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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Exploring Portrayals of Cults in News Media: Establishing a Continuum

Honors Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

Of The

Requirements of HON 420

Spring 2023

By

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Abstract

Exploring Portrayals of Cults in News Media: Establishing a Continuum

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This thesis examines and analyzes the way cults are portrayed by various news media outlets. The intention of this thesis and my research in general is to convey the power of media influence in forming an individual's perspective on cults. Each news media outlet (for purposes of this thesis, this includes Fox News, CNN, and the Associated Press) has their own definition of what a cult is, and this determines how they present those "cults" to the public. To understand how individuals form their opinions about cults and what exactly cults *are* via the media, it is necessary to investigate the media's depiction of cults by looking at how the media frames cults, the structure and style of cult articles, and the perceptions of cults by the three media sources analyzed. The research is significant because it can inform media professionals about the power they wield over the public, which may contribute to these professionals having a greater moral desire to write more accurate articles. It can also inform the public about how the media influences them, which may help them to be more aware of their media consumption as well as how they share it with others.

Keywords and phrases: cult, news media, articles, portrayal, media influence, continuum.

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Acknowledgements

It is with great pleasure that I credit my social psychology professor, Dr. Jodi Treadway, for inspiring me to choose this topic. I would also like to thank my mentor, Dr. Matthew Winslow, for supporting me and providing me with incredible advice and guidance that made this thesis possible. Lastly, I credit my Dad for always expecting the most from me— I would not have gotten this far without a little push.

Introduction

There is a natural fascination that is brought on by the word “cult” in our society. This is the result of a number of factors, but perhaps the most prominent is the human need to belong to something. The belongingness hypothesis acknowledges that human beings have an inborn desire to form bonds with others and to be accepted into a larger social group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Essentially, this theory proposes that people will seek out and join groups that meet their need for social connection and acceptance. Cults often provide a sense of community and belonging through shared beliefs, practices, and rituals. For some individuals, this sense of community and belonging that is provided by a cult can be much more appealing than that which is provided by mainstream society. Moreover, people often have trouble understanding how a cult can provide something that relates to feelings of general happiness, belongingness, and success while also being manipulative, cruel, and deviant.

To investigate how perspectives on cults are so complex, it is first necessary to examine the news media’s ability to influence others, as the media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion. The media has the power to control the information people receive and how they receive it, which can have a massive impact on their attitudes,

beliefs, and opinions. By determining what information gets put out, the media also prevents what they do not want people to know or to see from being shown. It is a heavily biased affair, where the receiver of the information only gets one side of the story and, due to the general assumption that the media is credible, an individual does not think to look elsewhere for what might have been left out. What is more, the news media can present a particular event in a way that emphasizes one aspect over another, which can have profound consequences for the public's perception of the event. A better illustration of these ideas can be seen when it comes to politics. The media typically scrutinizes the opposing side (e.g., a conservative media platform opposing liberal views) while uplifting the side they agree with (in this example: conservative views), regardless of the truth of the situation. The public will typically conform to the ideas the media throws at them due to a “façade of journalistic credibility¹” (Marinov, 2020). In addition to this bias in media coverage, other factors such as language and framing can do additional damage. Later, I intend to elaborate on these factors and further explain the power of news media in creating a limited range of perspectives on cults.

This will be done by conducting a content analysis of news articles about cults in major news outlets, such as the Cable News Network (written as “CNN” from here on, Fox News, and the Associated Press (written as “the AP” from here on). The content analysis will focus on the language used to describe cults, the types of stories that are covered, and the overall political and/or religious standpoint of the sources being analyzed. By understanding how the news frames cults, we can better comprehend the

¹ Refers to the perception that news media outlets are unbiased and present objective facts in their reporting, since the public often assumes that journalists are not influenced by political or corporate interests.

ways in which public perceptions of these groups are formed. The news is where many individuals first begin to conceptualize a topic, and thus to understand how their opinions developed and why, the origins of those opinions must be thoroughly inspected. This is why this media analysis is so important, and the specification of analyzing cult articles helps to provide insight into general beliefs about various cults. Additionally, this research can help to inform media professionals and other researchers about the ways in which the media can positively contribute to society by providing more accurate information on all matters (including cults) if they were to change the way they present that information to be less biased. Similarly, it can also inform them of the amount of power the news media wields amongst modern day society, and whether this may be dangerous.

Throughout this analysis, I will define a cult using media definitions, explain how the news media formulates cult depictions, explore the portrayals of cults in the three news media outlets mentioned previously, establish a continuum of the media's portrayals of cults, and discuss the findings and limitations of the research.

Forming the Cult Definition from Media Framing

Throughout the research, one of my primary questions has been: "what is a cult according to the media?" I quickly found that it was not a simple question, and it was arduous to find what criteria, in the eyes of the media, are required to define a cult as such. An article from the AP describes one cult by stating that a belief system and spiritual traditions were used by the group and its leader to manipulate others (Yamat, 2023). Another article obtained from CNN represents a more subtle form of cult, one in which anyone who does not support gun control is seen as a member of a cult, which

suggests that it is only defined as a cult because it deviates from CNN's primarily leftist view (Parini, 2019). The definition I produced is a compilation of definitions sourced from various news articles. For this reason, my definition is multifaceted: a cult is any group, religious or otherwise, that is perceived as being plainly deviant, or any group in which members' beliefs or practices seem extreme or malicious in nature. This definition is complex, but the key idea is that it is representative of most media definitions.

Many people likely see cults as spiritual entities that are purely harmful or abusive, which is not always true. I included "malicious" in my definition because the media more often reports the most outrageous and dramatized cases of cults. Thus, people more readily have a mental conceptualization of groups like The Manson Family², Jonestown³, Heaven's Gate⁴, and more when they think of cults. This is caused by a mental process known as the framing effect. The framing effect, coined by Israeli psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1981), is when the brain makes a decision about a particular topic based on how that topic has been presented to the individual (Grežo & Pilárik, 2023). Usually, this occurs because the presentation of the information either provokes a positive or negative connotation, which leads to a cognitive bias in the individual receiving the information (Gosling et al., 2020). This effect is often a consequence of information purposely conveyed by news media sources as a means of

² A cult led by Charles Manson; largely made up of women in their teens and 20s. The Manson Family is best known for the brutal murders they committed August 8 and 9 of 1969.

³ Jonestown, otherwise known as The Peoples Temple, was a cult led by preacher and political activist, Jim Jones. Jones is now better known as a mass murderer, who was able to convince the members of The Peoples Temple to drink kool-aid that was laced with potassium cyanide. Over 900 people died, including roughly 200 children.

⁴ Founded in 1974, the Heaven's Gate cult was led by Bonnie Nettles and Marshall Applewhite (Ti and Do, respectively), who claimed they were fulfilling the Two Witnesses Prophecy of the Book of Revelations. 39 members of Heaven's Gate committed suicide in 1997 because they sought to achieve transcendence via spaceship.

influence. As you will see in the article analyses, stories in the media tend to portray dramatic cult events, framing cults in negative ways. Therefore, one hypothesis is that individuals may create a definition of their own based on the media's presentation of cults that includes words like cruel, manipulative, demonic, etc. While these definitions may be accurate in some cases, they are not accurate in *all* cases, and this is where media bias can truly distort the real definition of a cult.

Cults do tend to be manipulative, and some are cruel or demonic, but cults also encourage support and growth among their members, and as discussed earlier, they provide a place for a person to build a community and a sense of belonging. Even those who grow up within a cult receive some of these benefits. In an interview with Wendell Jeffson, son of Warren Jeffs⁵, Jeffson stated that he was happy when he was in the cult. He noted that, of course he was brainwashed, but he grew up with a “great work ethic” and he had “a lot of siblings... [and] a great mom” (Nolasco, 2022). When people become members of a cult, they do not frequently do so to hurt anyone or anything. They are looking for a solution to the suffering of life, and they find that cults can give them the security and happiness they are searching for (Coates, 2012). While this sense of security and happiness may sometimes be illusionary, it is tremendously real to the cult member, and can even become an important facet of their overall well-being. To them, the definition of a cult would not even encompass the term itself. In fact, several studies have found cult members to be positively adjusted to life, and their membership was found to have had no harmful effects on life outcomes (Aldridge, 2007). In support of this information, it is necessary to recognize that a common definition of a cult by their

⁵ Polygamous leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) cult during the 1990s.

members is simply “family.” A modern-day example of this is The Satanic Temple (TST), which is a cult group based in Salem, MA. They consider themselves a non-theistic religious organization— using Satan as a mere figurehead that employs shock value and draws people in from all over the U.S. (The Satanic Temple, 2022). As explained in one article, TST’s ideology and rhetoric centers around utilizing Satan as a symbol for rebellion and the fight for personal autonomy (Hedenborg-White & Gregorius, 2020). This mission, including TST’s battle against the recent overturning of Roe V. Wade (1973), is paramount to its members. The common goal they all share, to fight for their cause and to spread their message to others, is prevalent on social media platforms and in news media interviews. One TST member fondly sent out this message over Twitter:

“Sending my @satanic_temple_ family love with some art. You guys make my life so much better” (@InfernalZoey, 2021).

Clearly, TST is the type of cult that has positive effects for its members, and it is not the only one. The reason this is so profound in this analysis is that it directly provides evidence for alternative definitions for the term “cult.” In addition, this alternate definition of a cult like TST being a “family” is purely a result of the perceptions of its members and those perceptions being reported by the media. If they did not feel a close connection or sense of security with the organization, then they would have a similar definition to those on the outside (non-members), which would likely be more negative. One example of this from the media comes from a Fox News article describing TST as a theistic, Satanist group (Carter, 2022). Fox News did not interview any members for this article, and only ever interviewed the leader of TST while on air. Doing so only created a

negative definition for TST, as the author of the article did not have any other perspective besides their own (an outsider perspective). Basically, the perspective either an individual in the media has or the perspective an individual *reporting* to the media has is what defines the cult.

The preceding example and investigation of cult definitions is what caused me to have a more complex definition of cults that attempts to include all beliefs about them from the news media sources analyzed. Some may argue that the presence of a charismatic leader is necessary criteria for the overall cult definition, but, when examining more modern cults in the media, it is evident that that is not always true. If it is not present in the majority of the articles, then it cannot be a necessary criterion. TST, for instance, is run more collectively, with a vast number of subgroups occupying different locations in the U.S. (Escobedo, 2015). Thus, I did not exclusively include the existence of a charismatic leader in my own definition. It is still a significant aspect of cults throughout history that cannot and should not be ignored, but it will not, at the same time, be as thoroughly discussed by the present research.

To sum up this section, the definition of a cult is wildly elaborate, encompassing a range of deviant, religious, and (some) non-theistic groups— with each having their own cause by which they are a united entity. While some cults may provide a sense of community and belonging to their members, others may engage in practices that are harmful or abusive. Ultimately, media sources more often associate a cult with the latter, and consequently that is how they are defined. Understanding the variation in cults, however, is important in order to also comprehend the psychological, social, and cultural forces that can influence what defines them. It is also important in that it conveys the

power the media has over its audience, and how the overall negative media definition has become commonplace amongst the public. Another necessary component of the cult definition in media is that the cult must be described as a cult plainly by the authors of the article. This will be further explained in the next section, but it is necessary to make note of here.

The Patterns of Cult Representation in News Media

How the media portrays cults and why they do it in such a formulated manner is one of the major focuses of the current research. To have an impact on others with their stories, the media has to stick to a formula for writing their articles in which descriptive language, the overall tone of the article, and the selection of information and visual images are employed and show patterns that are present in nearly every case. As far as cults are concerned, the media does an excellent job at limiting the information they present and framing cults in whatever way benefits them the most. Of course, some accuracy is required of them in these articles as well, but the central focus is the way in which cults are portrayed, *not* how accurately they are portrayed. In the following paragraphs, I will provide examples of this and explain the patterns present in the media formula for cult articles.

Descriptive Language

First, we will cover descriptive language. Perhaps the most surprising word usage in these articles deals with that of labels. In the media, a cult cannot be a cult without being labeled as such, and therefore any article that is attempting to depict a cult — whether it actually is one in reality or not— is called a cult by the author(s). In an article

from the COVID-19⁶ pandemic era, Tucker Carlson and Fox News (2020) emphasize the concept of a “cult of mask-wearing” in the United States that they claim is based on control and conformity. Did this cult ever exist? No, but using the word sparked a lot of controversy during the pandemic about mask requirements and whether it was a matter of keeping individuals under control of the government or a matter of public safety. Other news media outlets like CNN and the AP do the same thing; using the word cult alone draws people in, and whether there is an actual cult involved in the article is irrelevant.

In the articles where the word cult is used more appropriately, they still often will not *name* the cult, especially not in the title. An article from the AP (2018) provides information about the aftermath of the Aum Affair— an incident involving a cult in Japan that released sarin gas into Tokyo subways in 1995. The attack killed 13 people and sickened about 6,000 others, and in the year this article was written, Japanese authorities were in the process of executing those in the cult that were responsible. The interesting thing about this article is that the cult is not mentioned by name in the title, and also not until the fourth line of text. This may not seem all that significant, but the media intentionally leaves out the name from the title and the introductory sentences for several reasons— all of which benefit the media source.

In situations where the cult itself is not the focus of the article or is only tangentially related to the topic, the name might be brought up later in the article or omitted entirely in order to streamline the article and stray from unnecessary distraction or confusion. This was the case with the CNN article, where the focus was the punishment to those involved in the cult and not the cult itself. Another reason the media

⁶ COVID-19, otherwise known as coronavirus, is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This virus created a pandemic in 2020 that endured for approximately two years.

would exclude a cult's name might be to avoid giving the cult undue attention or publicity, which could inadvertently attract more followers or encourage the cult to engage in further attention-seeking behavior. This creates an aura of tension around the article as well, which allows the media source to attract readers via a sense of mystery and danger. Though the cult may not be a threat to the reader personally, not knowing who the cult is at first or at all can intrigue the reader and hook them into reading the full article. In some cases, news outlets may also be concerned about potential legal action from the cult or its members if it is not a group that has been criminalized yet, and they may choose to err on the side of caution by not including the name. Why is this information important in the patterns of the media's portrayals of cults? Largely because it tells us why the word cult is used more often than the names of the cults themselves. It is a word that captivates attention, avoids specification to streamline articles, and prevents the media from getting blamed for giving people the idea to join the cult in question.

Tone

The diction in these articles, as one might be starting to piece together, is almost always intentionally dramatic like the use of the word "cult." Other words one might find in an article about cults include: "heinous" (Associated Press, 2018), "control" (Carlson, 2020), "brainwashing" (Associated Press, 1987), "crime" (Roberto, 2021), "conspiracy" (Lowry, 2023), and many more. For the most part, the use of these words is justified. At the same time, they have another purpose that is not as obvious as simple description. These words have connotations that make the reader feel a certain way about the content of the article. They give the reader feelings of pity, anger, shock, etc. Without the effect

of this word choice, the author(s) would not be able to set the proper tone for the article. Setting the right tone in a news article is crucial to convey the message effectively and keep the audience engaged. The tone of an article can also assist a writer in establishing a perspective. Additionally, setting the right tone can help to create an atmosphere of trust and credibility between the writer and the reader, as the tone can convey a sense of expertise and professionalism— even if the writer does not have either of those things in reality. This notion goes back to the concept of the “façade of journalistic credibility” that was covered earlier. Most articles investigated in this research are fantastic examples of this, but there is one article from CNN (2023) that makes these suggestions difficult to dispute. The article focuses on a man named Larry Ray, a small cult leader who was able to take control over the lives of eight students at Sarah Lawrence College. CNN author Brian Lowry effectively uses tone to relay a sense of gravity and urgency in relation to Ray’s cult. Throughout the piece, Lowry employs strong, emotive language —words such as “controlled,” “manipulation,” “transgressions,” “shocking”— to describe the experiences of the students involved and to highlight the harmful impact that the cult environment had on them. By using language that is emotive and critical, the article is able to efficiently communicate the gravity of the situation and the harm that was inflicted on the students involved. The majority of news media articles on cults attempt to set this sort of tone and provoke emotions from the audience, and that is one pattern shown for sure, but not every article does it as explicitly as the preceding example.

The Selection of Information

Another pattern found in media articles involving cults is the selection of information. Any story is better when the boring details are left out and the theatrics

remain, but what tends to be lost in the process is context. When *any* kind of information is left out, the reader is missing a piece of the puzzle. As that information goes from the media article to the person reading it, even more information is lost the next time the story is communicated via the reader. It is similar to a game of telephone, where the first player whispers a message to the player next to them, who then whispers it to the player next to them, and so on, until the message reaches the last player in the circle. The last player then says aloud what they heard, and the message is compared to the original to see how much it has changed. The game is designed to illustrate how easily messages can become distorted as they are passed from person to person. As the message is whispered around the circle, slight changes in wording, tone, and even emphasis can accumulate and result in a message that is far different from the original. This example illustrates the importance of clear communication and the potential pitfalls of relying on hearsay and, in the case of these media articles, limited information that can become distorted by the simple process of relaying it.

The information the media typically opts to include in cult articles is the controversy surrounding the cult, the harm that fell upon the cult's victims, or an implication of the amount of people that are in the cult (the media frequently appears to exaggerate the number of people involved).

Controversy

Politically and religiously charged media outlets are the most likely to utilize controversy in their cult articles, especially Fox News, a predominantly right-wing media source with somewhat of a foundation in Christianity (Burge, 2021). The reasoning behind this is that outlets like Fox News appeal to their audience, who are primarily

conservative and/or religious, by showing them evidence for why liberals or other parties are “in the wrong,” or how others are straying away from God. One article from Fox News discussed the Canadian truckers’ freedom convoy, where the subtitle read “A liberal cartoonist with The Washington Post likened the truckers to supporters of fascism” (Nolasco, 2022). That alone suggests the author was attempting to appeal to the conservative audience, but they took it even further by quoting MSNBC’s⁷ comment about the convoy being a cult. As one can conclude from this example, the controversy surrounding cults or supposed cults can allure readers for these media sources, and therefore it is fairly common to see them depict a cult based on its controversial qualities.

Harm

Another way the news media selects certain information is that they emphasize or dramatize the harm done to victims of the cult. This is not such a terrible thing; doing so could actually help prevent similar events from happening, as people might be more likely to avoid cults if they hear more about what could happen to them. An article by the AP tells the story of a man who described his childhood in an abusive cult⁸, and the writers go into great detail to communicate the horrors of what happened to the man. The authors even took special note of one quote by the man, Jamey Anderson, who said “I don’t trust anybody... it can change the way people look at you,” (Weiss & Mohr, 2017). When taking the context of this quote into account, it reveals Anderson’s difficulty forming romantic relationships with other people. What does the media have to

⁷ Microsoft and the National Broadcasting Company

⁸ The Word of Faith Fellowship: a Protestant nondenominational church in Spindale, NC. They are known for being involved in multiple allegations of being a cult, and are accused of abuse.

gain from this? Well, the short answer is that they get a heartbreaking story and thus more people who are interested in reading the full article. People love drama, and the more tragedy the better.

Impact

The media also usually implies that a lot of people were involved in the cult or the event that occurred due to the cult's practices. This is typically done to make readers believe the ordeal was more significant than it actually was. A larger number of people involved can indicate that the story has broader implications and impact and may draw more attention from readers. One CNN article makes the notion that there is a "cult of guns" in America, which they also suggest is made up of Christians, Trump and his supporters, and all of Hollywood (Parini, 2019). The author makes it clear, with a frustrated tone, that they include ALL people involved in these categories in the blame for America's gun control policies. It is an effective tactic that gets people excited to rally for gun control, and it implies that the "cult of guns" in America is vast and that its members are willing to fight to keep guns around.

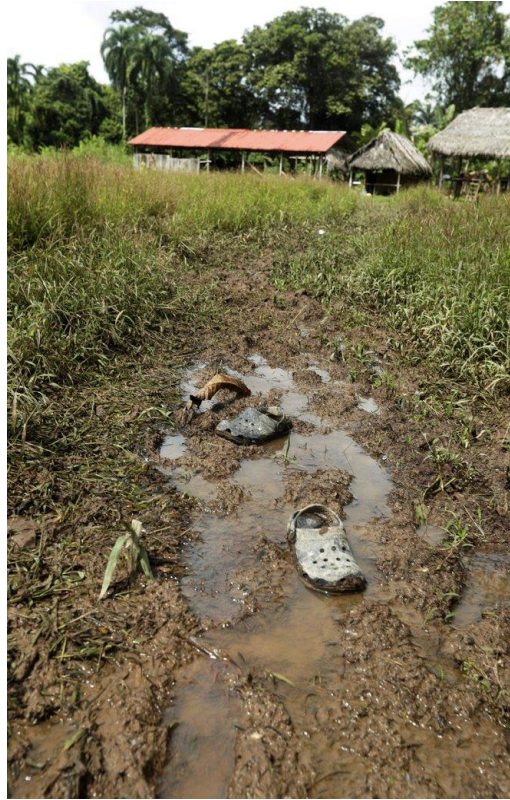
The Selection of Imagery

The final of the more prominent patterns shown in the media depiction of cult is the selection of imagery, which is primarily a method of keeping the reader's interest. Images in a media article can also enhance the reader's understanding of the story and provide additional context, help readers visualize the subject matter, and create an emotional connection to the story. They can also serve to break up large blocks of text and make the article more visually appealing and engaging. Another crucial factor in including visuals

in news media articles is that they increase the article's shareability⁹ on social media. Articles with compelling images are more likely to be engaged with on social media platforms, potentially expanding the article's reach and impact (Backman & Sonnentag, 2022). This is more common in cult articles than other articles, likely due to their fascinating nature. To provide an example, there are several gripping images from an AP article describing a cult in El Terron, Panama, circa 2017. The cult had their own “sanctuary,” where dirty shoes and burned clothing were found; as it turns out, the cult claimed to be anointed by God, and sacrificed non-believers (Zamorano, 2020). An unsettling image from this article shows shoes left in the mud outside a “temple” where a pregnant woman, five of her children, and a neighbor were murdered during a religious ritual conducted by the cult of this remote jungle community. It was concluded by authorities and from the clothing left behind that these people were tortured, burned, beaten, and attacked with machetes (Zamorano, 2020). The image provided from the article is disturbing and can be seen in Figure 1. Again, this is only one of the images within this article, but all of them are impactful. The attributes of image use such as this are part of what makes cult articles so riveting, and precisely why the media uses these types of images in cult articles. Additionally, the AP uses more images in their articles than the other two platforms. Perhaps this is a tactic more specific to AP’s platform, but I still talk about the selection of imagery as if it applies equally to all sources analyzed. I do this because it would not be appropriate to say that the other two sources do not use the selection of imagery as often, as I do not have a large enough sample of articles to indicate much significance in this aspect.

⁹ The spread of something through people, typically via the internet.

Figure 1



Note. Photo from AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco

Summary

In general, news media articles involving cults are formulated with heavy diction, a serious tone, limited information, and captivating images to portray cults in various ways by different media outlets. In the following sections, I will first present a continuum model of how cults are portrayed in the media, and then I will individually examine each media source that was analyzed. This will be done to convey how the different media sources perceive various cults and how they portray them to readers.

The Media Portrayals of Cults Continuum (MPCC)

The Media Portrayals of Cults Continuum, or MPCC, is a table I created that represents the linear progression of the depiction of cults in news media from the least “problematic” (non-threat cults) to the most “problematic” (extremist cults). From left to right, the three main categories a media portrayal of a cult can fit into are non-threat cults, ambiguous cults, and extremist cults (see Table 1 for descriptions). Between each of these categories is a bidirectional arrow, which signifies that a cult portrayal can exist anywhere along the line between each category. For example, one media outlet might portray a cult to have radical practices, but they lack information on the cult. In this case, the cult would be placed between extremist and ambiguous, possibly leaning more toward extremist or more toward ambiguous depending upon how the media source structures the article in question and their underlying motivations (represented by the “Additional Criteria” row on Table 1. This row on Table 1 is further explained by Table 2).

The MPCC is meant to be used as a template for any portrayal of a cult from any media source, and the categories include a description and additional criteria that can help one to place a cult portrayal from the media somewhere along the continuum (non-threat through extremist). Though the MPCC was designed based only upon the three sources analyzed by this thesis, it is generalized as much as possible to be applicable to other news media sources. At the same time, the MPCC, once again, is a template and not a set of rules for cult portrayals. This means that the continuum can be edited or added to for personal use, since it is simply a guideline formed by the current research. Essentially, the MPCC as it is formatted below is most applicable to this thesis and the media outlets analyzed in this thesis. It can of course be reworked to apply to other projects as the individual sees fit.

Table 1

	Non-threat Cults	↔	Ambiguous Cults	↔	Extremist Cults
	Groups that may be classified as cults simply for grouping together. Can also be the <i>idea</i> of an organized group that may or may not actually exist.	Falls between non-threat and ambiguous; having some amount of both of these categories' characteristics.	Groups that may be classified as cults but not much information is given or is known about them.	Falls between ambiguous and extremist; having some amount of both of these categories' characteristics.	Groups that may be classified as a cult and are considered as such based on the radical ideas and/or practices of the group.
Additional Criteria	-No controversy -No harm -No impact		-Potential controversy -Potential harm -Potential impact		-High controversy -High harm -High impact

Designing this continuum involved the creation of a few drafted models that I revised throughout the course of writing this thesis. I of course knew there had to be two endpoints, which both had to be the “extremes” of the continuum. After some consideration, I decided on non-threat cults and extremist cults. This was an easy choice, as I knew that there needed to be a sort of starting point (the minimum level at which cults could be portrayed) and an overall peak (the highest level at which cults could be portrayed). The starting point, to me, meant that that endpoint needed the capacity for the group to be *barely* perceived as a cult. This is the point where the media might imply a group is a cult—even if it is not one in other contexts— just to support some sort of agenda. This agenda could be anything, but some examples include: a political agenda, a religious agenda, or even a smear campaign that is aimed against some other individual or organization. There is also the peak endpoint— extremist cults. Choosing this endpoint

was easy as well, and I used the label of “extremist” for fairly obvious reasons. Finally, there is the midpoint, which I designated for ambiguous cults. It represents the category as vague, which allows cults portrayed with little information or with selected information to exist along the MPCC line. The decision to include the arrows between categories was more of a necessity than a choice, because the portrayals of cults by the media can exist between the more major categories by having a certain amount of attributes in each of the two distinct categories.

Table 2 provides a short description of underlying news media motivations in each category. These descriptions do not include *all* media motivations, but it is a quick and straightforward way to check and see how each portrayal benefits the media outlet being investigated. As mentioned previously, it can also be used alongside the “additional criteria” row of the MPCC table. In this way, the media motivations table functions as more of a reference for the MPCC and this thesis in general. Like the MPCC, it can also function as a template and be changed in accordance with other projects.

Table 2

	Non-threat Cults	Ambiguous Cults	Extremist Cults
Media Motivations	May want there to be an implication of a cult to support some kind of agenda (e.g., political agenda) even though the items listed in the additional criteria row (controversy, harm, and/or impact) of the MPCC do not exist.	May want to use the cult to enhance viewership by playing on fear of the unknown by using limited information. Could be used to support an agenda as well if the media outlet indicates a potential for controversy, harm, and/or impact.	May want the benefits of a dramatic and shocking story, which might help to enhance viewership as well as an agenda. The high presence of controversy, harm, and/or impact make this goal easier to achieve.

The MPCC is the heart of this analysis. It allows me to have a definitive method of categorizing how the different media outlets portray cults, and it grants others the ability to see *why* I have categorized them that way. It is also significant for use in future research on this topic or for general reference among academics, researchers, media professionals, and other individuals.

CNN's Perceptions and Portrayals of Cults

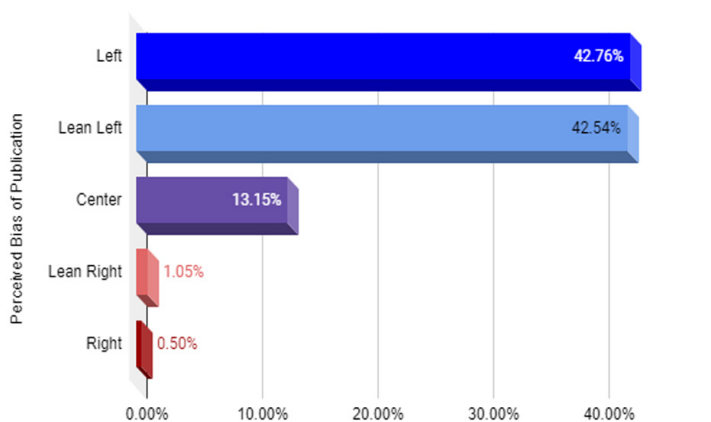
Some news media outlets strive for balance and accuracy in their reporting, while others may be more prone to exaggeration or sensationalism. CNN is prone to exaggeration, which is due to its left-leaning political foundation (see Figure 2) and the need for people to read their articles (“CNN (Online News) Media Bias Rating,” 2021). In this section, I will provide evidence for this and explain how these “needs” contribute

Figure 2

Survey: CNN Online News Bias

Nov. 2020 Blind Bias Survey - Normalized Data

AllSides asked over 2,200 people across the political spectrum to rate the bias of content from CNN online news (not TV content) blindly.



Note. Graph from AllSides

to CNN's depiction of cults in their articles. In doing so, I will include in this section three articles by CNN that cover diverse types of cults, and what those three articles have in common as well as what the differences are among them. This will allow me to analyze CNN's formula in portraying various forms of cults.

The first article we will look at is called "5 things you didn't know about satanists," by CNN writer Tricia Escobedo (2015). In this article, Escobedo focuses the discussion on two well-known satanic groups— The Church of Satan¹⁰ and, previously introduced, The Satanic Temple. Being a more liberal media source, CNN and Escobedo paint these two organizations in a more positive light, generally accepting these cults for what they are. You could call CNN one of the more "woke"¹¹ sources of the three we will be investigating. In the introduction of the article, for instance, it is mentioned that many satanists in modern times are a lot more interested in community activism and individual freedoms than heavy metal music or performing bizarre rituals. Not only does this information imply that CNN is accepting of modern satanism, but it indicates that CNN knows its audience. They know that by taking more progressive, left-wing stances such as this, they can keep a majority of their readers interested while also supporting their own political agenda. Thus, their perspective and depiction of this type of cult is one of acceptance. This form of cult is portrayed by CNN as non-threatening and overall nothing for the public to be worried about. It is important to note that cults such as this have produced no real harm to anyone. That being said, it is easier for CNN to accept them for

¹⁰ A religious group that worships themselves and humans in general, using Satan as a symbol for the idea that humans are carnal by birth, as well as pride, liberty, and individualism.

¹¹ Being conscious of racial discrimination in society and other forms of oppression and injustice. In mainstream use, woke can also more generally describe someone or something as being "with it."

what they are than if they had caused injuries or deaths or psychological damage to occur. Under the laws of the MPCC, this cult would be considered a non-threat cult for CNN.

Another article from CNN is titled “What the rise of this ’70s cult says about American culture,” and it talks about the similarities between the Heaven’s Gate cult and American culture. In this article, Christianity is said to play an influential role in both the Heaven’s Gate cult and in America. However, the true commonality is the paranoid style of American religion, which is how Christianity and conspiracy seem to go hand-in-hand (Zeller, 2020). The Heaven’s Gate cult had a basis in Christianity, and so does most of American culture. By linking the two together, CNN suggests that Americans are paranoid by anything that threatens their religion or religious prophecies. The Heaven’s Gate cult, like other Americans, embraced the “culture of conspiracy,” which historian Michael Barkun says divides the world into evil forces and true believers, where the evil forces conspire, and the believers are aware of the conspiracies and reject them (Zeller, 2020). Many Christian Americans do the same thing. Most recently, they even began rumors about conspiracies involving the COVID-19 vaccine during the pandemic (Beyer & Herrberg, 2023), which is telling of how this religious paranoia can be so dangerous and so cult-like. The Heaven’s Gate cult and others like it, by CNN’s standards, are extremist cults and are depicted as such, with this article and others related to it showcasing the worst of Heaven’s Gate.

The last article to be analyzed in this section is “Scientology: What exactly is it?” (Gilgoff & Escobedo, 2017). The title essentially explains the article; it attempts to describe Scientology as well as its founder— L. Ron Hubbard¹². Unfortunately, this

¹² American author of science fiction and fantasy; best known for founding the Church of Scientology in 1954.

article offers limited information about Scientology, but it does its best in explaining Scientology as a self-improvement focused organization that also happens to believe in alien influence in our human traumas. CNN also mentions popular celebrities like Tom Cruise, who is known for his involvement in the Church of Scientology. However, without knowing much about what goes on within the church, CNN seems to keep a distanced opinion that Scientology is not good or bad, just a bit strange. When looking at the controversy section of the article, CNN calls Scientology part therapy, part religion, and part UFO group (Gilgoff & Escobedo, 2017). From this, it can be interpreted that CNN perceives Scientology as a group involved in conspiracy and the belief in ancient alien civilizations, but it is not so much a violent organization as far as anyone can tell. It also seems to have some desire to help the members of the church in getting over their life traumas, even if they believe those traumas are the result of alien parasites (Gilgoff & Escobedo, 2017). Thus, CNN depicts the Church of Scientology as an ambiguous cult, where not much is known or understood about the cult, but it seems relatively harmless and does not directly reject CNN's political views or reject any religious views CNN may hold. This type of cult also likely provides CNN with a higher viewer count, as the article employs the fear of the unknown through Scientology.

Fox News' Perceptions and Portrayals of Cults

Like CNN, Fox News is a media outlet that typically exaggerates the stories they report. This is of course true of their cult stories as well, and as with CNN, it is due to their political foundation—right-leaning for Fox (Meylan, 2022) as opposed to CNN's leftist approach—and the need for people to read their articles. Yet, Fox has one more card up their sleeve that CNN does not, which is *religion*. Fox News is interwoven with

Christian ideals, and so this is another motivation for them to exaggerate and sometimes even lie according to The Washington Post (Wilkinson, 2023). Similarly to the previous section, I will provide evidence for Fox News' motivations and explain how these factors (politics, the need for an audience, and religion) contribute to this media source's depiction of cults in their articles. To do this, in this section I will analyze three articles by Fox that cover different types of cults, and what those three articles have in common as well as what differences are among them. This will allow me to display Fox's formula for portraying various forms of cults.

For our first cult article from Fox News, we will be reviewing "Tucker Carlson: Christianity is dying and being replaced by cult of coronavirus" (2021). This article is, as the title mentions, by Tucker Carlson— a Fox News broadcasting host nationally known for his extreme right-wing opinions ("Tucker Carlson media bias rating," 2023). Carlson's article encompasses all three factors of motivation in how Fox tends to depict cult articles, as it focuses on the supposed lack of Christianity in the U.S. and how COVID-19 apparently enabled politicians to "close down" churches (Carlson, 2021). Politics and religion play a clear role in this article, and Carlson even directly claims that "politicians used the pandemic... to close thousands of churches and throw Christians in prison for practicing their faith," even though this would have no real benefit to said politicians. Carlson also imposes the idea that these politicians *personally* instituted the "cult of coronavirus" to somehow "criminalize" Christianity, though he offers no facts to back this up (2021). In this way, Carlson portrays COVID-19 as a political cult that rivals and even despises Christian practices, which of course infuriates the Fox News audience—an audience that is primarily Christian (see Figure 3)— and makes them more

interested in reading and spreading Carlson’s article. The chart below includes data collected from survey respondents analyzed by Ryan Burge (2021), a professor in political science. One question on the survey was about news consumption habits, and it asked what television news networks respondents had watched in the prior 24 hours (relative to taking the survey). This graph represents the amount of Fox viewers that belong to each religion listed. As one can see, most of the viewership resides with various Christian denominations. It is apparent that Fox is no stranger to targeting the Christian audience. It is also apparent that Fox utilizes a more right-winged approach to appeal to

Figure 3

Almost two-thirds of white evangelicals said they watched Fox News at some point over the previous 24 hours

The network was also popular among white Catholics, Mormons and Orthodox Christians. But only 1 in 7 atheists tuned in.

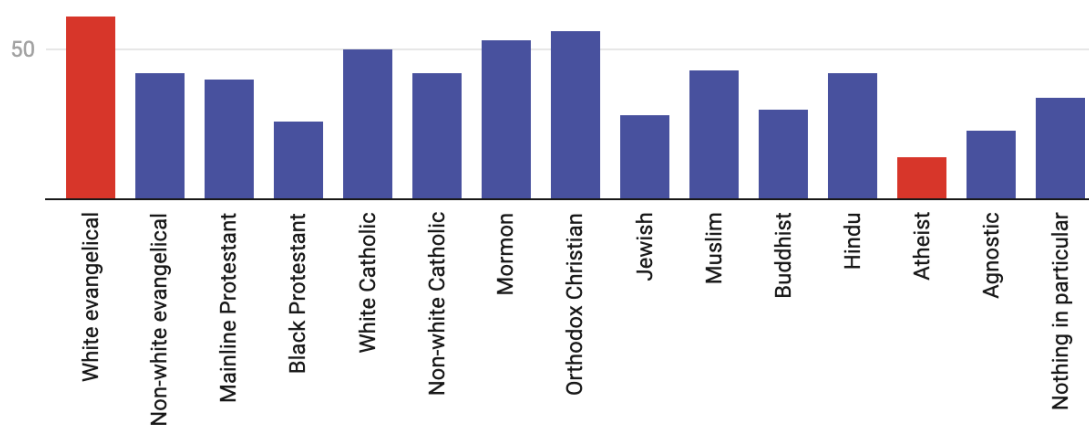


Chart: The Conversation CC-BY-ND • Source: [Ryan Burge/CES](#) • [Get the data](#)

Note. Graph from The Conversation/Ryan Burge

Christians when it comes to political cults, as these cults appear to directly oppose

Christian values (such as the example of politicians “shutting down” the church during

lockdown¹³ in the COVID-19 era) while also supporting Fox's conservative political agenda. In light of this, these types of political cults are portrayed by Fox News as extremist cults, where the cult has radical and opposing political views as well as opposing religious views. With this particular cult, Fox suggests those within the cult of coronavirus have created their own religion that is well established and anti-Christian. That religion, according to Fox, is a faith in the procedures to defend oneself against COVID-19.

The second Fox News article under investigation involves the Branch Davidians, the cult led by David Koresh (a.k.a. Vernon Howell), as well as one former Branch Davidian who fled the cult before its tragic end¹⁴ in 1993 (Nolasco, 2018). Because what happened with this cult is well documented, this article does not have as much exaggeration as others. It does, however, undermine the role of religion while emphasizing the lack of freedom in the cult, even though these two aspects are inseparable in this case. Specifically, the article fully blames Koresh for the ordeal, suggesting that he pursued polygamy without the consent of others among the group or the consent of the religious beliefs the cult followed. From my own viewpoint, the reasoning behind this is that Fox avoids offending their Christian audience by making them believe their religious beliefs are not like the Branch Davidians'. They seem to even try to say that the Bible and the passion for it—and God—is not partly to blame for what transpired from the Waco conflict. Instead of acknowledging that the Branch

¹³ A period of time during the COVID-19 pandemic in which people were asked to quarantine in their homes and avoid going out in public. Most businesses, schools, churches, and other establishments were closed during this time.

¹⁴ In 1993, David Koresh and his followers barricaded themselves from federal agents in their compound in Waco, Texas. This 51-day standoff resulted in a fiery inferno that burnt down the compound and killed about 80 people.

Davidians were more radical in nature, Fox portrays them as somewhat ambiguous instead. Not entirely a “threat,” but also not harmless either— with respect to politics and religion, but general violence as well (see Table 1). Fox does recognize the armory within the Branch Davidian’s compound in this article, though, which still implies some level of threat, and therefore this religious cult and others like it are depicted as being somewhere between an ambiguous cult and an extremist cult. There is not much about the Branch Davidians cult that aligns with or opposes Fox News’ political agenda, and therefore that motivational factor is absent from this article. For this reason, the cult is depicted further towards ambiguous rather than extremist.

The final article to be analyzed from Fox is titled: “NXIVM victim, neighbor react to Nancy Salzman's prison sentence: 'Thrilled'” (Roberto, 2020). This article explains the drama behind the sex cult, NXIVM¹⁵, where young girls and women in general were allegedly sex trafficked and abused. It is revealed by this article that Nancy Salzman, co-founder of NXIVM, was sentenced to prison for three-and-a-half years. This article benefits Fox News in two aspects; politics and viewer/reader count. Politically, Fox is able to show that, as a conservative media outlet, they reject NXIVM and anyone negatively related to the organization. With regard to viewer/reader count, Fox emphasizes names, the concept of sex abuse, and describes the cult as owning “sex slaves” and being generally evil in nature. They also provide images of those imprisoned for the crimes of NXIVM, so that viewers/readers have a visual of who they should be angry with; solidifying intense emotions to keep the audience at full attention. One image

¹⁵ (NEK-see-um) A cult led by Keith Raniere, a sex offender. Initially, the cult had been disguised as a self-help organization. After members came forward about Raniere’s behavior, the media exposed NXIVM for what it really was— a sex cult founded in human trafficking.

used in the article is pictured below (Figure 4), and it shows an exasperated expression from Salzman before her sentencing, as if she believes she will be acquitted. Instead, she

Figure 4



Note. Photo from AP Photo/Mary Altaffer

was given a sentence, but the image evokes strong emotions from the audience, consequently increasing the amount of views/reads for the article from people who feel the need to share their feelings about the topic with others. With this cult being depicted by Fox as being involved in immense political drama as well as having a damaging impact on those who were victims, Fox portrays NXIVM as an extremist cult, even without the religion criterion. Often, the impact a cult has can trump the value of the other criteria in each category of the continuum, as long as the portrayal of high impact benefits the media outlet more than politics or religion would (or possibly in addition to).

Perceptions and Portrayals of Cults in the AP

Unlike the previous two news sources, the AP has been viewed as less biased because of their lack of religious and political agendas (Meylan, 2022). They do not tend to exaggerate as much in their articles because of this, which makes their opinions sometimes hard to see. The motivation to obtain a great amount of attention to their articles is still present, though, so there is still data that can be found in the articles. For this reason, the following articles will be analyzed primarily on their use of linguistics and imagery.

One article we will dig into is about a cult of “corpse-worshippers” that involves a self-proclaimed holy man and his followers (Vejpongsa, 2022). According to the AP, the cult believed that consuming bodily fluids such as urine and phlegm —either from their leader or from corpses— would cure illness. When it comes to linguistics, the diction used to describe this cult is important, as the words “corpses” and “chaotic” are used right away and hold value in depicting this cult. Firstly, the word “corpses” evokes haunting images in the reader’s mind, which leaves behind a sort of mental/emotional residue that makes the article significant for the individual. This significance is beneficial to the AP because the reader will remember it easily, and they will be more likely to share it (or at least the information and where that information came from) with others; this is similar to the process of episodic memory¹⁶ (Weill Institute for Neurosciences, 2023). “Chaotic” is another important example of word choice, where the word instills a mild sense of shock in the reader that makes them want to continue reading. In fact, later in the article, the

¹⁶ A type of long-term memory involving the recollection of experiences associated with (often) intense feelings and/or a specific time and place.

author also actually uses the word “shocked,” which has the same effect, just in a more literal way. With there being no political or religious agenda in this article, we can only judge the perceptions and portrayals of this cult from the AP based on their word usage. Additionally, there are no images in this article, so no decisions can be made on that front, either. Other than the words already mentioned, the description of the cult leader, Thawee Nanra, helps us understand the perceptions in this article as well. Specifically, they call him a “bearded, shirtless white-haired man,” indicating that they believe he is a stereotypical crazy old man. The author wanted the reader to know that the man was disheveled and older in age, hence why they included the descriptive words “bearded” and “white-haired.” “Shirtless” was more of a bonus detail to imply that the man was not very well-kept, and simply contributed to the imagery of the crazy old man stereotype. The AP clearly believes this group to be outlandish and overall peculiar, even including that the Provincial Governor of Chaiyaphum, Thailand, stated that it was disturbing to know that practices such as this are still going on in the modern era (Vejpongsa, 2022). This religious cult is depicted by the AP as an extremist cult, and others like it would be portrayed similarly via linguistics and imagery. While no political or religious motivations can be derived from this article, it is clear from the way the AP writes about this cult that they are attempting to represent this cult as it is— shocking and involving a great deal of harm to those who were victims.

The next article to be analyzed from the AP is titled: “Yoga sect allegedly exploited women to lure men like Domingo.” This is an ambiguous title, so to elaborate, the “yoga sect” they are referring to was the Buenos Aires Yoga School, which operated out of Argentina for about 30 years. An investigation into the school revealed that the

organization was exploiting vulnerable women and engaged in sex trafficking, money laundering, the illegal practice of medicine, and other crimes (Politi et al., 2022). The other part of the title that is ambiguous, “men like Domingo,” ties into these crimes. Domingo is an opera star, his full name being Placido Domingo, and he was accused by the AP as having benefited from influencing outside opinions of the school. Being famous, the social status he held gave the school a good reputation. Behind the scenes, though, the AP suggests that Domingo was sexually involved with the exploited women from the yoga school and was paying to support the organization and their criminal activities (Politi et al., 2022). In Figure 5, an image of Juan Percowicz¹⁷ is shown. The

Figure 5



Note. Photo from AP Photo/Riccardo De Luca

¹⁷ Leader of the “sect” that claimed to have divine powers and wisdom. He used this claim to gain a following (students at the yoga school) and to exploit people for his own benefit. Supposedly, audio from a wiretap reveals Percowicz talking about allowing Domingo into the “museum,” a code-word for the top-floor of their facility where influential men could have sex with members of the yoga school.

article uses this image to show how surprised Percowicz looks when he gets arrested, representing that the yoga school and men like Domingo (such as Percowicz) were shrouded in a cultish secrecy that they believed would never be discovered. It is also worth noting how fed up and disturbed the Argentinian officers look while arresting Percowicz, which may be useful to the AP in depicting this cult as cruel in their practices as well as showing the severity of the crimes committed. Even when it comes to language in this article, the AP uses words like “reduced,” and calls people involved with the yoga school “cult members,” effectively attempting to portray the yoga school as an extremist, criminal cult. The word “reduced” is significant because of its context, with the authors saying that some members of the group were “reduced to ‘a situation of slavery,’” which emphasizes the idea that the cult was forcing people into a horrific existence while often being victims of sexual abuse (Politi et al., 2022). It effectively suggests that the people themselves were in a position that left them “reduced” to nothing, and their only purpose became serving the cult. While this cult is perceived and portrayed by the AP as more of an extremist cult, it could also be argued that this cult leans into the ambiguous category as well. This is mostly because the AP also uses words such as “allegedly” to describe the events that occurred in the cult, so in a sense they are admitting that some of what they portray is mild fabrication (Politi et al., 2022). Thus, some details about Domingo and the practices of the cult are left a bit ambiguous, though the idea that the yoga school was *still* a cult group is observed to be factual by the authors. The word “allegedly” is also important in differentiating the AP from CNN and Fox News, as articles from the AP appear to be more likely to *implicate* their findings than the other two news sources. In this way, they seem to retain a more unbiased perspective. CNN and Fox News have a

tendency to treat their opinions and accusations about cults as fact, represented by statements like “guns *are* a religion now” (Parini, 2019) in an article from CNN and statements like “*what they're really telling you* is that masks *are* magic. What appears to be a flimsy cotton face covering *is in fact* a holy amulet that protects us from disease” (Carlson, 2020) in an article from Fox News. In these quotes from the article, I have italicized the words that indicate CNN and Fox News treat their opinions as fact so that you can clearly see how the AP differs from these two sources relative to their word choice.

The last cult article to be examined is “Cult to Contrary, World Fails to End,” from AP author Marta Kolomayets (1993). This article happens to be older; published in November of 1993, and takes place in Kyiv, Ukraine. The article talks about a doomsday cult known as the “White Brotherhood,” led by Maria Devi Khrystos (A.K.A. Maria Tsvihun¹⁸), in which members of the cult believed their supposed messiah (Khrystos) would commit suicide and be resurrected by the Holy Spirit on “doomsday” in the Saint Sophia Cathedral. In this article, Kolomayets’ tone is satirical, and her use of language/diction in the article follows that tone. Kolomayets uses words and phrases like “huge ball of flame” and “failure” and “self-styled” in portraying Khrystos and her cult. These words are fairly self-explanatory and show exactly how little Kolomayets thought of the “White Brotherhood.” In the last few lines of the article, Kolomayets even jokes about how Khrystos moved the date of her alleged “apocalyptic” event, and her followers still believed that Khrystos would go up in a 60-yard ball of flame. In sum, the AP

¹⁸ Predicted that the apocalypse was coming and that the Holy Spirit would come to Earth on November 10th of 1993. She led the cult called the “White Brotherhood” to storm the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kiev, Ukraine, where Khrystos and other cult members were arrested for endangering the public.

portrays this cult as a non-threat cult, with a slight lean into an ambiguous cult, as there was no sign of a political agenda and not much harm was done; though religious views are still mentioned and highlighted to some degree by the article. Despite the fact that religion did not play a major role in this article's portrayal of the "White Brotherhood," it could be said that the AP pokes fun at the concepts behind Christianity, which is primarily what leads the cult into being depicted as "ambiguous," even though there is a lot of information on the cult. So, for the sake of the continuum, the cult is depicted as non-threat, with only a slight boost into ambiguous territory because of them having a religious background. Additionally, extremism does not really fit this representation, so it must be concluded that the cult resides between non-threat and ambiguous in terms of the AP's perceptions.

Categorization of the Examples

For reference, I have included a table below (Table 3) that represents how the MPCC is used in this research. For each cult portrayal from the articles described in the last three sections, their categorization along the MPCC is shown below. This might be helpful to those who may want to use the MPCC in their own research, or it can plainly be used as a visual for those who might understand the cult portrayals in the articles better by seeing it laid out. This table is also a good example of how the MPCC can be used by others for personal purposes or for research purposes. For the current research, the table is organized by article title and date of publication and includes the platform the article was published on as well.

Table 3

Non-threat Cults	↔	Ambiguous Cults	↔	Extremist Cults
<p>“5 things you didn’t know about satanists” (CNN, 2015)</p>	<p>“Cult to Contrary, World Fails to End” (AP News, 1993)</p>	<p>“Scientology: What exactly is it?” (CNN, 2017)</p>	<p>“Former Waco Cult member opens up about escaping David Koresh in New Documentary” (Fox News, 2018)</p> <p>“Yoga sect allegedly exploited women to lure men like Domingo” (AP News, 2022)</p>	<p>“What the rise of this ’70s cult says about American culture” (CNN, 2020)</p> <p>“Tucker Carlson: Christianity is dying and being replaced by cult of coronavirus” (Fox News, 2021)</p> <p>“NXIVM victim, neighbor react to Nancy Salzman's prison sentence: 'Thrilled” (Fox News, 2020)</p> <p>“Police in Thailand arrest leader of corpse-worshiping cult” (AP News, 2022)</p>

What is interesting about this table is how many cult portrayals fall towards the extremist end. This might have implications for media exaggeration, though further research would need to be conducted. Additionally, a larger sample of articles could contribute to a more complete understanding of the implications of this table and could be useful in future research about the methodology of news reporting— this does not necessarily have to be reporting on cults.

Discussion

In conclusion, the findings of this analysis provide valuable insights into the complexities of cult articles in the media. Firstly, the cult definition that was created after

compiling the information from the three media sources can give us a proper model for what a cult is or *should* be, so that this model can be compared to media portrayals of cults. In this way, we are immediately able to see whether the media is fairly accurate in their cult representations. It also allows us to acknowledge that different perspectives on cults create different definitions that are more accurate for an individual's conceptualization. Second, the data shows that across the three media sources, cult stories are primarily employed for one of three reasons: to support a political agenda, to support a religious agenda, or to draw attention to the specified news media platform. Because this is not true of *all* cases, it is important to note that the most generalizable conclusion we can make from this is that the media not only aims to inform but also aims to influence their audience in some way. From this, it is also reasonable to argue that this generalization applies to other media outlets not analyzed by this thesis. When it comes to Table 3, there is also the implication that a majority of cult articles fall toward the extremist end of the MPCC, which might indicate a greater amount of exaggeration than I originally proposed. As previously stated, further research would need to be conducted to determine this. Finally, the research suggests that, overall, CNN and Fox News utilize politics in a majority of their cult articles, while the AP mainly relies on finding stories that include a fair amount of drama. The different motivations behind each media outlet are what determine how cults are portrayed in their articles, which sometimes leads to the audience receiving limited information on the cults presented. This can have the effect of the audience forming a biased opinion that is majorly based upon one article from one media source. In sum, through the examination of CNN, Fox News, and the AP, we have defined a cult and compared other definitions, we have analyzed the structure of cult

articles, we have established the MPCC continuum, and we have analyzed the cult articles themselves alongside the media outlet they were written for.

Recognizing that this is what has been covered by the current analysis, it is also pertinent to discuss the implications of this research. For the most part, our analysis implies that the media has a great deal of influence in the general public. It also implies that most news media outlets write their articles in a manner that benefits them in numerous ways. With this analysis being specified toward cult articles, though, perhaps the most important implication is that cults are given different classifications by different sources. This consequently enables more organizations, or even the *suggestion* of an organized group, to be categorized as cults even if they do not entirely fit into the “typical” cult definition.

With all of this in mind, a few questions that may be valuable to consider are:

- Why does the media wield so much power over our perceptions?
- Are the cults in media articles genuine threats to society? (This question may be resolved by using the continuum in this thesis to categorize different cults.)
- Do professionals in news media realize when they are being deceptive in their coverage of cults?

These questions are just topics to think about after reading this analysis, but they may help to spark future research about cults in news media, or just one of the two. Regarding future research, researchers may want to compare the news media outlets analyzed by this thesis to others to gain a more general understanding of the motivations in the media and whether the established continuum needs to be expanded or edited. Future research may also want to go beyond articles and investigate news broadcast clips, or even interview

the broadcasters/writers themselves to gain more insight on the topic. It may also be interesting to have future research be more empirical in nature.

Limitations

The current analysis has several limitations. Firstly, the analysis does not cover the same cults across the different news sources, which led to a lack of relevant comparison when I was going over each separate media outlet and the ways in which they portrayed cults. This was simply for the sake of the continuum, as a variety of cults and cult articles were necessary to create a working model that could effectively classify the portrayals of cults in the media. Other limitations include the issue of many cult articles being written by the same author, as it seems they are almost “assigned” to the cult topic in the media source they write for. The authors of the articles themselves were also not investigated for individual biases that could have affected how the cults were portrayed. This would cause the article to have biases not only from the platform it was written for but also the biases from the author(s), which could compound in ways that are currently unknown. In addition, a larger sample of cult articles may have produced a more representative depiction of cults from each media source. Lastly, other aspects of news media like broadcasts were not analyzed, which caused some data to be excluded. A more extensive, future project could analyze these aspects of news media and contribute further to the current research, or produce its own separate findings.

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