

## **New religious movements and alternative religions in France**

### **The use of digital media as a counter-strategy against social and legal exclusion**

#### **Introduction**

In comparison to TV, radio and newspapers the combination of digital and 'new' media such as the internet provide a relatively democratic means of distributing information and express opinions in a variety of forms, all having a potentially worldwide coverage. There is also the capability also to use pictures, video and audio files increases the range of impressions which may be mediated to the addressee, and thus to present information in a more vivid and intuitively accessible way. There are plentiful examples of this, ranging from reports of fan behaviour in Poland at the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship, to unofficial reports from of the 'Arab Spring' (for further reading, see Hänska-Ahy and Shapour 2013). The internet is widely used internationally by individuals and groups who otherwise perceive and experience a lack of influence and even repression by authorities and whose opinions remain invisible in or are ignored by the mass media. The new media are a frequently-used means of expression in the political struggles of social and religious movements, especially as part of attempts to increase the number of supporters and to mobilise public opinion. The extent, of the usage as well as its degree of success, does vary and because of this variety, a comparative analysis can illuminate parts of the whole conflictuous configuration as well as the chances and limits of resistance and opposition via these media channels. Organisations which were chosen to be investigated here were the so-called 'new religious movements', or more precisely, the many forms of alternative religion in France who face significant levels of social and legal exclusion, while most of their members are themselves usually strongly committed to democracy and their identities as equal French citizens. Therefore, they choose to perform counter-actions which are within the law and act strategically, which makes them a special case compared to revolutionary political movements which may question the social order of the state as a whole.

France, with its 'anti-cult' policy, has come to a unique standing within the Western world in this respect.<sup>1</sup> Though religious freedom and state neutrality in relation to religious issues are constitutionally granted, a differentiation is made – and partially even legally enforced – between good religions and harmful ones which attempt to manipulate their adepts mentally. The roots of the respective developments in a democratic state can rather be tracked back mainly to specific social and political actors who were able co-operate with the public media in shaping public opinion than to a monolithic state ideology (see Altglas in Barker 2008).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the debates are held in a constant dynamic between the struggling parties of 'anti-cult' movements (hereafter referred to as 'ACM's) and alternative religions (new religious movements and alternative therapies and spiritualities will be simplified as 'NRM's, or will be more broadly referred to as 'alternative religions').<sup>3</sup> The exclusion of the latter from the mass media is revealed be one central means of hindering them from gaining approval within society, because positive portrayals which might counterbalance the widespread negative public view are prevented.

Two umbrella associations of and for NRMs in France have been formed in opposition to French 'anti-cult' activism and therefore have also started to make use of the relatively unregulated and uncontrolled internet, including social online networks and digital media. An investigation into how they do this and how far they are and potentially can be successful is the main focus of the following article. During this first, relatively open and mainly empirical analysis, it is revealed that apart from other, not explicitly claimed functions, the two main purposes of the association's work are to provide practical support for victims, as well as balance the media discourse, by providing informa-

1 For a brief history of the development of 'anti-cult' activities from the perspective of Union Nationale des Associations de Défense des Familles et le l'Individu Victimes de Sectes (UNADFI), see UNADFI website. One of the earliest investigations on the matter is Beckford 1985.

2 For a detailed, actor-focussed description of the history and further discussion of this argument see my PhD thesis (still in progress).

3 The term 'new religious movements' (NRMs) has been the classic signifying term used by scholars of the sociology of religion occupied with 'cult' debates in various countries and it is kept in use here for the purpose of connecting partly to this scholarly discourse, which has produced most of the available scholarly knowledge on the topic. Nevertheless, substantially it rather designates movements and thus does not display sufficiently the developments within the religious field of the last twenty or thirty years towards more and more weak institutionalisation and non-communal structures. Therefore, the expression 'alternative religions' is used here at the same time, explicitly intending to pay regard to these changes and to include weakly institutionalised beliefs and practices.

tion and distributing expressing their own opinions. Starting from the finding of the centrality of the problem of exclusion from public discourse, initially a description of the more general historical development of the social (medial) and strongly connected legal exclusion of alternative religions in France will be given, followed by an analysis of the use of digital media by the two main associations: *The Centre d'Information et de Conseil des Nouvelles Spiritualités* (CICNS, 'Information Centre and Council of New Spiritualities' – it is an NGO with consultant status within the UN) and the *Coordination des Associations & Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience* (CAP LC, 'Coordination of Associations and People for Freedom of Conscience'). The results will be discussed with a special focus on the differences between the two organisations and the limits of and conditions necessary for an effective use of digital media in this case. The final evaluation of the latter has been undertaken against the backlash against the actual success of these organisations, which has been rather scarce concerning attracting the interest of the public, the mass media and authorities, while searching for possible explanations within the current progress of the debates themselves and within media theory.

### **The development of the French 'cult' debates**

The emergence of NRMs in the second wave of the late 1960s – traditionally characterised either by charismatic leadership and strong group cohesion or extra-ordinarily loose group cohesion and a network structure close to 'New Age' forms of belief and practices in connection with alternative forms of therapy in a wide variety – has led to so-called 'cult debates' in France in a fashion similar to other countries. A lot of mainly newly-developing religious groups were labelled as *sectes*, meaning, basically, that they were viewed as harmful and dangerous groups, especially regarding their attractiveness to younger people, whom they were suspected to be 'brainwashing' and stripping of their financial means and personal freedoms. In France these debates became apparent in the late 1970s and led, following the Enquête Report (Gest and Guyard 1996), in which 173 dangerous groups in the 'Western world' were named, to a quite unique 'anti-sect' legislation, concentrated in the About-Picard law of 2001. Among the names of NRMs that were counted among the *sectes* were well-known groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, the Raelian Movement, Silva Mind Control, Children of God, ISKON, Scientology, and many from the 'New Age' and New Esotericism spectrum, but a majority had French origins or were mainly located in France, including *La Fraternité Blanche Universelle*, *La Fraternité Notre Dame*, or *L'Invitation à la Vie Intense*.

The conflicts started in relation to adepts of NRMs who left their families to follow a group; their relatives were often most concerned and feared the worst for their, quite often over-25-years-old, children or spouses. This, along with one case of suicide, initially motivated the foundation of the so-called ACM in the early 1980s, which in France held atheist as well as Catholic ideals. From then on, for the next fifteen years, they were the main organisation for opponents NRMs, whose activism consisted mainly of reporting any negative information about said-to-be suspicious groups, substantiated or not, to employers of individual persons, as well as other means of public defamation. Most importantly, they also offered consultation for 'victims' and also became the major informants for the mainstream or mass media,<sup>4</sup> sending sometimes up to 500 faxes per day. This was possible, because, after an initial, widely-read newspaper article which secured them primary authority on the question and was published at the very beginning in 1978, most people addressed them with their concerns related to *sectes*. Consequently, for the most part information accumulated not among scholars but most swiftly within the ACM, which had seemingly no interest in ascertaining whether this information would always prove to be true. Further, TV talk-shows on the topic were placed *in situ*, where 'victims' and 'experts' were often portrayed accompanied by respective gloomy music and scary images. In short, it was often unverified information as well as mere rumours which were disseminated and therefore shaped the picture of alternative religion in the public domain, while the negative picture was also actively constructed in and through the mainstream media. This to some extent inflamed people's fears to the degree that incidents in terms of attacks by civil persons on spiritual centres or even people on the street (in at least one case with a fatal consequence), made simply existing very difficult for many suspected groups who found it hard to rent rooms for worship, for example, or were threatened with prohibitive levels of taxation.

NRMs, small spiritual communities and even psychotherapists with more unconventional approaches very soon also found their voices and opinions being rigidly excluded from the mainstream mass-media, while newspapers, radio and television provided a huge and effective platform for their opponents to distribute their respective views.

When in 1993 and 1994, about 15 years later, members of the Solar Temple committed suicide or were killed, finally the French state started its investigations into the issue. The implementation of the About-Picard law in 2001 following the 1995 Enquête report (see Gest and Guyard 1995), was not the be-

4 Cf. UNADFI history (accessed 29.10.2012).

ginning of conflicts being carried out in courts, but a turn that put even more legal pressure on NRMs and moreover, it functioned for suspected groups in a very unfavourable way: it was a symbolic act in which, despite its questionable functionality, the French state confirmed that a 'sectarian danger' actually exists. As a result, the criminal potential of NRMs was more than ever manifest as a basic assumption in the discourse, which means that no one could say something neutral or positive without at the same time distancing themselves from potential but as yet uncommitted crimes. For those people which were indifferent towards the topic, there was now also a strong excuse for not intervening. The phrase 'Well *if* they are criminal, they should be punished' is something I got to hear myself more than once.

As the law was met with the passive support and to some extent active approval of the population, of which only very few actually were personally affected or even have had personal contact to any member or believer, the negative media coverage is to be seen as a key issue and a major problem for NRMs. Within the media and public discourse NRMs were (and are still) referred to by means of the pejorative term *sectes* and were thus stigmatised *per se* and more or less coverless objected to the accusations of their opponents. Also, there was basically no-one in France to speak on their behalf because also scholars of religious studies or the sociology of religion remained unheard. According to interviews carried out by Susan Palmer (2008), for scholars (as well as for politicians), speaking out loudly was an easy way to limit their career opportunities.

What were the means available to the NRMs, being excluded from the regular media channels, to balance the negative media coverage that designated them as dangerous cults in public opinion? They were legal means – going to court in cases of defamation – which they had already been using for a long time, if they could afford to. Still, their successes rarely got coverage in the mainstream media. Their means of self-presentation initially had consisted of demonstrations, flyers, partly scholarly and, more regularly, publications which presented information from their point of view and had 'homiletic' as well as accusing notions. As a further means to spread information, e-mail lists were subsequently used – in sum, media which could distribute information and self-representation only within a relatively short range. They partly demand personal contact or physical presence, while the limited numbers of readers/listeners were spread all over France and probably had at first rather limited opportunities for internet access.

## The use of the internet and digital media

Since around the year 2000, when the the use of the internet and digital media became very easy and widespread, the two associations working on the support of NRMs or alternative religions in France, the CAP LC (*Coordination des Associations & Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience*) and the CICNS (*Centre d'Information et de Conseil des Nouvelles Spiritualités*), launched their own websites. The web presences of both organisations will in what follows firstly be described in terms of their contents, and secondly analysed in terms of their functions, specifically in their intended and potential functions as well as in their actual functionality. The foci for the latter were mainly placed on the self-presentation of the organisation ('who are we?', 'what aims do we want to achieve?' and 'which strategies do we prefer?') and to whom they addressed themselves, explicitly and implicitly, and in which way. Further, what sources are provided in which forms, the contact possibilities they offer, the visual appeal of the website, other offers such as different languages, as well possibilities for personal meeting have been taken into account, as those may, in addition to the potential and intended functionality, already illuminate aspects of the the factual effects, while the final evaluation and attempts to explain the situation have been left for the summary and discussion.

### ***The web presence of the CAP LC and the CICNS***

The CAP LC is the older of the two associations and it developed out of the organisation 'FIREPHIM' (*Fédération Internationale des Religions et Philosophie Minoritaires*) in the context of the much more aggressive pre-2001 struggles (for FIREPHIM see Altglas in Barker 2008, cf. Palmer 2011). These years witnessed plenty of not fully legal civil activism (Palmer 2011: 97–8) and 'Mediabolisation' (a term used by Palmer, see 2008 and 2011: 33ff.), as well the use of diverse legal strategies against NRMs. On the other hand, the NRMs themselves went to court. The organisation has a clear agenda<sup>5</sup> of defence against the perceived suppression of NRMs in France, offering practical, legal and moral support for victims of discrimination. It also provides information about current events on its websites and through a newsletter.<sup>6</sup> This had already started in the latter stages of the 1990s, as a direct means of defence against civil and legal attacks at a time when these were much more acute (comp. Becourt 2002: 1ff.) Hence, it is mainly potential victims who are addressed in their own writings, directly and indirectly. To this day

5 Cf. the CAP LC charter on their homepage (accessed 23.10.2012).

6 Cf. CAP LC subscribe (accessed 5.6.2012).

it continues to direct most of its efforts into research and counselling on legal questions, as well as on establishing contacts between NRMs or individuals who feel threatened by media or the law and lawyers are established in cases of need. Emphasis is also placed on providing moral support and there are various email contacts available for information on different problems and issues and thus also the opportunity to share experiences is provided. This service is run mainly by members of those NRMs who had already been the main targets in earlier stages of the struggle and have had their own damaging encounters with discrimination.

The main page starts with currently debated issues and links to recently released brochures and blogs, followed by the charter of the CAP LC, contact information and an invitation to make contact. On the left side, one can choose different kinds of information from links to primary documents such as petitions, summaries on law cases, further web-links, newspaper articles, videos of parliamentary discussions and secondary literature. Further, an editorial outlining current events and other self generated writings are offered. In short, the CAP LC web presence addresses potential or actual victims, gathers and provides news on incidents and the actual progress of the debates as well as offering its own opinions and links to secondary literature, but mainly provides information in the form of primary sources. The web presence is fairly small, and the main language is French, while some parts of it are translated into English.

By contrast with the CAP LC, the *Centre d'Information et de Conseil des Nouvelles Spiritualités* (CICNS), founded in 2004, explicitly addresses NRMs and alternative religions, but also emphasises the importance of distributing information to a wider audience including the authorities and the (mass) media.<sup>7</sup> It was, having initially been planned as a local sub-group of the CAP LC, finally launched as an independent project in 2004 by 'a dozen volunteers',<sup>8</sup> representing NRMs and alternative religions, with special emphasis on 'New-Age'-related beliefs and practices. These are referred to as 'new spiritualities' (*nouvelles spiritualités*),<sup>9</sup> as distinct from the 'old' traditional religions and the term 'spiritualities' which is in common use in French discourse.<sup>10</sup> Further, the CICNS determinedly draws on peaceful strategies in

7 Cf. CICNS news (accessed 24.10.2012).

8 Cf. CICNS homepage (accessed 23.10.2012).

9 Cf. CICNS new spiritualities (accessed 23.10.2012).

10 Religious communities, which are not officially recognised as such usually register themselves in France as 'associations déclarée' which can then be voluntarily name 'spirituelles'.

order to oppose discrimination and has seemingly the view that the new spiritualities are relatively homogenous, or at least close to each other,<sup>11</sup> indicating that there is not merely common ground in the opposition to repression (more the notion of the CAP LC), but that some kind of intrinsic community between the different NRMs exists. They offer some practical help or advice and are closely working together with lawyers for practical purposes, but, more significantly, with them as experts along with reputable scholars of the sociology of religion and with groups and individuals from various points on the alternative religious spectrum who provide their own comments on and partial analyses of various issues. All contributors, but not the core team, are openly introduced on the website, which itself is more systematically structured than that of the CAP LC.

It begins on its main page with a video introduction of the CICNS, further links to the FAQs and contact information. On the left we find a column with other subordinated topics – the charter which has been cited above, descriptions of the situation, problems and conflicts, followed by an analysis of the history of the French ‘cult’ debates. The terms and concepts used in the public debate, clearly take the point of view of the NRMs, aiming at deciphering what might be perceived as ‘real’ by the public as an ideological debate which is using false arguments. About eighty comments and scholarly papers on a range of issues can be found in all, as well as plenty of videos with expert interviews, testimonies and self-presentations by groups and individuals, followed by a detailed portrayal of actor-groups campaigning against NRMs, produced by the CICNS, and a list of websites from pro-NRM associations. In the end we find the information to which the CICNS addresses itself, a bibliography and a collection of CICNS newsletters that come out about twice a month and an editorials archive. Further, a Facebook page exists as an alternative to the newsletter for receiving news regularly.

The newsletters and other informative material is further said to be sent regularly to the authorities, elected officials, media, various organisations and personalities, as well as to the spiritual movements themselves. An overview about related book publications is also provided and the contents of the site are in the French language, while the self-presentation as an association is also available in English language. There are some primary sources available, but the focus is clearly on secondary texts.

11 CICNS new spiritualities (accessed 24.10.2012).

### ***The different purposes and functions of the websites***

As described above, the CAP LC emphasises practical defence against discrimination of NRMs and alternative religions in France. Hence, the self-claimed central function of their website is to be a platform which enables contacts with the association for people who feel threatened or are in serious trouble and need moral and legal support. As everyone stays more or less anonymous and contacts are established via email, phone or postal contact, it does not serve as an open platform for free networking between people. The web presence is rather functional, so one might even say that seemingly less effort has been expended on the web page design than on the contents that are provided. The links provided in sum constitute first of all a huge database, which provides people who have an interest in primary sources with material which they can use to research the topic and get the information they desire. This audience would be members, groups, or individuals under social and/or legal pressure who want better to understand their own and the overall situation as well as the possible courses of action; for example scholars or lawyers or anyone else who needs information in order to become active.

Moral support can be found in the associations' own writings, which provide alternative interpretations and which are mainly somewhat different from those of the mainstream, as well as emphasising the right to the free choice of beliefs. Sarcastic mocking of ACM or MIVILUDES-members<sup>12</sup> are quite common, and the successes of NRMs, which exist but are rarely reported in the mass media are reported and celebrated on these websites.

Thus, the main impression, backed by the findings, that the web presence is rather directed at the 'inside' or to a special audience than towards the public remains, though they are also said to send press releases and organise meetings which are in theory open to everyone. However, most of the activities related to their web presence serve the super-ordinate community of those NRMs who feel threatened by meeting their demands for information and support and, most importantly, raising awareness of itself as a larger entity of people with the same problems and interests in relation to the ACM and the French state. This can include people who range from being neutral to positively interested (and for example make use of the huge data collection), who might distribute their opinions in other places and might be given more

12 MIVILUDES is short for *Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires* ('Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Struggle against Cultic Aberrations'). See MIVILUDES homepage.

authority because they are not directly members of a group, but their mobilisation seems to be allowed to develop relatively independently.

The explicitly self-proclaimed aims of the CICNS are going in the other direction: it is said explicitly, that they try to balance the mainstream discourse through 1) 'providing neutral to positive information about spiritualities and alternative healing methods,' as well as 'promoting spiritual world-views' and 2) they aim to 'enlighten the power structures and onesidedness of their representation in the mainstream media,' 3) the provision of 'information about discriminatory acts and counsel for those whom they regard as victims,' 4) 'in order to gain attention from the authorities, criticising French society as a whole.'<sup>13</sup> To points 3 and 4 it should also be reported that information is also given about not directly *secte*-related discrimination by officials in other areas such as compulsory hospitalisation.<sup>14</sup> Examples for all these claims made in the self-presentation can be found in the web presence. Further, the websites contain much less discussion of legal issues and overall slightly fewer primary sources compared to the numbers of academic secondary texts. Multi-media is not only present insofar as other media than text are included, but also to produce videos and commentaries of testimonies and scholars. Hence, the use of the websites, the consumption of information is facilitated and the range of impression (especially relevant for the presentation of testimonies) that is transmittable has widened. The information itself is (since the aim is to balance the contra-NRM conditioning of the other side) to a large extent conditioned, often written by and partly backed by legal, scholarly or other experts.

Also, a consciousness of a community may be created through this website (through a common aim and as contact, help and counselling is offered), but this is seemingly not the main purpose. Attempts to practice open networking are made possible separately through a Facebook page the CICNS has run since February 2011. It currently has fewer than 400 'fans' and gets on average 8 'likes' per post, suggesting that open networking is not the most pressing need or demand, for more or less unknown reasons. In comparison to CAP LC which focusses strongly on legal issues, the CICNS internet presentation is much more outward and discourse oriented, aiming to influence public opinion while mobilising those already signed up is apparently of lesser interest.

To present the different aims and strategies of both organisations in summary, a direct comparison as well as the practical linkage of both is useful. The

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the CICNS charter (accessed 5.6.2012).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. CICNS compulsory hospitalisation (accessed 5.6.2012).

CICNS was initially thought of as a sub-association, but decided to become independent due to disagreements on strategy. The CAP LC still refers positively to the CICNS,<sup>15</sup> while the CICNS reports openly why they are not part of the CAP LC.<sup>16</sup> The CAP LC is, according to the CICNS, the more combative organisation which emphasises the rights and the value of alternative religions, aiming to mobilise and strengthen public protest and support for their own lines of defence, addressing mainly aggrieved parties. The CICNS wants 'to operate more peacefully', which fits with their explicitly expressed aim of influencing the discourse with the help of scholarly and other expert authority. This means communicating, enlightening and convincing, rather than fighting and being involved in legal battles. The CICNS is an NGO with consultant status in the UN, but not within France, where the role of a consultant organisation is filled by the ACM.

Both associations created, apart from other activities, internet platforms which are visible in theory to everyone, where plenty of primary and secondary scholarly material is provided and their views about themselves, the ACM, public opinion and state policy are presented. In this respect, they have both achieved theoretical visibility in the debates by means of digital media.

CAP LC and CICNS both use multi-media on their websites, which notably improves the quality and variety of the presentation of the information provided. This would not have been (as easily) possible before the thorough digitalisation of media. The CAP LC provides mainly ready-made primary material from official sources, while the CICNS produces videos of testimonies and interviews with experts themselves, but they put overall much more effort into presenting the information. Inherently, a more general spiritual message concerning the unity or similarity of many contemporary forms of alternative religion may be detected, while they distance themselves from Scientology, as such an association might hinder them in reaching their aim of achieving public credibility, and presenting themselves as less radical than the CAP LC and creating an image of themselves as a (potential) public player.

## Summary and conclusion

To what extent are both of these strategies, but especially that of the CICNS effective? The offer of information, shared opinions and practical assistance as

15 CAP LC intervention (accessed 26.10.2012).

16 Cf. CICNS new spiritualities (accessed 23.10.2012).

emphasised mainly by the CAP LC is a factor that makes the situation easier for members of NRMs in France, as it provides a huge amount of informational data and a contact platform where help, opinions from like-minded people and moral support can be found without being necessarily in personal contact and revealing one's identity to a broader and maybe unwanted audience. Insofar, the anonymity of the internet, being openly accessible perfectly needs this kind of demands. Likewise, from another perspective, a sense of not being alone but being part of a community may well be perceived as a form of safety and as an encouragement to stick to one's own beliefs and practices instead of giving in to pressure. Colloquia, conferences and sometimes parties are organised to work on and discuss certain topics and strategies with specialists among themselves and are the place where people can meet each other personally. The mocking of the ACM and MIVILUDE members can function as morally encouraging and is one classical mean of disarming political enemies, here at least in the sight of the own party members. In this respect, the internet presence of the CAP LC enables a broadened political and social community of NRMs. The web presence of the CICNS may function in a similar way to that of CAP LC, though less strongly inwardly oriented through the different emphasises. The main interest here was if each of the web presences, especially taking into account the described aims and efforts of the CICNS is likely to have a significant impact on the public debates in France, that is to say in which ways could information and opinions presented there enter the mainstream discourses? Such influences could develop, if the information is consumed, accepted and maybe spread by either 1) a larger number of people, 2) by some influential individuals with a relatively high degree of credibility or 3) directly by the mainstream media and/or the authorities.

For option one: in the context of 'new media' or 'digital' media, the internet can be more precisely described through its 'on-demand', informative character, meaning here that some kind of demand to know must exist at first, as one will rarely stumble over the website while surfing, if not with a special related interest, and of course, occasionally with a willingness to re-assess one's own attitude. Leaving to one side the question of the possibility and quality of internet access in France, assuming that the opportunity is widespread, I want to stress the point made before: there are, beside the negative media coverage of NRMs in the mass media which has shaped the opinion of a majority, by now many topics, like the Muslim community in France, which are much more present in the media at the moment. Especially since it is perceived that 'the state has taken care of it', interest has seemingly

decreased and many I have talked to consider the criminal potential and the harmfulness of *sectes* as a more or less given fact or are indifferent. Those people already interested in the topic are likely to be members of NRMs and especially those who experience discrimination as well as scholars who may make use of the internet archives and want to be updated. Further, the political opponents of NRMs and maybe French citizens who have become interested or curious for other reasons are potential visitors to these websites. Especially scholars and perhaps also citizens constitute a second option to spread different information and opinion, functioning as possible key persons and inter-mediators. It is those persons who might be well networked and they may also be more easily listened to as they potentially have access to some other platforms. For option three, the mainstream media and authorities are dealt with already by additionally sending press releases and material to the authorities seems to be more promising, but it depends on the willingness to take this information into account. A fourth opportunity is attention from outside of France, in fact many interested scholars are not French and were and are critical towards France's 'anti-*secte*' policy. The European Court of Human Rights (EctHR) can be and is asked for help so the extreme asymmetry of power within France can be outweighed in some cases; the websites may be here indeed a way to respond to interest from outside France, possibly with a certain language barrier.

At this point it can be said that indeed in the era of the internet with its opportunities for self-presentation as well as the digitalisation of media, the relative social isolation of NRMs in France has in theory been overcome. Nevertheless, this is to a large extent only the case insofar as potentially interested persons are now provided with accessible information, partly even in low-threshold formats and options to establish flexible and fast contact. Further, the web presence serves NRMs directly for that purpose with the addition of the relatively fast and easy opportunity to get practical help as well, as they add a visible forum that represents them also as a super-ordinated entity with the same interests. But despite this, the practical effects on the mainstream discourses, understood as taking place in 'one' or the major public sphere, seem to be very limited. Compared to the other ways via key persons and sending information directly to authorities and media which relies on the acceptance and co-operation of the latter, that would be a way to create some kind of 'grass-roots' pressure. But what is created instead, would due to the 'on-demand' character of the internet rather be covered by the concept 'public sphericle' (for an overview, see Macnamara 2008), a special segment of a fragmented public sphere where people who already share this rather special

interest discuss together. The unfolding of its potential to distribute contents beyond this sphericle and thereby either enter other discourses or at least extend it is likely only with an increased success in gaining attention, interest and enhancing personal credibility, which has to be initiated by other means.

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