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The cult/sect phenomenon in the digital age

It is not a question of demonising digital development, which has invaded our societies. The positive potentialities are numerous but they have a downside. The negative effects of an almost exponential development over the past two decades are hotly debated and remain largely to be studied, if not discovered. Cyber-harassment, *fake news*, addiction, dependence on screens or excessive consumption - the realities covered by these terms are in a state of flux. Some highlight the freedom offered by new media, while others denounce the paradoxical situation in which the abundance of information and the freedom to join such and such a virtual community leads some to a narrowing of the horizon, to withdrawal to the point of being locked in a bubble, and not only an algorithmic one.

For several years now, Miviludes has been interested in conspiracy discourses, omnipresent on the Internet and social networks, analysed as a breeding ground for sectarian aberrations, but also for new radicalities. In particular, we can recall the publication in the 2014 report of G. Bronner's article on the Internet, an incubator for extreme thought.

Miviludes now wants to provide some data on what it has recorded over the past two years. It observes that the abuses specific to sectarian aberrations - addiction, alienation of the faculties of expression of an autonomous will, predation of victims - seem to be able to be carried out solely by digital networks.

In the vast majority of requests addressed to Miviludes, interaction on the networks is initially involved. This leads to an interest in **digital seduction strategies** deployed by potentially dangerous groups or individuals. In some 200 testimonies received over the past two years, there is a clear description of the **mechanisms for attracting and capturing the individual through networks**. Cognitive confinement is the most well-known, but it resonates with the emotional impact of a new form of socialisation and the benefits derived, which gradually modify the subject's relationship to his or her immediate environment. The particular perspective, which we all share here because of our knowledge of the sectarian phenomenon, leads us to highlight the shift **from dependence on digital networks to the exploitation of this dependence**. The person is deprived of his or her skills and autonomy in favour of a group or individual who dictates the rules, and punishes or rewards. Some twenty situations reported to Miviludes highlight a dependence and submission prejudicial to the victim who will have met only virtually the one who benefits from it. All the appearances of mental control are there.

1/Digital seduction strategies

Gurus have become experts in digital marketing
In digital marketing, the consumer is at the heart of the strategy. This consists in going and getting the consumer wherever he or she is. The other specific dimension of this marketing is to integrate the interactivity specific to digital networks.

We observe that the sites of movements identified as potentially sectarian set up content marketing, thus obtaining excellent referencing. The content includes expressions and keywords calibrated to optimise the effect of search engines (SEO). Specifically, the content of the site allows it to appear in the most common search results of the movement's target audience. Starting from the public's centres of interest and leading the public down another path requires a mastery of screen writing. This writing is particularly complex in a visual and often sonic space that must arouse the desire to interact.

Sectarian entrepreneurs also know how to apply their strategy through communication methods such as blogs and videos, which are favoured by certain audiences.

Influence marketing is also exploited. The strategy consists in using a known personality who will advise, without being adept, the group's productions. In the same vein, sectarian groups recruit *community managers* from among their followers around key themes that attract future recruits.

Web marketing would not be complete without the presence of the guru on social networks, whose notoriety is relayed by his followers, who post praiseworthy comments and *likes*. There is no visibility today without a presence on Facebook or Instagram. However, the direct presence of the *leader* on this type of open network is more the hallmark of small sectarian companies, with gurus of international status often preferring to spare their appearance to mask linguistic distance or mark the exceptional privilege of rarity. But these people have communicators on the networks.

The card of respectability and transparency

To attract their audience and thwart cautious reflexes, some movements rely on an appearance of seriousness and transparency.

The leader's itinerary and the résumés of those in charge are clearly visible. The course is coherent, and diplomas, official activities, and meetings with celebrities are often highlighted. The testimonials section, which is always praiseworthy, is very extensive. Similarly, all information that may indicate recognition (press articles, participation in public demonstrations) is well exposed, as are the official recognitions that are the most popular.

Some sites can be confused with official sites by imitating their structure, aesthetics and often even their logo.

The conspiracy card

In contrast, there is the communication strategy that plays on the attraction of conspiracy discourses. The aim here is to identify the target audience's concerns and propose explanations based on a mixture of real facts and pure fabrications, connections that would be worth proof and revelations.

The Happy Few

More elitist, some groups play the access card reserved for a few privileged people who will benefit from being uniquely well-informed. It is necessary to give the visitor the feeling of having access to a small group of elected officials. Dissemination by word of mouth on networks is the way to create this illusion.

The agility of sectarian companies

We were aware of the ability of sectarian movements to hide their true faces, but those who have been able to adapt to the new digital communication environment demonstrate a formidable agility in terms of an organisation's ability to remain efficient by adapting in time to changes in its environment.

However, there are very effective diversification and adaptation strategies. Miviludes has mapped the different sites that depend on it for some particularly marked movements. Complex networks appear whose links escape first glance. These different sites, controlled by the same organisation, allow communication to be adapted to different audiences. This communication involves the aesthetics of the screens, which adapt to the contemporary imagination and tastes of the public. Indeed, on networks, image and sound are integral components of attractiveness.

The profusion of sites, which has led to the emergence of thematic portals, is not only the result of the diversification strategy, but also of the emergence of many small one-man businesses. The low cost of building sites and the immediate benefits that can result from them explain why many are launching at lower risk.

2/ Old manipulation techniques revisited

In the digital versions of sectarian movements, we find well-known manipulation techniques. In speeches, whether esoteric, pseudo-scientific or New Age, accompanied by gender-specific symbols and iconography; whether redemptive or miraculous, illuminated faces bear witness through images.

Some specific features can be observed: the simplification of messages, the direct address to the Internet user who is asked to participate, in particular through personality tests. Everything is done to ensure that the visitor leaves personal data that he or she will provide voluntarily, which will allow the visitor to be reactivated. In this respect, it should be noted that the General Regulation on Personal Data (GRPD), which came into force in May 2018, may hinder the massive collection of data by powerful sectarian movements.

The incentive to participate in the group's actions often involves a guilt-ridden discourse in the form of "What do you do for others? for yourself?" or more insidiously in the promises of success that refers the Internet user back to his or her failures, dissatisfaction or lack of self-esteem...

Techniques that promote self-absorption

The development of the digital society provides a clear illustration of how we make choices and interact with our environment. Digital tools accentuate or underline the features of our functioning, which has never been studied so much by cognitivists... From cognitive biases to algorithmic confinement, we see that the Internet user is attracted and seduced by a certain type of discourse, at total risk of only encountering confirmations corroborating this discourse, even if it is a view supported by an extreme minority.

Predators only have to exploit both the characteristics of the natural functioning of the individual and that of the network that captures our interests and offers us all that is related to them.

A virtual group remains a group

Socialisation in a virtual community seems to work much like that of a real group. It is likely that the group dynamic effect is different, but what is more relevant to the "mechanics of sects", namely the emotional impact, is very present according to testimonies.

The person isolates himself or herself at all times in order to facilitate exchange with his or her new friends and receives messages of encouragement. The virtual group becomes a refuge.

This specific mode of socialisation makes it easy to assume a new identity, which may initially be a game but which gradually blurs the markers.

The time spent in contact with the group or the number of messages exchanged day and night reach such high proportions that real life takes a back seat and there is no time to work or pay attention to loved ones. Offline social life is becoming non-existent.

What you think you're winning

The compulsive consumption of networks fills an existential void, and caters to narcissistic and social needs. The smartphone is a transitional object and a familiar environment. Mobile technology becomes an extension of the person as an augmented self.

Consumption provides answers to real or suggested difficulties, to the injunctions of the "personal well-being" happycracy. It can respond to social anxiety, depression, or loneliness. However, the search for psychological comfort increases the risk of encountering sites harbouring dangerous ideologies.

Immediate satisfaction of expectations increases dependency. This is the very mechanism of addiction, which affects more and more people because of the generalised habit of high consumption, the permanent availability of networks, their attractiveness and their limited cost.

A whole scientific literature describes new forms of addiction and psychosis: cleavages between virtual and real self; fear of missing out on something (*Fear of missing out*, Fomo, Baker et al, 2016); nomophobia (No mobile phobia) accompanied by hallucinations or ghost signals that generate stress; or simply smartphone dependence (consulted every 5 minutes, more than 200 times a day). The phenomenon of control is, of course, not only sectarian.

Can these new evils also be symptoms of a sectarian hold?

3 / Dependence on sectarian control

The sectarian phenomenon invests in digital technology and we form the hypothesis, in view of the situations analysed, that mental control can be achieved in a context of virtual exchanges.

As soon as dependence goes beyond the compulsive behaviour of connecting to the network to develop into dependence on a leader and a group, the characteristics of alienation appear: loss of contact with reality and others, inconsistency, inability to control one's actions.

Loss of contact with reality and isolation

The digital vector helps to erase the boundary between virtual and reality. Avoiding confronting reality in order to take refuge in an ideal or re-enchanted world, built with new rules, is the first step.

In testimonies, relatives describe the permanent contact with networks that causes ruptures with the real environment in favour of the virtual group. The result is isolation and greater vulnerability.

Takeover and monitoring

The permanent contact that is established allows the leader or sectarian group to exercise remote control over the followers. Relatives testify that no further decisions can be made without the person referring to their mentor, who is in reality a tyrannical master.

The predator's interest: easier means of payment and lower risk

The prices of services, consultations or remote care, payment facilities, and justifications for calls for donations are often clearly visible. This makes it possible to assess the company's potential profitability. And the rates for remote care, for example, are sometimes much higher than those for a consultation with a leading specialist. On the other hand, what remains as discreet as possible, and what the testimonies attest to, is direct solicitations by instant messaging.

In reality, nothing is free, and all contacts, even when they are imposed, cost money. The financial losses, which are the easiest to measure, are very significant. It is also possible, in the case of evidence gathering, to track the frequency of courier exchanges, which says a lot about the constant pressure exerted.

In these exclusively virtual relationships, it becomes difficult to identify and locate the individual or group that benefits from them. Predators use the most ephemeral and least traceable technologies.

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To our knowledge, the courts have never yet ruled on a situation that would be described as an abuse of weakness induced by a power exercised solely through digital interactions. In any case, the sectarian phenomenon is already sufficiently nourished by the potential of new information technologies for us to push research in this field and adapt our means of investigation and analysis.