
Showing Who You Are: Witnessing Texts

Annabelle Mooney
Cardiff University

Witnessing, speaking or writing about one's beliefs and faith, is standard for many religions. In the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, it is central to their practice. In this paper, close text analysis is conducted of letters to the editor in one of the movement's publications, *Awake!* While this may be seen as atypical witnessing activity, it sheds light on the function of letters to the editor generally and also on the specific narrative requirements that members adhere to. In systematic and identifiable ways, writers of letters witness to their membership as well as actively performing it. The letters can also be seen as a recruitment tool as well as pedagogic in the sense of displaying to the wider discourse community what is required as a member.¹

The particular letters here come from a Jehovah's Witnesses' publication, *Awake!* which is produced fortnightly. The five issues from which these letters (45 in all) were taken, were collected in a departmental foyer at Glasgow University between September 1998 and June 1999. It is by no means a complete set from this period. While the corpus is not large, it is sufficient for the text analysis undertaken here.

The letters are valuable data because of the ubiquity of letters to the editor in general. Consideration of these letters may shed some light on letters to more 'mainstream' publications, something which (to my knowledge) has not been extensively researched (cf. Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002; Holden and

Holden, 1998; Richardson, 2001).ⁱⁱ Ultimately, letters to the editor allow us an insight into the discourse community that reads a publication.

Awake! is not a religious publication as such. It includes articles on a variety of subjects, from the building of Brasilia to teenage depression (Sept. 8 1998). The letters written to the editor are prima facie comments on the articles in the magazine. Knowledge of the magazine is implied or presupposed in the letters; it is usually also explicitly signalled. The letters offer thanks, comments or corrections to material which has already been published. In this way, the letters require the magazine as a prompt for their existence. But the letters do more than just comment on the magazine; they also comment on the place of the movement in the writers' individual lives. They witness to members' affiliation to the group.

Part of being a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, indeed rather a large part, is proselytising. To be an active member is to speak of one's membership. It is an obligation. Members witness because of their own understanding of what it is to belong to the group (that is, witnessing as a way of performing membership of this discourse community) but also to represent the movement to other members (expressing a kind of unity and common bond) and to outsiders, inviting them to join this group (recruitment). In this paper, I deal first with the possible reasons for writing these letters and the audiences they address. How the publication aligns with secular text conventions is briefly discussed, followed by an analysis of the letters structure, the kinds of argument they use and some stylistic features. This provides an explicit profile of what is presumably learnt through exposure in terms of what is required from a member in such letters.

Writing as Witnessing and Recruitment

The point of the *Awake!* letters to the editor is bound up in part at least in this particular discourse community's emphasis on witnessing. Usually, letters to the editor may be considered as a way of the reading community participating in the publication. Along these lines, letters to the editor are

directed towards the membership of the community and are at once display and affiliative. It is a way of showing that others how to be a member of the community as well as showing that one is a member of the community.

Because this magazine is distributed to non-members in what is itself a witnessing activity, there is another audience being addressed. Considered in this context, demonstrating affiliation to the community and demonstrating how to be a member of the community are strategies directed at recruiting new members.

We see both member and non-member audiences present in the content of the letters. As part of the audience are already members, some pieces of 'insider' information are allowed. One writer remarks 'I can hardly wait for the time in the future when all of us will have perfect teeth' (22/12/98). This is a reference to the future coming of Jehovah's kingdom on earth, when everyone will be free from trouble, including imperfect teeth. This speaks largely to the current membership of the group. Expressing this wish for the coming of Jehovah's kingdom, is a demonstration of membership of the group. It is an aspiration common to this discourse community, though here it is particularised in an example about teeth.

We also see evidence in the letters of how the publication is used as a witnessing text itself. This type of contribution, while addressed to members, brings in the outside world in the narration of a witnessing event. One writer tells us how s/he left the article on orthodontics at the dentist's.

The dentist later expressed appreciation, saying that the article was informative and concise and written in a way that was easy to understand. He also said that he had given copies of the article to some patients to help them understand their treatment program (8/1/99).

The praise reported from the dentist serves as testimony for the movement. It can be read as more valuable than testimony from members exactly because it is from an outsider and a professional. That such a narrative is considered important by this letter writer (and indeed by the editors

selecting letters) establishes the writer's membership of the group. The writer is sufficiently familiar with the discourse community and its values to know the importance of the dentist taking up the magazine. This can also be seen as containing a 'tip' for witnessing, that is, to leave magazines in places such as doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms.

We see a kind of recruitment being reported in the dentist's praise and distribution of the magazine. The argument implicit here in terms of seeing the letters as recruiting texts is as follows. A professional (dentist) praises and passes on information from the Jehovah's Witnesses to his/her patients. If the Jehovah's Witnesses can be so expert and well-informed about something which is not their particular area of speciality (i.e. orthodontics) what might they have to say about spiritual questions?

As will be explored in the following sections, letters sometimes deal with the way in which *Awake!* articles have helped readers solve practical problems (like study skills and concentration). These positive contributions by members signal to non-members the advantage of being part of this community. The letters aid in establishing the Jehovah's Witnesses as an appealing community to join. The magazine generally, including articles on various issues and events, also creates the impression of the movement as being wide-ranging in its interests, open minded and worldly.

While the letters are not ostensibly addressed to non-members, the publication *Awake!* is. The letters provide the non-member with a glimpse of what life is like as a member. Even though the letters (and *Awake!*) do not look like recruiting texts they serve an important priming role in familiarising non-members with the normal lives and interests of members.

Where Does It Come From?

Physically

Awake! cannot be purchased (though often a donation will be asked for). As an instrument of proselytising, it is distributed by members of the movement. This may be by personal door to door distribution or by depositing a number of publications in certain places. The magazines used

in this study were found in the foyer of a Glasgow University building. I have also seen piles of them in hospital waiting rooms and public libraries. I have not, on the other hand, experienced a Jehovah's Witness standing in the street approaching passers by. When members are distributing literature, they will often do so in groups. While only one or a couple of people approach any particular household, members may be out together in a particular neighbourhood.

Textually

It is worth considering not only people are presented with the magazine (in terms of how they obtain it) but also how the magazine is presented in terms of layout and other printed text conventions. The letters draw on established convention in at least two ways with respect to presentation. They rely on the publication (*Awake!*) in so far as they orient to articles already published. Further, the publication itself mirrors other publications originating in secular society. Most magazines contain readers' letters which allow readers to affiliate to the discourse community that the publication creates and perhaps to criticise the publication for not meeting expectations of this discourse community. *Awake!* aligns with these conventions in so far as it seeks to reproduce traditional periodical conventions. These practices can be understood as indicating that groups are conscious of their marginal status (cf. Brown and Herndl, 1996). If the publication is to play any role in recruitment of members, it is essential that the movement is seen as appealing and safe. The same is true of any recruitment (or indeed publicity) material, from corporate brochures to newspaper job advertisements. This can be understood in terms of risk minimisation; in fact the risk is perhaps best understood as effort for reward. Hoffman writes,

To induce the reader to cooperate, the writer must win the reader's trust and convince the reader that the goal/change to be made is worth whatever risk [or effort] is involved. He must make the reader see that he has influence only if the reader cooperates and that there are areas where cooperation can reasonably and safely occur (1979: 180, my insertion).

Some religious groups seek to minimise the perceived risks of membership because of negative preconceptions people may have. More usually,

however, the same practices that can be read as risk minimisation are actually persuasive techniques which seek to show the benefits of membership. Understanding the effort that potential members have to expend (as a member, or in simply making a commitment) appears to be fundamental in the choice of discourse practices.

Unlike the distribution of this text, the layout of the letters page is like any other magazine in so far as a number of letters are presented with occasional editorial comment. Indeed, the entire publication looks something like a *Reader's Digest* in that it covers a range of diverse topics apparently of general interest (cf. *The Watchtower*, another Jehovah's Witnesses publication which is overtly religious). *The Watchtower* provides information to the interested person on a variety of topics. The letters, however, foreground the true ideology of the publication, and that of the producing and consuming discourse communities: that of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

There are some important differences between the *Awake!* letters and those in, for example, women's lifestyles magazines like *Cosmopolitan*. The letters are at the end of the magazine. Generally, though by no means always, they would be placed at the start of a publication. Names are routinely withheld in *Awake!*, with only initials being given as well as place of origin. Why this is so is not clear, however it does show the reader the wide net of the publication as contributions come from all over the globe. While it is not unusual for names to be 'withheld' in mainstream publications, if it occurs they are completely withheld (with not even initials given) and usually only in the case of controversial or sensitive claims within contributions.

The layout of the page visually suggests some kind of discourse colony, that is, a collection of texts, similar in kind, each able to stand alone and yet grouped together (Hoey, 1986). The page is split into three columns, and running left to right, the letters are in no discernible order (though if letters deal with the same topic they are grouped together). There are no photographs or images on the page. All letters are formatted in the same way, given a topic heading

(derived from what the letter comments on) and providing writers details beneath. Responses from the editors are set in italics and placed immediately after the relevant letter. There is no 'prize letter' as is common practice in some women's magazines. The implication from this layout is that all letters are equal; all contributions are treated equally. This mirrors the structure of the movement where all members are considered equal.

Structure

The way in which the letters are composed predominantly follows two forms. They point out the article on which they wish to comment, offer a comment and/or an evaluation; or they narrate a personal crisis resolved by membership of the group. The letters draw on personal background in doing this. This is a standard structure for all kinds of witnessing texts. As the purpose of proselytising is to proclaim the goodness of a particular movement or way of doing things, this is usually contrasted with bad ways of doing things. The articulation of life before and out with the movement allows non-members to identify with the speaker and to see themselves as potentially making the same positive changes in their lives.

These letters are structured according to particular combinations of certain elements. The letters were examined and classified according to the following seven types; thanks, lesson (with change subset), affect, prayer, correction, comment, outsiders. The categories developed through close attention to content and purpose of the letters.

The basic structure that these letters use is as follows.

1. Focus/Thanks
2. Background
3. Relevance

The focus/thanks identifies the topic of the letter and establishes a relationship between writer and receiver. The background sections introduce the self and the final section ties the first two parts together and ratifies the connection. We see this structure clearly in the following example:

[1] Thank you for the articles in the April 8, 1998, issues 'Orthodontics – What Is Involved?' [2] I am 12 years old and have recently started wearing braces on my teeth. I'm not too keen on the idea. [3] But your article explained how they will help me and that many people wear braces, so I don't have to feel embarrassed. (12/12/98)

As is normal in letters to the editor, the opening identifies the relevant part of the magazine which is being commented on.ⁱⁱⁱ The second part explains why this individual feels able to comment and the final section gives a justification of this. There is some variation in these structures according to the particular type of letter. All, however, witness in some way to the movement. The majority are from members writing about the effect of articles on their faith. A couple describe how the magazine is used to witness to outsiders. Only one, in the 'change' category to be described, shows someone who is an outsider joining the movement because of an article.

1. Thanks

The category I have labelled 'thanks/affirmation' makes up the bulk of letters (14/45). These letters include a reference to the specific article, a thanking element and optionally some background about the writer which may include some specific affirmation of article content. The affirmation of content is often from personal experience. Thus in response to an article about teeth grinding, A.M.N.C of Brazil writes,

Grinding Teeth. [article] The article 'Do You Grind Your Teeth?' (March 22, 1998) fitted my needs. [background] Because I suffer from this problem, I found it very informative and encouraging. [comment] I never imagined that you would publish something on this subject. With such a variety of information, you touch each individual reader. (22/12/98)

This letter takes the form; article, background, comment. While it has no explicit thanking section, this would appear to be implicit especially in the last line. In fact, this is the only letter in this set that does not explicitly express thanks. Other 'thanks/affirmation' letters are more explicit in their thanking. The following has only scant background information about the writer (M.N from Italy).

[comment] *Awake!* contains a lot of information that is very interesting for youngsters like me. I benefited from this article because [background] not concentrating is a problem I have.[thanks] Heartfelt thanks.(8/6/99)

2. Lesson

The second category of letters has been labelled 'lesson' because the writer attributes the magazine with providing them with some realisation (12 of the letters). This may solve a pressing problem or strengthen present faith in Jehovah. A subset of the 'lesson' letters is the 'change' letters in which the writer describes specific change coming about because of a specific article (which provided a 'lesson' which motivated a change). These letters come closest to the traditional witnessing formula in as far as they acknowledge a past mistake or mistaken point of view which is corrected by the movement (by means of the magazine article). There are varying levels of change described in these letters. The following, for example, refers to an article about stuttering. K.K from Japan writes,

Sven Sievers' positive attitude in the face of setbacks impressed me. In our congregation there is one brother who is struggling with stuttering. I will now speak to him with more respect and concern (8/10/98).

At the other end of the scale, one lesson letter describes how M.S. from Japan returned to the movement.

Street Gangs. I was moved by the articles on street gangs in the April 22, 1998, issue of *Awake!* Right now I am in a reformatory school. My mother is one of Jehovah's Witnesses, but a while back I stopped going to meetings. Then I got involved with bad friends and took part in a series of violent thefts. That's why my mother sent me this *Awake!* At first I thought, 'This again!' But as I looked at it, I got engrossed and read it all. By the time I had finished reading it my thinking had changed. I never realized that *Awake!* could help me so much. I want to make a new start and attend meetings again. I have come to feel that I never want to repeat my mistakes and that I want to serve Jehovah as long as I live. (8/1/99)

3. Affect

There are a five more types of letters which have only a handful of examples in the set. The first (of which there are 3) is the 'affect' letter

which simply describes the emotional effect of the letter on the reader. The following, from K.S. United States, comments on an article about women. It includes a kind of 'lesson' section in as far as the final line comments on the realisation the reader had. One of the other affect letters has a similar component; the other does not.

I was touched by the difficult life-styles of many women around the world. It brought tears to my eyes to hear of all the things these women have to do – many times bearing the burden alone. I am a mother of two, and I often cry about the many hardships I face. This article helped me to realize that my lot in life is more agreeable than that of many others. (22/12/98).

Despite the 'lesson' section, these were coded as 'affect' letters as the emotional effect of the article appears to be the reason for writing the letter. More importantly, the 'lesson' does not involve an active correction of a mistake, or a promise to do better. Rather, the 'lesson' is some kind of insight into the lives of others.

4. Prayer

The prayer letter comments on a particular article and then articulates a wish in the form of a prayer. There are four of these prayer letters. The prayer letters are arguably a subset of the 'thanking' letters but distinguish themselves by adding a hope of some kind which is essentially a prayer. It seemed appropriate to distinguish them from the 'thanking' letters because of the religious nature of the discourse community and also because the prayer elements would not be found in non-religious publications. The prayer element involves the framing of a wish in terms of religious belief. In relation to an article on tuberculosis, P.P from Indonesia has this to say.

I contracted this disease and was under medication for 6 months. Your article helped me to learn more about this killer disease. More important, it has helped build my faith that the Kingdom of God will bring a global solution to this problem. (8/9/98).

The prayer letters always provide background of the writer which motivates their personal interest in the article. The prayer section can be seen as the writer witnessing to other members of the group. This is way of

performing membership and sharing personal experiences with other members in a way that is familiar; that is, in terms of God/Jehovah.

5. *Correction*

There are also three factual correction letters. Two of these thank the magazine for the article and then offer the correction (8/9/88 and 8/6/99) while the third excludes the thanking component (8/9/88). The editor replies in the text to all three with a note of thanks for the correction. A correction in relation to an article about birds is found in 8 June 1999 edition.

I enjoyed very much the article 'Bird-Watching – A Fascinating Hobby For Everyone?' (July 8, 1998). But the hummingbird, which you refer to as a bird from 'North/Central America,' can also be seen in South America.

J.P Argentina

Our caption was incomplete, and we appreciate the clarification – ED.

6. *Comment*

There is a single 'comment' contribution which simply comments on an article about Shakespeare. It is highly unusual as it makes no mention of the letter writer's life, does not thank the magazine and does not mention the movement at all. It is also the longest letter of the set. Perhaps flagging that it is an unusual contribution, there is a note from the editor which reads, '*The controversy over the bard is not likely to be resolved anytime soon. Nevertheless, we appreciate these comments – ED*' (8/6/99). The letter, however, does not raise any controversies. It simply mentions some information found in a book about Shakespeare that the writer was 'inspired' to read by the article in *Awake!* The only other letters which merit an editorial comment are the factual correction letters already mentioned.

7. *Outsider*

Finally, there are two letters which describe witnessing to outsiders. In a way these could be understood as 'effect' letters, as specific articles have specific effects. However, because they explicitly mention uptake of the magazine's message by those outside the movement, they differ

substantially from those in which members attest to the veracity of the movement (as in effect letters). These letters witness to the veracity of the movement and also to the efficacy of *Awake!* as a witnessing tool. An article about tuberculosis prompted this contribution.

My mother-in-law, who is not religiously inclined, saw the article on my table and read it. She asked if she could take it home. I was able to place two other issues of *Awake!* with her, thank you for all the hard work you do to produce each magazine,
L.N United States. (8/9/98)

The mother-in-law, not being religiously inclined, is certainly not a Witness. However, her interest in the article allowed L.N to place further witnessing material (in the form of copies of *Awake!* with her). The other letter of this kind also provides implicit tips about how to witness with *Awake!* In the second example, a member leaves the magazine at her dentist who takes up an article on orthodontics and recommends it to patients (8/1/99).

Anecdotes

The letters are generally anecdotal in the proof that they offer. This form, anecdotes from one's life, is suitable for witnessing as it bridges the gap between the personal and the general. Steffen writes,

Anekdotens har den kvalitet, at den bevarer sin autenticitet som individuel erfaring samtidig med, at den hævder en gyldighed ud over den specifikke individuelle kontekst [Anecdotes are characterised by retaining their authenticity as individual experiences while simultaneously demonstrating relevance to other specific contexts] (Steffen, 1996: 111)

Anecdotes thus contribute to a common experience, or a common way of understanding experience, by way of articulating individual experiences. The purpose of these is to 'påvirke andre til en bedre forståelse og accept af en given tilstand [give others a better understanding and acceptance of a situation] (Steffen, 1996: 108). The letters perform membership of the group. The prayers and the examples of witnessing to non-members are entirely appropriate in this discourse community, though they would not be in many others.

With the exception of the prayer letters, it is likely that one would find examples of all types in mainstream magazines. Women's glossies in particular often recount how a particular article gave them insight into the lives of others or enlightened a partner/friend when the article was 'accidentally' discovered. Certainly, the thanking letters are standard. The form of letters too is consonant with readers supplying background information about themselves to validate or embellish the letter contribution they make. Doubtless empirical investigation into other letter pages would show letter types not found in *Awake!* Specifically, contributions which are critical of the magazine or particular points of view articulated in articles. Such letters seem the best evidence of a cohesive discourse community at least in as far as readers expect certain representations and attitudes from publications which they routinely read.

Kinds of Proof

It is also possible to categorise these letters according to the kinds of arguments that they make, in short the kind of authority that they rely on. All texts make choices, even though these may be somewhat predetermined by conventions of the text and context. In this case, I draw on Aristotle's tripartite classification of kinds of persuasion; ethos, logos and pathos. This is argument from character, logic and emotion respectively. Ethos, proofs that 'reside in the character of the speaker...are produced, whenever the speech is given in such a way as to render the speaker worthy of credence'. However, 'this effect...must come about in the course of the speech, not through the speaker's being believed in advance to be of a certain character'. Aristotle notes that ethos is 'almost the strongest proof of all' (Aristotle 1.2: 1356a). Proofs 'produced by real or apparent demonstration' are proofs from logos, residing 'in the speech itself' (Aristotle 1.2: 1356a). Pathos, or 'proofs from the disposition of the audience are produced whenever they [the audience] are induced by the speech into an emotional state' (Aristotle 1.2: 1356a).

The relevant topics in these letters are personal experience and (personal) knowledge. We find examples of the three main kinds of invention: ethos,

pathos and logos. The letters give information (which can be considered factual, therefore connected with logos), personal experience (which guarantees the credibility of the writer; ethos), and personal emotion (presumably intended to invite compassion or empathy by expressing emotion; pathos).

We see letters that draw on all three of these strategies. The first are factual corrections of articles or comments on the actual content of articles and can be understood as drawing on logos. As mentioned, factual corrections are minor, for example one reader points out that a hummingbird, said in the article only to be found in North/Central America can also be seen in South America (8/6/99). These also represent a minority of letters; only 3 of the 45 examined. This represents argument through logos. It is the closest that these particular letters come to criticising the magazine. But these letters point out an omitted detail rather than substantial errors of analysis or approach. Further, two of the three offer explicit thanks in any case. In this way they are fundamentally different to their related critical contributions in 'mainstream' publications. These letters are not witnessing to the veracity and goodness of the movement but they do serve an important function of construction of the discourse community in terms of participating in it. This kind of corrective contribution further suggests that the editors are not infallible; that this is a discourse community of equals.^{iv}

The second type of letters are commendatory and are formulated from personal knowledge (ethos). These include the lesson, change, and thanks letters. The personal knowledge letters first establish the writer's ability to comment on the subject at hand. For example, 'I work in one of the most advanced train factories in the world' (8/6/99) opens one letter that goes on to comment on the 'excellent article' on trains that was 'factual and well documented'. Letters like this serve to ratify the apparent reason for *Awake!*, that is, to inform people about various subjects in the world. These letters praise the ostensive reason for the magazine and in doing so ratify it. Because this comes from personal knowledge born of personal expertise and experience we can see these contributions as arguing from ethos. In so

far as the individuals are qualified, however, these letters are underpinned by logos.

The personal experience letters constitute the bulk of the contributions and are of two types. The first simply comment favourably on the article and bring out the implicit religious message of the publication; some of these were identified above as prayer letters. These are not so much personal experience as expressing a personal affective bond with the movement through the articles. For this reason they are coded as pathos letters, but this is not entirely satisfactory. In relation to an article on birds in the Amazon, one letter writer comments, 'Thank you for your gentle description of a marvellous creation of Jehovah' (8/6/99) and another 'it emphasized that Jehovah made all these creatures for our enjoyment'. As we have seen, even something as unlikely as an article on orthodontics gets similar praise: 'I can hardly wait for the time in the future when all of us will have perfect teeth!' that is, when Jehovah's kingdom comes to earth. These letters can be seen as witnessing documents from the converted to the converted. These letters, then, while firmly grounded in personal experience (though one prompted by the articles in the publication rather than prior life experiences) are grounded in ethos. They differ from the first type (informed by logos) in so far as they recount personal experience, rather than just asserting facts. They praise the real, religious purpose of the magazine. However, the emotive content of the letter gives a connection with pathos. While the reader of the letter may not be expected to be emotionally moved; the writer of the letter has been emotionally moved by the magazine and their faith to write the letter.

The second type of personal contribution letters are a confessional type of witnessing; identified as lesson letters. Because of this grounding in personal experience and because of the 'lesson' involved, these are informed by ethos. They differ from the previous ethos letters, however, because the writer has had a conversion of some kind. Commenting on an article about study techniques and improving grades, one writer says that he lacked motivation to study; he presents this as a failing. The article made him see

the light, 'I can clearly see that I can accomplish more by setting reasonable goals' (22/11/98). This ratifies the educational purpose of the magazine in so far as it shows members how they can improve their life with the right information and understanding. These kinds of letters are not always in response to particular articles but often in response to the publication as a whole. In these letters *Awake!* is represented as a life transforming text. This affirms the ideological and religious purpose of the magazine while taking on board its pedagogical goals.

Personal Involvement

As we have seen, the letters draw largely on personal authority and the authority of personal experience. It isn't surprising that the authors refer to themselves and articulate thoughts and beliefs which can be understood as personal disclosure. 'I was touched' (22/12/98); 'I never really understood' (22/12/98), 'I was so delighted' (22/12/98) and so on. While not confessional in the sense of stating a personal failing, they are confessional in the often intimate choice of words. The material in the magazine is related back to the personal, even when a factual contribution is being made as in a letter about trains. 'I work in one of the most advanced train factories in the world' IDC from Portugal writes, '[y]our information was factual and well documented' (June 8, 1999). There are also a significant number of emotional verbs and adjectives (as one would expect with arguments from *pathos*); 'feel', 'moved' as well as desires 'want', for example, 'I was comforted' (8/10/98), 'It was uplifting' (8/1/99) and 'My heartfelt thanks' (8/1/99).

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the letters is the placing of 'the article' or 'it' in the subject position. We see comments like 'It made me appreciate still more the freedom we have' (8/1/99), 'It helped me to learn...' (8/1/99), 'This article helped me to realise...' (22/12/98).

Thus we have a kind of discourse between the article and the reader, the 'I'. The 'I' and 'it', are the main actors and participants in these letters. Whether the article stands for the collected wisdom of the movement is

not clear. But argument can be made for this as the letters address an institutional voice. This may also explain why articles within the magazine are not generally provided with a by-line; they can be understood as authored by the movement as opposed to an individual. There are exceptions to this; usually when a reader writes a whole article about personal experience, which is in effect an extended witnessing event. But there is a certain homogenising process taking place here on both sides. Using 'the article' as an actor reifies the movement as a whole; and as a text producing whole, with truth standing behind it. The conformity of the readers to the views, despite their different backgrounds, also makes it clear what is required of a member; that the magazine is to be used a teaching tool of the movement, the texts are to be read against the ideology of the movement.

The articles stand as proxies for the movement, evidence of the wide ranging experience and expertise of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The members engage intimately with these texts and by doing so with other members of the community. As a covert recruiting text (covert in the sense that this is not their *prima facie* function), these letters construct a cohesive, sensitive, appealing community of discourse and practice.

Conclusion: Doing Identity

Potter and Wetherell remark, 'Much of social interaction is based around dealings with events and people which are experienced only in terms of specific linguistic versions' (1987: 34). That is to say that despite 'actual' experiences of people and events these are still mediated by language. The language used by people is specific to their location, role and so on. The particular language used constructs the interaction in a specific way. Thus in relation to the letters, they construct *Awake!* as a religious text. There is nothing overtly religious in the articles. It is members' constructions of the articles, made when expression thanks or telling a personal story of change, that places them in a religious frame.

Certainly letters pages form a kind of magazine identity; an 'interactive' forum for readers to express individual views prompted by material in the

publication. What is interesting about the letters here is that they comment on the content of the magazine as it is presented; as factual stories, but also on the implicit religious ideology of the magazine. Without the letters pages, it may be difficult to ascertain that this is a publication produced by a religious body. The letters construct a concept of member and membership.⁵

The readers' letters ground the discourse community in the magazine. The discourse community communes with the help of these articles in the forum of the letters page. In so far as letters are included at all, witnessing is taking place. Such a section demonstrates that there are readers who engage with *Awake!* thus there are members who engage with the movement. However the fact that there is a movement is not explicitly foregrounded. That the authoring community is the Jehovah's Witnesses is not hidden, but neither is it proclaimed.

In terms of forming the discourse community, the letters allow members to take faith and strength from the stories of others; which is the point of witnessing. The stories of others is a way of members sharing common experiences and also introducing the positive effect of the movement on their life to others. Witnessing texts, being personal but also communal count as proof for the goodness of the movement.

Det er blandt andet derfor alle bevægelser bruger så meget tid til at formulere deres fælles historie, som hvert enkelt medlem løbende kan indskrive sine personlige erfaringer i og dermed give dem ny betydning og retning...Fællesskabet leverer så at sige konteksten til hvert enkelt medlems tekst

[In part, that's why all movements invest time in composing their common (his)story, one that every member can relate to his/her own experiences and thus give them new meaning and relevance...The community provides a framing context for members' own texts] (Steffen, 1996: 109).

The mere participation in the narrative event is a way of affirming membership status, rehearsing commitment and inculcating new members into the narrative practices of the group. These narrative practices further determine what meaning is to a group. Katz writes 'Meaning is a personal and subjective coloration, a texture that people engrave into all their

intellectual abstractions'(1993: 55). Meaning is inscribed in narrative. If a group conditions narrative action of its members, they also condition meaning that the members understand and thus their worldview, conception of lifestyle and so on.

Part of what is at stake in this conditioning of meaning is the question of identity. The question of identity is closely tied to the us/them bifurcation. Kenneth Burke writes,

Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity (Stillar, 1998: 64-5).

Identity is not natural, it is constructed. The ideologies that we identify with identify us. The letters in *Awake!* allow members a forum in which to construct and recognise their own identity as a group and individually in relation to this group. This furthers the community itself as well as potentially bringing others to it. The performance of witnessing is way of being a Jehovah's Witness as well as displaying to the group and to outsiders what it means to be a member. The unity of the Jehovah's Witnesses is exactly constructed through forums, such as witnessing letters, for the expression of an appealing discourse community.

Notes

ⁱ 'Discourse community' is a term of art. See Swales six features:

- a. A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals;
- b. A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members;
- c. A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback;
- d. A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims; [and]
- e. In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific texts;
- f. A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise. (Swales, pp. 24-27).

ii The latter in particular shows that letters to the editor are often forums for debate, especially in newspapers. Preliminary research into women's magazines suggests that letter content is more akin to that found in the texts under consideration in this paper.

iii See for example, 'Men and infertility. TVF: A Man's View' by Dominic Moore (December) was beautifully written and made me feel like crying. It also made me realise the truth of his point, that the man's misery is often overlooked. I know I find it harder to broach sensitive issues with male friends as I am never sure of their reaction - usually an embarrassed brush-off or a jokey one-liner. I hope Dominic and his wife find happiness' (Red, March 2001, p16).

iv Of course whether or not this is actually the case is a separate question especially thrown into doubt by the highly authoritarian structure of the movement. Further, the small number of these letters hardly makes a strenuous point in any way.

v This is certainly common to other magazines. Indeed, often letters point out that the readers feel that the publication has somehow betrayed its discourse community. In response to an advertisement for the Countryside Alliance which ran in *Private Eye*, for example (9-22 March 2001), five readers wrote to cancel their subscription or to say they would not be purchasing the magazine again. Two readers wrote to congratulate the magazine on their humorous spoof. This demonstrates that the readership have a very detailed understanding of what it means to be part of the community and what is acceptable and unacceptable in these terms.

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