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Religion, Media, and Joint Commitment

Jehovah's Witnesses as a 'Plural Subject'

Andrea Rota

Abstract

Drawing on the example of Jehovah's Witnesses, in this contribution I will explore the role of media in the production of religious commitment. I will argue that, while providing important insights into the relationship between media interpretation and media use, the popular concept of 'religious-social shaping of technology' (Campbell) risks producing an excessively uniform picture of an interpretive community. To outline a more dynamic conception of religious communities, I will introduce a theoretical framework derived from the emerging philosophical fields of collective intentionality and social ontology. In particular, I will draw on the philosopher Margaret Gilbert's work on 'joint intentions' and sketch a frame for the analysis of Jehovah's Witnesses, in their relationship with media and the Watch Tower Society, as parties in a 'plural subject'.

Keywords

Jehovah's Witnesses; Religious community; Media; Religious-social shaping of media; Collective intentionality; Social ontology; Joint commitment; Plural subjects

1 Introduction

In the study of media and society, deterministic views that predicate a direct effect of media and media content on the masses of passive consumers (e.g., McLuhan and Fiore 1967) or postulate a distinctive logic of the media (e.g., Hjarvard 2008, 2013) are the object of growing criticism from scholars of religion and media (e.g., Krüger 2018; Lövheim 2011). To break out of the deterministic mold, numerous authors have emphasized how the production and use of media are linked to interpretative processes through which new technologies are adapted to specific contexts and goals

(Ayaß 2007; Campbell 2010; Krüger 2012). In this contribution, I discuss the potential and the limits of this hermeneutic approach and suggest some improvements regarding its application to the study of the dynamic relationship between media use and the constitution of religious communities.¹

At the core of this approach lies an inversion of perspective that the sociologists Elihu Katz and David Foulkes put in the following terms: “[T]he question [is] not ‘What do the media do to people?’ but, rather, ‘What do people do with the media?’” (Katz & Foulkes 1962, p. 387, cit. in Krüger 2012, p. 12). In what follows, I shall rephrase this idea in more holistic terms and ask, “What do *religious communities* do with media?” From a theoretical point of view, this reformulation demands a reflection on the concept of community and on the relationship between the attitudes of individual members and the nature of collective action. To discuss this point, I will draw on insights from the emerging philosophical fields of social ontology and collective intentionality (Schweikard & Schmid 2013; Searle 1996, 2010). In particular, I will make use of the theory of joint commitment and plural subjects put forward by the philosopher Margaret Gilbert.

In a nutshell, I shall present the following threefold thesis: the hermeneutic approach to media and community, epitomized by the work of the theologian and media scholar Heidi Campbell, while very effective for the analysis of the ‘domestication’ of new technologies in religious settings, is predicated on a vague conception of the relationship between individual and collective media use and interpretation and ultimately invites one to adopt a ‘summative’ account of a religious collective. On the contrary, I contend that a religious community’s attitude toward media does not emerge from the sum of its members’ attitudes and practices, but exists autonomously from – although not necessarily in contrast with – such attitudes and practices. Furthermore, I will argue that the ritual production of a ‘plural subject’ (the term will be explained in due course) of a distinct collective attitude is a constitutive feature of a religious collectivity – a proposition that can be paradigmatically illustrated by the study of the religious framing of media. To flesh out this thesis, I will draw on the empirical case of Jehovah’s Witnesses and present data collected through historical, quantitative, and qualitative research methods.

The article is structured as follows: after briefly presenting the history of Jehovah’s Witnesses and their media production (2), I will introduce Heidi Campbell’s concept of religious-social

¹ This article combines insights gained through the SNSF research project “Die Dynamik von Mediennutzung und den Formen religiöser Vergemeinschaftung” at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) with some aspects of the theoretical framework that I am developing as part of my ongoing habilitation project at the University of Bern (Rota, in preparation). I would like to thank my colleagues at both universities for their insightful comments and suggestions, in particular Oliver Krüger, Jens Schlieter, Fabian Huber, and Evelyne Felder. Preliminary versions of this contribution were presented at the conference “The Dynamics of Religion, Media, and Community” in Fribourg, September 29–30, 2017, and at the workshop “Religion and New Media” in Trent, Italy, May 17–18, 2018. I would like to thank the participants of both events for their stimulating questions and interesting discussions.

shaping of technology (3) and show how it can be applied to analyze both the framing of media in the Watch Tower Society's publications (4) and the declared use of media by individual Jehovah's Witnesses (5). Against this backdrop, I will discuss some shortcomings of this framework for the conceptualization of a religious community (6), and introduce an alternative model based on Margaret Gilbert's theory of plural subjects. To do so, I will proceed in three steps: first, I will present new empirical evidence that challenges the previous framework (7); second, I will provide an account of Gilbert's model (8); and, finally, I will apply it to the analysis of the ritual use of media in the Witnesses' congregational meetings (9). In my conclusion (10), I will draw attention to the methodological and theoretical consequences of my alternative analytic perspective.

2 Jehovah's Witnesses and Media Production

The denomination known today as Jehovah's Witnesses emerged from the American neo-Adventist milieu in the 1870s. Its founder, Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), was active in the theological debate of the time and contributed to various publications before launching its magazine, *The Watchtower*, in 1879.² In 1881, Russell founded the publishing company Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society to print and distribute the magazine as well as other religious pamphlets and books, including Russell's successful series, *Millennial Dawn* (later renamed *Studies in the Scriptures*). Three years later, the company was incorporated and, in 1896, its name was changed to Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, Inc. (Beckford 1975, pp. 1–10; Chryssides 2016, pp. 35–62). To the present day, the Watch Tower Society³ continues to constitute the main legal entity of Jehovah's Witnesses, and its publications represent the fundamental references in matters of doctrine and practice for Jehovah's Witnesses around the world.⁴

By 1880, there were already about 30 local groups in the United States who identified themselves with the work of Russell (Penton 2015, p. 37). However, these local ecclesiae, as they were called, were only loosely in contact with one another and were largely autonomous concerning their organization, practices, and biblical interpretations (Chryssides 2016, pp. 125–126; Penton 2015, pp. 40–43). Indeed, at the moment of founding the Watch Tower Society and launching its

² Initially entitled *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*, the magazine went through a few name changes over the years. Since 1939, its complete title has been *The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom*. In this contribution, I will use the widespread shortened title, *The Watchtower*.

³ In this contribution, I will speak of the Watch Tower Society, the society, or the organization to refer to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, Inc.

⁴ While the Watch Tower Society constitutes both a juridical and a religious entity, the relationship between these two dimensions is quite complex and cannot be detailed here. See Chryssides 2008, pp. lxiv–lxvii, 64; Chryssides 2016, pp. 141–144; Penton 2015, pp. 294–303.

magazine, Russell neither intended to constitute a new denomination nor to pursue a career as a religious leader (Chryssides 2016, p. 49; Penton 2015, pp. 34–40). Accordingly, in the beginning, the name he chose for his followers was, simply, ‘Christians’ to stress the inclusive orientation of the movement.⁵ In 1910 the name was changed to ‘Bible Students’,⁶ and in 1931, it was changed again to ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses’ (Chryssides 2008, pp. 79–80; Penton 2015, pp. 86–87).⁷ The name change in 1931 clearly marks a pivotal moment in the development of a separate group identity under the presidency of Joseph F. Rutherford (1869–1942), who succeeded Russell at the helm of the Watch Tower Society in 1916. This evolution corresponds to a period of rising tensions between the organization and the surrounding world as well.⁸

During the 25 years of his presidency, Rutherford not only staged demonstrations and discourses against the ruling political powers and mainstream religions, but also enacted important reforms. His actions helped him exert stronger control over the local congregation and push them to standardize their practices, such as the use of the Watch Tower Society’s literature (Beckford 1975, pp. 25–33; Blanchard 2008, pp. 68–74). Besides the new name, Rutherford introduced many of the distinctive characteristics that are commonly associated with Jehovah’s Witnesses today, such as the house-to-house ministry (Penton 2015, pp. 80–81). Concerning this missionary work, Rutherford also launched a new magazine in 1919. Originally titled *The Golden Age*, this publication was later renamed *Consolation* (1937) and finally *Awake!* (1946) (Chryssides 2008, p. 12).

The decades following the Rutherford era were marked by a diminished level of tension between the organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses and the surrounding world (Introvigne 2015, pp. 77–81). Ethical concerns gradually replaced the focus on biblical prophecy, and an attitude of indifference to the outside world replaced the Society’s previous rejection of the outside world (Beckford 1975, pp. 52–61). But these years were also a period of global expansion and rapid membership growth (Cragun & Lawson 2010; Stark & Iannaccone 1997). Today, Jehovah’s Witnesses are (officially or unofficially)⁹ present in virtually every country of the world, and the number of active members worldwide has risen from about 180,000 in 1947 to more than 8.1 million in 2016. This growth is accompanied by a constant expansion in the production of the two flagship magazines, *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* In 1960, *The Watchtower* already had a

⁵ “Our Name.” *The Watchtower*, February 1884, reprints vol. 5 (7), pp. 584–585.

⁶ “International Bible Students’ Association.” *The Watchtower*, April 1, 1910, reprints vol. 21 (7), p. 4593.

⁷ The Watch Tower Society used an upper case ‘W’ in ‘Witnesses’ only after 1976. Here, I follow the current capitalization convention.

⁸ In some cases, these tensions resulted in open conflicts in the streets and the courtrooms (see Henderson 2010; Knox 2013) and even in relentless persecution, notably in Germany under the Nazi regime (see Gerbe 1999) and, later, in the USSR (see Baran 2014).

⁹ Jehovah’s Witnesses are currently banned or cannot operate freely in a number of countries. According to the Watch Tower Society, however, “Even in countries where the Kingdom work is banned, Christians find ways to keep on preaching the good news.” “Keep Conquering the Evil with the Good.” *The Watchtower*, June 1, 2007, p. 29.

circulation of 3,750,000 copies. In 2018, the number of printed copies for each edition has reached 69,804,000, confirming *The Watchtower* as the most widely circulated magazine worldwide, followed by *Awake!* with 64,905,000 copies.¹⁰

These data, together with the brief presentation of the foundation and development of the Watch Tower Society, provide a clear indicator of how important the production of print media is for the organization and the preaching work of Jehovah's Witnesses (Blanchard 2006; 2008). Since its early history, however, the society employed diverse media to spread its message. For instance, in 1914 Russell released the so-called *Photo-Drama of Creation*, a groundbreaking multimedia work showcasing God's plan for the world and humankind through colored glass slides and moving pictures synchronized to music and recordings of Russell's preaching. In the following two years, the drama was shown on four continents and was viewed, in its full eight-hour version or in an abbreviated adaptation, by more than nine million spectators, which testified to the society's "unqualified endorsement of moving pictures and stereopticon slides as an effective and desirable method for evangelists and teachers" (WTBTS 2014, p. 71)

Starting in the early 1920s, the Watch Tower Society was among the pioneers of religious radio broadcasting (McLeod 2010), and later freely adopted all sorts of media technology, including phonographs, 'sound cars' (vehicles with loudspeakers mounted on top), motion pictures, video and audio cassettes, floppy disks, CDs, and others (WTBTS 2014, pp. 68–77). Furthermore, to meet the need for adequate typesetting in different languages – a consequence of the society's global expansion¹¹ – Jehovah's Witnesses were at the forefront in the development of publishing software, releasing their Multilanguage Electronic Publishing System (MEPS) in 1986 (WTBTS 1993, pp. 114, 596–597). Finally, the introduction of the refurbished multimedia website, jw.org, in August 2012, dramatically changed the media landscape of Jehovah's Witnesses, and the development of dedicated applications for smartphones and tablets is having a great impact on their congregational activities and preaching work (Rota 2018).

3 Religious-Social Shaping of Media

On the whole, this historical overview portrays the picture of a very media-friendly organization. Nevertheless, the embracing of new media technologies by the Watch Tower Society was never

¹⁰ This information, however, should not obscure the fact that some important changes have taken place in the publishing schedule and format of these magazines in recent years: fewer issues are published each year and the number of pages per issue of most magazines has been reduced from 32 to 16. See Rota (2018).

¹¹ The magazines *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* are currently available in 337 and 192 languages respectively. The official website of the organization, jw.org, is at least partially translated into 950 languages (May 2018).

indiscriminate. On the contrary, a closer look at the society's adoption of new media corroborates Heidi Campbell's thesis regarding the religious-social shaping of media. In her classic study, *When Religion Meets New Media* (2010), Campbell draws on insights provided by the social shaping of technology (SST) approach to call attention to the negotiation processes that accompany the introduction of new forms of media technology in religious contexts. Scholars in the SST tradition have noted that when new technologies are welcomed into various social spheres, they go through a process of domestication, meaning that these "technologies are conditioned and tamed by users in ways that enable them to fit more neatly into the routine of daily life" (Campbell 2010, pp. 50–51). By advocating a religious-social shaping of technology (RSST) approach, Campbell wants to emphasize how "spiritual, moral, and technological codes of practice guide technological negotiation" (Campbell 2010, p. 59).

In her book, Campbell discusses examples from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. However, she is well aware that these traditions are not internally homogeneous and that within each of them there is a variety of theological, moral, and organizational options. For this reason, her unit of analysis is not entire religious traditions, but specific communities within those traditions, conceived as "spiritual networks of relationships and practices" (Campbell 2010, p. 8):

[R]eligious community represents a network of social relationships connected through a set of communal life practices. These practices are established through a shared history and maintained through a shared story shaped by religious language and understandings that provide the basis for collective meaning-making (Campbell 2010, p. 8).¹²

In this respect, Campbell convincingly argues that while individuals within the same religious tradition usually share certain beliefs and practices, "it is the specific grouping to which they belong that often dictates their rules of religious life" (Campbell 2010, p. 15). Accordingly, it is within the boundaries of a specific community that the specific choices and reactions to new media technologies are negotiated. As she puts it, "religious communities are unique in their negotiations with media due to the moral economies of these groups, and the historical and cultural settings in which they find themselves" (Campbell 2010, p. 58). I shall come back later to this conception of religious community. For now, the main takeaway is the acknowledgement that a study of the relationship between religion and media "involves asking questions about how technologies are conceived of, *as well as used*, in light of a religious community's beliefs, moral codes, and historical tradition of engagement with other forms of media technology" (Campbell 2010, p. 59, my emphasis).

¹² See Campbell 2005, pp. 21–40 for a detailed discussion.

To operationalize her theoretical stance, Campbell identifies four chief factors that shape the adoption of media technologies by a religious community: 1) the role of the history and tradition of the community with respect to media, in particular, its relationship to text; 2) the core beliefs and patterns of the community; 3) the community's position toward authority and its consequences for the negotiation process; and 4) the communal framing and discourse legitimizing the use, adaptation, or rejection of a new media technology (Campbell 2010, pp. 62–63; Hutchings 2017, pp. 203–209). The different aspects of this analytical framework can be fruitfully used to analyze the case of Jehovah's Witnesses. In the following, however, I will concentrate on the fourth of these factors – the way in which the Watch Tower Society frames the legitimate and illegitimate use of various media – and touch upon the other aspects only incidentally.

4 Framing the Use of Media Technology within the Watch Tower Society

Campbell distinguishes between three main discursive strategies to circumscribe the appropriate use of media technologies within religious communities. The first is what she calls a *prescriptive discourse* through which “religious individuals and groups laud the embrace of technology because of its ability to help fulfill a specific valued goal or practice”, notably for its missionary work (Campbell 2010, p. 136). For instance, a prescriptive framing was developed to legitimize the use of the radio in the 1920s (Krüger & Rota 2015; Rota 2018). After presenting the new technology as the realization of a biblical prophecy,¹³ the radio was pushed as a revolutionary way to spread God's message. Thus, a column in *The Watchtower* advised:

The Lord has brought into action the radio, evidently for the purpose of giving a witness to the people. [...] It would seem that each class, instead of spending large sums of money for halls, newspaper advertisements, handbills, etc., could better serve by conserving their money and arranging to broadcast the message of truth over some radio station.¹⁴

During the 1930s the Witnesses' use of the radio encountered rising resistance from various religious and public institutions, prompting the Society to reorient its missionary strategy away from this technology. Nevertheless, the Watch Tower Society's retrospective account of its broadcasting mostly glosses over these problems and presents its media history as a series of uninterrupted successes. The current adoption of the Internet as a central instrument in the service

¹³ See “Views from the Watch Tower [Radio Tells Millennium is Coming].” *The Watchtower*, June 15, 1922, Vol. XLIII, p. 180.

¹⁴ “Efficient Service.” *The Watchtower*, April 15, 1927, Vol. XLVIII, p. 127.

of its missionary work is directly linked with the earlier use of the radio (WTBTS 2014, pp. 72–74). The society’s media historiography (Knox 2011), the publicity surrounding the recent Internet use, and the insistence on the growing circulation and translation of its magazines are all good examples of the second of Campbell’s discursive strategies, *validating discourses*, through which religious groups demonstrate “how technologies validate group goals and serve as a way to affirm their communal identity” (Campbell 2010, p. 137).

The third framing strategy identified by Campbell is the *officializing discourse*, which “seeks not only to promote designated uses of technology but also to set defined boundaries for the use in terms of technological beliefs and social values” (Campbell 2010, p. 144). Numerous articles in the magazines *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*, as well as books, videos, and other online content published by the Watch Tower Society, involve such framing, which deserves closer scrutiny.

A cross-media analysis shows that the outright rejection of a medium is rare, and the publications usually mention the potential benefit one can derive from using different media. For instance, Felder (2016, pp. 23–25) notes that when discussing the topic of television, the magazine articles often present it as a means of reducing the distance between nations and people as well as a source of information about global events. From the 1950s to the 1980s, particular emphasis was also put on the educational potential of TV. Similarly, many articles discussing the topic of the Internet from the mid-1990s draw attention to its many useful aspects (Krüger & Rota 2015, pp. 100–101). Nevertheless, in most cases, the positive aspects of these and other media technologies are relativized by a stronger emphasis on the possible risks associated with their misuse (see Felder 2016, pp. 25–30 for the case of television), as the following example illustrates:

ALL OVER THE WORLD, MILLIONS OF PEOPLE USE the Internet every day. Many log on to conduct business, to catch up on world news, to check the weather, to learn about different countries, to obtain travel information, or to communicate with family and friends in various parts of the world. But some – married and single adults as well as a surprising number of children – will be going on-line for a very different reason: TO LOOK AT PORNOGRAPHY.¹⁵

The potential drawbacks of using different media mentioned in the Watch Tower Society’s publications are numerous. However, certain dangers are featured more prominently and consistently in relation to various media (Krüger & Rota 2015, pp. 99–104; Felder 2016, pp. 25–28, 35–36). Since the arguments are similar in their numerous iterations, a few selected examples will suffice to convey an idea of the dominant interpretative patterns.

¹⁵ “Pornography Goes On-Line.” *Awake!*, June 8, 2000, p. 3 (emphasis in original).

Being exposed to pornography or otherwise immoral content, as indicated in the previous example, is one of the most notable perils associated with the use of media. As the article quoted above argues, pornography “can seriously affect your quality of life, warp your judgment, damage your relationships with others and, most important, ruin your relationship with God”. Thus, readers are warned: “Whether featured in a book or a magazine or online, pornography is not for Christians. Avoid it at all costs!”¹⁶ The Watch Tower Society’s publications similarly warn readers to avoid media portraying or discussing the sphere of the occult. Jehovah’s Witnesses’ theology underscores the influence of invisible beings in humans’ everyday lives (Chryssides 2008, pp. 101–102). While God’s angels protect people from spiritual harm, the rebellious angels, or demons who are on the side of Satan, seek to mislead them through various forms of spiritism. “The practice of spiritism”, as one of the most popular publications of Jehovah’s Witnesses explains, “is involvement with the demons, both in a direct way and through a human medium” (WTBTS, 2005, p. 100). Thus, a recent edition of *Awake!* features the following admonition:

“You cannot be partaking of ‘the table of Jehovah’ and the table of demons.” (1 Corinthians 10:21, 22)
All who truly love Jehovah will stay away from books, movies, and computer games that are rooted in the occult or that promote occult practices and beliefs. “I shall not set in front of my eyes any good-for-nothing thing,” says Psalm 101:3. What is more, occult entertainment often glorifies violence and immorality, which “lovers of Jehovah” repudiate.—Psalm 97:10.¹⁷

According to the theological views of the Watch Tower Society, the Devil also seeks to incite mankind to rebel against God. Thus, “[i]t is no coincidence that violence, often with occult themes, saturates the popular media”.¹⁸ Indeed, Satan “tries to estrange us from Jehovah by sowing a spirit of violence in our hearts, in part by way of questionable literature, movies, music, and computer games,” and, for this reason, “[t]hose who cleave to Bible principles shield their mind and heart from all forms of entertainment that nurture a lust for violence”.¹⁹

The consumption of inappropriate content, however, is not the only risk associated with media use. In the eyes of the Watch Tower Society, electronic media that invites interactive use can lead to dangerous associations. Many articles warn parents about the risks their children might incur when visiting chatrooms of online forums.²⁰ Additionally, young people are advised to be very

¹⁶ “Protect Yourself and Those You Love.” *Awake!*, June 8, 2000, p. 10.

¹⁷ “What Draws People to the Occult?” *Awake!*, February 2011, p. 6.

¹⁸ “The Source of Evil Exposed!” *The Watchtower*, June 1, 2007, p. 6.

¹⁹ “Let Jehovah’s ‘Saying’ Safeguard You.” *The Watchtower*, September 1, 2005, p. 29.

²⁰ See, e.g., “Beware of Internet Chat Rooms.” *Awake!*, December 8, 2000, p. 20.

selective in their online friendships and to avoid bad company²¹ and superficial relationships.²² Still, even without connecting with other users, media can harm communication. By offering time-consuming forms of entertainment²³ and a constant flow of (often incorrect or misleading) information,²⁴ television, social media, and the Internet in general can distract from activities that contribute to one's spiritual well-being and can hinder contact with friends and family. Therefore, the Watch Tower Society warns: “[D]o not let attraction lead to ‘addiction.’ By ‘making the best use of your time,’ you can avoid misusing digital technology”.²⁵

This overview demonstrates that the publications of the Watch Tower Society make use of all three discursive strategies defined by Campbell. However, while the prescriptive and validating discourses are geared toward regulating the use of media in relation to religious practices, it is the organizing discourse that appears to have the most far-reaching consequences for Jehovah's Witnesses everyday interaction with media. What can we say on this matter?

5 Declared Media Use among Jehovah's Witnesses

Quantitative data on Jehovah's Witnesses' media use are scarce. In his groundbreaking study, *The Trumpet of Prophecy: A Sociology of Jehovah's Witnesses*, James Beckford surveyed the use of media among the members of ten British congregations (1975, pp. 142–144). However, his data, while interesting, are quite meager and ultimately inconclusive; furthermore, the data do not provide any information regarding newer media technologies, notably the Internet. To bridge this gap, in 2016, my colleagues at the University of Fribourg and I conducted, with the help of a group of students, a survey in four German-speaking assemblies of Jehovah's Witnesses in Switzerland, filling out a total of 183 questionnaires through face-to-face interviews.²⁶

²¹ See, e.g., the whiteboard animation video “Be Social-Network Smart,” <https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/teenagers/whiteboard-animations/social-network-smart/> (May 2018).

²² See, e.g., “Children Online—What Parents Should Know.” *Awake!*, October 2008, p. 7.

²³ See, e.g., “Let Nothing Distance You from Jehovah.” *The Watchtower*, January 15, 2013, p. 15.

²⁴ See, e.g., “Firmly Uphold Godly Teaching.” *The Watchtower*, May 1, 2000, p. 8.

²⁵ “Do You Use Digital Technology Wisely?” *Awake!*, April 2015, p. 15.

²⁶ Our sample included 93 women and 89 men. The average age of the surveyed Jehovah's Witnesses was 47 years and the distribution of age cohorts was as follows: 5.5% 20-year-old or younger; 34.4% between the ages of 21 and 40; 35.5% between 41 and 60; 26.4% 61 or older.

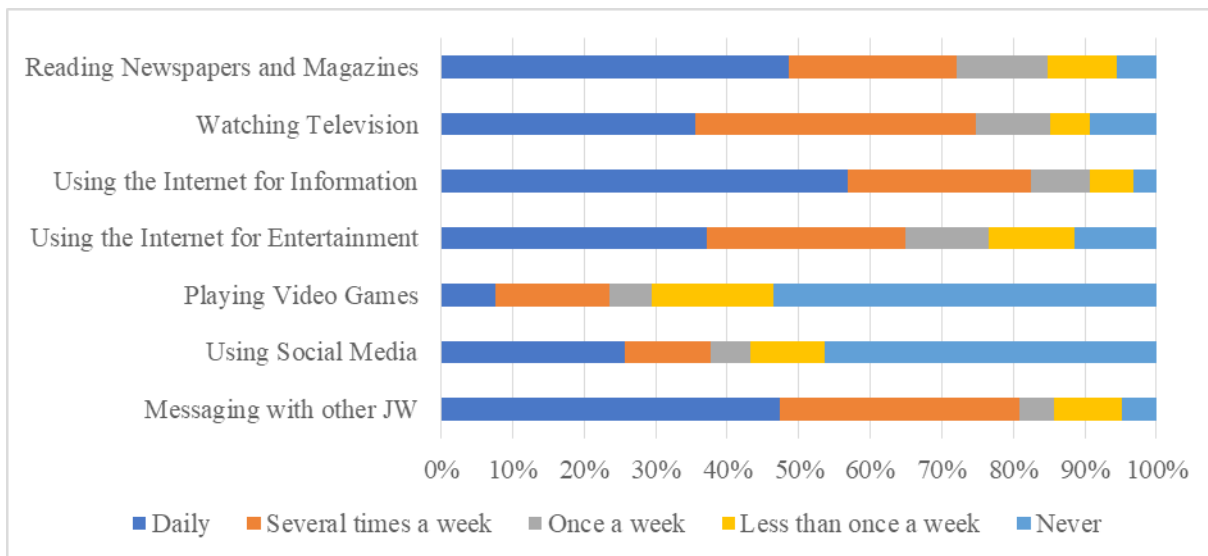


Figure 1: Frequency of Media Use (N=183)

The data collected reveal that 72% of the surveyed Jehovah's Witnesses read a mainstream newspaper or magazine on a regular basis. Furthermore, 75% declared that they watched television daily or several times a week. The Internet also belongs to the everyday media habits of most Witnesses, with 82.5% browsing it daily or several times a week to find information on various subjects – a datum that suggests Internet use in line with, if not slightly more frequent than, the national average.²⁷ Sixty-five percent surf online as often to look for entertainment. The use of video games is less widespread: only 29.5% of the surveyed Jehovah's Witnesses play video games at least once a week. This might be due in part to the average age of the people surveyed. It is worth noting, however, that this figure is still slightly higher than that pertaining to the Association of Evangelical Churches, which served as a contrast group in our project (see Krüger & Rota as well as Huber in this special issue), in which no more than 28% of the members played games on a weekly basis.²⁸ The use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter is split into two uneven groups: 37.7% of the surveyed Witnesses affirm checking them daily or several times a week, while 46.5% never use them. By contrast, almost 86% of the respondents use WhatsApp or other messaging services to communicate with other Jehovah's Witnesses at least on a weekly basis.

²⁷ According to the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics, almost seventy-eight percent of the surveyed population uses the Internet daily or almost daily in all uses combined. See <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/kultur-medien-informationsgesellschaft-sport/informationsgesellschaft.assetdetail.4482185.html> (May 2018).

²⁸ The average age of the surveyed members of this association was 50 years. However, people over 60 are clearly less represented in this sample than in the sample of Jehovah's Witnesses.

On the whole, the warnings in the publications do not seem to deter the use of electronic media in general. However, the surveyed Witnesses largely share the concerns expressed in the Watch Tower Society’s publications about the potential risks of browsing the Internet.

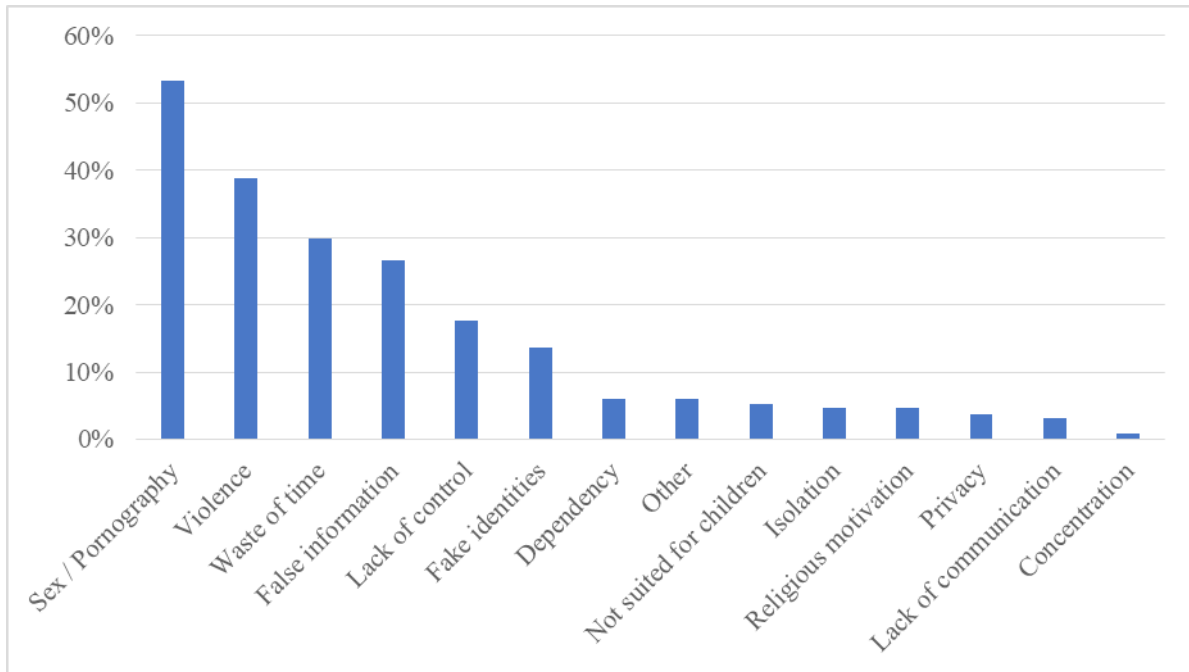


Figure 2: Dangers of the Internet for Children and Teens (N=131)

Pornography, violence, and wasting time are the three most cited dangers that the use of media in general can pose to children and teens.²⁹ Thus, from the quantitative data emerges the idea that the surveyed Jehovah’s Witnesses do not reject media technology per se, but are concerned about its possible misuse. This view appears to be in line with the framing of media in the magazines and is confirmed by further data.

²⁹ The survey explicitly asked about the influence on children and teens, whom the magazines of the Watch Tower Society present as particularly vulnerable to the potentially harmful consequences of media use.

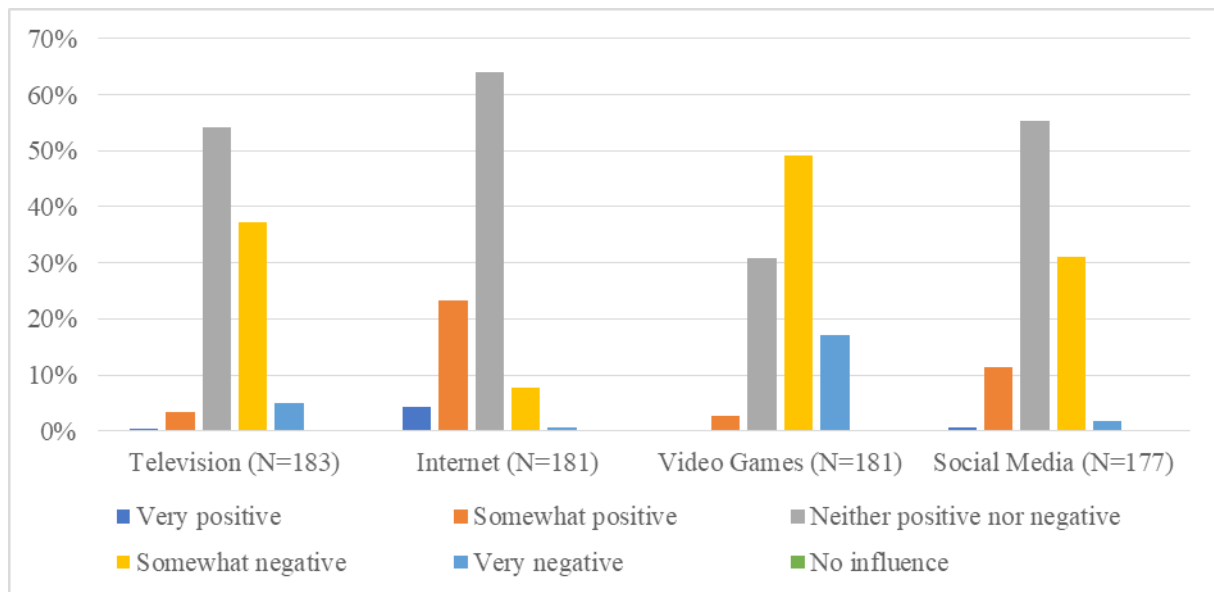


Figure 3: Influence of Media on Children and Teens

Accordingly, the surveyed Witnesses tend to remain ambivalent regarding the influence of different media on children and teens. Most of them consider that watching television, surfing the Internet, or using social media has neither a positive nor a negative influence on young users (54.1%, 64.1%, and 55.4%, respectively). Video games, which are perceived in a more negative light, represent the only outlier among electronic media. Still, about 30% of the surveyed Witnesses remain undecided regarding the potentially harmful effects of video games.

These results gain further coherence when compared with the qualitative data that my colleagues and I collected among Swiss and German Jehovah’s Witnesses. For example, Lara,³⁰ a Swiss Witness in her twenties, mentions watching TV on a regular basis. The popular series *The Big Bang Theory*³¹ is one of her favorite programs. Still, she would advise younger people to choose in advance what they wanted to watch on TV or the Internet, instead of zapping from one thing to another: “For instance, on YouTube,” she says, “you can jump from one video to the other and, suddenly, you have lost an hour!” Lara is also skeptical of social media and offers the following explanation for why she does not have a Facebook or Twitter account:

I don’t like that [using social media]. I mean, on the one side it is definitely very convenient. It has benefits, and I don’t want to push it aside. But for me, personally, it would certainly be time consuming, and I don’t like the frivolity that often prevails there [on social media]. I don’t want to

³⁰ All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

³¹ *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007–present) is an American TV sitcom series.

generalize, but there are many things that I consider superficial, such as when everyone posts “nice weather” [...]. It’s not my cup of tea.

While recognizing the possible advantages of social media, Lara does not trust herself to make wise use of the technology and, fearing she will waste her time, she prefers to refrain from using it.

Frank, a 40-year-old Jehovah’s Witness from Germany, addresses the topic of video games. Frank was baptized as a Witness in the early 1990s. However, during a period of his life between his late twenties and early thirties, he distanced himself from the Watch Tower Society. In those years, he was a very active gamer, and was particularly engaged in the online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*. On the server where he played, he became, in his own words, “kind of a star”. In 2007, Frank came back to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and now regularly attends the semiweekly meetings. He still plays video games sometimes, but his attitude toward *World of Warcraft* has changed:

The problem [...] is the things one has to deal with. *World of Warcraft* is a fantasy world. [...] And then there were also demons and ghosts and whatever. And then, that was it for me. OK, I don’t want this anymore. [...] *World of Warcraft* is infested with the occult. And at the beginning that wasn’t clear to me. [But] it became clearer and clearer to me. [...] That doesn’t fit what I learn in the Bible.

Frank admits that it was not easy for him to quit playing *World of Warcraft*. At least five times a year, he says, he is tempted to install the game and see “what’s going on”. To this, he comments: “It is important to be disciplined. It is just a phase that lasts two days and as quick as it comes, it is also gone.”

Finally, Jörg’s comments bring home a similar point regarding television. He is a Swiss Jehovah’s Witness in his sixties. For many years, he did not own a TV and, even though he now has one, he is less than enthusiastic about watching it:

Nowadays you have about 150 TV channels. [...] And you can browse 150 channels and just find things that ... *pffff* [are not good]. A lot of crime thrillers, violence. And I am always wondering why people like these things [...] and want to see them. Ah, it disgusts me. [...] On TV we watch nature programs and sometimes you get a good movie like *Into the Wild*. [...] Otherwise, the things shown in movies are violence, sex, conspiracies, corruption. [...] I am not some kind of delicate flower in the corner [*keine Mimose dort am Rand*] but I don’t need to watch those things. And my wife doesn’t either. We’d rather discuss something together, or study something, for instance, in *The Watchtower*.

Nevertheless, Jörg would not say that watching TV is in itself harmful:

No, no, it is not harmful. You just have to get a handle on it [*im Griff haben*]. Something comes up and you say, “I don’t need to see this.” Some violence or some, ah [almost disgusted], science fiction movie. [...] You know what’s coming. And I have to make a distinction between what is useful to me and what brings me nothing. What can I watch? There’s not much left. And when sometimes there’s a nature movie [...] then I think that’s a good thing.

After reviewing so much empirical data, we can now ask ourselves how these findings contribute to our understanding of the dynamic relationship between religion, media, and community.

6 Religion, Media, and Community: A Provisional Appraisal

A comparison between the content of the publications and the quantitative and qualitative data collected among Swiss and German Jehovah’s Witnesses indicates a remarkable consistency in the way different media and their use are framed and portrayed. In light of this finding, we might follow Campbell and define the *community* of Jehovah’s Witnesses as a “‘family of users’ who create a distinctive ‘moral economy’ of social and religious meanings that guide their choices about technology and rules of interaction with them” (Campbell 2010, p. 58). This conception, however, remains fairly vague about the nature, production, and consequences of such a “distinctive moral economy”. In this regard, Campbell only states that moral economies are “distinct spaces where symbolic-meaning transactions occur” and are created by “members choosing to come together into a shared space, be it physical or ideological space” (Campbell 2010, p. 58).³² How does this gathering lead to the formation of a moral economy? How does the moral economy guide the religious users’ choices? How does it shape their practices? And how should we understand the image of a family of users? In the following section, I will argue that to answer these questions and thus improve our understanding of the relationship between religion, media, and community in the case of Jehovah’s Witnesses, we have to meet two related challenges: a methodological and a theoretical one.

The methodological problem concerns the status of the interview and survey data. Our first instinct might be to take these data at face value and analyze them as indicators of the actual practices of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Indeed, at first sight, there is no ostensible reason for not doing so. However, this approach would imply a direct connection between media interpretation and media use. This “shortcut” is taken by a number of prominent scholars studying Jehovah’s

³² Elsewhere (2010, p. 51) Campbell describes ‘moral economy’ as the “interplay between moral-cultural beliefs and economic practices, often associated with tightly bounded communities where set moral values and strong social ties dictate choices related to material and social good”.

Witnesses. Thus, Beckford (1975, p. 144) notes that, “many Witnesses revealed in the course of conversation that they were highly selective in their choice of programme. They were uniformly reluctant, moreover, to visit the cinema and to attend dance-halls.” Similarly, in his ethnographic research in Britain, Holden (2002, p. 131) observes that “although Witnesses are by no means the only parents to worry about the possible effects of television on children’s behaviour, the Society still issues an authoritarian warning against unsuitable television programmes”. Then, directly after, he quotes a Jehovah’s Witnesses married couple who confirmed to him they would only watch programs “that would be suitable for their own children and that portrayed behaviour that they, the parents, would allow to take place in their own homes” (Holden 2002, p. 131). Finally, in his authoritative presentation of the history of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Chryssides states:

Although Jehovah’s Witnesses may make occasional visits to the cinema and theatre, they prefer outings to be congregational rather than individual, and in any case, the amount of sex and violence that is regularly on release *leaves little that they would wish to view* (Chryssides 2016, p. 175, my emphasis).

But is this really the case?

This question leads us to the theoretical problem regarding the conceptualization of a religious community. The idea implied in the scholarly assessments above is that Jehovah’s Witnesses follow the Watch Tower Society’s guidelines concerning the appropriate use of media.³³ A community, therefore, is implicitly conceived of as a sum of men and women, each individually having committed to a certain set of attitudes. According to this quite intuitive view, to say, for instance, that, as a community, Jehovah’s Witnesses abhor violence in movies would mean that each member of the community – or at least most³⁴ – having assimilated the message conveyed in the publications, individually abhors violence in movies and acts in accordance with such an attitude.

In contrast to this summative attitude, a holistic account of a community would maintain that it is not each individual Witness who abhors violence in movies, but the *community* of Jehovah’s Witnesses as such that does. *Prima facie*, however, such a change of perspective would necessarily seem to imply the existence of some dubious super-individual ontology, such as a group mind or a *conscience collective*.³⁵ In the following, I will argue that Margaret Gilbert’s concept of plural

³³ This representation fits a certain stereotypical image of Jehovah’s Witnesses as a sectarian group that leaves no room for individual agency, an image that the authors quoted above otherwise carefully discuss and deconstruct.

³⁴ In this perspective, it is fair to assume that a diverging attitude of a minority of members would not compromise the existence of the group itself. See Gilbert 1987, pp. 186–187.

³⁵ Durkheim himself felt the need to address this problem, responding to his critics in his preface to the second edition of the *Rules of Sociological Method* (1901). See Durkheim 1982, pp. 34–47. The debate over the relationship between the individual and the collective levels in Durkheim’s theory is not yet closed. See, e.g., Lukes 1973, pp. 8–15; Sawyer 2002.

subjects allows us to advance a non-summative conception of community that avoids such ontological pitfalls. To illustrate the potential applicability of such an approach, I will first present some empirical evidence that indicates the limits of a summative conception and demonstrates the need for a more complex understanding of the dynamics underlying the constitution and persistence of a religious community. Thereafter, I will outline Gilbert's philosophical account.

7 Conflicting Attitudes

The first empirical case concerns Emma and Ralph, a married couple of Swiss Jehovah's Witnesses in their forties living in a village of the Swiss Plateau. When asked about his television-watching habits, Ralph states that he is "rather passionate about the news and documentary films". As for his wife, he implies, she has other preferences, but he would rather let her explain, which leads to the following exchange between the two:

Emma: Other things [television programs]. [Laughs.]

Ralph: What kinds of things? [Laughs.]

Emma [emotionally]: Crime thrillers! [Laughs.] Oh! [addressing the interviewer] You are recording that now? [Laughs.]

Ralph: Yes, that is recorded.

In the following conversation, Emma details her taste for crime thrillers. She explains that in addition to the popular German television series *Tatort*,³⁶ she enjoys watching English and Swedish crime thrillers, before inquiring again, "Eh! That's anonymous, right?"

In this interaction, Emma expresses a preference regarding media content that contrasts with the views put forward in the magazines of the Watch Tower Society. At the same time, her reaction reveals her unease when imagining that her statements might be made public. Commenting on his wife's reaction, Ralph notes that Jehovah's Witnesses have their flaws and weakness, too:

This also shows that we are no saints. Everyone has his preferences and enjoys watching something. Personally, I also enjoy watching a disaster movie. Perhaps that does not fit the concept of Jehovah's Witnesses when one looks from the outside. But we are a community that goes to the movies.

³⁶ *Tatort* (literally: 'crime scene') is a police procedural television series (Das Erste, 1970–present) produced and broadcast by various networks in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Each episode takes place in a different city in one of these countries.

In this statement, Ralph seeks to minimize what from the outside might be perceived as deviance. On the one hand, he stresses that Jehovah's Witnesses are not barred from going to the movies; on the other, he notes that to indulge in certain forms of entertainment is also 'human'. His remarks prompt a new exchange between the couple:

Ralph: We should also live. [...] Everyone has his preferences, and they are also part of our lives. There is nothing wrong with that. Of course, we must be somewhat careful [...] if we go around preaching the love of Jehovah God and at home we watch a movie portraying a mass shooting [*'s Geballer*], you know...

Emma: That wouldn't be so believable.

Ralph: Our credibility might be slightly questioned if somebody should ask or get to know what kind of movies we watch.

Emma: Or everything with an esoteric content. That is also taboo for us. [...] Because we know that we are observed. The people do not just listen to what we say but observe us.

The couple's assertions draw attention to a distinction between their public behavior as preachers of God's message and certain personal attitudes that might be perceived as incompatible with that behavior. The general public implied in Emma's and Ralph's last statements appears to be the world of non-Witnesses that surrounds them. Emma's preoccupation with her anonymity, however, also suggests a concern that other people might recognize her by her name. A second case will allow us to explore this aspect in a comparative perspective.

During an interview, Helena, a 45-year-old living in a Swiss city, describes her media habits. Helena subscribes to a daily newspaper and to a Sunday paper, and watches various news and current affairs shows on television. On Sunday evenings, she usually watches an episode of *Tatort*. Watching TV is also a regular activity in her family life:

As a family, every Friday evening we divide in two groups and my husband watches something with one of the children and I watch something with the other. We have said, this is a kind of mommy and daddy time, and they can say what they want to do with us. And they want to watch TV. [...] They can choose a film and then we watch it together. And I always like to discuss the movie for a moment – not just watch the movie and then, "Bye-bye, see you", but rather, "What happened? What did you like?" or something like that for a moment.

In addition to movies, she started watching the TV series *Breaking Bad* and *House of Cards* as a family activity.³⁷ Helena recognizes that these choices might seem surprising and notes:

³⁷ The TV series *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013) narrates the struggles of a chemistry teacher turned criminal and his career in the violent world of drug trafficking. *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018) is a political thriller

Well, I watch it now. If someone else does not watch it, that is OK. Now, I don't think that *Tatort* is that bad but, yes, *Breaking Bad* is probably somewhat at the limit. My younger son is not allowed to watch it. That's clear. Yeah. But, well, I wouldn't go and tell my congregation, "Hey, I watch *Breaking Bad*." I mean, you have some idea of who might also watch it, and you know with whom you can talk about such things.

Helena's statement shows that she knows her private media habits do not correspond to the expectation of the Watch Tower Society and therefore she would refrain from mentioning them in a communal setting. At the same time, she is also aware that other Jehovah's Witnesses do watch similar TV series while also refraining from mentioning it openly at the congregational meetings, and she feels like she can share her viewing experiences with them, at least privately.

In sum, when it comes to their individual media use, Helena, Emma, and Ralph are evidently not always guided by the moral and religious framing conveyed by the Watch Tower Society's literature. Furthermore, Emma's embarrassment and Helena's secrecy manifestly reveal their awareness that they are doing something they should not. Finally, they recognize, at least implicitly, that their fellow Jehovah's Witnesses (or at least some of them) would have a standing to rebuke them should they find out about their favorite series.

In light of these considerations, it might be tempting to analyze their statements in a normative sense. In this way of thinking, Emma and Helena might be considered 'bad' or 'incomplete' Jehovah's Witnesses who have not yet fully assimilated the beliefs and moral system of the group. Or perhaps they would be regarded as weak or faulty members of the group who lack the willpower to act on their beliefs. These positions may well describe the attitude of the community toward them³⁸ and, indeed, seem to somewhat grasp the self-representation that some interviewees have of themselves.³⁹ However, they do not really advance our theoretical understanding of the dynamic nature of a religious community. To move forward, I advocate approaching the community of Jehovah's Witnesses as a *plural subject* in Margaret Gilbert's sense.

8 Plural Subjects and Joint Commitment

What is a plural subject? In a nutshell, a plural subject is a group of people jointly committed to intend something as a single body – that is, to emulate, by virtue of the actions of all, a single

portraying a Washington congressman's rise to power through intimidation, violence, and corruption.

³⁸ This, however, remains an empirical question that cannot be simply settled through speculation.

³⁹ This seems to be the case of Emma and Ralph, who both admit to their flaws and weaknesses while trying to live their faith in a way that allows them "to stand with good conscience before God" (Emma).

intentional agent (e.g., Gilbert 2014a, p. 7). To unpack this idea, it is worth starting with an illustrative example in the form of a thought experiment.⁴⁰ The example proceeds by first demonstrating the limits of a summative account for the definition of a group and then introducing a non-summative account.

Let us imagine a single person, John, reading a poem and finding it very moving. John is in a room with other people reading the same poem. The mere physical proximity of the people in the room or the fact that they are reading the same text does not seem to provide grounds for considering them a group or community in any intuitive sense.⁴¹ This conclusion would not change even if we assume that all the readers personally believe that the poem is moving, for their attitude remains private. Would the situation be different if each of them had expressed their attitude openly to the others? That is, if the way each of them feels about the poem had become common knowledge among all of them? According to Gilbert, the answer must be negative. While each person would know what the other readers individually believe, “the fact that a *group* is involved does not play any obviously essential role in what is going on” (Gilbert 1987, p. 189). As Gilbert notes, “An analogue of group belief exists in many populations which are not intuitively social groups. It is probably common knowledge in the population of adults who have red hair and are over six feet tall that most of them believe that fire burns, for instance” (Gilbert 1987, p. 189). Thus, the summative account presented so far would be compatible with a set-theoretical approach to collective phenomena,⁴² but it seems only accidentally to refer to a phenomenon involving a group.

Following Gilbert, however, we can imagine a different situation. This time, John and the other readers meet at Jane’s house to talk poetry. After having read the poem aloud, they discuss its merits and conclude that the poem is very moving. A few moments later, Jane’s husband (who did not participate in the discussion) enters the room, and asks if the poem is interesting, to which Jane replies, “It is quite dull.” We can imagine on hearing this statement John would retort, “But we thought it was very moving!” In this situation, John’s rebuke would appear to be justified on grounds that cannot be accounted for on the basis of a summative conception of a group (Gilbert 1987, pp. 192–193). What has changed concerning the situation sketched above is that through their communicative practice, the people convened at Jane’s house have decided to “let a certain interpretation ‘stand’ in the context of their discussion” as an attitude that can be ascribed “to the group as a whole” (Gilbert 1987, p. 191). John’s standing to rebuke Jane “appears to be understood

⁴⁰ This particular illustration is a simplified version of an example offered by Gilbert in 1987, complemented with further insights discussed in Gilbert 1996a.

⁴¹ Compare this example with the passengers on a train carriage reading the same journal.

⁴² I would like to thank Boris Rähme for pointing out this analogy during the workshop “Religion and New Media”.

as grounded *directly* in the existence of a group view that contradicts what the speaker says” (Gilbert 1987, p. 193).⁴³

In line with Gilbert’s terminology, we can say that the people participating in the poetry discussion have jointly accepted a certain attitude as that of their group and are thus jointly committed to upholding this attitude as a body. As such, they constitute the plural subject of that commitment. Furthermore,

It is understood that when a set of persons jointly accepts that *p* [where *p* is any propositional content], then each of the individuals involved is personally obligated to act appropriately. Such action consists, roughly, in not publicly denying that *p* or saying or doing anything which presupposes its denial (Gilbert 1987, pp. 194–195).

Thus, the creation of a joint commitment entails important corollaries (Gilbert 2008). First, as we have already seen, it creates a set of mutual rights and obligations. Each party in a plural subject is now entitled and obligated to behave in a certain way “*qua* a member of the whole” (Gilbert 1996a, p. 186). A violation of these obligations constitutes grounds for rebuke. Second, individual members cannot unilaterally break their joint commitment by simply changing their minds because they are not individually the subject of the commitment they are revising. It is the group that constitutes the plural subject of such a commitment (Gilbert 2000).⁴⁴ Thus, an individual can abandon a joint commitment without fault only if the other persons have waived their rights to the conforming action. Third, the joint commitment would still hold – and its plural subject would continue to exist – even if one or more of the parties should no longer *personally* share the attitude that the group has jointly accepted. Indeed, we can imagine that, in the meantime, John has revised his personal attitude and now also considers the poem in question to be quite dull. (Indeed, he might have had this opinion from the beginning, but being, say, shy or a conformist, he has refrained from stating it.) Nevertheless, when he rebukes Jane, he speaks for the group. Thus, Gilbert draws this radical conclusion:

[I]t is not a necessary condition of a group’s belief that p [i.e., a given propositional content] that most members of the group believe that p. Indeed, given the above it seems that it is not necessary that any members of the group personally believe that p (Gilbert 1987, p. 191, emphasis in original).

⁴³ The adverb “directly” serves to emphasize that such a right to rebuke is based neither on moral nor on prudential reasons. See Gilbert 2014b for a more detailed discussion of the nature of this standing.

⁴⁴ Contrast the case of a joint commitment with the case of an individual commitment. If I decide to go to the theater tonight, I commit myself to a certain course of action (for instance, I will not go out of town for the evening). However, since I am the subject of my commitment, I can rescind it by a simple change of mind (see Bratman 1999 for a more nuanced discussion of this point). However, this would not be possible for me if you and I were jointly committed to going to the theater *together*.

At this point, it is important to avoid some common misunderstandings. Gilbert's conclusion does not mean that personal and joint attitudes *never* converge – just that they do not *necessarily* have to. In this sense, a plural subject cannot be simply reduced to individual intentions, and yet, it does not constitute a new metaphysical reality. Accordingly, Gilbert's thesis does not seek to provide a measure of the *intensity* of individual commitments, but rather to specify the *form* of commitment – i.e., a *joint* commitment – at the core of group-building processes.

This theoretical discussion allows us to see the empirical cases of the previous section in a new light and to consider Emma, Ralph, and Helena as parties in a plural subject, jointly committed to abhorring violence in movies independent of their personal attitudes on the matter. To support this view, however, we still have to identify the circumstances under which the interviewed Jehovah's Witnesses could have entered into such a joint commitment. Gilbert emphasizes that joint commitments are an essential element of everyday life, and a simple exchange between two people is sufficient to create one (Gilbert 1996a, p. 184). All it takes is for the parties to express their readiness to be jointly committed with the others concerning certain intentional content (Gilbert 1989, pp. 180–184; Gilbert 2006, pp. 138–140). With respect to our empirical case, however, I maintain that the parties entered a joint commitment in a ritual setting that involves the ritual use of media.⁴⁵ It is to such a setting that I now turn.

9 Ritualized Use of Media

Jehovah's Witnesses are openly invited to use the publications of the Watch Tower Society to deepen their understanding of the Bible. The study of these publications, however, is not only an individual activity but also, and foremost, a communal activity taking place at the congregation meetings organized semi-weekly at Kingdom Halls (Jehovah's Witnesses' places of assembly) around the world. During the weekend, each congregation meets for a public Bible discourse and then reviews an article from *The Watchtower*. In a second meeting, on a weekday, the congregation receives instruction on the basis of various publications to organize their missionary work and improve their rhetorical and teaching skills. Until December 2008, a third meeting devoted to the

⁴⁵ The following discussion bears an important resemblance to Roy Rappaport's theory of ritual (see Rappaport 1999, pp. 107–138). However, there are also fundamental distinctions. In particular, Rappaport's theory, which draws on Austin's and Searle's analysis of speech acts (see Austin 1952; Searle 1969), is predicated on the exchange of individual commitments, whereas Gilbert's standpoint introduces the idea of a single *joint* commitment to accept a proposition as a body (see Gilbert 1996b). For reasons of space, I cannot discuss this distinction here, but see Rota (in preparation).

study of a Watch Tower Society's book was held weekly in smaller groups at private locations. This meeting has since been integrated into the midweek program.⁴⁶

The magazines, books, and, since 2012, the multimedia content published on the website jw.org play a fundamental structuring role in each meeting (Blanchard 2006, pp. 55–57; Blanchard 2008, pp. 110–115; Rota 2018). The program of each encounter is communicated well in advance to all members through the various publications and is the same worldwide.⁴⁷ The announcement includes the detailed list of articles, book chapters, and videos that will be studied each week. Since the early years of the organization, the way of interacting with the publications also became increasingly standardized. Already under Russell, the Watch Tower Society started publishing questions to guide the study of the book series *Millennial Dawn*. From 1922 onward, the articles in the *Watchtower* became a regular object of study and, since 1942, the magazine prints questions pertaining to each paragraph at the bottom of selected articles (WTBTS 2014, pp. 173–174).

During the congregational meetings, these questions are used to conduct a review of the articles in the form of a question-and-answer session. The congregational study of other publications is patterned on the *Watchtower* study. Our participant observation in several Swiss and German congregations indicates the following basic structure:⁴⁸ First, a member of the congregation reads a paragraph from the *Watchtower* or another publication (depending on the meeting) aloud from the stage. Then, another member asks the public in attendance to answer one or two questions related to that passage, as reported in the publication. The participants in the assembly can raise their hands to answer the question. One name is called from the stage and that person receives a microphone so everyone can hear his or her answer. After a few answers have been collected, the congregation moves on to the next paragraph.

Although the answers may appear spontaneous, it does not take long for observers to notice that most answers are more or less elaborate paraphrases of the text read from the stage a few moments previously, which is no mere coincidence. In its publications, on its website, and even in its instructive cartoons for children, the Watch Tower Society⁴⁹ encourages Jehovah's Witnesses to

⁴⁶ See "New Congregation Meeting Schedule." *Our Kingdom Ministry*, October 2008, 1; see also WTBTS 2014, pp. 174–176.

⁴⁷ The centralized production and distribution of media played a fundamental role in the global standardization of the meetings (see Blanchard 2008, pp. 151–160). Improvement in the printing and translation processes since the mid-1970s allowed the Watch Tower Society to publish an increasing number books and magazines simultaneously in different languages. For instance, by 1985, *The Watchtower* was published simultaneously in about 20 languages, by 1992 in 66, and today in 337 (see WTBTS 1993, p. 598).

⁴⁸ Through various publications, the organization regularly provides formal recommendations and instructions regarding how to conduct these study sessions. Here I prefer to draw from observational data.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., WTBTS 2012, lesson 9, and the above-mentioned animated video (June 4, 2018): <https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/children/become-jehovahs-friend/videos/prepare-your-comment-meetings/>

prepare for each meeting carefully by reading the publications, looking in the text for answers to the given questions, making notes, and preparing a brief comment in one's own words.

To better understand the significance of this process for the constitution of a joint commitment among participants in the meeting, let us consider a concrete example from the book *Keep Yourselves in God's Love* (WTBTS 2008), first used in a congregation study in 2009. In a chapter entitled "How to Choose Wholesome Entertainment", the readers are admonished to "abhor what is wicked". After noting that the entertainment offer can be broadly divided into forms of entertainment that Christians definitely avoid and others they may or not find appropriate, the texts examines the first category:

[S]ome forms of entertainment highlight activities expressly condemned in the Bible. Think, for example, of websites as well as movies, TV programs, and music that have sadistic or demonic content or that contain pornography or promote vile, immoral practices. Since such degraded forms of entertainment portray, in a positive light, activities that violate Bible principles or break Bible laws, they should be shunned by true Christians (WTBTS 2008, p. 56).

The following question appears as a footnote to guide the communal discussion of this passage: "What forms of entertainment do we reject, and why?" (WTBTS 2008, p. 56). The answer to such a question in the public setting of a congregation's meeting not only amounts to a statement recognizing a certain state of affairs, but can be viewed as a speech act through which the speaker commits himself or herself to upholding a normative attitude toward certain forms of media entertainment (Searle 1964; Rappaport 1999, pp. 107–138). However, I would argue that the commitment in question is not an individual one, but rather a *joint* one. In this respect, it is worth noting that while other personal pronouns appear in the organization's publications, the "we" form is frequently used in the formulation of the study questions. By providing a response to the question in the plural form, the person answering outlines an attitude for the group and signals his or her readiness to enter a joint commitment with the other participants to uphold an attitude. The other participants tacitly do the same by refraining from challenging the collective position encapsulated in the answer. In this way, the members of the congregation are constituted as the plural subject of the attitude and are jointly committed to upholding it as a single body independent of their private attitudes on the matter.

10 Conclusion

Margaret Gilbert's theory of joint commitment and its application to the analysis of empirical data concerning the organization of Jehovah's Witness allow us to put forward a more nuanced conception of religious community and of the role of media in its constitution. Gilbert maintains that

In order for individual human beings to form collectivities, they must take on a special character, a "new" character, in so far as they need not, *qua* human beings, have that character. Moreover, humans must form a whole or unit of a special kind, a unit of a kind that can now be specified precisely: they must form a plural subject (Gilbert 1989, p. 431).

Accordingly, a set of individuals each having the same attitude provides neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition to constitute a group in any strong sense; in fact, not even a set of individuals each personally feeling that they belong to a group would seem to make the cut. In a similar way, a family of users gathered on the basis of similar individual media use does not yet constitute a unit of any special kind. Rather, the creation of such a unit requires the formation of a joint commitment, which can be achieved through a ritual means. Thus, following Gilbert (1986, p. 195), I would argue that "any set of persons who jointly accept some proposition thereby become a social group or collectivity, intuitively [...] if they were not one before".

It is worth noting that Heidi Campbell closely associates the creation of a moral economy with a series of negotiation processes that can be interpreted as conducive to a joint commitment. However, in line with her research interests, her analysis places particular emphasis on the negotiation between religious groups and leaders and particular *media*, drawing attention to how such media are subjected to different rules to fit the moral order of the community. In this case, the community is considered to be preexisting; it is presupposed a priori. However, I would argue that the community is also generated by the imposition of such rules on how media should be used.⁵⁰ To invoke a distinction introduced by John Searle (1996), the rules in question are not regulative rules by which a community regulates its use of media, but constitutive rules by which the community constitutes itself *as a community*. These rules are not like those at a theme park forbidding its guests to dive into a pool (which presupposes the existence of the theme park); they are more like the rules of chess, without which chess would not exist.⁵¹

⁵⁰ I am not claiming here that the rules specifically concerning *the use of media* are in some way central to the constitution of a group. The point is rather that the analysis of these rules allows us to discuss, *exempli gratia*, the central process in the constitution of a collective – i.e., the creation of a joint commitment.

⁵¹ Such rules are not only outlined in organizing discourses, but can be reproduced by prescribing or validating frames as well. I am grateful to Heidi Campbell for her feedback on this point during a workshop in Trent, in May 2018.

In the empirical case discussed in this contribution, the constitutive rules in force shape the attitudes of the plural subject of Jehovah's Witnesses and provide grounds for policing the public behavior and discourse of the parties in such a plural subject. However, as long as such constitutive rules are not publicly challenged, diverging personal attitudes remain possible and, as the empirical data suggest, are tacitly known and tolerated by at least some of the members. From a methodological point of view, this indicates that "simply asking people for an opinion on some issue may well not be enough to elicit a personal belief" (Gilbert 1987, p. 196), as a person might answer in his or her capacity as a participant in a plural subject.

In this respect, I must stress that by pointing out the possibility of discrepancies between the collective and individual attitudes among Jehovah's Witnesses, I am not implying that none of the Witnesses has personal feelings and intentions that support his or her involvement in the group; I am only indicating that such a convergence of personal and collective attitudes is not a logical necessity for the existence of the group. Nor am I suggesting that these discrepancies are the result of coercion or hypocrisy of any kind. In fact, I would argue that the arguments of hypocrisy or coercion apply only if we assume that the existence of a religious community depends on the corresponding individual intentions of the members. While this might be a normative expectation of the community, it need not be part of our theoretical understanding of the actual dynamics of such a community.

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