

The Art of PR War: Scientology, the Media, and Legitimation Strategies for the 21st Century

Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses
2018, Vol. 47(3) 373–395

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DOI: 10.1177/0008429818769404

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Abstract: This article explores the relationship between the Church of Scientology and various forms of media, in particular the Internet. Building on insights in the academic literature, this piece attempts to fill a lacuna by giving more attention to some of Scientology's *own* media programs and efforts. With these in mind, the Church of Scientology is a case study in the challenges that a new religion faces in legitimating itself to an increasingly globalized audience in the digital age. On a popular level, Scientology parishioners seem increasingly open to discussing, defending, and disseminating Scientology on social media platforms. These efforts may encourage others accustomed to a Scientological *theology of evil* in which “entheta” should be avoided and “suppressive persons” (SPs) shunned. As such, socially engaged Scientologists, in particular second- and third-generation members, may become witting and unwitting foot soldiers on behalf of the church in waging an ongoing public relations war, and thus poised to legitimate Scientology to outsiders disinterested in or suspicious of “institutional religion.” This hypothesis is all the more intriguing and plausible in the American context, given the market share created by the heterogeneous “rise of the nones” (religiously unaffiliated/disaffiliated populations).

Résumé : Cet article s'intéresse aux rapports qu'entretient l'Église de Scientology avec divers médias, et plus particulièrement internet. En s'appuyant sur la littérature savante disponible, ce texte souhaite combler certaines lacunes en ciblant les plateformes médiatiques exploitées par l'Église de Scientology. La démarche permet d'observer

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l'émergence de nouvelles religions et leurs efforts de légitimation dans un monde globalisé et numérique, l'Église de Scientologie étant utilisée comme un exemple particulièrement représentatif. En effet, les membres de l'Église semblent de plus en plus enclins à discuter, défendre et promouvoir cette dernière dans les médias sociaux. Ces efforts pourraient être utiles dans la dispersion des idées polarisantes fondamentales de l'Église, par exemple les notions de « entheta » (personnes négatives qui doivent être évitées) et « personnes suppressives » (qui doivent être bannies). Ainsi, les Scientologues des deuxième et troisième générations pourraient bien devenir, à leur insu, les porte-paroles d'une institution constamment engagée dans une lutte médiatique, contribuant à légitimer l'Église aux yeux des non-pratiquants a priori méfiants envers les religions traditionnelles. Cette hypothèse est d'autant plus intéressante qu'elle est analysée dans le contexte américain, c'est-à-dire qu'elle participe d'un marché créé par les personnes non affiliées aux institutions traditionnelles.

Keywords

Scientology, media, new religious movements, public relations, “rise of the nones”

Mots clés

Scientologie, médias, nouveaux mouvements religieux, relations publiques, non affiliés

When one is not fighting a battle against black propaganda, public relations is easy.
—L. Ron Hubbard, “How to Handle Black Propaganda” (1972)

Victory is knowing when it is possible to engage in battle and when it is not possible to battle.
—*The Technology of War* (translation by Colin I. Thorne of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* (2010: 35)

The Church of Scientology, it has been argued, is the “most *persistently* controversial of all contemporary new religious movements” (Lewis, 2012; Lewis, 2015a). Surely one reason for this perception among scholars—evident even to casual observers—is the manner in which Scientology has been continually portrayed in the media *as* controversial (Doherty, 2014; Cusack, 2009, 2012; Thomas, 2013). From recent documentaries and journalistic exposés (*Going Clear*, Gibney, 2015, for instance) to the preponderance of secondary literature on Scientology that traces to disgruntled former members (typically former members of the church's clergy, the Sea Organization) to portrayals in venues such as *South Park*, the purpose has been clear: to expose, denigrate, ridicule, or otherwise delegitimize the Church of Scientology (its management, practices, and theology) in the eyes of the intended audience. This pattern is by no means new, of course, and the history of published works critical of Scientology in book form is an excellent case study (O'Brien, 1966; Cooper, 1971; Vosper, 1971; Burroughs, 1985; Kaufman, 1972; Corydon, 1987; Miller, 1987; Atack, 1990; Many, 2009; Hawkins, 2010; Reitman, 2011; Rathbun, 2013; Miscavige Hill, 2013; Sweeney, 2013; Wright, 2013; Ortega, 2015; Remini, 2015; Miscavige, 2016; Cannane, 2016). Looking to the

US, where Scientologists are most numerous (concentrated in Los Angeles and Clearwater, Florida), the result is measurable in a discernible lack of trust about Scientologists. In 2008, for instance, Gallup polled 1000 Americans and surveyed their views on a variety of religious traditions (with “total positive,” “neutral,” or “total negative” as options). The poll found that 52% had a “total negative” view of Scientologists—the lowest of all groups in the poll—after Muslims and atheists, respectively. Only 7% had a “total positive” view of Scientology (again the lowest), and 37% polled were “neutral” on the subject (Jones, 2008).

This article examines a little-known side to the skirmishes between the Church of Scientology and the media, namely the church’s *own* media efforts, at both the institutional and grassroots levels, which seldom receive attention. In addition to surveying some of these efforts, this article suggests that ongoing tension with the broader society may motivate more Scientologists at the grassroots level to become public relations advocates for the church in its ongoing attempt to legitimate itself in America and abroad (Lewis, 2003). Moreover, the “rise of the nones” in the United States¹—that is, the increase of religiously unaffiliated/disaffiliated populations—may provide the Church of Scientology a demographic with which it can expand its membership and legitimate itself in the country where its members and organizations are most numerous. In fact, as argued below, the church has already made apparent efforts to proselytize at least some segments of the American “nones” population. Whether this strategy will bear fruit remains to be seen as the Church of Scientology continues to wage a public relations war in the 21st century.

Scientology and Grassroots Counter-cult/Anti-cult Movements

Scholarship certainly has been written about the rocky relationship between the *Internet* and the Church of Scientology, in particular with respect to the ways in which it has been used by critics to publicly, even if anonymously, voice concerns and discontent about the organization (Lewis, 2015a; Schorey, 2012, 2015). However, a brief survey of this history is provided below in order to contextualize the broader role of the media and the church’s ongoing and evolving reactions to it.

Since the mid-1990s, the Internet has become, as I have argued elsewhere (Westbrook, 2015a), a platform for a series of *grassroots counter-cult movements* directed against the Church of Scientology.² These efforts qualify as “counter-cult,” “anti-cult,” or “cult-awareness” because the individuals in question regularly use the term “cult” to describe the beliefs and practices of Scientology and because they resemble earlier, more institutional efforts at delegitimation, most notably through the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) (Shupe, Darnell and Moxon, 2002; Shupe, 2009; Shupe and Darnell, 2006). However, what distinguishes the *digital* anti-cult movement is that it is diffuse and decentralized compared with the institutional or geographically rooted efforts of CAN. Also, unlike CAN, the Internet movements are not necessarily motivated (directly or indirectly) by a particular religious ideology that considers itself normative, in comparison with Scientology’s theological deviance. In the case of CAN, this was Christianity, given that many of those affiliated with its main office and branches were Evangelical or Protestant Christians influenced by the counter-cult milieu (Patrick, 1979; LeBar, 1989).

Instead, these grassroots online efforts are quite often decidedly secular in nature, in that their members often display skepticism toward religious institutions and traditions in general.³ These critics have found in Scientology the personification of harmful and institutional religion, which they believe is all the more pernicious because the church's legal and corporate nature led to attempts to shut down online sites. This, in turn, sparked protests against the church, including allegations of free speech infringement (Coleman, 2014; Cannane, 2016).

The earliest online anti-Scientology forum, the newsgroup *alt.religion.scientology*, was created in 1991 by Scott Goehring. In its early years, it was a forum for debate about both positive and negative aspects of the church and the Scientology religion. However, by 1994 and 1995, the newsgroup began to sharpen its anti-cult edge when ex-members Dennis Erlich, Arnie Lerma, and Bob Penny used the forum to publish versions of the church's confidential Operating Thetan (OT) materials. As a result, church attorneys approached the three and alleged that posting the materials violated copyright and trademark law and revealed trade secrets. In 1995, federal marshals, working in conjunction with Religious Technology Center (RTC) Scientologist representatives, searched for and confiscated confidential materials in all three of their homes.⁴

Evidently posting the confidential materials was intended to ridicule and denigrate Scientology teachings or perhaps represented an exercise in freedom of speech. However, from the church's standpoint, the online publication was a grave violation of its legally protected and confidential sensibilities of the sacred and esoteric. Ultimately from the critics' viewpoints, however, the church appeared to be little more than a bully armed with lawyers. As Erlich put it while police and RTC representatives searched and photographed his home, "I don't have a lawyer, and I couldn't afford one even if I did... all they trashed was my fucking civil rights."⁵ The *alt.religion.scientology* episode and this early history illustrate differences of opinion related to the First Amendment (US Constitution), with the church appealing to it in support of freedom of religious expression (and protection), and Erlich and others online appealing to it in support of their right to free expression and dissent. Meanwhile, the increased presence of negative information about Scientology from the 1990s onwards has discouraged Scientologists from searching about the church on the Internet, due in part to potential access to confidential scriptures but more generally out of a concern about exposure to negative and critical information—under the umbrella of what Hubbard, in his penchant for neologisms, termed "entheta" (or "enturbulated theta," which is to say negative and mentally/spiritually disruptive energy) (Hubbard, 2007c). In the late 1990s, some Scientologists even installed software to filter out negative online information about Scientology,⁶ although these counter-efforts have proven somewhat unnecessary (and irrelevant) in recent years, given, for instance, the self-censorship that I encountered among Scientologists and the proliferation of smartphones and other digital that provide numerous and unlimited digital access points (Westbrook, 2015a).⁷

Historically speaking, arguably the next major grassroots online push against the church came in 2008, when the online group Anonymous launched "Operation Chanology" in response to the church's objection to a YouTube video featuring Tom Cruise at an International Association of Scientologists (IAS) event.⁸ The event in

question was an IAS anniversary where Cruise received the association's highest honor, the Freedom Medal of Valor Award. Once again citing copyright law, attorneys for the church demanded that the video be removed, but it remained online due to persistent efforts and viral communication, notably through the persistent efforts of the now-defunct website Gawker. However, as in the Erlich case, the effort to have the video removed was viewed as an infringement on free speech. In "Message to Scientology," posted to YouTube on 21 January 2008, a distorted and unrecognizable voice representing the collective Anonymous delivered a message set against the ominous backdrop of a stormy sky:

Hello, leaders of Scientology. We are Anonymous. Over the years, we have been watching you. Your campaigns of misinformation, your suppression of dissent, your litigious nature—all of these things have caught our eye. With the leakage of your latest propaganda video into mainstream circulation, the extent of your malign influence over those who have come to trust you as leaders has been made clear to us. Anonymous has therefore decided that your organization should be destroyed. For the good of your followers, for the good of mankind, and for our own enjoyment, we shall proceed to expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form. (Anonymous, 2008)

Anonymous's attacks first came virtually (for instance through denial-of-service (DoS) attacks on church websites) but evolved into organized non-violent protests in 2008 and 2009. These included anywhere from a handful to hundreds of protestors at churches around the world, most prominently in Los Angeles and Clearwater (Coleman, 2014). Members of Anonymous profess no hierarchal leadership and instead claim to be comprised of a digital, democratized, and international network of individuals who support a libertarian and anarchist philosophy (Schorey, 2012; Pendergrass, 2013; Olson, 2013; Coleman, 2014). Protestors wore Guy Fawkes masks, based on their popularization in the graphic novel (and movie of the same name) *V for Vendetta* (2006). Wearing these masks created a sense of solidarity among the protestors and also concealed their identities, philosophically in line with the movement's name, and frustrating to the church because it could not easily identify individuals (Urban, 2011: 196, 207). However, Anonymous's efforts against the church dissipated by 2009, and seemed to have had little long-term and mass effect on the parishioners and staff members I interviewed, and in fact the protests seem to have paradoxically strengthened the resolve and communal solidarity of at least some Scientologists. One Sea Organization (Sea Org) member in Los Angeles, for instance, who was present during the 2008 protests, recalled to me that he felt "annoyed" by the protestors and "sorry" for them, and ultimately went about his business unaffected (Westbrook, 2015a). Also, there has been criticism among church members that some Anonymous "protestors" were in fact uninvolved outsiders paid to stand outside churches. One parishioner I interviewed in San Jose, for instance, claimed that one of his friends was solicited on behalf of Anonymous to protest for \$20 an hour, on the condition that he wear the Guy Fawkes mask. "I didn't care really what it was," the friend reportedly said, to which the San Jose parishioner responded: "You really need \$20 an hour? I know plenty of places that will hire you to do something a hell of a lot more productive" (Westbrook, 2015a).

Although Anonymous's campaign against the church was relatively short-lived, it does seem to have had at least one long-lasting and significant repercussion, namely that it seemed to embolden former members and critics of Scientology to become more vocal and publicly engaged in their disagreements with the church. The evidence for this changing *Zeitgeist* is the proliferation of blogs since 2010 authored by critical former members, some of whom were senior executives who worked with David Miscavige and even with Hubbard himself.⁹ Most of these individuals are apostates who no longer identify as Scientologists, while others claim to be "independent" or "Free Zone" Scientologists who practice outside the church and may even hold out hope that the church will reform itself (Lewis, 2013). However, what they have in common is a disdain for the church and its practices, in particular Miscavige's leadership, an inordinate focus on fundraising, and the abuse of policies such as disconnection (i.e., individual and institutional shunning). The church is variously referred to as a cult, "corporate Scientology," and the "Church of Scientology" (Lewis, 2014). Since 2010, the church has waged its own war against this new brand of critics, launching and supporting the launch of dozens of websites that counter what it considers false claims, perhaps most notably via the Church of Scientology International's *Freedom* magazine. In addition, the church maintains its own official websites, though these typically contain little, if any, reference to critics—namely *Scientology.org*, *ScientologyNewsroom.org*, and *ScientologyReligion.org*. Presumably this new online assault will be exacerbated in the event that disaffiliated but independent Scientologists offer Dianetics and Scientology services outside the church. This is because the delivery and in particular the unauthorized commercialization of Dianetics and Scientology would attract more legal attention, much as they did when *alt.religion.scientology* drew the legal ire of RTC.¹⁰ However, at present, the church's current web counter-offensive is primarily a public relations battle, since most of the critics seem to be both disaffiliated from the church and unaffiliated with any form of Scientology.

These grassroots responses reflect the current major legitimation struggle for the church. The well-known and decades-long *tax war* with the IRS for tax-exempt status involved one *institution* pitted against another, but in the case of Anonymous and dozens of anti-Scientology blogs the church has pitted itself as a kind of Goliath against the would-be Davids who no longer seem to feel threatened by legal or extra-legal means of retaliation. Instead, the church and these grassroots anti-cult efforts are engaged in an *ideological war*, in which the critics allege that Miscavige has altered Hubbard's technologies, broken apart families, and fostered a culture of intimidation and abuse within the church (Urban, 2011: 6; Lewis, 2014). However, this new "war" against diffuse and decentralized foes may spur on an entirely new brand of Scientology public relations counter-offensive, in which the church is less concerned with *countering* Hydra-like enemies than in *proselytizing* and focusing on positive contributions to increase its membership base looking ahead to the rest of the 21st century. In order to do so, the Church of Scientology may ironically profit by appealing to a segment of apparently secular American society that at first glance seems to have more in common with its recent anti-cult antagonists: the "rise of the nones," in particular the subset known as spiritual-but-not-religious "seekers" (Pew Research Center, 2012).

“Rise of the Nones” as a Resource for Proselytization and Legitimation?

According to the US-based Pew Research Center in 2012, approximately one-fifth of Americans are religiously *unaffiliated* in some sense (Pew Research Center, 2012). This amounts to over 60 million individuals. And more recent statistics from Pew suggest that these numbers are likely to continue to rise for the foreseeable future (Pew Research Center, 2015a, 2015b, 2016). Taken as a single group, the “nones” rival other major religious traditions in the United States, for instance Evangelical Protestants (26.3% or about 80 million), Catholics (23.9% or about 75 million), and mainline Protestant Churches (18.1% or about 55 million) (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Of course, the “nones” are not as homogeneous as these other religious groups due to the diversity of intellectual positions and the general lack of institutional support and membership bodies.¹¹ According to Pew, in 2012 the unaffiliated category predictably consisted of atheists (2.4%) and agnostics (3.3%), but the largest percentage was “nothing in particular” (13.9%). This latter category also represents a significant portion of the American population, approximately 40 million. A 2012 joint survey by Pew and PBS’s *Religion and Ethics News Weekly* found that many of the religiously unaffiliated consider themselves religious or spiritual in a personal, but not institutional, sense. For instance, 68% believe in God and 37% consider themselves “spiritual” but not institutionally “religious.” And the largest segment of the unaffiliated category are Americans under the age of 30, who represent one-third of the “nones” (Pew Research Center, 2012). In other words, generationally speaking, the single largest portion corresponds to the Millennials, who are generally viewed as individuals who were born between the early 1980s and early 1990s.¹²

On the face of it, the religiously unaffiliated may seem like a poor market for membership in the Church of Scientology. After all, according to the Pew survey, 88% are “not looking” to become a member of a religious tradition. However, 10% are presently “looking,” indicating that at least a slice of this market, within which the Millennials figure most prominently, is open to surveying the multitude of alternative religions on the American landscape, including Scientology (Pew Research Center, 2012). Indeed, if recent marketing is any indication, the church has implicitly acknowledged that it is interested in this demographic as a source of new membership. Since 2012, the church has advertised itself in a decidedly secular and surprising venue: the Super Bowl. The 2012 advertisement, in particular, appeared to be geared toward a Millennial audience, based on its inclusion of young actors and the content and tone of its message:

To the rebels, the artists, the freethinkers and innovators, who care less about labels and more about truth, who believe nonconformity is more than a bumper sticker, that knowledge is more than words on a page . . . sure, some will doubt you . . . let ‘em. Dare to think for yourself, to look for yourself, to make up your own mind, because in the eternal debate for answers, the one thing that’s true is what’s true for you. (Church of Scientology International, 2013)

At the end of the video, the website address “Scientology.org” flashes and lingers on the screen. The conclusion of the script, of course, is reminiscent of Hubbard’s “Personal

Integrity” article (“What is true for you is what you have observed *yourself*”) but even more significant is the church’s apparent recognition that new recruits could come from a growing population of Americans for whom traditional religious institutions are antiquated and unappealing (Hubbard, 1961).¹³ Ironically, the appeal to the “rebels, the artists, the freethinkers and innovators” may even be a direct appeal to the very types of individuals in chat rooms, in Anonymous, and on anti-Scientology blogs, who would theoretically be diametrically opposed to the church’s practices and theology. However, again the type of Millennials or “nones” targeted are presumably spiritual-but-not-religious seekers, not the stereotypically angry atheists or skeptics who might theoretically or factually align with the secular anti-cult; and one can even imagine a libertarian subset of the seeker demographic that sympathizes with the church’s campaigns against “Big Pharma” and coercive psychiatry (Westbrook, 2017b).

If my assessment is correct, it is still rather perplexing that after gaining tax-exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in 1993—and the de facto imprimatur of religious status—the Church of Scientology would now engage in a campaign to recruit a population effectively disenchanting with the very brand of institutional religion that the church now eminently personifies.¹⁴ However, this strategy arguably makes perfect theological sense, because spiritual-but-not-religious Millennial seekers do not have a pre-existing religious affiliation that would pose a problem for dedicated membership in the church. If, as I have concluded elsewhere (Westbrook, 2015a, 2017a), most long-term Scientologists identify exclusively as Scientologists despite the church’s apparent all-denominationalism, and this is due in part to a gradual shedding of prior theological affiliation as one moves up the Bridge to Total Freedom,¹⁵ then targeting this demographic presents a possibly quite ideal sociological solution. It solves the problem of future incompatibility by removing the very source of incompatibility in the first place: prior spiritual or religious affiliation. Indeed, if successful,¹⁶ the result could be new recruits who, much like first-generation members born out of the counter-culture of the 1960s,¹⁷ would be relative *tabulae rasae*, unencumbered by spiritual commitment, and open to experiencing the unique and alternative brand of religion Scientology represents.

This possibility, of course, speaks to societal forces in the larger and evolving religious/non-religious makeup of the US and suggests that the spiritually-minded segment of the “nones” may be a fluid demographic whose future self-identification is in development in ways that include experimentation with both traditional and non-traditional forms. Thus, such individuals may be prime recruits for Scientology as well as *other* traditions (both mainline and alternative) seeking to expand their market share in the American religious economy. However, in the Church of Scientology’s case, success in this regard might require first or simultaneously waging and winning a public relations war in which it counters perceptions of authoritarianism, abuse, and regulation of criticism online. Otherwise, the church will likely be perceived as hypocritical in its mis-sociological approach and alienate the very rebels, artists, freethinkers, and innovators that it seeks to include in its flock—although it is also quite possible that spiritual contrarians might still be attracted to Scientology’s philosophy and practices out of sympathy with an institutional underdog in a state of tension with the larger society (Stark, 1996).

In the absence of such engagement, or even aided by it, I suggest that the church’s current second- and third-generation membership will discover means to make Dianetics

and Scientology more relevant for a 21st-century audience. This will be necessary for the church's long-term survival in conjunction with its impressive corporatized efforts at self-preservation and self-perpetuation. One generational mechanism that can be used is the *culturally bilingual sense* in which children of Scientologists, including second-generation Sea Organization members, are familiar with contemporary popular culture as well as with the peculiarities of Scientology's theology and ecclesiology (Westbrook, 2015a). These individuals and their parishioner counterparts will be in a unique position to lead the church, having learned the lessons of their parents who often experienced marginalization due to leaving a former religious tradition, and the possible resulting condemnation from their own parents or friends. One additional challenge is that many members are simply unfamiliar with the history of their own church or the particulars of the legitimation battles that can be traced from the 1950s to the Internet age. A degree of historical literacy will therefore be required, especially given the abundance of data freely available on Internet for popular consumption.

However, one challenge to the social engagement of second- and third-generation members will be a degree of insularity within the church that has some basis in Scientology's theology of evil. As one Clearwater parishioner described to me, some members of the church continue to suffer from a "bunker mentality" due to the persistence of prejudice against the church (Westbrook, 2015a). This sectarian spirit is theologically aided by Hubbard's teachings on anti-social personalities or "suppressive persons" (SPs), who are believed to be detrimental to one's physical and spiritual well-being. Information critical of Scientology is also to be avoided, as it is "entheta" and very often the product of SPs who are intent on misleading others about the "true" nature of Scientology's spiritual technologies. They thus act, as Hubbard put it, as "Merchants of Chaos" (his label, incidentally, for journalists as well) (Hubbard, 1963). The interplay between Hubbard's theologizing of the dangerous suppressive Other and the consistent presence of criticisms of Scientology outside the church may imply that the church *by design* will continue to marginalize itself and its members from greater social engagement. However, this does not seem to be a theological or sociological inevitability; in fact, the realities of sectarian tension can inform a new religion's self-assessment and therefore its possible and eventual navigation from the margins to the mainstream of American religious life (Bainbridge and Stark, 1980).¹⁸ For instance, despite this theology, I formally and informally encountered many Scientologists in their late 20s and early 30s who are in fact quite familiar with the viewpoints of outsiders, from criticisms in blogs and *South Park's* ridicule to tabloid preoccupations with celebrity members. Despite this influence, they remain dedicated and Bridge-advancing Scientologists and view themselves as all the stronger. "There's power in knowledge," one member said. "It's like LRH [L. Ron Hubbard] said, you have to look for life's answers 'in the real world'" (Westbrook, 2015a: 335; Hubbard, 2012: 139).

Case Studies: Strategies to Wage a PR War

Finally, this article presents a number of case studies in illustration of the church's (and Scientologists') own media counter-efforts. Some of these expressions are institutional responses to external public relations threats, for instance special issues of *Freedom*

magazine, which the church has published since 1969. Others are purposed with the direct dissemination of Dianetics and Scientology to parishioners and outsiders. For instance, in 2011, the Church of Scientology International purchased a television station in Los Angeles (the former site of KCET, a local public station) and reincorporated it as Scientology Media Productions (SMP), which opened in May 2016. The Scientology Network (Scientology TV) launched in March 2018 and broadcasts programming on behalf of the church and its community partners, both in and outside the United States. As David Miscavige noted in his speech at SMP's opening: "We also open our doors to humanitarian organizations, charities and religions of every denomination. Our facilities will be open for all manner of community events, telethons, religious programming of all faiths, you name it" (Church of Scientology International, 2016b).¹⁹ Another recent effort comes from the Scientologists Taking Action Against Discrimination (STAND) League, which was founded by the church and now sponsors a blogging community and active Twitter page (over 102,000 followers as of January 2018). Church officials and parishioners post blog articles at STANDLeague.org to describe their own success with Scientology and counter misperceptions and stereotypes about the religion.

But in addition to these progressive and inter-faith institutional efforts, there are grassroots efforts—analogue to the grassroots anti-cult actions described earlier—in which individual Scientologists are increasingly using the Internet and social media. That is to say, Scientologists themselves are creating more and more of a presence for the purposes of self-communication, apologetics, dissemination, and proselytization—outside of the institutionalization of the church's internal public relations apparatuses (most notably its Office of Special Affairs at the international and local levels). Another way of putting the point is that both the Church of Scientology as an institution and Scientologists as individuals are seeking to *legitimate* themselves to the societies in which they operate. However, if we witness a trend toward increased and substantial participation of individual Scientologists who use forms of media—television, radio, Internet, social media—these methods may more accurately fall under the umbrella of a Vietnamese "war of attrition," in which small victories and defeats may incrementally yield public relations and legitimation returns at the grassroots level.

Dozens of websites stand out in this regard for consideration, both church-sponsored and from individuals. One example is *ScientologyMyths.info*, which appears to be the work of a Scientologist named Louanne Lee, who mostly posts on the basis of sources from the Church of Scientology itself.²⁰ This site is essentially one long Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page on a host of classically controversial Scientology topics: the OT materials, the "Free Zone" (Independent Scientology), journalistic exposés, prominent ex-executives such as Marty Rathbun, the church's stance on homosexuality, the Guardian's Office, and many others. The information posted on *ScientologyMyths.info* is clearly pro-Scientology and supports the positions of the Church of Scientology—for instance countering the legitimacy and claims of "squirrel" (splinter or heretical) groups.²¹ It thus operates in a manner that *dead agents*—Hubbard's "technique of proving utterances false" that can be traced to *The Art of War*—the "black propaganda" about the church and the religion that abounds on the Internet, in the media, and in popular culture at large (Hubbard, 1972).

Other sites are much more clearly grassroots in orientation and origin, such as *Dissem.org*, which until 2017 offered links to webpages of members in good standing who maintain independent blogs on Dianetics and Scientology. This most notably included *field auditors*—those affiliated with the church’s International Hubbard Ecclesiastical League of Pastors, or I HELP)—who rely on the Internet as a way to advertise themselves and stay connected in order to recruit pre-Clears (PCs) from around the US and world. The auditors’ websites also served to advertise the spiritual benefits or “wins,” as they are called, that their PCs achieved in auditing and auditor training.

Another example is *ScientologyParent.com*, a US-based site created and maintained by Scientology parishioner Tad Reeves that features posts from Scientologists who blog about the uses of Scientology in parenting. This includes a myriad of claimed benefits, such as the minimization of noise and especially speech during birth and other traumatic episodes as outlined in *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (originally published in 1950), and even promotion of a barley-based formula Hubbard created for infants. It should be noted that this particular site does link to the church’s official website and directs viewers to online courses, for instance one entitled “Successfully Raising Children Course,” and invites Scientology parents to submit their own parenting stories as guest posts; more recently, in an arguable bid to capitalize on its readership for the sake of improved public relations about Scientology at large, the site has expanded its content to include posts on topics such as disconnection and brainwashing (Scientology Parent, 2017).²²

There are international examples as well, including non-English websites. One of the most prominent and certainly one of the most revealing as a case study is *EricRoux.com*, the personal website of French Scientologist Eric Roux. Roux is a minister at the Church of Scientology’s Celebrity Centre in Paris who also serves as the church’s chief spokesperson and interfaith activist in Europe. He is unique because, to my knowledge, he is the only Scientology staff member in the world who works in public relations *and* has his own Scientology-related website, as well as his own active Twitter feed, where he reposts blog entries and videos of interviews conducted with French media. Given that no other single public relations representative in the church maintains such a prominent digital presence, it seems quite possible that Roux would maintain a similar presence as an individual Scientologist even if he did not hold a staff position. In any event, it is a revealing model and case study that might serve as the basis for replication among other PR staff in and outside Europe.

If more public relations staff members (Sea Org and non-Sea Org) were as prominently and vocally pro-Scientology on the Internet, it would provide more of a “face” (or “faces,” as the case may be) to the public relations network of the church—in much the same way that particular individuals have served this purpose in the past at the international level (e.g. Heber Jentsch, Mike Rinder (now a vocal critic with a blog of his own), and Tommy Davis). In the absence of familiar faces, the Church of Scientology International has largely communicated to inquiries in the form of press releases, and, as one might expect, through official Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube postings. One exception to this rule might be the official Facebook page of David Miscavige (listed as “David Miscavige, Leader of the Scientology religion”), although it appears that the posts and responses come from church staff members and reflect much the same material that is

posted at the official Church of Scientology Facebook page (searchable on that site simply as “Scientology”).

Or Are the Ships Passing in the Night?

Robert Vaughn Young, a former Scientology public relations representative who became a vocal critic in his later years, remarked in the early 1990s that the Internet would prove to be Scientology’s “Waterloo”—which is to say the turning point that precedes institutional decline and system-wide failure (Cook, 2008). This military analogy has been repeated by others (Urban, 2011: 178; Lewis, 2015a; Coleman, 2014) and the idea, furthermore, is that the Internet would be the last major battlefield in which the obviously evil “cult” would be unable to overcome the negative PR that would result from the hydra-esque and often anonymized onslaught that exposed its true and inherently destructive ways. However, given the complexities of the digitized and globalized age, not to mention the church’s counter-efforts, this sort of analogy seems simplistic. In any event, the Church of Scientology has continued to exist in the age of the Internet and social media. There is evidence to suggest that church membership has dropped since the 1990s, and there certainly are examples where Scientologists have left the church due to the “entheta” they encountered online (Urban, 2011; Lewis, 2014). But it is also true that new members join and old members remain, which only serves to caution the observer that the presence of critical information on the Internet is not quite the “Achilles’ Heel” one may have hastily predicted in the nascent days of the Information Superhighway (Westbrook, 2015a).

At the same time, it bears repeating, the church has been known to invoke the language of “battles” and “war” to characterize external conflicts—most famously with the announcement of the 1993 victory against the IRS to secure tax-exempt status, which is well known within the church as the “War is Over” event. In fact, I chose the title “The Art of PR War” precisely because Sun Tzu’s classic *The Art of War* continues to be standard reading for public relations officials, based on Hubbard’s own familiarity with and use of the text in his “PR Series” writings (Hubbard, 1970).²³ A Sea Organization member connected with the Office of Special Affairs International, Colin I. Thorne, even re-translated the seminal text from the Chinese and published it as *The Technology of War* (Tzu, 2010).²⁴ The substitution of “Art” with “Technology” in the title is a clear reference to Hubbard’s use of *technology* as a description for his own body of work and in particular the scientific precision required to deliver Dianetics and Scientology exactly as the founder intended. This translation is relevant for understanding public relations (among other subjects) from a Scientological point of view and deserves further study—both on its own terms as a new translation of a classic text and as a translation by a long-term Sea Org and OSA staff member who worked for the Church of Scientology International.

Despite the demographic tools and institutional/grassroots efforts outlined above, a researcher may still have reason to remain skeptical of the public relations potential of the church’s activities to counter the flow of critical information in its ongoing war with the media. This is chiefly due to the church’s habit of responding to critics in a manner that arguably hurts, rather than helps, its larger public relations objectives. To be fair, in

recent years the church has seemed to view the proliferation of anti-Scientology websites more with annoyance than antagonism, with the exception of those relatively few former members and critics who are vocal and exert influence as “opinion leaders” over the dozens and in some cases hundreds of regular online interlocutors. However, as an example of a curious and self-defeating strategy, take the 2011 special issue of *Freedom* magazine entitled *The Posse of Lunatics: A Story of Lies, Crimes, Violence, Infidelity, and Betrayal* (*Freedom Magazine*, 2011). In this instance, the church’s *delegitimation* strategy was to personally discredit former members and their claims about the organization. In combination with the often equally *ad hominem* anti-cult attacks online, the current situation may seem stalemated; in any event, the church’s apparent “tit for tat” strategy falls short of the more substantive and reasoned responses one might expect from a bona fide religious organization. This is all the more the case in light of Hubbard’s own moral teachings, for instance his formulations of the Silver Rule and Golden Rule in *The Way to Happiness*: “Try Not to Do Things To Others That You Would Not Like Them to Do To You” (Precept 19) and “Try To Treat Others As You Would Want Them to Treat You” (Precept 20) (Hubbard, 2007a).

At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that the church’s aggressive and *ad hominem* response strategies do in fact find support in some of Hubbard’s other writings in the larger context of what I have elsewhere described as Scientology’s systematic theology (Westbrook, 2015b). As early as 1955, Hubbard wrote: “The DEFENSE of anything is UNTENABLE. The only way to defend anything is to ATTACK, and if you ever forget that then you will lose every battle you are ever engaged in, whether it is in terms of personal conversation, public debate, or a court of law” (Hubbard, 1955). And this call to action in the social arena traces back even earlier to his prescription for the direct handling of engrams in *Dianetics* (originally published in 1950): “We know that there are five methods of handling an engram. Four of them are wrong. To succumb to an engram is apathy, to neglect one is carelessness, but to avoid or flee from one is cowardice. *Attack* and only *attack* resolves the problem” (Hubbard, 2007b: 216).

But, one could interject, might this Scientological mindset that the “best defense is a good offense” invariably lead one back into the “bunker mentality” mentioned by the Scientologist from Clearwater? Quite possibly it could, especially if it continues to lead to skirmishes in which the Church of Scientology is perceived as a petty public relations Goliath pummeling the Davids in its path. Another alternative is that *pro*-Scientology communities (in person and online) may continue to form but remain overly sectarian in nature, with little if any commerce with non-Scientologists, including ex-members and critics, who would remain content (again in person and online) to stay in their own *anti*-Scientology communities. In such a scenario, perhaps the language of “war of attrition” is misleading and, instead, the image of fleets of warships passing in the broad digital daylight should come to mind. They may sail in the same expansive online oceans but with little if any acknowledgement or awareness of one another—and by self-design and intention. Critics among critics, Scientologists among Scientologists, self-censorship and confirmation bias on both sides, with little if any permeability despite the fact that the world is theoretically more globally inter-connected than ever. Perhaps the “pro” and “anti” camps would have an occasional skirmish—usually when someone publicly

leaves the Scientology organization: the latest “defector” or “deserter,” depending on which side you are on—but then the waters would eventually settle back down as the combatants acclimatize to a new equilibrium of insiders and outsiders. Something along these lines may explain why, on the one hand, the Internet has not quite proven to be Scientology’s “Waterloo” after all. Of course, on the other hand, it also suggests a sociological stalemate that is only problematized by the challenges of depersonalized communication in the digital age—the tendency to “troll” rather than empathize, and foster civil dialogue and mutual understanding.

John and Jane, who *happen to be Scientologists*—in addition to being parents, children, teachers, community volunteers, and so on—are thus *reduced to that label* and with it all of the Otherizing baggage: John “the Scientologist,” Jane “the Scientologist.” (And precisely the same could be said of Jim and Joan the *ex-Scientologists*.) Connecting once more to Scientology’s theology of evil, the stalemate may seem unavoidable given the doctrine that the suppressive person (SP) is *not* to be dialogued with, precisely because there are no means to, as it were, “handle” him or her. The only solution, for a bona fide SP, are to disconnect from (shun) the suppression—the antithesis of engagement.²⁵ So theologically, as well as communicatively, there is once more a possible *built-in problem* that divides those “with” the church and those “against” it, including as collateral damage those who might otherwise prefer to communicate across enemy lines in constructive and even diplomatic ways.

However, discussion of suppressive persons is related to another key and often overlooked concept in Scientology, namely the relationship between *good* and *evil*, or between what Hubbard termed “theta” versus “entheta.” Hubbard originally described these forces in his 1951 book *Science of Survival* and in more detail in the following years. In that 1951 book, and in a more rudimentary way in the 1950 book *Dianetics*, Hubbard introduced the notion of a *Tone Scale*, namely a series of tones or emotional levels that any individual might occupy, whether chronically or acutely, from serenity of beingness at the top to total failure at the bottom, with “tone levels” throughout, such as exhilaration, enthusiasm, cheerfulness, conservatism, boredom, antagonism, anger, resentment, covert hostility, and apathy (Hubbard, 2007c). Each of these levels even has its own specific number, in keeping with Hubbard’s quantifiable sensibility, and the basic idea is that, the higher one is on the Tone Scale, the more one is operating in a manner that maximizes theta (life energy) and minimizes entheta (enturbulated theta).

One corollary of this theology is that as a Scientologist, one can in effect communicate—indeed transmit—theta (or for that matter, entheta) according to *one’s tone level* but also according to *one’s actions*. This notion even shows up in the grammar of some American Scientologists, for instance in phrases such as “that person is so theta” and “that website is just entheta designed to enturbulate others.” In other words, from a Scientologist’s point of view, one possible solution to the stalemate described above and to the unwillingness to dialogue with a suppressive person would be the proliferation of pro-Scientology websites that have the effect of spiritually infusing the Internet with theta. If enough Scientologists were engaged in such an activity, then theoretically this would tip the so-called “theta/entheta ratios” of the Internet and the media in favor of theta and thus help turn the tide in the Church of Scientology’s battles against “black propaganda” (Hubbard, 1972). This mindset already exists in the church with respect to

church-set auditing (counseling) targets. For example, the Flag Service Organization in Clearwater, Florida has the goal to put 10,000 individuals on and through the auditing level OT (Operating Thetan) VII, on the assumption that doing so will release enough positive spiritual energy (theta) into the environment and help tip the world's "theta/entetha" ratios in favor of planetary calm and in the direction of "Planetary Clearing."²⁶

Of course, the public relations problems of Scientology are not solely caused by the low numbers of Scientologists engaged in public discourse and may in fact only be partially related to this syndrome, in addition to obvious factors such as legitimate grievances leveled against the church in and outside its walls, both privately and publicly. But it certainly does seem to be the case that the Church of Scientology's and Scientologists' further engagement with the media could lead to a higher degree of transparency and cross-cultural understanding for the public at large, whose knowledge of Scientology typically does not come from the internal media efforts described above but from the dominant narratives of apostates and critics. As David Miscavige put it at the grand opening of Scientology Media Productions (SMP) in Los Angeles in May 2016: "Because as the saying goes, if you don't write your own story, someone else will. So, yes, we're now going to be writing our story like no other religion in history" (Church of Scientology International, 2016b). It remains to be seen exactly what role this facility and the Scientology Network might play in disseminating and legitimating Scientology in the digital age in a manner that moves beyond polarizations and stalemates to capitalize on the zeal of individual Scientologists amid the shifting demographics of religion in the 21st century.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Mathilde Vanasse-Pelletier for inviting me to present an earlier version of this article at the New Religious Movements and the Media workshop she co-organized with Professor Solange Lefebvre, Chair for the Management of Cultural and Religious Diversity, at the University of Montreal (March 2016). Jean Larivière of the Church of Scientology of Montreal was kind enough to provide a copy of Roland Chagnon's 1985 work. Two anonymous reviewers provided a wealth of feedback that further enhanced the method and content in a number of areas. Finally, my thanks, as usual, go to Yvette Westbrook for superb copy editing.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. While this article focuses on the United States, where the vast majority of Scientologists reside, this is of course not to suggest that the "nones" phenomenon is limited to America or, for that matter, to North America. For quantitative and qualitative data on non-religious

- populations across the globe, see Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale (2016), Zuckerman (2007), and Lewis, Currie, and Oman-Reagan (2016).
2. To be sure, the Church of Scientology is not alone as an online target. Other examples, on smaller scales, include The Family International and the Exclusive Brethren.
 3. Indeed, some new religion researchers, such as Massimo Introvigne, have referred to “religious counter-cult” or “secular anti-cult” orientations, but these still largely concern institutional forms of antagonism. See Introvigne (1995).
 4. Federal marshals also searched the home of Lawrence Wollersheim. See Urban (2011: 184–188), which describes the relationship between these events and preceding Wollersheim and Fishman cases.
 5. The video of the raid and confiscation is available on multiple sites, including YouTube. See Erlich’s “Informer Ministry” (2013).
 6. This was a content filtering software to be used with Microsoft Windows 95. In addition to censorship of negative websites, the program afforded church members the opportunity to create a personal website, introduce themselves as Scientologists online, and meanwhile produce “prevent anti-Scientology” search engine results. Many of these websites are still in existence and display a uniform template, including sections such as “About Myself,” “My Success,” “My Favorite Quote,” and “Groups I Support.” See, for example: <<http://home.scientologist.org/cjensen/myself.htm>> (accessed 3 January 2017).
 7. The filtering and reappropriation of digital information by and within religious communities has been fruitfully explored in the work of Heidi A. Campbell (2010).
 8. The video featured an interview with Cruise before he received the medal from Miscavige. The video is now on public display in Ideal Org churches, and easily found online as well (for instance, YouTube).
 9. A simple Internet search reveals examples of blogs from former members who worked with various church entities.
 10. The rise and fall in the early 1980s of the Advanced Ability Centre (AAC) splinter group, founded by former Sea Org member David Mayo in Santa Barbara, is a notable example.
 11. However, American organizations do exist, such as the Skeptics Society, Center for Inquiry, Council for Secular Humanism, Freedom from Religion Foundation, American Humanist Association, American Atheists, Atheist Alliance of America, Secular Coalition for America, and Secular Student Alliance.
 12. Zuckerman (2012) includes qualitative research on apostasy with respect to this American demographic. For a recent and relevant quantitative analysis of census data from Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, see Lewis (2015b).
 13. Over the years the church has collected statistics about its membership, including about past and present religious affiliation(s), which deserve systematic analysis. In the interest of documentation, and to encourage further research, some of these statistics are included here, with percentages related to the religiously unaffiliated (“nones”) put in italics. Notably, the “nones” represent the third largest groups represented in church survey data discovered from 1978 and 1998, indicating the possibility that this demographic has persistently been attracted to Dianetics and Scientology, which would make sense given church efforts to position Hubbard’s creations in non-religious ways (for instance in the scientific and pragmatic language of “technology” and “applied religious philosophy”). However, it is also possible that the “nones” represented here are simply first- or second-generation members who solely and

- exclusively identify as Scientologists by virtue of preference or upbringing. Church of Scientology of California (1978: 246) reported data from a June 1977 survey of 3028 Scientologists on the subject of “Religious Background” as follows: non-Catholic Christian (38.44%), Roman Catholic (25.89%), no religious affiliation (20.64%), Jewish (6.57%), Eastern religions (1.75%), unspecified Christian faiths (0.82%), other specified Christian faiths (1.8%), Methodist (0.36%), Scientologist (0.33%), Baptist (0.13%), and no answer (3.2%); 70% of these survey respondents indicated “Yes” when asked “Do you consider yourself still to be a practicing _____?” (although a further breakdown by religious tradition is not provided). Unfortunately, Church of Scientology International (1998: 567) provides less detailed information (for instance, this last question from the 1977 survey is omitted, and no sample size is given). However, the following data is provided in a section entitled “Vital Statistics of Scientologists Across the Globe”: Protestant (27.3%), Catholic (26.0%), none (23.8%), Jewish (5.3%), Eastern religions (1.0%), other (6.3%), and no answer (10.3%). In 2012 and 2013, I conducted in-depth interviews with 69 Scientologists across the United States in preparation for my dissertation. In response to the question, “If you were not raised in the church, what was your religious affiliation, if any, before becoming a Scientologist?” 61 affirmative responses were recorded as follows: Protestant Christian (41%), Catholic (26.2%), none (11.5%), Jewish (18.0%), Eastern religions (1.6%), and Muslim (Nation of Islam) (1.6%). For further details and analysis, see Westbrook (2015a: 351–355, 2017a: 33–34). Of course, percentages will vary depending on geography, for instance reflecting much larger Catholic percentages in France and Canada, as confirmed in the work of Régis Dericquebourg (1998: 168) and Roland Chagnon (1985: 85–94), respectively.
14. Other recent efforts include the “Meet a Scientologist” campaign, which began in the 1990s and in the late 2000s took the form of brief video testimonials. These arguably represent attempts to normalize Scientologists to the broader society as a means to encourage visits to churches and ultimately foster proselytization. Many of these videos feature young adult Scientologists (Church of Scientology International, 2016a).
 15. Bryan R. Wilson (1998: 140–141) made a similar point in an anthology published by the Church of Scientology International worth quoting in full: “A distinctive feature of Scientology is that members are not required to abandon other religious beliefs and affiliations on taking up Scientology. It might be inferred from this feature that Scientology contented itself with being a merely additional or supplementary set of beliefs and practices, but such an inference would be unwarranted. I have spoken with senior Church officials as well as individual Scientologists on this aspect of Scientology and their response was that while exclusivity is not required, it comes about as a matter of practice. According to them, as one becomes more involved with Scientology, one inevitably discards one’s prior faith. For example, my experience is that a Jew who becomes a Scientologist might remain affiliated with Judaism for cultural reasons and might celebrate Jewish holidays with family and friends, but he or she would not practise and would not believe in Jewish theology. From my view as a scholar this explanation seems correct. Scientologists regard their faith as a complete religion demanding dedication of its members.” This article has been reproduced by the church on its ScientologyReligion.org site: <<http://www.scientologyreligion.org/religious-expertises/scientology-analysis-and-comparison/scientology-and-other-faiths.html>> (accessed 3 January 2017).
 16. I am not aware of the quantifiable impact of this or subsequent Super Bowl ads and am here referring to a possible long-term legitimization tactic in the digital age.

17. Indeed, prior studies of recruits to new religious movements discovered that most came from non-religious or nominally religious homes. See note 13 for a sample of data about the current and former religious affiliations of first- and second-generation Scientologists.
18. The Amish and Exclusive Brethren are two quite contrasting cases in point. Both have developed surprisingly permeable social boundaries with the broader society in spite of separatist theologies and practices.
19. This relative openness to collaboration with the media also makes sense in light of the church's more progressive and less aggressive relationship to others in its legal affairs. See Urban (2010).
20. This same Louanne also (semi-regularly) maintains a Twitter account (@scientologymyth). I cannot find independent evidence that there is a Scientologist named Louanne Lee, so it is possible that this is a pseudonym. However, judging from the writing style and the infrequency of posts, it seems that there is one individual who consistently uses this account and posts on ScientologyMyths.info.
21. Hubbard (2007e: 310) decreed that the organization of "a splinter group to use Scientology data or any part of it to distract people from standard [that is, orthodox] Scientology" constituted a "Suppressive Act" worthy of excommunication.
22. Examples include "Disassembling the Media Myth of Brainwashing," ScientologyParent.com, 3 January 2017, available at: <<http://www.scientologyparent.com/disassembling-the-media-myth-of-brainwashing/>> and "Religious Choice of Children Raised in a Scientology Family," ScientologyParent.com, 29 December 2016, available at: <<http://www.scientologyparent.com/do-children-raised-in-a-scientology-family-have-to-stay-in-scientology/>> (accessed 4 January 2017).
23. Hubbard also recommended the 1964 textbook *Effective Public Relations* co-authored by academicians Scott M. Cutlip and Allen H. Center. In fact, the church's Bridge Publications, Inc. (BPI) re-published a special edition featuring Hubbard's views in red type (notes, underlining, and even entire pages crossed out) for the purpose of PR training. A note on the copyright page of that edition reads (also in red script): "This edition of 'Effective Public Relations' has been especially produced for Church of Scientology personnel. It is not for resale and is only available as course material for inclusion in the Public Relations syllabus for Church and Mission staff. It is not for resale." The following note is included two pages later to underscore this point: "Special edition printed by Bridge Publications, Inc." (Cutlip and Center, 1964).
24. The text is available on Amazon (Kindle) and viewable in full on Google Books.
25. The theory and theology here is that suppressive persons (SPs) ought to be shunned because they are anti-social personalities who inevitably wreak havoc and have little to no chance of rehabilitation. Hubbard wrote that approximately 2.5 percent of the population is suppressive (anti-social), with 20 percent of the population negatively affected on mental and spiritual levels by virtue of these connections. For more about this theology of evil (suppression) in historical perspective, especially its connection to what I refer to as Scientology's "anti-psychiatric theology," see Westbrook (2017b) and Hubbard (2007e: 203, 207, 226–227).
26. This apparently arbitrary number traces in one instance to a 1952 lecture in which Hubbard referenced 10,000 as a key number needed to bring about lasting social change. He told the audience: "At any one time on Earth there were not more than about 10,000

people of a caliber that was sufficient to do a little steering or leading” (Hubbard, 2010: 205). Another source in support of this number, though less commonly attributed, came in October 1953, when Hubbard told another audience: “People condemn Dianetics and Scientology and say we’ve got a lunatic fringe! Sure we got a lunatic fringe, you bet your life. But do you know the only people interested in this, really, are an intellectual strata which number, I’m afraid, amongst the first five or ten thousand in the United States. You know there are only about ten to fifteen thousand intellectuals in this country? That’s a horrible fact, isn’t it? But it’s true enough. I’ve checked it up often enough” (Hubbard, 2007d: 180). Approximately 7000 Scientologists have started or completed OT VII as of early 2017. See Westbrook (2017a: 31).

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