves as an alternative avenue for populist insurgency. As Timothy Melley has argued, the most recent surges in conspiracism not only attempt to tackle some specific political issue, social organization or historical event; they are better understood as stemming 'largely from a sense of *diminished human agency*, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action and, in extreme cases, may not be able to control their own behavior' (2002: 62).

The Internet, as will be elaborated in the conclusion, allows individuals some sense of agency outside the reach of government, and outside the reach of traditional media organizations. It functions as an inexpensive way for them to expound deeply held beliefs that the mainstream media tend to marginalize. Additionally, the Internet fosters what Cass Sunstein (2007: 77) has called 'enclave deliberation', in which like-minded individuals associate and converse almost solely with one another. I begin with an exploration of right-wing populism in the United States, before examining how views of Obama, specifically, are developing online.

They Got It under Control: Right-Wing Populism in America

The movements and worldviews discussed below are multifaceted and evade simple classification. They are a cocktail of millennialism, conspiracy, patriotism and scapegoating. The search for the Antichrist at times gets wedded to theories of the Illuminati and the New World Order. At other times, it remains purely in the realm of religion. For example, one individual I interviewed dismissed the 9/11 Truth movement and Illuminati conspiracy theories as products of the irrational mind all the while convinced, based on flimsy numerological acrobatics, that Obama was the Antichrist. Although not a perfect term, 'right-wing populism' best captures the contours of these

varying worldviews (Berlet and Lyons 2000). Another reason for using the term is to rectify the common misconception that these worldviews need not be taken seriously, as they are merely the 'lunatic fringe' of society. As Berlet and Lyons make clear, 'right-wing populists are dangerous not because they are crazy irrational zealots—but because they are not. These people may be our neighbors, our coworkers, and our relatives' (2000: 3; see also Boyer 1992).

Populism has been defined in a variety of ways (see, e.g. Canovan 1981), but it is generally thought to contain at least two core elements: a celebration of 'the people', plus some form of anti-elitism. 'The people' are always viewed as fighting back against the constant onslaught of the elites, who can varyingly be genuine social structures of oppression or ethereal forces difficult to pinpoint. As Berlet and Lyons note, right-wing populist movements are generally characterized by resistance to social change, fueled 'in a central way by fears of the Left and its political gains' (2000: 5). In Richard Hofstadter's seminal examination of the right-wing paranoid style in America during the 1960s, he similarly noted that there were three distinguishable fears that plagued many Americans: (1) there is a sustained conspiracy to undermine free capitalism and install socialism; (2) there has been a Communist takeover of government that has sold out national interests; and (3) Communist agents have infiltrated education, religion and the media to make it impossible for loyal Americans to fight back (1966: 25-26). If we attribute the amplified fear of Communism to the Cold War, it seems that there may be nothing new under the sun.

Right-wing populism, for the purposes of this paper, will be explored as a movement that is characterized by conspiracism as well as apocalypticism and millennialism. For some individuals, the two elements function separately, but, for most, they are intimately related, producing an extravagant anxiety about the one-world government, the Illuminati, Lucifer, the Antichrist, and the end times. As Mark Fenster notes, apocalypticism 'often echoes, and at times explicitly borrows, the theories of more secular right-wing conspiracy theorists; the lines between popular eschatology and reactionary, secular conspiracy theories can be blurry indeed' (2008: 199). However, for simplicity's sake, I will introduce them separately. Conspiracism is generally thought to be a form of scapegoating that 'frames the enemy as part of a vast insidious plot against the common good' (Berlet and Lyons 2000: 9). As Michael Barkun notes, the essence of a conspiracy theory is a sincere attempt to understand and explain evil. 'A *conspiracy belief* is the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end' (Barkun 2003: 3). According to conspiracy theorists, events in the world are governed by design, not randomness. This emphasis on design, Barkun notes, often manifests itself in three principles that can be found to be part of all conspiracy theories: nothing happens by

accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected (2003: 3-4). As we will see below, the fears surrounding the rise of Obama are a mixture of older fears of the Federal Reserve as a cabal of secret bankers, of the Bilderberg Group/Trilateral Commission, Bohemian Grove, the Illuminati and the Freemasons. Obama, some argue, is nothing more than a Trojan horse, hand-picked by the global elite to enrapture the masses and sedate their revolutionary anger following the Bush administration.

Few secret societies have aroused as much suspicion as the Freemasons. The early Freemasons were craftsmen who were adept at carving stones on buildings such as cathedrals and castles. In order to keep out interlopers, 'they both guarded trade secrets and (with time) devised confidential verbal and physical signs that enabled one accredited mason to recognize another' (Pipes 1997: 59). The reason why non-craftsmen eventually came to join the Masons remains the subject of scholarly debate. However, it is known that by 1717 the Masons had founded a Grand Lodge in London, and that six years later, they had developed a constitution.

After a lodge opened in Paris in 1737, King Louis XV demanded that his subjects not associate with the group. The Vatican similarly issued several papal bulls against the organization. Around this time, the Freemasons began to splinter. For example, a Scottish Freemasonry developed, and an individual by the name of Giuseppe Balsamo founded an Egyptian Freemasonry, which may have played a role in the French Revolution. It is with this increasingly decentred chaos that conspiracy theories begin to be associated with the Freemasons. One argument put forth by some anti-Masons stated that 'whatever the innocence of specific members, the order as a whole might be guilty of insurgency or sabotage. There could always be a further, more hidden rank that manipulated all the others' (Pipes 1997: 61). The secrecy of the Freemasons began to be linked with other groups, such as the Knights Templar, the Philosophes, the Rosicrucians and the Jews. To make matters seem more ominous, conspiracy theorists began to look into the Bavarian Illuminati, which emerged around the same time.

The Illuminati scare can be traced to its 1776 founding in Bavaria by law professor Adam Weishaupt (1748–1830). Although completely ceasing to exist by 1787 and counting only three thousand members throughout its existence, the Illuminati would become the main ingredient of almost all contemporary conspiracy theories (Pipes 1997: 63). The teachings of the group, Hofstadter notes, 'seem to be no more than another version of Enlightenment rationalism, spiced with an anticlerical animus that seems an inevitable response to the reactionary-clerical atmosphere of eighteenth-century Bavaria' (1966: 10). They were initially suspected of having penetrated into France and causing the Revolution, and some in the United States feared that their country was next. The 1798 Alien Act, written with such fears in mind, stated that the president could expel any foreign national

thought to be involved in 'treasonable or secret machinations against the government' (Goldberg 2001: 6). As a secret society, the Illuminati were characterized by strict rules of membership and a model of governance whereby the leadership kept secret their purposes from the general members. In other words, what some anti-Masonic groups feared about the Freemasons 'became a deliberate strategy of Weishaupt's Illuminati' (Pipes 1997: 63). The Illuminati were far more influential after ceasing to exist than during their brief tenure. Already by 1797, the Illuminati were being accused of attempting to rule the world. In the United States and Canada, they were seen to be keen on destroying religion, installing communism and directing 'all evil forces'.

Although fear of the Illuminati and the Freemasons was present throughout the twentieth century, it made headway in the mid-twentieth century through the famous John Birch Society (JBS). Founded by Robert Welch in 1959, the members of this group expressed fears that both the United States and the Soviet Union were controlled by the same global cabal, and 'if left unexposed, the traitors inside the US government would betray the country's sovereignty to the United Nations for a collectivist new world order managed by a "one-world socialist government"' (Berlet and Lyons 2000: 177; see also Goldberg 2001: 37-50). When the Cold War came to a close, many thought it was simultaneously the death knell of the JBS. However, the Gulf War, George H.W. Bush's call for a New World Order, and the increased right-wing populism of the 1990s, kept the group active. As will be evident, many of the fears expressed by the JBS are present in the discourse surrounding the Obama administration.

The second element of right-wing populism is apocalypticism/millennialism (Baumgartner 1999; Fenster 2008: 197-232). As Berlet and Lyons note, 'The poisoned fruit of conspiracist scapegoating is baked into the American apple pie, and its ingredients include destructive versions of apocalyptic fears and millennialist expectations' (2000: 11). Apocalypticism is the belief in an imminent confrontation between the forces of good and evil, a cataclysmic event that will lead to epochal transformation. Millennialism can be seen to be a form of apocalypticism, in which contemporary Christians believe that when Jesus returns, he will reign for a period of one thousand years (a millennium). Millennialism often takes two forms: post-millennialists, on the one hand, believe that the millennium will be brought about by humanity, through social reform and the installation of Christian values in society, all working in accordance with the divine plan. Christ will return after this slow progression toward goodness and the gradual elimination of evil. Premillennialists, on the other hand, believe that Christ's return will *begin* the one thousand years of Christian rule. This belief assumes that humanity cannot save itself, that this 'inherently sinful world can be redeemed only through catastrophe and supernatural intervention' and that

leading up to the Second Coming of Christ, 'humanity will become increasingly evil' (Wojcik 1997: 35).

Christian apocalypticism and millennialism are based on many biblical sources, such as the books of Daniel and Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible, and the Gospel of Mark (ch. 13) and the book of Revelation in the New Testament. Revelation, however, is by far the most influential text for apocalyptic and millennialist thinking. As Jonathan Kirsch notes, 'The idea that the world will end (and soon)—and the phantasmagoria of words, numbers, colors, images, and incidents in which the end-times are described in the book of Revelation—are deeply woven into the fabric of Western civilization, both in high culture and in pop culture' (2006: 2). Probably written toward the end of the first century CE by John on the Greek island of Patmos, Revelation takes the form of a letter that John wrote to a group of seven Anatolian churches that were being persecuted by the Romans. Revelation is, in a sense, John's way of offering encouragement and comfort 'by revealing the blessed future state of Christians who are faithful to the testimony of Jesus even at the cost of their own lives and by assuring the readers of the inevitability and imminence of the divine punishment of their persecutors' (Aune 2000: 1187).

Many Christians in the United States have found such sentiments relevant for the contemporary world. As Goldberg states, for believers 'the nation was created to perform the Lord's will and surely was chosen as the site of the Second Coming and God's future kingdom' (2001: 66). The United States, however, was currently awash in sin and 'had betrayed its calling and fallen away from the Lord. Its leaders had sacrificed national sovereignty to the Antichrist and sworn allegiance to Satan's New World Order' (Goldberg 2001: 67). In modern America, they argue, the signs of transgression are many: condom sales, rampant sexuality, pornography, abortion, Darwinism, popular music, the changing status of women, the New Age movement, the crime rate, television and homosexuality. Apocalyptic writers also point to the reign of science and the scientific method as promoters of 'the same false message of human self-sufficiency' (Boyer 1992: 236).

Believing that the United States was mired in sin, apocalyptic writers turned to biblical sources in order to track God's plan for the future. Above all, Revelation provided individuals with the most fodder for apocalyptic speculation:

> John writes of an angel who beckoned him to the 'door' of heaven to see 'things which must be hereafter'. Before him appears a succession of images of tribulations and calamities in sequences of seven. Earthquakes, storms, polluted rivers and seas, falling stars, locust, famine, and plague devastate the faithless but are only a prelude to the final battle. Satan confronts God and takes the shape of 'a great red dragon having seven heads

> and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads'. On a base of ten kingdoms, the dark lord elevates his heir, the 'beast' or Antichrist: 'And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying Who is like unto the beast? Who is able to make war with him?' Joined by his coconspirator, the false prophet, the Antichrist creates an economic system that requires every person to 'receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of the beast. . . . Six hundred threescore and six.' God pours out his wrath on those who accept the mark, while the faithful suffer through forty-two months of persecution. The physical return of Jesus brings redemption, and he leads the heavenly host to victory over the beast and false prophet (Goldberg 2001: 67-68).

Popularizers of end-time prophecy have been numerous in the United States, including people such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jack Van Impe and John Hagee. One of the individuals who first put apocalypticism on the best-seller lists in the United States was a charismatic preacher named Hal Lindsey (b. 1930). His book *The Late, Great Planet Earth* was published in 1970 and has sold over thirty-five million copies to date. Lindsey's great skill was to decipher the bizarre visions recounted in Revelation in a way that contemporary readers could understand them (Fenster 2008: 209-14). As Jonathan Kirsch notes, Lindsey's book, largely a restatement of John Nelson Darby's dispensational premillennialism, is distinguished by his 'undeniable genius for hot-wiring the book of Revelation to the geo-political realities of the contemporary world' (2006: 223; see also Boyer 1992: 80-112; Wojcik 1997: 37-59).

According to Lindsey, the Antichrist will be a politician who comes to power in the 'revived Roman Empire', the equivalent of today's European Union. As we will see, some of those who are convinced that Obama is the Antichrist point to this ingrained opinion as one of the main reasons why Obama's true identity has gone unrecognized. In *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, Lindsey predicted that the Rapture would take place in 1981. When this did not occur, he provided a new prediction in *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* (1980). In 1994, he provided yet another prediction in *Planet Earth 2000 A.D.* This time, it was not Communism but Islamic fundamentalism that would be the final adversary of Jesus Christ (for more on Lindsey's methods of argumentation, see O'Leary 1994: 134-71).

Apocalypticism entered American politics on the back of an individual deeply inspired by Lindsey's *Late, Great Planet Earth*. Ronald Reagan was 'perhaps the first national figure outside of fundamentalist circles to openly and unapologetically affirm his belief in the imminent fulfillment of Bible prophecy' (Kirsch 2006: 226). Reagan was accustomed to seeing cosmic significance in worldly events. Following the 1969 Libyan coup by Muammar al-Gaddafi, Reagan remarked that it was a 'sign that the day of

Armageddon isn't far off. Everything's falling into place. It can't be long now' (quoted in Kirsch 2006: 226). Reagan's secretary of defense, Caspar Weinberger, and his interior secretary, James Watts, among others, all read the book of Revelation along with Lindsey's book and eagerly awaited the end times. Reagan was so influenced by Lindsey's book that he wanted his military leaders to understand its significance fully. With Reagan's blessing, Lindsey was invited to brief the Pentagon on the 'divine implications' of their hostilities with the Soviet Union. Similarly, Jerry Falwell was asked to deliver the same message to the National Security Council. No other president in recent history has allied apocalypticism and national security with such ease or impenitence.

As Paul Boyer has written, 'The theological foundation for these wide-ranging reflections on contemporary global developments was the doctrine of *Antichrist*—the evil figure who will arise after the Rapture and rule for seven years (the Tribulation) before his defeat at Armageddon' (1992: 272). This scenario develops out of a handful of references in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. For example, believers point to the book of Daniel, where there is description of a 'little horn' that sprouts from the Beast, or to Revelation, where in chs. 13 and 17 the Antichrist is thought to be the beast that arises from the sea. Jesus' warning about false Christs in Mk 13.22 and St Paul's statement about a 'man of sin' in 2 Thessalonians are other examples. However, the actual word 'Antichrist' appears in only four verses of Scripture: 1 Jn 2.18, 22; 4:3; and 2 Jn 1:7 (see Fuller 1995 for discussion). As Boyer notes, 'From these brief and cryptic references evolved a vast body of belief and legend that took many forms throughout Christianity's two-thousand-year history' (1992: 273). Many individuals have been suspected of being the Antichrist, with popes heading the list. In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy was also suspected by some apocalyptic writers. After his death, a few 'expected Kennedy to rise from his coffin, fulfilling the prophecy in Revelation that the Beast would miraculously recover from a deadly head wound' (Boyer 1992: 275). In the 1970s, Henry Kissinger was a suspect, as well as Ayatollah Khomeini (during the hostage crisis), Saddam Hussein (during the Gulf War) and Osama bin Laden (after 9/11).

Baracknophobia Online: Films, Forums and Facebook

Certain elements of the American population have come to distrust deeply those in power. Since he declared his intention to run for president, Obama has become the object of much of this suspicion (Friedman 2009). When he quotes Scripture, they think he is being crafty; when he is photographed in prayer, they think it political posturing. Such a sustained pessimism cannot be countered with fact or rational argument (see Stroup and Shuck 2007;

Zeleny 2009). What most take to be his charisma, his sincerity and his genuine concern for the future of America, is, for some individuals, a well-oiled façade, a sham designed to enrapture and hypnotize the masses, while truly devious plans are secretly unfolded. Beginning during the 2008 election cycle, the Internet began teeming with speculation about Obama and the New World Order, and about Obama and the Antichrist. As Kirsch notes, speculation about the identity of the Antichrist 'can be seen as a kind of Rorschach test for the anxieties of any given age' (2006: 12). E-mails circulated widely and amateur videos were posted on YouTube proclaiming strange personality and numerological resemblances between Obama and biblical statements about the Antichrist. A recent Google search of 'Obama' and 'Antichrist' yielded 2.4 million results.

Two Facebook searches of the same terms, as well as 'Obama' and 'New World Order', indicated the existence of over 200 and 137 Common Interest groups respectively, some with several hundred members. These search results indicate at the very least that there is a budding interest in the idea of Obama as the Antichrist. It does not, to be sure, show that millions of people subscribe to such beliefs. This section of the chapter will explore the online presence of anti-Obama sentiment in its varying forms. The Web sites, forums, and films discussed below were not chosen randomly but were selected based on the number of people they attracted, the popularity of their ideas (i.e. if the same beliefs appeared in several different venues) and frequency of user activity. In other words, examples were chosen if they showed some evidence of being a moderately active online community. For the sake of organization, I have divided the profusion of online content into two themes: (1) those who believe Obama will pave the way for the Antichrist, and (2) those who believe that Obama is the literal Antichrist.

Obama Is Part of the One-World Government and Will Pave the Way for the Antichrist

Those who believe that Obama is the literal Antichrist (see below) seem to be smaller in number than those who believe that he is only *paving the way* for the end times. Beliefs under this first theme vary widely among those who, for some reason, find Obama slightly scary, those who believe that Obama is a puppet of the New World Order (NWO), and those who believe that he is working for higher powers than the NWO (namely Lucifer). As one individual noted in the *Backwoods Home Magazine* forum discussion, which is dedicated to the issue of Obama as the Antichrist, there is just *something* about Obama that makes her fearful:

> The things the man said and his actions I found to be quite unnerving. Especially his speech in front of the stage with the pillars and the huge pictures of himself. There was a point during this speech where Obama

> paused to hear the crowds applaud and chant his name. The stance he took and the expression on his face were very Hitler like. This speech scared the hooey out of me when it was so obvious to me that he was so much absorbing and gaining so much energy off of the crowd's enthusiasm. It was truly freaky (BHM Forum 2008).

Following from this, there has been another document circulating around the Internet entitled, 'An Examination of Obama's Use of Hidden Hypnosis Techniques in His Speeches' (PennyPress n.d.: 1), which argues that Obama is 'not just using subliminal messages, but textbook covert hypnosis and neuro-linguistic programming techniques on audiences that are intentionally designed to sideline rational judgment and implant subconscious commands to think he is wonderful and elect him President'. Similarly, YouTube contains many clips attempting to prove that if Obama's 'Yes we can' speeches are played backwards, it clearly sounds like 'Thank you Satan.' Fortunately, many of the comments following these clips mock the intention of the creators, asking, for example, why they feel the need to play the speech backwards at all (YouTube 2009b).

A small poll conducted on Survivalistboards.com shows that while 50 per cent of respondents believe that Obama is not the Antichrist, 12.5 per cent believe him to be the literal Antichrist, and 37.5 per cent believe that he is a 'smaller' Antichrist. Opinions vary about the nature of Obama. For example, one commenter stated:

> You are giving him way too much credit. His puppet masters are the ones in power. He appears from nowhere two years ago, is groomed for the presidential office before he completed the first term of an unremarkable couple of years in the senate, then runs a campaign costing hundreds of millions of dollars, which were certainly not his bucks. He's a tool for the power elite to achieve their ends. He's nobody and certainly not an Antichrist (Survivalistboards.com 2008).

As we will see, Obama's quick rise to power seems to signal different things to different people. Also, for this individual, Obama is just another puppet of those who are really running the United States and the world.

Discussions of the NWO exist in both apocalyptic literature and secular conspiracy theories. Peter Knight, for example, rightly points out that individualism is one of the main reasons why such fears are so prevalent in the United States. As he argues,

> In part, the United States is a nation of conspiracy theorists because the influence of larger social and economic forces in determining the lives of individuals is often regarded as a paranoia-inducing encroachment on the self-reliance of individuals. So, for example, where other people might conceivably view the daily involvement of 'big government' in the lives of its citizens as the caring embrace of the welfare state, many Americans see

> only surveillance, conspiratorial interference, and an erosion of individual autonomy (2002: 7).

Alternatively, this obsession with the one-world government is indeed closely tied to apocalypticism and millennialism. Apocalyptic writers, through a reading of the book of Daniel (ch. 7) and Revelation, have been mining geopolitical events looking for signs of the one-world government, and they have found many candidates. As Daniel Wojcik notes, the postwar system of international finance and commerce, the emerging global economy, the League of Nations, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Bilderberg Group have all 'been closely monitored by premillennialists and regarded by some as evidence of the coming of the Antichrist's one-world economy and one-world government' (1997: 16).

Such religious and secular reactions to the threat of the New World Order are at times indistinguishable. For some individuals, the attitudes are intimately intertwined. For example, a popular report written by Mel Sanger, an author and researcher of the end times, argues that Obama

> does not qualify as the Antichrist because his lineage is not of Jewish descent as is required not only from a biblical perspective but also his bloodline and lineage is not consistent with the Masonic Jews requirement for a final messiah who will head a world government and convince even Orthodox Jews that he is a descendant of the line of David. . . . However what is clear, is that Barack Obama will be another pawn in the global government agenda since as president of the United States he will facilitate policies that will move the world closer to global government (2008: 14).

As another individual commented on the Kitco Forums, Obama's presidency

> must happen to set the stage for a total collapse of our monetary system. In turn we will be sold out into the one world government and our Constitution will be thrown out with last night's trash. . . . We will be broke, along with the rest of the world, and the people will welcome with open arms the Antichrist who will rise up out of the ashes of despair to be our savior. . . . Then for a short time things will be pretty good, then *shift* big time like we have never seen before or ever again. I believe Obama is key to all this being able to happen in the coming years (Kitco Forums 2008).

One of the most extensive anti-Obama Web sites is an elaborate, rambling, inconsistent, and disorganized blog run by an individual named MoniQue, containing links to documentaries, Illuminati conspiracy theories, 2012 predictions (the end date of the Mayan long count calendar), the Birther movement, as well as information about Obama as the Antichrist. It would require several weeks adequately to peruse this site, so let us focus

on only a few key themes. Although I have placed this site under the first theme, it is in fact a medley of all of these subjects plus a dozen more.

On her Web site, MoniQue scolds those who believe Obama to be just another puppet of the NWO. She argues that the hierarchy places Lucifer at the top, followed by the Illuminati, and then the New World Order. She pleads, 'Don't be a fool. Do not underestimate Obama, as if he is just a typical puppet of the now . . . Lucifer has big plans for Obama' (MoniQue). She goes on to note that Obama is in fact part of the Illuminati, but is planning to overthrow them. Obama secretly despises the Illuminati, made up of rich and powerful white men, because of his narcissism and megalomania. The site also argues that Obama is a member of the Boule, an African-American counterpart to Yale University's secretive Skull and Bones fraternity, as well as a member of the Prince Hall Freemasons, a black counterpart to the Freemasons (YouTube 2007). MoniQue goes on to argue that 'men like Farrakhan, who is said to be a 4-letter Mason and . . . Rev. Wright, a 33 degree Prince Hall Mason, and Boule members Rev. Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, and others . . . are in ecstasy waiting' for Obama's coup. They know not, according to MoniQue and her fans, that Obama, with the help of Lucifer, is planning a total takeover.

Of all the sources discussed thus far, however, *The Obama Deception*, a 2009 documentary by talk radio host and darling of the conspiracy community Alex Jones, has been the most influential. As of this writing, it has been viewed over four million times on YouTube, is also available on GoogleVideo and is recommended on most of the Web sites and forums discussed in this chapter. *The Obama Deception* has garnered over ninety thousand viewer comments on YouTube, and over thirty thousand ratings, giving it an average rating of four and a half out of five stars. The film begins with Alex Jones setting the stage for the rise of Obama: 'America, in 2009, was desperate for change. The past eight years had been a disaster . . . the elite were in trouble. The people were beginning to see through their façade, past their front man, and to the ruling elite behind the throne. . . . And then on to the scene came a man who promised change' (YouTube 2009c). However, the film argues, change is not possible in the United States, as the presidency is nothing more than a 'puppet post' behind which stand the global power elite.

The Bilderberg Group, frequently attacked by conspiracy theorists (with some dedicating part of their lives to following the group's every move), is again singled out in the documentary as responsible for rising oil prices and the collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market. Another entity targeted is the Trilateral Commission, which supposedly executes the plans of the Bilderbergs through regional groups around the world. The regional assemblage that manages the United States is, according to the film, the Council on Foreign Relations. Under such conditions, 'even if Barack Obama was

the most wonderful person in the world, he was groomed and brought to power by the global elite to carry out their agenda' (YouTube 2009c).

According to Jones and others in the film, the objective of the global elite had been hampered by the 'disastrous' Bush administration. Americans had been on the verge of revolution, dissatisfied with their government and ready for change. The global elite had to rectify the situation, and they found in Obama the perfect tool. He had the ability to placate the masses once again; his charisma and his words would anesthetize feelings of anger and frustration. As the film states, 'Obama is the perfect Trojan Horse. He makes the people feel like they finally have a place at the table, even as he betrays them' (YouTube 2009c). The paranoia in the film often reaches new levels of absurdity. For example, the film points to Obama's transition Web site and interprets his plan to 'require 50 hours of community service in middle school and high school and 100 hours of community service in college every year' *not* as Obama's attempt to engage the youth or foster social capital, but as a fascistic plan to conscript all 18- to 24-year-olds in America into 'a paramilitary, domestic security force' (YouTube 2009c).

Obama Is the Literal Antichrist

As discussed above, the quest to discover the identity of the Antichrist has a long history. The belief that Barack Obama might be the Antichrist is very difficult to trace to any single source. The Web site About.com traces one of the origins of this belief to an e-mail circulated in early 2008. The e-mail reads:

> According to The Book of Revelations the Antichrist will be a man, in his 40s, of MUSLIM descent, who will deceive the nations with persuasive language, and have a MASSIVE Christ-like appeal . . . the prophecy says that people will flock to him and he will promise false hope and world peace, and when he is in power, will destroy everything. Is it OBAMA?? I STRONGLY URGE each one of you to repost this as many times as you can! Each opportunity that you have to send it to a friend or media outlet . . . do it! (Emery 2008 [emphasis original]).

If this relatively innocuous e-mail message is in fact the root of such beliefs, it has successfully engendered a cottage industry of speculation and paranoia on the Internet.

YouTube has become home to many amateur videos proclaiming (or mocking) the idea that Obama is the Antichrist. A search for 'Obama' and 'Antichrist' yielded about fifteen thousand videos, attempting to relate Obama to, among other things, the Bible Code, the book of Revelation, the Illuminati, the New World Order, and the year 2012. One of the most popular videos propounding that Obama is the Antichrist is entitled 'Jesus Gave Us the Name of the Antichrist' (YouTube 2009a), which has, as of this

writing, been viewed over six hundred thousand times and is referenced in dozens of other Web sites. The narrator of the video points to Lk. 10.18, which states, 'And he said unto them, I saw Satan as lightning falling from the heights (or heavens).'

The video notes that Jesus probably spoke Aramaic, and since Aramaic is the 'most ancient form of Hebrew' (which is false), it holds that we can translate the key terms in this verse into Hebrew to see what they really mean. The narrator notes that, according to the Strong Hebrew Dictionary, the word for lightning is '*baraq*'. Similarly, the word for heights is '*bamah*'. The narrator then points out that the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, waw, is often transliterated as a *u* or *o* and is mostly used as a conjunction. Thus, 'I saw Satan as lightning falling from the heights' (Lk. 10.18) would, in Hebrew, be 'I saw Satan as *baraq o'bamah*'. The video contains a disclaimer at the end stating that the narrator is simply pointing to the facts, not declaring that Obama is the Antichrist (for a thorough treatment and debunking of this popular viral video, see Heiser 2009).

Another popular video, viewed over two hundred thousand times, is entitled 'Is OBAMA the ANTICHRIST?—12 of 19 Characteristics Are Met!' (YouTube 2008). The video explores 19 supposed characteristics of the Antichrist and argues that Obama met 12 of them even before taking office. The video is filled with vague associations, misinformation and simplistic analysis. To take just three examples, the video proclaims (with reference to biblical verses) that the Antichrist will be: (1) a 'stern-faced' king (Dan. 8.23) (according to the video, many have commented that Obama has a somber, stern face); (2) a 'lawless one' or 'rebel' (2 Thess. 2.3) (the video notes that the Secret Service has given Obama the codename The Renegade); (3) seen 'standing in the Holy Place' just before he takes office (Matthew 24) (the video shows pictures of Obama at the Western Wall as evidence). The video concludes by stating that it is 'too early to tell' for certain whether Obama is the Antichrist.

The quest to discover the identity of the Antichrist is matched in dedication by the effort to identify the 'Beast' whose name is symbolized by the number 666 (Kirsch 2006: 82-84). A clip posted on Dailymotion.com, a video hosting service based in France, has attempted to crack this code and has been growing in popularity (Dailymotion 2009). It approaches the issue through the use of numerology and Gematria (the Hebrew system of assigning numerical value to words and phrases). The video points to '7 Strange Coincidences' related to Obama, which are, as the video notes, likely to be mere coincidences, but factual nonetheless. I will recount two of these here: (1) Barack Hussein Obama, according to the video, has a Gematria value of 501, which is the 'same value for Judgment and End of Days'. Barack in Arabic means 'blessed'; Hussein in Arabic means 'handsome'; and Obama is an African word meaning 'leaning'. The video notes that

when the Gematria values of blessed (246), handsome (268) and leaning (152) are added together, the sum is 666. (2) Obama's name is indeed found in the Bible Codes, which are 'equal-distance-letter-spacing sequences' that look for patterns of letters within the Bible text (Dailymotion 2009). When the name 'Obama' is placed in the Bible Code using the text of the King James Bible, his name supposedly appears in the text of Rev. 13.1, one of the most prominent verses dealing with the Antichrist.

One of the most frequented Web sites arguing that Obama is the Antichrist is run by Kenneth Alex Randolf, a fifty-six-year-old former lawyer living in Seattle. Randolf's blog has been featured on CNN, and his other Web site is extremely popular among those concerned with the issue of Obama as the Antichrist (Randolf 2008). His Web site recounts the idea, discussed above, that Obama's name adds up to 666, and he believes that Obama is 'the prophesied political leader that will bring Tribulation (God's trial of humanity) that ends with Armageddon (World War III)' (Randolf, personal communication, 10 September 2009). Randolf notes that he has taken a serious look at other political leaders in the past, but none has fit his beliefs about the Antichrist prophecy until Obama came on the scene. One of the main factors leading him to believe that Obama is the Antichrist is the fact that none of the 'experts' in the area (i.e. Hal Lindsey, John Hagee, Oral Roberts *et al.*) believe this to be the case. According to Randolf, these experts, and nearly all millennial dispensationalists, are under the false impression that the Antichrist will 'hail from the former Roman Empire (Western Europe) and will lead a coalition of European nation states' (Randolf, personal communication, 10 September 2009).

This, according to him, is the main reason why Obama has not been recognized as the Antichrist. Unlike many others discussed in this chapter, Randolf does not believe that Obama is deliberately leading the world toward destruction. As he told me, 'I don't believe that the Antichrist believes he's the Antichrist because he does not believe in the concept or in the religion that produced the concept.' Just as Jesus did not become Christ until after 'his forty days in the desert and his contest with temptation . . . Obama will not become the Antichrist until he faces and fails the modern day equivalent of the forty days and temptation by evil' (Randolf, personal communication, 10 September 2009).

Randolf also adheres to the belief that the rise of Obama is related to the McNaught comet of 2007. The McNaught comet was the brightest comet seen from Earth in forty years, and it reached its perihelion (brightest phase) on 12 January 2007, 'close to' the time that Obama announced his candidacy for president (10 February 2007). Some believe that the McNaught comet is in fact the Mabus comet prophesied by Nostradamus (1503–1566) and thought to herald the advent of the so-called third Antichrist. John Hogue, the preeminent world expert on Nostradamus, wrote that many of

his fans have asked him to write about the relationship between Obama and the Antichrist. Hogue, who calls himself a rogue scholar, is the author of over fourteen best-selling books on the prophecies of Nostradamus. As he writes in his new online book *Nostradamus and the Antichrist: Code Named MABUS* (2008: 9), Nostradamus believed that there were three Antichrists, not one. The first two are likely Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler (2008: 18-54). Nostradamus gave a code name for the third Antichrist: Mabus (2008: 55-66). As Hogue writes,

> Though his true name is occulted, his destiny is made clear. World War III begins when Mabus dies an untimely death. The passing of this man will unite a hundred nations in a war against what Nostradamus calls the Eastern kings secretly allied in opposition to the West. They would use piracy (hijacking?), ambush and subterfuge to wage war. Know the war has begun when hollow mountains of a great New City (yet to be built in Nostradamus' day) at latitude 4455 in an unborn country he called Americh or Amorica, will be attacked by a fire in the sky. The hollow mountains crafted by man will be seized and plunged into the boiling cauldron of their own debris clouds. After this happens we will be living in the days of the last Antichrist (2008: 13-14).

Although the precise identity of the Antichrist is not known, one thing is clear: Mabus does not live through the world war he ignites, a conflict that will last twenty-seven years. For Hogue, many individuals in the twenty-first century come close to qualifying as the third Antichrist—Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush *et al.*—and he is ultimately unsure whether Obama fits the bill. He begins the chapter on Obama by stating that, although he does not believe Obama to be the third Antichrist, he must explore it as a scholarly endeavor. He writes: 'Don't blame me, my readers made me do it. They badgered me in hundreds of letters trying to perform anagrammatic acts of "lexicon-striction" thrusting the surname of Barack Hussein Obama down an anagramming veggie blender to slurry up an Obama "Mabus"'. (2008: 190). One of these attempts, also found on Randolf's Web site, argues that Mabus may be an anagram of Obama's full name with 'literary symmetry'. The first letter of his first name is *B*, the second and third letters of his middle name are *US,* the fourth and fifth letters of his last name are *MA*. Putting these letters together produces BUSMA, which is a simple anagram of MABUS. This kind of mix-and-match millennialism, what Barkun (2003: 18) calls 'improvisational millennialism', is characterized not by an adherence to secular or religious worldviews but by a 'relentless and seemingly indiscriminate borrowing'. Thus, the simultaneous use of astronomy, Nostradamus, and the New Testament produces not dissonance but a sense of holistic truth with multiple sources pointing to the same reality.

By far the most vitriolic anti-Obama Web site is beastobama.com, run by the notorious Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), an independent Baptist

church in Topeka, Kansas. The WBC Web site derides Obama as a 'fag enabler in chief', as 'worse than a Dateline pedophile' who had an 'atheist whore' for a mother and a 'deadbeat Muslim' for a father. The WBC, run by Pastor Fred Phelps (famous for coining the protest slogan 'God Hates Fags'), has long been monitored by the Anti-Defamation League and other groups for hate speech as well as for their picketing of military funerals. Beastobama.com presents a 30-minute documentary putting forth a 'Bible-based' argument why Obama is the Antichrist. In the documentary, one individual at a WBC protest states, 'God hates fags, God hates fag-enablers, and God hates baby killers. Therefore, God hates Antichrist Obama' (beastobama.com). For the WBC, Obama's unwillingness to decry the 'fag agenda' or to put a stop to abortion means that he is working against Christ (literally, anti-Christ). The media love affair with Obama, they argue, keeps the nation enthralled and blind to reality. As one individual states in the film:

> Satan is energizing the fag juggernaut that we know as the international media and entertainment industry to present a sparkling, sanitized coronation of his son the Antichrist. . . . To the men of the world, the Antichrist isn't some fire breathing, ugly monster. To the men of the world, the anti-Christ is beautiful; the anti-Christ is clever, brilliant, a smooth orator. The Antichrist is a friend of the world (beastobama.com).

Like the beast rising out of the sea in the book of Revelation (13.1), the Web site notes that Obama has risen from the sea of 'troubled humanity' and has captured their imagination: 'Barack Obama is the Antichrist, and is leading doomed America to her final destruction and the destruction of the world! We're not talking some vague, nebulous postulation; we're talking plain, straight Bible talk backed up by an overwhelming amount of real evidence' (beastobama.com). As Kirsch notes, such rhetoric is reflective of the ways in which the book of Revelation is being read in the contemporary world, and used as a 'potent rhetorical weapon in a certain kind of culture war, a war of contesting values and aspirations' (2006: 17).

Conclusion: Why the Internet Matters

There has been much hype surrounding the social significance of the Internet. Scholars have looked to cyberspace as a haven for finding new ways in which individual identity, community and ritual are expressed and experienced in the contemporary world. Apparently, on the Internet we can be different people, experience things we could never hope to experience in real life, help in the creation and perfection of collaborative knowledge and engage in participatory media. Scholars have however tended to get carried away when discussing the utter uniqueness of the Internet. As Douglas Cowan has noted, often what we think of as virtual reality is nothing

more than an electronic version of real life: 'Shopping online is not a visit to a "virtual store," but represents little more than choices made from a catalogue one accesses electronically' (2005: 258). In other words, not all online activity is unique and worthy of being studied as if it is so. For example, virtually no Muslims, one would presume, would declare themselves a *hajji* after completing a virtual *hajj* (Bunt 2000). Similarly, the experience of watching a lecture or a sermon online is relatively indistinguishable from watching one on television.

Such critiques are indeed significant for our current purposes: right-wing populism is obviously not a product of the Internet. However, cyberspace has become enormously important, practically and symbolically, for contemporary right-wing populists. The relationship between the Internet and the *persistence* of right-wing populism can be understood in two ways: first, the ease with which blogs, forums and Web sites are created has given rise to an alternative media, existing outside traditional sources of information, and varying in size and reliability (Atton 2004; Dartnell 2006). This alternative media gives voice to individuals who feel left out of the dominant media discourse. In this way, the Internet comes to have great symbolic significance. Second, since the online presence of individuals is largely driven by choice, the information and communities with which they interact tend to be less varied (Slevin 2000: 90-117; Manjoo 2008). Individuals, in other words, are more able to interact with people who share their ideological or sociopolitical worldviews instead of just spatial propinquity. The Internet simultaneously enables and fosters the development of networks among individuals separated by vast physical distance but connected by ideological proximity (see Sunstein 2007). Such interaction, combined with their activities in alternative media platforms, has the potential to foster a subcultural communal identity. Let us deal with both of these elements in turn.

As alluded to in the introduction, right-wing populism is best understood as a symptom 'of a larger and more mainstream set of anxieties about human agency' (Melley 2002: 58). As social reality only increases in complexity, conspiracy theories and apocalypticism tend to offer a strange kind of comfort, drawing in disparate social events under a grand 'master narrative' that the believer has succeeded in deciphering. Understanding the intricacies of this world system is necessary, as people are all merely characters in a much larger stage play, the plot of which very few comprehend. As discussed above, fears of such large-scale control are characteristic of modern conspiracy theories and apocalyptic beliefs. Disparate threads—the book of Daniel, Revelation, the Illuminati, Freemasonry, Nostradamus, etc.—are seamlessly and effortlessly woven together into an elaborate tapestry of paranoia that is nearly impossible to disprove.

Melley (2002: 60) and others have pointed to three characteristics of recent right-wing populism that allow us better to understand such beliefs

while also providing some hints about why the Internet has been particularly significant for these movements. First, conspiracies are viewed as enormously difficult to detect and 'marvelously efficient'. Indeed, the perpetrators of this grand deception are often seen to have supernatural capabilities. Second, conspiracy theories allow individuals easily to conceive of the relationship between themselves and the larger world. Following from this, the third characteristic understands conspiracy as a 'structure that curtails individuality, or that is antithetical to individualism itself' (Melley 2002: 60). The second and third elements are most significant for our purposes. Right-wing populism, rising out of a sense that the individual is under attack, is deeply concerned with self-protection, with guarding the agency of the individual against the onslaught of the social order. As Melley argues, 'by making diverse social and technological systems enemies of "the self", the conspiratorial views function less as a defense of some *clear* political position than as a defense of individualism, abstractly conceived' (2002: 61).

This *agency panic* is closely tied to issues of trust, authority, and epistemology. Far from being the product of clinical paranoia, right-wing populism expresses a fundamental distrust of those who produce knowledge and 'develops from the refusal to accept someone else's definition of a universal social good or an officially sanctioned truth' (Melley 2002: 64). Much of right-wing populist identity comes from this belief that they are privy to certain kinds of knowledge that the rest of society is unable or unwilling to see. They are the embattled vanguards of a fight that the rest of the world does not even realize is taking place. They consider themselves to be the protectors and purveyors of what Barkun has called 'stigmatized knowledge', which are 'claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalization of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error' (2003: 26). For many right-wing populists, stigmatized knowledge has a hint of truth *by the very fact* of its stigmatization. In other words, it is believed that the conspirators have used their power to ensure that such information is kept hidden from the public.

It is when examining issues of agency panic and stigmatized knowledge, that the significance of the Internet can be fully grasped. As Robert Campbell notes, 'The Internet is a medium ideally suited in some regards to the populist, emotional, eclectic, and assertive style of the American tradition of apocalyptic prophecy' (2004: 242). Cyberspace is also the quintessential form of participatory media, where any individual, regardless of education or expertise, can create Web sites, dialogue with others in forums or message boards, and produce viral video clips that may be viewed by millions of people (Keen 2007; Burgess and Green 2009). The Internet holds symbolic value for right-wing populists because it lacks gatekeepers and is free of

the checks and balances that these individuals view as diminishing an individual's autonomy. As Alex Jones states in *The Obama Deception*, the global elite 'are bringing in classical, hardcore tyranny in the US, *but we have the Internet*, we've grown our numbers, the alternative media has exploded—that's why they are trying to move in, and shut down, and regulate, and tax the web. But, it's too late for them' (YouTube 2009c [emphasis added]). According to Jones, the alternative media have allowed them to organize under the radar of the global elite and mobilize a grassroots resistance.

For right-wing populists and other social movements, the Internet is invaluable as a resource for disseminating views, bonding like-minded individuals and fostering a sense that they are part of a subcultural resistance movement fighting a war on behalf of an unaware public. As Laura Stein has noted, 'The mainstream media often systematically distort, negatively cast or ignore social movement viewpoints' (2009: 750). These movements are often denied access to the mainstream media, as their perspectives are considered part of the irrational 'fringe'. Alternatively, when they *are* given access, the message frames used are such that they undermine or mock the message of the movement. The Internet, then, allows social movements to bypass media gatekeepers and communicate directly with their constituency. According to Alex Jones and others, the Internet 'levels the playing field' between themselves and the resource-rich media conglomerates, by allowing them 'greater speed, lesser expense, further geographical reach and relatively unlimited content capacity' (Stein 2009: 750). As Kenneth Randolf notes,

> There is no doubt in my mind that the spread of messages that would otherwise be rejected and ridiculed by mainstream media is a fundamental Internet function. The subject of Obama as Antichrist is a prime example of just such a message. The Internet is full of Obama as Antichrist messages, information, Web sites, and blog sites, while the mainstream media is relatively silent on the subject and treat it much as they would an uncorroborated report that Martians have landed in Brooklyn (Randolf, personal communication, 11 September 2009).

In addition to alleviating some of the agency panic that characterizes contemporary right-wing populism, the Internet also fosters ideological or sociopolitical networks—a kind of closed 'community' reinforcing their own beliefs and biases. Craig Calhoun notes that, *inter alia,* the Web facilitates the development of cultural and sociopolitical enclaves, where individuals, more than is possible in their real-life neighborhoods, migrate toward people and information with which they have an ideological similarity. He writes:

> What computer-mediated communication adds is a greater capacity to avoid public interaction of the kind that would pull one beyond one's immediate personal choices of taste and culture. Discussion groups may

> transcend the spatial community, thus, but they do so precisely by linking people with similar interests, not by forging links among people sharply different from one another (1998: 385).

Farhad Manjoo concurs: 'Instead of getting together with people who are close to us physically, now we can get together with people who are close to us ideologically, psychically, emotionally, aesthetically' (2008: 54; see also Sunstein 2007: 46-96 on 'enclave deliberations'). Thus, in addition to its integral religious and conspiratorial roots, the Internet must be viewed as one of the main social forces contributing to the persistence of right-wing populism.

As Blanchard and Horan (1998) point out, virtual communities are not uniform. They distinguish between what they call a *physically based virtual community* and *virtual communities of interest*. The former, as the term suggests, is a more traditional physically based community that merely provides electronic resources for its members. For example, a group dedicated to combatting alcoholism, while meeting regularly in person, may also decide to maintain an online forum, a mailing list or a bulletin board for its members. The second type of virtual community 'is geographically dispersed with members participating due to their shared interests in a topic and not their shared locations. . . . The members of these communities might never meet each other, and their interactions might be limited to just that topic or community of interest' (Blanchard and Horan 1998: 295). Participating in this second type of online community—posting on forums and message boards, creating viral videos, responding to comments, blogging and the like—tends to foster an increased connection to other members of the online community while also solidifying one's membership in it. As Barkun notes, 'The validation that comes from seeing one's beliefs echoed by others provides a sense of connection for otherwise isolated individuals' (2003: 20).

It should be evident however that the nature of these virtual communities of interest casts doubt on the potential of the Internet to rectify fully the agency panic felt by many right-wing populists. Although the Internet has allowed many *individuals* to express their views and acquire somewhat of an online following, *at the group level* they are fully conscious of the fact that they hold worldviews that are not a part of the mainstream. In other words, as a group, they are still very much a subcultural movement seeking a voice in mainstream politics. We must bring to mind what Richard Hofstadter said long ago:

> The situation becomes worse when the representatives of a particular political interest—perhaps because of the very unrealistic and unrealizable nature of their demands—cannot make themselves felt in the political process. Feeling that they have no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their original conception of the world of power as omnipotent, sinister, and malicious fully confirmed (1966: 39).

The potential of the Internet, then, may be limited to disseminating information, providing a venue for the marginalized to have a voice (which may then be largely ignored or ridiculed), alleviating some agency panic at the individual level and fostering or enhancing a subcultural group identity (Mitra 2001; Mitra and Watts 2002; Smith 1998; Sunstein 2007).

Aside from these important contributions, the Internet has proven that it increases the ease with which grassroots organizing can take place, allowing for the logistical coordination of geographically dispersed groups and individuals (see, e.g. Shirky 2008). However, with the notable exceptions of Alex Jones and the Westboro Baptist Church, many of the individuals and online communities who propound apocalyptic beliefs about Obama do not take their fight to the street. For them, the Internet allows some alleviation of agency panic through their part-time, after-work, leisurely interaction with viral videos, forums, message boards, and blogs. It is evident, as Calhoun has written, that social movements existing entirely on the Internet encounter very little success; 'the Internet matters much more as a supplement to face-to-face community organization and movement activity than as a substitute for it' (1998: 382). Kenneth Randolf, for example, admitted as much when he mentioned to me that many people, influenced by his Web site and blog, have contacted him with the question, 'What do we do now?'

Thus, the Internet can be enormously influential in disseminating information nationally and globally, but, as Calhoun states, the Web 'is most empowering when it adds to the capacities of people organized outside it' (1998: 382). However, when I asked Randolf whether he planned to take his views 'onto the streets', he argued that the streets of the twenty-first century are on the Internet: 'if done properly and if the circumstances are just right, it's clearly possible to reach hundreds of millions of people on those "streets". In terms of cost-effectiveness, time consumption, overcoming language and cultural and national barriers, there are no better "streets" to be active on' (Randolf, personal communication, 13 September 2009). Randolf is optimistic, but it remains to be seen whether the rallying cries and slogans of socioreligious movements can be heard when shouted solely, or even primarily, from within the dark alleys of cyberspace.

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6. Rationalization of the Rapture: The Culture of Managing Risk on the Youvebeenleftbehind.com Web Site

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Abstract

In 2008, the 'youvebeenleftbehind.com' Web site surfaced, offering services to Premillennialist Christians wishing to communicate with those 'left behind' during the anticipated Rapture. In this instance, the interpretation of Rapture serves to manufacture fear and anxiety through what Ulrich Beck (1992) called the 'Risk Society'. In this chapter I argue that a focus on the effectiveness of this Web site is an exercise in the culture of risk itself, as the security of the system is based largely on assumptions made about (1) the reliability of humans involved in the technological operation, (2) the protection of the server bank and (3) the prevention of a technical malfunction.

Dear Customer,
Thank you for subscribing to our after rapture email service. It is the stated goal of You've Been Left Behind *to give our friends and loved ones one last chance at accepting the good news of the Gospel.*
—Mark Heard, Founder of youvebeenleftbehind.com

In March of 2008, a Web site titled 'youvebeenleftbehind.com' (also referred to as YBLB) sprang up on the Internet. The Web site, created by techno-architect Mark Heard, offered services to Christians wishing to cast last-minute communications to those 'left behind' in the beginning moments of the anticipated Rapture. Heard created this service as a preparatory mechanism to alleviate concerns about the uncertain fate of those who had 'failed'

to accept Jesus Christ as their savior and were now destined to experience the Tribulation found in Premillennialist doctrines.

Although the YBLB service appears to be a relatively novel phenomenon, in reality the interactive relationship between religion and communication technology is nothing new. Early-twentieth-century radio personalities like Samuel Parkes Cadman and Charles Edward Coughlin first championed the liturgical broadcast airwaves. In the televised world, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen's crossover from radio to television prompted a new era for faith-based entertainment. Within a decade of Sheen's show, Pat Robertson aired the *700 Club* in 1961 on the Christian Broadcasting Network, and he effectively initiated the televangelist revolution. Since the modern use of this medium, interaction with techno-religious phenomena has grown tremendously. Today one can atone for one's sins through online confessionals (http://mysaintmiriam.org/online_confessions.html); journey to Mecca and experience the *Haj* in Second Life (www.IslamOnline.net); join a cybersangha and partake in spiritual meditation (http://www.buddhanet.net); or even receive communion through a variety of nondenominational Web sites (www.holycommunionontheweb.com and www.eholy.com).

Even the YBLB site has had at least one innovative predecessor, albeit through the use of a less sophisticated system of communication. At the turn of the twenty-first century, founder Scott Butcher created RaptureLetters.com, a free service that offered to send e-mails to individuals left behind during the anticipated Rapture. Yet, where Butcher's site merely offered to relay messages, YBLB goes several steps further and encourages the secure delivery of personal information. According to Mark Heard:

> We anticipate that you will use . . . your account to pass on your earthly assets to those left behind.
>
> Some of your assets are locked up into online banking accounts, atm linked accounts, and brokerage accounts that use a[n] ID, passwords and, test questions.[1]

The implication of statements such as these is that material possessions or the means to acquire them are considered to be an important feature of this evangelical culture. It might also suggest that survival after the Rapture may depend on one's ability to prosper financially and/or compete for capital in a class struggle. To be sure, anticipatory beliefs that value materialist notions of distributing wealth such as these deviate considerably from the nonmaterialist concept of disregarding everything and ascending into the company of Jesus Christ.

In this way, religious conviction may be one motivating factor for use of the YBLB service; however, a subtext of preparing oneself for futuristic

1. Mark Heard, e-mail message to author, 22 September 2009.

uncertainties, as well as the welfare of those that stand to be affected by these uncertainties, is certainly another factor that needs to be addressed. Moreover, with the incorporation of factors associated with anticipating, preventing, or even coping with risk, it is important to take into consideration what is effectively meant by attempting to change the outcome of a futuristic event.

The above-mentioned themes of preparation, anticipation, prevention and anxiety or fear in response to risk appear to align quite convincingly with what Ulrich Beck (1992) called the 'Risk Society'—a society where modern social orders operate in response to a multitude of human-manufactured risks and futuristic possibilities. Computer technology generally—and the use of the Internet in particular—has become one method of negotiating one's level of anxiety and preparation in relation to such risk. In this instance, the interpretation of Rapture serves to manufacture fear and anxiety, while the youvebeenleftebehind.com Web site engenders an opportunity to prepare rationally for such an event through the use of virtual technologies.

Rather than anticipating the materialization of an erratic scenario where last-minute communication may fail, this Web site virtually mitigates the anxieties of those believing they will experience the Rapture. However, I argue that a focus on the futuristic effectiveness of this site is clearly an exercise in a culture of risk itself, as the security of the system is based largely upon assumptions made about (1) the reliability of humans involved in the technological operation, (2) the protection of the server bank and (3) the prevention of a technical malfunction. That is, in the event that this system fails to operate properly, the possibilities of prematurely distributing personal information poses an even larger series of risks associated with the misuse of information and identity theft.

As the complementary relationship between religion and the Internet continues to grow, a pattern of dialectical structuration is emerging where both a social influence on technological creations and technological influence on social structure reciprocally serve to construct a social reality (Howard 2006, 2009; Brasher 2001; Crang, Crang and May 1999; Kong 2001). In general, structuration illustrates the interaction between structure and agency (Giddens 1984), yet in instances where the precepts of religious doctrine and the application of technology serve to increase the influence of structure on an individual's agency, a new social phenomenon emerges where religion is effectively mediated by the technological capacities of a given medium. Correspondingly, agency has the potential to modify the social structure that one inhabits.

Surfacing roughly a century after the Rapture doctrine was established, the YBLB service demonstrates the adaptive qualities that religions have successfully practiced well into the modern age. Unlike examples of move-

ment toward secularization, technological developments such as these have proven to be an empirically useful tool for advancing the principles of a traditional system of religious beliefs. Yet, regardless of how useful computer and Internet technologies have been in advancing such belief systems, ultimately these technologies have served to confine people who share similar views about a given topic and practise what Cass Sunstein has called 'enclave deliberation' (2002: 75-76)—a term that refers to closed Internet consultation among like-minded individuals in support and reinforcement of a particular set of ideas. In conjunction with this enclave deliberation, participants may opt to ignore all other forms of dissonance by expressing what Michael Barkun has called 'stigmatized knowledge', or 'claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalization of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error' (2003: 26).

In this chapter I explore a series of questions about the meaning and function of the YBLB service. What does it mean to protect one's information from a belief in supernatural forces, and what is the actual function of such a service in light of the belief that human history is coming to an end? Is this service merely an extension of popular culture surrounding evangelical Christianity, or could this be an example of a broader trend in responses to fear and anxiety that has characterized much of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries?

A Brief History of Rapture Culture

The Rapture, as it is popularly understood today, extends from the nineteenth-century Christian dispensationalist movement promoted by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). Dispensationalism taught that history was divided into different periods, or 'dispensations', that would eventually culminate in a seven-year Tribulation followed by the second coming of Jesus Christ.[2] Darby would go on to teach that in the final moments prior to this Tribulation, Christ would actually return in 'secret' to assemble his faithful followers for ascension into heaven, while leaving nonbelievers to deal

2. According to Ernest R. Sandeen's book *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (1970), dispensationalist doctrines were not entirely the creations of John Nelson Darby. Sandeen comments, 'The system of dispensations is not primary in Darby's thought; and, furthermore, it is shared by many of Darby's opponents and by literally scores of others, some of whom were not millenarians at all' (1970: 68). Given this observation, I use Darby's form of dispensationalism as a reference point for this movement because he is credited with expounding the notion of a 'secret rapture'. In this way, the dispensationalist view of Darby, in conjunction with the secret rapture, is a unique development in this form of premillenarian Rapture.

with the end of human history on earth (Sandeen 1970; Boyer 1992;Wojcik 1997; Frykholm 2004; Radosh 2008).

Darby's interpretations were not based on his dispensationalist doctrines alone, but also on a literalist interpretation of New Testament Scripture. Bible scholars have traced the origins of the term 'rapture' as it is used today by drawing special attention to the following passage from 1 Thess. 4.16-17 (Reasoner 2004; Frykholm 2004):

> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of the God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the Air (New International Version 1984).

As Amy Frykholm has explained, through his translations of Latin Vulgate, Darby would go on to use the English variation of 'rapture' derived from mediaeval Latin to translate the phrase 'caught up' in 1 Thessalonians (Frykholm 2004: 16).

Although Darby drew on the significance of the Rapture, mainstream acceptance of this concept would not take hold until nearly thirty years after his death when Cyrus I. Scofield published the *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909. According to Ernest Sandeen:

> The *Scofield Reference Bible* combined an attractive format of typography, paragraphing, notes and cross-references with the theology of Darbyite dispensationalism. The book has thus been subtly but powerfully influential in spreading those views among hundreds of thousands who have regularly read that Bible and who often have been unaware of the distinction between the ancient text and the Scofield interpretation (1970: 222).

With the publication of Scofield's Bible and a second revision in 1917, the Rapture narrative encompassed an entire culture of meaning that would later develop into popular versions of Christian evangelical eschatology. The Premillennialist approach by Scofield, which held that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ occurs prior to the millennium (of course incorporating the secrecy of Rapture), would become a definitive feature of this new undertaking.

As Daniel Radosh (2008) points out, the combination of historical developments such as Israel's 'victory' in the Six-Day War and literature that advanced Darbyite doctrines such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970) were decisive in the modernization of rapture culture. This culture would be characterized by considering political, social and cultural affairs around the world that could be viewed as indications of Darby's Premillennialism. And with the championing of a political lobbying force from Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority in 1979 and the growing tenor of public acceptance for evangelicalism through modern media outlets, a new

conservative movement of Christian worldviews became institutionally grounded.

Perhaps no other event in history contributed more to the popularization of the Rapture than the best-selling novels titled the *Left Behind* series.[3] Written by Timothy LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, the 16 books, which include 12 sequels to the original and 3 prequels, tell the story of a modern-day apocalypse through the lens of evangelical Christians. Complete with Christians disappearing into thin air and an Antichrist to mislead the remaining masses, the series not only adapted the Premillennialist teachings to current affairs, but through marketing and prose it also made the Rapture accessible to all levels of readers. The series became an enormous hit with Christian evangelicals, serving to reaffirm Rapture doctrines through popular literature.

As the notion of being saved through the Rapture and 'leaving behind' nonbelievers took hold, innovative references to Premillennialism spread throughout popular cyberculture. For example, Web sites like Raptureready.com offer a vast amount of information on the Rapture, explanations of foreseen events, and even survival advice for those 'left behind'. Mark Heard's Web site was simply another one of these innovations—though an innovation that conferred an interactive component between belief and practice. In addition, Heard himself seemed to advocate for a certain sense of compassion toward nonbelievers. According to a section on the Web site titled 'Why?', Heard establishes the mission of the service and confirms this empathy toward the 'left behind':

> We all have family and friends who have failed to receive the Good News of the Gospel. The unsaved will be 'left behind' on earth to go through the 'Tribulation period' after the 'Rapture'.
>
> Imagine how taken back they will be by the millions of missing Christians and devastation at the rapture. They will know it was true and that they have blown it. There will be a small window of time where they might be reached for the Kingdom of God. We have made it possible for you to send them a letter of love and a plea to receive Christ one last time. You can also send information based on scripture as to what will happen next. Each fulfilled prophecy will cause your letter and plea to be remembered and a decision to be made. 'WHY' is one last chance to bring them to Christ and snatch them from the flames! (Heard, youvebeenleftbehind.com).

For Heard, Tribulation serves to punish nonbelievers as well as to offer a final opportunity to accept this brand of Christianity. However, in preparing for the Rapture in this fashion, Heard establishes a more pronounced division between those who have made a concerted effort to confront the risk

3. The first novel titled *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* was published in 1995.

involved in disbelief and those whose disbelief and lack of preparation will lead to their demise. An individual who enrolls in the youvebeenleftbehind.com service is driven by the certainty of controlling the perceived uncertainties of a given situation; yet the fallibility of technology reveals even greater uncertainties and leaves certainty up to the belief in faith.

How YBLB Works

When Mark Heard launched the YBLB Web site, he posted an annual $40 membership fee[4] that included services designed to send up to sixty-two e-mails notifying nonbelievers some six days after the Rapture takes place. In addition to offering generic templates to assist members in crafting letters to loved ones and unlimited access for editing, YBLB also provides up to 150 megabytes of encrypted storage space, as well as another 100 megabytes of non-encrypted storage. The encrypted storage—presumably important information—can be transmitted through 12 e-mails, while the non-encrypted storage can be sent through the remaining 50 e-mails.

Upon subscribing to the account, one will be assigned a username and password. After logging in, a rather simple user page will appear with the following headings and drop-down menus to facilitate service options:

Encrypted box
- View File List
- Upload File
- View Recipients

Unencrypted Box
- View File List
- Upload File
- View Recipients

Security

Edit Profile

Subscribers may then upload files (including pictures, documents, etc.), view these indexed files, add or delete recipients' e-mail addresses as well as edit security and profile settings. According to Heard, subscriber information will remain in this cyber-storage until the Rapture has begun.

However, the notion of sending e-mails during a time when access to electronic devices may be difficult at best raises some questions about

4. As stated in a welcoming e-mail from Mark Heard, the annual $40 fee would be reduced upon membership renewal. Currently, the fee is $14 per subscription.

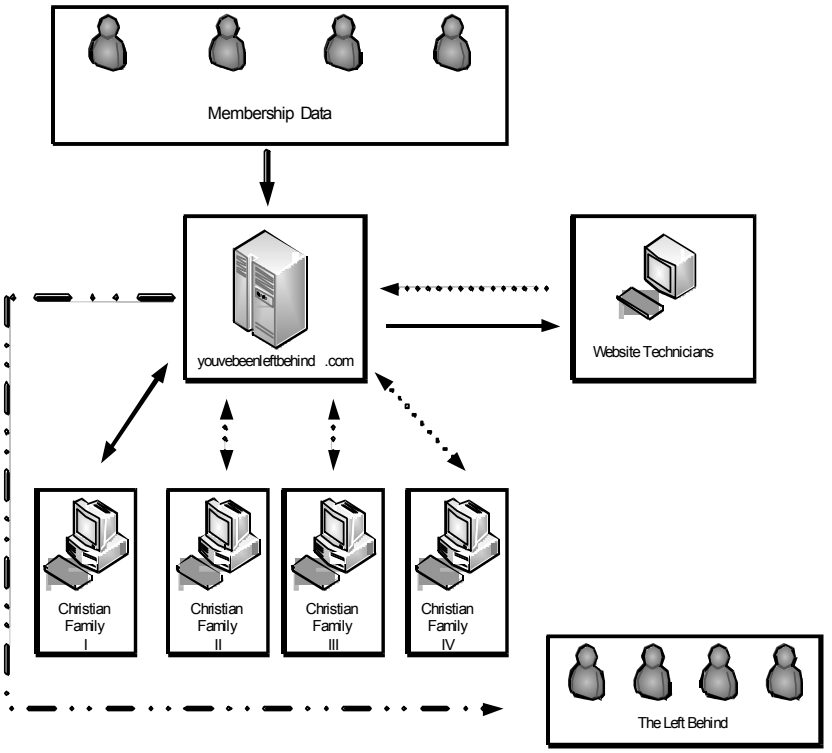

Figure 1. This diagram illustrates the youvebeenleftbehind.com service at the point of acknowledging that the Rapture has begun. Solid arrows represent communication in their respective directions. Dotted arrows represent a failure in communication. Arrows that alternate from a dash to double dots represent the dissemination of information. In this scenario, three of the four Christian Families fail to communicate with YBLB for three consecutive days. YBLB then allows Web site technicians three more days before acknowledging that the Rapture has begun. At the conclusion of these three days, YBLB confirms the Rapture is taking place and begins to send members' information to those 'left behind'.

how Heard anticipates the distribution of this information. Unlike Scott Butcher's RaptureLetters.com, which operates on a 'dead-man switch' (where Butcher's failure to check in initiates e-mail distribution), Heard's service is much more complex. According to the YBLB Web site, the service operates on a system that requires daily communication between four Christian couples and the Web site engineers. If three of the four couples do not make this daily communication for three consecutive days, the system will assume that the Rapture has begun and it will then notify the Web

site engineers to warn them of this new development (see Figure 1). If these engineers do not respond to the main YBLB system within another three days, the youvebeenleftbehind.com server bank will distribute all e-mails to the members' chosen recipients.

Risk and Rapture

On the surface YBLB is a highly innovative form of communication. Not only does YBLB offer a service to convey final communiqués with others in the absence of intimate interaction; it also reinvigorates a discursive discussion about the Rapture within the information age—effectively communicating a reaffirmation of evangelical belief systems.

In a much closer examination, however, YBLB services provide a rational attempt at modern problem solving through the use of digital technology. To illustrate simply, where an individual is faced with a problem of how to communicate from a distance with another individual, available technology often provides suitable solutions (i.e. mail, telephone, beepers, e-mail, etc.). Given the state of communication technology, there does not appear to be anything extraordinary about this method. Yet, when this rational means-to-ends schema is mediated by an intervening system of beliefs based on irrational reasoning—in this case, the anticipation of the Rapture—then these circumstances may suggest a reaction to something sociologically larger than mere religious foreboding.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, two seminal books were published on the topic of the implications of risk in the modern era: Peter Bernstein's *Against the Gods* (1996) and Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* (1992). Where the former traced the origins and history of risk management from the ancient Greeks to modern-day uncertainty, the latter devised a theory of a society organized around responses to human-manufactured risk. Given the preponderance of managing a rather unpredictable scenario, it is important to consider an analysis of the YBLB service as it relates to risk.

As Anthony Giddens explains, risk as we know it today emerges after the 'end of nature' where humans have intervened ubiquitously throughout the physical environment, as well as the 'end of tradition' where lives cease to be lived through predetermined institutions. The type of risk that emerges after 'end of nature' and the 'end of tradition' is characteristically different from the type of a risk found in an industrial society. For example, Giddens argues that an industrial society is dominated by 'external risk' that affects individuals from an outside source (i.e. earthquakes, hurricanes, forest fires, floods, etc.). However, the type of risk that is associated with post-industrialism is 'manufactured risk', or risk 'created by the very progression of human development, especially by the progression of science and technology' (1999: 4).

The onset of computer technology offered an extraordinary number of possibilities and on the surface appears to provide the tools that solve problems—especially those associated with risk. As Bernstein has cautioned:

> Nothing is more soothing or more persuasive than the computer screen, with its imposing arrays of numbers, glowing colors, and elegantly structured graphs. As we stare at the passing show, we become so absorbed that we tend to forget that the computer only answers questions; it does not ask them. Whenever we ignore that truth, the computer supports us in our conceptual errors. Those who live only by the numbers may find that the computer has simply replaced the oracles to whom people resorted in ancient times for guidance in risk management and decision-making (1996: 336).

As we inquire into the means of solving such human issues as belief systems, faith and/or religion, we may assume that the answers lie in interactive software, advanced hardware and a little help from technicians; yet these combinations may create more harm than help. Ironically, computer technology may offer a medium for dealing with human-manufactured risk, but at the same time it produces equally risk-filled phenomena.

Yet within this society of risk, the manufacturing of risk through post-industrial development accounts for only one side of the thesis; the other side is attuned to the production of a new social order that is created in response to risk. Dealing with risk through computer technology is indicative of this social ordering. It is important to note that the YBLB service does not solve problems but instead organizes members of a particular creed around their response to a perceived problem. Within a society that is organized around class structures, individuals who have enough capital to purchase and own computers as well as enough educational capital to understand how such technology functions, acquire a substantial amount of privilege as members within a class that has successfully navigated the information age.

In a post-industrial society, by contrast, a different social structure emerges that is organized around how one deals with human-manufactured risk. Quelling anxieties about the uncertain fate of nonbelievers through subscribing to the YBLB service not only reinforces the collective beliefs of particular groups of Christians, but it also distinguishes a set of prepared Christians from unprepared Christians. To believe, and to act on that belief in response to risk, generates new criteria for organizing a social order. For example, instead of being classified in accordance with one's socioeconomic status, one would now be classified in relation to how one deals with, or prepares for, the impending Tribulation.

Finally, emphasizing the future is also an important feature of the risk society thesis. As Giddens notes, 'The idea of risk is bound up with the aspiration to control and particularly with the idea of controlling the future' (1999: 3). To concern oneself with the volatility of risk for a future event and an attempt to control it begets a need for resources—inclusive of tech-

nology—that can assist an individual to this end. The focus on the futuristic effectiveness of the YBLB site draws on this culture of risk, where Heard's YBLB service offers security within several spheres. First, it invokes certain religious principles that assure faithful followers an opportunity to modernize their convictions and connect with those they believe will face Tribulation. In the same way that one would prepare for one's death in a secular context through creating a will or purchasing a life insurance policy, YBLB provides a faith-based form of indemnity that operates under the precepts of religious doctrine.

Second, YBLB provides a safe repository for important information. As in all forms of digital encryption, facilitating effective secrecy is one objective of the YBLB service. Heard offers 12 of the 62 e-mails in an encrypted format, which would suggest that any given member has the option of safeguarding information destined to be received by a chosen number of recipients. Although the formal quantification of an option—in this case, the number of recipients—may be limiting, 12 recipients appears to be a relatively substantial number. Even the 50 remaining non-encrypted e-mails are a relatively ample number. Furthermore, in general, computers and their complex operating systems provide at least some comfort in knowing that information is not only retrievable within a given system, but also that such information is well-embedded within the network of cyberspace. Although there is certainly a skeptical relationship between security and modern computer technologies, the latter have at least appeared to complement the former and have increased the possibilities of securing oneself and one's possessions.

Third, YBLB attempts to ensure that the method of delivering members' information is impervious to failure. Other forms of delivery, such as regular postal letters, must pass through several hands before arriving at a destination, and the increased number of steps results in an increase in the margin of error—hence the availability of paid insurance and/or delivery confirmation options. Given the unique circumstances under which the YBLB service is supposed to operate, the use of postal delivery would not appear to be the most effective method for delivering messages. Instead, the concerted effort to initiate delivery of electronic messages appears to be infallible.

In emphasizing security, however, has Heard's YBLB service done anything more than present the illusion of security in the face of human-manufactured risk? After all, relying on a system of nonhuman technology to resolve a human issue, based on a system of theology, does not seem to be a very effective model. Yet Beck's theory of risk is based not on solving the challenges that uncertainty poses but rather on acknowledging the organizing systems that result from responding to such uncertainties. Moreover, these three spheres of security that are thought to manage uncertain-

ties amount to mere assumptions made about (1) the reliability of humans involved in the technological operation, (2) the protection of the server and (3) the prevention of a technical malfunction.

Reliability refers to the extent to which the YBLB service and its employees are dependable. Presumably the individuals involved in the technological operation of the YBLB service were chosen, in part, because of their reliability. For the four Christian couples that must maintain daily contact with the YBLB server, reliability is extremely important to the operation. In his delineation of the service, Heard describes these Christian couples and his established design used to maintain reliability in the event of external threats.

> I have a team, of Christian couples, scattered around the U.S. 4 active couples and one alternate. One of each, of the active couples, are required to log into the system everyday. They are scattered to protect us from having the team wiped out by attack, natural disaster, or epidemic. They are couples in case one is sick, injured, killed, and to assure their walk with God (youvebeenleftbehind.com, 'FAQs').

Assuming that Heard has actually chosen four couples that reside far enough away from each other to stop any single threat from interrupting the flow of communication, there remain at least some issues of reliability with regard to personal commitment. That is, do commitments still remain in such events as fatigue, loss of interest or faith, Internet interruptions, a falling out, breakups, or divorce? After all, humans are susceptible to change, especially change that may take personal precedence over a commitment to a larger community. In perhaps the worst-case scenario, if three of the four couples, or even all of the couples rely on a supposition that the other will maintain communication with the server and then decide not to check in, one step of the data delivery process would be initiated. Certainly this is just speculation, but, conversely, so are Heard's assumptions about reliability. Moreover, if the effectiveness of simple, everyday operations dealing with the maintenance of the YBLB site is an indication of reliability, I have encountered firsthand an example that would appear problematic.

In September 2009, I opened an account with youvebeenleftbehind.com. After paying a $14 subscription fee I received a username and a password. However, for a total of 31 days I was unable to access my account. Since the only contact information for the Web site provided is Mark Heard's e-mail address, I began e-mailing him—though to no avail. Finally, I found a link to another online ministry featured on the YBLB Web site and contacted their office to find out if they could assist me in reaching Heard. This ministry did in fact help, and within a day Heard e-mailed me with a new password to access my account. An entire month passed before I was able to receive access; given the fact that Heard had assigned a new password,

he too would have then had access to my account. I do not mean to imply that there would be any misconduct on the YBLB site, but I do believe it is important to draw attention to the potential for error within a system that may control the distribution of important information.

The protection of the server bank refers to the security involved in preserving the YBLB system. Aside from basic promise of encryption, Heard admits that his system is not protected to the extent that it is impenetrable. As he explains, 'We have put into our system as much security as is reasonably possible . . . given enough time, the right person, can get into anything.'[5] With talented hackers, complex computer viruses, and a host of computer worms and Trojan horses, no computer or server is completely protected from infection. Heard's solution, however, is to enlist his own members in the security system by instructing them on how to create complex passwords.

> If you are at all concerned with the safety of your stored documents, you can make the greatest difference of all. Instead of actually sending the passwords etc. You can send information to the recipient as to where they can find these for themselves. Here are a couple of ideas: Give a gift of a framed picture or artwork to your loved one, something that they will cherish. On the back of the picture copy down a matrix, (keep a copy for yourself) like this, but make up your own:
>
> | | | | | | | | | | | |
> |---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
> | A | 1 | d | 5 | g | t | 8 | y | z | o | 9 |
> | N | k | 6 | 4 | t | l | 3 | f | g | w | 2 |
> | 7 | 5 | g | t | z | 3 | b | o | w | L | L |
> | s | o | 6 | q | p | s | n | 7 | y | d | f |
> | 6 | 4 | 3 | l | x | j | 5 | s | t | v | 4 |
> | c | 1 | I | l | d | 4 | 7 | 3 | L | k | j |
> | Q | e | r | t | 2 | 2 | h | t | I | 6 | l |
>
> Now in you[r] document tell your recipient about the hidden matrix and which line, vertical, horizontal, diagonal, up, down, forward, or backward, is your account password.[6]

The combination of encryption and Heard's instructions to encode passwords provides at least some assurance that one's information will be protected. Yet the notion of searching beyond YBLB's technical capabilities for assistance in protecting the server suggests, at the very least, that the system is a bit more vulnerable than Heard is willing to concede. Here again, the assumption that the YBLB server is safe from the predatory dangers of the

5. Mark Heard, e-mail message to author, 22 September 2009.
6. Mark Heard, e-mail message to author, 22 September 2009.

Internet is less than convincing and may only serve superficially to comfort subscribers.

Prevention of a technical malfunction is perhaps the most important priority for Heard and his Web site technicians. Of course the system of checks and balances used to initiate e-mail distribution appears comprehensive and certainly well devised, but is it enough to prevent a malfunctioning system where e-mails are distributed prematurely or even to the wrong recipients? Within the distribution initiating schema, Heard has prepared for some human failure through the use of an 'alternate team member'. According to Heard, this alternate member is 'ready as a replacement for a lost teammate' (youvebeenleftbehind.com, 'FAQs'). Heard also states that at least one Christian couple will be 'located near enough to the server bank, with access, in case the net goes down, or malfunctions' (youvebeenleftbehind.com, 'FAQs').

Notwithstanding all of these preparations, how has Heard explained the way in which the YBLB system will function during the disasters of the Tribulation? On the youvebeenleftbehind.com Web site, Heard does in fact address this concern, albeit with some ambiguity:

> I do believe that the Internet will be up and running. There may be some localized temporary outages. Today the entire global economic and commerce system is completely dependant on the Internet to function. They will keep it working. There is also huge redundancy and overlap in the system. A message [will] keep trying pathways and services until it is delivered. Most of the net is buried underground. Eventually God will take it down, as he destroys the World system that has been built up by a people trying to do it all without him. That won't be until the second half of the tribulation though (youvebeenleftbehind.com, 'FAQs').

In explaining how the system will continue to function during the Tribulation, Heard relies on the very people destined to be 'left behind' to maintain the Internet**.** He also adapts apocalyptic Scripture to this end by keying into a narrative of a two-part Tribulation—apparently the fate of the Internet rests within the second half.

Letters from the Rapture

Material culture that conveys one's personal beliefs and wishes are considered sacred items. Although I am not at liberty to access these e-mails, I was interested in procuring a general understanding of what letters from the Rapture might look like. In a welcoming e-mail, Heard provided a link to a blog site at youvebeenleftbehind.blogspot.com. According to Heard, this site is intended to assist subscribers in the composition of letters to the 'left behind'. Although it remains unclear whether these examples are authentic messages composed by subscribers of YBLB or by Heard himself, they

nonetheless provide a good idea of what might be found in an actual letter. In addition, as these messages are written in the past tense, they also offer a certain amount of prescience into how some evangelical Christians view the state of futuristic events.

After reading through this blog site I found that the majority of these posted letters contained at least three recurring themes including (1) the citation and interpretation of Scripture through an assumptive mood, (2) precautionary advice on how to avoid danger during the Tribulation and (3) an air of moral entrepreneurship about lessons to be learned.

Not surprisingly, these examples of letters from those intended to be raptured included biblical texts—of course highlighting the New Testament and the book of Revelation. Several messages listed signs—both literal and symbolic—of impending Tribulation as they relate the individual's interpretation of the apocalypse. These messages were loosely written in an assumptive mood whereby these Christians cast their interpretation of Scripture in accordance with their indoctrinated systems of belief. A grammatical pattern emerges in which a given passage from Scripture is cited, followed by an interpretation and then an assumption about its logical soundness. Consider the following samples from separate posts on youvebeenleftbehind.blogspot.com:

> Verse 16 talks about men trying to hide from Him who sits on the throne. I think this means that many people will be convinced about the truth of who Jesus Christ is after this earthquake, if they survive.
>
> Revelation 16:17-21 describes the seventh bowl judgment. There will be an earthquake so great that the topography of the earth will be altered. . . . 'The great city' is probably a reference to Antichrist's kingdom.
>
> In Revelation 7:9, John sees in his vision a multitude that no one could number coming to receive Jesus Christ. This means perhaps a billion people will come to know Christ.
>
> In the first verse of chapter four, John sees a door open up in heaven, and a voice tells him to 'Come up here.' I believe this is symbolic of the rapture. Others might disagree with my assessment of this verse, but since you are only reading this if I was right, and the rapture occurred before the time of tribulation, I think it's symbolic of God removing His people, the Church, the true believers, in this case symbolized by John, from the earth before the tribulation begins.
>
> The white horse (Revelation 6:1-2)—This is the Antichrist. He comes with a bow but no arrows, and he wears a crown. I think this signifies that the Antichrist will be the 'king of the world', the leader of the one-world government.

> The 'people' referenced above is the Roman Empire and the ruler who will come is the antichrist who rules from the modern day Roman Empire, perhaps the European Union.
>
> With the world in chaos, perhaps more terrorism, and missing people, keeping track of everyone will sound necessary for the world to become stable and safe again. The raptured Christians will probably be blamed for the world's problems and the new tribulation saints will be seen as a problem, as well, and therefore persecuted for not being committed to the new system of the antichrist.
>
> However, because the Antichrist will be a great deceiver, these nations will probably align with him to fight their real enemy, Jesus.

Interpretation of Scripture through the assumptive mood suggests that even the authors of these messages are attempting to grapple with the uncertainties of the future. To write in this mood demonstrates one's apprehensiveness to be entirely certain about the coming events, and thus indicates one's familiarity with and commitment to dealing with risk.

In addition to this pattern of the assumptive mood, there was also quite a bit of precautionary advice on how to avoid danger during the Tribulation. For example, the following post discusses the author's interpretation of Revelation, then instructs the recipient on how and where that person might find the type of Scripture that would complement the interpretation:

> I recommend the New American Standard for being understandable, and a very accurate translation. Read the last book of the Bible, Revelations. Read in the 'Old Testament' Zechariah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Find the set of books called the Left Behind series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Go to the homes of missing people and search their book shelves. Go to churches that have lost most of their members and search the pastor's office and church libraries for video tapes or study guides they may have created just for this event. Look for the web sites of places like Jews for Jesus, Lamb and Lion Ministries, and others. Check out the 'rapture ready' sites that give tips on how to survive the Tribulation. These web sites won't last forever because there may not be anyone left to keep them up, so don't delay. Also, Bibles may be banned ultimately, so secure yours soon (youvebeenleftbehind.blogspot.com).

Along these lines, instances where Revelation was interpreted as a warning were also frequent. Here authors attempt to teach the nonbelievers about the concepts of the 'Mark of the Beast' and the 'Antichrist'.

> Some think this mark will be a bar code tattoo, others think an implanted computer chip. It will solve allot of problems with, identity theft, illegal activities, taxation of the underground economy, street crime for money, and economic control. However, it will give the government absolute control. Everything you earn, buy, or sell will be stored on computer for their observation. Step out of line and you will be erased.

> The Bible is clear that NO ONE who takes the mark will ever enter heaven. That will be the last chance to decide to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ and reject the Satanic impostor!! (youvebeenleftbehind.blogspot.com).

One individual ended a message with some simple advice about how to identify the Antichrist, stating 'PS—Look out for the guy who wants to bring peace!' (youvebeenleftbehind.blogspot.com).

These warnings seemed to express an individual's elite knowledge of impending disaster, while cautioning recipients with the message to heed this advice and change their lifestyles before it would be too late. In this way, elite knowledge of the risk involved becomes an organizing mechanism that separates the prepared from those less so, or the 'saved' from the 'left behind'.

This theme of offering precautionary advice was coupled with yet another similar theme, whereby authors put forth an air of moral entrepreneurship about lessons to be learned. In Heard's welcoming e-mail, he advises against sending messages in what he calls an 'I told you so tone'.[7] Yet despite Heard's advice, many of these letters appear to include some amount of moral entrepreneurship. That is, communication to those that have been 'left behind' is often accompanied by a lesson about right versus wrong. These lessons range from the sympathetic to vindictive. Examples of the former can be found in the following posts on youvebeenleftbehind.blogspot.com:

> There is still a chance for you to live an eternal life with Jesus. If you accept Him, one day you will be with all of us that have gone before you. If you choose to live thru Christ, then when He comes to destroy all the evil in the world you will be where there is no more pain and no more hunger or sorrow.

> As you see these events taking place each one of them should reinforce that the Bible is true and that the God who wrote it is still in charge, making it all come true. . . . Everyone is going to die so accept his salvation and live. At this point you have nothing left to lose.

> We have watched so many that would not believe, searching this world to try and find the answers and the filling of these needs. But to no avail. You have chosen not to believe the only thing that would give you all things. The answer was so simple. Believe in The Lord Jesus Christ! Seek His love, His will and His ways and choose to live!

A more vindictive example could be found in the following post:

> Yes, yes, I know. There are all sorts of Christians running around now insisting that this explanation CANNOT be the correct one because THEY

7. Mark Heard, e-mail message to author, 22 September 2009.

> are Left Behind. This may include some very visible Christians, like maybe a Pope or something. What does this tell you? It tells you that any 'Christian' left behind was a phony. They may have said they believed, blah blah blah, but God knows the heart of men, and He has seen that they are fakes.

To illuminate one's shortcoming within this Premillennialist discourse is effectively to distinguish oneself and one's actions from those of another. One's interpretation of morality, above all else, becomes the defining tool for where one will rest within the social order of this society of risk.

Conclusion

Youvebeenleftbehind.com is an innovative technological creation that demonstrates the adaptive qualities of religion in the modern age. It provides a service that allows followers of a particular faith to rationalize about a relatively controversial interpretation of the New Testament. With the help of literature, film and sociopolitical movements, Mark Heard's service has the potential to grow in size over time. In a twist of irony, however, without the confirmation of Rapture, the YBLB service will fail to execute its stated goal. This is because the entire system is based on the notion of dealing with human-manufactured risk—a risk that can only be confirmed through the reification of a futuristic event.

For this analysis, reification is an important concept; it refers to the treatment of the abstract in concrete terms. In other words, to offer a line of communication under the unconfirmed pretext that communication will be absent at a given point in the future is to establish a reality based on something that is not yet real. To peer into the future with such prescience and equate interpretation and speculation to solutions about problems that are not yet problems is to practise dealing with risk, not reality. In perhaps one of the most telling examples, Heard offers advice about legal affairs during an anticipated time when the legitimacy of the legal system would, presumably, be suspended:

> You might also pre-sign a Power-of-Attorney and use You've been Left Behind to notify your loved one of its existence and where to find it, as well as any test question answer that could verify the right person gets the attorneys assistance. (Such a Power-of-Attorney might be needed if you had a joint home ownership or joint account. Your 'left behind' spouse would not be able to sell, and probably pay for, your joint property without someone legally allowed to sign for you. There won't be any bodies to declare dead and Probate!).[8]

8. Mark Heard, e-mail message to author, 22 September 2009.

If the period of Tribulation will be as horrific as Premillennialists have described, the notion of retaining power of attorney would appear futile, as the legalities of authority over oneself and one's possessions simply would not apply. That is, the use of worldly solutions in the face of otherworldly problems is a problem in and of itself.

The preparation for dealing with these otherworldly, hypothetical, uncertain or unconfirmed issues surrounding risk can serve to produce more risk than opting to ignore this risk altogether. Although technological advances—in this instance, Internet communication—appear to offer some tools for dealing with risk, their vulnerability may also contribute to the high degree of anxieties that existed prior to the use of any such technology. As Bernstein has noted about the use of computer technology, 'Fortuitously perhaps, impressive technological innovation coincided with the urgent demand for novel methods of risk control', yet along with this innovation came an increased 'sense of alienation' (1998: 302). Computer technology and the use of the Internet merely provide a portal through which foibles of preparation prompted by anxiety may be exercised. Such preparation left in the custody of computer technology and in the hands of humans capable of error leaves valuable information vulnerable to hacking, computer viruses and, of course, technical malfunction.

However, to project about the future within the risk-laden society is all too common. In the samples of the blog site posts, the citation and interpretation of Scripture through an assumptive mood once again illustrate the notion of dealing ever so cautiously with the uncertainties of the future. To act based on one's interpretation of the future, while at the same time avowing that certain beliefs may be based only on speculation, is typical of dealing with risk—after all, risk is uncertain and dealing with it could never be more certain than that.

In this way, the only difference between dealing with risk and offering advice is that the latter fails to organize a society. Within the society of risk, social hierarchies that were once based on class may now rely on the organizing mechanism of dealing with, in this instance, the perceived fallout of risk. Although YBLB promotes an empathic approach to creating messages for the 'left behind', the blog appeared to do something of the opposite by casting almost-condescending posts toward nonbelievers. Whether it is the delivery of precautionary advice or moral entrepreneurship, this phenomenon of establishing separation suggests that the very mechanism of organizing a society based on a record of dealing with risk has taken effect. That is, one that deals with this risk properly through preparing for the Rapture has executed their duty as a Christian to 'love thy neighbor', as well as inform, teach and advocate for the spiritual betterment of that neighbor. The implication is that the individual who prepares has thus invested more commitment to their faith than one who has not.

With such division it comes as no surprise that not all people find the YBLB service to be a positive contribution to Christianity, much less to society. Some critics have gone so far as to accuse Mark Heard of creating nothing more than a profitable scam that exploits the faith of evangelical Christians. I do not share this critique, yet I am suspicious of Heard's motives—though to a different extent. I am left wondering whether these e-mails, addressed to the 'left behind' are ever really intended to be sent? Or do they simply fill the void of having nothing left to reveal about prophecy? That is, could Heard's service simply serve to calm the nerves of those suffering from years of religious hyper-anxiety? After all, prophecies come and go, and research on the failure of these prophecies (Festinger *et al.* 1956) shows that, despite disconfirmation, faithful followings may not only remain intact but may at times generate an even greater belief in the principles of the social system that brings them together. As the remnants of failed prophecies are modified and adapted to new current affairs, technological innovations seem to be the one engaging form of religious invigoration. With nothing new to reveal and very little possibility for scriptural revision, youvebeenleftbehind.com is simply something technologically unsullied for new generations of Premillennialists to call their own.

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7. Pan-Islamist Networks of the Apocalypse: Mobilizing Diasporic Muslim Youth on Facebook

David Drissel

Abstract

Prior to the global diffusion of the Internet, overt discussions of Islamic prophecies foretelling the apocalypse were limited mostly to Muslim scholars and clerics. However, recent years have witnessed a dramatic proliferation of Islamic Web sites devoted to eschatological topics. This chapter examines the computer-mediated mobilization of diasporic Muslim youth on Facebook and related apocalyptic networks. The role of Facebook in framing pan-Islamist messianic folklore, which focuses on the prospective appearance of the Mahdi, is investigated.

Introduction

Prior to the global diffusion of the Internet and related forms of computer-mediated communication, overt discussions of Islamic prophecies foretelling the apocalypse of Yawm al-Qiyamah ('Judgment Day') and related eschatological events, were limited mostly to Muslim scholars and clerics. However, recent years have witnessed a dramatic proliferation of English-language Web sites devoted to Islamic apocalyptic topics, which cater to a diverse array of unofficial Muslim commentators and audiences. Increasingly, various online forums, Web blogs, chat rooms, social networking services, and video-sharing Web sites have become informal venues for disseminating contemporary interpretations of centuries-old Islamic prophecies, including the prospective appearance of a Muslim messiah named al-Mahdi ('the Rightly Guided One'), the second coming of the Prophet Isa (Jesus Christ), and the related dawning of a 'new golden age' for the Muslim world immediately prior to Judgment Day.

As a consequence of ever-expanding interactions and information exchanges among Muslims in cyberspace, relatively new transnational social networks have been established. Many such networks have been influenced by the ideology of pan-Islamism (often simply termed Islamism), which refers to the modern fundamentalist belief that Muslims must become reunified as the *ummah* ('community of believers'). According to this perspective, ethno-linguistic differences, religious sectarianism, and 'decadent' Western influences have seriously debilitated or even destroyed the *ummah*. Thus, pan-Islamists assert that a 'true' Islamic society must be reconstituted through the political power of a single Islamic state. Though there are many different types of pan-Islamist movements, they tend to share a common commitment to restoring the Caliphate (Khilafah)—the legendary yet defunct Islamic multinational theocratic empire that previously incorporated much of the Middle East and North Africa. Under the Caliphate, theocratic Islamic law (*sharia*) will take precedence over civil law. Thus, pan-Islamists 'see Islam not as a mere religion, but as a political ideology that should reshape all aspects of society' (Roy 2004: 58).

The rising global popularity of assorted strains of pan-Islamism has been fueled by the presence of second- and third-generation Muslims living in North America and Western Europe.[1] Teenagers and young adults in the Muslim Diaspora[2] (i.e. the geographic separation of Muslims from their ethno-religious ancestral 'homelands' in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia) have become progressively engaged in expansive online discussions and debates concerning various religious issues, including the relevance of prophetic signs and symbols presaging *aher al-zaman,* 'the end times'. Notably, Muslim youth of various nationalities have developed extensive contacts in cyberspace with like-minded religious/generational cohorts from a multiplicity of geographic locales.

The vast majority of Muslim teens and young adults living in North America and Western Europe have been raised in a relatively secular, cosmopolitan environment, especially compared to that of their parents or

1. According to recent figures, there are approximately twenty-three million Muslims in Europe, comprising approximately five per cent of the population. Europe's Muslim population has 'more than doubled in the past three decades and the rate of growth is accelerating' (Savage 2004: 26). In the United States there are approximately 2.35 million Muslims, although figures vary with some estimates as high as five million (Cesari 2004: 11)..

2. The idea of a global Muslim Diaspora has surfaced only in recent decades, substantially expanding on the traditional concept of a Diaspora based on shared ancestral origins within a particular nation, state, or ethnic group (Sheffer 2003: 66-67). Significantly, the Muslim Diaspora concept is not merely descriptive and historical but also directly influential in the present era; enabling widely dispersed people to envision themselves as a 'community' (Cornwell and Stoddard 2001: 7)

grandparents. However, the religious origins of diasporic Muslim youth have invariably impacted their collective identity. Living in countries with predominantly white Christian majorities, diasporic Muslims are often perceived as members of a 'racialized' minority group (Sheffer 2003: 66-67). Muslims are often viewed as 'foreign' in Western societies, regardless of their birthright as citizens. Rising levels of Islamophobia have contributed to the stigmatization of Muslims, especially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. What has been dubbed the 'Bin Laden Effect' has effectively transformed Muslims into a suspect category.[3] Suspicion and hostility have been directed toward young Muslim men in particular, thus contributing to the process of reactive identity formation (Cesari 2004: 35-42).

Recent years have witnessed a corresponding 're-Islamization' (return to the fold) of diasporic Muslim youth. In contrast to their elders, many in the new generation of Western-born and educated Muslims consider their religion to be significantly more important as an identity marker than any specific ethnicity, nationality or citizenship status.[4] Correspondingly, the younger generation of Muslims seems to be searching for 'a more authentic form of Islam than the one their parents practice' (Benjamin and Simon 2005: 120). Compared to their parents' generation, Muslim youth are more likely to be doctrinaire in their religious beliefs and to attend religious services more frequently (Pew Research Center 2007: 25-26). Neo-fundamentalist versions of Islam, in particular, have gained new sources of support among Muslim youth as a result of this generational religious revival (Roy 2004: 2). In large measure, the re-Islamization of diasporic youth is an apparent reaction to the Bin Laden Effect and a perceived need among younger Muslims to counteract new stereotypes and resist discriminatory practices.

Though several Western scholars have investigated the impact of the Internet and related forms of computer-mediated communication on the negotiation and construction of Muslim collective identities (Mandaville 2003; Bunt 2003; Roy 2004), the more specific subject of Muslim youth participation in social networking services such as Facebook and MySpace remains vastly underexplored (see Drissel 2007). While a handful of authors

3. For example, a July 2004 public opinion poll found that one in every four Americans holds a 'negative stereotype of Muslims'. Approximately 25 per cent of respondents said they believed that Muslims 'value life less than other people' and 'teach their children to hate unbelievers' (cited in Benjamin and Simon 2005: 122).

4. A recent poll revealed that Muslim youth in the West are more likely than their parents to view themselves primarily as Muslims. For instance, by a margin of more than two to one (60 per cent to 29 per cent), American Muslims under age 30 were more likely to see themselves as Muslims first and foremost (Pew Research Center 2007: 31).

have addressed the online dissemination of pan-Islamist apocalyptic narratives (Furnish 2005; Cook 2005), there is an apparent dearth of studies focusing on the impact of online social networks in particular. This is somewhat surprising, given the fact that such Web sites are filled with countless thousands of easily accessible, English-language profile pages and group sites, which are customized by members who proudly identify their religion as 'Islam' or 'Muslim'.

In recent years, Facebook, MySpace and other social networking sites have become important venues for the computer-mediated diffusion of various types of apocalyptic folklore. By definition, folklore refers to 'those traditional items of knowledge that arise in recurring performances' (Abrahams 1976: 195), including parables, legends, myths, fables, anecdotes, rumors and other forms of storytelling that reflect various cultural or subcultural norms, values and concerns. In many cases, such folklore contains a sociopolitical narrative or theological underpinning, which in effect instills or maintains a sense of collective identity by reflecting and confirming 'the self-perceptions of a social grouping' (Kibby 2005: 774). Thus, folklore reflects the 'culture and history of a given people' and authenticates 'a culture's self-identity' (Fernback 2003: 31).

Islamic eschatological folklore is based in large measure on ancient narratives known as the *hadith*s (traditions)—not included in the Qur'an—which describe the alleged words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad on the subject of the end times, among other topics. Initially disseminated orally, the *hadith*s were written down and canonized approximately two hundred years after the death of Muhammad. These 'traditional' stories are similar in style and substance to the Jewish and Christian versions of the 'literary apocalypse', found in the books of Daniel and Revelation respectively (Cook 2005: 7). Though many conservative Muslim scholars and clerics tend either to reject or minimize the importance of the *hadith*s, 'radical' messianic Muslim writers base most of their prophetic and political stances on such narratives (Furnish 2005: 91).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the role of diasporic Muslim youth in framing the pan-Islamist messianic movement and related apocalyptic folklore on Facebook. The prospective appearance of the Mahdi is emphasized, who is described in the *hadith*s as 'a powerful figure, whose arrival must occur before Judgment Day' (Kabbani 2003: 228). Shortly after his identity has been revealed worldwide, the Mahdi allegedly will become the new and final caliph (*khalifa*), ruling over all Muslims (and eventually the entire world) during the end times. The followers of the Mahdi and Isa will gather under 'black banners' to confront the 'evil' forces of al-Dajjal Masih ('the false messiah') at the final great Battle of Armageddon (Filiu 2009). Muslim Mahdists generally assert that the Dajjal will be killed and his forces vanquished at Armageddon, which will presage a final

utopian era of peace and prosperity for the Muslim *ummah*. As Muhammad Kabbani contends in his book *The Approach of Armageddon? An Islamic Perspective*, 'The Mahdi is coming to remove evil and bring peace in the world' (2003: 229).

Accordingly, this chapter focuses on relevant research questions such as the following: What religious and sociopolitical factors have prompted the youthful articulation of a pan-Islamist apocalyptic discourse on social networking Web sites? How have messianic concepts and related eschatological narratives been framed on Facebook pages, for the apparent purpose of mobilizing pan-Islamist movement supporters in the Muslim Diaspora? What has been the impact of various intra-Islamic theological and sectarian disputes concerning this apocalyptic discourse? Why have Jihadist and non-Jihadist network-activists in the Diaspora employed divergent folkloric frames of the apocalypse? In order to answer these and other questions, specific examples of pan-Islamic networks of the apocalypse observed on Facebook are surveyed, analyzed and compared.

Framing Social Movements

Researchers concerned with the mobilization of social (and religious) movements often focus on the ways in which relevant events, ideas and issues are framed through the mass media and other forms of communication. Defined by Erving Goffman, frames are a 'schemata of interpretations' that enable individuals 'to locate, perceive, identify, and label' various events and occurrences within their own life experiences (1974: 21). Specific social phenomena do not become meaningful to individuals until they have been framed, that is, socially and cognitively organized as part of a discourse. Movement activists and writers frequently attempt to mobilize prospective participants by linking a given movement's frames with the social experiences, values, beliefs and concerns of a sympathetic audience. Such 'frame alignments' are essential components in the micro-mobilization of social movement participants (Snow and Benford 1988: 198). When individual movement frames are connected to a larger belief system sanctioned by potential movement participants, a frame alignment occurs (Snow *et al.* 1986: 464).

Thus, frames and framing are utilized by social movement activists to recruit new adherents and rally supporters, while focusing on the perceived injustice of particular situations and the need for a collective movement to challenge such problems directly. Framing serves as a simplified method for distinguishing in-groups from out-groups, that is, differentiating 'us' from 'them' as a means of enhancing the movement's appeal to particular demographic/ideological groups (Polletta and Jasper 2001). The identification of a tangible enemy through the framing process is a necessary ingredient in

developing an individual's collective consciousness. As William Gamson theorizes, 'Without an adversarial component, the potential target of collective action is likely to remain an abstraction—hunger, disease, poverty, or war, for example' (1992: 232).

In order for any social movement to gain active supporters, a sense of collective identity must first be present. Based primarily on the shared experiences of everyday life, collective identity refers to 'an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution' (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 285). Moreover, collective identities involve 'the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute or related set of attributes, that is/are given priority over other sources of meaning' (Castells 1996: 6). Such an identity becomes particularly pronounced when relevant social movements emerge, which tend psychologically to embody a given group's 'perception of shared status or relation' (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 285). Although perceptions of collective identity typically affect one's personal identity, individual feelings alone cannot engender a collective identity as such. Rather, there must be a shared identification that extends beyond the self and encompasses some sort of communal orientation.

One important discursive tactic for mobilizing movement participants is termed 'frame lifting', that is, the process by which movement activists and adherents 'shape the collective action to match an institutionally embedded frame' (Morris 2003: 445-54). Put simply, movement participants recognize that there are important symbols, narratives, and channels already in existence that might facilitate collective action. The challenge for movement activists is to connect the emotional and cultural sentiments of the movement with a preexisting frame found in society's agency-laden institutions or, alternatively, in other familiar cultural practices. Such 'frame bridging' involves the 'linkage of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem' (Snow *et al.* 1986: 467). Accordingly, activists often seek to link their social movement to 'unmobilized sentiment pools or public opinion preference clusters' (Snow *et al.* 1986: 467) of people who share analogous concerns or grievances.

Computer-Mediated Muslim Identities

Computer-mediated forms of communication are ideal for framing purposes, given the deliberative and often targeted dissemination of text, images, video and audio online. As an inherently polycentric and interconnected technology, the Internet enables (and empowers) activists to frame and disseminate views and ideas to geographically dispersed individuals with common interests and concerns. Howard Rheingold coined the term

'virtual communities' to describe such 'social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (quoted in Foster 1997: 24). Thus, cyberspace is a highly fertile terrain for expansive social movement networks to take root, particularly since the Internet is akin to a rhizome, that is, 'a subterranean stem lacking a definite beginning or end that continues to grow in all directions, constantly building new connections while old ones die' (Froehling 1997: 293).

The decentralized structure of the Internet is tailor-made for the diffusion of identity-based, socioreligious movements/networks such as pan-Islamism and its various ideological offshoots. Indeed, online expression and interactivity have directly influenced the negotiation and formation of new transnational Islamic identities tied to various sociopolitical perspectives. As Gary Bunt states, 'The Internet has not superseded traditional forms of political expression, but is a means through which conventional boundaries and barriers can be transcended' (2003:11).

Because of the seemingly ubiquitous and dispersed character of the Internet, Muslims increasingly are organizing their religious life at the individual level—no longer compelled to follow the rigid orthodoxies propagated by hegemonic religious elites. As a result of the Information Revolution, many Muslims in the West have in effect 'privatized' their religion, since they are able 'to select their creed from a plethora of Islamic authorities, including those on the Internet—just as Muslims everywhere now choose their preachers and muftis from an increasingly media-intensive market' (Kurzman 2007: 523).

The Internet and other forms of computer-mediated communication have encouraged the growth of what Olivier Roy terms a 'deculturalized Islam' (2004: 23). Previously, Islam was almost always tied to specific states and territories that varied widely in practices depending on the specific cultural milieu. Islamic customs involving women's head coverings, for instance, fluctuate enormously depending on the culture. Though this is still the case today in many locales, the globalization of Islam has resulted in the growth of movements and networks that often transcend geography. The migration of large numbers of Muslims to North America and Europe necessitated that Islam undergo such a profound transformation. Away from their countries of origin, Muslim migrants have been compelled to create new religious-based identities that supersede their specific ethno-national origins. As Roy notes, cyberspace provided an opening for the coalescence of various pan-Islamic and neo-fundamentalist networks that seek to 'reconstruct a Muslim community based solely on Islamic tenets', essentially stripping the faith of any 'non-Islamic customs and traditions' tied to particular nationalities (2004: 29-30).

In general, the Internet has had a profound impact on the articulation of apocalyptic discourses. For centuries, this type of discourse—whether of the Jewish, Christian or Muslim variety—had been under the monopolistic purview of religious hierarchies and theological elites, operating within a static interpretive system that was closed to most debate. In contrast, the Internet has facilitated the creation of various religious networks that reflect a relatively open discursive system. Thus, cyberspace has enabled the creation of apocalyptic narrative structures that are flexible or 'plastic' enough to incorporate new and novel interpretations of current events, including 9/11 (Howard 2006: 26). Though 'orthodox closure' was the hallmark of traditional Islamic authority for centuries, cyberspace has made possible the democratization and enhanced plasticity of a global Islamic discourse. As Brian Turner observes, 'While orthodox Islam claimed that *ijihad* ("the gate of interpretation") of the Quran was closed, modern media technology has opened up religious debate, not on a local, but on a global scale, with unpredictable consequences' (2007: 121).

The Facebook Generation

Like their non-Muslim peers, the vast majority of Muslim teens and young adults in the West have grown up with the Internet, e-mail, instant messaging, cell phones, video games, music downloads and other interactive media. In the past decade, social networking services such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter have risen to the digital forefront through the use of highly novel, user-driven, profiling systems. In spite of their underlying technological complexity, such services 'have a simple mission—network through existing and compound relations (i.e. "friends of friends")' (Murthy 2008: 844). In this regard, online network members can easily 'search' for current or prospective 'friends'. Such 'browsing' is largely automated and based on relevant demographic factors such as location, school affiliation, age, ethnicity, gender, religion, political ideology, income and sexual orientation.

In terms of global popularity, Facebook has in recent years overtaken MySpace to become the leading social networking service, with an estimated four hundred million registered users worldwide. Though people of all ages are joining Facebook, teenagers and young adults have fueled the current social networking boom in disproportionate numbers. For instance, nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) of American teens (ages 12 to 17) have online social network profiles, according to a Pew Internet and American Life Project survey in 2009.[5] The numbers are even higher for youth in the 14 to 17 age bracket, at 82 per cent. The use of social networking sites has

5. For survey results, see http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults/Part-3/1-Teens-and-online-social-networks.aspx?r=1.

increased dramatically in recent years among young adults, ages 18 to 29. According to recent figures, 72 per cent of young adults in the United States maintain a social network profile, while 45 per cent access such sites daily.[6]

In social-psychological terms, members of social networking sites often engage unwittingly in 'impression management',[7] which occurs through the transmission of contextual cues found in self-selected text, images, music and videos posted online. Accordingly, a type of dramaturgical performance occurs when online actors attempt to control or manipulate the impressions other people have of them. The relatively high levels of immediacy, intimacy and communal interactivity found on social networking sites tend to enhance such interpersonal performances and impressions. Members effectively contextualize their online personas by uploading photographs to their profile page, selecting popular songs and video clips to be featured for public perusal, listing their interests and activities and leaving public comments on other friends' pages that may include selected images, videos or Web links (see further Tufekci 2008: 21-23). All of these items 'supply the scenery and stage props—present the "expressive equipment", with which the individuals articulate the "front" or a general introductory performance of the self, as opposed to the "backstage", where a more authentic self resides' (Papacharissi 2009: 211).

For public online performances on a even larger stage, members often join various network-mediated 'groups', 'causes' or 'fan pages' that are devoted to topics relating to politics, religion, social movements, contemporary issues, hobbies, musical genres, celebrities, sports and so on. On such 'group-sites', members from a variety of geographic locales express their common concerns and post comments openly in a highly interactive format, with discussion and debate often ensuing. By creating personal profile pages and joining various group sites via social networking services, members are, in effect, typing themselves into existence (Sundén 2003). Thus, they are visibly staging their own self-presentation and constructing collective identities in an exceedingly overt, interactive environment (see Papacharissi 2009).

For teenagers in particular, the realm of online social networking represents a largely autonomous space of identity construction and experimentation, which often involves relatively 'safe' forms of rebellious discourse. In this regard, social networking provides an 'opportunity to conduct the social psychological task of adolescence—to construct, experiment with and present a reflexive project of the self in a social context' (Livingstone

6. See http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults/Part-3/2-Adults-and-social-networks.aspx?r=1\.

7. Erving Goffman, the acclaimed sociologist and father of dramaturgical theory, coined this term in 1959.

2008: 396). Even among teenagers and young adults, there is a strong tendency for such individually contextualized technologies to instill in members a sense of 'user agency' (Christodoulides 2009: 42). As a highly public form of online expression, such sites effectively empower individuals (and their networked cohorts) to challenge and potentially reconfigure dominant media/political representations.

In effect, Facebook, MySpace and other comparable social networking services have not only revolutionized the Internet but also have dramatically transformed the mass media, entertainment, politics and social movement activism. Such Web sites have accomplished this feat by enabling and encouraging like-minded, geographically dispersed persons to connect (and reconnect) one on one, through shared information and demographic/ideological affinities, thereby forging ever-expansive social networks online. Indeed, what makes social network sites distinctive and transformational 'is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks' (boyd and Elisson 2007).

Methodology

In preparing to write this chapter, I carefully perused and examined over fifty English-language Muslim-related Facebook group sites (including 'causes' and 'fan' pages), during the months of February and March 2010. Examples of group sites devoted to Islamic collective identities and concerns include 'Proud to be Muslim', 'From my Muslim Heart to Yours', 'I Am Muslim', 'Muslim Prayer Times', 'Muslim Greetings and Words of Blessing', 'Islam—World's Greatest Religion' and 'I Love Islam'. I discovered that many Facebook pages are designed specifically to appeal to Muslim youth, including 'Muslim Hip-Hop', 'We the Muslim Youth Can Change this World' and 'Young Muslims'.

For the purpose of identifying relevant Facebook sites featuring pan-Islamic ideas and commentary, I conducted online searches by inputting key words (e.g. 'Muslim', 'Islam', 'al-Mahdi', 'al-Qiyamah', 'jihad') into Facebook's network search engine. While perusing specific sites, I focused my attention on discussion threads involving apocalyptic folklore and related political/religious issues of concern to Muslims. In keeping with my research focus on diasporic Muslim teenagers and young adults, I quoted and paraphrased postings primarily from Facebook members living in the West (or in English-speaking countries) who had listed their age as 16 to 29 years old, or who appeared relatively youthful in their profile photos, given the common privacy protocols of personal profile pages.

As a result of viewing the issue-oriented discussion threads of various group sites, I discovered that members often post comments in a highly

interactive format, with lively discussions frequently ensuing. Pan-Islamist viewpoints—of both the relatively moderate and radical variety—are often transmitted and reconfigured for particular audiences on such sites. Importantly, I observed that members of various group sites frequently engage in highly interactive and near-synchronous debates over questions relating to the theological veracity, historical reliability and political efficacy of apocalyptic prophecies and related messianic issues. In conducting my research and evaluating my data, I did not employ any statistical methods, but instead chose to utilize a mostly qualitative content analysis approach. After reading through hundreds of discussion threads and thousands of individual postings, I selected and coded such comments under specific rubrics such as 'Mahdi', 'Dajjal', 'Mahdist movement', 'Pan-Islamic', 'New World Order', 'Jihad' and 'Armageddon'.

Contesting Hadiths *on Facebook*

Over the past decade, pan-Islamic apocalyptic discourse has expanded from mostly Arab-language academic tomes and publications to English-language Web sites in general and social networking services in particular. One of the biggest issues of contention in contemporary Islamic discourse, as expressed on various Facebook group sites, concerns the relative veracity, meaning and importance of the *hadith*s (traditions). Such narratives allegedly include a detailed description of the everyday deeds and prophetic comments of the Prophet Muhammad. Though most of the *hadith*s were written approximately two hundred years after Muhammad's death, they are considered by many Muslims to be a sacred, integral part of the Sunnah (i.e. the everyday 'practices' and customs of Muslims).

The main debate revolves around paranormal messianic figures described in the *hadith*s - such as the Mahdi and the Dajjal —which are not mentioned in the Qur'an. Messianic supporters of the *hadith*s often attempt to apply such prophecies to current events, while conservative critics tend to reject or minimize messianic predictions. As a relatively conventional religion that is extremely wary of theological 'innovations', Islam has produced many scholars who have sought to endorse and uphold traditional beliefs, while discouraging potential dogmatic and political challenges based on messianic claims (Cook 2005: 3). Facebook includes numerous group sites that are devoted to a discussion of the *hadith*s, including 'Hadith of the Day', 'Islam: Hadith Citations', 'Quran and Hadith' and 'Islamic Hadiths: Sayings of the Prophet'. Such sites tend to have both a purely theological and a messianic-proselytizing purpose. As the administrator of the 'Hadith of the Day' site explains, 'I set up this page to share beautiful and inspiring *hadith*s with people from all over the world.'

Advocates of the *hadith*s on Facebook generally contend that reading such ancient stories is imperative for having a better understanding of the Qur'an and Allah's future plans for humankind. Pro-*hadith* comments by relatively youthful posters on various group sites include the following: "All *hadith*s are indeed complements to the Quran'; 'The Quran offers details but not in a manner that is adequate by itself to offer *salaah* (prayers)'; and 'It is compulsory to follow the teachings of the Sunnah—which includes the *hadith*s.' Conversely, other Muslim commentators on Facebook oppose or seriously doubt the *hadith*s' messianic prophecies concerning the Mahdi and the Dajjal. This intense questioning of the *hadith*s is due allegedly to a lack of divine inspiration and a poorer-quality writing style, compared to the Qur'an. For instance, one young man writing on Facebook's 'Ka'aba—The House of Allah' observes, 'the Qur'an is enough for formulating the ideological structure of Islam'. Posting on the same site, a 24-year-old graduate student states, 'The language of the Quran is superior to the language of *hadith*s.' Such *hadith*s, he alleges, are often 'contradictory', 'silly', 'too detailed', 'blasphemous' and 'fabricated'.

In response to such conservative charges, messianic Muslims defend the *hadith*s and their prophecies on Facebook. For example, one 18-year-old male contends that conservative views questioning the authenticity of the *hadith*s are unnecessarily disruptive to the *ummah*. 'Why don't Muslims stop bickering with each other on these issues?' he asks. 'The Dajjal will take advantage of these divisions between Muslims and everyone else to rule the world . . . isn't that known?' In reply, another young man notes simply, 'How can Dajjal take advantage of us when there is no Dajjal?' Labeling many stories in the *hadith*s as 'utter nonsense', a respondent asks contemptuously, 'So what if he will come? Let fairies and demons and dajjals have their place in folklore. Let's just aspire to be Muslims; last time I checked that was a full time job lol.'

Entering into the discussion, a young American Muslim man posting on the same thread defends the *hadith*s by arguing that the writings were compiled originally through a 'painstaking process to ensure authenticity'. Thus, the *hadith*s were fully inspired and affirmed by Allah, he alleges. Addressing a conservative skeptic of the *hadith*s, a British Muslim youth states, 'Fourteen hundred years down the line u dismiss it with just a few words . . . tell me who has more knowledge, Allah or you, brother?' Like many other Muslims, one Detroit teen frames the *hadith*s (and beliefs in various messianic figures) in pan-Islamic messianic terms. As she contends, 'The Dajjal is real and our prophet gave a description of him and told us to make *du'aa* ("offering prayers") to be protected from him.' Similarly, a Canadian college student emphasizes his rejection of what he terms 'old school' theology. 'Most of the Islamic scholars are so deeply drowned in the pit of prejudice that they deny the existence of Imam Mahdi in its entirety,'

he contends. Posting on 'I Am Awaiting Imam al-Mahdi', he claims that the 'prophetic traditions' of the *hadith*s prove the Mahdi's 'holy existence'. Other Muslim youths on Facebook take a relatively moderate position on the issue, such as one Bangladeshi male, contending that 'the *hadith*s can be used as a supplement, but not as a parallel to the Quran, as is often done'.

Signs of the (Muslim) Apocalypse

Mirroring to some extent discussions among other apocalyptic religious movements and belief systems, the discourse of pan-Islamist messianism often focuses on contemporary interpretations and contextualizations of various 'signs' or 'omens' that reputedly will signal the end times. Pan-Islamic messianic writers claim that there are 'minor' signs (prefiguring or pointing to the end times) and 'major' signs (providing proof that 'the end of history' is imminent) (Furnish 2005: 94). Various pages and discussion threads observed on Facebook (e.g. 'Islam—50 Signs of Qiyamah—Doomsday'; 'Signs of the Coming of Imam al-Mahdi'; 'Are We Well Prepared for the End of the Days?') are concerned directly with prospective time frames of the years leading up to the apocalypse. While some online posts claim that such signs indicate that the 'world today is moving to its end', others counter with the argument, 'Only Allah is the one who knows about the resurrection day.'

Posting on the group site 'I'm Muslim & I'm Proud', one college student claims that his list of 'signs' is based on contemporary interpretations of *hadith* prophecies. He introduces his list with the topic heading '"Signs of Qiyamah" and encourages others to forward the message to others'. In the list, he refers to recent 'lesser signs' such as the growing number of people discussing 'nasty stuff' rather than Allah, dance clubs overtaking mosques in size, distances on earth becoming shorter owing to airline travel, Jews 'gathering again' in Canaan (i.e. the establishment of Israel), adultery becoming widespread, Allah sending 'a disease to fornicators (AIDS)', suicide rates increasing, earthquakes growing in number and severity and alcohol consumption mounting. He then proceeds to list the 'greater signs' of the end times, including the prospective appearance of the Mahdi, the Dajjal and the Prophet Isa (Jesus).

Several discussion threads on the group site 'Ka'aba—The House of Allah' focus on the alleged necessity to be fully prepared for the impending apocalypse. For instance, one notable thread is entitled 'Are you ready for al-Dajjal and al-Mahdi?' At the beginning of the thread, an American male undergraduate states matter-of-factly, 'It's been said in so many places that our generation is the one that will see al-Mahdi, Jesus, and al-Dajjal. If that's true, are you ready?' He describes the final battle of Armageddon as 'the good vs. evil war' and 'the most important event in history to come'.

In a candid response, another young man asserts, 'Nope, I am not ready. I don't think anybody can ever be ready for Dajjal. Once he comes, a lot of us will step up to fight him, and those who are weak in knowledge will fall for him.'

On numerous Facebook postings, Muslim messianic youths have framed various signs of the apocalypse as relating to present-day events or issues. For instance, a Canadian male in his early twenties authored the essay 'A Possible Major Sign Fulfilled?' that was published on the 'Anti-Dajjal' group site. He asserts that recent natural disasters, including Hurricane Katrina, are alluded to in the *hadith*s as signs of 'the end times'. However, he makes the following stipulation: 'I am by no means claiming that this absolutely is the sign, but the *hadith* is strikingly similar to these events.' Other eschatological interpretations of current events are presented by a British Muslim teen, posting on 'Hadith of the Day'. He contends that the growing prevalence of unisex clothing and transvestitism is strong evidence that the apocalypse is near. 'Women will dress like men and men will dress like women', he interprets prophetically.

Along these lines, another young man displayed a lengthy list of signs on the 'Anti-Dajjal' site, which includes the prediction of 'dire' feminist trends in society such as women entering the workforce 'out of love for this world'. Going further, a teenage female student states on 'I Am Awaiting Imam al-Mahdi' that the elevation of women such as Hillary Clinton into top political positions is a sign of the apocalypse. On 'Ka'aba—The House of Allah', a young adult asserts that an important sign has been fulfilled in the post-9/11 era: 'The world now belongs to America.' Thus, as he concludes gleefully, 'The Mahdi is coming soon and I hope really soon!' The 'Companions of the Messiah' page refers to the appearance of both the Mahdi and Jesus as looming in the near future, based on various signs: 'We are Muslims who believe in the imminent coming of the Imam Mahdi and the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary to usher in the Kingdom of God promised by our Lord in all the revealed heavenly books.'

More cautious Muslims contend that focusing obsessively on various 'signs' of the apocalypse can be disadvantageous to the here and now. This issue is raised directly in a blog posted on the fan page 'Brotherhood and Unity among Muslims'. The author expresses his concern that some Muslims have become overly preoccupied and obsessed with the eschatological prophecies of the *hadith*s, while failing to address serious contemporary issues in the process. Such Islamic texts are being wrongly interpreted as encouraging 'inactivity and fatalism', particularly in the realm of political and social change. He notes that messianic Christians and Jews have at times undergone similar trends, 'justifying their fatalistic behavior and inaction to tackle the problems they faced by stating that they would be saved by the second coming'. Cautioning that the *hadith*s can be easily

misinterpreted, a more 'realistic' approach is endorsed. 'As far as *hadith* of prophecies, they discuss about things that are not in the reality and are therefore beyond the limits of our minds', he explains. 'Hence we cannot make a judgment on these matters.'

Nevertheless, many of the strongest messianic supporters tend to frame the prophecies of the *hadith*s as the actual 'words' of the Prophet Muhammad, rather than simply visionary stories written by his followers hundreds of years later. For example, a young male college student from Minnesota, posting on the Muslim-sponsored site 'Deception of the New World Order', notes, 'The Holy Prophet Muhammad has prophesied about several events that will occur just before the advent of the Day of Judgment.' He explains further that the appearance of the new 'messiah', the Mahdi, is one of the final signs presaging Judgment Day.

Framing the Mahdi's Origins

When it comes to pan-Islamic apocalyptic discourse, the messianic figure of the Mahdi is by far the most important character in the narrative, though in many ways the most mysterious and controversial one, too. Consequently, there are numerous Facebook sites devoted to discussions about his reputed origins and subsequent role in the end times, including the following: 'Coming of the Mahdi', 'Friends of Al Mahdi', 'Mahdi Supporters', 'One Man Will Unite Them All—Imam Mahdi', 'Association al-Mahdi', 'Army of al-Mahdi', 'Al Mahdi Youth Society' and 'Imam Mahdi Soldiers'. Such pages often feature lively deliberations concerning when and where the Mahdi will appear, exactly what role he will play in the apocalypse, and how he (and Jesus) will eventually defeat the 'wicked' forces of the Dajjal at Armageddon.

Importantly, Sunni and Shia Muslims have major differences regarding the Mahdi's origins. For example, Sunni messianists generally assert that the Mahdi will reach adulthood during the same time period in which he rises to power, while Shias contend that the Mahdi has been living on earth surreptitiously for centuries and will reveal himself publicly during the end times. Shias, in contrast to Sunnis, believe that the Mahdi is a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. According to this narrative, the Mahdi was born in 869 CE and was hidden from view as a five-year-old child to avoid being killed by Sunni tyrants. Ever since, Shias contend that he has been living in a state of *ghaybah* ('hiddenness' or 'occultation'). For this reason, Shia messianists often refer to the Mahdi as the 'Hidden Imam' (caliph) or 'Twelfth Imam'. Amazingly, the Mahdi allegedly has survived all of these years, thanks to Allah's divine intervention and protection. Accordingly, Shiites postulate, 'This now Hidden Imam will someday

emerge as the Mahdi, the deliverer of the Islamic community in its hour of need' (Furnish 2005: 4-5).

While many Facebook pages and threads focusing on the Mahdi are geared primarily toward either a Shia or Sunni audience, others appear to be relatively nonsectarian in their approach. For the most part, the Mahdi is not framed overtly on Facebook as either Shia or Sunni, but rather as a pan-Islamic messianic figure that is largely nonsectarian. But certainly, the Shia conception of the 'Hidden Imam', who has been engaged in covert occultation for centuries, differs substantially from the Sunni view that the Mahdi will appear within forty years or so of his birth. Thus, while Sunni comments on Facebook predict the Mahdi's initial 'appearance' on earth, Shias focus on his 'reappearance' in the end times. As the Shia-sponsored 'Muslim Youth Group'[AQ] page states, 'Our intention is to help lay the foundation of the reappearance of the leader of humanity, Imam Mahdi who will establish a Global Government of Justice.'

The Shia origin story of the Mahdi has a decidedly anti-Sunni narrative, since the 'savior' allegedly went into hiding as young child for the express purpose of avoiding execution by oppressive Sunni authorities. This has led to occasional comments posted on Facebook that are critical of the other sect's depiction of the Mahdi. Shia comments on such sites often emphasize the Mahdi's alleged family lineage—which reputedly goes back to the founder of the breakaway sect, Ali (Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law). One Shia Facebook page describes the Mahdi as 'the Khalifatullah (Representative of God) in the end times of the world. He will be a descendant of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) through the bloodline of Ali ibn Abu Talib and Fatima.' In contrast, Sunnis on Facebook sometimes explicitly reject the Shia depiction of the Mahdi who was allegedly 'hidden' from view as a child. One post, for instance, states the following strong critique of the Shia version of the Mahdi's origins:

> The Mahdi will come at the end of time. . . . He is not the Mahdi who is expected by the Shia, who they claim will appear from a tunnel in Samarra. This claim of theirs has no basis in reality or in any reliable source. They allege that his name is Muhammad ibn al-Hasan ibn al-Askari, and that he went into the tunnel when he was five years old.

Framing the Mahdi's Messianic Role

There seems to be general agreement among messianic Muslims on Facebook—whether Sunni or Shia—when it comes to the main purpose of the Mahdi. Indeed, messianists generally depict him as the alleged 'savior' or 'redeemer' of the Muslim world. Paradoxically, such Muslims tend to frame the Mahdi's raison d'être in both liberationist/futuristic and restorative/nostalgic terms. The Mahdi reputedly will usher in a new utopian era for the

world, which is modeled on the 'pristine' Islam of centuries past. This 'millennial vision' of Mahdism recalls the era of the Prophet Muhammad and his 'golden age of unity (*tawhid*), harmony, lawfulness, economic prosperity, and peace' (Werbner 2004: 453).

The growing popularity of the Mahdi among Muslims undoubtedly has been fueled by the fact that virtually all of the modern pan-Islamist movements have invoked the folkloric-religious language of the Muslim *ummah*. Given the fragmentation that has plagued Islam for centuries, there is a very strong interest among Muslims for some type of reunification of the faith, thus seeking to restore the (presumed) religious utopia of the distant past. As a wistful comment on the 'Muslim Ummah' page reveals, 'Muslims, for thirteen centuries were one bloc, under one leadership, in the name of Allah.' However, the author notes that the *ummah* is currently in dire need of revival. 'When you cut an elephant into 100 pieces, you don't get one hundred elephants, instead you get a bloody mess', he observes. 'Incited against each other using nationalism, this is what the Muslim *ummah* has become.'

The reasons often cited for the lack of Muslim unity are not only internal discord but also external oppression. As an American male undergraduate observes on the Muslim group site 'Deception of the New World Order', the Mahdi 'will materialize when the believers are severely oppressed in every corner of the world. He will fight the oppressors, unite the Muslims, bring peace and justice to the world, rule over the Arabs, and lead a prayer in Mecca at which Isa (Jesus) will be present.' This particular frame of the Mahdi as the heroic rescuer of the 'oppressed' Muslim *ummah* is found on several Facebook pages, often contextualized with story lines featuring interpretations of contemporary events and related rallying cries.

In theoretical terms, such an approach directly relates to the formation of specific group boundaries and an 'oppositional consciousness' (Heath 2003: 426) designed to articulate grievances and resist domination. The theme of oppression is designed to instill in Muslims a sense of collective identity by framing the narrative as 'us versus them'. For example, the administrator of the 'Imam Mahdi' Facebook page describes the plight of Muslims around the world thus:

> Today we Muslims are being tortured and are ruled by these tyrant Zionists. Everyday our Muslim brothers and sisters are dying at their hands in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Pakistan and other places. No Muslim country can create any resistance. And they also call us terrorists! Now we are very weak, as we don't follow Allah and the Quran.

However, despite such highly pessimistic introductory comments focusing on alleged Zionist repression, the same author proceeds to frame the Mahdi (and the corresponding Mahdist movement) as the only solution to

such woes. As he notes, 'We have one hope and that is al-Mahdi, whom we Muslims believe will come and unite the Muslims again and will make an end of this Jewish-Christian tyranny and fill the earth with peace.' Appealing to potential movement recruits, the writer states, 'It's my request to Muslim brothers and sisters to join this group. Know our Imam, learn the signs of his arrival and get ready because fear not for the dawn is the night.' In this passage, the author seeks to demonstrate that the Mahdi and his forces will succeed in their mission. Otherwise, without such assurances of victory, Muslims will be less likely to embrace the Mahdist movement. Such a sense of agency, or the widely held belief that it is possible to effect change and alter conditions or policies, is a necessary prerequisite for widespread movement mobilization and collective behavior (Gamson 1992).

Notably, many relevant comments on various Facebook group sites emphasize the supreme importance of the Mahdi in reestablishing the Caliphate (Khilafah) on behalf of the *ummah*. This ideal Muslim state allegedly will counteract and eventually obliterate the hegemonic power of the Dajjal, thus preparing the world for Judgment Day. As one American college student from the Midwest states, 'Imam Mahdi is the Savior who will come at the End Times to save and unite the Muslim *ummah* and fight against the evil and restore peace and Khilafah around the world.' According to a Palestinian young adult, 'Islam cannot be protected without an Islamic state. This is the only way to erase these artificial borders between Muslims, and unify at least 1.5 billion Muslims in one super state. Muslims must have a new Imam.'

Meaningfully, much of the language of messianic Muslims on Facebook emphasizes the need for movement mobilization to accomplish the goal of restoring the Caliphate. In this respect, the Mahdi is framed as the metahuman embodiment of a pan-Islamist political agenda, rather than simply a pious-religious savior. Commenting on a thread entitled 'The Jews and Christians Know about these Signs', one young man states, 'We need to change ourselves, we need a change. We need a Mahdi movement around the world to get rid of the Anti-Christ society.' Politicizing the Mahdi even further, the ethno-religious frame of the Caliphate (and its head, the Caliph) is extended and amplified by several Facebook commentators into a global eschatological theocracy. 'Al-Mahdi will come out to establish a one world government which is purely based on Islam, a government which will also be ruled by Jesus whenever al-Mahdi dies', states a Washington, DC, college student.

Folkloric descriptions of the Mahdi, as articulated on Facebook, indicate that he is a very powerful and charismatic man, though neither divine nor immortal. In fact, he is reportedly unaware of his true identity and the great power that he has been granted by Allah, at least until he reaches his life's apex as leader of the *ummah*. According to a note posted on the

'Imam Mahdi' page, the Mahdi 'will not carry out any miracles or receive any revelation but will rule with justice which will bring prosperity for the Khilafah state. He will not know that he is the Mahdi, as the *hadith* indicates that he will be reluctant to take the allegiance (*bay'ah*), and he will need to be convinced to take it.'

In this respect, the Mahdi is framed as a modest and unpretentious man, one who is seemingly oblivious to his messianic role (at least initially); thus in need of movement support to prompt his own spiritual self-realization and politico-religious agency. In turn, the Mahdi—once he has fully realized his 'sacred' purpose—will galvanize the Muslim *ummah* into fighting against evil and subsequently guide the entire world into a new millennial-style golden age. According to this scenario, the unofficial Mahdist movement will play a pivotal role in preparing the world for the Mahdi's appearance and supporting the Mahdi once he is revealed to the world. Thus, the Mahdist movement is framed as having direct agentic responsibility for facilitating certain eschatological events, thereby encouraging the present-day micro-mobilization of movement recruits via pan-Islamic online networks.

Framing the False Messiah

One of the most common pan-Islamic topics on Facebook is Dajjal al-Masih, which literally translates as the 'false' or 'impostor' messiah, also known as 'the Dark Messiah', 'the Antichrist', and 'the Lying Christ'. Surprisingly, there are several different Facebook pages that are devoted exclusively to discussing the Dajjal and his eschatological machinations, including 'Arrival of Dajjal/Anti-Christ', 'Dajjal vs. Mankind', 'Dajjal Is Enemy', 'Will You Be with or against Dajjal (Anti-Christ)' and 'Dajjal (Anti-Christ) Is in the World and Mahdi and Jesus Are Coming'. One such site, 'Dajjal al-Masih', describes the Dajjal as 'an evil figure in Islamic eschatology that will pretend to be the true Masih (or the Messiah) prior to the time of Yawm al-Qiyamah (Judgment Day)'. According to a note on the group site 'Ka'aba—The House of Allah', 'the Dajjal is a deceptive man with great powers that will appear at the beginning as a pious man, then claims prophet-hood and then claims Godhood!'

Among messianic Muslims on Facebook, there are three major interpretative frames of the Dajjal most often employed. The first frame depicts the Dajjal as an actual person—a very wicked yet highly charismatic individual who will control most of the world. According to this perspective, he will rise to power through deception and lies in the years immediately prior to Judgment Day. The second frame presents the Dajjal as a depraved nation (or group of nations), which has become particularly malevolent toward the Muslim world. According to this frame, the Dajjal is not an individual man per se but rather a symbolic name for a collective conspiratorial entity, one

that may already be in existence in some form or fashion. The third major Dajjal frame is actually a synthesis of the first two frames, thus depicting the Dark Messiah as the leader of a hegemonic global system or evil empire that bears his name (at least metaphorically).

For an example of the first interpretative frame, the Dajjal is described on the group site 'I'm a Muslim and I'm Proud' as 'a physical being, a human and not a system'. More specifically, as detailed on the 'Anti-Dajjal' page, this Dark Messiah is the last in a series of thirty *dajjal*s or 'deceivers'. One frequent appellation for the final Dajjal—which is often used to distinguish him from past deceivers in history—is 'The Anti-Christ Dajjal' or simply 'The Anti-Christ'. This is both a highly provocative and hybridized religious name, since it has been 'borrowed' directly from Christian apocalyptic discourse. Notably, the term 'Antichrist' is not used in the *hadith*s or the Qur'an, but instead is lifted from Christian eschatology for the apparent purpose of appealing to a broader range of potential movement adherents.

Selecting such a familiar English-language name as 'the Antichrist'—to be used interchangeably with the Dajjal—is designed apparently to build on the apocalyptic literary traditions of both Christianity and Islam. Particularly among diasporic Muslims living in the West, such a frame alignment resonates very strongly, given their likely exposure to references of the Antichrist in Western folklore and popular culture.[8] In effect, Muslim messianists are linking Islamic and Christian apocalyptic characters through similar nomenclature and roles, though infusing them with very different story lines. This is an example of frame bridging, since there is an apparent attempt to link ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames together for the purpose of movement mobilization. Thus, Mahdists are attempting to expand the appeal of their movement to potentially sympathetic groups of Muslims (particularly in the Diaspora) who have not yet been mobilized.

Quite obviously, there are numerous Facebook postings that describe the Dajjal's ethnic background, physical appearance, and ideological agenda in detail. For example, he is often described as being blind (or deformed) in one or both eyes, hunchbacked, and having a wide forehead and barreled chest. He is also described repeatedly on Facebook as a 'powerful Jewish leader' who has the Arabic word *kuffar* ('unbeliever') written indelibly on his forehead. This highly profane word (also written as *kufr*), allegedly describing the Dajjal's true, immoral nature, is visible only to genuine believers of Allah (i.e. Muslims), while the rest of the world simply becomes mesmerized by the Dajjal's charisma and sociopolitical hegemony. Similarly, his true (ugly) facial features are seen only by the 'enlightened' Muslim world.

8. For examples of Western popular culture focusing on the Antichrist and other apocalyptic figures in Christianity, see Monahan 2008: 813-30.

As one young man commented on 'Hadith of the Day', 'The Dajjal is so called because he will conceal his *kuffar* from the people by lying to them, deceiving them and confusing them.'

Several postings on Facebook speculate that the Dajjal will emerge out of Israel before taking charge in the United States and Great Britain. After solidifying his power base in the West, he will proceed to conquer the rest of the world, though eventually the Mahdi and the Prophet Isa (together with their assembled army) will stop his advance and even kill the Dajjal at the Battle of Armageddon. According to this portrayal, the Dark Messiah's core followers will be predominantly Jews, Zionists, Freemasons and the 'feeble-minded'. The Dajjal allegedly will most easily control women and 'illegitimate' people (born out of wedlock).

Thus, the Dajjal is being framed in conspiratorial and anti-Semitic terms. In many respects, such an anti-Semitic description tends to amplify the Dajjal frame within parts of the Muslim world, thus potentially enhancing the appeal of messianism to persons who hold such prejudices. Indeed, there are several blatantly anti-Semitic comments on such sites. On 'Ka'aba—The House of Allah', for instance, one young man from Kosovo writes in reference to Jews, 'If you die with whatever religion except Islam—you are in the Hell of Fire "Jahannam" forever!' However, other relatively moderate pan-Islamic messianists claim that the Dajjal will not be Jewish but will instead have an indeterminate nationality. Some messianic commentators on Facebook even defend Jews and Christians as fellow 'People of the Book'. For example, an Australian young man states, 'There is no Quranic evidence that Jews and Christians will go to hell.' Similarly, an 18-year-old Bangladeshi male contends, 'God never eliminated the Jews' and Christians' chance to go to heaven. He eliminated the monopoly that only Christians and Jews may go to heaven.'

In addition, a few Facebook postings seem to minimize the Jewish narrative and depict the Dajjal primarily as a *jinni,* that is, a 'shape shifter'—harking back to traditional Arabian mythology. By lifting this particular frame from pre-Islamic Arab folklore, there is an apparent attempt to extend or broaden the discourse to include members of a previously unmobilized audience, that is, those who have heard stories of the legendary *jinn* but have not yet embraced pan-Islamic messianism. For many such folks, particularly those who have ethnic roots in the Middle East, the *jinn* are a comparable frame of reference for understanding the dajjals, and are thus designed to resonate with potential new movement recruits in the Muslim (and Arab) Diaspora.

On a lighter note, there is at least one Facebook page that employs humor and satire in its highly personalized portrayal of the Dajjal. The group site, 'I Wanna Poke Dajjal in his Eye', is designed obviously in jest, yet some members of the group post comments that appear somewhat serious. For

example, one young woman reveals that she would indeed enjoy poking out his eye. As she states, 'Once I see him, I would like to do it. May Allah give us strength.' Revealing his temerity, a Finish youth explains that it is fully appropriate to poke the Dajjal's eye out if and when he comes nearby. 'That's not cruel', he proclaims defiantly. 'It's the right thing to do.' This particular Facebook site attracts almost exclusively teenaged posters, which is not particularly surprising given the sophomoric humor found on the page.

Framing the Dajjal System

Rather than describing the Dajjal as an individual person, the second major interpretative frame found on Facebook focuses on 'the Dajjal System'—an allegedly conspiratorial international organization and coalition of countries that is already in existence but growing more powerful every day. For instance, a poster on the 'Anti-Dajjal' site contends that the Dajjal is simply a 'metaphor for Israel' and other countries that have fallen prey to Zionist control. Posting on 'Dajjal vs. Mankind', the youthful administrator of the site focuses his ire on the New World Order (NWO), which he claims is synonymous with 'the Dajjal System' and is controlled by the US government. Owing to the hegemonic power of this 'one-world government', people around the world have been 'taught to hate Muslims', he states. 'There's so much hate already in the world due to the Dajjal; people in the USA who refuse the NWO are going to camps to be starved and beaten to death!'

Conspiracy theories of the Dajjal System are quite detailed on various pan-Islamic Facebook group sites such as 'Deception of the New World Order'. One Muslim commentator observes that the Dajjal System is 'a worldwide conspiracy being orchestrated by an extremely powerful and influential group of genetically-related individuals which include many of the world's wealthiest people, top political leaders, and corporate elite, as well as members of the so-called Black Nobility of Europe (dominated by the British Crown) whose goal is to create a One World (fascist) Government, stripped of nationalist and regional boundaries, that is obedient to their agenda'. Most importantly, he contends from the Muslim messianic perspective, 'It is the system that is covering your eyes to blind you from the truth and the truth is we are all slaves to the system of "The New World Order" (Anti-Christ System).'

There are related depictions of the Dajjal System with allegations of alleged conspiratorial culpability for the attacks of 9/11/01. Most noteworthy in this regard is a lengthy blog entitled 'Story of World Trade Center', also posted on the group site 'Deception of the New World Order'. The blog presents a detailed conspiracy theory of the 9/11 attacks, involving the US government, Freemasons, the Illuminati and al-Qaida. In essence, the

author argues that 9/11 was a vehicle for the rise of the New World Order—the Dajjal System—as foretold reputedly in the *hadith*s. The blogger utilizes various numerological constructs to make his arguments, alleging that 9/11 displayed an 'occultist illuminist signature'. For example, he notes that the two World Trade Center buildings physically resembled the number 11, which has an ominous, occultist meaning. As he contends, 'The number "11" symbolizes all that is evil and imperfect (The Old World Order).' Thus, the New World Order was allegedly behind the 9-11 attacks. 'Certain members of the U.S. government and the U.S. military knew the event was going to happen because they are the ones who planned it', the blogger notes. 'They worked together with Osama bin Laden to bring this event to pass.'

The final major interpretative frame of the Dajjal that I found on Facebook involves the dualistic personification of the dark-messianic concept in both individualistic and collectivist terms. According to this frame, the Dajjal System is inextricably intertwined with the Dajjal Messiah, which are two sides of the same coin, thereby coexisting in a malevolent symbiotic relationship. Commenting on 'Ka'aba—The House of Allah', a teenager from Montreal observes, 'Yes, the Dajjal is an actual man but don't forget that the Prophet said that there will be a system that would come before him which is called the Dajjal System. It's like the media, TV and America and Israel.'

Explaining further, a Michigan youth writes on 'Hadith of the Day' that there are three major aspects of the Dajjal—the anti-messianic individual, the worldwide social and cultural phenomenon and the dark unseen force. Accordingly, the Dajjal leader will not become truly visible until the international 'support system' that he needs to rule has been fully established. 'Dajjal the individual will be the epitome of the *kuffar* system, the ultimate *kuffar*, and therefore inevitably chosen as the leader of that system, when he appears', the author contends. Thus, the concept of the Dajjal, according to this third major interpretive frame, is depicted as both the ultimate wicked man and the definitive evil empire/movement, which are both working together in concert, with the latter being a necessary prerequisite for the former. Articulating a related conspiratorial argument, a young Floridian alleges, 'The US is trying to form a one world government which they seem to be very close at accomplishing, that government belongs to al-Dajjal.'

One of the main themes of pan-Islamist messianism is that the entire world (including historic Muslim lands in the Middle East) will fall temporarily to the Dajjal's multinational army and be controlled for an indeterminate period of time by the American/British/Zionist *kuffar*-coalition of '77 flags'. Several posts on Facebook interpret these 77 flags as referring either to the New World Order or the United Nations, both equally reviled by radical Mahdists. As a Pakistani teen on 'The Awakening the Khilafah'

page observes, 'The downfall of Islam is inevitable because it is one of the signs of the Last Days and in order for Islam to rise again it needs to fall.'

On several Muslim-related Facebook pages, there are links posted to a YouTube video entitled 'The Arrivals', which traces the history of various 'sinister' Western secret societies whose goal is to establish a 'one-world government' linked to the Dajjal. Produced by the 'Wakeup Project', the video refers to the 'Dajjal System' as the combined product of long-term Jewish, Illuminati and Masonic conspiracies to conquer the world, which will eventually give rise to the Antichrist himself. There is even a Facebook site named for 'The Arrivals', which is described as exploring 'the revelations in world religions regarding the arrivals of the Antichrist Dajjal, Imam al-Mahdi, and the Second Coming of the Christ'. Produced by Muslim-messianic entrepreneurs, the video is touted online in a commercially slick and eclectic religious style, claiming to be based on 'the words of the noble Quran, The Holy Bible, and The Torah'.

In sum, pan-Islamic apocalyptic conspiracy theories portray the Dajjal System as synonymous with the New World Order, US government, Zionists, Freemasons, Illuminati, United Nations and other allegedly transnational hegemonic forces. Such a highly eclectic, conspiratorial approach among Mahdists indicates increased levels of discursive plasticity in the post-9/11 era, through the utilization of both frame lifting and frame bridging. Ironically, Muslim-messianic activists have lifted the reputedly malicious frame of the New World Order from the far-right fringe of American political discourse. In the process, they have effectively constructed a metaphorical bridge that links Mahdism to the anti-globalist ideology of militant anti-government groups in the West. Indeed, various fundamentalist apocalyptic Christian sects (and related militia groups) in the United States often frame the NWO as a type of multinational cabal, intent on obliterating borders, consolidating banks and confiscating guns. Even several notable American evangelical ministers have expressed the belief that the Antichrist will utilize the NWO as a launching pad for achieving a totalitarian one-world government.[9]

Framing Planet X

The increasingly popular 'Planet X' astronomical/apocalyptic scenario, in which a large asteroid supposedly collides with Earth in the year 2012, is being utilized as an eschatological frame of reference on several messianic-Muslim Facebook pages. For example, the Facebook page, 'Dajjal vs. Mankind', features the YouTube video 'The Arrival of Mahdi, Dajjal, and Planet

9. For example, see Pat Robertson's book *The New World Order* (Dallas: Word, 1991).

X'. The video begins with melancholy Arab-style music (which includes ominous sounds of thunder crashing intermittently) and a photo showing the Earth apparently exploding into pieces. On the same slide, the video raises the question ominously, 'Where will you be in 2012?' Citing the *hadith*s, the video text states that the Prophet Muhammad 'provided us with various signs on the coming of the Mahdi to inform us about his approach', including massive landsides, tsunamis and earthquakes throughout the world. Muhammad is quoted as saying, 'The final hour will not come until you see a smoke that will rise and cover the whole world.'

Tellingly, the video combines Planet X imagery with Islamic messianism, claiming, 'One of the signs of the coming of the Mahdi is the coming of a star (comet) with a luminous tail near Earth lighting up the sky and causing sinking of coastal areas.' Asserting that this 'comet' is Planet X, the video explains that two-thirds of the Earth's population will 'perish' and most of the planet's infrastructure ('technologies, electricties, buildings, cities, skyscrapers, etc.') will be destroyed as a result of this cataclysmic event in 2012. Soon thereafter, humankind will revert to 'the dark ages', the video alleges. However, the Mahdi eventually will rise from the ashes to combat the Dajjal and his 'evil' British/American/Jewish cabal. After defeating the Dajjal's forces, the Mahdi will establish a new pan-Islamic world empire that will thrive for at least seven years, prior to Judgment Day.

From a theoretical standpoint, pan-Islamic messianists are lifting the frames of Planet X and doomsday 2012 from non-Muslim Western sources. At the same time, such frames are being synthesized with Islamic eschatology in an apparent attempt to mobilize supporters. This is potentially an effective strategy, since such frames are increasingly familiar to both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, thanks in large measure to incessant media hype and pop-culture depictions of Mayan-related prophecies and pseudo-scientific projections of doomsday events allegedly to occur in 2012.

Notably, other messianic Muslims strongly disagree with the Planet X/Muslim hybridized hypothesis. For example, one Muslim Facebook group site is devoted specifically to debunking this particular doomsday scenario, namely 'Believing "2012 is the End of the World" is Against Islam'. As the youthful administrator of the page states, 'You cannot conclude by any means that the world would end in 2012, nor before neither after!' The author frames the 2012 scenario as anti-Islamic, contending that such views reflect 'disbelief' in Allah and the Prophet Muhammad. Notably, he directly identifies with the messianic Muslim movement otherwise, as is evident in the following statement: 'There are many signs to come such as Imam Mahdi, Dajjal, re-coming of Isa (peace be upon him).' A 20-year-old Malaysian teen posts a link on the same page rejecting the 2012 doomsday scenario by citing alleged scientific evidence. As a young Pakistani woman comments on the page, 'Surely, knowledge of the Hour is with Allah alone.

I don't believe this 2012 is the end of this world! Whereas, I believe it's a group of people from all over the world working mutually for the interest of the Dajjal.'

Other messianists on Facebook articulate a relatively nuanced position on the issue, claiming that Planet X will indeed hit the earth and create massive devastation, but not necessarily in 2012. Posting on the Islamic-focused 'Deception of the New World Order' page, a young man from Bangladesh claims that Planet X is mentioned in 'the glorious Quran'. As he states, 'It is a "piercing star" that crosses the orbits of all the planets in our solar system. It is called At-Tariq (Night Visitor) because it takes the (sleeping) world by surprise.' Nonetheless, the writer is concerned that expectations might be raised unrealistically prior to 2012, thus leading to demoralization, despair, and disbelief in the Mahdi, when and if Planet X fails to materialize at that time. Thus, he counsels against accepting the potentially erroneous assertion that doomsday will occur definitively in 2012. 'My utmost request to you all is that please do not believe that Planet X will hit the earth on 2012', he states. 'Yes, it will hit the earth, but do not be confused with the date as Allah knows the best.'

Framing Jihad and Jihadism

One of the most significant disputes among Muslims today concerns the concept of *jihad,* with various pan-Islamist movements and factions often defining the concept in markedly different ways. The Arabic word *jihad* translates roughly as 'struggle' or 'striving' and is often classified by Muslims as either internal ('the greater *jihad*') or external ('the lesser *jihad*'). In this respect, there is a competitive Islamic discourse about *jihad*, with militant fundamentalists often emphasizing the need for an external 'holy war' against non-Muslim *kuffars,* while other Muslims are more apt to portray *jihad* primarily as a personal strategy for overcoming evil. In reality, both definitions have some theological validity, as Gary Bunt notes, *jihad* 'accommodates peaceful "striving" and effort in the name of Islam, as well as militaristic activities'.

In contrast to many Islamic fundamentalists, relatively moderate Muslims tend to portray Islam as a religion of peace and thereby frame *jihad* in mostly nonviolent terms. For instance, one youthful commentator on the Facebook site 'I'm a Muslim & I'm Proud', refutes the violent frame of *jihad* directly. 'Do you even know what the meaning of *jihad* is?' he asks defiantly. 'If you're gonna say "holy war", you're wrong. The meaning of *jihad* is "to struggle and strive" against one's own evil inclination, to strive and struggle to make society better. It doesn't mean "to strive and struggle and then kill people."' Similarly, a Toronto college student argues that *jihad* 'is not the equivalent of war, for which the Arabic word is *qital*'. As

she observes, 'One must understand that in the Quran, there isn't any verse that explicitly promotes *jihad* as "holy war."' Referring to the 9/11 attacks and related terrorist incidents, she notes, 'Representation of Islam had taken a huge blow because of some stupid acts in the name of Islam and *jihad*.' On the 'Muslims against Terrorism' page, one poster contends that Islamic extremists have hijacked the 'true' meaning of *jihad*. As he asserts, 'It is our duty and our obligation to unite and speak out against terrorism!'

Though many mainstream Muslims acknowledge that a military-style *jihad* is appropriate in certain situations, they narrowly define its parameters. For example, several mainstream Muslims on Facebook make the argument that the Qur'an prohibits all forms of violence and aggression, except in cases of 'self-defense'. Commenting on 'Ummah Islamia', a Scotland-based college student asserts that the word *jihad* has been misrepresented and misunderstood. 'The word doesn't mean "holy war", as war is not considered holy in Islam but sometimes a necessary measure', she explains. 'War was conceded to by God after the believers had suffered a great deal of persecution, torture, and death, and all other options for putting an end to oppression by unjust regimes had been exhausted.' On the group site 'Allah Is the Greatest', a young adult in England postulates that spreading the word of Allah peacefully is vastly preferable to violence. 'But then I also agree that if our Muslim brothers and sisters are being killed, that we should help', he stipulates. 'And if war and fighting is the only way to do so, then I pray our lord would make us fit and strong for that day.' Rejecting terrorism in particular, many moderate Muslims on Facebook tend to be very critical of the Jihadist movement. 'Al-Qaeda is not a representative of Islam, as it abandons the teachings of Allah', one member states. 'Their actions bring shame to the Muslim *ummah*, they are not of the Muslims and the Muslims are not of them!'

Conversely, militant Jihadists argue that a violent 'holy war' against the West is absolutely necessary, given the current state of world affairs. On Facebook, Jihadists often frame the United States and its allies as 'evil', 'satanic', 'barbaric' and 'warlike', thereby necessitating that 'heroic' action be undertaken by Muslim fighters—including targeting civilians if need be. For example, one commentator on 'United Muslim Ummah' contends that Muslims must always support their co-religionists in any 'just fight' against 'disbelievers', even when suicide bombings targeting civilians are utilized. As he declares, 'If a Muslim kills each and every civilian disbeliever on the face of the earth he is still a Muslim and we cannot side with the disbelievers against him.' In the same thread, a young Canadian quotes from the Qur'an to defend *jihadi* attacks on civilians. 'Soon shall we cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers, for that they joined companions with Allah, for which He had sent no authority: their abode will be the fire', he states. 'And evil is the home of the wrong-doers!'

In sharp contrast to mainstream Muslims, Jihadists frequently depict 9/11 and other highly destructive acts as 'defensive' measures, designed ostensibly to protect Muslim lands from American/Christian/Zionist occupation, exploitation and destruction. Paradoxically, the United States and other Western powers are often framed as the true 'terrorists'. One young adult posting on 'Brotherhood and Unity amongst Muslims' makes the argument that the US response to 9/11 and the subsequent 'war on terrorism' were unjust and based on convoluted logic. 'The 9/11 attacks are seen as the cause, and the invasion of Afghanistan as a result', he observes sardonically. 'Yet, the reality is that the 9/11 attacks were the result, and the occupation of Muslim lands was the cause.' Correspondingly, a youthful poster on the 'United Muslim Ummah' page refers to the 'brave *mujahideen*' in Afghanistan who since 9/11 have used 'successful tactics of warfare to target the invading enemy and their coward supporters'. Referring to the 'farcical endeavors of Obama and his war-mongering allies', the writer promises that the Taliban's next offensive against the 'crusaders' will be even 'more severe and tragic'.

Posting on the 'Al-Qaida' Facebook page, one highly militant young man issues a clarion call to the 'sons of Islam everywhere', claiming that 'jihad is a duty to establish the rule of Allah on earth and to liberate your countries and yourselves from America's domination and its Zionist allies, it is your battle—either victory or martyrdom'. Audaciously, he pledges to his *mujahideen* cohorts, 'I am ready to sacrifice everything in completing the unfinished agenda of our noble *jihad*.'

Fusing Mahdism with Jihadism

Even though the Mahdist vision of the end times includes violent scenarios—most notably the Battle of Armageddon, this viewpoint tends to reject or minimize the importance of waging contemporary (pre-apocalyptic) Muslim wars against the West. Though messianic Muslims tend to be highly critical of Western governments, most avoid calling for *jihadi*-style violence in the present day, thus awaiting the Mahdi's commands to initiate the final conflict. The 'Companions of the Messiah' page, for instance, describes the mainstream Mahdist movement's opposition to any type of armed conflict unless there has been an appropriate declaration by the Caliphate. 'We believe in spiritual *jihad* and condemn violence as a means to an end', the page description states. 'Jihad, as a just and defensive war, is valid in very strict circumstances and may only be declared by a righteously guided Caliph.' Significantly, the last time a caliph was officially in power was in 1924, under the auspices of the former Ottoman dynasty. Messianic Muslims view the Mahdi as the future and final caliph, who is charged with restoring the legendary Muslim empire and leading troops into

battle against the Dajjal's forces at Armageddon. Thus, from this relatively moderate messianic perspective, only the Mahdi can directly sanction any type of violent attacks upon the West.

However, Mahdism—like virtually any social movement, religious sect or belief system—can be taken to the extreme and thus exhibit markedly aggressive and bellicose tendencies in the process. Most troubling in this regard is the potential convergence of Mahdist ideas with neo-fundamentalist Jihadism. For starters, Mahdists and Jihadists generally share the same pan-Islamist outlook that endorses the Caliphate as the ideal universal governing system. Second, both movements tend to agree that the world's most serious problems are the result of American/Christian/Zionist hegemony. Notably, both Mahdists and Jihadists often describe the 'enemy' with the highly derogatory term *kuffar*s. Finally, contemporary Mahdist and Jihadist activists share a similar apocalyptic vision of a world ultimately converted (or 'reverted') to a pristine Islamic state once the United States and its allies are finally defeated.

According to many Mahdists, the *hadith*s have foretold the apocalyptic destruction of Israel and the Islamic conquest of the West—the supposed realm of the Antichrist. Several radical messianic writers in the contemporary era have even contended that the Mahdi will launch nuclear strikes against 'wicked' cities in the West such as New York and London, or alternatively that Western nuclear weapons will backfire 'accidentally', resulting in massive destruction. In the aftermath of this global Armageddon, the authors claim, the Mahdi will emerge triumphant and proceed to install a utopian 'one-world government' that will reign for seven years, leading ultimately to Judgment Day (Cook 2005: 147).

For the most part, such extreme Mahdist scenarios of nuclear holocaust are absent from the Facebook pages surveyed. Nonetheless, there are certainly several Facebook examples of messianic Muslims inciting or subtly encouraging apocalyptic-style violence against the West in the present day. On sites such as 'A Global Call', one young messianist contends, 'The *fitna* [time of trial] of the Anti-Christ is at its peak at the moment.' Ironically invoking the American author Samuel Huntington,[10] he claims that there is currently a 'clash of civilizations' between the Muslim world and the West; thus, the apocalyptic era has already begun and violent *jihad* is needed. Correspondingly, the 'Imam Foundation' page makes a plea for the Mahdi to reveal himself immediately, noting that the end times have arrived. 'Given the recent events in Gaza and the world wide crusader occupation of Muslim lands NOW is the time we need Imam Mahdi to come.' Posting on the

10. Samuel Huntington's book *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) portrayed 'Islamic Civilization' as one of the main ideological enemies of 'Western Civilization' in the post–Cold War world.

'United Muslim Ummah' page, a radical young woman refers to the World Trade Center as 'the towers of oppression' whose destruction, she claims, was foretold in the *hadith*s. 'There are no apologies in Islam', she states. 'Those nineteen who flew the mission under Muhammad's direction are martyrs!'

The fact that messianic Muslims tend to believe that the Mahdi and his army will someday emerge in Afghanistan or Iran, based on centuries-old *hadith* prophecies of the ancient kingdom of Khorasan,[11] further fuels the possibility of a Mahdist-Jihadist ideological convergence. One post on the 'Ummah Islamia' page, for instance, refers to a 'great army' that will come from Afghanistan in the last days. 'They will pave the way for the establishment of Imam Mahdi's kingdom', the post notes. 'The army will carry black banners. Nothing shall stop their onward march, and eventually they will plant their flag on the soils of Jerusalem.' In fact, there are several comments on various Facebook group-sites that effectively combine messianic theology with Jihadist rhetoric regarding Afghanistan. Given the escalating conflict in Afghanistan and the presence of al-Qaida's 'black flags' in that country (and nearby Pakistan) emblazoned with the Islamic creed, this type of frame bridging is not surprising. For example, one young member of the 'Brotherhood and Unity amongst Muslims' page asserts that the Mahdi is a 'shield behind whom you fight and protect yourself'. Rather than waiting for the Mahdi to show himself physically, he argues that Muslims must rise up immediately to defend the *ummah.* In justifying this viewpoint, he alleges that 'the invasion of Afghanistan by the *kuffar* colonialist America and its crusader allies' has resulted in the deaths of 'thousands of its innocent civilians including children, women and elders, under the guise of the so called war on terror'.

Probably the most bizarre convergence theory involving Mahdism and Jihadism is the possibility that Osama bin Laden—the 'hidden' leader of al-Qaida—is indeed the Mahdi. His global apocalyptic vision certainly coincides with many of the most radical doomsday scenarios of Muslim messianic writers. Despite bin Laden's nefarious reputation in much of the world, many of his followers consider him to be a 'saint'; thus, he is a prime candidate for asserting the Mahdiyah, that is, status of the Mahdi. Significantly, from a Mahdist standpoint, bin Laden began using 'Muhammad' as part of his name in the years immediately following 9/11. This is especially important since most messianic Muslims believe that 'Muhammad' will be the name of the Mahdi (Furnish 2005: 158).

11. Kabbani (2003: 231) observes that many contemporary messianic Muslims, basing their arguments on *hadith* prophecies, contend that the Mahdi and his army will first emerge in Afghanistan or Iran (i.e. what was historically called Khorasan).

Tellingly, al-Qaida ('the Base') has employed Mahdist rhetoric on occasion in its online communiqués and press releases, particularly since the 9/11 attacks on the United States. For example, an Arabic-language statement by al-Qaida in 2003 noted that belief in the Mahdi has 'a firm foundation in *hadith*'. However, the statement was seemingly critical of certain 'weaker' *hadith*s describing the Mahdi, noting, 'No one knows yet who will restore the caliphate and restore the ummah to prominence' (quoted in Furnish 2005: 153-54). Paradoxically, other Muslims believe that bin Laden is the Antichrist or somehow in league with the forces of the Dajjal. The title of one recent Arab-language book raises this contentious issue directly: *Usamah bin Ladin: The Awaited Mahdi or the Dajjal? The War of Extermination and the Barons of the CIA* (Cairo: Madbuli al-Saghir, 2002) (see Furnish 2005: 153-54).

In perusing Facebook, I found very few overt references to bin Laden as either the Mahdi or the Dajjal. However, on several *jihadi*-related Facebook pages there are 'saintly' pictures of bin Laden along with 'sacred' al-Qaida symbols—particularly black flags with Arabic inscriptions of the legendary Caliphate. There are also several comments describing bin Laden, al-Qaida and the Taliban as modern-day 'Soldiers of Allah', presumably engaged in a messianic mission to vanquish the *kuffar*s and restore the Caliphate. One blog, entitled 'Al-Qaida vs. Soldiers of "Freedom of Democracy"', posted on 'Brotherhood and Unity amongst Muslims', cites numerous alleged human rights abuses and other examples of 'savagery' by the United States. The author quotes bin Laden approvingly as follows: 'If avenging the killing of our people is terrorism, let history be a witness that we are terrorists.' Referring to al-Qaida, the writer contends, 'The al-Qaida fighters need no justification for their acts in Iraq, against the illegal invaders and criminals. They have acted with far great honor and dignity, in comparison to the barbarism shown by the coalition criminals.'

Hip-Hop Jihadism and Mahdism

Several Facebook pages feature music videos or comments about songs that include Jihadist-style apocalyptic lyrics and symbolism. For example, the hip-hop–style video 'Dirty Kuffar', by the British-Pakistani group Sheikh Terra and the Soul Salah Crew, combines *jihadi* argot with messianic imagery. Widely distributed online via YouTube and other video-sharing sites since its debut in February 2004, the video features ski-masked rappers toting both guns and the Qur'an. In an obvious attempt to inflame passions, the video includes CNN video footage of American soldiers gleefully shooting Muslims in Iraq, Chechens killing Russians, and the Twin Towers exploding as manic laughter is heard in the background. Toward the beginning of the video, the phrase 'G-Had' (combining 'gangsta' with

jihad) flashes on the screen, superimposed on a background of al-Qaida's black flag. Meaningfully, bin Laden is shown in a favorable light, morphing into a great lion. This is particularly relevant since the Mahdi is sometimes referred to as the 'Lion of Islam'.

In the video, the rappers encourage their fellow Muslims to 'throw them (*kuffar*) in the fire where they will burn, burn, burn'. One scene shows a roadside bomb blowing up an American tank, with the caption 'kill the crusaders'. Several different political leaders from around the world are labeled *kuffar*s in the video, including George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, Tony Blair, Vladimir Putin, Ariel Sharon, and Hosni Mubarak. One scene includes footage of Ronald Reagan's attempted assassination. The implication is that each of these famous men is one of the thirty dajjals or even the actual Dajjal Masih. The video effectively fuses radical Jihadist/Mahdist folklore with hip-hop, thereby incorporating many American rap themes of hyper-masculine rage, defiance, and gunplay. Thus, the video generates a hybridized multicultural frame that is designed to appeal to diasporic Muslim youth in particular.

Other examples of hip-hop bands with both Jihadist and Mahdist influences include Sons of Hagar and Soldiers of Allah—both of which are composed of Arab-American young men who have reportedly experienced re-Islamization. Based in Washington State, Sons of Hagar combine pan-Islamist militancy and prophetic-apocalyptic references with hip-hop bravado and depictions of gangsta rap–style revolutionary violence. Indeed, the lyrics of the song 'Revolution', posted on Facebook's 'Jihad' Web site, seem focused on accelerating Armageddon through a violent insurrection:

> The revolution's gonna shine. Shine its light on Palestine. Armageddon 'round the corner kid I'm cockin' my nine. Israelis fightin' coz they think it's theirs. I'm fightin' coz I know it's mine. I'mma kill Sharon, that devil's mine.

Soldiers of Allah, a Los Angeles–based hip-hop band, has a Facebook fan page featuring an album cover with a lone soldier on horseback holding the black flag of the legendary Islamic Caliphate, while a large moon shines in the background. Significantly, the band's *mujahideen*-style album cover is featured on numerous Muslim Facebook sites—including various student organizations that bear the name 'Soldiers of Allah'. One of the songs by the band, 'Bring Back Islam', includes several pan-Islamist references such as supporting the eradication of national 'borders' that separate Muslims. In the song 'Talk Is Cheap', the rappers repeatedly issue a call to arms for Muslims worldwide, clearly defining *kuffar*s as the enemy of Muslims around the world. As the lyrics state:

> Kuffars want to tame me so I resist. Looking for soldiers for Allah will you enlist? Does it take you to get dissed to see the truth? They got designs on

> our deen look close to see the proof. But if you can't feel me . . . I ain't mad. Pray for me though when they put me in a body bag. Remember me as a soldier man among men. Talk is cheap . . . Y'all can have the pad and the pen. Talk is cheap.

Conclusion: Diasporic Muslim Youth in Transition

Muslim youth living in the West are undergoing a profound transition, being buffeted by conflicting social trends. On the one hand, they are products of Western societies that reward economic achievement and educational attainment. Nonetheless, they are being cast increasingly as racialized 'outsiders' and 'dangerous foreigners', particularly in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Largely circumventing traditional Islamic religious structures, virtual social networks of diasporic Muslim youth have formed across the world. Facebook in particular has facilitated the growth of such networks, given its relatively high levels of accessibility for the global youth market, broad networking capabilities and highly individualized and dramaturgical approach to online expression. With the ability to create a profile page in a matter of minutes, users are able to assemble a digital self-portrait of their own identity, posted online for immediate public consumption. Seeking out like-minded cohorts is only a keystroke away, as subcultural networks congeal and expand exponentially.

Due in large measure to the relatively recent phenomenon of re-Islamization among diasporic Muslim teens and young adults, there is a certain degree of social-psychological susceptibility to pan-Islamist appeals on the Web. Much of the jargon associated with messianic Mahdism is already in the vernacular of non-mobilized Muslim youth. The challenge for the Mahdist movement is to connect pre-existing institutional frames with the movement's emotional, ideological and cultural sentiments. Notably, the Mahdi is framed repeatedly on Facebook as the superheroic champion of an 'oppressed' Muslim world. He is depicted as primarily responsible for the prospective restoration of the *ummah* and its prophetic-political remanifestation as the legendary Caliphate. Such historic, ideological and emotional frames are highly familiar and appealing to many Muslim young people living in the Diaspora. For this reason, online activists and others associated with the Mahdist movement have sought to achieve a frame alignment. Indeed, such collectivist narratives resonate with many diasporic Muslim youths, as evidenced by the content of numerous Facebook postings examined in the course of this study.

Mahdism has been contextualized on Facebook with *hadith*-based story lines featuring new interpretations of current events, designed to frame the apocalyptic enemy as the malevolent Western *kuffar* participating in a conspiratorial, anti-Islamic system. In order to facilitate the growth of an

oppositional consciousness among Mahdist movement recruits, the Dajjal is framed as the ultimate monstrosity—an ugly, half-blind, Jewish shape-shifting man-beast intent on deceiving and conquering the world. By utilizing such oppositional framing, movement activists are attempting to construct or strengthen the collective identity of Muslim youth, thus fueling the growth of the pan-Islamist Mahdist movement. Moreover, the Mahdist movement is framed on Facebook and elsewhere as having direct agentic responsibility for enabling and supporting the Mahdi's rise to power, thus encouraging the micro-mobilization of Muslims from around the world.

This chapter has presented numerous examples of frame lifting and frame bridging, as employed by pan-Islamist movement activists on Facebook. For example, messianic Muslims have lifted the frame of the Antichrist from Christian eschatology in an apparent attempt to build on diasporic Muslim familiarity with such a figure. This concept easily resonates with many diasporic Muslim young people, thanks in large measure to folkloric depictions of the Antichrist (and similar monstrosities) in Western popular culture. In addition, recent messianic Muslim dalliances with far-right Western apocalyptic ideologies involving the New World Order, the Illuminati, Freemasons and other supposed conspiratorial agents reflect an organized attempt at bridging Muslim and Christian (fundamentalist) apocalyptic discourses. Ironically, such arch-Christian apocalyptic frames have been lifted for the ultimate purpose of destroying the reputed Dajjal System of the Christian world.

Various pan-Islamist factions have lifted the concept of *jihad* from the Qur'an for micro-mobilization purposes, with the concept being framed on Facebook in divergent ideological contexts by moderates and fundamentalists. This is an example of a 'frame dispute',[12] which involves a contestation for power between various adversarial movements within Islam. Though Mahdists and Jihadists share many pan-Islamist beliefs, they often differ strongly on tactics—particularly when it comes to engaging in pre-apocalyptic violent attacks on Western civilian targets. Nonetheless, there has been increasing fluidity and overlap between the two movements, with some degree of discursive convergence visible on Facebook.

The fractional fusion of Mahdism with Jihadism is particularly evident on the YouTube video 'Dirty Kuffar' and similar hip-hop rants posted on Facebook. The hyper-masculine image of the 'thug'—which has been glamorized in American hip-hop folklore for years—is the iconoclastic symbol of subcultural defiance for many diasporic Muslim youths. In effect, transformational framing has cast the inner-city outlaw as the global messianic revolutionary. Thus, cultural hybridization occurs as Muslim youth mix

12. For more information on the concept of 'frame disputes', see Fiss and Hirsch (2005: 30).

pan-Islamist imagery with gangsta-rap slang in various hip-hop songs and videos. Constructing a hybrid identity is particularly appealing to diasporic Muslim youth, who are often stereotyped as 'non-white' and 'foreign'[17] (see further Drissel 2009). Muslim young people in North America, and in Western Europe in particular, often tend to resent such racialized exclusionary depictions, apparently finding solace in the black-inflected identities of 'the transglobal hip-hop *ummah*' (Alim 2005).

As has been illustrated in this chapter, pan-Islamic apocalyptic discourse is far from monolithic, frequently being the site of spirited contestations among diasporic Muslim youths (and other interested parties) over the appropriate interpretation of ancient *hadith* prophecies. The Internet and related social networking services have dramatically facilitated the plasticity of this particular apocalyptic discourse, enabling individualized interpretations of eschatological events to circumvent the relatively static system of traditional Islamic hierarchies. Such discursive plasticity has been amplified further by 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and other catastrophic events in recent years, generating an apocalyptic buzz among armchair cyber-theologians on Facebook about reputed 'signs' of the (Muslim) apocalypse. The Planet X phenomenon has only fueled such discursive trends, sparking highly eclectic and electrifying theories that seek to infuse Muslim messianic dogma with pseudo-scientific pop-culture prognostications for 2012 and beyond.

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8. 'We All Stray from our Paths Sometimes': Morality and Survival in *Fallout 3*

James Schirmer

Abstract

This chapter observes the resurgence of post-apocalyptic themes in popular media as evident in video games. *Fallout 3* is one such game, offering a unique perspective on morality and survival in the post-apocalypse. User modifications to *Fallout 3* add complexity to this perspective. This chapter suggests not only the necessity of ascribing to a moral code for survival in the post-apocalypse but also the importance of video games as places of creativity and experimentation among individuals empowered to connect through the Internet.

'On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world.'

—Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Introduction

Evidenced by this collection as well as across multiple media, there is a renewed appeal and interest in the post-apocalypse. Beyond the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* in November 2009 and the wide release of *The Book of Eli* in early 2010, the resurgence of end-of-the-world-and-after stories is perhaps most evident in the medium of video games. The year 2010 will witness at least three releases featuring post-apocalyptic settings and themes, including 4A Games' *Metro 2033*, Ninja Theory's *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West* and Obsidian Entertainment's *Fallout: New Vegas*. The previous year saw the pertinent release in

September of *Fallen Earth*, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), and in October, *Borderlands*, a first-person shooter with role-playing elements. While these titles differ in approach and scope, they share characteristics explored nearly 30 years ago in Fantasy Games Unlimited's *Aftermath!* and Interplay's *Wasteland*, role-playing games that were among the first to place survival in a post-apocalyptic setting as a paramount objective.

Part of the reason for this resurgence has to do with immersive aspects of the post-apocalyptic that only increase in video game–oriented settings. With the game player at the centre of a post-nuclear narrative, there is a greater experiential immediacy to certain speculative events of how civilization and life in general continue afterward. In fact, a particular series of games has a history of utilizing aspects of various post-apocalyptic stories. Interplay's *Fallout* and *Fallout 2*, spiritual successors to *Wasteland*, and Bethesda's *Fallout 3*, present both an idealized past, one rife with technological advances from robots with fully functioning A.I. (artificial intelligence) to nuclear-powered vehicles, and a nullified future, one complete with roving bands of marauders and radioactive ruins.

While the player's perspective in *Fallout* and *Fallout 2* was more removed in an isometric, third-person perspective, *Fallout 3* presents player experiences in the first person, making every action more immediate and present. Instead of viewing a limited amount of squares of space featuring the desert wastes of what was once California, the setting for the first two *Fallout* games, *Fallout 3* allows the player to survey the bombed-out suburban areas of Washington, DC, capital buildings reduced to rubble by nuclear warfare and roads torn asunder by the passage of time. The atmosphere and visual aesthetic are not only reminiscent of post–World War II America and the prevalent nuclear paranoia present during that time, but *Fallout 3* also recalls prior descriptions of the post-nuclear world found in such classic science fiction as Poul Anderson's 'Tomorrow's Children' and Harlan Ellison's 'A Boy and his Dog'.

It is, in part, because of these recollections that *Fallout 3* is the focus of this particular chapter. Despite no longer being the most recent post-apocalyptic example in the medium of video games, *Fallout 3* stands as a better, clearer connection to past written works and the ideas expressed therein. Before moving deeper into this discussion, though, it should be noted that the greater attention given to the post-apocalyptic is not limited to video games or to film.

In the introduction to *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse*, features editor John Joseph Adams reflects on the literary resurgence of post-apocalyptic allegories. Drawing a line from Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, published in 1826, to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, published in 2006, Adams (2008: 1) identifies this subgenre's high point as coinciding with the height

of the Cold War, 'when the threat of worldwide nuclear annihilation seemed a very real possibility', before its popularity fell with the Berlin Wall. In acknowledging a renewed interest in post-apocalyptic tales, though, Adams argues that it has less to do with endless war and environmental unease than with the fulfilment of desires for adventure, the discovery of new frontiers and the chance to begin anew. To scaffold this point, he quotes at length from John Varley's 'The Manhattan Phone Book (Abridged)', and I include part of that here as it fits the focus not only of this chapter but also of the overall collection:

> There's something attractive about all those people being gone, about wandering in a depopulated world, scrounging cans of Campbell's pork and beans, defending one's family from marauders. Sure, it's horrible, sure we weep for all those dead people. But some secret part of us thinks it would be good to survive, to start all over. Secretly, we know we'll survive. All those other folks will die (Varley).

It is this element of survival, and the morality (or lack thereof) accompanying it, that piques my own interest in portrayals of the post-apocalypse. It is also because I think that the post-apocalyptic subgenre, like that of science fiction in general, is often in a more unique position to explore what makes us human. Because a mere shred of civilization remains in many of these scenarios, humanity is distilled to its essence. What arguably makes for some of the best science fiction is such imaginings of the human condition and its possible outcome(s), whether it be a glorious humanistic paradise as a result of our bravery and intellect, or a drab dystopia reflecting the darkest side of our nature. A majority of post-apocalyptic stories are the latter, showing why humanity is wrong and perhaps even deserving of such an end. Rarely is this subgenre of science fiction about things done right.

It is because of this that in the 'Forewarning' to the earlier post-apocalyptic collection *Beyond Armageddon*, Walter Miller, Jr, observes the often-noticeable nostalgia and regret present in post-apocalyptic stories, how 'the underworld mood is there . . . because post-Megawar stories are about an afterlife' (1985: xv). And rather than make reference to this subgenre of science fiction as 'post-holocaust', a term that saw greater acceptance in years past, Miller introduces 'Megawar . . . another barbaric neologism' (1985: xiii) not only to identify war at the end of civilization but also to avoid diminishing the memory of the mass murder of Jews living in Europe during World War II. This different term adheres rather well to Miller's later layout of nuclear Armageddon, how often Megawar 'happens offstage, between stories, and the rest is about the survivors, the orphans of a psychopathic civilization' (1985: xiv). This is as much the case in *Fallout 3* as in other Megawar-type representations, but this video game also captures the morality and survival aspects of previous post-apocalyptic tales, building

on the kinds of ethical quandaries first presented there. Explicit reference to these past written works reveals potential inspirations for the design and development of *Fallout 3* as well as its morality and survival elements. I cite them here also because the authors of such important literature often impart particular aspects in words better than those I might have chosen myself.

However, as readers of post-apocalyptic tales, we can only accept their traumatic events; as players of post-apocalyptic games, we have a more active role in causing or preventing trauma. In the online column '*Fallout 3*: The Challenge of a Gaming Morality', Alan Noble acknowledges that other media, books, films and television often involve some judgment on characters' actions, thereby constituting a limited morality system, but he emphasizes that video games are unique 'in that they invite the player to engage and act out the plot in a way that differs from other storytelling mediums' (Noble 2009). That players with the technical knowledge to make significant user modifications to the game itself are able to do so with *Fallout 3* is of additional note and importance. Such elements of engagement not only separate *Fallout 3* from the stories that perhaps inspired it but should also draw our interest in the game and what it offers in terms of post-apocalyptic commentary.

By providing an overview of the game's karma system, an analysis of select side quests and observations on the influence of user modifications to the actual game, this chapter endeavors to show not only how morality and survival are intertwined all the more in the post-apocalypse but also how neutrality is a more troublesome approach—that even a strongly secular interpretation of the post-apocalypse yields discussion of the religious. *Fallout 3* is a video game that offers a provocative perspective on a particular post-apocalyptic scenario. Though on a scale more personal than political and more intimate than global, *Fallout 3* possesses an almost singular focus on simple survival and the moral choices associated with it. With individual morality and survival at the forefront, *Fallout 3* provides perhaps a more honest view of humanity at the end of history, one to be amended and augmented by the players.

Overview of Karma in Fallout 3

The actual narrative of *Fallout 3* places the player two hundred years after nuclear war has devastated the planet in an alternate, post–World War II time line. The player begins as an inhabitant of a survival shelter designed to protect humans from nuclear radiation, but when the player's father leaves the shelter without prior notice, the player does as well, traversing the Capital Wasteland that was once Washington, DC. In this environment,

there is little more than 'empty corpses of blasted buildings', as observed by Vic in Harlan Ellison's 'A Boy and his Dog' (1985: 342).

While the most evident similarities between *Fallout 3* and 'A Boy and his Dog' concern visual aesthetics, that is, references to the 1975 movie starring Don Johnson, many of the ideas first appeared in Ellison's original story. No matter the path taken through *Fallout 3*, the player is almost certain to encounter the canine companion nicknamed Dogmeat as well as survivors locked away in underground vaults. Furthermore, Ellison's tale and *Fallout 3* both feature a blending of 1950s Americana and futuristic horror: mutants green with nuclear radiation and 'roverpaks', nihilistic bands of nameless individuals bent on little more than destruction. Also similar to 'A Boy and his Dog', evil as well as good deeds in *Fallout 3* can garner positive rewards for the player, but excessive evil or goodness prompts Regulators to exact vigilante justice upon the player or Talon Company Mercenaries to put down 'another holier-than-thou white-knight'. Such in-game judgment of the player's actions is revealing of the dominant function of *Fallout 3*'s karma system, which involves the maintenance and record of the player's moral actions and consequences, thereby representing inclination toward a good, neutral or evil overall in-game status.

Fallout 3 measures karma via a point system, but only a particular karmic title, not a numerical value, is available and visible to the player. Despite the very term 'karma' having roots in Hinduism, in-game imagery associated with these titles is Christian in nature. The five icons indicative of the player's karma level feature Vault Boy, a cartoonish blond-haired young male wearing a vault jumpsuit. On either end of the karmic spectrum are the most extreme icons, with a variation on Satan for Very Evil and a variation on Jesus Christ for Very Good. For the Evil and Good representations, Vault Boy sports devil horns, crossed arms and a scowl or a halo, prayer hands and white wings. The lone Neutral representation has Vault Boy in perhaps his most recognizable pose, with hands on hips and a broad, toothy smile.

Related to this are the additional karmic titles in place for the player at every experience level. This is important to note because certain *Fallout 3* achievements, which constitute a form of bragging rights as well as an additional record of the player's progress, are tied to particular titles. The majority of these hold no particular religious connotation until later levels of experience, and, again, the images accompanying the achievements themselves can be revealing. For example, while reaching experience level 8 with good karma unlocks the Protector achievement with an icon reminiscent of Batman, earning the Ambassador of Peace achievement at level 14 reveals a haloed Vault Boy with a dove perched on his hand. Even further than this are the Last, Best Hope of Humanity and Messiah achievements available at levels 20 and 30; the former features Vault Boy with prayer hands and the latter as a Christ-like figure, complete with a beard and a

crown of thorns. In contrast, the evil karma achievements at those same two levels, Scourge of Humanity and Devil, feature Vault Boy as just that, a devil. However, the Pinnacle of Survival achievement for neutral karma at level 14 implies a willingness to do what one must to survive in the Capital Wasteland, and the Paradigm of Humanity (level 20) and True Mortal (level 30) achievements mark a clear absence of religious overtones.

Even those karmic titles unassociated with *Fallout 3* achievements hold similar connotations. For example, the player acquires the title of Saint or Evil Incarnate at experience level 19, Restorer of Faith or Architect of Doom at level 21, Shepherd or Deceiver at level 23 and Earthly Angel or Demon's Spawn at level 29. In sharp contrast, many of the neutral-karma titles are positive and negative, such as Beholder at level 17, Super-Human at level 19, and Person of Refinement at level 27, as well as Egocentric at level 23, Model of Apathy at level 26, and Moneygrubber at level 28. Perhaps the most accurate neutral-karma title is Gray Stranger at level 29, revealing not only the cloudy karmic area the neutral player inhabits but also the lack of NPC interaction that might be necessary for charting such a trajectory through the Capital Wasteland.

For instance, if a player has very good karma, an NPC in the town of Megaton will talk to the player every day and provide free items, such as ammunition, food and/or medicine. A player with evil karma, though, has an opportunity for the same benefits in Paradise Falls, a former shopping mall converted into an enslavement camp. Karma limits which NPCs may join the player as a valuable companion in combat. Clover, a slave, and Jericho, a mercenary, are most loyal to the player with evil karma and will express boredom should the player perform too many good actions. Butch, a Vault 101 dweller, and Sergeant RL-3, a military robot, can be recruited by the player with neutral karma but will not leave should the player perform too many evil or good actions. Fawkes, a friendly Super Mutant, and Star Paladin Cross, a Brotherhood of Steel member, will follow the player with good karma of their own free will and without cost, but both will leave and refuse to follow again should the player develop evil karma. However, Charon, a ghoul, and Dogmeat, a dog, are the two lone NPCs who will join the player regardless of karma.

The player's karmic status is never fixed, though; it is always in flux and dependent on particular actions taken by the player. In addition to killing evil characters and performing good quest actions, positive karma choices include donating caps to any church, selling the fingers of evil characters to the Regulators, providing scrap metal toward the repair of Megaton's water purifier and offering purified water to beggars outside settlement limits. In addition to killing non-evil characters and performing evil quest actions, negative karma choices include stealing items from NPCs, selling the ears of non-evil characters to Daniel Littlehorn, providing the drug psycho to

Paulie Cantelli in Rivet City (which results in his death), hacking locked computer terminals and enslaving NPCs. Of course, the player can perform a mixture of these actions to maintain neutrality, but an arguably more authentic and interesting experience awaits the player determined to earn as little good and evil karma as possible. As explained later, *Fallout 3*'s karma system reveals much about a particular definition of morality and how survival can become more or less likely as a result.

Analysis of Karma and Side Quests in Fallout 3

Striking a balance between good and evil actions can be a point of emphasis and exploitation in *Fallout 3,* as the player is able to steal from NPCs, gain evil karma and yet still be greeted warmly by those same NPCs. Only those negative actions occurring in full view of NPCs, such as the enslavement of a certain munitions dealer in the larger settlement of Rivet City, garner significant in-game backlash. Then again, the player need only wait a set period of time before being able to re-enter a town without the threat of violence. Still, true neutrality is often the most difficult path to take, given the absence of in-game rewards. Simply to eke out an existence in a post-apocalyptic wasteland is often more challenging than choosing good or evil actions. While both have drawbacks, the benefits of being good or evil are significant.

This is perhaps most evident not in the main quest, which involves following in the father's footsteps and deciding the fate of the Capital Wasteland and its inhabitants, but in the great variety of side quests available to the player. There are numerous possibilities for earning both beneficial items and karma in such tasks, and the next section of this chapter explores three such side quests, 'Oasis', 'Power of the Atom' and 'Tenpenny Tower', each of which offers interesting moral quandaries to the player of *Fallout 3*.

In 'Oasis', Harold is a unique NPC, not only because he appears throughout the *Fallout* series but also because he has a tree growing from his head that has rooted him to the ground in the northern region of the Capital Wasteland. The immediate area surrounding Harold is green with plant life, a stark contrast to the outer wasteland, and those who discovered him began to worship him, calling themselves Treeminders. In this particular instance, religion functions as a way to explain science that is otherwise incomprehensible. After being stuck in the same spot for decades, though, Harold is eager for death, imploring that the player destroy his heart. Certain Treeminders have other wishes, asking that the player either suppress or expand Harold's fertility. What is interesting about these three options for completing the 'Oasis' side quest is that none of them garners a karmic reward. Only a fourth option, burning Harold down with a fire-based weapon, earns the player evil karma.

Arguably the most morally vague quest in the game, 'Oasis' presents a variety of choices that, save for burning Harold, have positive outcomes. Following through on Harold's wish to die means also destroying the lives not only of his followers but also of the plants blooming around him. Stopping Harold's growth means protecting the oasis from outsiders but betraying Harold's trust. Speeding Harold's growth means putting the betterment of the Capital Wasteland above Harold's desire for death.

The morality of this particular quest is muddled, to say the least, which is a problem Nick Dinicola identifies in his *PopMatter*s column 'Morality and Karma Systems' (2009). Dinicola thinks that 'Oasis' reveals the limitations of a black-and-white karma system like the one present in *Fallout 3*; even with the addition of a neutral stance, morality must be assigned. And when the choice, writes Dinicola, 'is as nuanced as putting the needs of many above the needs of one, assigning any kind of morality defeats the purpose of having such a complex choice to begin with'. I am not sure I agree with Dinicola, though, for no good karma is possible as a reward in this quest. With positives and negatives to each choice, save for burning Harold, the player is better able to choose to their own personal satisfaction. In turn, the item rewards associated with a particular chosen outcome reveal something deeper about the content of the player's character, perhaps showing how the player might best survive in future situations.

In contrast, the available choices in the side quest 'Power of the Atom' are quite stark in their differences. The player's arrival in Megaton often marks the first encounter with civilization in the Capital Wasteland as well as the first truly significant karmic opportunity. Lucas Simms, sheriff of Megaton, requests the disarmament of the unexploded nuclear bomb in the middle of the settlement, while Mr Burke, who considers Megaton a blight on the landscape, wants the player's help in the bomb's detonation. Disarming the bomb garners a variety of rewards, including caps, the deed and key to a house in Megaton, experience points and good karma (if the player disarms the bomb for free). A 'contract for extermination' will also be placed upon the player, thereby incurring the wrath of Talon Company mercenaries who will ambush the player at various times throughout the course of the game. In what is not a great contrast, detonating the bomb also garners sundry compensatory measures, including caps, the deed and key to a suite in Tenpenny Tower, experience points and evil karma. The Regulators, a vigilante-justice group, will place a similar contract on the player, ambushing at random like Talon Company; former citizens of Megaton might also ambush the player.

This side quest has some similarities to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, by Walter Miller, Jr, particularly the portrayal of the relationship between religion and science. These two often-disparate elements of society are fused together in *Fallout 3*. The Church of the Children of the Atom, while per-

haps an intended nod to *Beyond the Planet of the Apes*, which also featured worship of an unexploded atomic bomb, shows sustained interest in the preservation of artifacts (namely the bomb), though not with as grand an aim as that of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz. Whereas the latter was concerned with 'saving a small remnant of human culture from the remnant of humanity who wanted it destroyed' (Miller 1959: 64), the former wanted the unexploded nuclear warhead for the purposes of worship.

Such worship is dependent on the belief that each atomic mass contains a universe entire, that the splitting of an atomic mass creates many universes. Therefore, the Church of the Children of the Atom views the use of atomic warfare not as destructive but as a creative and unifying holy event. Should the player choose to send the Children to their destiny by detonating the Megaton bomb, though, evil karma remains the lone result, perhaps because of the non-cult members residing in the settlement. Furthermore, if the player's karma level was neutral or evil prior to this event, accepting Mr Burke's offer and pushing the button that detonates the Megaton bomb cause the player to have the lowest possible karma in the game. Being witness to and causing such an in-game event makes for one of the most disturbing and significant moments in *Fallout 3*.

However, an equally troublesome situation is available for the player in 'Tenpenny Tower'. Ghouls, individuals who have been horribly disfigured by nuclear radiation yet still retain some degree of humanity, desire to live in the luxurious hotel and suites of Tenpenny Tower, but none of the present residents, including owner/landlord Allistair Tenpenny, are willing to let them in. The first option available to the player involves murdering Roy Phillips, leader of the Ghouls, which is a direct request made to the player by Mr Tenpenny. A second option, coming from Roy this time, concerns helping the Ghouls into Tenpenny Tower and slaughtering its human population. A third option, and the only one by which the player might earn good karma, engages the player's sense of diplomacy through the discovery of a harmonious, nonviolent solution to the conflict. As in the cases of 'Oasis' and 'Power of the Atom', the player's decisions in 'Tenpenny Power' have a permanent effect on the fate of another human settlement in the Capital Wasteland.

Most interesting for the purposes of this chapter, though, is the third option, which involves talking to all interested parties about the possibility of a peaceful negotiation and then convincing Tenpenny Tower tenants that having Ghouls as neighbors is not something to dread. The player might feel that this is the best course of action to take, if only because, as Pat Frank observes in *Alas, Babylon*, 'the economics of disaster placed a penalty upon prejudice' (1959: 190). A more idealistic player might find resonance, as I did, with the main character in Poul Anderson's 'Tomorrow's Children', who declared, '[O]ur problem is to learn to live with the mutants, to accept

anyone . . . no matter how he looks, to quit thinking anything was ever settled by violence or connivance, to build a culture of individual sanity' (1985: 170). However, such a culture is not to be had at Tenpenny Tower. Ghouls and humans initially do live together and get along well at the completion of this third option, garnering the player caps, experience points and a very useful item in the form of a Ghoul Mask, which makes the player friendly with all feral Ghouls. However, a subsequent return to Tenpenny Tower will see all human residents gone. Further investigation by the player reveals that the tenants had a disagreement that caused Roy Phillips to decide to 'take out the trash', that is, slaughter the humans and loot, strip and dump their bodies in the basement of the hotel.

With no way to prevent this from happening, the player may find the good karma earned from this side quest cheapened, as was the case in 'The Situation at Tenpenny Tower', by D. Riley: 'The "good karma" reward tastes a little acrid in your mouth. You drove out the bigots, you paved the way for acceptance, you did everything right, but somehow you managed to let a group of innocent people die' (2008). With every solution to this particular side quest ending in murder, Riley observes that all that is left for the player to decide is 'how many people have to be killed'. In lacking a true good answer to the situation at Tenpenny Tower, *Fallout 3* made Riley uncomfortable with his agency as a player, leaving part of him wishing he had 'left well enough alone'. It is possible, then, to view the Tenpenny Tower side quest as an argument for post-apocalyptic neutrality. In such a situation where one's own survival should be paramount, perhaps it would be better not to become involved in the affairs of others.

Any player of *Fallout 3* has just as much freedom to leave certain quests and tasks incomplete. The agency and immediacy that *Fallout 3* provides in terms of morality and survival and just how meaningful it can be to be good or evil in this particular post-apocalyptic environment are characteristics noted by Allen Cook, video game critic for the community blog *Gamers with Jobs*. In 'Hero of the Wastes', Cook observes how the player 'can truly revel in the epic nature of [their] betrayal of humanity' or feel as though they have 'contributed substantially to the well-being of mankind by simply handing some guy a cheap bottle of water'. Although Egocentric is a karmic title that the game reserves for the player marking a neutral path through the Capital Wasteland, Cook implies that the entire experience is about ego: 'I'm the hero because I'm the one with the tools, the knowledge. . . . I am the arbiter of history because I'm the only one who knows it. . . . I'm the only one who can write it.' *Fallout 3* provides this greater agency and influence from the very beginning, and the question of what the player will do is ever-present.

This is also a point on which Duncan Fyfe explains in the blog post 'Escape from Vault 101', observing that 'making moral decisions isn't a

feature designed to encourage replayability, it's arguably the entire point [of playing the game]'. All falls upon the quality of the character being developed by the player, and if they 'try and approximate the moral and legal standards of today, then that's a statement in itself'. In a way, the player becomes similar not only to Ellison's Vic but also to J.G. Ballard's Traven in 'The Terminal Beach', in that the player's time in the Capital Wasteland becomes 'completely existential, an absolute break separating one moment from the next like two quantal events' (1985: 131). Furthermore, the player's actions come to mirror those taken by Randy Bragg in Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon*, for 'in everything he did, now, he found he looked into the needs of the future' (1959: 173). Such characteristics compose the essence of survival in a post-apocalyptic scenario.

Fallout 3 is similar to previous takes on the post-apocalypse because it is just as revealing of how the survival choices made in such a setting can influence an individual's particular character. Dale Bailey, in his referential and self-aware 'The End of the World as We Know It', identifies three varieties of main characters typical of post-apocalyptic tales: the individualist whose self-reliance and knowledge of firearms puts that one on the 'way to Re-Establishing Western Civilization' (2008: 287), the bandit who is not 'displeased by the expanded opportunities to rape and pillage' (2008: 287) and the world-weary sophisticate, who needs no further description. Using elements of choice and freedom coupled with a simple but effective system of morality, *Fallout 3* allows, and perhaps even encourages, the player to be each of these characters.

User Modifications in Fallout 3

Numerous user modifications to the already extensive experience provided by Bethesda further emphasize ethical in-game actions on the part of the player. This is almost despite the fact that player expertise will tend 'towards the ultraviolent' (Langan 2008: 311), no matter one's particular karmic bent. Given the potentially violent outcomes of assisting those met in the Capital Wasteland, it might be more worthwhile simply to move along. Then again, there is a chance that completing a certain quest or engaging in a particular task could be all the more necessary if the player has made modifications.

While the game designed and developed by Bethesda is an offline gaming experience, much engaged discussion of the game occurs online, and user modifications, better known as 'mods', are a major aspect. In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Alexander Galloway notes the ways in which a video game may be modified:

> (1) at the level of its visual design, substituting new level maps, new artwork, new character models, and so on; (2) at the level of the rules of the game, changing how gameplay unfolds—who wins, who loses, and

> what the repercussions of various gamic acts are; or (3) at the level of its software technology, changing character behavior, game physics, lighting techniques, and so on (2006: 107-108).

Jim Rossignol, author of *This Gaming Life*, simplifies the act of creating video game mods, or 'modding', as 'the process of taking an existing game and modifying it to create free variants. It's a kind of nonprofit amateur game design' (2008: 39). Both Galloway and Rossignol allude to how augmenting, continuing and even disrupting in-game experiences by way of mods is revealing of creativity and sophistication; Galloway even observes that modifying games is 'almost as natural as playing them' (2006: 112). Thus, the importance of mods to the sustained success of video games such as *Fallout 3* as well as Bethesda's previous releases, including *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, cannot be overstated.

By presenting the opportunity for players with the technical knowledge to modify the game world and the experiences to be had within it, game developers encourage fuller ownership of the game itself, making game play that much more of a personal investment. And while some mods might be seen as superficial, for example, those offering a greater variety of armor and weapons, other user creations have greater depth and potential impact for any player choosing to download and install them. Even those mods that provide little more than aesthetic changes can influence the player's perspective on the game world.

For instance, having become tired of 'the world that went to ruin . . . [and wanting] to see green occasionally', modder Khyrin created and uploaded files to the most comprehensive collection of *Fallout 3* mods, http://www.fallout3nexus.com/, a Web site that functions as much as a ranking system as it does as a repository. It is here that users post their own modding efforts and provide detailed explanations and screenshots of their modifications to the video game environment. Khyrin's mod, though, changes the Capital Wasteland in one significant way, by introducing lush greenery. Instead of burned-out, dark brown trees and soil devoid of life, the 'GreenWorld' mod induces a transformation; ferns sprawl across the landscape, growing in the gaps between buildings left half-standing, and trees with bright green leaves line the rubble of former roads. This particular modification to *Fallout 3* augments a sharper contrast between civilization and nature, how the former often has a greater struggle in returning to prior glory than the latter. On recommendation of in-game continuity, the creator of 'GreenWorld' also suggests installation of this mod after the completion of 'Oasis' or the main quest. Doing so gives greater credence and impact to both as the results of the player's in-game actions become more tangible.

Similar to 'GreenWorld' is 'Fellout', which, as modder Hattix explains, provides 'a harshly lit world more reminiscent of the Sahara Desert'. Gone are the washed-out greens and browns so dominant throughout *Fallout 3*,

replaced by a sharper integration of color. Bright sunlight and deep blue skies with puffy clouds replace the persistent, yellowish haze on the horizon; rust is redder on those buildings still standing. The changes brought about by 'Fellout' are perhaps most noticeable outside, but any player entering an in-game building should also notice a clearer, more fluorescent lighting arrangement. User-player modifications like 'GreenWorld' and 'Fellout' suggest a brighter, almost inviting post-apocalyptic scenario, though the core elements of the game itself make for an ever-increasing contrast. Roving packs of wild dogs will still run through the greenery to attack the player; raiders and Super Mutants remain threats to the player's survival, but not to that of the trees surrounding them.

Other *Fallout 3* mods go beyond aesthetic improvements, making for fundamental changes to the player's experience of the game. Boasting the addition of 120 new weapons along with many new types of ammunition, hundreds of retextured items, a more balanced system of armor and weapons, revised character leveling and strength and greater cost to all items—weapons and ammunition in particular—'FOOK 2' is an extensive community-created mod that, as observed by multi-format video game Web site Games Radar, 'makes [*Fallout 3*] feel more post-apocalyptic'.

The same could also be said for '*Fallout 3*—Wanderer's Edition' (FWE), which, as modder Mezmorki explains, concerns 'improving the challenge, sense of immersion, depth of gameplay and range of options' so that the player 'will find the wasteland to be a more dynamic, but far less forgiving place'. This particular mod enhances *Fallout 3*'s first-person shooter elements by giving a faster pace to combat with a greater foundation on the player's skill and also augments the game's role-playing elements by placing greater emphasis on choice and consequence. 'FWE' manages both by slowing player leveling, eliminating the possibility of the player having mastered every combat skill by level 20.

This makes the choice of particular perks and specific skills much more important, and perhaps more difficult, too, as the effects of many underpowered perks and skills present in the original game have been improved. Furthermore, 'FEW' increases the lethality of combat by having weapons and attacks perform significantly more damage to the player and to potential enemies. This, in turn, makes in-game injuries more severe, and healing is no longer the simple task it is in the original *Fallout 3*. 'FEW' even includes an optional 'primary needs' feature, requiring the player to eat, drink and sleep on a regular basis. This mod also offers less ammunition and other items needed for survival in the Capital Wasteland, thereby requiring the player to be more mindful of acquired expenditures.

It could be that the player who installs user-created modifications like 'FOOK 2' and 'FWE' will walk that truer neutral path, if only for the simple reason that involving oneself in the struggles of others increases the chances

of one's ultimate demise. Then again, given the substantial rewards of certain side quests, such mods may also prove a greater temptation to pursue a good karma or evil karma result, depending on which represents a better possibility for the player's continued existence in the Capital Wasteland.

By making for even greater challenges and arguably better immersion in a particular post-apocalyptic scenario, *Fallout 3* mods have the potential to cause many in-game decisions to carry more influence in terms of both morality and survival. For example, if the player has 'primary needs', how much more important does it become not to discourage an NPC's intentions to write a Capital Wasteland survival guide and instead provide assistance, given the range of helpful items available as rewards? Furthermore, if the player has little interest in the karma-neutral gifts in the Oasis quest, then why not be witness to the one-time event of Harold the man-tree mutant going up in flames? And if good and evil in-game rewards are comparable, then why not also be witness to the nuking of Megaton?

Conclusion

Given the myriad opportunities for damnation and salvation, maintaining neutrality in the Capital Wasteland can be a rather fruitless, if not futile, endeavor. Perhaps this is what the post-apocalyptic scenario offered by *Fallout 3* and a prolific modding community is most suggestive of, that ascribing to a moral code, be it harmful or helpful to those encountered, is most essential for survival. That this can be achieved as much through the original gaming space as through user modifications is of no small significance.

Without the Internet, this would be much more difficult to accomplish. There would be no *Fallout* wiki devoted to detailing every aspect of the game, from characters and plot to in-game items and locations. There would also be no online forums intended to provide step-by-step instruction in completing various parts of the game, including the exploitation of design weaknesses and the discovery of in-jokes hidden by the developers. Because these online spaces are available, the gaming enterprise overall is 'social since all players need to get and share information about the games in order to become adept at playing them . . . many games involve building, interacting with, and progressively shaping a simulated world' (Gee 2007: 91-92). This is rather analogous to Mitra and Watts's understanding of cyberspace as 'a discursive space produced by the creative work of people whose spatial locations are ambiguous and provisional' (2002: 485).

The modding community consists of additional discursive spaces, not only in the form of the *Fallout 3 Nexus* but also in the actual mods themselves. Players and modders are required to shift between online and offline

modes, logging on to upload/download mods, logging off to experience mods and then logging back on to acknowledge and provide feedback. In other words, players and modders are agents creating a variety of cyber- and game-spaces where they can 'comfortably dwell, and create their ethos or "dwelling space", which they inhabit and from where they can address the public sphere' (Mitra and Watts 2002: 486). This is possible because, just as 'virtually anyone with internet access can now be an agent' (Mitra and Watts 2002: 489-90), virtually anyone can now be a player and/or a modder. We then might see modders as taking advantage of the opportunity to 'voice themselves' (Mitra and Watts 2002: 488), not only responding to the discursive space provided by Bethesda but also revising it for a variety of purposes and reasons.

Much of this chapter has concerned itself with documenting the wide variety of actions available to the player and the modder in *Fallout 3*, showing how it is possible to view the Capital Wasteland as a sort of 'safe haven in which to enact the problem of being as it appears in gamespace, but without the oppressive stakes of one's own life on the line' (Wark 2007: 124). Of course, such a space is 'safe' only in the sense that it is not real, because 'games are playgrounds where players can experiment with doing things they . . . would not normally do' (Juul 2005: 193). *Fallout 3* functions as a kind of dual playground, allowing the player to engage in moral experiments and also encouraging modders to create their own.

In *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul explains that thematic complexity is something games resist because of the medium's rule-governed nature. Love, ambition and social conflict, not to mention the ethics of post-apocalyptic survival, are not 'easily implemented in rules' (2005: 189). The performable actions available to the player are, as a result, rather simple, but this does not wholly prohibit possibilities for making meaning.

As a popular culture medium, video games still manage to 'reflect back to us, in part, the basic themes and even prejudices of our own society' (Gee 2007: 20). Video games are frames 'in which we see things differently . . . we can seek the beauty of the activity itself' (Juul 2005: 201). Video games are 'our contemporaries, the form in which the present can be felt and, in being felt, thought through' (Wark 2007: 225). So, despite the imperfect complexity of the original game and its many user modifications, *Fallout 3* provides the player and the modder with the opportunity to experiment with freedom of choice in a frame of understanding that is both different from and similar to the real world. Video games like *Fallout 3* allow us the chance to think and feel our way through the post-apocalypse in ways as meaningful and unique as ourselves.

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9. The Media-savvy Ritual Suicides: How the Heaven's Gate Group Co-opted Institutional Media and Created a New Tradition

Robert Glenn Howard

Abstract

In this chapter, I argue that the acceptance of suicide as necessary and desirable created the opportunity for the Heaven's Gate group to draw a mass-media audience to their vernacular media products. Without discounting the complex psychosocial dynamics involved or their religious convictions about transcending the mundane world through death, their desire to disseminate their message must be recognized as a significant component of their worldview because it demonstrates the media-savvy foresight with which they made their suicidal decisions. Bearing testament to the power of the media strategy the group enacted, a new Heaven's Gate religious tradition is being forged in the participatory media of today's vernacular web.

Nearly ten years after the 22 March 1997 Heaven's Gate ritual suicides, a group calling itself Heaven's Gate: The New Followers placed a statement of belief on an obscure Web site. With names like Spunkody—USA, Xfody—Canada and Thurstondoy—Brazil, the New Followers collaborated to write the nearly two-thousand-word Web page titled: 'Heaven's Gate Lives'. Composed by twelve individuals spread over nine countries, their document expressed the belief that the appearance of the McNaught comet of 2007 was a sign that it was time for them to state publicly the truth of the Heaven's Gate doctrines: 'We are new beacons of light to Heaven's Gate. There are no new doctrines or rituals. We just follow what Ti and Do taught and our commitment is to their teachings' (Webspawner.com 2007).

Echoing the original Heaven's Gate leader Marshall Applewhite, or 'DO', these new adherents believe that the world will soon be 'spaded over'. They believe that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, began an apocalyptic scenario and that a destructive cataclysm is imminent. At least some of them also believe that the Earth can still function as a 'stepping stone' to the 'Level Above Human' as it did for DO and his 39 followers in the 1997 'EXIT'. Calling the 39 suicides of 1997 'The Star Children', the page on Webspawner.com states, 'They left an essence behind.' This essence is disrespected, however, by the mass media's emphasis on the ritual deaths themselves. The Web page laments, 'It is sad that in order for a message like "Heaven's Gate" to get an interest, across the planet by the media, would only be if a mass suicide took place' (Webspawner.com 2007).

Unlike the high-profile presence of the original group after the 1997 suicides, the New Followers have hardly been mentioned in public discourse. There are no large-scale professional Web sites like that of the 1997 group and no media organizations fighting over any slick press kits. Instead, the New Followers are using several free blogging sites to post their beliefs, collaboratively articulate a history of the group and engage in debates about the meaning of DO's teachings. This tiny presence has brought them little media attention and few new converts.

In the immediate aftermath of the dramatic 1997 EXIT, an ABC weekly news program featured the topic, 'How Cults Use the Internet to Recruit Members. And What, if Any, Regulations There Should Be'. At that time, some scholars sought publicly to distance mainline religion from the destructive choices of Heaven's Gate (Brasher 1997; Marty 1997). In the ten years that followed, numerous studies examined the wealth of documents left behind by the group to try to answer the basic questions about why the members chose suicide and what role Internet media played in that choice.

Some scholars have focused on the seemingly postmodern aspects of the beliefs (Chryssides 2004, 2005; Urban 2000). Concerned about a new surge in 'millennial fever' made possible by Internet communication, Brenda Brasher has argued that the effective deployment of a postmodern idiom of pastiche dovetailed with the new characteristics of Internet communication in a particularly powerful way (2001). Other research has shown how the communication behaviors exhibited by Heaven's Gate were more monologic than was typical of network communication at that time (Howard 2005b; Robinson 1997). Some have articulated the assessment that the reasons behind the Heaven's Gate suicides were characteristic of religious groups centred on charismatic leaders who enforce coercive social norms (Balch and Taylor 2002, 2003; Davis 2000; Lalich 2004; Lewis 2003). Now, more than ten years later, the role that the Internet played in the motivation of these individuals to commit ritual suicide is still debated.

Although it seems true that a significant factor in their choice was the powerful combination of a charismatic leader and social pressure, it is also true that something fundamentally different in the history of alternative religious movements had emerged in 1997. Despite the failure of Heaven's Gate to garner a large following, their deft manipulation of mainstream media through the deployment of vernacular media on the World Wide Web demonstrates the emergence of a 'vernacular web' (Howard 2008a, 2008b).

Characteristically postmodern, such webs of amateur expression on participatory Web sites generate what postcolonial culture critics Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge have termed 'zones of contestation', where 'national, mass, and folk culture provide both mill and grist for one another' (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995: 5). From these zones, the Heaven's Gate's media campaign demonstrates how it is possible for vernacular voices to rise up and seize a level of mainstream attention previously available only through institutional media. This access came at such a great cost that only a very few would be willing to seriously consider the invitation it offered. Bearing testimony to the power of the media strategy that the group enacted, however, a new Heaven's Gate tradition is being forged in the participatory media of today's vernacular web.

In this chapter, I argue that the acceptance of suicide as necessary and desirable created the opportunity for the Heaven's Gate group to draw a mass-media audience to their vernacular media products. Without discounting the complex psychosocial dynamics involved or their religious convictions about transcending the mundane world through death, their desire to disseminate their message must be recognized as a significant component of their worldview because it demonstrates the media-savvy foresight with which they made their suicidal decisions.

Two central factors allowed them to enact their innovative strategy: (1) the emergence of online vernacular webs, and (2) vernacular religious beliefs that anticipated and rendered acceptable an almost wholesale rejection of their ideas by a mainstream audience. The Internet made it possible for them to distribute extensive material in a way that would persist after their deaths. Their vernacular beliefs led them to expect that the mere exposure to this material would result in an epiphanic 'recognition' experience in those who harbored a 'Soul Deposit' (Doe@Ti.Lah 1995). However, they were not sure how many Soul Deposits were on Earth.

Because they felt their suicides were necessary whether there were more Soul Deposits or not, the group maximized the chances that any remaining would be drawn to the recognition experience by carefully preparing the information they left behind for the public to devour. The media-savvy foresight of these ritual suicides emerges in the convergence of communication technologies and vernacular religious belief. Beyond the intentions of the original group, the surfacing of the New Followers demonstrates that

this media strategy has helped to generate a tiny but persistent religious tradition.

In 1997, Internet media allowed these individuals to transmit their vernacular beliefs in the form of detailed texts and other media at a level not possible before. Since then, the growing popularity of participatory forms of Internet-based media have begun to allow more people to place their own vernacular content online more easily. These new modes of transmission are less like traditional institutions of religion and more like the informal clamor of the folk—transmitting their ideas alongside but apart from institutional documents. Taken together, these expressions create a web of ongoing interaction where emergent ideas can grow and change. The Internet is ensuring the continued availability of DO's ideas. As it does, those ideas are diversifying in the vernacular web of individual expression made possible by today's participatory media.

Why Exit?

On 26 March 1997, at 4:00 pm, a San Diego County sheriff's deputy responded to an anonymous tip. He entered a suburban mansion and found several human corpses. Returning with a warrant, he said, 'the dead were scattered throughout the rambling two-story house'. Most were found lying on their backs. Some were on the floor with their hands at their sides. Some lay on cots and mattresses. Their hair was uniformly short. They wore dark shirts and pants and matching athletic shoes. All but two of the individuals had their faces covered with purple scarves. These scarves were draped so that one corner was on the forehead and one was on each shoulder. 'All appeared as if they'd fallen asleep', said the sheriff's office (McKinnie 1997). On the Easter Sunday after the discovery of the suicides, CBS's *60 Minutes* opened by saying, 'If you are having trouble understanding what motivated those 39 people in California to take their own lives, you're not alone. So did we' (KFMB 1997).

The reasons individuals cite for their motivation to join alternative religious groups are diverse, but typical patterns do emerge. Many individuals cite health or social reasons for maintaining religious affiliations that are rooted in a deep sense of shared community. As Ted Peters, a scholar of contemporary religion, has noted, communities formed around a plan to commit ritual suicide do so out of deep individual religiosity (1998, 2004). Since Max Weber's discussion of charismatic authority in *Economy and Society*, researchers cannot discount the power of a group leader to create and maintain social cohesion (Weber 1978). However, James Lewis has criticized the emphasis on 'charisma' associated with theories that religious leaders can 'brainwash' their followers (2003). For Lewis, an overemphasis

on the leaders draws attention away from the powerful social forces that function to create and maintain small religious communities.

Based on the work of Robert Cialdini on persuasion, Robert Balch and David Taylor have argued that 'social influence' was the most powerful force behind the Heaven's Gate group's cohesion (Cialdini 1993; Balch and Taylor 2002, 2003). While initial recruitment might occur in a momentary flash of charisma, ongoing involvement in the religious group took an ongoing commitment and effort on the part of DO's followers. Heavy top-down prescriptions on daily behavior created a social environment where dissent was not reasonable (Balch and Taylor 2003). After twenty years of strict top-down control, the group's 1975 surge of two hundred or more converts had dwindled to 40 or so. Among those, several people had come and gone. Some of those left periodically but would return episodically. Others lived elsewhere but remained friends of the group. By 1997, the 44 or so remaining Heaven's Gate members were deeply committed. After discussing it for at least four years, that commitment culminated in the initial suicides (Balch and Taylor 2002). While discounting 'brainwashing' as a useful description of this level of commitment, Winston Davis has argued that the rejection of conventional ideas through emphasis on religious obedience caused the group members to isolate themselves from other sources of social influence. This isolation then allowed Applewhite to convince his followers to revalue even their own lives through 'religious conditioning' (Davis 2000: 242).

While both leader charisma and social norms were clearly central forces in maintaining group cohesion, these forces were minimized for the millions of individuals the group exposed to their beliefs through the Internet in 1997. In the case of initial conversion, any individual's contact with the Heaven's Gate ideas would be, by definition, as an outsider. Hence, the influence of isolation or the other social factors cultivated by the group would not yet have been in place. In 1997, millions of people were exposed only to sound bites and snippets of video on the nightly news shows. Even for those who sought out the Web site, the technological characteristics of the Internet at that time limited their online materials to writing and graphics. Far from the direct experience of a face-to-face meeting, any charisma that DO might have had would have been difficult to experience through these media.

While there may have been initial concerns about the Internet's ability to recruit new believers into 'cults', those fears turned out to be largely unfounded. Of the members who committed suicide, only one initially came into contact with DO through the Internet and even that case is arguable.[1]

1. 1. While initial reports suggested that one suicide did first discover the group through their Web site, the husband of that individual later admitted that it was actually he that had first discovered the group. He then convinced his wife to follow him to

Further, after the media frenzy there was, it seems, no 'millennial fever' spread online. In the best estimates, there have been only between three and five suicides since the initial 40. This fact clearly supports the sociological perspective that places the emphasis on social factors as the cause of the religious suicides. While this is an important finding, it does not fully account for the functional relationship between the suicides and the online recruitment campaign. Even though it failed to recruit anyone new, the Heaven's Gate media campaign did bring their message to millions of new individuals.

Though communication can travel far faster online than face to face, it relies on the diffuse editorial authority of many individuals choosing to exchange the information through e-mail forwards or other kinds of individual communication choices (Gurak 1999; Kibby 2005). This 'extra-institutional' discourse online has long been seen as a potential source of grassroots social movements (van de Donk *et al.* 2004). Heralded by Henry Jenkins as marking a new era of 'participatory culture', the amount of vernacular content being placed online through free blogging, personal networking, photo sharing, and other new genres of Web sites has exploded (Jenkins *et al*. 2006).

However, 'viral' marketing campaigns that seek to exploit this online vernacular expression are often unsuccessful in garnering wide support. Researchers have found that, typically, the majority of online communication associated with a social movement occurs among those already committed to the movement (Diani 2000; Howard 2006). While the Internet has proven very effective for organizing the members of an in-group, it is less so for reaching new audiences. In the sea of communication occurring online, it is difficult for any single individual to differentiate her- or himself enough to seize a wide audience (Castells 1997; Froehling 1997; Danitz and Strobel 1999).

The Heaven's Gate media strategy could overcome this problem because their media goals were different from those typical of grassroots campaigns. While a social movement might seek to effect a change in attitude and behavior in as many people as possible, the Heaven's Gate group sought only to locate a very few rare individuals. While a social movement usually seeks to garner as much media attention for as long as possible, Heaven's Gate sought to gain only the short-term attention of as many people as possible. As a result, their strategy made sense for their specific goals.

These goals made sense because of the nature of their religious beliefs. They could use their suicides to gain massive but short-term attention because each of the deeply committed members of the group believed that

meet DO. He left after a couple of months, but the direct experience of DO led his wife to make the choice to EXIT. This information is reported in an interview in Vick 1997.

they had recognized the truth of DO's message immediately upon coming into contact with him. As former member Rio DiAngelo described it in 2007, 'Everyone, including me, had some sort of recognition of the information or [of] TI & DO. We all seemed to have experienced the same thing in our own way' (2007: 63). The next section describes how, for the few who stayed committed to the group, this experience gave rise to the belief that they were carrying transdimensional beings for which their human bodies were only 'containers'—containers that could be sloughed off in suicide.

Awakening the 'Soul Deposits'

Applewhite received an early education in dealing with the national news media. On 14 September 1975, he held a public meeting in the small coastal town of Waldport, Oregon. Soon, the national newspaper stories fed a rumor that two New Age spiritual leaders had kidnapped over 20 attendees of that meeting. Later, it was revealed that these individuals had chosen to join the group willingly. Nonetheless, Applewhite and the cofounder of the group, Bonnie Lu Nettles, garnered national attention for the first time (Balch and Taylor 1977). During that episode, Applewhite got a firsthand experience both of the media's sensitivity to the idea of 'cults' and of how easily one could be thrust into the national spotlight by being associated with such alternative religious ideas. Describing his experience after the incident, DO wrote, 'We had become a national media item. Their unrelenting spotlight glared upon us for over half a year. And by and large, almost every report either written or aired about us was either riddled with inaccuracies or outright lies' (DO 1997a). For the next 23 years, the group would more or less successfully avoid media scrutiny. However, they did not go away. Instead, the two spiritual leaders would take on a series of new names, which referred to the transdimensional beings that their bodies carried: Guinea and Pig, Lah and TI, Bo and Peep, TI and DO and so on. They traveled the United States in near poverty, working for food and promoting their blend of theosophy, Christianity and scientism. Over the years, they came into the news briefly only to disappear again.

Bonnie Lu Nettles was born and raised in Houston. In 1948, she graduated from the Herman Hospital's nursing school in that city. She first met Applewhite while working at Houston's Bel-Air Hospital in 1972 while he was being treated for a heart blockage. Later that year, they formed the short-lived Christian Arts Center together. Then, in January of 1973, she left her husband and children and, with Applewhite, left her ordinary life behind. Traveling to a campground near the Rogue River in Oregon, they withdrew from society together (Steiger and Hewes 1997: 22; Balch and Taylor 2003; Wessinger 2000).

Raised the son of a Presbyterian minister, Applewhite received a master's degree from the University of Colorado and went on to be the choir director at a series of Texas churches. In 1966, he joined the faculty of the University of St. Thomas in Houston. Later, when the university founded a music department, he served as its first chair. He worked with various Houston-area church choirs. He was married and had two children. In 1970 however Applewhite was fired from the Christian university. School authorities cited emotional problems as the reason for this dismissal. Others claimed that Applewhite became involved in a romantic affair with a male student (Balch and Taylor 2003; Wessinger 2000). Whatever occurred, he decided to abandon his ordinary life.

Retreating to their campground hideaway for six weeks, Nettles and Applewhite came to believe that they were 'the Two' prophesied in Revelation 11. Making the first moves to spread their message, they started making contacts with individuals in known New Age circles. Eventually, they met a spiritual leader named Clarence Klug, who invited Nettles and Applewhite to speak to his students. Twenty people, including Klug, decided to join them in their isolated campground life. Once there, the members were split into androgynous male and female pairs. Each individual sought to help his or her partner overcome human consciousness through meditation. By widely advertising, the Two managed to draw approximately two hundred people to a meeting in Waldport, Oregon, in September of 1975. At that meeting, 33 people decided to join the group, and briefly settled in a Colorado campground (*San Diego Union Tribune* 2007). As intense media attention began to focus on the supposed disappearance of these 33 individuals, the Two split the group into 'families', sent them in different directions, and went into hiding themselves (Balch and Taylor 2003).

Even with their leaders absent, the group grew. With similar meetings, more and more individuals joined. At its peak, the membership for the group reached over two hundred individuals. However, with the Two absent, the groups quickly began to fall apart over the course of 1975. Finally, in 1976, TI responded to a heckler at a public talk they had organized in Kansas by declaring, 'The Harvest is closed!' (Wessinger 2000: 234). Afterwards, the Two stopped having public meetings. Instead, they focused on a reconstituted and far smaller group.

Emphasizing that each member must make a strong personal commitment to stay in the group, the Two demanded strict regimentation of every personal moment of every individual in the camp they set up in Wyoming. Demanding complete commitment, they even sent 19 members away at one point (Balch and Taylor 2003; Wessinger 2000: 234). In 1977, two members inherited $300,000 (Wessinger 2000: 237). The group began renting houses and even taking jobs. They continued to rent large living spaces, to live together as androgynous pairs and to move about every six months. In

1985, Nettles died of cancer. In 1993, nine members including DO chose to be surgically castrated in Mexico in order to reduce their sexual drives (Wessinger 2000: 237).

That same year a new recruitment campaign began. In 1993, the group placed advertisements in over 25 newspapers including *USA Today*. DO made videos and had them broadcast via satellite TV. However, this media strategy yielded no new members. By January 1994, it is estimated that there were only 26 members left (Balch and Taylor 2003: 231). Then the group again began hosting small meetings. With several new adherents (including Rio DiAngelo), their numbers grew to 39. In 1995, the group first attempted to use the Internet to spread their message. They put up a Web site and posted a message to 95 Usenet newsgroups. After receiving significant hostile feedback from their online audience, DO acknowledged that his initial strategy was not successful. For him, 'this was the signal to us to begin our preparations to return "home"' (quoted in *New York Times,* 1 January 2007).

For these believers, 'returning "home"' was what the transdimensional being would do when it cast off its 'vehicle', the human body associated with its incarnation. On the 1997 Web site, DO explained the belief. He wrote of how two thousand years ago 'crew members of the Kingdom of Heaven' deemed that a few human bodies were ready to 'be used as "containers" for soul deposits'. One 'body that was chosen was called Jesus'. In 1997, DO claimed, 'I am in the same position to today's society as was the One that was in Jesus then. My being here now is actually a continuation of that last task as was promised, to those who were students 2000 years ago' (DO 1997b). After this description of the way in which transdimensional beings incarnate in humans, there was an invitation to join DO in the efforts to enter the Kingdom of Heaven: 'Looking to us, and desiring to be a part of my Father's Kingdom, can offer to those with deposits that chance to connect with the Level Above Human, and begin that transition' (DO 1997b).

As sociologists Robert Balch and David Taylor have noted, DO 'emphasized the importance of free choice. According to the Two, anyone who had to be persuaded wasn't ready to leave the planet' (2003: 217). At first, the notion that the Heaven's Gate group explored ways to reach a wide media audience seems to be at variance with its refusal to 'persuade'. However, DO's description of Soul Deposits states that 'only a small percentage' of people on the Earth have them. As a result, many people needed to be contacted with his message to locate them (DO 1997b). As Catherine Wessinger has noted, 'Ti and Do taught that individuals who accepted their message and recognized them as Representatives from the Next Level had earlier received a "deposit" of a soul containing life from the Next Level. All other human beings were simply mammalian "plants".' However, that

deposit required nurturing offered by the regimented lifestyle DO asked his followers to live (Wessinger 2000: 236).

Applewhite believed that most people are not inhabited by transdimensional beings. Thus, the entire effort of the Heaven's Gate group's media campaign in 1996 was a concerted attempt to locate those few individuals who might still have these deposits among the millions of humans on Earth. The strategy that DO and the Heaven's Gate group devised to locate any few remaining deposits was to draw millions of people to take what he called the 'Big Tester'. This 'Tester' would work, the group believed, because any exposure to the Heaven's Gate material would trigger a 'recognition' experience in the Soul Deposit.

The 'Big Tester'

In this article, I have been arguing that the acceptance of suicide as necessary and desirable enabled the Heaven's Gate group to use the media attention that would be generated by their EXIT to draw a massive audience to their vernacular Web site. Two factors made this strategy possible. First, the easy access to and persistent nature of Internet media gave the group a means to disseminate their vernacular materials widely even after death. Second, the belief that individuals who had Soul Deposits would begin a process that led to a revelatory 'recognition' the moment they came into contact with DO's teachings rendered irrelevant the immediate rejection their ideas would face from the vast majority in any mainstream audience. They recognized that their choice to EXIT would make their beliefs very difficult for most people to take seriously. However, they also believed that there were few of these Deposits on Earth. As a result, their anticipation of rejection by a mainstream audience reinforced their certainty of belief.

As DO put it in 1995, being exposed to the Heaven's Gate materials would act like a 'homing beacon' for those with Soul Deposits. Accessing the materials would 'offer their recipients "recognition" of the Representatives [DO and TI] and, to some degree, recognition of the "information" from the Kingdom of God" (Doe@Ti.Lah 1995). This belief emerged most clearly as a media strategy in a feature of the 1997 Web site called 'The Big Tester'. The 'Tester' was a statement that attempted to compel the audience to experience the direct sensation of their Soul Deposit. Specifically, DO requested that his audience honestly consider if the beliefs he had outlined so far were 'arrogant, pompous, or egotistical'. If the reader saw this 'arrogance', then she or he had no Soul Deposit. If their Deposit recognized the truth of DO's claims, however, it would begin to awaken by pursuing the nurturing teachings that DO offered. Rhetorically, this tactic functioned to create a self-sealing argument because it suggested that rejection of its

claims were, by definition, a failure truly to understand them (see Darsey 2002; Howard 2000). DO's 'Big Tester':

> The next statement that we will make will be the 'Big Tester', the one that the 'lower forces' would use to clearly have you discredit or disregard us. That statement is: Unless you are currently an active student or are attempting to become a student of the present Representative from the Kingdom of Heaven—you ARE STILL 'of the world', having done no significant separation from worldliness, and you are still serving the opposition to the Kingdom of Heaven. This statement sounds—to humans who have been so carefully programmed by the 'lower forces'—arrogant, pompous, or egotistical at the least—as if by taking this stand we had something to gain—as if we were seeking recognition as 'Deity' or as self-appointed prophets. That Luciferian programming has truly been effective, for we don't even want to voice to you the statement in question. However, believe it or not, it is only for your sake—the sake of prospective recipients of the Kingdom of Heaven—that we must 'tell the truth', openly identify to you as Representatives of the Kingdom of Heaven, well aware of the 'fallout' of that position (DO 1997c).

As the religious studies scholar Hugh Urban has noted, this is not an attempt at persuasive argument in any traditional sense (2000). It makes no claims to reason. Instead, it appeals directly to experience. Relying so completely on the appearance of a specific experience as a result of this test, DO and his followers demonstrate a supreme confidence in the existence of Soul Deposits and the power of their awakening. Part of this certainty manifested in a very developed sense of what that awakening experience was like.

A number of group members wrote explanations for their choices to commit suicide. They recount how they experienced a sense of familiarity when they first met DO and/or TI. One member, identified as JWNody, stated, 'It was like being awakened abruptly from a deep sleep. The voice of our Shepherds [TI and DO] rang clear in the depths of our soul as we heard their familiar song once again' (JWNody 1999). Another member, LVVody, described her experience saying that she first 'began showing obvious symptoms of having a "deposit" in the early to mid-70s'. She continued, 'Mainly feeling a "presence" and having strong thoughts of wondering, "What am I supposed to do? What do you want me to do?" while feeling very close to and wanting to talk to God in my silence.' This feeling grew in LVVody over many months. She found herself 'begging God to "Please show me, what am I supposed to do?"' (LVVody 1999).

LVVody felt compelled to leave the East Coast. Soon she found herself in Oregon, where her deposit 'carefully led [her body] through a series of experiences that eventually led it to show up at the meeting by the Two in Waldport, Oregon, on 14 September 1975'. There, she had an intense revelatory experience. She recounts it:

> As I approached them, Ti asked, 'How can we help you?' This vehicle was speechless at first, and I remember so clearly that the impulse I had was to want to drop to my knees and cover my eyes. The only way I can describe it is the way it was interpreted through this vehicle's computer, colored by its old religious programming —because it felt like I was standing before my Lord, my God. They seemed so familiar, but the thought I had was, 'It seems so strange to see you in these human bodies' (LVVody 1999).

Her brain, which she refers to as 'this body's computer', was frustrated by the reality she felt. Looking back on the experience, LVVody refers to her 'body' in the third person. This emphasizes the very real daily experience of her identity as LVVody. Her Soul Deposit identity and her human form have become totally distinct. The reality her body recognized, as LVVody recalls it, was that it was 'standing before my Lord, my God'. LVVody presents us with a clear example of an epiphany where she recognizes actual appearance of a deity in the form of TI and DO.

Maybe the most compelling account of this experience slips into overtly experiential terms by calling it a 'revelation'. NRRody recalled her awakening:

> Just prior to my incarnation, this vehicle experienced a kind of 'revelation' while standing on top of a tall building looking down at people scurrying about, cars, buses, phone lines, roadways, smog, billboards, etc. Nothing particular was going through the brain, but for several days questions about the vehicle's purpose had dominated all thoughts. Suddenly, it was like watching a huge screen, showing the world—all humanity—the extent of ignorance, lack of development, the corruption, selfishness, and greed—the big picture, as from afar, in a moment of extreme clarity, and it was the most overwhelming emotion the vehicle had ever experienced. It was incomprehensible how it all happened and why humans made the choices they made. After the experience, a feeling of emptiness followed . . . except for this persistent hope and desire for something more (NRRody 1997).

Her 'revelation' was of the depravity of the human condition, the 'corruption, selfishness, and greed'. As a result, she was depressed. However, this is all part of her Soul Deposit's plan. A couple of weeks later:

> When Ti and Do walked through the door at the meeting place, this vehicle went into shock. I called out, 'I KNOW them. I KNOW them'. At that time there wasn't enough of me in the vehicle to understand that it was the mind I knew, but I feel there was probably some kind of briefing prior to my incarnation that allowed me to recognize even the vehicles they wore (NRRody 1997).

When NRRody says that 'there wasn't enough of me in the vehicle to understand', she is expressing her belief that the current consciousness she experiences is that of her incarnate being or 'deposit', which was drawn

into self awareness by meeting TI and DO. The body, or brain, can hardly understand the revelation. All she is able to do is shout, 'I know'. In a state near ecstasy, the purity of knowledge is complete. There can be no response but the euphoric affirmation, 'I know!'

Recognizing the centrality of this experience in their belief system, the goal of the Big Tester becomes clear. It was to trigger recognition in individuals who had Soul Deposits. Motivated by this goal, the group attempted to widely disseminate messages that might draw the attention of as yet undiscovered Deposits. In the early years, they held public meetings to do this. In 1994, they purchased advertising space in newspapers and on television. When those communications yielded poor results, they held more meetings and picked up a few more members. With the growing popularity of the Internet in 1995, they tried posting to Usenet forums (Howard 2005a). Then, in 1996, they put up their major Web site. Despite these efforts however they remained largely unknown.

When their EXIT hit the nightly news, they finally seized the attention of a wide audience because all the major media institutions repeatedly broadcasted the location of their vernacular Web site. Millions of people went online to take the Big Tester. In death, the Heaven's Gate group used a combination of their vernacular materials and the mass media in a skillful and systematic way. While the primary goal of the EXIT was to reach the Level Above Human, the group left little doubt that they had thoroughly prepared to take advantage of the surge in media attention it generated. They expected to be portrayed badly. However, they believed that such negative portrayals would be transcended by the epiphanic recognition of the Soul Deposit. As DO described it, 'The sole task that was given to this member from the Kingdom of Heaven was *to offer the way leading to membership into the Kingdom of Heaven* to those who recognized Him for who He was and chose to follow Him' (DO 1997b).

From an outsider's perspective, their negative portrayal and their lack of a mass following could be seen as a failure. One obvious reason for such a failure was the complete lack of persuasive tactics in their vernacular media as exemplified by the Big Tester strategy. In the context of their vernacular beliefs, however, it is clear that they did not imagine these results as failures because they did not want or expect a large following. In fact, being largely ridiculed only fulfilled the expectations their beliefs generated. By drawing as many people as possible to the Web site and exposing them to the most challenging claims made by the group, only those with actual deposits would be able to respond. Since there were only a few if any on Earth with these deposits, the most important goal would be to contact as many people as possible. Because their beliefs demanded ritual suicide anyway, the attention generated by those suicides could be used as part of a last effort to hold

open Heaven's Gate for any stragglers who might still be on Earth. From an insider's perspective, their media strategy was completely sensible.

It seems that this strategy began to take form in 1996. Sometime that year, DO received a telepathic message from TI. In the message, TI told him he should compile a book of the doctrines written by several of the group members. This book would become the basis for the vernacular media used in the press kits sent out just before the suicides. In addition, texts used in the book were placed, in total, onto the 1997 Web site (DiAngelo 2007: 58). Ten years later, a former member described the plan: 'They drew attention to Their Exit for a reason. They Exited the way They did for a reason.' He recalled another group member calling it, 'Next Level marketing' (CRLody 2007b).

This 'marketing' was important because DO felt that there still might be a few Soul Deposits they had not yet found. He clearly stated that, though difficult, it was possible that some might still be able to follow the 40 into Heaven's Gate:

> During a brief window of time, some may wish to follow us. If they do, it will not be easy. The requirement is to not only believe who the Representatives are, but, to do as they and we did. You must leave everything of your humanness behind. This includes the ultimate sacrifice and demonstration of faith—that is, the shedding of your human body. . . . We know what we're saying—we know it requires a 'leap of faith'. But it's deliberate—designed for those who would rather take that leap than stay in this world (Trancenet 1997).

The May after the mass EXIT, two more followers of DO did attempt suicide. One was Wayne Cooke, also known as JSTody. The other was RKKody or 'Ric'. Both on-and-off-again members of the group, they were not ready to EXIT with the rest of their 'Class' in March of 1997. In December 1996, Ric had left the group to live in Denver for a while. DO had called and asked him to open a Post Office Box (RKKody 1997c). Ric had first joined the group in 1975. Though he had faced difficult challenges following their strict lifestyle, he remained close friends with them. Then, in March 1997, Ric was one of several friends and former members who were mailed the Heaven's Gate press kit. Rushing to California, Ric heard the news breaking on the radio. It was only two months later that JSTody and Ric attempted their own EXITS. When only JSTody was successful, RKKody felt that

> There are presently only a few individuals left on this planet who are faithful to the Next Level. While I am still here I am committed to sharing their information about the Next Level with any others who might want a chance of surviving the coming recycling (RKKody 1997b).

With another former member, CRLody, Ric spent the following nine months attempting to spread the message (CRLody 2007a). He created a new Web site. He tried to sell copies of a collection of DO's audio-taped lessons, which the group had left in his keeping. I came across his Web site in August after the mass suicide, and I e-mailed him some questions about his experiences with the Heaven's Gate group. When I asked him about the expected audience and the intentions of their Internet communication, he responded:

> We offered the information and let free will take over. It was designed by our Creator that only those who had been given a special 'gift' of recognition, would be drawn towards this material. I know that sounds very sci-fi, but if you really take a good look at the record of Jesus' ministry you would see that Ti and DO brought the very same formula for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. The message then was only meant for those who have ears to hear, and it is the same today (RKKody 1997a).

A few days before 17 February 1998, Ric drove from San Diego into the Arizona desert, put up a small tent, and ran tubing into it from the exhaust pipe of his car. Near his body he left the simple note: 'DO NOT REVIVE' (Thornton 1998). Not locating any more Soul Deposits, he felt his job was done, and he had finally evolved to the point where he was able to EXIT.

Before he left, however, he had contacted Mark and Sarah King. Also former members and friends of the group, the Kings created, with Ric, the TELAH Foundation. Through the foundation, the Kings established a permanent location for the original Heaven's Gate Web site as well as promised to continue to distribute DO's teaching materials after Ric had gone (Apologeticsindex.org 2007). Having secured this apparently permanent caretaker, Ric began the process through which DO's message would be preserved and disseminated through the Internet. He had fulfilled the group's final directives. There would be other believers. Ric ensured that, and today's online statements from the New Followers bear testimony to the fact that he was successful.

Now over ten years later, something is emerging. In their vernacular media communications, the New Followers, former members and others seem to be actively generating what could amount to a sectarian controversy. As of this writing, several members of the New Followers contend that the Kings (with DiAngelo) are conspiring to limit access to many of the audiotapes DO and Ric had intended to make available. Part of this debate centres on whether or not DO's 'brief window' to Heaven's Gate is still ajar. One reason this issue has come to the fore is that continuing to disseminate the materials, as if the Gate were still accessible, could lead to more suicides.

The Media-Savvy Ritual Suicides

Using their suicides to draw the attention of the mainstream news media, the members of Heaven's Gate left behind their primary Web site (http://heavensgate.com), a desktop published book, a press release, and other materials. The combination of this vernacular media and the sensational nature of both their beliefs and the suicides themselves ensured that the group would garner massive media attention. Because the Web site would persist and remain widely accessible after their deaths, it presented a unique opportunity to draw people from the mainstream media broadcasts to their otherwise obscure vernacular Web site. By carefully constructing materials that would be available online after their deaths, those deaths functioned to project their beliefs into the public sphere and into popular consciousness.

Just before the suicides, each member made an individual videotaped message they called 'Exit Videos'. These videos were sent to Rio, Ric, and the others who received the press kits. Later, they were distributed to news agencies and edited portions were broadcast. Speaking in calm and understanding tones, each individual stated their willingness to follow DO into death. They acknowledged the pain and confusion they would leave behind among their families, and they anticipated the negative reactions of the public as a whole. In the press release, the group noted, 'by the time you read this . . . a flurry of fragmented reports have begun to hit the wire services' (*New York Times* 1997). They were keenly aware of the media and correctly predicted the response that they did not live to see.

One member referred to the news media reporting about the group in the 1970s: 'You've probably heard of the news media stories that we've had about a bunch of people disappearing from Waldport, Oregon. Well, we're still here! But not for long [laughing]' (KGTV 1997b). Another member summed it up cogently:

> We know that the spin-doctors, the people who make a profession of debunking everybody and putting down everybody, are gonna attack what we are doing just like they attacked the Solar Temple and Waco and what-have-you. They're gonna say: 'These people were crazy. They were mesmerized. They were whatever.' We know it isn't true, but how can you know that? (KGTV 1997b).

The Heaven's Gate media strategy worked because their means of expression, their beliefs, and their suicides combined to create a fascinating and macabre media event. Their beliefs were newsworthy precisely because they were extremely difficult for most people to accept as a rationale for suicide. In most cases, the members of a grassroots movement would seek to garner a large audience in order that people could be persuaded to do or believe something new. For the vast majority in Heaven's Gate's audience,

any claims the group might have made were already deemed unconvincing in the extreme. The very act of ritual suicide that propelled them into the public sphere also completely undermined any authority they might have had to persuade. While Internet technologies have made it possible to locate very specific audiences, it is still difficult to garner the attention of a large audience. This is at least because the sheer volume of individual voices obscures any single vernacular speaker at the global level (Diani 2000). The original Heaven's Gate group devised an effective strategy to overcome the problem. As the New Followers noted on their Web page, it was only through the drama of their own deaths that their message would be broadcast 'across the planet by the media' (Webspawner.com 2007).

Since 1997, religious suicide has been a topic of growing public interest. Not entirely unlike Heaven's Gate, the suicides of the September 11, 2001, hijackers and suicide bombers around the world have shown themselves equally if not more able to harness mainstream media to the ends of their specific communication. While previous eras saw religious war protesters burning themselves alive for a wide media audience, those protesters were not able to use their suicides to draw a mainstream audience immediately to their own extensive vernacular writings. In some ways, the members of Heaven's Gate were ahead of their time, at the cusp of an age where sensational acts can render vernacular media powerful on a global scale. While the glare of their direct media attention has long faded, the vernacular beliefs of this group continue to be transmitted at an informal level through participatory media on the Internet. This vernacular web of discourse extends the influence of Heaven's Gate beyond the media they left behind and beyond the control of any single individual or institution.

Today, Rio DiAngelo claims to be the 'sole survivor' of Heaven's Gate. In his 2007 book he tells how, after joining the group in 1994, he felt a telepathic compulsion not to follow the rest of the 'Class' in ritual suicide. In an emotional meeting with DO in February of 1997, it was decided that he would stay behind to speak for the group and help guide the message through the media. A corporate art director by profession, Rio left the group and awaited instructions. Four weeks later, he received an overnight package like that sent to Ric. Realizing what had happened, Rio grabbed his video camera and caught a ride to the San Diego mansion. Beating Ric there, he was the first to discover the suicides and taped the most iconic images seen in the media—the hand-held video of purple-scarved corpses. For the following ten years, Rio 'went through many economic changes' but, like the New Followers, he has come to admire (and maybe even begun to apotheosize) the 'advanced minds' his 'classmates possessed' (DiAngelo 2007: 113-14).

Today, Rio emphasizes that 'everyone starts out as re-incarnating spirits that keep returning to learn life's lessons until they are ready to grow a Soul'

(DiAngelo 2007: 123). He suggests that individuals might be able to choose to 'grow' a 'Soul Deposit'. However, he resolutely rejects suicide saying, 'The EXIT of Heaven's Gate was a time of passage and is over' (DiAngelo 2007: 124). Rio, however, is not the sole leader of any new group or the sole authority on the Heaven's Gate teachings. His is only one voice among many that are rapidly proliferating in the online discourse loosely termed 'Heaven's Gate'. Calling Rio's claims a 'corruption' of DO's teachings, CRLody, another former member, makes an almost fundamentalist call for a return to the original texts. Recently emerging as an influential voice for the New Followers, he posted to his personal blog, writing:

> In his statement Rio has said the following: 'When a person decides to create a soul . . .' and 'These important lessons enable you to know how to create a soul'. Ti, Do and the Class were quite clear about where Souls came from and they certainly aren't 'created' by an individual on their own (CRLody 2007c).

On a different participatory Web site (Freewebs.com), another participant in the Heaven's Gate discourse named XFody seems to offer a more nuanced idea of how human choice might interact with the implantation of a Soul Deposit: 'When a human takes in the Next Level information and thus believes it to be true, the Next Level will only then implant a soul so the new body may begin to evolve and rise above this Hell called "Earth"' (Freewebs.com 2007). For XFody, it seems that people can act in ways that will encourage the 'implanting' of a Soul Deposit. For CRLody, individuals cannot attain Soul Deposits 'on their own'. For both, it seems that choosing to EXIT may be possible. However, still another blogger posts a more tentative assessment of the issue:

> We aren't here to tell you to leave this world or to stay either. All we are saying is to study the information and decide for yourself. . . . Some humans say that 'the gate is closed'. Beware of their words because they themselves are false examples of Heaven's Gate. Nobody truly knows if the gate is closed or still open. What each person does with the Next Level information they study is entirely up to them (WESlody 2007).

These are just a few of the voices in what seems to be an emerging sectarian controversy. The growing debate centres on whether humans can access the Level Above Human by changing how they live their lives, and, if so, whether a purposeful EXIT can transmit their Soul to the Level Above Human. Whatever interpretations prevail or even if no single one ever does, a new religious movement seems to be forming through the dynamic web of vernacular communication made possible by today's participatory media. Long after 1997, Heaven's Gate may turn out to be one of the first Internet-based religions that researchers will have documented from its inception. If so, a key moment of that inception will be the 1997 media-strategy that used

overwhelming media coverage and the Internet to project DO's teachings into the popular mind.

In 1999, well-known scholar of religion Wade Clark Roof wrote, 'The boundaries of popular religious communities are now being redrawn, encouraged by the quests of the large, post–World War II generations, and facilitated by the rise of an expanded spiritual marketplace' (1999: 10). This 'marketplace' is characterized by the creation of individualized belief systems chosen from a diverse array of ideas. When the Internet becomes a significant component of that marketplace, religious belief can be expected to expand its diversity and strengthen its individuality because network media offer more opportunities to consume diverse ideas and express individual beliefs. Exhibiting what anthropologist Paolo Apolito has astutely termed a 'neo-Baroque' character, today's Heaven's Gate does just this (2005: 3). It emerges as an extreme example of an experience-oriented, eclectic and technologically savvy form of religiosity. Because no individual or institution is able to exert control over the web of communication where this new tradition is being forged, it seems to be evolving into something more like folk religion than any institution. Over ten years after the suicides, a new Heaven's Gate is being enacted in an emergent vernacular web of Internet discourse, and this is being done with a significant degree of self-awareness.

In one of the New Followers' collaborative Internet posts, Tina 'Twilight' Hayes sums up the distributed and individualized way that Heaven's Gate is evolving online:

> We read the purple book online and in solid form 'How & When "Heaven's Gate" May Be Entered?' as a Bible aid. We watch the 'Beyond Human—The Last Call' series consistently as a Bible aid. We listen to audio recordings of 'TI' & 'DO' as adequate food in due season in a world full of lust, hatred and violence. There is no commune or compound we live in. None. There is no church we go to. None. We are all 'self churches', 'self communes' and 'self temples.' There are twelve of us world wide, not including associates, silent members, prospects and survivors (Freewebs .com 2007).

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