

# UPDATE

A Quarterly Journal on New Religious Movements

Vol. 10, No. 2  
June 1986

## Information Disease: Effects of Covert Induction and Deprogramming

---

by Flo Conway, James H. Siegelman, Carl W. Carmichael,  
and John Coggins

---

### Introduction

In their 1978 book *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, Conway and Siegelman introduced the term 'information disease' for what may represent a new class of information-processing disorders caused not by germs, drugs, illness, or any recognized physical abuse, but by the manipulation of information. Their concept proposed that basic human capacities of thinking and feeling can be altered solely by information and communication.

In this initial explication, Conway and Siegelman supported their contentions with comments from interviews with former members of some extremist religious sects they refer to as 'cults' and a number of related 'mass-marketed self-help therapies,' many of which, according to their distinction, employ 'identifiable communication techniques' that may 'make captive' and, over time, alter or impair fundamental individual information-processing capacities (Conway and Siegelman, 1978, 1979, p. 220).

Ex-members they spoke with reported a variety of disturbances of thinking and feeling that persisted for months and, in some instances, for years after they left the group. Such conversations were sufficiently convincing that the authors felt it necessary to conduct a more systematic study to document the alleged effects of the communication techniques used by these so-called 'new age' cults and sects. A questionnaire was constructed that contained 98 specific and four open-ended questions covering every stage of experience in the new cults and sects: recruitment, conversion, daily membership life, separation, 'deprogramming,' rehabilitation, and long-term effects.

The questionnaires were distributed to ex-sect members who were contacted through intermediaries: psychiatrists, lawyers, social workers, clergy, etc. Nearly a quarter of the questionnaires sent out by these intermediaries were completed and returned, almost all

