

# **Sustainability and Radical Rhetorical Closure: The Case of the 1996 “Heaven’s Gate” Newsgroup Campaign**

Robert Glenn Howard

*Because of its multilateral structure, Usenet newsgroups offer their users the benefit of rich audience feedback. When sustainable, feedback dramatically expands an individual communicator’s audience. In the summer of 1996, the H.I.M. religious group used multiple posts to Usenet newsgroups to try to locate individuals who might join their spiritual community. However, H.I.M. failed to garner a large audience and, as a result, failed to locate new members through Internet newsgroups. This occurred because the group’s posts did not conform to the “negotiative” rhetorical tactics typical of newsgroup discourse. Negotiative rhetorical tactics encourage feedback and imply a pluralist attitude. As a negative case, the H.I.M. newsgroup posts of 1996 indicate that individuals who believe they have attained certain knowledge can disregard the influences of a pluralistic medium because their beliefs allow them to value benefits that differ from those most obviously associated with that medium. This level of rhetorical closure may imply the potential for dangerous antisocial behavior.*

*Key words: Internet, new religious movements, “Heaven’s Gate,” rhetoric, recruitment*

**I**n late March of 1997, the Heaven’s Gate group committed mass suicide, emerging from obscurity to fill mainstream news media with a host of troubling questions. The members of the group were well educated, and they created a Worldwide Web design company that seemed to be successfully riding the technology boom of the late 1990s. How could successful and Internet savvy individuals join a community so profoundly antisocial that it led them all to take their own lives?

As attested to both in direct statements and in rhetorical tactics used in online discourse, the members of the H.I.M. (or

“Heaven’s Gate”) religious group were clearly motivated to join the community by a spiritual or “revelatory” experience. Based on this experience, seemingly normal people came to believe they were multidimensional beings, their human bodies were only “containers” for those beings, and ultimately, their containers were to be sloughed off through ritual suicide.

While the reasons individuals give for their motivation to join alternative religious groups are diverse, typical patterns do emerge. Many individuals cite social reasons for maintaining religious affiliations because they are rooted in a deep sense of shared community. Often a personal experience with the divine unites alternative religious communities in a belief that members share a special knowledge. Sometimes this experience comes at a turbulent time in a new convert’s life. Individuals recount addiction to narcotics and alcohol, involvement in criminal activity, difficult family breakups such as divorces, and even just a general sense of depression brought on by a loss of direction in their lives (Barker 25-31). However, as New Religious Movements scholar Timothy Miller notes, these factors often also rely on a “profound spiritual experience” (6).

For the members of H.I.M., this sort of defining revelatory experience was the norm, and this experience led them to use radically rhetorically closed discursive tactics in their Internet communication. In 1996, the members of H.I.M. attempted to locate new members through the dialogic medium of Usenet newsgroups. However, because they used tactics that implied a radical rhetorical closure, they failed to contact any new believers. This closure was the result of their reliance on revelatory experience as the basis for their beliefs.

In their 1996 email campaign, the H.I.M. members posted to over eighty newsgroups looking for individuals who were, although unaware of it, hosting multidimensional beings in their bodies. From the H.I.M. perspective, the only way one could discover this being was through an intense direct experience. This direct experience seemed to be so powerfully persuasive that the individuals who had it chose to commit suicide. Because of their belief in the necessity of direct experience, the rhetori-

cal tactics employed by the newsgroup posts seek to create a direct connection with the divine, a revelatory experience, in their audience. They seem uninfluenced by the medium's most obvious benefit (rich audience feedback) and deploy few if any rhetorical tactics that are necessary to the creation of sustained discourse in newsgroups.

After the pivotal media studies of the 1970s, there can now be little doubt that the medium that is used for a particular communication has an effect on the communicative act (Altheide and Snow; Ellul; McLuhan; Postman). A medium in which the unilateral transference of what appear to be incontrovertible facts would not seem to encourage participation in a discussion. Very few individuals attempt to negotiate with their television sets. In the same way, media with multilateral transference of what appear to be opinions should be expected to encourage audience feedback and discussion. Normative modes of communication in newsgroups should encourage "negotiative" or discussion-centered tactics over "revelatory" ones. Previous research indicates that fundamentalist Christians engaged in traditionally experiential discourses have taken on more negotiative styles in their Internet discourse (Howard "Apocalypse in . . ."). One factor contributing to this behavioral pattern may be a perceived resource of "sustainability" as a primary benefit of using the newsgroup medium. By "sustainability," I refer to the ability of a particular medium to sustain a particular discourse over time and thus expand the actual quantity of discursive behaviors associated with the defined discourse.

Online discourse must, like traditional discourses, support social processes that convert resources into valued benefits (Butler). The Usenet newsgroups were designed to be and remain one of the most open and multilateral communication media. The newsgroup medium offers the resource of feedback from a large audience. The longer the exchange and the more individuals involved in an exchange, the more responses the participants generate to any individual post and the more the resource of audience feedback is increased. In this way, one primary value of using the Usenet newsgroup medium for any discursive ex-

change is in this ability to generate a large amount of responsive discourse. The longer a given discursive exchange is sustained, the more response generated. For its users, sustainability becomes a primary value of the Usenet newsgroup medium.

Anticipating the possibility of rich feedback, initiatory newsgroup email posts should exhibit rhetorical tactics that encourage audience response. However, in the case of the H.I.M. newsgroup posts, the data present a negative case. As professional Web site builders, the H.I.M. group was very Internet savvy. As early as 1995, members of the group were participating in newsgroup discourse. There is evidence that at least some members of the group were capable of generating audience response through negotiative rhetorical tactics. Still, the H.I.M. posts of 1996 disregard this resource and make no attempt to generate sustainable discourse. As a negative case, the H.I.M. posts show that individuals who believe that they have attained certain knowledge can disregard the influences of arguably the most pluralistic and multilateral of the Internet media because their beliefs encourage them to value benefits that differ from those most obviously associated with that medium. An extreme example, the H.I.M. data points toward the role radical rhetorical closure can play in the failure of any pluralistic medium to act as an inhibiting factor on monologic communicative behaviors.

## **Methods**

For this research, I am employing the single case study method to explore the claim that Internet media users engage newsgroup communications to gain the benefit of sustainability. An extreme example, this case is critical in how clearly it demonstrates one way in which individuals can choose not to engage in the norms encouraged by a given medium. As a single negative case, this study raises important questions about the potentially complex relationships between individual perceptions of benefits offered by a given medium and the communicative behavior that the individuals exhibit in that medium (Yin).

This article contributes to a growing scholarship that addresses the unique methodological needs of research on net-

worked communication. In order to advance the interpretive aspect of this method, this article presents a specific case study of the tactics employed by members of this religious group in their mass emailed messages during the year before their ritual suicides. Discourse analysis brings to light what goals the group sought to realize through its use of Internet media.

That data for this case study is threefold. First, I was able to conduct an email-based interview with the only surviving member of the H.I.M. group at that time. Second, the 1997 Web site that the group left behind is the source for their beliefs because it contained the clearest and most full statements of these beliefs less than a year after the 1996 Usenet newsgroup posts. The third source of data for this case is the 1996 newsgroup posts.

Usenet newsgroups are one of the earliest Internet information sharing protocols. In essence, they are electronic posting areas where individuals can read and post topically defined emails. The medium was designed to encourage dialogic communication. In 1979, before the public Internet was brought into being, two graduate students at Duke University decided to attempt create a "poor man's ARPANET." ARPANET was the government network that would later integrate to become the Internet. This desire to have a non-government ARPANET led to the 1979 formation of the Unix Users Network or "Usenet." First, Usenet "newsgroups" were largely sets of computers that regularly used modems to telephone batches of messages to other computers through an informally arranged pattern. Sharing the newsgroup software, these computers could transmit a dynamic set of messages and organize them on a bulletin board that resided on all the individual computers that were using modems to call each other. A highly informal and distributed system, the driving philosophy of the Usenet was to create a non-political and non-governmental medium that offered its users a place to communicate from equal dialogue positions (Castells 23ff).

In 1981, Usenet's informal array of computers linked by modems was moved to the University of California at Berkeley's computer servers where it had access to the early Internet. The limitations of modem dialing overcome, Usenet exploded from

400 sites in 1982 to 11,000 in 1988. Gregory G. Woodbury, a Usenet pioneer, described the idealistic hopes many held for the supposedly egalitarian nature of newsgroup communication in those early years: “News allowed all interested persons to read the discussion, and to (relatively) easily inject a comment and to make sure that all participants saw it” (cited in Hauben).

By 1996, newsgroups were one of the primary non-Web based modes of Internet communication. Since anyone could publicly post, it was possible for the H.I.M. group to attempt to locate new members through the medium. After a preliminary few posts in 1995, H.I.M. began building what would become the 1997 Website. Then, in 1996, they engaged in an organized newsgroup recruitment campaign.

In order to locate as many of the H.I.M. posts as possible, I searched for and located four email addresses associated with the Internet domain names known to be associated with H.I.M. Next, I searched newsgroup archives for all the public posts made by those email addresses. In all, I located seven texts posted in 126 different newsgroups. Of these 126 posts, 102 were posted on June 20, 1996. All of these posts were exactly the same seven-line message ending with a link to the H.I.M. informational Web site. The remaining four texts were posted a total of 20 times between June 21, 1996 and December 21, 1996. Of these posted texts, three were monologic statements of belief and made the revelatory claim that the emailer was a form of divine being. Only one text posted only once clearly encouraged response: “Thanks for Actions Against CAN.” This final and idiosyncratic H.I.M. post made no revelatory claims and did create a far more sustainable discourse than the previous posts.

### **Revelatory, Experiential, and Negotiative Rhetorical Tactics Online**

Ulises A. Mejias suggests that one critical question raised by a case-study approach to Internet communication is to what degree a discourse under analysis is “sustainable” (Mejias). In my analysis, “sustainability” refers to the ability of a particular medium to sustain a particular discourse over time. If a sustain-

able discourse occurs in a dialogic medium, behavior in that discourse should encourage more individuals to participate. If a dialogic discourse is to be sustained, that discourse must be tolerant of multiple voices. In Bahktin's sense, dialogic discourse encourages the participation of multiple voices while monologic discourse limits participation to a single voice. Dialogic discourse pushes away from a centralized voice through "centrifugal force" while monologic discourse pushes the attention of its participants toward the center through "centripetal force." Though all discourses will exhibit varying degrees of both of these forces, a discourse that is characterized by a strong centrifugal force shows more "heteroglossia." That is to say: it is tolerant of many voices, modes of communication, and the divergent thinking that arrive with both (Bahktin 666ff).

As a medium, Usenet newsgroups differ from most other contemporary electronic media because they allow dialogic discourse. Because the resource offered by this medium is rich audience response, individuals using newsgroups should value response in their newsgroup discourse. Thus, discourse on newsgroups should exhibit centrifugal force. However, discursive behaviors within that medium may also exhibit varying degrees of centripetal force and those behaviors, to lesser or greater extents, discourage dialogue. From a descriptive perspective, rhetorical tactics in newsgroups should encourage sustainability so that the value of audience response is maximized by creating more individual responses. From a critical perspective, sustainability is desirable in so far as it encourages the tolerance necessary for the participation of multiple voices in a given medium. Case studies in a clearly dialogic medium, then, can assess to what extent the expectation of sustainability in the medium is met in observed human discourse.

In the case of H.I.M., their discourse was not sustainable. Their rhetorical tactics ostensibly failed on two fronts. First, they did not "recruit" a single new member through the Internet. Secondly, their discourse resulted in what appears to be its inevitable conclusion: their own deaths. However, by H.I.M.'s standards of judgment their discourse did not fail. They did not

conform to newsgroup communication behaviors because they did not seek the benefit of sustainability in their use of multi-lateral Internet media. In this way, their specific choice negated the centrifugal force of the multilateral medium.

In previous research among fundamentalist Christians, the terms “negotiative” and “experiential” have been used to define two varieties of observable rhetorical tactics (Howard “On-Line Ethnography . . .”). In general, rhetorical tactics are small scale communicative choices made by a communicator in an effort to gain some benefit from an audience. Negotiative rhetorical tactics are those that encourage the audience to respond to the communicator. These are common in multilateral media such as newsgroups and are essential for any discourse to be sustainable. Experiential rhetorical tactics are those that use direct personal experience to establish authority. Experiential rhetorical tactics do not encourage audience response. Revelatory tactics are a sub-variety of experiential tactics. These tactics specifically claim special access to authority based on a direct experience of the divine and thus particularly discourage audience response.

Locating these rhetorical tactics in newsgroup discourse serves two functions. First, the employment of a particular tactic is evidence of the communicator’s attitude toward belief about the topic at hand. Second, the prevalence of one or another rhetorical tactic in a given medium is evidence that the medium encourages both those tactics and the attitudes that those tactics imply.

While it is clear that media do exert some influence on both tactics and attitudes, the power of human behavior to misunderstand or even knowingly ignore such influences must not be underestimated. Amongst the surge of scholarly claims about the impact of Internet media on human behavior in the mid-1990’s, some of the most optimistic claimed that Internet use would breed a more wholesome and pluralistic worldview. In the field of rhetorical pedagogy, Cooper and Selfe argue that computer technologies encourage their students to: “think divergently, to argue from different perspectives” and even “dissent through discourse” (851).

Far more well known, one of the most outspoken and influential advocates of the idea that the Internet is creating a more “democratic” citizenry is Jon Katz. Representing the extreme of the so-called “technophile” perspective, Katz describes in his 1997 article “Birth of a Digital Nation” how a “post-political revolution” is afoot on the Internet. “Out of sight of the reporters, handlers, spin-masters, and politicians of the presidential campaign, a new political sensibility took shape in 1996. It brought fresh ideas. It brought real debates about real issues.” For Katz, a digital nation will be comprised of individuals he calls “netizens” who are more democratic, pluralistic, and, most of all: “they don’t merely embrace tolerance as an ideal; they are inherently tolerant” (Katz “Birth . . .”).

Katz’s optimism arises out of the early designers’ hopes for the multilateral media made possible by the Internet. Most famous among these is J. C. R. Licklider’s 1962 vision of an “Intergalactic Network” that he articulated while working on Internet protocols at MIT. Licklider conceived of a globally interconnected set of computers through which individuals could quickly access data and programs from any location (Licklider; Hauben).

The new media evolved from these dialogic and pluralistic ideals. If the medium itself defines the field in which individual acts become possible, then it would make sense that multilateral communicative media would define a field in which it would be necessary for individual acts to account for or accommodate more than the unidirectional expression of ideas. One would expect that individuals who are familiar with a highly multilateral medium such as newsgroups would engage in rhetorical tactics that seek to accommodate and adjust to an environment that is based on the exchange of ideas. A discourse that does not engage in negotiative tactics in a highly multilateral environment is simply not sustainable. Thus, it would seem, individuals would modify their communicative behaviors in an effort to maintain the sustainability of the discourse they are attempting to engage. However, based on the H.I.M. data, this is not always the case.

Instead of engaging sustainable tactics in their belief discourse, H.I.M. primarily employed experiential rhetorical tactics;

tactics that proved, in the end, to be decidedly destructive. Not only did they base their persuasive appeals in claims to direct experience, but they claimed that the source of their direct knowledge was divine. In this sense, they repeatedly engaged in a sub-set of experiential tactics termed “revelatory.” That is: they repeatedly attempted to persuade their audiences that they were the keepers of special knowledge that had been revealed to them through direct contact with the divine. It is exactly this possibility, this intensely emotive experience of the divine, which allows the H.I.M. recruitment rhetoric to seek a conversion that is beyond argumentative persuasion. Such non-rational or non-persuasive motives have no need to seek sustainability.

If we accept Kenneth Burke’s claim that attitudes are implied by the choice of tactics, then the optimistic vision of Katz (that the Internet encourages pluralism) might find some hope on the horizon (Burke *A Grammar* . . .). Changes in tactics might mean subtle changes in attitude. Multilateral media encourage tactical changes by their very form, thus they should encourage a move toward a pluralistic, a “comic” in Burke’s term, attitude (Burke *Attitudes* . . .). In the case of the H.I.M. group, this vision is not realized. Instead, the evidence indicates that when a group member has the ability and chooses, in one set of circumstances, to employ negotiative tactics, this has no impact at all on the far more prevalent tragic attitude that is evidenced by the constant and uncompromising claims to revelatory knowledge held up even in the face of widespread social recalcitrance. Because these individuals know that such claims will not invite sustainable discourse and still use them, it seems clear that these individuals do not value the resource of sustainability in their online communications. In this way, the intentional tactical choices evident in their communications imply that belief can play a far stronger role than medium in the manifestation of communicative behavior. The choice to engage in discourse with a radical rhetorical closure may be evidence of an attitude that rejects the centrifugal force pluralistic communication media were designed to encourage.

### **Revealing Heaven's Gate Online**

Two thousand years ago, crew of members of the Kingdom of Heaven who are responsible for nurturing “gardens,” determined that a percentage of the human “plants” of the present civilization of this Garden (Earth) had developed enough that some of those bodies might be ready to be used as “containers” for soul deposits. Upon instruction, a member of the Kingdom of Heaven then left behind His body in that Next Level (similar to putting it in a closet, like a suit of clothes that doesn't need to be worn for awhile), came to Earth, and moved into (or incarnated into), an adult human body (or “vehicle”) that had been “prepped” for this particular task. The body that was chosen was called Jesus. I am in the same position to today's society as was the One that was in Jesus then. (Do “Heaven's Gate: How. . .”)

This passage presents the basic belief that Marshall Applewhite held about his own identity from 1974 to 1997. Although it was, in the mid-1970s, more clearly linked to passages in the Bible, he consistently believed that he was an incarnated spirit or “Extraterrestrial” named “Do.” The passage above is quoted directly from the introductory page of the 1997 Web site that the group left behind in the wake of the first 39 suicides.

After the above quoted passage more or less identified Jesus as a sort of multidimensional space alien, the “Kingdom of Heaven” is presented as a sort of multidimensional space craft, and Applewhite himself as another incarnate and benevolent, though enigmatic, “space alien.”

In this text, Do presents himself as an incarnation of the divine and then makes a series of monologic claims. He states that, “Your separation from the world and reliance upon the Kingdom of Heaven through its Representatives can open to you the opportunity to become a new creature, one of the Next Evolutionary Level, rightfully belonging to the Kingdom of Heaven” (Do “Heaven's Gate: How. . .”). Joining this “Next

Level,” the human would reach the next stage of an overall cosmic progression. Do fused “evolution” or scientific perspectives on cosmic progression and a revelatory emphasis on personal transcendence. Because Do believed that most people are not inhabited by multidimensional beings, few individuals will have access to this higher Level. Do felt, however, that it was his earthly mission to locate these few people. Do: “Looking to us [the incarnates of other-world beings], and desiring to be a part of my Father’s Kingdom, can offer to those with deposits that chance to connect with the Level Above Human, and begin that transition” (Do “Heaven’s Gate How. . .”). Like Applewhite, some humans have these trans-dimensional beings or “soul deposits” placed in their bodies by the members of the Kingdom of Heaven, and this belief was the main motivation for H.I.M.’s so-called “recruitment” activities including the 1996 newsgroup posts.

Because the entire effort of the H.I.M.’s Internet communication was a concerted attempt to locate and bring home “soul deposits,” only revelatory tactics were used. According to Do, the believers and followers of Jesus at the time of Christ were “only those individuals who had received a ‘deposit’ containing a soul’s beginning had the capacity to believe or recognize the Kingdom of Heaven’s Representative” (Do “Heaven’s Gate: How. . .”). In order to locate these souls in 1996, Do used the revelatory rhetorical tactic of the “Big Tester.”

About three fourths of the way down a 1997 Web page, in a section entitled “Why It Is Difficult To Believe or Accept Us,” Do makes a performative rhetorical appeal that is overtly revelatory. Much of the previous explication of his belief system is a set up for the final move that Do calls “the big tester.” As a rhetorical tactic, it functions to radically close Do’s claims to any engaged discussion or dialogue by presenting a self-sealing argument.

At length, Do states:

The next statement that we will make will be the “Big Tester,” the one that the “lower forces” would use to

clearly have you discredit or disregard us. That statement is: Unless you are currently an active student or are attempting to become a student of the present Representative from the Kingdom of Heaven - you ARE STILL “of the world,” having done *no significant* separation from worldliness, and you are still serving the *opposition* to the Kingdom of Heaven. This statement sounds - to humans who have been so carefully programmed by the “lower forces” - arrogant, pompous, or egotistical at the least - as if by taking this stand we had something to gain - as if we were seeking recognition as “Deity” or as self-appointed prophets. That Luciferian programming *has truly been effective*, for we don’t even want to voice to you the statement in question. However, believe it or not, it is only for your sake - the sake of prospective recipients of the Kingdom of Heaven - that we must “tell the truth,” openly identify to you as Representatives of the Kingdom of Heaven, well aware of the “fallout” of that position. (Do “Why Its Difficult to Believe. . .”)

In this long quote, “Do” is the “Representative from the Kingdom of Heaven.” The “big tester” question is, are you or are you “attempting to become” a student of Do’s teachings. If you are not, that proves that you are still under the powers of a normative society inspired by the demonic “Luciferians.” If, however, you have (after reading the previous beliefs of Do) realized that he is right, then you are already a student.

This tactic is, as Do rightly calls it, “a test.” Most readers, as he believed, would not have been convinced by the time they read the words that should have convinced them. Those few readers who were convinced were being influenced by the revelatory experience of sensing their own divine “soul deposit.” In this “test,” Do engaged an extreme experiential rhetorical tactic. There is no room for discussion in this discourse. In fact, to engage in discussion would be proof that one did not have the deposit; an individual knew that he or she had a soul deposit

only because he or she “felt it.” Hence, the “big tester” is radically rhetorically closed because it relies on the personally experienced “test” and makes no attempt to offer reasons based on shared assumptions. Because the entire text that contains the test is a series of assertions based on the initial claim that the source of the text, “Do,” is a space alien/Jesus, it is also monologic.

In the desktop published document that was also part of the 1997 Website, a number of the H.I.M. members wrote explanations for their choices to commit suicide. Functioning as first hand testimony of their beliefs, most recount how they experienced a sense of familiarity when they first met Do. In fact, one H.I.M. member’s retelling of his experience makes it clear that these and other examples are in fact revelatory experiences by actually naming them as such, Nrrrody recalled:

Just prior to my incarnation, this vehicle experienced a kind of “revelation” while standing on top of a tall building looking down at people scurrying about, cars, buses, phone lines, roadways, smog, billboards, etc. Nothing particular was going through the brain, but for several days questions about the vehicle’s purpose had dominated all thoughts. Suddenly, it was like watching a huge screen, showing the world – all humanity – the extent of ignorance, lack of development, the corruption, selfishness, and greed – the big picture, as from afar, in a moment of extreme clarity, and it was the most overwhelming emotion the vehicle had ever experienced. It was incomprehensible how it all happened and why humans made the choices they made. After the experience, a feeling of emptiness followed . . . except for this persistent hope and desire for something more. (Nrrrody)

Here, Nrrrody specifically recounts what he calls a “revelation.” This revelation was of the depravity of the human condition, the “corruption, selfishness, and greed.” As a result, he was depressed. However, this is all part of his soul deposit’s plan. A couple of weeks later:

When Ti and Do walked through the door at the meeting place, this vehicle went into shock. I called out, "I KNOW them. I KNOW them," At that time there wasn't enough of me in the vehicle to understand that it was the mind I knew, but I feel there was probably some kind of briefing prior to my incarnation that allowed me to recognize even the vehicles they wore. (Nrrrody)

When Nrrrody says that "there wasn't enough of me in the vehicle to understand" he is expressing his belief that the current consciousness he experienced was that of his incarnate being or "deposit" that was drawn into self awareness by meeting Do. The body, or brain, can hardly understand the revelation. All he is able to do is shout, "I know." This example is perhaps the purest expression of revelatory rhetoric from the H.I.M. material.

The H.I.M. religious group gained converts for the reasons Miller described above. The pattern is typical of most alternative religious conversions. Many converts describe being depressed or feeling that their lives were meaningless before the conversion. This placed them in a convertible state. In the case of H.I.M. converts, however, the "revelatory" nature of the experience is even more obviously experiential because they felt that in the presence of Do they were actually in the presence of God. It is not just a sense of presence of the divine, but recognition and association between the physical body of Do as the container of a god. When they met Do, they experienced what was for them an undeniable truth. Through a recognition of God incarnate, they immediately knew that Do was their "Lord" and they were really a "deposit." This recognition, however, proved to be a difficult thing to attain through network media.

Of all the final forty-one H.I.M. members who committed suicide, none had their revelatory experience "online." In fact, none originally came into contact with the group through the Internet. The revelatory rhetoric that H.I.M. employed repeatedly failed to find much of an online audience. Their reliance on radically experiential tactics was discouraged by the newsgroup me-

dium where their online campaign primarily took shape. Hence, their attempts to locate soul deposits online were met with a huge amount of social recalcitrance. As the examples in the following section demonstrate, they were laughed at, mocked, and flamed. However, this recalcitrance only functioned to confirm members' belief that the mundane world was fundamentally separated from that of the Level Above Human.

### **The 1996 H.I.M. Newsgroup Posts**

The H.I.M. religious group's revelatory belief system yielded communicative behaviors that were radically rhetorically closed. This closure is clearly evident in the 1996 newsgroup posts that are the core data for this case study. These posts include 102 messages posted to 126 newsgroups from June to September of 1996. Among these posts, there were four varieties of what appear to be recruitment posts. By far, the most widely posted message was made up of seven lines with a link to the H.I.M. Website. The seven-line post first appeared on June 6 1996. In full, it read:

HEAVEN'S GATE

- How and When the Door to the Physical Kingdom Level Above Human May Be Entered
  - Organized Religions Are Killers of Souls
  - UFO's & Space Aliens -Sorting Good from Bad
  - Final Warning for Possible Survivors
- [www.heavensgate.com](http://www.heavensgate.com) (Rep "Out . . .")

The last line was a click-able link directly to the elaborate Web site that featured Do's "big tester" as I cited it above. In this way, the bulk of the newsgroup posts were actually simply monologic invitations for individuals to go to the Web site and take the "test" for the "soul deposit."

This post was the most widely distributed and was reposted on several dates following June 6. There is no doubt that many thousands of individuals saw at least its title. However, there were almost no responses to it in the newsgroups. I have located only three. One responded curtly: "that's nice dear, now

go sit back down and count your breaths” (Khadro). The rhetorical appeal used by this post failed to gain a large or engaged audience precisely because it did not conform to the negotiative norms of newsgroup discourse. It offered its audience no reason to respond and thus no reason to attempt to engage a sustained discourse.

In August of 1996, another series of posts began to come from H.I.M. email addresses. There were three distinct varieties. Each presents similar claims. All of them were mass posted to a wide variety of Internet news groups. All of them employed very similar rhetorical tactics. The post titled “THE JEWS AND CHRISTIANS PROMOTE LIES - UNKNOWINGLY,” a mass-posting of 866 words, appealed to those who desire to enter the “Evolutionary Level Above Human” (Rep “The Jews. . .”). This post begins by restating the claim that Do was Jesus: “I came to Earth some 2000 years ago from another physical, biological, Evolutionary Level as the expected ‘Messiah,’ or Jesus, and for this current mission, RETURNED to this level, this planet and entered into a human body some 24 years ago, Earth-time” (Rep, 1996, “The Jews. . .”). By beginning the post with the claim that the speaker is a multidimensional Jesus, the text becomes ultimately monologic: it is the monologic voice of the divine speaking through the text to an audience of disbelievers.

The post continues by claiming that the “Jews and Christians” are in service of “the true” Antichrist and his fallen followers” the “Luciferians.”” Although the post clearly appeals to a Christian symbolic system, it was destined to fail even among many in the Christian Internet community with whom it might otherwise find a sympathetic ear because Do persisted in his direct assault on main-line Christianity. Here, Do’s attack is a virulent sort of dogmatism: “The true Antichrist and his fallen followers significantly strengthened their position beginning in particular with the Charismatic Evangelical movement of the 1960s” (Rep “The Jews. . .”).

It is easy to see how badly such a rhetorical stance might fail. For the non-Christian, prophecies about any “anti-Christ” are absurd. For the apocalyptic Christian, direct attacks on evan-

gelic preaching would probably not be met with much sympathy even though some 250 words of the post are devoted to quoting the gospels of Luke and John in support of its assertions. The post implores the reader to look at the Bible in new ways: “a true seeker who really wants to know what Jesus required of His disciples in order to go with him into his Father’s Kingdom would read what JESUS SAID (His sayings in the Red Letter edition) on these subjects in the gospels” (Rep “The Jews. . .”). While for many Protestants this statement by itself would be entirely acceptable, the members of the various discourse communities that responded did so with dismissive derision because of the authoritarian way in which the argument was initially set up.

One reply that exemplified the general attitude taken towards the post stated: “I’m sorry, this is the wrong mental illness group. This is alt.support.depression. You must be looking for alt.support.eschatological-delusions. Common mistake.” The response continued more seriously: “As another millennium approaches, the nuts start coming out of their burrows. I was starting to worry they weren’t coming at all” (Ostendorf). Another individual, who appears to be both Christian and involved in the Christian militia movements, rejected the post not because of its attack on fundamentalism, but instead appealed directly to the lack of the post’s topical relevance to that particular newsgroup: “Get bent, and you can use the cross you rode in on to do it, too. When you have something to say about Militias (this being a *Militia* newsgroup —alt.religion.nutter is two doors down yonder), talk to us” (Malcomson).

Overall, the responses can be classified into three general groups. First, many attacked the lack of relevance of the post to the topic of the newsgroup. Second, many stated, simply, that the H.I.M. poster must be insane. The third and the most common variety of response was that of the “yeah-I’m-Jesus-too.” One example: “Jesus Christ, it’s you! How ya doing buddy? It’s me, Cleopatra! Plato and me was thinking of scaring up a few friends for poker. You in?” (Karen). There were 50 similar responses that I was able to locate. From these examples, it is clear that there was little if any reasoned engagement of the post’s claims.

The other two longer 1996 posts offer no examples of negotiative tactics either. Neither created any sustained discourse. "TIME TO DIE FOR GOD? or ARMAGEDDON – WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?" was posted on September 21, 1996. On September 24, 1996, this post was edited down from 1805 to 1660 words and reposted as "TIME TO DIE FOR GOD? –THE IMMINENT 'HOLY' W AR – WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?" The editing seems to be directed at shortening and clarifying the basic claims of the text but did not alter the meaning or strategies of the posts. Both texts begin with a somewhat less monologic the assertion than did the previous posts. In fact, this post fails to offer any initial warrant for its authority at all:

We are at the end of an Age, or the end of another civilization. As was prophesied, this is the "judgment time" for all living creatures on or related to this planet -- in other words, the time when "where we find ourselves," as a result of our accumulated choices during our time here, determines our Judgment. (Rep "Christ' Illustrates . . .")

There are no reasons given for this "judgment time." The Bible is not quoted. There are not yet any claims to divine revelation.

The text, however, does acknowledge its audience when it, immediately following the above quote, envisions a counter argument to its claim that a "judgment" is at hand:

The choices of many will find them in a "mind set" that would see the above statements as "cultish," radical, and doomsdayish, to say the least, while others have chosen to seek mental nourishment that would have them suspect "Truth" in these statements. With little awareness of it, all of us at this time are finding ourselves aligning with others of common mind. (Rep "Christ' Illustrates . . .")

Here in what Stephen O'Leary has recognized as the typically closed or "tragic" apocalyptic rhetorical move, the post dismisses those who would disagree with it even before they

have responded by suggesting that those who “seek mental nourishment” will see the “Truth” of the opening claims. Those who do not are already wrong (O’Leary).

The post goes on to describe, an “evolutionary procedure” that allows people to “graduate from the human kingdom.” Again with out any reasoning, the post simply states that a “Representative” of the “Next Kingdom” will take the individuals who feel the “Truth” through the steps necessary for “final separation “ The post states that,

[The candidates’] final separation is the willful separation from their human body, when they have changed enough to identify as the spirit/mind/soul, ready to put on a biological body belonging to the Kingdom of Heaven. (This entering into their “glorified” or heavenly body takes place aboard a Next Level spacecraft, above the Earth’s surface.). (Rep “Christ’ Illustrates. . .”)

After describing both the historical and individual steps necessary to make this final separation, the post ends by asserting that:

Whether we like it or not, the Armageddon – the Mother of Holy Wars – has begun, and it will not cease until the plowing under is completed. The Angelic Armies of the Kingdom of Heaven will complete the spading under – the end of the Age. On which side are you? Will you go into the keeping of the Next Level, or to dust return? (Rep “Christ’ Illustrates. . .”)

Finally, there was a link directly to the 1997 Worldwide Web page containing “the big tester.”

All of these posts assert that a multidimensional Jesus has embodied a human and is sending email. This is a radically rhetorically closed claim because it posits that the monologic voice of the email is that of the divine itself. It is revelatory at the most basic level because it claims that the writer is God. With-

out negotiative tactics, the post failed to sustain any discourse and thus did not benefit from any serious audience response. It would seem that the H.I.M. poster was simply ignorant of the value and norms in newsgroup discourse. Surprisingly, however, this was not the case.

Someone in the group did have a very good grasp of normative newsgroup discourse. Further, all the H.I.M. members in 1997 were highly versed in technical Internet usage. They built Web sites professionally. The poster or posters of most of these emails must have been quite aware that the H.I.M. message would fail to reach the vast majority of their audience.

The H.I.M. email campaign posters did not engage negotiative tactics because they did not seek the benefit of sustainability in the newsgroup communications. The "JEWS AND CHRISTIANS" post ends:

If you can identify with these thoughts, you are possibly one who might be chosen to go with us. If you see what we say as blasphemous, then you have clearly chosen to be a part of the opposition. If you desire to assist us or to become more aware of who we are, our temporary Internet address is: <http://www.heavensgate.com> Or you may email us at [rep@heavensgate.com](mailto:rep@heavensgate.com) (Rep "The Jews . . .")

There is, in these newsgroup posts, no attempt at negotiative tactics. Instead there are a series of direct assertions with revelatory authority. They are revelatory because recognizing their truth is being aware that Do is an extra-dimensional spirit that has inhabited the physical bodies of Christ, Buddha, and others. This sort of directly experiential appeal to authority failed on the many newsgroups to which it was posted in the sense that it gained almost no audience response at all. For this reason, the posts generated no sustained discourse and made no use of the audience response benefit offered by newsgroups. Further, because of their radically tragic belief system, the experiential strategy employed by the posts seems a correlated manifestation of a radically tragic attitude. Because of their attitude, these

communicative strategies were appropriate even though there is clear evidence that at least someone in the group was aware of and could have chosen to deploy more negotiative rhetorical tactics in their Usenet posts.

The evidence that someone in the group did have the knowledge and ability to communicate within the rhetorical norms of newsgroup discourse came on December 12, 1996 in the form of a different sort of newsgroup post. It met with a much more engaged and considerate audience. From the rhetorical moves employed, it is clear why this happened. The post engages negotiative rhetorical tactics as it attempts to persuade a perceived audience. Its rhetorical tactics clearly imagine and encourages audience response. In so doing, the post initiates a sustained discussion.

The post begins: "Here's a round of applause to the Church of Scientology for their courageous action against the Cult Awareness Network" (Lah). Though later sued and then purchased by The Church of Scientology, at that time the "Cult Awareness Network" or "CAN" was a Christian organization that aggressively pursued what it perceived as dangerous "cults." At the time of the Usenet posting, it must have been clear to the poster that the idea that the Church of Scientology was a good thing would meet with a lot of resistance on the alt.religion.scientology newsgroup. This newsgroup is generally devoted to attacking the Church, though some supporters also participate. The claim that the Church of Scientology had done something good would immediately be at issue. However, the idea that underlies it, that acting in a courageous fashion is a good thing, is an assumption acceptable to a wide audience.

In a clearly negotiative phrase, the next line of the post specifically admits alternate perspectives: "from our point of view . . ." The post is, apparently, a response to a indictment of the Heaven's Gate group by CAN. The Heaven's Gate post claimed that CAN "condemned the innocent." And that it, "accused our group of 'cult activities' promoting all sorts of lies about us. When we asked to speak to them to correct some of their false accusations, they refused to listen." The post con-

cludes: “we hope you will all continue to advertise on behalf of freedom of thinking for all” (Lah).

In this post, the initial claim is that it is good to be courageous. CAN is accused of lying and of “refusing to listen.” CAN is portrayed as decidedly unethical. This lack of ethics is contrasted with the idea that each group should have the opportunity to present its case in order to judge the truth of its claim. Then this open-forum attitude is linked to a commonly held belief in the value of free speech and thought. The post encourages and allies itself with those who “advertise on behalf of freedom of thinking for all” (Lah).

The general Internet community tends to value the right to have each party make its case in public disputes. The post has, on this basis, taken an effectively dialogic stance using negotiative cues that intended to find engaged response to an attack by a group that is characterized as dogmatic and self-righteous.

Instead of being aimed at all people who might have a deposit, this email was only posted to one newsgroup and was directed at the audience specific to this newsgroup in a persuasive manner. Among the responses, the post received a full range of engagement. Some of the responses did not engage the post at all. One single line response commented on CAN’s alleged description of the group as a “UFO cult” said: “\*Which\* UFO cult? Scientology is itself an UFO cult !!” (Hausherr). A few others included reservations about the lack of a “signed” name on the post.

However, two of the five responses did engage the email. These two replies show that the H.I.M. email was successful in that it fulfilled the newsgroup norm of deliberative exchange. This is evident in the fact that it initiated the normal mode of Usenet discourse and achieved a short but potentially sustainable exchange.

One of the two responses that did engage the post directly attacked the Church of Scientology. Here, the responder attacked the “cult” of Scientology for being less an advocate of free thinking and more of a “recruiter” that uses “manipulative, deceptive etc etc” techniques. Still, this responder, aware that he or she may

face a contrary response from the original poster, states at the end of his or her message in a clear move toward deliberation: “Look forward to hearing from you” (Bell). This individual not only acknowledges the validity of the H.I.M. poster as a reasonable person, but he or she encourages the poster to respond. Unlike the derisive joking that followed the recruitment posts, this respondent seems to desire a sustainable exchange.

The second engaging responder takes up the claim that “cults” encourage free thinking as well. This response attacks the means that he or she assumes such groups use: “is it that whatever organization you claim to represent considers that the means justify the end, no matter what those means may be?” (Steve). It goes on to engage the H.I.M. post in a section-by-section criticism.

The final section of the H.I.M. post describes an historical need for so-called “cult” groups saying:

History proves that nearly every conceptual milestone now considered “good” was at one time considered a “cult.” In the early/inception stages of any significantly updated thinking, it seems that some embodiment of narrow-minded opposition takes it upon themselves to threaten its right to exist. (Lah)

The responder replies directly to that assertion:

History has also proven that many organizations that make such claims (such as the National Socialists in Germany, the Order of the Solar Temple, Jim Jones’ mob, Scientology, and the Moonies, to name but a handful) are capable of causing a considerable amount of damage to both their own members, and innocent third parties. (Steve)

This responds to H.I.M. in a way made possible only by the rhetorical position that the initial post takes up. The H.I.M. post is an open invitation to discussion that seeks to persuade an audience clearly conceived of as reasonable and persuadable.

The responder, in turn, is clearly aware, and in fact may expect, that the H.I.M. poster will be reading and ready to reply. The responder says: “and, before you even think about suggesting it, no: this is not a case of self-regulation” (Steve).

From this exchange, we can see that at least one H.I.M. group member had the ability to both hold beliefs that seem to most people totally unreasonable and, at the same time, engage in reasonable discussion. However, this is a single dialogic post among many monologic ones.

The vast majority of the 1996 H.I.M. newsgroup posts sought to locate people who have, through some direct knowledge, already been determined to know the truth of the statements, those already inhabited by divine multidimensional deposits. Since it was necessary for each divine deposit to come to self-knowledge in order to escape the earth-classroom, it is not surprising that the poster was willing to put up with a little Internet ridicule in order to locate those few who still needed to receive the message. Further, since no amount of discussion could persuade an individual into having a soul deposit and since the final goal of the deposit was to leave the human body through suicide, sustainability was not a necessary component of their newsgroup discourse. Because they did not seek the benefit of sustainability, they did not use negotiative rhetorical tactics.

### **Final Evidence From a Straggler**

The case of H.I.M. posts to Usenet newsgroups in 1996 indicates some possible reasons why a highly dialogic medium with highly skilled users still might not limit monologic communicative behaviors. There can be no doubt that the members of the H.I.M. group used the Internet in a skillful and systematic way to make their revelatory appeals. However, it is equally clear that they recruited no new believers through the Internet. If their goal was recruitment, they failed. The evidence suggests, however, this was not their goal. Instead, their goal was the location of people who contained a soul deposit that could be “awakened” inside the human container. To locate such convertible people, the H.I.M. group did not engage the appeals to reason, fact, and

value that might elicit discursive responses from their audience. Because of their revelatory experiences, the rhetoric engaged by these individuals was a rhetoric of belief so absolute that it stood beyond any logic or line of reasoning.

This raises an important final point.

To give up one's own life for a belief is a rare act. It must take a sense of certainty that is so powerful it completely overcomes our fear of the unknown. In 1997, religious suicide may have hardly seemed relevant for serious study. After September 11, 2001, it cannot. Even at the extreme edges of mainstream religions, the potential for religious suicide exists. With suicide comes the potential for violence because the level of certainty that could support both stands beyond any social, logical, or dialogic ideals.

This rejection of dialog is particularly important today because citizenship in the new world of global communication may well necessitate dialogic discursive engagement. As Robert Asen has noted: "Discourse practices present potentially accessible and powerful everyday enactments of citizenship. Even regular voters can vote only periodically . . . By contrast, discourse practices suggest a frequency and sustainability to civic engagement" (207). As global travel and communication technologies encourage a more and more global perspective on citizenship, the traditional structures of participatory democracy lag behind that global interconnection. Through blogs and other network media, communication is emerging as a primary way that global citizenship can be enacted.

In this age of global communication, scholars of religion must ask what sort of communicative behaviors correlate with the ability to commit religious suicide. In the case of the H.I.M. group, suicide correlates with a near complete disregard for sustainable communication. Both suicide and monologic rhetorical tactics imply a radical type of antisocial behavior that disregards both the larger society and one's own life. These sorts of rhetorical tactics may indicate a potentially dangerous group.

Shortly after the mass suicide in Rancho San Diego, the last two followers of Do also attempted suicide. One suicide was

successful: Wayne Cooke or “Sawyer” also known as “Nic”. The other was “Rkkody” (pronounced, Rick-o’-de); or just “Ric” as he asked me to call him. His attempt failed.

After coming out of a coma as a result of this suicide attempt, Ric created a new Web site because he felt his life had been spared so he might stay behind a little longer and attempt to locate any last deposits. I came across his Web site, and emailed him questions about his experiences with the H.I.M. group.

I asked him about the expected audience and the intentions of the newsgroup posts in 1996. He responded:

We offered the information and let free will take over. It was designed by our Creator that only those who had been given a special ‘gift’ of recognition, would be drawn towards this material. I know that sounds very sci-fi, but if you really take a good look at the record of Jesus’ ministry you would see that Ti and Do brought the very same formula for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. The message then was only meant for those who have ears to hear, and it is the same today. (Ric “RE:”)

A few days before February 17, 1998, Ric drove from San Diego into the Arizona desert, put up a small tent, and ran tubing into it from the exhaust pipe of his car. Near his body he left the simple note: “DO NOT REVIVE” (Thorton).

Ric’s extreme actions as well as this entire case study present evidence of individuals who were adapted to network media and still chose not to engage in the communicative behaviors it should encourage. If online discourse must support the social processes that convert resources into valued benefits, then access to a responsive audience should offer users of the news group medium the resource of audience response. Because the medium presents the possibility of rich audience response, newsgroup discourse should exhibit rhetorical tactics that encourage that response. I have termed those tactics “negotiative.” The resource of potential feedback in online discourse should be perceived by individuals who value discourse in these media as a benefit.

Overall, this benefit should encourage these individuals to exhibit communicative behaviors that seek to produce a sustainable discourse. In rhetorical terms, discourse in this medium should exhibit negotiative rhetorical tactics.

In the case of the H.I.M. newsgroup posts however, the perceived benefit of the newsgroup seems to be unilateral access to a large group of individuals. The more individuals accessed, the more likely the very rare “soul deposit” might be found. Though there is clear evidence that at least one member of H.I.M. was capable of generating audience response through negotiative rhetorical tactics, the mass newsgroup posts of 1996 disregard this resource because they are not interested in creating any sustainable discourse. The H.I.M. newsgroup posts of 1996 clearly show that individuals can choose to disregard this influence of the medium in their newsgroup communications.

This case study throws into sharp relief at least one situation where the perceived benefit from a multilateral medium is not the resource of sustainability. Instead, the perceived benefit is the ability to access large groups of people much as one would through a unidirectional mass medium. The choice to engage this medium in this way stems from the same belief that encouraged H.I.M. to employ revelatory rhetorical tactics. Such tactics are appropriate to their use of the medium because their persuasive techniques are not based in the modes of sustained public discussion. Because of the revelatory basis of their belief system, public discussion (and thus sustainability generally) are not valued results for their communications. Their choice to employ such tactics despite knowledge of the norms of newsgroup communication clearly demonstrates that, in this case at least, the power of individual belief can take precedence over the influence of the media employed. When individuals make this sort of choice, it will be evidenced in their choice of rhetorical tactics. Scholars of religious communication may well be in the position to recognize and critique discourse when it exhibits this sort of radical rhetorical closure.

**Robert Glenn Howard** is an Assistant Professor of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin — Madison. Dr. Howard would like to thank Helen Sterk and the anonymous reviewers for *JCR* for their insights during the preparation of this manuscript. Further thanks to Daniel Wojcik at the University of Oregon and Megan Zuelsdorff at Northwestern University for their editorial comments and suggestions.

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