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Image of sects in public discourse based on an analysis of press articles between 2000 and 2007

Abstract: The article is analysis of articles dealing with sect issues, published in the Polish press between January 1, 2000 and April 1, 2007. The result of this analysis is a classification of articles based on type of sect image presented in article (positive, neutral, negative). The dominating type of articles includes a negative description of sects. This study describes characteristics of this type of press articles. The author indicates selected mechanisms causing the creation of a medial image of sects and the social consequences of this image.

Key words: sect, cult, religious minorities, image

Types of articles creating an image of sects

Religious sects are a subject which evokes much media interest and controversy. At the same time, articles on sects are not among the most popular. Because the issue of sects in society is a difficult one, an analysis of media presentation of this issue should shed some light on the present state of affairs.

The phrase 'sect' is often used freely and it is not always used to describe religious groups but also people manipulated by others or a particular group. Within public discourse, however, this term is most frequently used to mean religious groups. In Polish language the connotation is decisively negative and means people or groups to whom authors wish to attribute negative characteristics. Consequently, calling any group this name, especially a religious one, results in creating a negative image of it.

The goal of this article is to analyse press articles on sects¹ and to select the most popular and repeatable characteristics dominant in the articles. Generally, there are three types of articles on sects:

- Articles depicting sects as groups negatively influencing society and individuals.
- Articles depicting sects in a neutral way, especially reports not including judgement or opinion, with an equilibrium of positive and negative comments.
- Articles in which dominant are positive aspects of sect activity.

¹ Articles on sects were considered those which described new religious movements, established after WW II or texts about such activity. Analysed were also those texts not directly about new religious movements but those assessing them. Not examined were articles describing organizations created before WW II, which are sometimes considered sects (ie. Opus Dei).

In the first stage of analysis it will be determined which types of articles are dominant in Polish press. In order to do that a frequency analysis was performed on a selected group of two dailies and two weeklies. In the second stage performed will be an analysis of the most frequently appearing type of articles on sects and a selection of most frequently occurring elements of these articles (especially those which can influence readers' image of sects). The articles analysed were those which appeared in the press between January 1, 2000 and April 1, 2007.

Types of press articles

For the purpose of the analysis selected were two most frequently quoted dailies ("Rzeczpospolita" and "Dziennik") and two most frequently quoted weeklies ("Wprost" and Newsweek)². Analysed were articles with information on sects (as the main subject and those including only short information on sects). The time frames of analysis vary as does the frequency of publication (dailies and weeklies) which influences the overall numbers of published articles. The dailies were examined between April 18, 2006³ and April 1, 2007 while the weeklies were analysed between January 1, 2001⁴ and January 1, 2007.

Newspaper	Number of articles on sects	Negative image of sects	Neutral image of sects	Positive image of sects
Rzeczpospolita	7	5	2	0
Dziennik	24	22	1	1
Wprost	4	4	0	0
Newsweek	22	18	3	1
Total	57	49	6	2

² Selection was made based on a report by the Institute of Media Monitoring. *Najbardziej opiniotwórcze polskie media w lutym 2007 r. Analiza częstotliwości cytowania poszczególnych mediów przez inne media na podstawie przekazów prasowych, telewizyjnych i radiowych z okresu od 1 do 28 lutego 2007 roku.* Warszawa. 2007, http://www.institut.com.pl/IMM/o_firmie/raport_krotki_media_luty07.pdf

³ First issue of "Dziennik" was published on April 18, 2006 and that is the beginning date of the analysis.

⁴ Similarly to dailies, the beginning date is that of the first issue of Newsweek (January 1, 2001).

The largest group of articles on sects is that with a negative image. As far as dailies, there were a lot more articles on sects in “Dziennik” than in “Rzeczpospolita”, as far as weeklies, “Newsweek” published more articles than “Wprost”. The proportions in both categories are similar which allows us to conclude that these newspapers present a fairly uniform image of sects.

Most common features of articles creating a negative image of sects

Characteristic features appearing most often in these types of articles were selected based on an analysis of press articles between January 1, 2000 and April 1, 2007. The articles analysed were published in the largest national newspapers which influence and upkeep a negative image of sects in public discourse and define particular religious groups as sects.

1. The term sect is used freely, most often to describe groups which, according to the author, negatively influence society. The term ‘sect’ is used by different authors and in various context.
2. Authors present sects as groups which take advantage of their members, use brain washing and psycho-manipulation.
3. Articles describing a group’s criminal activity, also often citing other examples of breaking the law by different group members or mass suicides. Resulting may be an image of sects as criminal groups.
4. Reports on people who have left sects or families in conflict as a result of one member belonging to a sect.
5. The context of an article is build through titles, subtitles and select terminology.
6. The article’s construction and proportions between various opinions on sects make it seem that the article presents sects in a negative light while formally it is neutral (different sides’ opinions were presented).
7. Experts are people involved in eliminating sects.
8. Leaders and members of sects are attributed bad intentions toward other sect members and society.

Journalists use the term 'sect' to mean different things, but mostly to describe small religious groups⁵, groups of 'psycho-manipulatory' character⁶ or new religious movements⁷. The term 'sect' illustrates all of the above mentioned types of religious groups. In effect all groups described as sects (small and new) can be considered ones using 'psycho-manipulatory techniques'. Sect activity toward its members is often portrayed as 'brainwashing', 'mind control' or 'psycho-manipulation'⁸. Journalists do not define these terms or describe them generally as types of *psychological and sociological techniques of manipulation*⁹. Meanwhile, religious groups called sects usually use methods similar to traditional, those generally accepted by church and only a few of them apply non-standard manipulation techniques¹⁰.

Many articles published between 2000-2007 were on the subject of religious groups' criminal activities¹¹ or reported information on court rulings for crimes committed by sect leaders¹². This type of information may be attractive to readers but news presented this way results in people associating all sects with criminal activity. The dangerous sects, in a way, become representatives of all sects. Also people may link sect activity with application of illegal means of control of members (ie. keeping people against their wish, physical abuse). An image of group leaders may be created as ones who intentionally act against present and potential group members.

It should be noted that the analysed type of articles is not uniform in terms of the way sect activity is presented. Among the examined texts there were reports with detailed accounts of crimes whose offenders were given sentences¹³ as well as general articles on all sect activity without providing any specific cases of crimes committed¹⁴.

⁵ On groups larger than several hundred members see: Adriana Sikora, Tomasz Patora, Marcin Stelmasiak. *Bóg chce dziesięć procent. Sekta dla bogatych*, "Gazeta Wyborcza", January 3, 2005, <http://serwis.gazeta.pl/df/1,34467,2470718.html> [11 II 2007].

⁶ Tadeusz Hanausek, Grzegorz Mikrut. *Pralnia mózgów*, "Wprost", nr 14 (908), 2000, <http://www.wprost.pl/ar/?O=1311> [27 I 2007].

⁷ Konrad Piskała. *Tom Cruise chce werbować Polaków do sekty*, "Dziennik", April 24, 2006, <http://www.dziennik.pl/Default.aspx?TabId=14&ShowArticleId=11084> [5 II 2007].

⁸ Hanausek, Mikrut, op.cit.

⁹ Hanausek, Mikrut, op.cit.

¹⁰ Elieen Barker. *Nowe Ruchy Religijne*. Kraków: ZW NOMOS. 1997, p. 63.

¹¹ Michał Karnowski, Andrzej Rafał Potocki. *Bractwo nigdy nie wybacz*, "Newsweek", nr 46 (150), 2003.

¹² Michał Engelhardt. *Zabójca z tokijskiego metra będzie wisiał*, "Dziennik", September 15, 2006, <http://www.dziennik.pl/Default.aspx?TabId=14&ShowArticleId=16543> [5 II 2007].

¹³ Karnowski, Potocki, op.cit.

¹⁴ Hanausek, Mikrut, op.cit.

As report results on sect activity in Poland show (prepared by Interdepartmental Unit for New Religious Movements¹⁵) between 1992 and 1999 there were 13 court rulings sentencing sects members (presently there are 139 registered ‘churches or other religious groups’¹⁶, and sentences regarded also non-registered groups). Articles in the press often inform on criminal sect activity that takes place abroad and has nothing to do with Polish groups. Criminal sect activity is also sometimes mentioned along side discussion on other dangerous or negatively viewed activities such as terrorism¹⁷ which only strengthens the negative image of sects as unsafe groups.

It should be noted that among the crimes reported there is a part which can be classified as crimes commonly committed, outside of sects or not in connection with them (ie. falsifying documents, false testimony, theft). The authors of the report say, *analysing the facts presented above, we can conclude that criminal sect activity in Poland is not a threat to society*¹⁸. At the same time, we can also assume that many crimes resulting from sect mechanisms may not have been brought to light.

Knowledge that we have on sect structure, based on which some conclusions can be made, predominantly comes from accounts provided by former sect members¹⁹ or parents whose children are sect members²⁰. According to Eileen Barker, such accounts are not always credible²¹. Former members usually have negative attitudes toward the sect they belonged to due to apostasy, transfer to another religious group, conflict as a result of leaving the group or being excluded from it. This type of negative attitude can regard not only religious groups but also any other social group or institution and is a way of justifying the resulting situation.

Usually it is the headlines which suggest the following content of the article (Seven Threats Lurking Your Child²²), sub-headlines (Soul Hunters²³) and other terminology²⁴. All

¹⁵ Międzyresortowy Zespół do Spraw Nowych Ruchów Religijnych. *Raport o niektórych zjawiskach związanych z działalnością sekt w Polsce*. Warszawa. 2000, http://www.mswia.gov.pl/ftp/pdf/raport_o_sektach.pdf [18 X 2006].

¹⁶ This number does not include 15 largest churches whose functioning is regulated by separate agreements, data from March 31, 2000.

¹⁷ Joanna Kowalska. *Od Bejrutu do World Trade Center*, “Newsweek”, nr 1 (1), 2001.

¹⁸ Międzyresortowy Zespół do Spraw Nowych Ruchów Religijnych. *Raport o niektórych zjawiskach związanych z działalnością sekt w Polsce*. Warszawa. 2000, p. 50, http://www.mswia.gov.pl/ftp/pdf/raport_o_sektach.pdf [18 X 2006].

¹⁹ Sikora, Patora, Stelmasiak., op.cit.

²⁰ Eliza Głowicka. *Bądź posłuszny i dziel się*, “Gazeta Wyborcza”, Wrocław, Wieża Ciśnień, January 7, 2005, p. 3, <http://serwisy.gazeta.pl/df/1,34467,2470718.html> [11 II 2007].

²¹ Barker, op.cit. Interesting analysis of the report point out lack of credibility, additionally including references to factual relationships between members, in: Piotr Szarszewski. *Cisza po medialnej burzy*, “Tygodnik Powszechny”, nr 30 (2924). 2005, <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/1547,1238280,0,355785,dzial.html> [17 VII 2007].

²² Marta Buler. *Siedem zagrożeń czyhających na Twoje dziecko*, “Dziennik”, June 20, 2006, <http://www.dziennik.pl/Default.aspx?TabId=14&ShowArticleId=12797> [5 II 2007].

of the above create a negative image of sects in the reader's mind despite a seemingly neutral content of the text²⁵. Order and frequency of quoted statements are also imperative. For example, in the article *Bądź posłuszny i dziel się (Be obedient and share)*²⁶ first quoted were women embittered by the fact that their children (adult) were in a sect. Additionally, their statements were used as sub-headlines (ie. *Mother- They're brainwashing my child*). Later on in the article, an expert (from a Dominican Centre of Information on New Religious Movements and Sects) neutral opinion was cited. Finally, toward the end quoted was the pastor's (movement leader) statement. The article was 1 454 words long, of which 792 words were mothers' whose daughters belong to Kanaan stories²⁷ (54% of the text's volume). This is imperative as it is predominantly this part of the publication which puts Kanaan in such negative light. Also, putting such long and emotional statements at the beginning sets the tone of the article; the readers adopt a negative attitude from the start and before they read all of the included information.

The other parts of the text were much shorter, description of mass – 298 words (21% of volume), short group history and expert opinion – 247 words (17%), and pastor/founder's statement 116 words (8%). Also neutral opinions were mixed with negative ones. Kanaan pastor's words only comprised 8% of the text's volume and were rather defensive in character (which can be intentional) and sect members' words are hardly ever quoted in these types of texts, or perhaps just fragments of them, taken out of context²⁸.

It is quite popular to cite expert opinions in these types of articles. Who they are is imperative as they are treated as authorities on the subject. Their opinions do not even have to be uniform but they need to support the text author's hypothesis on the subject. Generally, in this type of articles, the experts who speak out are representatives of organizations which fight against sects. Their opinion vary greatly from those of religion experts who are not as keen on being negative about sects as the above mentioned activists.

It should be noted that even the activists do not always agree and are not uniform in their opinions. One expert who journalists like to quote is Ryszard Nowak, leader of the

²³ Marcin Kowalski. *Apostołowie nienawiści*, "Wprost", nr 29 (1025), 2002.

²⁴ In one article journalists replaced religious terminology with economic one, ie. 'firm' instead of 'church'. 'clients' instead of 'faithful', Sikora, Patora, Stelmasiak., op.cit.

²⁵ For more on this see: Maciej Wierzbicki. *Językowe środki perswazji w „Gazecie Wyborczej”*, "Studia Medioznawcze", nr 1 (24), 2006, p. 11-24.

²⁶ Głowicka, op.cit.

²⁷ Kanaan is a religious group subject of this article.

²⁸ Some statements supporting authors' assumptions regarding economic aspects of sect functioning in: Sikora, Patora, Stelmasiak., op.cit.

National Defence against Sects Committee²⁹. Representatives of seven other organizations have released statements that they do not have the same opinions as he and have pointed to his lack of basic knowledge on sect activity³⁰. Meanwhile, it is Nowak's activity which is often discussed by media³¹, and his expert advice is frequently quoted. Choosing such a person who gives shocking or sensational information or other experts randomly does usually result in greater reader interest but, at the same time, it may provide a false or one-sided image of sect activity not based on facts.

Some of the discussed articles, when discussing sects, attribute them identical characteristics, typical of one specific type of religious group³². These authors assume that sect leaders and their members consciously manipulate others in order to gain some advantages³³. The phenomenon of asymmetric relationships³⁴ between leaders and members is often assumed without verification. Such relationships are generally typical of religious groups but when it comes to sects, journalists assume that sect leaders use others economically and emotionally, in contrast to traditional church.

Consequently, the discussion on sects is limited to methods of preventing their existence and activity, without analysis of evidence on the type of activity they lead. The sole fact that a group is classified as a sect makes it a potential threat. Evidence presented against one group is treated as evidence of threat for all groups considered sects.

Based on this, we can conclude that authors of articles on sects assume that the threat lies in sect structure characteristics and not in individuals in charge of such groups³⁵. Moreover, no evidence is presented which shows the destructive character of all sects. The authors probably assume that readers are familiar with them. This way such press articles only strengthen people's negative image of sects, by confirming assumptions created earlier³⁶.

²⁹ Organizations involved in disseminating information on sect activity also often focus on aiding people who have left sects, this differentiates them from organizations which predominantly fight against sects, such as National Defence against Sects Committee.

³⁰ *Oświadczenie Ośrodków Informacji o sektach i NRR dotyczące działalności Ryszarda Nowaka*, <http://www.effatha.org.pl/nowak.htm> [3 II 2007].

³¹ Dariusz Rembelski. *Szokujące zdjęcia z życia sekt w Polsce*, "Dziennik", June 14, 2006, <http://www.dziennik.pl/Default.aspx?TabId=14&ShowArticleId=12579> [5 II 2007].

³² Groups which purposely take advantage of their members for material gains.

³³ An example of such article: Hanausek, Mikrut, op.cit.

³⁴ Asymmetric relationships mean an uneven exchange of resources in interaction between leaders and members.

³⁵ Not all articles classified as those negatively assessing sects are general texts. Some articles were focused on the group they described and not the entire sect community.

³⁶ It is possible that some articles on sects maintain a negative image, but based on the analysis of the texts it is not possible not to sustain such a hypothesis. The hypothesis is obviously not true for all articles.

Public enemies?

The conclusion is, based on the analysis carried out, that dominant in the press are publications creating a negative image of sects. This is how journalists draw readers' attention, with articles on sect members' criminal activity and group suicides. Attributing sects destructive character is an effect of generalisation, all religious group outside mainstream are considered sects. In consequence an image of a sect is created, one that breaks the law, manipulates its members and takes advantage of them. Of course, this image was not created due to the articles under analysis³⁷, but it is maintained by such types of articles.

Press information, to a large degree, shapes social reality, influencing the way people view the world. Transmitting information that is unverified or simply gossip can lead to the creation of an image of a certain phenomenon, person or institution that has little to do with the truth³⁸. Or else, the same effect is created when the press focuses on presenting a given phenomenon not through the prism of its representative part. In this case, the negative image of sects was created as a result of both of the above situations.

Obviously, aside from the discussed type of article, there are also publications which present a different point of view. In this analysis there were some articles which presented sects both in a positive and negative light³⁹. Also there were a couple of texts which attempted to show the consequences of presenting sects in a uniform, negative way as well as presenting false accusations regarding sects⁴⁰.

Results of the analysis show that although sects have a tendency to isolate themselves from society⁴¹, they are also ostracised by society. The resulting relationship between sects and society is an effect of activity on both sides. And it is not just about isolation. Another consequence is lack of understanding between sect members and society which can result in further mutual intolerance.

Further analysis would have to be required using methods which go beyond content analysis. Some evidence pointing to this hypothesis plausibility will be discussed in the following part of the article.

³⁷ Such an image of sects was created also due to publications from the mid 1990s or the beginnings of new religious movements activity in Poland. This is supported by an analysis of Catholic press article between 1989-94, in: Małgorzata Ibek. *Obraz sekt w prasie katolickiej*, "NOMOS. Kwartalnik Religioznawczy", nr 14, 2006, p. 59-105.

³⁸ Aleksandra Wagner. *Plotka jako narzędzie kształtowania rzeczywistości społecznej. Afera Rywina w dyskursie prasowym*, "Studia Socjologiczne", nr 4 (183), 2006, p. 41.

³⁹ Andrzej Zucha. *Prorok z tajgi*, "Newsweek", nr 19 (175), 2004.

<http://www.newsweek.pl/wydania/artukul.asp?Artykul=9694> [6 IV 2007].

⁴⁰ Anna Szulc. *Sektofobia*, "Przekrój", nr 32 (3138). 2006,

http://przekroj.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1976&Itemid=58 [27 I 2007],

Szarszewski, op.cit.

⁴¹ Such characteristics are attributed by authors of the analysed texts.

Expert power

Perhaps some journalists, when writing on this subject, cease to be objective or neutral because they feel that they need to warn society of the threat that sects present. If they remain neutral it could mean that they are indifferent to the situation and do not care about informing society about socially significant issues and their solutions.

If we accept this justification, then presenting negative aspects of sects is not journalists' intentional activity. They do not purposely present a deformed picture of reality but their own interpretation of it, by them considered obvious. Strengthening the negative image of sects is, in this case, due to generalisation – all sects are attributed the same characteristics and the negative examples are focused on, although they are not representative of the whole.

Another possible explanation of the negative image of sects is a result of anti-cult organizations' intentional activity. These organizations purposely wish to create such an image, threatening to society. These activities are intentional which can be observed based on examples of articles describing these organizations' actions⁴². These articles could be a result of media campaigns lead by these organizations with a goal to promote their plans⁴³. This is similar, in a way, to projects supported by non-government organizations, ie. charity events.

Declarations made by representatives of anti-cult organizations sustain this hypothesis. The Movement for Family and Individual Defence has three main goals for their activity, one of which is the *prevention by dissemination of knowledge on cult group doings*⁴⁴. The Dominican Centre of Information on New Religious Movements and Sects from Wrocław also has a goal of *prevention by raising social awareness regarding the functioning of sects, their threats, ways of recruitment, criteria for recognizing sects, and taking precautions*⁴⁵. Propagation of knowledge on the dangers and risks created by sects is one of the basic goals that such organizations have. Consequently, getting the media involved in dissemination of information seems rational from their point of view.

The fact that anti-cult organizations are involved in propagation of information via information centres and Internet websites means that these organizations are active in

⁴² Rembelski, op.cit.

⁴³ More on intentional activity of anti-cult organizations in: Agnieszka Kościańska. *Koło przemocy symbolicznej – o konfliktach wokół nowych ruchów religijnych*, "Przegląd Religioznawczy", nr 1 (199), 2001, p. 119-130.

⁴⁴ <http://rorij.free.ngo.pl/rorij.htm> [6.II 2008]

⁴⁵ http://www.centrum.k.pl/tekst/o_nas.html [6.II 2008]

dissemination of sect information. This can then be interpreted as carrying out intentional activity with a goal to create a negative image of these religious movements and, this way, to fight against them. However, this does not necessarily mean that such activity is effective and it is difficult to estimate what kind of influence members of these group have on sect presentation in the media. We can only assume that there is pressure put on the media.

As far as members of anti-cult organizations, we can say that they are carrying out their mission and the information on sects propagated by the members is considered 'objective truth' by them⁴⁶. However, attempts to impose their view of reality, justifying it in public discourse or preventing other means of presentation of the subject can be called symbolic abuse. If so, media discourse can be considered a playing field between those in opposition to religious sects and those in favour, or those who see the issue in a different manner than their opponents⁴⁷.

Most likely, the image of sects presented in and by the media during the time period of the analysis is partly unintentional but also partly thoughtless activity on the journalists' part, combined with anti-cult organizations' influence. Journalists often re-produce information which they obtain from experts who belong to anti-sect organizations. The experts may also feel obliged to warn society of the threats that sects can pose and they will use the media to be their 'voice'. But what if the view of the world presented by the media differs from that outside media reality?

⁴⁶ This is indicated by research carried out by Agnieszka Kościańska on the Movement for Family and Individual Defence: Agnieszka Kościańska. *Sekta i antysekt*, "Przegląd Religioznawczy", nr 4 (198), 2000, p. 75-81.

⁴⁷ Agnieszka Kościańska. *Koło przemocy symbolicznej – o konfliktach wokół nowych ruchów religijnych*, "Przegląd Religioznawczy", nr 1 (199), 2001, p. 119-130.

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