The modern Hydra: the Exclusive Brethren's online critics

A case study of cult awareness activism and community formation in cyberspace

Laura Dyason and Bernard Doherty

> The Internet can mobilize participation and group formation in conflicts and social movements, and can be used as a vehicle to enhance struggle and contending in conflict. Because the Internet provides fast and efficient communication and enhances information exchange among potential participants, it can provide an easy basis for people to share information and learn about a conflict, others who are involved and what tactics are useful in the struggle.[1]

One notable aspect of contemporary online discussions of religion is the vehement tone adopted by many participants. The general absence of traditional gatekeepers or editorial oversight in online forums has meant

Laura Dyason is an honours student at Federation University, Victoria. Her thesis project is entitled, 'Development and Management of Identity in Second Generation Former Members of the Exclusive Brethren'. Dr Bernard Doherty is Adjunct Lecturer in New Religions at St Mark's National Theological Centre, Charles Sturt University, Canberra.

that the discussion of various topics is often unmediated and unrestrained. Perhaps more in the case of already controversial religious groups than with mainstream churches, it is indisputable that a high degree of acrimony in discussions of religion is a marked feature of online discourse. Factors like the comparative novelty of the internet as a communications medium, a relative absence of non-textual social context cues, and the real or perceived anonymity of participants, have combined to make the internet an ideal platform for contemporary religious contestation and the implications of this online discourse have occasionally bled into offline social conflicts.

In this article we conduct a preliminary exploration of how the controversial Christian group, the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, usually referred to as the Exclusive Brethren, have become the topic of what Swiss scholar of religion Jean-François Mayer has dubbed 'cyberspace propaganda wars'.[2] We will examine how the offline practices and various ideological perspectives existing within the Cult Awareness Movement (CAM)[3] have been transposed into cyberspace through a brief history and analysis of some of the major websites established by former members of the Brethren.

We suggest that these websites function in at least a dual capacity. On the one hand, these sites provide a support network, what Canadian sociologist Lorne Dawson has called 'virtual community',[4] fostering a public, interactive, enduring, and regulated network for former members to engage in mutual support. On the other hand, these sites provide a platform for a sustained critique of Brethren beliefs and practices, whereby former members of different ideological persuasions can not only vent their frustration regarding what they consider the negative aspects of Brethren practice, but moreover where they can engage in propaganda campaigns against their former coreligionists. We examine this second aspect utilizing the theoretical lens of E-Space propaganda (proposed by Canadian sociologist Douglas E Cowan) to outline some of the major strategies used by these sites.[5]

Taking a controversy online

Since at least the 1960s when a series of newspaper reports began to appear pertaining to the Exclusive Brethren, the group has been the subject of infrequent bursts of media attention, largely due to its strict adherence to the doctrine of separation from what members consider the evil practices of the wider world. Over the period from the 1950s through to the present, the Brethren as a group have displayed a high degree of what sociologists

call 'sectarian tension'[6] and have maintained tight communal boundaries between community members and mainstream society, placing strict limitations on the degree to which members can interact socially beyond the Brethren community.

When these boundaries are transgressed by Brethren members this usually results in a member being 'shut up', a disciplinary process whereby their interactions with the wider Brethren community are severely restricted for an indeterminate period of time. If an errant member is considered by elders within their local assembly to be unrepentant, the member is then 'withdrawn from', essentially a form of excommunication which severs their ties with the Brethren community.[7] Those 'withdrawn from' are subsequently subjected to varying degrees of religious shunning by members in good standing, which often includes immediate family. In cases of what are considered more serious sins (for Brethren those sins outlined in passages like 1 Corinthians 5:11–13), being withdrawn from is an inevitable outcome in order to maintain communal moral purity. Being withdrawn from is never an irreversible condition, but few individuals withdrawn from subsequently return to Brethren fellowship.

This process has severe outcomes, for those withdrawn from, many of whom suffer greatly from the challenges of adapting to the world outside the tight-knit Brethren fellowship with minimal or no social support; but also for family members who remain in fellowship, who are often faced with the dilemma of choosing between their religious adherence—and, more often than not, the only social world they have ever known—and contact with loved ones. While it is difficult to estimate how many families have been affected by this situation, it is widely held that up to 8,000 Brethren left the group over the period 1953–70, with a greater concentration of these being in the northern hemisphere, especially following the so-called 'Aberdeen Controversy' of 1970.[8]

Since Bruce D Hales became worldwide leader of the Brethren in 2002 there have been promising signs of a less rigid approach to separation, with the leadership openly acknowledging that some past disciplinary actions may have lacked procedural fairness, along with some attempts to facilitate minimal contact between separated relatives. However, these approaches, referred to as 'The Review', have been treated with suspicion by many former members and in most instances renewed contact has been short lived. As such, separation continues to be the major source of contention surrounding

the group, fuelling criticism and scrutiny of other arguably less controversial aspects of Brethren communal life.[9]

Prior to 2005 the tensions surrounding the effects of the doctrine of separation tended to emerge sporadically as the result of media reports outlining the experience of former members who had been withdrawn from. In certain cases the published memoirs of former Brethren regaled experiences both within the group and after their departure, almost always under contested circumstances and with a significant degree of animosity. This status quo of infrequent exposure, however, changed rapidly in 2005 when the group became the subject of newspaper headlines after a series of high-ranked Brethren members were linked to third-party election advertising donations supporting the incumbent government of Prime Minister John Howard and the conservative electoral campaign of then New Zealand opposition leader, Don Brash. Subsequent investigative reports revealed individual Brethren also engaging in the funding of advertisements in the USA, Sweden, and Canada.

While this situation was heavily reported in the Australian and New Zealand media at the time, one important but largely unexplored aspect of this controversy has been the role played by internet websites critical of the Brethren. Anti-Brethren websites have fostered and maintained a network of predominantly ex-Brethren members in a series of inter-related campaigns aimed at exposing what they feel are the malevolent activities of the group. This ex-member network has also sought to encourage government and regulatory bodies to institute social control measures against the group's activities (e.g. by campaigning to have the group's charitable exemptions and state funding for their schools overturned). Mayer calls these kinds of campaigns 'cyberspace propaganda wars', and notes that 'for those lonely former members who felt they had to confront and expose international movements they had left, the Internet provided them with an unprecedented venue for voicing their complaints and concerns.'[10]

The role of the internet in escalating conflict between former members and the Brethren cannot be underestimated. Indeed, the relatively new site of contestation provided by cyberspace has clearly provided a more effective means for countermovement mobilization against the group. As former Brethren member Joy Nason has written in her recently published autobiography:

> In 2000 I heard about a website entirely devoted to matters concerning the Exclusive Brethren. *The first time I visited this site was a pivotal moment for me.* My initial reaction being—who could possibly care? I was wrong. A great many people did care. Their horrifying histories were revealed in stark detail on this site. They were my soul brothers and sisters from another life, their stories were my stories.[11]

Nason's experience of encountering and engaging with a virtual community of former Brethren is similar to that recounted by numerous others who have found support and a voice on the succession of three websites critical of the Brethren. Beginning in 1997 with former Brethren member Dick Wyman's website, ExclusiveBrethren.net, these websites have emerged at different stages of a wider controversy that has been taking place offline, each generally more elaborate than the last, and each building on subsequent developments and trends in communication technology to facilitate—if not necessarily achieve—a greater reach within cyberspace and to further the basic countermovement tasks of 'information assembly, management, and dissemination.'[12]

The anti-Brethren web: a brief history

The first significant website dealing with the Brethren (ExclusiveBrethren.net) was set up in 1997 by former member Dick Wyman. Wyman had left the group in 1963 at the height of James Taylor Junior's tightening of the group's boundaries. After a short stint in the US Air Force, Wyman moved into computer programming and eventually decided, after over twenty years working in IT, to set up his own website. He chose the theme of the website because he felt that there was insufficient information online regarding the Brethren. Wyman's original site, discussed in some detail by Australian investigative journalist Michael Bachelard, was a relatively low-tech affair, featuring mainly textual resources and web links to other information available online. More importantly, it featured a guestbook that 'allowed former members of the Brethren to make contact with one another, seek out lost members of their families, and to tell their stories.'[13] A sizable number of former members like Nason chanced upon this site and, according to Wyman, at its peak the website had around 5,000 pages of information and was being updated almost daily.

In addition to this Wyman's site also contained documentary material on the Brethren's history and links to other online resources of varying accuracy. As was the case with later websites, Wyman's website also provided a space for comments by various participants on media and academic articles dealing with the Brethren. Wyman vetted most of these comments before posting, however, to remove any overtly offensive material or spelling errors. Wyman described his own purpose in a BBC *Everyman* program in 2003:

> The Brethren were deliberately trying to conceal their activities from the general public and I wanted to provide a counter-balance to this secretiveness that the Brethren insist on maintaining about themselves.[14]

This said, Wyman noted in the same documentary that his own perspective had become somewhat more 'conciliatory' over time and while some of the material on his website was very negative, Wyman himself remained an earnest and moderate critic. As the Webmaster of the more developed Peebs.net website, Tim Twinam, notes:

> [Wyman] was a fatherly man, a very thoughtful man, with an academic kind of approach, who simply started a guestbook. And that's what took off, he was searching for himself, asking 'What am I, what's my background?' And he was creating an online story and allowing other people to put theirs up, too.[15]

While a modest enterprise, Wyman's site provided a preliminary platform for giving voice to an assemblage of participants in what Canadian sociologist Susan Palmer has dubbed the 'equalization of perspectives' offered by the internet. [16] Writing in regard to similar sites which appeared during this period, Palmer notes:

> Since the late 1990s, the dissident voices of hitherto powerless minorities inside the NRMs [New Religious Movements] can be heard by fellow members and by outsiders. These include second generation members (adults, teens or children), dissident members, ex-members, fringe members of the group, ex-wives, discarded lovers or alleged rape victims of the charismatic leader, and even rival, schismatic prophets.[17]

Prior to Wyman's site, the perspectives of former Brethren members were limited to occasional biographical pieces in newspaper reports and autobiographical memoirs which had limited circulation. With the arrival of Wyman's site, and considerably more so with its successor, Peebs.net, former members became able to tell their stories en masse, and utilize this new communication platform to reconnect with former friends and estranged family members who had also left. As Bachelard perceptively summarized:

> This was in the early days of community activism on the internet, well before social-networking sites began, but members of this unique and traumatised community eventually found Wyman's site and began using it with enthusiasm. For many of them, it was the *first time they had found anybody else who had gone through similar experiences, and the first time they felt that they were not mad or alone*.[18]

Despite its popularity with former Brethren, Wyman's site was not without controversy, not least when in October 2000 a disenchanted current member of the Brethren contacted Wyman and began providing internal details about the group to the website, which eventually found their way onto a documentary on BBC's *Everyman* television program. This documentary told the stories of a group of former members as well as featuring interviews with prominent Brethren elders in Britain, an early example of the bridging of controversy between different forms of communications media which has expanded exponentially in recent decades. In early 2004 a defamation suit for copyright infringement, business interference, and other matters was filed by the Brethren's publishing arm, the Bible and Gospel Trust in Minnesota, against both Wyman and Canadian Daniel Little, who, since July 2003, had been primarily responsible for the upkeep of the website's guestbook. Wyman closed the site in February 2004 in response to this, noting that the closure had been for 'personal reasons.'[19] The lawsuit was eventually settled out of court with Wyman being paid $10,000 and apologizing to the Brethren for any offence caused.

While there was a short-lived site set up by Daniel Little (http://www.withdrawnfrom.com), the next phase of this online controversy was instigated by American-based Englishman Tim Twinam, who founded Peebs.net in 2004. Like many of the more active ex-members who have utilized

these websites, Twinam's family had been withdrawn from in 1970 when he was aged just 15, after his father had questioned the Brethren leader at the time. As was the case with Nason illustrated above, Twinam noted the importance of Wyman's website in fostering his interest and helping him to come to terms with his unconventional religious upbringing. As journalist Andy Bromage observed in a report on Twinam's later legal problems:

> Twinam says he never thought much about his upbringing until, in 1998, he discovered a website, ExclusiveBrethren.net, devoted to reconnecting former followers. The stories Twinam read there—of broken families, shattered lives and people driven to despair—*dredged up long-buried memories*.[20]

Just as it had been for Nason and Wyman, for Twinam this was a journey of self-discovery, as he told Bromage, 'Suddenly, I discovered why I am who I am … I started to understand my life, why I'd been a little bit different'.[21] When Wyman's site was abruptly closed down in early 2004, Twinam contemplated setting up his own, although he was initially hesitant about potential legal actions like those Wyman had encountered. However, when changes in law allowed for the confidential registration of web domains in California, Twinam decided to step into the breach that had been left by the closure of Wyman's site. Over the following four or more years Twinam and his wife updated the website daily, connecting former members through both public and private forums.

A software developer by profession, Twinam was able to design a more sophisticated internet platform which encompassed, among other features, the entirety of the guestbook feature from Wyman's site, as well as documents on the Brethren's history, in particular focusing on the controversies over the events in Aberdeen in 1970 and what Twinam, and others such as Nason, had claimed 'were unmistakable signs that the Exclusive Brethren had become a cult'.[22] The site also included a virtual memorial entitled 'Suicide and Murder' for a series of former members who had died either by suicide or, in at least one case, murder. These cases, the virtual memorial claimed, featuring press reports or short biographies, were linked in some way with the deceased having left the Brethren. At the time of its closure, the site alleged that it was 'currently researching nearly 50 deaths that deserve investigation'.[23]

Far more interactive than Wyman's site, particularly in its latest incarnation before it was pulled down in early 2013, Peebs.net amassed an extensive archive, and described what it anticipated would be further development to create a 'modern state-of-the-art web environment'.[24] Moreover, the site crossed over from being a mere repository of information and medium for communication to developing an active offline network of 144 helpers in twelve countries who offered exiting Brethren 'a wide range of voluntary services including shelter, counseling, friendship, financial help, jobs and the special bond that cult survivors share'.[25] It is likely that it was this function, which Twinam 'credited with having saved lives'[26]—together with the outside developments described above which had brought the Brethren into sharper public focus—which saw the website become a target of Brethren litigation.

While the tone of the site's content was generally negative, Twinam claimed that he did not 'wish the death of the Exclusive Brethren', but rather the 'ability of families to talk'.[27] Regardless, in 2007 the Bible and Gospel Trust sued Twinam and his wife for copyright infringements relating to material which he boasted he had obtained from Wyman's now defunct site, in contravention of the earlier legal settlement with Wyman. The case carried on unsuccessfully for a number of years until Peebs.net was eventually taken down in early 2013, amid ongoing rumours among former members as to the circumstances of its demise. At the time of its demise, active participant and retired Scottish academic, Dr Ian C McKay, described the site as 'the main route through which damning evidence against the Brethren was disseminated by ex-Brethren'.[28] While information gathering and dissemination was a major feature of this site, its social function for ex-members appears to have been equally important. As Bachelard noted when asked about it by another journalist:

> [Twinam's] using a tool that is incredibly powerful … I've heard many times the story of people who come out and are separated from family and feel completely alone in the world, *until they come across this website and feel community again*.[29]

Soon after Peebs.net was taken down the latest site, Wikipeebia.com appeared. In the words of McKay, 'fighting the Internet, whether by bribes, threats or litigation, is a bit like fighting the legendary Hydra. Every time you chop off one of its heads, another two sprout up in its place'.[30] Loosely

based on the Peebs.net site design, but so far lacking the volume of content, Wikipeebia.com appeared in early 2013 but has yet to achieve the level of traffic attained by its predecessor. The reason for this, we suggest, has to do with a migration of former members to Facebook and Twitter for maintaining virtual community, rather than the public forum of Wikipeebia.com, which appears to have become largely the province of a small group of more activist participants. The website administrator of Wikipeebia.com has chosen not to publicly disclosed his/her identity, with the domain registered instead under the menacing name of the Amalek Group.

The emergence of Wikipeebia.com has coincided with the issues pertaining to a 2012–13 dispute between the Brethren and the Charity Commission for England and Wales. The website became a source for promoting the lobbying of politicians in support of the Charity Commission's original ruling, which had disallowed the registration of the Brethren's Preston Down Trust on the grounds that it 'had not demonstrated that it had sufficient beneficial impact on the wider community to meet the public benefit requirement to be a charity'.[31] Moreover, the website, especially through links to the blogs of key participants, seeks to emphasize what former members consider to be detrimental and harmful aspects of the Brethren on their members and the wider community. The Charity Commission agreed in January 2014 to register Preston Down Trust under a series of conditions, much to the chagrin of Wikipeebia.com participants. Since this time the website has sought to promote other campaigns, such as 'Tie a Yellow Ribbon',[32] in which former members tied yellow ribbons to the gates of meeting rooms mainly in Britain, recording the names of relatives still in the Brethren or deceased who the former members had lost contact with by virtue of being withdrawn from.

Wikipeebia.com also seeks to maintain a vigilant watch on Brethren activities, for instance, by the dissemination of negative press coverage via Twitter and Facebook and with a button on the welcome page inviting viewers to 'Report a Breach'[33] to the Charity Commission. This is an attempt to highlight what critics contend is the Brethren's self-interested campaign to maintain its charitable status—for example, through its establishment of Rapid Relief Teams to assist during times of community need with catering services. Similarly, the website has published documents critical of the Brethren's growing network of schools both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, which critics see as potentially damaging to social cohesion and in some instances receiving undue public funding. However, even critics

have conceded that in many instances these schools have performed at an above-average level.[34]

While this site has devoted bloggers and a small number of regular participants on its forum, the level of controversy and public interest in the Brethren has reduced in recent years. Moreover, litigation against both Wyman and Twinam by the Brethren has encouraged former members to move toward Facebook groups (with their privacy controls, opportunities for more effective vetting of members, and relative immunity from litigation) to provide a more secure online environment for the maintenance of the supportive functions of virtual community established on earlier sites. While the establishment of virtual community has thus far proven to be a more tangible outcome of the online discussion about the Brethren, it is equally important to examine the strategies of contestation which some participants on these websites have employed in their campaigns against the Brethren.

Cyber propaganda wars: strategies for online contestation

While drawing on a number of perspectives to analyze the strategies for contestation used on anti-Brethren internet sites, in this section we will draw in particular on Cowan's discussion of the use of propaganda in online contestation. Propaganda here is defined as:

> A systematic, ideologically driven, action-oriented manipulation and dissemination of information, which is (a) designed for a specific target audience, and (b) intended to influence the beliefs and behavior of that audience in a manner consonant with the aims and objectives of the propagandist.[35]

This definition does not imply any value judgment on the actors involved in anti-Brethren websites, but rather seeks to examine the wider communicative processes that can be observed in online contestation and the strategies adopted by participants. Of particular interest is how these relate to those strategies adopted by other players in the Cult Awareness Movement (CAM). Augmenting his earlier work with the late Jeffrey Hadden, Cowan identified four interdependent principles that condition whether or not a propaganda campaign is likely to be successful: (1) *affinity*; (2) *repetition*; (3) *consistency*; and (4) *simplicity*.

Each of the anti-Brethren websites has exhibited all of these principles. As suggested above, ExclusiveBrethren.net easily achieved *affinity,* specifically

among its target audience of former members. Many participants had been subject to the strict disciplinary processes of being shut up and later withdrawn from, and thus stories of these processes relayed on the website, coupled with the increased sectarian tension of the Brethren from 1950 onward, resonated with their personal experiences. This situation provided a readymade audience of former members with a direct affinity, even if, as the case appears to be, many had hitherto been fully integrated into mainstream society and built lives outside with little reference to their Brethren past. Peebs.net and Wikipeebia.com also achieved affinity, as indicated by the comment of Nason that Peebs.net became 'a place for former Exclusive Brethren to bare their souls, pour out their grievances and seek comfort in like-minded people'.[36]

These themes (and others discussed below) have also achieved some limited affinity with a critical non-Brethren audience and anti-cult activists who have already been sensitized to the negative image of the Brethren which has taken shape since the 1950s. This was summarized well by Harold Rowdon when he referred to the group as having 'forfeited the sympathy of all right-thinking people' and described their system as being comprised of 'crack-pot regulations, ostracism of non-conforming relatives, broken marriages and broken homes, inhumanity and even suicides'.[37] It is also worth noting is the way in which different types of media have overlapped here in fostering this wider affinity. Newspaper coverage of the Brethren has been almost entirely negative and the group's public image has on several occasions been severely tarnished, especially in the 1960s and in recent years. Furthermore, new media technologies like Facebook and Twitter have allowed isolated offline media coverage items to achieve a far greater circulation than had hitherto been possible in a pre-social-media environment, which leads us to the second principle of propaganda: *repetition*.

In terms of *repetition*, Cowan notes that for propaganda to be successful it must 'repeat [its] message constantly'.[38] One need only read the recurrent negative themes which emerge on these websites to see this aspect in play. Aside from the direct cloning of content between Wyman and Twinam's earlier websites, and the frequent posting and re-posting of negative media material, Wikipeebia.com contains an entire section of ex-member testimonies which contain formulaic accounts framed by a set of suggested questions like, 'Why did you leave or were thrown out?' and 'What was the reason you were withdrawn from?'[39] Furthermore, the site's

bookshop link contains a combination of recent former member biographies, critical journalistic books, classic secular anti-cult literature, and a selection of nineteenth-century evangelical counter-cult polemics against the Plymouth Brethren.

The perspectives adopted by contributors to the 'True Leavers Stories' section are notable for their ideological divergence. On the one hand there is a small group of participants who have adopted a more secular humanist, anti-cult perspective which draws on insights from counselling psychology or more popular anti-cult discourse (claims of brainwashing, for example). On the other hand, there is group who adopt a more religiously oriented counter-cult perspective, framing their discussion of the Brethren in terms of their post-Brethren Christian identity. As Nason has noted, 'the Peebs.net website was weighted with postings from former EB members who still clung tenaciously to their Christian faith,'[40] though Nason herself identifies as a secular humanist and utilizes the writings of popular anti-cult writers like Raphael Aron. The recurrent themes of secular, anti-cult discourse are all present here: allegations of family separation, child abuse, suicide, financial malfeasance, brainwashing, as well as more general issues like limited personal freedom and threats posed by the group to social cohesion.

In contrast to this, many religious counter-cult themes are repeated, such as criticisms of the allegedly un-Christian nature of Brethren beliefs and practices when compared with the more mainstream evangelical Christian groups who comprise the majority of Christian counter-cult writers. Most participants adopt what can be defined as a 'rationalist counter-cult perspective,'[41] whereby the Brethren are accused of failing to follow the teachings of Jesus, of perverting the Scriptures, of religious hypocrisy, and of more specific ecclesiological and sacramental aberrations (e.g. their understanding of separation and their adoption of infant baptism rather than believer's baptism). It is also interesting to note, as Italian sociologist Massimo Introvigne observed in a recent conference presentation,[42] that Wikipeebia.com also contains links to a number of anti-Brethren tracts, written by evangelicals during the nineteenth century and now readily available through archival websites, thus repeating a series of predominantly heresiological arguments that have circulated since the emergence of the Brethren in the late 1820s.[43]

It might at first appear paradoxical to find both secular and religious ideological perspectives derived from the CAM informing criticisms on this website. Yet this functions to increase the degree of *affinity* that the

critical messages find among a diverse body of former members, as well as to maintain its *consistency* by virtue of the repetition of the negative religious counter-cult and secular anti-cult themes outlined above. Many accusations posted on the site are not restricted to the Brethren alone, but are part of the wider discursive matrix of cult-awareness polemics. They thus amplify the potential affinity with target readers. As Cowan suggests, 'this ongoing replication allows countermovement Web sites to present a consistent message that is repeated over and over, a consistency that contributes in no small measure to the self-limiting construction of reality that informs such material'.[44] The repetition of a consistent message targeted at the specific audience of former members, both secular and religious, helps to reinforce the viewpoints contained therein and by virtue of this provides little or no space for competing social constructions of reality. Put simply, Wikipeebia.com presents a varied but hegemonic anti-Brethren discourse which brooks little in the way of alternative perspectives. Indeed, as British sociologist Eileen Barker noted regarding her own extensive experience with more negative sectors of the CAM, 'these anti-cultists had no intention of listening to anything that might require them to adjust their images—even if the information came from former members of the movements'.[45] On the rare occasion a Brethren member stumbles on to one of the forums and attempts to frame their beliefs in a more positive light, they are almost invariably met with a degree of hostility and incredulity. McKay summarizes the attitude of the general website participant toward Brethren contributions on Peebs.net:

> Brethren members often contributed fiercely to the discussions on these blogs, apparently trying to defend and support Hales Brethrenism, but seldom used anything more than empty assertions unsupported by evidence or argument, interspersed with *argumentum ad hominem*. Or in English, if you couldn't discredit the message, they would attack the messenger. Or sometimes they would warn him that he was heading for eternal torment in Hell.[46]

While the few Brethren contributions read this way, the hostility certainly goes both ways. This brings us to the final principle of propaganda: *simplicity*.

While these sites often contain some scholarly material which might provide more detailed analysis (although such are an exception), the

principle of simplicity, namely the deployment of 'simplified analysis of the problem and the proposed solution,'[47] is readily apparent on Wikipeebia.com as well as earlier sites. The general design of anti-Brethren websites has focused heavily on a highly simplified negative image of Brethren life. The Brethren are reduced to a two-dimensional image like the caricature by Rowdon quoted above. Here one of the attached blogs summarizes this simplified image quite well:

> This is the place for those interested in the Hales exclusive brethren cult who actively destroy families, castrate Gays, avoid paying taxes, cause suicide and murder and are told by leader Bruce D Hales to develop an utter hatred of the world![48]

Here the social construction of the Brethren is simplified and clear, and aims at the 'dissemination of information that "exposes" the group in question, its practices, and/or its leader(s),'[49] drawing on simplified sets of what British sociologist Stanley Cohen has dubbed an 'inventory of images'—that is, the way in which social phenomena are reduced to a set of exaggerated and distorted criteria.[50] Furthermore, by doing so the blogger above seeks to 'curtail the group's expansion in a particular social space'.[51] In other words, the construction of reality (or inventory of images) presented on Wikipeebia.com and earlier anti-Brethren sites mirrors those found in offline media that have been identified in earlier studies of how the group has been consistently portrayed as a threat to wider society and is, by extension, underserving of charitable status or public funds for its schools.[52] The simplified image of the Brethren portrayed here seeks to encourage government and regulatory bodies to institute social control measures against the group's activities, whether this be their earlier transgression into the political sphere, or more recently their amassing of public funding for their schools and religiously-based charitable exemptions, while still fostering a high degree of sectarian tension with the wider society.

Conclusions

In this article we have argued that in the case of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church 'the Internet … has provided critics with a relatively low-cost tool with potentially wide impact'.[53] However, while a significant amount of material —if not the majority—disseminated on websites like

ExclusiveBrethren.net, Peebs.net and Wikipeebia.com can be clearly identified as propaganda in sociological terms, this by no means exhausts the functional role played by these websites. Instead, we have suggested that a more important and successful function of such websites has been the establishment and maintenance of a virtual community of former members who engage in mutual support, admonishment and information sharing. Furthermore, we have demonstrated that while participants are by no means unanimous in their current beliefs, these websites provide a social platform for them to make sense of their shared pasts, as well as to seek amelioration for perceived past wrongs committed against them by the Brethren. In general, however, such sites lack wider appeal outside a small target audience of former members, largely as a result of their tailored discourse and the inwardly directed nature of the discussions. Such sites may achieve a strong affinity among former members, but little affinity with a wider internet public aside from those already sensitized to the Brethren's negative public image and CAM discourses. While we have touched upon aspects of the Brethren's response to these websites, such as their use of litigation in attempts to mute criticism or to preserve the integrity of certain internal documents, much more could be written regarding the development of the Brethren's own online presence and their internal negotiations about how they utilize the internet whilst maintaining strict communal boundaries. We hope in the near future to expand more on this important topic.

Endnotes

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2. Jean-François Mayer, 'Religious Movements and the Internet: The New Frontier of Cult Controversies', in Jeffrey K Hadden and Douglas E Cowan (eds), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, JAI Press, New York, 2000, p. 250.
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9. For suspicions about 'The Review' of 2002–03 see Ngaire Thomas, *Behind Closed Door: A Startling Story of Exclusive Brethren Life*, Auckland, Random House NZ., 2005, p. 293; David Tchappat, *Breakout: How I Escaped from the Exclusive Brethren*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, 2009, p. 237.
10. Mayer, 'Religious Movements and the Internet', p. 271.
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