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## **Hate Speech in the Internet Communication on Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia**

### **ABSTRACT:**

A STUDY ON THE INTERNET USERS' PERCEPTIONS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THEM IS IMPORTANT FOR UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF JOURNALISM IN THE FORMATION OF TOLERANCE FOR NON-TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES. AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLICATIONS ABOUT JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN THE NETWORK COMMUNICATION INDICATES OF A STABLE NEGATIVE SET OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS THEM IN RUSSIA. THE PAPER IS BASED ON AN ANALYSIS OF MASS "SELF-COMMUNICATION" TEXTS ABOUT JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES, IT REVEALS THE OBVIOUS "TRACES" OF THE MEDIA TEXTS THAT CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE EFFECTS OF THEIR IMPACT ON THE AUDIENCE. THE ANALYSIS SHOWS THE SENSITIVITY OF THE MASS CONSCIOUSNESS TO BROADCAST INFORMATION ABOUT THE LITTLE-KNOWN OR COMPLETELY UNKNOWN SOCIAL GROUPS AND READINESS FOR THE REJECTION OF THOSE WHO THE MEDIA LABELED AS "ALIEN".

### **KEYWORDS:**

MEDIA EFFECTS, MASS CONSCIOUSNESS, RELIGIOUS MINORITIES, MEDIATED COMMUNICATION, MYTHS, STEREOTYPES.

The concept of "new religious movements" (hereinafter - NRM) was introduced in the second half of XX century. Some scholars use synonymous concepts of "new religious community", "non-traditional religions", "non-traditional cult", "marginal religious group", "totalitarian sect" (though the latter, because of its negative connotation, is used less and less).<sup>1</sup>

It hardly seems feasible within the short text to deepen the discussion on the classification of religious studies and building typology of NRM. It is important, however, to indicate three important features that distinguish NRM from other religious communities: a) a relatively recent occurrence; b) less articulation of doctrine, and c) a mixture of different existing traditions. According to participants of the seminar "Religion and Society" in the Carnegie Center in Moscow, the total number of fractions of a percent of the total population of the Russian Federation (about 300 thousand), and it is essential to assess the possibilities of interpersonal direct communication with the main part of Russian citizens.

The Internet users perceptions of NRM and mass consciousness attitudes towards them are important for understanding the role of journalism in 1) the formation of tolerance towards non-traditional religious communities and 2) the provoking and spreading hate speech 'cliche' and stereotypes.<sup>2</sup>

The lack or total absence of personal contacts with representatives of religious minorities leads to the situation when media becomes the main (if not the only) source of information on them. Then the knowledge taken from media public distributes via mass "self-communication"<sup>3</sup>: blogs, fora, social networks, etc.

### Internet users' spontaneous texts vs public opinion polls

The public opinion polls are still traditional, proved and dominant methods of acquiring a knowledge on what people think, on their attitudes and values. Meanwhile this research paradigm (as the technologies develop, it constantly broadens its field of application and usage of its mainly quantitative methods) is not the only possible one in the study of mass conscience and its some segments.

There is another promising approach to mass consciousness studies proposed in 1980-s by Soviet and Russian sociologist professor Grushin: "Text analysis will help answer the question of mass consciousness far more completely and reliably than this can be done using the traditional public opinion polls" - this is the essence of "Grushin hypothesis".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: I. Kanterov, *Novye religioznye dvizheniya v Rossii* [New religious movements in Russia], Moscow 2007.

<sup>2</sup> More about stereotypes and myths on religions in Russian public opinion see in: V. Khroul, *Religion and Media in Russia: Functional and Ethical Perspectives*, Saarbrücken 2012; V. Khroul, *Mifologizatsiya khristianstva v rossiyskoy zhurnalistike* [Mythologization of Christianity in Russian journalism], in: *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta. Seriya 10. Zhurnalistika*, 3 2013, pp. 31–51.

<sup>3</sup> M. Castells, *Global governance and global politics*, in: *Political Science & Politics*, 38(1) 2005, pp. 9-16.

<sup>4</sup> M. Anikina and V. Khroul. *Mass Self-Expression Texts as a Promising Research Field: Interdisciplinary Perspective*, in: *International Journal of Business and Management Vol. II (1)*, 2014, p 88.

The same subject could be reflected and explicitly fixed in two ways: in responses to the sociological questionnaire and in spontaneous mass consciousness texts (possibly, latently provoked, but this is hard to trace). And the sequence of research tasks appears principal and the most significant point for both modes of the “Grushin hypothesis” proving.

In the attempt to confirm the “Grushin hypothesis” of comparability of results obtained in public opinion polls and those obtained by means of auto texts analysis we dare name the introduction which was called to engage users in the discussion of *an open-ended question* in a questionnaire, and, on the whole, comparing the texts with the totality of respondents’ answers to a set of open-ended questions. Another important advantage characteristic of mass consciousness texts on the Internet is participation of the a priori active people who have something to say on the subject.

In our view, the “Grushin hypothesis” is confirmed for the particular case since both the opinion polls and the Grushin method of multidimensional analysis of spontaneous mass texts are equally suitable for research of mass consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

Of course it would be arrogant to claim that this approach will give more reliable data about the mass conscience than other research methods (on the issue of representativeness it is certainly inferior to sociological surveys). But a new qualitative approach has its potential value in its ability access the new and uninvestigated characteristics of the consciousness.

As of September 20, 2015, one of the most popular resources of the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet site “I love, I hate» (*lovehate.ru*) had 256,103 registered users (128,785 men / 127,318 women). They expressed their views in relation to the 77 437 subjects (topics), the total number of texts has exceeded one million (1,012,931). For qualitative analysis we selected texts on JW (I love = 83 / I have = 252) because it reflects the most common effects of media the mass consciousness in the framework of the dichotomy “we” - “they”.

Scholars define hate speech as a text that carries the expression of hatred for some group and provokes violence against a group of persons defined in terms of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc.<sup>6</sup> And we keep this understanding in our paper.

For qualitative analysis, we have selected texts “Jehovah's Witnesses” (*lovehate.ru/JehovahWitnesses*) because, 1) the number of users of judgments is the biggest among the NRM, and 2) the most common media effects are visible here more evidently.

Negative love/have balance (83/252) generally confirms negative image of the JW in Russian public opinion empirically proved by Furman and Kaariaynen held in the 1990s. 47% of respondents expressed negative attitude towards JW (for comparison: nega-

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<sup>5</sup> M. Anikina, V. Khroul. Memories about the Brezhnev Era in Public Opinion Polls and Mass Consciousness Texts: a Comparative Study. In Elena L. Vartanova (ed.), *World of Media 2011. Yearbook of Russian Media and Journalism Studies*. Moscow, Faculty of Journalism Lomonosov Moscow State University, 2011, p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> C. Calvert, *Hate Speech and its Harms: A Communication Theory Perspective*, in: *Journal of Communication*, 47 1997, pp. 4–19.

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tive attitude towards Baptists - 45%; the Pentecostals - 37%, to Old Believers - 29%, Muslims - 18%, Catholics - 13%).<sup>7</sup> The reasons for this attitude can be kept hidden in the very activity of a religious association, which causes 1) a lack of understanding and, consequently, 2) rejection in the public mind and in the interpretation of this activity in the media. However, if we try to "weigh" the first and second factors influencing the formation of a negative attitude, then we can say that the effects of communication mediated by the media, will have much greater "weight" on the effects of interpersonal communication, given the extremely small contact by representatives of mass information with the greater part of the Russian population.

### Vox Mediorum - Vox Populi?

What we have revealed in the current study are consistent tenets of the mass consciousness for repressive measures used against the JW that, we believe, are largely the effect of the activities of the media (of course, this hypothesis needs to be confirmed through an extensive content analysis of texts for institutional communication, which might be the subject of a larger separate study).

However, we can now talk about the obvious, those empirically observable "traces" of media publications, observable instances found in the texts of mass consciousness. Let us turn to the statements of visitors to the website *lovehate.ru*:

"According to news shows, journalists covered how some sect engaged in raping children"; "Recently in the news on TV it was said that a 50-year-old man, a Jehovah's Witness, set himself on fire. He considered himself a great sinner who had allegedly had to wash away his sins. Thus, we see what this sect leads us to"; "This is a false religion, which is no good and kills a person (religiously destructive sect)"; "This is the most vile of sects, posing as Christianity. In fact what we have is a simple case of Freemasons".

It works in the public opinion, supporting the media's binary opposition of "we/they," and when given the search for the "enemy of Russia," JW, as a religious organization with its center in the United States, is very well suited to this hostile image, which is also borne out by the following text:

"Comrades, the US sponsors Jehovah's Witnesses in order to break up Slavic society rendering this society subservient to the US. I recall that in the US in an early 90's program, the US carried out a plan for the disintegration of Slavic society"; "These Gates and Kissingers dreamt of a Slavic society split into a thousand disparate sects."

As noted by Russian scholar Stetskevich conscious myth-making (including myths made about the NRM) "turns out to be successful only if in that society there are real social and psychological preconditions for the adoption of a certain hoax."<sup>8</sup> And these pre-

<sup>7</sup> D. Furman and K. Kaariaynen, *Religioznost' v Rossii v 90-e gody XX – nachale XXI veka* [Religiosity in Russia in 1990-2000], Moscow 2006.

<sup>8</sup> M. Stetskievich, *Mify o «totalitarnykh sektakh» i «vakhkhabitakh» v sovremennoy Rossii: popytka analiza* [Myths about "totalitarian sects" and "Wahhabis" in modern Russia], in: Smysly mifa: mifologiya v istorii i kul'ture [The meaning of the myth: the mythology of history and culture], vyp. 8, Saint-Petersburg 2001, p. 300.



Religious life is being mythologized when quite understandable and verifiable things/artifacts/phenomena (events, facts , statistics , the structure of the religious association , social and charitable activities , the position on various issues of public interest , etc.) are intentionally or unintentionally corrupted and public opinion has a distorted understanding of religion, including the JW.

conditions are in a number of cases created by the media's supporting and strengthening "we/they" ideology.

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"Turning to religious topics , journalists can make two common mistakes : to use words with negative connotation about members of religious minorities and, suggesting that one denomination possesses some advantage over another, belittling, and sometimes humiliating this lesser denomination... And in doing so, acting in a way that runs quite contrary to the principles of journalistic professionalism—they do not give the criticized denomination the opportunity to respond in order to present its point of view in the same article , in which they have been criticized," said the lawyer.<sup>9</sup>

### **JW image in public opinion: contra and pro**

What specifically was due to the attitudes of the JW, and how exactly are these manifested? Let's refer to some spontaneous texts of Internet users.

Firstly, there are interesting negative indications of JW, which are well entrenched in the mass consciousness and articulated in various texts. Let us consider them in the context of statements of visitors *lovehate.ru* (the vocabulary, spelling and punctuation of posts have been preserved) .

**1. A strange morality.** "What impressed me most: 1) to have sexual intercourse before marriage is almost the most terrible sin, 2) one needs each day and in the evening

<sup>9</sup> A. Pchelintsev, *Pressa i religioznye konflikty* [Press and religious conflicts], in: *Prikladnaya konfliktologiya dlya zhurnalistov* [Applied conflictology for journalists], Moscow 2006, p. 73.

before going to bed, as well as before every meal to pray to Jehovah God. 3) blood transfusion - a terrible sin, in their opinion, it is better to die than to submit to a transfusion... 4) And finally, those "sins" that most people commit regularly, masturbation, viewing pornography." (*It should be noted that 1, 2 and 4 are forms of behavior qualifying as a sin in Christianity and Islam—the two dominant religions in Russia in terms of quantity of members, but this fact finds no reflection in the communiqués of present participants' communicative internet activities*).

**2. The terrorist threat to society.** "These bandits are worse than Muslim martyrs, but they are enabled to set off a possible bomb. No, they are not witnesses— they are ordinary heretics and Satanists."

**3. Fraud.** "In most cases it is swindlers who come to you in your city, find your idiots, and practice on them their pseudo religion ..., rake in some loot from these same idiots who helped them build churches and who gave them money to build; and when the loot becomes sufficient, they just plop down in other cities or they even leave the country"; "It's all one big global fraud"; "Even apartments are forcibly written off by these idiots"; "In their speeches one hears the subtext of our children's tale of the fox, Lisa: wealthy Pinocchio, give us all your money and at the same time your apartment, etc. etc., and then you'll save your soul and go to heaven. All their activities are geared toward breeding suckers to be fleeced"; "Strange, truly these organizations of Christian sects. One acquires the love of God through a marketing network."

**4. Intrusive, overbearing.** "They don't care about me. But their persistence is annoying"; "I do have something against them going from door to door in the morning. On the weekends I sleep in, and these repulsive people ring the buzzer until I open the door, or I take to yelling expletives at them to get rid of them"; "And even when I say that I'm an atheist and I don't need religion, they'll take to trying to persuade me and smile beatifically. Therefore I can't stand them. Painfully persistent they are"; "I personally, as soon as I catch sight of them on the horizon, I take off run away fast..."; "Unlike other sects, JW are pests. In their latest leaflets that they have been foisting on passers by in Moscow."

**5. The falsity.** "Most false sect that I have ever encountered do not believe in God; they force themselves to believe in God. Throughout their form, their vices, their manner of speaking one senses falsity. These are deeply unhappy people; they have a void in their souls; they want to fill it by faith; but they do not have faith."

**6. The damage psyche and health.** "These sects are well-thought-out in terms of psychology, which cripples the lives of people. It is better to practice Satanism than join one of these Christian sects..."; "In fact, from the members of various sects you can expect just about anything, especially followers of the Aum Sinriko, the White Brotherhood, etc. .. they'll knock themselves out to achieve their goals—actively make use of subconscious methods for influencing the psyche, that is to say, they actually are involved with encoding people's brains, especially those people are amenable or weak of heart and mind"; "They kill their children, not giving/refusing them the necessary medical treatment (blood transfusions)."

What is positive about JW in public opinion? In contrast to the negative assessments - often monosyllabic and categorical—are these positively expressed assessments, which in contrast to the above-mentioned negative ones tend to be expressed much more fully and convincingly. Here are some of them.

"We are all Orthodox, Catholics, etc., whom our moms and dads baptized, whose faith we adopted by dint of inertia, because the flock does so in the case of Russia, because we are all an Orthodox country. And no one really tries to find out what he or she truly believes, so he or she is baptized and learns to recognize particular icons, and such becomes that, which constitutes faith! JW know in what they believe, and these beliefs are in laws, not written not by some American fanatic, but in laws spelled out in the Bible. And if we abstract from all religions laws and we open their books, there wisdom is written!"

"If you choose to compare them with the Orthodox Church, then I'm definitely on the side of the Witnesses. They do not wage war, do not rape, do not kill, do not by means of force drag anyone to their faith, do not hypnotize prospective novitiates; and do not take money, apartments, or cars from parishioners".

"I not only love these people but also have great respect for them because they not only talk about the Bible but live in harmony with what is written in it (which is unfortunately not accepted by the majority of people who call themselves Christians )."

"I love the JW because they are unusual . They have such a mystical manner - they suddenly and for no apparent reason begin to speak on biblical themes ... They dream of turning the whole world into a beautiful garden , and this idea cannot fail to fascinate ... they are sometimes irksome , but overall their force is a powerful one."

Some of the opinions and positions of participants in online communication - negative and positive - are based on direct correspondence with the JW (from personal experience or the experience of the inner circle of communication) :

"I hate them for personal reasons, because I was one of these JW for 3 years and know them from the inside and know what kind of vile cuisine they're cooking up"; "Based on the experience of communicating with Jehovah's Witnesses, I came to the conclusion that all these poor people are zombified, serving superiors who sit, neither in Russia nor in Ukraine"; "I saw the family inside, what they are in life. Absolutely normal people, not fanatics , and not detached from the life of ordinary people . There are both university graduates and high-school graduates; there are the very rich and the poor. They are well-read, intelligent people capable of thinking ! What's most important is they are decent people and those who still remember life's values!"

But what is primarily revealed in the spontaneous mass texts, relevant to JW, is a nearly always readied response to the question, "What should I do?" which attests to a high level of intolerance:

"They needed planted. And not in prison, but on a stake!"; "And these nits , who are messing with our heads, I'd strangle with my own hands"; "It is time to join close-knit ranks with the international organization to do battle against totalitarian sects"; "As in all such evil on this warm company of Jehovah's Witnesses do not have enough of the Inquisition!"; "Their place is in prison! The police must carefully monitor them. And to

extinguish them"; "You just have to create a commission for thoroughly rooting out and persecuting Jehovah's Witnesses and all the way!"; "Your existence is nothing more than a mistake in our criminal code!"

### Hate speech as a trigger for social discrimination

The analysis of the texts makes visible two important things: 1) behavioral attitudes of intolerance with respect to the JW, and 2) the willingness of mass consciousness to take tough repressive measures against JW from the state.

In sum, this "explosive mixture" is already provoking a request to the authorities, as in the case of aggravating state-religious relations or the case for a need to find another "enemy," it can become a "trigger" for negative measures taken not only against the JW but also against other NRMs and as some of the so-called "non-traditional" religions, who at the current juncture come across as an easy target.

When the media successfully cope with that which gets "lost in translation", going from the religious to the secular language, and does not consider these loose translations strictly through the prism of a binary opposition "we" vs "them" in pragmatic terms, this successful translation leads to an adequate perception and creates a favorable social climate.

Only in this way can the media counteract the tension that exists in the public sphere about religions, in particular the JW. In the meantime, according to our observations the media engages in a reverse process - it mythologizes that, which the audience is not in a position to verify and which it is doomed to believe.

Media effects of painting the enemy with predominantly negative connotations sometimes are direct (visible in internet communication while quoting TV, radio, newspapers), sometimes - indirect (hidden, mixed with stereotypes and multiplied in the 'echo' of horizontal communication), but in any case they are cumulative.<sup>10</sup> Growing degree of hate speech reproduced in mass communication on societal level may cause destructive consequences for minorities and a threat to the social stability in general. ■

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<sup>10</sup> W.R. Neuman and L. Guggenheim, *The Evolution of Media Effects Theory: A Six-Stage Model of Cumulative Research*, in: *Communication Theory*, 21(2) 2011, p. 189.

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