



GUEST ARTICLE

Scientology v. the Internet

by Jeff Jacobsen

The Internet is a world-wide interconnected network of computers that can be accessed by anyone who has a computer, modem and phone line and pays a nominal fee for the service. People can send "e-mail" to anyone else around the world on the Internet and can post messages on "newsgroups", or bulletin board areas discussing certain topics. These newsgroups are typically open to all and completely unmoderated. The culture of the Internet is one of radical adherence to free speech. There are an estimated 30 million people on the Internet worldwide.

One of the most controversial newsgroups is called alt.reli-

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gion.scientology (a.r.s.), which was begun shortly after the 1991 *Time* cover article, "Scientology: The Cult of Greed." Most posts to this newsgroup in the past months have been made by critics and ex-members of the church, wherein the practices and teachings of Scientology are criticized and panned.

The church has no official representative posting on a.r.s. The closest person to this would probably be Helena Kobrin, attorney for Religious Technology Center, a corporation that holds the patents and trademarks that Scientology uses. Kobrin essentially posts only to warn critics that they may be in danger of a lawsuit for violating church copyrights.

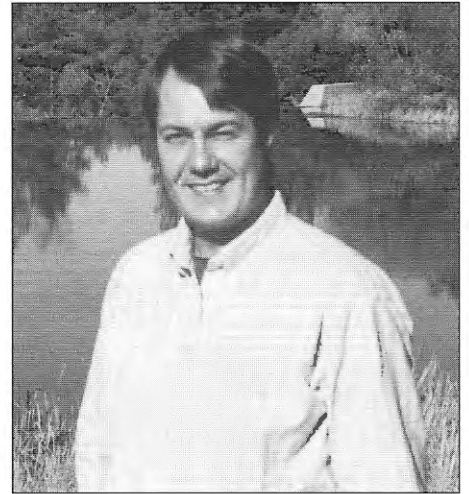
Scientology initially began showing an interest in the newsgroup in the

summer of 1994 when an alleged church plan to take over the newsgroup was leaked to the outside world and posted by a critic. The plan called mainly for a concerted effort on the part of Scientologists to simply out-post the critics, thus burying any critical remarks in positive testimonials and scriptural passages.

This mild and unsuccessful competition heated into a full-scale clash shortly after Christmas Eve 1994. That night someone anonymously posted some of the church's supposedly secret upper level teachings for all the world to see.

The church reacted almost immediately. They went to the service provider of the offending poster and demanded that the account be closed. Church attorneys sent letters to all anonymous remailers (a computer that people can send posts to which strips off their real Internet address before posting the text) requesting that they not allow anyone to use their remailers for a.r.s. or alt.clearing.technology, a newsgroup used by those who have left the church but still believe the teachings. Helena Kobrin sent a software command called "rnigroup" which is designed to remove a newsgroup from the entire Internet. While this command was essentially ignored by Internet providers, it brought immediate interest and concern from many Internet users to a.r.s. since attempting to remove an active newsgroup is considered offensive behavior and an attack on free speech.

In January an as yet unidentified Internet user began cancelling certain posts of church critics by forging the identity of the poster and sending a command to cancel. This cancellation procedure, which continues today, is usually targeted at those posts which discuss the church's upper level teach-



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ings or which contain quotes from Scientology scripture. Critics have responded to this activity by simply re-posting the cancelled material over and over and by posting relevant laws which seem to indicate that such cancellation is a crime.

Church attorneys succeeded in obtaining a search warrant against Dennis Erlich, a frequent critic on a.r.s., and on February 13 a cadre of Scientologists and off-duty police officers entered Erlich's home, spending the next seven hours going through his home and computer files. The warrant claimed that Erlich was violating church copyrights by posting their scriptures onto a.r.s. When other Internet users heard of this, a defense fund was set up and a law firm volunteered to defend Erlich.

These attacks by Scientology against free speech on the Internet produced demonstrations against the church on May 6 in Phoenix, Houston, Boston, and elsewhere. And the church reacted to these protests as well. Within the space of two weeks, after an earlier March 13 picketing in Phoenix, I received a visit from Eugene Ingram, a private investigator used frequently by Scientology to investigate critics; two private investigators sta-

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tioned themselves outside my home until the police were called and I confronted them; my phone company phoned to let me know that someone claiming to be Jeff Jacobsen had made three attempts to obtain information from my phone bill in the phone company's computer (there is a pass code on the account which prevents anyone without the code from gaining access); and I was served with a subpoena to be deposed in a civil case in which Scientology was named as a defendant.

Scientology critic Grady Ward also had a brush with Ingram. Ward's elderly mother was visited by a man calling himself Jack Hoff and claiming to be an old friend of Ward's. Ward's mother welcomed the man in, and even gave Hoff a photo of Grady with his children when Hoff requested one. When Grady found out about this visit, he showed a photo of Eugene Ingram that had been posted on the Internet to his mother. His mother identified Ingram as "Jack Hoff". Ward filed a theft complaint against Ingram.

Back on a.r.s., Scientologists began a remarkably brazen attack on church critics who were using pseudonyms. A Scientologist going by the name Vera Wallace somehow found out the true identity of a poster calling herself Tarlastar. Vera not only posted Tarlastar's real name, but her address as well. Four critics using pseudonyms had their true identities exposed in this way. After many complaints were made to Vera Wallace's Internet provider, it appears that her account was closed by the provider for breaching Internet etiquette.

As I am writing this, someone has posted what appears to be a death threat against a church critic. "Start digging your grave instead", warns the poster, "You'll be there any day now, most likely sooner than you think and 6 feet closer to your ultimate destination."

These and other tactics by those unhappy with the postings of church crit-

ics and the church's official representatives have stirred up animosity against Scientology by an enormous number of Internet users, many of whom had not had any concern or thoughts regarding the church previously. The church seems to be much more concerned with silencing its critics than creating good public relations on the Internet. So far, however, a.r.s. has grown in public awareness and use. Newspapers, radio, and magazines have commented on the attacks on free speech. Many newsgroups discuss the different aspects of the cancellations, the Scientology attorney letters, and the other breaches of ethics and morals displayed on the Internet.

The ability of the Internet to interconnect people quickly and cheaply,

and its ability to disseminate information (including photographs) to a wide audience, had made it more difficult than in the past for Scientology critics to be harassed without public awareness of such harassment. Internet users have rallied to the defense of a.r.s. and Dennis Erlich against the church's attacks.

For more information access the Internet newsgroup alt.religion.scientology or see Ron Newman's web page at <http://www.cybercom.net/~rnewman/scientology/home.html>.

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- cal and supervisory levels, and
- drawing upon studies and research.

The job includes the following:

Resource bank. Find out who claims expertise as to cult phenomena. Critically apprise everyone. Develop internal assessments as to which experts seem most reliable and for what purposes.

Strategic planning capability. (1) Plan how law enforcement, when confronted with a particular cult situation, can best learn how to deal with the group. (2) Review previous experiences of serious law violations involving cults. Invite outside viewpoints, and conduct a vigorous internal debate.

Training. Train law enforcement authorities who are most likely to have to deal with cults.

Also necessary are:

Access and attention. When a crisis breaks out the responsible law enforcement agency can determine which of its agents has developed tactical readiness.

Research. Congress should insist upon, and the national research team should draw upon, a strong research program for both law enforcement and civilian purposes. Such research should in no way compromise our national commitment to freedom of religion, speech and assembly and to due process.

A copy of the complete text of this document, including End Notes omitted because of space restrictions, is available from CAN. Send a self-addressed envelope with two stamps with written request. ❖

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rant patrons in order to provoke retaliation by law enforcement.

A 14-year-old girl who had lived at Mt. Carmel as a follower of Koresh when she was 10 years old testified to sexual abuse by Koresh.

Finally, Baylor University Professor and child-abuse expert Bruce Perry described the physical, psychological and social condition of the children who had left Mt. Carmel and the abuse situation implied by the children's condition. ❖