The Implications of Digital Technologies for the LDS Church and for Orthodox, Heterodox, and Post-Mormon Identity

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THE IMPLICATIONS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR THE LDS CHURCH AND FOR
ORTHODOX, HETERODOX, AND POST-MORMON IDENTITY

by

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The final copy of this dissertation has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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The Implications of Digital Technologies for the LDS Church and for Orthodox, Heterodox, and Post-Mormon Identity

Dissertation directed by Professor Stewart Hoover

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been experiencing an information crisis that stems from the rise of the Internet and from digital technologies more broadly. The contemporary speed at which information flows, coupled with the ability that individuals now have to bypass traditional sources of religious authority and engage in horizontal communication and the production of alternative Mormon-themed texts and discourses online has caused LDS leaders to lose some of the control over Church-related discourse that they have customarily enjoyed for nearly 200 years.

As sensitive information about the Church is disseminated into widely-accessible digital forums, and as continual challenges to the Church’s doctrine, authority, and official narratives are mounted by heterodox Mormons, post-Mormons, and LDS critics in online settings, more and more members of the Church, whether intentionally, or not, are encountering this information and experiencing subsequent crises of faith as a result of the dissonance that these encounters often generate. In response to their faith crises, many Mormons have turned to digital communities to find similarly-situated others with whom they can discuss their questions, doubts, and concerns about the Church.

This study utilizes a culturalist approach to examine, through three unique case studies, how orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormons are finding meaning and constructing and
expressing their identities in digital settings in the midst of the information crisis that the LDS Church is experiencing.

The first case study examines orthodox Mormon media practices and identity by looking at how the LDS Church has used media throughout its history to promote the Church and to unify its membership. Using Michael Warner’s public sphere theory, the second case study looks at heterodox Mormon media practices and identity through an examination of the Mormon Stories Podcast Community. The final case study examines how post-Mormons are using satire to find meaning and negotiate identity in the wake of their departures from Mormonism. Taken together, these case studies address important questions about meaning-making, religious identity, and the potential impact of digital technologies on social institutions.
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Ryan Bartlett
July, 2018
Salt Lake City, Utah
CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT OVERVIEW ............................................. 1
   A Brief History of the LDS Church ......................................................... 11
   The Structure and Beliefs of the Church ............................................... 17
   Mormon .................................................................................................... 22
   Digital Technologies ................................................................................. 24
   Research Structure .................................................................................. 25

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: CULTURALISM AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA
    IN THE SHAPING OF IDENTITY .............................................................. 27
    The Culturalist Approach ......................................................................... 29
    Identity and Meaning Making .................................................................. 34
    Religion ..................................................................................................... 41
    Secularization .......................................................................................... 45
    Media ........................................................................................................ 50
    Alternative Media and the Public Sphere ................................................ 63
    The Public Sphere ..................................................................................... 68
    Third Spaces ............................................................................................. 79
    Research Questions .................................................................................. 82

III. METHODOLOGY ..................................................................................... 83
    A Qualitative Approach ........................................................................... 84
    Discourse Analysis .................................................................................. 84
    Participant Observation ........................................................................... 87
    In-Depth Interviews ................................................................................ 88
    The Insider- Outsider Approach ............................................................... 91
    My Position as a Researcher ...................................................................... 92

IV. PROTECTION, PROMOTION, AND PROSLEYTIZATION: THE
    MEDIA USAGE OF ORTHODOX MORMONS PAST AND PRESENT ........ 97
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Importance of the Press in Early Mormonism</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormonism and Media from 1846 to 1996</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assimilation and Mormonism on the Global Stage</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDS Authority and the Control of Member Media Usage</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormonism in the Age of the Internet</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search Engine Optimization</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Transparency</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apologetics</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. THE FIGHT FOR MEANING IN THE MIDDLE: MORMON STORIES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS A COUNTERPUBLIC AND A SUPPORT COMMUNITY FOR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HETERODOX MORMONS</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon Stories</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mormon Stories Community as a Counterpublic</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. POST-MORMONS IN THE VIP LOUNGE: SATIRE AS A TOOL OF</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND COMMUNITY BUILDING AFTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A DEPARTURE FROM THE LDS CHURCH</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon Expression and the Significance of Satire in Post-Morman</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satire as an Instrument of Critique, Identity Construction, and Group</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Importance of Satire in Post-Mormonism: The Mormon VIP Lounge.</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURES

Figure

1. Rainbow Girl Image.................................................................172
2. Welcome Home Image..............................................................194
3. Deserter News Image.................................................................195
4. iStone Image.........................................................................201
5. A Typical Mormon Ad Image.....................................................202
6. An Appropriated Mormon Ad Image.............................................202
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter “LDS Church” or simply, “the Church”) has been experiencing an information crisis that stems from the rise of the Internet and from digital technologies more broadly. The speed at which information now flows has caused LDS authorities to lose the tight control over Church-related discourse that they have, for the past two centuries, enjoyed. This is not to say that the Church has never met with challenges and resistance from internal and external actors. From its earliest days, the Church has had to deal with apostates, insurgencies, and counter-movements that have used the printing press to criticize, condemn, and expose the Church and its leaders. It is to say that the flow of information in our current, hyper-mediated age has left LDS leaders with seemingly few options for dealing with the widespread challenge to official Church doctrine, correlated Church history, and LDS beliefs and practices that has played a role in tens of thousands of Mormons leaving the LDS Church, and countless others questioning and doubting the authenticity and the truth claims of orthodox Mormonism.

To illustrate this point, on October 6, 2016, The New York Times ran an article entitled, “Leaked Videos Pull Back Curtain on Mormon Leadership.” The videos to which the article refers were leaked anonymously from an internal source at LDS Church Headquarters to Ryan McKnight, a post-Mormon, who then posted them to YouTube during the LDS Church’s October General Conference, a biannual, worldwide broadcast of talks given by Church leaders—talks that are meant to inspire and provide counsel to members of the LDS Church. Needless to say, General Conference is very important to Mormons, and the timing of the release
of the videos was meant to draw the greatest possible amount of attention, and, indeed, several
media outlets in Utah and across the nation covered the story.

Most of the leaked videos consisted of segments of closed-door meetings and discussions
among senior leaders of the Church. The topics of the discussions varied greatly, from same-sex
marriage to the legalization of marijuana, but ironically, one of the discussions centered on
WikiLeaks, and whether or not the LDS Church might, at some future point, be susceptible to
leaks of its own sensitive, potentially-damaging information, or, as the speaker in the video
referred to such leaks, acts of “radical involuntary transparency” (Mormon Leaks, 2016). The
speaker, addressing the senior leadership of the Church, presented three scenarios in which the
Church might become the victim of an information leak; one of the scenarios he mentioned
involved a “disgruntled individual on the inside… with access [to sensitive information] in a
remote location” leaking that information to an outside source (Mormon Leaks, 2016). The
speaker admonished the leaders to take precautions against potential leaks, but provided no
ultimate solution for protecting the Church against them. Instead, he assured them, through the
reading of a verse of scripture, that the Lord would exact vengeance on anyone who revealed the
Church’s secrets. McKnight, who uploaded the leaked videos, created a nonprofit media
organization called “MormonLeaks,” which provides, “…sources and whistleblowers the
technical ability to anonymously submit sensitive documents for use by professional and citizen
journalists for starting and expanding news reporting, public commentary, and criticism related
to Mormonism” (“Welcome to Faith Leaks,” 2018).

In another example that took place in November 2015, a policy change regarding gay
Mormons and their children, which was set to be implemented in the latest edition of the official
church handbook of instructions, was leaked to Facebook before the change was officially
disseminated and implemented by the Church. Within 21 minutes of the initial post, John Dehlin, a well-known podcaster in the heterodox Mormon community reposted the policy change to his own Facebook page, making it visible to thousands who, in turn, shared it on their blogs and Facebook pages (Brown, 2016). Many Mormons considered the policy change to be extremely offensive and unfair, and protests in Salt Lake City, which included mass resignations from the Church ensued. In each of these cases, digital technology provided a space where alternative media could be used to bypass traditional channels of authority within the Church, information that Church leaders considered sensitive and potentially damaging was released into the public sphere, and consequences for the Church followed, consequences not limited to embarrassment, public criticism from a number of media outlets, and a loss in membership numbers.

When I first began to conceptualize this project, my intent was to assess to what extent digital content, such as podcasts, memes, YouTube videos, blogs, and other digital user-created material, and the Internet more generally, were shaping and impacting the LDS Church, as an institution, both structurally and theologically. Olaiz (2002) describes one of Mormonism’s most basic anxieties as “…the threat to place and order that comes with the emergence and proliferation of open spaces” (p. 36). Indeed, the open, ubiquitous, horizontal flows of information, like those mentioned in the examples above, have brought much sensitive information about the Church—it’s history, the lives of its leaders, details about behind-the-scenes bureaucratic operations and decisions—to the fore, which has, in turn, led to many Mormons around the world questioning, doubting, and/or resigning from the Church (Avance, 2013; Goodstein, 2013; Walker, 2013). This, coupled with broader societal trends away from orthodox religious practice, and other effects of secularization, including the decline of traditional religious authority—to which Mormonism has not been immune—has caused serious
concern among Mormon leaders, who are struggling to comprehend and address the growing issue of widespread, global disaffection and secularization.

Upon discovering aspects of the Church that are not presented in correlated (Church-authorized) Church materials, many Mormons leave Mormonism quickly. Some demand that their names be removed from official Church records, while others simply stop participating in Church activities altogether. Others find a way to work around their doubts, or through what they often refer to as their “crises of faith,” and then continue with their dedicated activity in the Church; still others—many others—remain stuck in what has been called a “limbo phase,” a phase of not wanting to abandon, or not knowing exactly how to abandon the faith of their families, their friends, and their upbringing, yet also not knowing how to remain active and engaged in a religion that they feel has “betrayed,” “deceived,” or “hidden so much” from them. Throughout this research, I will be borrowing Homi Bhabha’s concept of “third spaces” to refer to these liminal spaces. To Bhabha, these spaces displace the histories that constitute them, and set up “… new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. The process of cultural hybridity [in these spaces] gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha, 1990, 211).

Wherever they fall along what I will be referring to throughout this work as the “Mormon belief spectrum,” from orthodox believer, to embittered post-Mormon, Mormons (and post-Mormons) are using digital technologies to challenge the hegemony of the mainstream Church, engage in the production of culture, community, and meaning, and reflexively shape and reshape their identities with regard to Mormonism. After engaging with those in conversation about Mormonism in these digital settings, whether they were orthodox, heterodox, or post-Mormon,
and after participating in many of these communities myself, I came to realize that my curiosity ran a lot deeper than simply wanting to assess the impact of digital technologies on orthodoxy and orthopraxy within mainstream Mormonism. I became much more interested in the practices that are taking place in Mormon-themed digital settings, and in the work that is being done, and the culture that is being produced within these settings. I decided to focus on these communities, and to let the answers to inquiries about observable impacts to mainstream Mormonism flow tangentially out of my observations within them.

This research employs the use of ethnographic methods—participant observation in digital and offline settings, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis of online content, with a particular focus on alternative media, such as Mormon-themed podcasts—to examine the use of digital technologies in media practice, meaning-making, and identity construction at various regions along the Mormon belief spectrum, each region represents its own broad category of “Mormon,” a term that, as will be shown, is actually quite fluid. Although arguments may be raised about terminology, as well as about the criteria for exclusion and inclusion in each of these regions, the extant literature, and my own research provide ample justification for the labels and terminology that I will be using, and I trust that this will be borne out in the work that follows. Each region on this spectrum will serve as a platform for a case study that examines the complex interplay between digital technologies, Mormonism, meaning-making, and identity construction. At each of these regions, I will utilize a slightly different theoretical lens to examine the Mormons who occupy that region of the spectrum, but each of the case studies will focus on identity.

The first region of the spectrum consists of active, believing, faithful, orthodox Mormons. I will most often refer to the members of these communities as “orthodox Mormons,” but I will
sometimes use the other just-mentioned terms interchangeably. These are the Mormons who attend Church regularly, and who, as Avance (2013) states, “more-or-less follow [the] normative beliefs and practices” of the LDS Church, and who “have a vested social interest in being recognized by others within and without the ritual community as being faithful” members of the Church (p. 17). Many of those in this category use digital technologies to construct, reinforce, and disseminate their religious beliefs through the production and sharing of memes, doctrines, quotes from LDS authorities, elements of mainstream Mormon culture, such as jokes, stories, recipes, faith testimonies, spiritual experiences, etc. This category also demonstrates the ways that digital technologies can serve to bolster, uplift, and promote the Church and its mission. As will be demonstrated, the Church does not simply sit back and watch passively as digital technologies are used to challenge and resist its authority; the Church has been incredibly proactive in employing PR experts and social media specialists to find ways to utilize these technologies as faith-bolstering missionary tools, and to combat the heightened challenges to its authenticity that digital technologies have enabled.

In one of the earliest comprehensive treatments of the Internet and Mormonism, Gold (1997) outlines a positive and idealistic vision, one in which digital spaces are rife with potential for the Church and its members, she states:

I see communities of like-minded Latter-day Saints coming together from their homes and offices in every little village in the world to inspire one another, to support one another, to work out the programs of the Church in their own ways… I have seen miracles take place in the lives of members—and nonmembers—of the Church through friendships they’ve found in online LDS communities. (pp. xviii-xix)

The case study for the orthodox Mormon region of the belief spectrum will consist of an examination of the LDS Church’s, and its members’ use of media to protect, promote, and proselytize the institution.
The second region of the spectrum, the largest and most diverse category, and the one that will constitute the bulk of the research in this study, consists of the Mormons who question and/or doubt certain aspects and truth claims of their faith, or who no longer believe in Mormonism altogether, but who continue to participate in Mormon-themed digital communities, often as part of what they consider to be a necessary transition process away from orthodox Mormonism. There is an extensive list of terms that have been used to describe this group of non-orthodox Mormons, but I will most often refer to this group as “heterodox Mormons,” although I will also sometimes use the term “doubting,” “progressive,” or “liberal” Mormon, as those words are commonly used in the *Mormon Stories* podcast and its corresponding digital community, which I will be examining. This category also consists of those Mormons who are in a liminal phase, unsure if and how they can stay in the Church, but also unsure if and how they can leave. Those in this category may feel entirely separated from Mormonism doctrinally, while continuing to self-identify as “culturally Mormon.” Others in this category are still active in the LDS Church, and even believe in most of what mainstream Mormonism teaches and practices, but certain issues, such as homosexuality, gender roles, race, Mormon history, etc., cause these members to become ambivalent about their faith. Others occupying this region of the spectrum refer to themselves and others similarly situated as “closet non-believers,” who continue to participate in Mormonism only because disavowing their faith would cause tension or rupture in their close relationships with family and friends. As will be shown, the mistreatment of those who leave the Church by the Mormon community to which they belonged is often candid and harsh; in fact, Church leaders have recently begun to encourage members during general conference to be more understanding and compassionate towards those who leave Mormonism (Uchtdorf, 2013). For many Mormons, these digital communities provide the only space where
complete honesty and the sharing of personal feelings about the Church is possible, and the anonymity of online interactions make these spaces a sort of safe zone for those participating in them.

Although most Mormons, even the orthodox ones described above, often claim that they question and experience doubts about their faith from time to time, this second category is reserved for the broad spectrum of Mormons who are experiencing, or who have experienced, what they typically refer to as a faith crisis, and who participate in the digital communities that were created specifically for questioning, doubting, or heterodox and liberal-minded Mormons. One of the primary differences between the orthodox Mormons in the first region, most of whom question or doubt from time to time, and those in the second category, is that the former seem to be able to put their occasional doubts and questions on a commonly-referenced metaphorical “shelf,” and to trust that answers to their questions will be provided “at some point in the future,” or “when the time is right,” whether that be “in this life, or the next,” while the latter view their doubts and questions as far too crucial and important to place indefinitely on a shelf. Some of the Mormons in the latter category have stated that the metaphorical shelf “broke” or “ran out of room.” To many of those in the heterodox region of the spectrum, these questions “make or break” Mormonism as a viable, legitimate belief system, so finding immediate answers to them is important. Some Mormons in this category have given up all hope in finding answers, or found only answers that caused further doubt and questioning, or that—in their words—“altogether discredited the legitimacy and truth claims of the Church.” Still, they also continue to participate in the heterodox realm of cultural Mormonism, or they wish to break with the Church, but fear the social repercussions, or they simply choose to “make it work” in spite of their misgivings. The case study for the heterodox Mormon region of the belief spectrum will consist of an
analysis that frames the *Mormon Stories* Podcast Community (MSPC) as a counterpublic using Michael Warner’s (2002) work on the public sphere.

The third and final region of the spectrum consists of post-, ex-, or former Mormons. Those at this region of the spectrum have left the Mormon faith either officially, by requesting that their names be removed from Church records, or unofficially, by simply choosing to stop attending church and participating in LDS Church activities. Those occupying this region of the spectrum no longer self-identify as Mormon. As Avance (2013) points out, former Mormons often seek digital and offline communities and participate in rituals that fill the space in their lives that was once occupied by Mormonism. I will most often refer to those in this group as “post-Mormons.” To those in this group, digital and offline community provides a space for meaning-making, and a way to find and establish a new, self-reflexively constructed sense of identity and purpose. For example, there are now four branches of the Oasis Network along the Wasatch Front in Utah—home to the highest concentration of Mormons and post-Mormons—where post-Mormons, many of whom originally met in digital spaces, can gather together each week (often on a Sunday morning) to laugh, share stories, give talks, and sing songs. Interestingly, many of these meetings are loosely patterned after the Sunday meetings offered by the LDS Church, with the exception being that nobody is excluded from any of the meetings, and the community is to remain secular in nature. This demonstrates that post-Mormons sometimes experiment with, and appropriate elements of their past Mormon identities and experiences, as will be explored further in the post-Mormon case study. Having attended a number of these meetings throughout the course of my research, I found that many of the people attending these meetings each week are simply looking for a place and a community where they can feel at home. The case study for the post-Mormon region of the belief spectrum will consist largely of
an analysis of how humor is used as an important tool in building community after a transition away from Mormonism.

As mentioned, each of the three regions of the Mormon belief spectrum, and the digital and offline communities that have been established around them, will constitute a unique case study that will be presented in this research. Together, these case studies will shine light on how digital spaces serve as a place of refuge, support, community, meaning-making, and identity construction for Mormons, whatever their level of belief and participation in the Church may be. Together, these case studies will also provide insight into the complex issues faced by the Church at a time when forced transparency and the rapid, ubiquitous spread of information has disrupted the Church’s hegemony, and the close control of their image, their history, and their narratives that Church leaders have traditionally enjoyed over the past two centuries. Although the LDS Church has, from the beginning, experienced resistance and dissent, both from within and from without, the Internet provides a unique situation because it allows users to bypass traditional hierarchal structures and, in a relatively short time, establish relationships with similarly-situated others across broad distances in time and space. This, of course, has great implications for religious authority, which will be explored throughout this work. Marlin K. Jensen, then historian of the LDS Church, while delivering a speech to students at Utah State University in 2012 stated, “Maybe since Kirtland, we’ve never had a period of—I’ll call it apostasy, like we’re having now” (Henderson & Cooke, 2012, n.p.). Jensen then went on to discuss how the Internet, and more specifically, Google, have made unauthorized, uncorrelated information about the Church and its history not only more accessible, but, in many cases, inevitable to those using search engines to research the Church. In fact, many of those who participated in this research claimed that they were not even looking for faith-challenging,
uncorrelated information about the Church, but that they simply stumbled across this information while searching for past talks given by Church leaders, LDS scriptures, or information to help them prepare for a Sunday school lesson.

Before I get into the topic of this research, I believe that it will be useful to provide a brief description of the LDS Church, beginning with its history, and then moving into its structure. This will serve to provide context, and to define important terms that I will be using frequently throughout this project. Following these descriptions, I will briefly define the terms “Mormon” and “digital technologies” as they will be applied in this research.

A Brief History of the LDS Church

What became the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (originally, the Church was called the “Church of Christ”) was founded by Joseph Smith, Jr. in Palmyra, New York in 1830, during the period of America’s Second Great Awakening. When Smith was an adolescent, there was a great religious fervor that had ignited in the area where he lived, and preachers from a vast array of religions were vying for parishioners. Smith, deeply concerned about finding out which of the many religions was “true,” went into a grove of trees near his home and knelt in prayer to ask God which church he should join. According to Smith, two beings, God and Jesus Christ, appeared to him in a vision and informed him that none of the churches on the Earth at that time had the full truth. The experience in the grove of trees was the first of many visions that Smith would have throughout his life. In another vision, Smith was told that an ancient record written on golden plates by ancient prophets who lived on the American continent, was buried in a hill near his home. This book, which Smith claimed to have translated into English using special translating tools that were buried with the book, along with help from God, became what is now
known as The Book of Mormon, which Mormons consider to be the keystone of their faith, and Smith, the book’s translator was esteemed by the Mormons as a prophet and a spokesman for God.

After completing the translation of the Book of Mormon, and officially organizing and incorporating the Church—a church which Smith claimed was the restored Church of Christ, and the one and only true Church on the Earth—Smith and his followers began to gain converts through preaching and missionary work. Hostility and ridicule from many of the people they encountered pushed Smith and his followers farther and farther west into the young American frontier in search of a place where they could peacefully establish and build their community, from Palmyra, New York to Kirtland, Ohio, then from Kirtland to Independence, Missouri, and then on to Nauvoo, Illinois. During this time, the Mormons faced what seemed to them to be an endless string of trials and hardships. In Kirtland, for example, a series of unfruitful financial speculations by Smith caused a number of Mormons—including several of the men who Smith had appointed as apostles and leaders of the Church—to turn against him. Many even called Smith a fallen prophet. Smith led those who remained faithful to him from Ohio to Missouri, where they hoped to find peace, but it was not long before the Missourians, who considered the growing number of Mormons to be eccentric and politically threatening, began to take up arms against them. Eventually, the Missourians even issued an extermination order against the Mormons, which was signed by then Governor, Lilburn Boggs (Hartley, 2001). The Mormons then fled to neighboring Illinois, where they set up the City of Nauvoo on the banks of the Mississippi; there, they lived peacefully in relative seclusion for several years. In Nauvoo, the Church’s membership continued to grow as proselyting missionaries in the United States and Europe—particularly in England—experienced great success. At the time, all converts to the
Church were encouraged to leave their homelands and join the Mormons on America’s western frontier (“The Convert Immigrants,” 2013).

Meanwhile, Nauvoo began to grow into a large town of about 12,000 inhabitants by 1844, over which Smith, in addition to being the religious leader, became the political and military leader, as well (Black, 1995; Bushman, 2005). Around this time, Smith and other leaders of the Church began to practice polygamy, a practice which has left a mark on the Church to this day. When news that Mormon leaders were marrying multiple wives went public, the hostility and violence committed upon the Mormons escalated once again. Many Mormons began to question Smith’s legitimacy as a leader. Some Mormons, appalled by the practice of polygamy, opened a printing press in Nauvoo called the *Expositor*, which Smith, as mayor of the town, ordered to be destroyed when he learned that the paper was criticizing him and calling into question his status as a prophet. As a consequence of having the press destroyed, Smith was brought to jail in Carthage, a town not too far from Nauvoo. While imprisoned in Carthage, Smith was murdered by a mob who stormed the jail, wanting to put an end to Mormonism; however, as O’Dea (1957) points out, instead of scattering the Mormons and causing the faith to dissipate, the assassination of their leader only served to strengthen the belief of many of the Church’s members.

After Smith’s death, Brigham Young, who eventually became the prophet of the LDS Church, led the Latter-day Saints into Utah Territory, where they lived in relative isolation for several decades. It was in Utah that they grew into their own unique culture, relying on each other and on their faith to turn the barren desert land of the Great Basin into a flourishing, well-organized city and community. O’Dea (1957) claims that isolation in the west shaped the Mormons into what could almost be considered a unique nation with its own ethnic identity;
through persecution and common experience, their struggles caused them to unite and become stronger. Eventually, the railroads and westward expansion brought Utah under greater control of the United States government, and Mormons were forced to relinquish the practice of polygamy, which they did in 1890; it would still be a number of years, however, before the practice was openly condemned and punished by Mormon leaders, and some branches of Mormonism—even not the mainstream LDS Church—still practice it to this day.

Throughout the 1900s, the Church continued to grow in Utah, and Mormons became more and more integrated into American life and culture, so much so that the media and some scholars have referred to them as ideal citizens, and model Americans (Chen & Yorgason, 1999). As O’Dea (1957) points out, “Since the defeat of the Church in the severe conflict with the United States government and an aroused public opinion in the 1880s, Mormonism has accommodated its teachings to the dominant monogamous mores” (p. 139). Or, as Paul (1977) states, “Having once resolved to surrender on the key issue of polygamy, the Mormon leadership decided further to reduce distrust and dislike by deliberately conforming to the rest of the United States in many other aspects of life” (p. 118). As part of this effort to conform, the Mormons, as a whole, came to be a very conservative and patriotic people, holding large parades in cities and towns throughout Utah on the 4th of July, revering the Founding Fathers as inspired men of God, and even evoking patriotism in the naming of their streets and geographic landmarks, for example, “Independence Avenue” and “Freedom Boulevard” in Provo, Utah, and “Liberty Park” in Salt Lake City. Their integration into American culture, and their strong sense of patriotism arises, in part, from the fact that The Book of Mormon states repeatedly that America is the “promised land,” and the chosen land, and the land where God will restore His one true church.
This sentiment has been reiterated throughout the years at general conference, and in Church publications, by LDS prophets and other Church leaders.

Another equally important reason for the LDS Church’s adoption of patriotism and its gradual conformity to American values has been its desire to fit in, to be viewed as an equal at the table of Christianity, to shake off the all-too-common perception that it is an unrelatable, eccentric, non-Christian institution, and to be welcomed into the American experience in a well-respected, ecumenical bond with other Christian faiths. At the same time, the Church also desires to be seen as unique, as the metaphorical “city on a hill” whose light cannot be hid, set apart from the rest of the world so as to be able to shine as an example unto it. In O’Dea’s (1957) words:

Throughout its history, as in its very origin, Mormonism was to be both typical of the larger American setting in which it existed and at the same time peculiarly itself, with its own special idiosyncratic emphases and interpretations. Even when most at odds with its fellow Americans, it was to be typically American, and it was always to feel and express this curious combination of typicality and peculiarity. (p. 21)

Since the late-19th century, Mormons have been encouraged by Church leaders to build up the Church in their homelands; members are no longer expected to emigrate to America to join the Mormons living in Utah. This, along with the Church’s extensive, worldwide missionary efforts has led to the globalization of the Church. More members now live outside the United States than inside, with Central and South America experiencing the largest rate of growth in membership (Grover, 2005). This has also led to efforts by Church leaders and public relations specialists to de-emphasize the Americanness of the Church; the LDS Church wants to be recognized as a global religion. Yet, critics of the Church’s effectiveness at becoming culturally diverse argue that the Church’s heavy emphasis on obedience and uniformity prevent the Church, internationally, from becoming more than an extension of American values and Utah
Mormon culture. van Beek (2016), arguing that the Church’s insistence on correlation and uniformity to Utah Mormonism’s standards of practice is hindering its progress and potential in sub-Saharan Africa, states:

African LDS wards are not allowed to play drums, may not dance and clap, and may not even sing the typical African exchange songs between men and women… For Africans, the lack of song and movement is a definite minus in LDS worship; using drums would be so much easier—and they would be played so much better! But instructions seem to be clear, ‘No more dancing, no more clapping, since our brothers in America don’t do it.’ (p. 88)

This focus on uniformity, even when it goes against the culture and customs of the host country might be one of the reasons that approximately 80% of Mormons living outside of the United States no longer participate in Church activities (Decoo, 2016). Due to the Church’s continued adherence to the Correlation Program, a centralization process which was launched by Church leaders largely in the 1960s and 1970s in response to the global growth of the Church, all LDS congregations around the world are expected to follow the same schedule, and to teach the same lessons from the same lesson manuals each Sunday. Many Mormons have complained that this program has caused the Church to become overly bureaucratic and inflexible. Even within the United States, Mormons complain that LDS Church worship services are tedious and boring, and that Church leaders are unwilling to adopt inventive ways of making the services more engaging—perhaps by decentralizing and giving more decision-making power back to local leaders and congregations. The unwillingness of Church leaders to adapt and to be inventive, both socially and structurally, has been blamed for some of the inactivity and disaffection in the United States and around the world. This will be explored in greater detail in the chapters that follow.

The Structure and Beliefs of the Church
According to LDS doctrine, after Christ and His apostles had died, the power and authority to administer the sacred rites and rituals of the gospel (authority that the Mormons refer to as the “priesthood”) were removed from the Earth, and the world entered a state of apostasy, or spiritual darkness that lasted up until the time that God and Jesus Christ returned to restore their Church and the priesthood through Joseph Smith. This is the reason that Mormons often refer to their Church as the “restored Church,” and the “one and only true Church on the Earth.” While Mormons believe that other religions have bits and pieces of the truth, they claim that only the LDS Church has the full truth through the Book of Mormon, living prophets, and the restored priesthood. In one of the Articles of Faith—13 brief statements that explain the main tenets and beliefs of Mormonism written by Joseph Smith and later canonized by the Church—the Church claims, “We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth” (“The Articles of Faith,” 2017). The Church is set up in a hierarchical structure and governed by worthy males who are baptized into the LDS Church, and who hold the priesthood. Worthy LDS males are called to positions like those listed in the Article of Faith above, and all members of the Church, both male and female, are required to honor and obey their priesthood leaders. In this sense, the Church operates as a well-organized, top-down, bureaucratic patriarchy.

At the top of the hierarchy is the prophet, more commonly referred to as the President of the Church. Directly beneath the prophet is the Quorum of the 12 Apostles, although two additional apostles serve as counselors to the president. Together, these 15 men comprise what is referred to as the First Presidency of the Church. Beneath the First Presidency are several Quorums of 70, from which vacancies in the First Presidency are often filled. The men in the First Presidency and the first two Quorums of 70, along with the presiding bishopric, are referred
to as general authorities of the Church. When Mormons attend general conference in April and October each year, most of the talks are given by these general authorities. The general authorities oversee the day-to-day operation of the Church around the world, and the First Presidency operates out of Church Headquarters in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah.

At the local level, Mormons belong to congregations called wards, which usually consist of about 300 members. If there are too few Mormons in an area to form a ward, then the congregation is called a branch. The ward or branch that a Mormon is assigned to is based solely upon geographic location, and LDS leaders discourage members from attending wards and branches to which they are not geographically assigned. In this sense, Mormon congregations often spur close-knit relationships and support systems, which can make it difficult for members to leave the Church if they no longer believe. In many college towns, and in areas with high concentrations of Mormons, there are usually Young Single Adult (YSA) wards that Mormons between the ages of 18-31 are encouraged to attend. Brigham Young University (BYU), one of the universities owned and operated by the Church, has close to 200 YSA wards, while many other locations have none. The purpose of the YSA wards is to encourage young men and women to meet each other and to work towards marriage. Because Mormons are encouraged to marry within their faith, many Mormon young adults, especially in the United States, will move to areas with YSA wards so that they can have a better opportunity to date other Mormons.

At the local level the wards and branches consist of a lay leadership. Each worthy member of the ward, male or female, is given a responsibility in the ward, which is referred to as a calling. A member might be called to do anything from playing the piano to teaching Sunday school. Callings are voluntary, and the members receive no monetary compensation for them.
Members often hold a calling for a few years before being assigned to a new calling. The responsibility of a calling adds to a member’s sense of commitment to his or her ward or branch.

Wards and branches are led by a male who is called as a bishop (for a ward), or a branch president (for a branch). Just as the prophet is the head of the Church, the bishop is the head of the ward; bishops are often referred to as the “father of the ward.” A bishop’s responsibilities include overseeing the teaching and missionary work in a ward. He is also responsible for conducting worthiness interviews with ward members, providing counsel, and administering Church discipline (“Duties of the Bishop,” 2017). At the next level of the hierarchical structure above wards and branches, are stakes, which usually consist of about five to twelve wards. Stakes are led by stake presidents, who choose twelve members from the wards in their stake to serve in positions that might be compared to the position of the apostles at the top level. Stake presidents are chosen by the general authorities at LDS Church Headquarters. Stake presidents are responsible for overseeing ward and branch leadership, providing counsel to local leaders, conducting worthiness interviews with members, serving as a liaison between local wards and branches and the LDS general authorities, and convening Church disciplinary courts, which can sometimes lead to the disfellowship or excommunication of a member.

Mormon women are not permitted to receive the priesthood or attend priesthood meetings with the men. Instead, they belong to an organization called the Relief Society, which was organized by Joseph Smith in 1842. According to the LDS Church, the Relief Society is meant to, “…help prepare women for the blessings of eternal life as they increase faith in Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ and His Atonement; strengthen individuals, families, and homes through ordinances and covenants; and work in unity to help those in need” (“Relief Society,” 2017). Because only those with the priesthood govern the Church, the Relief Society is considered an
auxiliary organization; however, the Relief Society presidents in each ward meet regularly with the bishops and branch presidents to report on the needs of the women in their organization, and to discuss any needs or plans they may have regarding the Relief Society.

Church services are held on Sundays at what is called a chapel, or a meetinghouse. The services last for three hours, with one hour being dedicated to sacrament meeting (the most important of the Church meetings), an hour of Sunday school, and an hour of priesthood or young men’s classes for males, or Relief Society or young women’s classes for females. During sacrament meeting, members sing hymns, partake of the sacrament, receive updates and counsel from the bishop or branch president, and listen to talks, which are usually given by other members of the ward (the bishop or branch president and their counselors assign which members will be giving talks on a given Sunday). On the first Sunday of each month, which Mormons refer to as “fast Sunday,” Mormons are asked to fast for two meals, and donate the money that they would have spent on those two meals to fast offerings, which is then used to help the less fortunate members in the ward and stake. On fast Sunday, instead of assigned talks during sacrament meeting, the microphone is open for about an hour to any member who wishes to stand up and voice his or her belief in the Church to his or her fellow ward members. This practice is called “bearing testimony,” and it is not uncommon to see members get emotional as they share faith-promoting stories and proclaim that they “know the Church is true,” and that “Joseph Smith restored the gospel to this earth.”

The LDS Church requires a high level of commitment from its members, in terms of both time and money. In addition to three hours of Church meetings on Sundays, there are often activities and meetings throughout the week. Mormon high school students, for example, are expected to attend seminary classes for about one hour each day during the school week for four
years. On Monday nights, Mormon families are encouraged to hold what is called Family Home Evening (FHE), where Mormons spend an hour, or so, with their families sharing scripture lesson and engaging together in a fun and uplifting leisure activity. On Wednesday nights, wards often hold meetings and social events for the 12-18 year olds. Additionally, Mormons are encouraged to have family scripture study each day, to pray before each meal, after waking up, and before going to bed. Mormons are also encouraged to help with local missionary efforts, to share the gospel message with their friends, and to visit other members of the ward in their homes each month as part of a program called “home teaching” (for men), and “visiting teaching” (for women), during which the visitors are expected to share a spiritual message and to make sure that other families in the ward are in good spirits and good health. Additionally, Mormons are asked to give ten percent of their income to the Church; this is known as “tithing,” and Mormons who do not give ten percent of their income to the Church are not able to enjoy the same privileges as those who do, such as entering the Mormon temples. Finally, at the age of 18 or 19, all Mormon males are expected to serve a two-year mission to any part of the world where the General Authorities ask them to go. The young men are expected to finance these missions themselves, and during their missions, they are only permitted to speak with their families twice per year (on Christmas and Mother’s Day). If Mormon women choose to do so, they are also invited to serve a mission for 18 months upon reaching the age of 19, but unlike with male members, a mission is not expected of them.

The reasons I included this brief history of Mormonism and outlined the structure and beliefs of the Church are twofold: first, many of the terms and beliefs outlined above will come up repeatedly in the following chapters, especially in the narratives of those I interviewed and observed. Second, I wanted to stress how committed to their religion most practicing, orthodox
Mormons are. Many Mormons will claim that the Church is the most influential and important component of their lives and, in one way or another, it often shapes all other aspects of their lives, both spiritual and secular. As was shown, the structure and doctrine of Mormonism serve to maximize participation and devotion; oftentimes, members consider those in their wards to be like family to them, thus they do not take it lightly when someone in their ward openly questions, doubts, or leaves the Church. The ward members support, encourage, and serve one another—they become, as mentioned, tight-knit communities. When a member doubts or leaves Mormonism, it is often the case that members of the community that was once such a large part of that member’s life ostracize, criticize, and sometimes ignore and shun that person. This is not to say that there are not Mormons who remain friendly and supportive of those who doubt, or leave the Church, only that the treatment of those who do doubt or leave is often disheartening, and there have been a number of cases of members who have left the Church being disowned by their families, or becoming severely depressed, and even contemplating, or attempting suicide as a result of their decision and the resulting fallout from that decision (Burr, 2015; Watch & Collins, 2016). One of the arguments that I will be making in this research is that the digital communities I will be examining provide a space for heterodox and post-Mormons to feel a sense of meaning and belonging when their belief in the Church is challenged or lost.

I will now define how I will be using the terms “Mormon” and “digital technologies” throughout this research before concluding with an outline of the remaining chapters.

**Mormon**

Throughout this study, I will be using a couple of terms that I will define here at the outset. The first of these terms is *Mormon*, a term that is used most commonly to refer to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) because of their belief in The
Book of Mormon, a book that Mormons consider to be a compilation of sacred scripture, comparable to the bible. After Joseph Smith, the founder, prophet, and first leader of the LDS Church, was abruptly murdered in 1844, the Church experienced a succession crisis in which a number of men came forward claiming to be the legitimate successor to Smith. This led to a plethora of schisms, each claiming to be the authentic continuation of the Church that Smith founded (Shields, 1975). The largest of these schisms was led by Brigham Young, who, due to the hostility and violence towards Mormons in the United States at the time, led them on an exodus to a territory outside of the United States that later became the State of Utah. Although a number of the other schisms that formed after the death of Smith claim to be Mormons to this day, it is the largest branch of Mormonism that grew and flourished in Utah that has most commonly come to be associated with the term “Mormon,” and it is this branch, which now claims nearly 15 million members worldwide, that will be the primary focus of this research (Cragun & Nielsen, 2009).

Even under the broad umbrella of mainstream LDS Mormonism, there are many different interpretations of what it means to be a Mormon, for example, there are some Mormons who believe that one cannot be a “true” Mormon if he or she drinks caffeinated beverages, or watches R-rated movies, while other Mormons see no problem with these practices. Some Mormons believe that consistent attendance at church meetings is required of anyone who can truly claim to be a Mormon, while others believe that being a Mormon is more about what you believe than what you do. Thus, no neat and clean, all-inclusive description of what it means to be a “Mormon” is possible; therefore, in this research, I will be using the term “Mormon” to refer to anybody who self-identifies as a Mormon or a post-Mormon, with the only exception being that the Mormonism being referred to must refer to the LDS brand of Mormonism, or “mainstream
Mormonism,” as I will sometimes refer to it. I will, where necessary, use clarifiers to describe what kind of Mormon one claims to be. For example, as I stated above, I will refer to active, believing Mormons as “orthodox” Mormons. I will refer to those who were once Mormons, but who no longer identify with Mormonism as “post-Mormons. The Mormons who occupy the middle of the belief spectrum are a little bit harder to define. They have been referred to in other settings as: unorthodox Mormons, open Mormons, cultural Mormons, liberal Mormons, buffet Mormons, cafeteria Mormons, doubting Mormons, new order Mormons (or NOMS), heterodox Mormons, and non-traditional, or non-correlated Mormons. I prefer the term “heterodox” to refer to these Mormons, but where possible, I will refer to the individuals in this category by whichever term they personally prefer, as indicated during interviews and participant observation.

Digital Technologies

Another term that will be used frequently throughout this study is digital technologies, by which I mean the interactive forms of communication that have been made possible by the Internet, including: blogs, social media, YouTube videos, podcasts, emails, instant messaging apps, and video chat platforms, such as Skype and FaceTime. By providing platforms that make it possible for users to create networks that subvert authority through symbolic manipulation, digital technologies enable the spread of information that has not been sanctioned by the Church, allowing for communities of like-minded individuals to form, and providing a public sphere where they can find and create meaning in their lives. Castells (2012) argues that the power relations embedded in society work to construct meanings in peoples’ minds, but that counter power serves as as a challenge to these power relations. Castells defines counter power as, “the capacity of social actors to challenge the power embedded in the institutions of society for the
purpose of claiming representation for their own values and interests” (p. 5). One of the main purposes of this research will be to demonstrate how digital technologies have made it possible for many Mormons to challenge the power embedded in the LDS religious institution, and to claim representation for their own values and interests.

**Research Structure**

This research consists of seven chapters. This chapter, the introduction, provides an overview of what this research entails, a brief outline of the history and structure of the LDS Church, and two key terms and definitions that will be used throughout the project. Chapter two surveys the literature and theory that will be used to analyze the data presented in the case studies. Chapter three outlines the various ethnographic methods that were used to gather data, and briefly describes the advantages and limitations of the positionally of the researcher as they pertain to this research. Chapter four, five, and six comprise the case studies that were written around the data that was collected and the interpretations that were drawn from that data. Chapter four provides an overview of the LDS Church’s media practices throughout its history, as well as its relationship with, and attitude towards media since its founding in 1830. This chapter will serve to provide a backdrop against which the Church’s contemporary relationship with, and attitude towards media can be examined. Here, I will argue that the Church, which has always been media savvy, pioneering the use of new media technologies, and establishing a media empire with which to promote itself and influence its members, is struggling to maintain that same level of influence in an era of digital technologies that allow for the creation of and dissemination of alternative messages. This chapter will also briefly address how orthodox Mormons are using digital technologies to maintain and perform their identities, and find meaning in the contemporary space of mediated Mormonism. Chapter five turns to the liminal space between
orthodox and post-Mormonism, and examines how the vast middle ground of non-traditional, heterodox Mormons are using digital technologies to build and develop communities of support, spaces where they can feel at home during their religious explorations and faith struggles, at times when they feel both compelled and repelled by Mormonism. Here, the focus is on the *Mormon Stories* podcast and its corresponding digital and offline community, although various other middle ground communities and digital platforms will be discussed. This chapter will also utilize Michael Warner’s model of publics and counterpublics to examine how the MSPC functions as a counterpublic. Chapter six turns to the opposite end of the belief spectrum, post-Mormons and their relationship with digital technologies through an examination of the uses of satire in the digital community that corresponds to the *Mormon Expression* podcast. Chapter seven, the final chapter, provides some concluding thoughts, discusses the limitations of this work, and provides some ideas and insights for future research.

The next chapter will examine the concepts that will be central to the case studies that follow. These concepts include: culturalism, identity, meaning-making, religion, secularization, media, the public sphere, publics, counterpublics, alternative media (with an emphasis on podcasts), and third spaces.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: CULTURALISM AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE SHAPING OF RELIGIOUS MEANING AND IDENTITY

Experiencing a crisis of faith is often a harrowing experience for the Mormon who faces the potential double blow of losing his or her sense of purpose and identity, *and* losing the support of his or her family and community. Only during the past two decades, with the rise of
digital technologies and their accompanying social media platforms, have Mormons enduring these faith crises been able to join and participate in the wide array of loosely-structured online communities that have been created for the purpose of connecting like-minded, similarly-situated individuals. Yet, at the same time, faithful, orthodox Mormons have been using these same technologies to assert and signal their orthodox Mormon identities, and to show support for mainstream Mormonism and its authority structures, while former Mormons use their own digital spaces to form communities and explore identities that best suit their own needs and desires. These technologies have served to demonstrate that the amalgamation of these technologies with religion can play—and has played—a role in the formation of new practices and beliefs that both challenge and uphold well-established traditional religious authority structures. To better understand how these digital platforms serve as spaces of meaning-making, identity construction, contestation, and religious affirmation, it is important that a theoretical lens be established through which these ideas and practices can be more closely examined. In this chapter, I will develop this theoretical lens in order to explore what is happening with these digital technologies, and the practices taking place through and within them, with regard to Mormonism.

In order to develop this theoretical lens, this chapter will examine the literature surrounding several key concepts that have direct implications for the case studies that follow. I will begin with an explanation of why a culturalist approach is the best theoretical framework for my case studies, as Hoover (2002) points out, culturalism is just as well known for its theoretical commitments as it is for its interpretive methodologies. Through its focus on reception, meaning-making, and lived experience, the culturalist approach allows for a theoretical framework that is grounded in the reflexive self as opposed to being grounded in structures. Here, I will also
provide an explanation of meaning making and identity formation, and explain how they fit within the context of my case studies, and the culturalist approach I will be using. Next, I will explore the concepts of religion and media, two institutions that lie at the center of this study. I will explore the interplay between these institutions, and discuss how digital media have provided spaces for challenges to traditional religious institutions and authority, as well as spaces for these institutions and their authority structures to be upheld. Here, I will also discuss alternative media, with an emphasis on podcasting, since podcasts are an important component of community-building and identify formation for heterodox and post-Mormons. Next, I will examine the concepts of the public sphere and publics; here, I will discuss how alternative media have created new possibilities for counterpublics to form in opposition to established religious authority structures. Finally, I will discuss third spaces. Related to the concept of media as practice is Homi Bhabha’s concept of third spaces. To many members of the digital communities I will be examining, the online community serves as an “in-between” space, a space that exists “beyond institutions (churches, mosques, denominations, faith groups) as the first space and individual practice as the second space” (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2012). These digital third spaces act as a space where culture can be produced, identity can be negotiated, and the signs and symbols of hegemonic power structures can be subverted or re-appropriated in numerous ways.

An examination of these key concepts will lay the groundwork for a better understanding of how digital technologies are impacting the way that religion is lived and practiced, and how people are using these technologies to negotiate identity in the wake of faith crises, in their search for community, and in their desire to challenge institutional hegemony. At the same time, an examination of these concepts will also lay the groundwork for a better understanding of how religious institutions and their more orthodox adherents use digital technologies to reinforce the
power of religious authorities, define boundaries, and maintain hegemony. I begin with an overview of the culturalist approach, identity, and meaning making.

**The Culturalist Approach**

The culturalist approach to examining social phenomena is rooted in a shift away from a positivist epistemology that took place largely in the 1960s and 1970s. Prior to the cultural turn, individuals were often conceived of by social scientists as belonging to a mass of docile social actors whose lives, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors were guided by emotional instincts, unquestioned traditions, and an unreflective adherence to the economic and ideological societal structures under which they were born, as well as to the symbols and messages that these structures disseminated. Much of the social research that was conducted during this time was positivist in the sense that it examined the effects that various stimuli, such as motion pictures, news reports, and other mediated messages, had on the beliefs and behaviors of individuals. The culturalist approach moved away from this positivism by ascribing more agency and self-reflexivity to social actors and their choices. As Carey (1979) explains, “Cultural studies is an attempt to bypass the rather discrete empiricism of behavioral studies and the esoteric apparatus of formal theories and to descend deeper into the empirical world” (p. 418). Carey goes on to state that under the new model (the cultural model), “human thought is seen more as interpretations men apply to experience, constructions of widely varying systems of meanings, which cannot be exhaustively verified by the methods of science” (p. 423). In other words, instead of utilizing positivist methodologies to determine the effect of stimuli on behavior and belief, the culturalist approach utilizes interpretivist methodologies to understand the meanings that others place on their own experiences. Hoover (2006) states that the burden of culturalist theory “is to understand how cultural meanings are produced and reproduced through the
instruments and contexts of culture,” and that the “meanings [that] are made through mediated sources are an important component of that larger process…” (p. 36).

During the turn towards culture, scholars began to shift their focus to how individuals resisted some aspects of their culture, while accepting, and re-appropriating others. For the culturalists, the emphasis was no longer on how culture and its constituent components necessarily shaped individuals into docile social actors, but instead on how individuals reflected on and negotiated the constituent components of their cultures in the process of meaning making, and identity formation. Thus, it is important to understand how culture has been defined in order to better understand how individuals are using culture to make meaning and establish identities, and to determine what sites and artifacts might provide insight into how these processes are taking place.

The cultural scholar, Raymond Williams, rejected the notion that society was constituted of masses who had somehow been duped into unreflectively accepting wholesale what the capitalist culture industries had produced. Williams (1961) stated, “There are no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses” (p. 289). Williams went on to state that “culture is ordinary,” that “every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings,” and that “the making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressure of experience, contact, and discovery…” (p. 289). Durham and Kellner (2001) explain that, “Culture in today’s societies… constitutes a set of discourses, stories, images, spectacles, and varying cultural forms and practices that generate meaning, identities and political effects” (p. xiv). They go on to describe some of the components of culture as artifacts, such as “newspapers, television programs, movies, and popular music,” practices, such as “shopping, watching sports events, going to a club, or hanging
out in the local coffee shop,” and discourses, including discourses about the artifacts and practices just mentioned (p.xiv). Richard Hoggart also had a broad conceptualization of culture. Hoare (2017) points out how to Hoggart, culture might even be considered as, “…the experiences and habits of everyday group life, even filtering down to varieties of light” (n.p). In painting a picture of British working-class culture, Hoggart (1957) mentions “…the sun forcing its way down as far as the ground-floor windows on a very sunny afternoon, the foggy gray of November over the slates and chimneys, the misty evenings of March when the gangs congregate in the watery yellow light of the kicked and scratched gas lamp (p. 56). Here, culture is depicted as a way of life. The scenes and images painted by Hoggart in this passage would likely be familiar to any member of the British working class. They are images that evoke feelings and emotions that create a common bond—a culture—for the members of that particular class and group; they are images to which each member of that group could likely relate their lived experiences. Clifford Geertz viewed culture more in terms of the meanings and negotiations of signs and symbols. Geertz (1973) states, “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”

In each of these descriptions of culture and cultural analysis, culture is described as a site where meanings are made, shared, and negotiated. E.P. Thompson believed that “cultural processes are energized by the never-ending need of human beings to find new ways of expressing, giving meaning to, and thinking about their experiences,” and that, “culture is necessarily a site of struggle” (Gunster, 2004, p. 180). Williams claimed that a society could not be fully understood until each of its practices were analyzed and accounted for (Gunster, 2004).
It is for these reasons that social scientists taking a cultural approach typically turn their attention to sites of cultural production and consumption in order to account for these practices, and to develop a deeper understanding of identity formation, meaning making, cultural resistance, and representation, and the role that society’s economic and ideological structures play in informing these processes. Carey (1977) describes this as “the process of making large claims from small matters: studying particular rituals, poems, plays, conversations, songs, dances, theories, and myths and gingerly reaching out to the full relations within a culture or a total way of life (p. 424). In a similar vein, Kellner and Durham (2001) state:

Culture is produced and consumed within social life. Thus, particular cultural artifacts and practices must be situated within the social relations of production and reception in which culture is produced, distributed, and consumed in order to be properly understood and interpreted. Contextualizing cultural forms and audiences in historically specific situations helps illuminate how cultural artifacts reflect or reproduce concrete social relations and conditions—or oppose and attempt to transform them. (p. 12)

Cultural scholars, like Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and their associates at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Great Britain were particularly interested in examining the reception and consumption of cultural texts and other artifacts, like those mentioned by Kellner and Durham and by Carey, in their attempt to locate and analyze sites of struggle and of counter-hegemonic forces of resistance among youth cultures, subordinate groups, and the British working class. For example, Hall (1980) describes how television viewers form their own interpretations and meanings (decoding) of television texts based on their own cultural and economic backgrounds, even if the producers of the texts intended viewers to arrive at the interpretations they had intended when the texts were created (encoding). What Hall demonstrated was that the very same text, regardless of how it was meant to be received by the so-called masses, can produce countless interpretations and lead to the making of very different meanings by the different consumers of that text.
A culturalist approach is the best fit for the case studies that follow because they exam the various ways that Mormons at different regions along the belief spectrum live, engage with others in their communities, and make meaning and build their identities around the reception, production, and re-appropriation of texts and other cultural artifacts related to Mormonism. Whether they are recirculating the official texts produced by the Church and its leaders, creating their own texts, or re-appropriating these texts by adding their own orthodox-, or heterodox interpretations to them, the members of the communities examined below are engaging in their own struggles to create, negotiate, affirm, and resist culture, or certain aspects of culture. Lynch (2005) advocates for a culturalist approach because, like Williams, he believes that it allows the researcher to approach culture as a “way of life for particular people in particular contexts, rather than simply as a collection of texts and other cultural products” (p. 16). Lynch (2005) goes on to state that “this broader approach involves looking at the wider structures, relationships, patterns, and meanings of every life within which popular cultural texts are produced and consumed” (p. 16). The case studies that follow do just that—they examine the wider structures, relationships, patterns, and meanings of the lives of those participating in the Mormon-themed digital communities where texts are produced and consumed. This examination will contribute to the analyses and accountings that Williams considered necessary for a fuller understanding of society.

**Identity and Meaning Making**

One important implication of culture that cannot be overlooked is its contribution to an individual’s search for meaning and his or her self-reflexive formation of an identity. Geertz (1973) notes:
Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives. As culture shaped us as single species—and is no doubt still shaping us—so too it shapes us as separate individuals. (p. 52)

And as Hoover (2006) notes:

A central object of meaning around the self is the formation and maintenance of identity. As an aspect of the self, the identity is the self’s description. As such, it is necessarily a presentation of a kind, and necessarily articulated in such a way that it is accessible to others in the same context or milieu that is culture. (p. 39)

Directly related to the structure vs. agency debate with regard to culture—with strict structuralist scholars on the one side making some form of the argument that society’s structures (the economic base, the politico-legal, and ideological superstructures, dominant discourses, etc.) determine how the culture and the cultural products of a society will take their shape, and scholars on the other side making the argument that individual social actors can exercise their personal agency in the creation of culture and of cultural products—is the structure vs. agency debate with regard to individual identity and meaning-making. Theorists like Louis Althusser, believed that, through the process of interpellation, a state’s hegemonic structures—the political and social institutions—transmit the dominant ideologies of that state into the individual identities of those living within the state. By recognizing and acknowledging the state and its hegemonic structures as such, social actors are inscribed in its ideology. In this sense, social actors are, as Althusser claims, always already subjects to the structures of society and to their ideology; thus, their identities are determined by their subjectivity to the state and its structures. To illustrate this point, Althusser (1971) provides the example of a person walking down the street who, when hailed by a police officer, turns toward the police officer in response, thus exhibiting his or her subject position with regard to the state. In the sense that ideology has always already constructed an individual’s identity, an individual is powerless in the construction
of himself or herself. Thus, from a strict structuralist perspective, identity is not something that an individual self-reflexively constructs out of the symbols and discourses surrounding him or her, but instead, it is an ideological subject position that one simply fills by coming to exist under the pre-existing conditions and power relations of a given society.

Other scholars have posited theories and explanations of identity that account for more individual agency in meaning-making and in the construction of an individual identity. Like the cultural theorists mentioned above, many of these scholars see struggle, negotiation, and self-reflexivity in the formation of identity. Irving Goffman, Herbert Blumer, Clifford Geertz, and Anthony Giddens each articulate theories of meaning-making and identity that are centered around the claim that an individual’s identity is not wholly inherited or pre-determined by society’s social structures and institutions, but that identity is something that is constructed, worked out, and performed by the individual through self-reflexivity and through the symbols and social interactions drawn from the culture—and the structures—in which the individual is immersed.

Goffman (1959) taking a dramaturgical approach, describes social identity as something that is performed by an individual actor in much the same way that an actor performs a role in a theatrical performance. During a theatrical performance, an actor is able to make alterations to his or her performance through the social cues received from other actors and from the audience, as well as through internalized reflections on how the performance is going; however, the actor’s performance is, to an extent, bounded by the structured elements of the performance: costumes, props, the size of the, etc. According to Goffman, an individual draws on a variety of communicative sources and social scripts in order to construct and perform his or her identity. To Goffman, the performance is the key to identity. One example of the concept of performance in
the context of Mormonism is the performance of Mormon identity during testimony meetings on the first Sunday of each month, when members of a ward voluntarily take turns standing in front of the congregation and proclaiming a knowledge that the Mormon Church is true, and that Joseph Smith was a prophet. By performing the social script of the testimony, and utilizing recognized LDS cultural symbols, in this case, phrases like, “I know this Church is true,” and “I know Joseph Smith restored the gospel,” members of the LDS Church signal to others, through performance, that Mormonism is a part of their identity, at the same time they are constructing that identity from the performances they are experiencing—or have experienced in the past.

Similarly, heterodox and post-Mormons often utilize these same symbols and social scripts in unconventional, re-appropriated ways when navigating and performing changes in their own identities with regard to the Church. In this way, LDS symbols and social scripts are used in cultural struggle and meaning-making for Mormons occupying all regions of the belief spectrum.

Related to Goffman’s dramaturgical approach, is Blumer’s theory of symbolic interaction, which was developed out of a reading of George Herbert Mead's early-20th century pragmatism. Symbolic interaction “refers to humans’ distinctive use of language to create symbols [and] common meanings for thinking and communication with others” (Hall, 2007, n.p.). Blumer (1969) elaborates three premises for symbolic interaction, these are: (1) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; (2) the meaning of things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others; and (3) meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by a person in dealing with the things they encounter. These premises are similar to Mead’s own elaboration of how individuals come to acquire their identities and make sense of the world around them. Mead (1934) describes how individuals are engaged in what he refers to as mind action, or the
process of constantly manipulating symbols to negotiate meaning and construct their own social understandings. Like the cultural theorists discussed above, social interactionists are less concerned with the way that social structures define individuals and create subjects than they are with how the repeated interactions of individuals, and the symbols that make up these interactions, allow individuals to construct their own subjective meanings, which, in turn come to “define the makeup of ‘society’” (Carter & Fuller, 2015, p. 1). Symbolic interaction theory “holds that we develop as social beings through our interactions with others, and that those interactions involve a kind of conscious self-construction and self-representation” (Hoover, 2006, p. 40).

Through our interactions with those around us, we develop a better sense of who we are, how we should act, and what society values and deems appropriate. “Over time, we develop an idealized sense of self that is relevant to our specific place, time, and web of social relations (Hoover, 2006, p. 40). Hoover (2006) also notes that:

This supports a logic of social and cultural life as the construction of identities that we understand to make sense because they reflect our understandings of the cultural logics of the contexts we live in, and because they contain the cultural objects, including symbols, values, and languages, that help constitute and make sense in those contexts. (p. 40)

For orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormons alike, symbolic interactionist theory offers valuable insights into how the interactions that take place within Mormon-themed communities, both online and offline, provide individuals with symbols and resources for finding meaning and constructing their individual identities.

Like the symbolic interactionists, Geertz believes that an individual makes meaning and acquires an identity through interactions with the symbols and artifacts that a given culture provides. Geertz refers to this idea as the “control mechanism” view of culture (Geertz, 1973, p. 45). Under the control mechanism view of culture, culture is not viewed as complexes of “concrete behavior patterns” or “habit clusters,” but as “a set of control mechanisms—plans,
recipes, rules, instructions [what might be called ‘programs’]—for the governing of human behavior” (p. 44). Geertz (1973) further explains the control mechanism view of culture by pointing out that:

Thinking consists not of ‘happenings in the head’ (though happenings there and elsewhere are necessary for it to occur) but of a traffic in what have been called, by G. H. Mead and others, significant symbols—words for the most part, but also gestures, drawings, musical sounds, mechanical devices like clocks, or natural objects like jewels—anything, in fact, that is disengaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon experience. (p. 45)

Here, Geertz borrows from Mead to explain how cultural—and individual—meaning is made through the symbols with which individuals interact. These symbols are not limited to words alone, but also include gestures, art, and objects because each of these things give meaning to an individual’s experiences. Geertz goes on to explain how, for the most part, these symbols already exist within the culture in which an individual is born (consider, for example, already-established language, traffic lights, clocks, anything that possess or generates symbolic meaning within a culture), and that sometimes, the individual uses these symbols deliberately, and most of the time, spontaneously, “but always with the same end in view: to put a construction upon the events through which he lives, to orient himself within ‘the ongoing course of experienced things’” (p. 45). In Geertz’s view, an individual can select various symbols and practices from pre-established cultural systems in order to find meaning and create and manifest identity, and the individual is only limited by the extent of the symbols that a given culture offers. In the context of Mormon-themed communities, we might, then, expect to see a wide variety of symbols (both LDS and non-LDS in nature) being used, both deliberately and instinctually, to derive meaning, and to construct and signal identity to other members of the community.

Like Geertz, Giddens believes that individuals have a certain degree of autonomy when acquiring meaning and constructing an identity from the resources that culture has to offer.
Where Goffman uses the metaphor of a theatrical performance to elucidate his dramaturgical approach to identity, Giddens employs the metaphor of the story:

The existential question of self-identity is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual ‘supplies’ about herself. A person’s identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though it is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self. (Giddens, 1991, p. 54)

We see here that Giddens believes that identity is malleable, and that an individual can continually construct—and reconstruct—his or her identity around the changing conditions and ongoing sequence of events that he or she experiences throughout life. According to Giddens, “Self-identity is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual’s action system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (p. 52). To Giddens, self-reflexivity is a key component of identity construction. The individual plays an active, conscious role in locating the symbols, scripts, narratives, and discourses that are meaningful to him or her, and the meaning gleaned from these resources allows the individual to assess and, from time to time, reassess and adjust certain aspects of his or her identity, or, as Campbell (2012) explains it, “…the social sphere offers individuals various resources and meanings from which they can select, assemble, and present a sense of self” (p. 71).

Giddens also believes that individuals today are more self-reflexive than they have been in the past; this is due, in large part, to the greater access to information that mass communications technologies have provided. Hoover (2006) explains that individuals, “…know and understand the web of social and cultural relations—and their place in that web—in a more sophisticated way than would have been typical earlier” (p. 38) This greater circulation of
knowledge has positive and negative consequences: on the one hand, individuals have greater opportunities than ever before to examine the plethora of cultural resources that are available to them, thus providing them with the opportunity to develop a fuller, richer sense of self, but on the other hand, these vast expanses of knowledge and cultural resources can overload the individual with symbols and information, making him or her feel as if ever finding any concrete meaning, or constructing a true identity is infeasible (Dean (2014) refers to this negative consequence as the lack of symbolic efficiency). Therefore, we might expect to find within the Mormon-themed digital communities, both those who feel satisfied and fulfilled with regard to their relationship to the Church (whether they are orthodox, heterodox, or post-Mormon), as well as those who feel overwhelmed and overloaded with information and possibilities to the point where they no longer know where they belong, who they are, or what they believe.

This section has explored various theories and ideas that address meaning-making and identity. Some scholars, including the strict structuralists, have posited that identity is shaped by ideology, specifically through the process of interpellation via society’s social, political, and economic institutions. According to this line of thinking, individuals may believe they have agency and control over their own identities, but this is only because the ideology that is maintained and transmitted to individuals by the state’s hegemonic institutions seems natural to them. In this way, simply by being born, individuals inherit subject positions that, in spite of the appearance of agency, really only allow for the manifestation of identities that were always already there. Other thinkers have posited more individual agency and control over identity. As has been outlined above, these theorists also believe that individuals are born into cultural systems that contain pre-established symbols, discourses, and other resources, but they believe that individuals are able to reason and reflect on these resources in such a way that they can
derive personal meaning and construct individual, unique identities from them. The case studies that will be examined in this paper will utilize primarily the latter approach to identity, however, the importance of ideology and hegemony in the construction of identity will also be taken into consideration. Identity narratives, as described by Giddens, and also by Ricoeur (1991), will be of particular importance in the case studies that follow. Ricoeur, like Giddens, states that narratives are a key component of identity formation. Narratives are stories that individuals tell themselves—about themselves—throughout their lives. These stories are comprised of an individual’s own experiences, the symbolic resources that an individual’s culture provides him or her, and an individual’s relationships with other people. The next section will provide a working definition of religion, and explore the concept of secularization as it applies to this work.

**Religion**

This work utilizes open and broad definitions of both religion and media. Hoover (2002) recommends that religion be thought of “in the broadest possible terms… [as] A wide range of things present themselves as religion when they may not be. At the same time, a range of things may deny that they are religion, but resemble it in important ways” (p. 34). Harrison (2006) states, “Elementary though this task may seem, it has proven difficult to formulate a definition of religion that can command wide assent” (p. 134). The term “religion” is, indeed, a broad concept, signifying a wide and varying range of interpretations, beliefs, meanings, and practices, some of which are contained in religious institutions, and some not. A number of academics have attempted to define religion, while others have chosen to stick with explanations of human beliefs and practices that have the appearance of being religious, or that bear a family resemblance to religion and spirituality, more generally. Tanner (1997) explains that even when looking specifically at Christian traditions, it is difficult to come up with a definition of what the
term “Christianity” truly means. With over one billion Christians in the world belonging to tens of thousands of different denominations and sects, with many practicing their own personalized versions of Christianity, it is impossible to say that Christianity is something that exists within strict boundary lines. Narrowing the focus even further, since the 1840s, within the Mormon tradition, there have been a number of schisms which have led to the emergence of new leaders who have claimed that their version of Mormonism is the only true Mormonism and that other versions, including the LDS Church, cannot define themselves as Mormons. The LDS Church has also attempted—and failed—to restrict the usage of the term “Mormon” to those practicing mainstream, LDS Mormonism (Cragun & Nielsen, 2009).

Exploring the various definitions of religion is beyond the scope of this work, but it is important to understand some of the implications that the term can have, particularly for meaning-making and identity construction; after all, religion has played—and continues to play—such an important role in the shaping of individuals, societies, and cultures, that it seems almost inconceivable to make a comprehensive accounting of human belief and practice without taking religion into consideration. Instead of focusing specifically on institutionalized forms of religion—though, institutionalized religion is also important to this study—I will be utilizing something more like Geertz’s functional approach to religion, which broadens the scope of how religion is commonly conceived. Geertz (1966) defines religion as:

…a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (p. 90)

This definition appears to shift the focus away from religion as social institutions, and place it on the individual, through the meanings, moods, and motivations that certain systems of symbols produce within an individual, or within a group of individuals. According to Geertz’s definition,
the term *religion*, certainly does include orthodox, mainstream Mormonism, but it could also include the loosely-structured digital communities where heterodox and post-Mormons go to find support and meaning, often through the exchange of symbols that assist these individuals in reorienting their spiritual beliefs and practices during—or after—a break with mainstream Mormon orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Other scholars have also emphasized individual experience and practice in their explanations of how religion should be examined, for example, Campbell (2012) explores the concept of “lived religion,” or, religion as practice, which she describes as, “the way religion is actually practiced outside of the traditional structures” (p. 67). With lived religion, “symbols and narratives become freed from their traditional structures and dogmas and so become tools for reconstructing spiritual meaning” (p. 66). Roof (1999) also examines the concept of lived religion, which he defines as, “…religion experienced in everyday life, [which] offers a model for integrating the official, the popular, and the therapeutic modes of religious identity (p. 41). Roof goes on to explain the three aspects that he considers crucial to lived religion, these are:

… scripts, or sets of symbols that imaginatively explain what the world and life are about; practices, or the means whereby individuals relate to, and locate themselves within, a symbolic frame of reference; and human agency, or the ability of people to actively engage the religious worlds they create. (p. 41)

With a “lived religion” approach, a conception of religion-as-institution is de-emphasized in favor of a broader approach, one that accounts for the ways that religion is actually lived and practiced by individuals in their everyday lives. This does not mean that religious institutions are left out of the picture altogether, simply that the emphasis shifts to the individual and to his or her religious practices. As Orsi (2003) states, lived religion, “directs attention to institutions and persons, texts and rituals, practice and theology, things and ideas—all as media of making and unmaking worlds.” (p. 172). Hoover (2006), citing Stephen Warner, discusses how the nature of
religion in late modernity has evolved, and how he believes that our understanding of religion must also evolve. He states that we must now think of religion as something that is achieved instead of as something that is ascribed; in other words, religion must be defined through the experiences practices, and aspirations of individuals, not solely through religious institutions (Hoover, 2006, p. 39). Hoover (2002) explains how there are a growing range of dimensions of social and cultural life that “bear a family resemblance” to religion that also need to be accounted for in cultural research.

These definitions and approaches demonstrate how culturalism informs the way that religion will be examined in this work. As was discussed in the previous section, the culturalists look for ways that individuals self-reflexively utilize cultural symbols to make meaning and shape and negotiate their identities. In the same way, a culturalist approach to the study of religion examines how certain cultural symbols, which fall under the umbrella of the spiritual, or of “religion” broadly defined, are being utilized to shape and negotiate religious identity, which could be considered a subset of identity. This work will examine the creation, exchange, use, and dissemination of these symbols to better understand how individuals at different regions of the Mormon belief spectrum are finding meaning and shaping their own religious identities. This research will operate under the premise that identity is shaped by individuals through their social interactions, which allow for the exchange of the cultural—and more specifically, religious—symbols necessary to sustain, construct and/or reconstruct religious identity. If an individual chooses to identify as a “Mormon,” or as an “open Mormon,” or a “former Mormon,” it can be assumed that that individual self-consciously arrived at that conception of his or her identity through some exchange—and internalization—of cultural symbols (texts, discourses, etc.) that were exchanged socially, and acted upon self-reflexively. This dissertation seeks to examine the
locations where these social exchanges are taking place in order to better ascertain how Mormon identities are being shaped, reaffirmed, and resisted. In the media landscape of today, much of this work is being done digitally, which is why an overview of media becomes important, but before I turn to media, I want to provide a brief overview of secularization, as it directly ties into the evolution of religious belief and practice that I have just described.

**Secularization**

In the 1950s and 1960s, a number of sociologists, including Peter Berger, began to produce a rich body of work that described the process of secularization, which Berger (1967) defines as, “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols” (p. 107). In other words, Berger and other sociologists believed that religion was fading from society, and that this process was an inevitable byproduct of modernization and industrialism (Reaves, 2012). More specifically, Berger believed that, among other things, secularization was being fueled by religious pluralism—or the weakening of a given religion’s ability to claim legitimacy due to the increased prevalence of numerous other religions and belief systems—and by “the pervasive influence of science” (Berger, 1967, p. 110). Both of these factors were, as Berger (1967) argues, results of modernization, including globalization. Berger predicted that as the process of secularization proceeded, religious institutions would begin to change the ways that they interacted with society (Reaves, 2012). For example, he believed that the leaders of religious institutions were aware that modernization was leading to a decline in their authority, and that, as a result, religions were bureaucratizing and becoming increasingly cooperative with other faiths, leading to homogenization. Berger believed that eventually, competition among faiths would turn competing institutional belief systems into a marketplace, and religion would be just one more commodity in that marketplace, where
religious institutions would change, if and when necessary, to fit the changing demands of their buyers (Reaves, 2012).

In spite of Berger’s predictions about the eventual fading away of religion, religion persists. In fact, Berger himself eventually retracted his predictions about the decline of religion and claimed that the world is as religious as ever, and, in some cases, even more so than it was before (Reaves, 2012). Hoover (2016) also addresses the persistence of religion:

This renewed attention to the place of religion has led to its discovery all around us, in places and in registers that are both emergent and persistent but previously overlooked… We can also see that there is reason to ask whether evidence of the resurgence of religion is instead evidence of its persistence in new forms, particularly in settings beyond the formal domains of discourse, such as popular and entertainment cultures. (p. 2)

While both Berger and Hoover acknowledge the persistence and ubiquity of religion in the world today, both are also aware that religion has evolved, and that to say religion persists does not necessarily mean that it persists solely in its traditional, institutional form. Although secularization has not caused religion to fade away, secular forces have changed the nature of religion. Berger (1999) argues that in spite of the fact that religion has not disappeared, certain secularizing effects can be seen in modern religious institutions. Hoover (2011) affirms this viewpoint, stating, “…many of the traditional indicia of religion have shown a marked decline of religious adherence and practice in the industrialized West. Religious identification and participation measures continue to show such trends, even in the relatively more ‘religious’ developed countries…” (p. 612). While Shepherd and Shepherd (2015) state that Berger’s abandonment of the “extinction hypothesis” with regard to institutional religion does not “invalidate recognition that secular modes of organization and thinking have become widespread in the modern world, with attendant large-scale social and personal consequences” (p. 180).
Indeed, Berger (1999) describes two ways that religions have reacted to the forces of secularization: rejection and adaptation, both of which can drastically alter the nature of the religious institution, or the social and political landscape of the locations where the religious institution exists. Rejection, for example, comes in one of two forms: revolution, wherein the religious institution attempts to take over a society and implement its own counter-secularizing policies, or the creation of subcultures and sectarian groups, wherein the religious institution attempts to implement guidelines and practices that distance itself from the broader, secularizing society (Reaves, 2012). The other approach, adaptation—sometimes also described as accommodation—involves the religious institution accepting, or conforming to certain secularizing forces. Throughout its history, the LDS Church has occasionally taken both approaches to secularization, as Mauss (1994) describes in his work on Mormon assimilation and retrenchment, which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four. At first, the Mormons attempted to separate themselves from society by establishing their own community in the American West—a clear sign of rejection of secularization. Additionally, Mormon leaders have long instructed LDS congregations to live “in the world, but not of the world,” and to shun worldly possessions in favor of even greater spiritual possessions. In more recent decades, the Church has seemed to adapt and accommodate on economic and social grounds, investing in commercial real estate, establishing for-profit businesses, dropping its priesthood ban on African Americans, and allowing women to pray at General Conference.

Other theorists of secularization have taken an approach that emphasizes the changing role of authority, as opposed to the persistence of religion itself. Chaves (1994) poses the question, “Does the persistence of religion falsify secularization theory? Or does the form of religion’s persistence render its persistence irrelevant to, or even supportive of secularization
theory?” (p. 750). Chaves answers this question by arguing that, although religion persists in abundance, the validity of secularization theory is not necessarily impacted if one shifts secularization theory’s object from religion, to something that, to Chaves, better explains religion’s ability to impact individuals and society, namely authority. Chaves central claims is that “Secularization is best understood not as the decline of religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority” (p. 750). (p. 756). Borrowing from—and elaborating on—Dobbelaere’s three dimensions of secularization (secularization at the societal level, at the religious institutional level, and at the individual level), Chaves describes how religious authority has declined at each of these levels: religious authority no longer commands the same control and influence over society’s other institutions, nor over its own institutional symbols and products, nor over an individual’s actions. At each of these levels, religious authority is now just one among many other sources of authority vying for influence and control over society and the individual (Chaves, 1994). In this sense, religious authority has been greatly diminished and, therefore, secularization cannot be overlooked.

The various theories and definitions that have been explored here make it clear that the terms “secular” and “secularization” are incredibly nuanced, and that the implications of secularization for religion in the modern world depend largely on how the term is defined, and on what the object of the term “secularization” is. Because the secularization thesis, as originally conceived by Berger, has been shown to be inaccurate, and religion—particularly in its functional form—continues to thrive, I tend to find the term “secularization” more useful when its object is not institutional religion itself, but religious authority, as Chaves (1994) advocates. For this study, theories of secularization will be useful in examining the influence of Mormon authority at the societal, the institutional, and the individual levels. At the societal level,
secularization’s effects would be seen in the various ways that other institutions, such as the media, political institutions, the education system, etc., have become more and more influential in society, at the same time the influence of the LDS Church has diminished. At the institutional level, secularization’s effects would be seen in the ways that orthodox, heterodox, post-, and non-Mormons are using the LDS Church’s own official symbols and resources—such as quotes from Church leaders, Church-authorized art and images, instructional manuals, Church magazine articles, etc.—in settings, formats, and channels that have not been sanctioned by the Church. Whether or not some of the unsanctioned uses of these symbols and resources benefit the Church is irrelevant, since the argument is that secularization at the institutional level means that religious authority is experiencing a loss in the ability to control its own institutional resources within the religious sphere. And at the individual level, secularization’s effects would be seen in the lived experiences and beliefs of individuals on the Mormon belief spectrum. For example, individuals claiming to be Mormon may choose to live certain aspects of their lives, or hold certain beliefs, that go against what LDS leaders and LDS doctrine teach and encourage.

Although secularization theory hasn’t played out as originally theorized by Berger and other sociologists (and perhaps someday it may), it is important to hold on to the aspects of secularization theory that continue to be relevant and informative for examining the nuances of institutional and lived religion today, as to ignore them would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater (Chaves, 1994). For this dissertation, the term secularization is helpful in that it shines the light on some of the broader trends that have been causing changes in the nature of institutional religion, including Mormonism, and in the beliefs and practices of Mormons all along the belief spectrum. The decline in religious authority is accompanied by a rise in the authority and influence of other social institutions, and an examination of the discourses, texts,
and cultural symbols being used in Mormon-themed digital communities will help to elucidate the different ways that LDS religious authority has, or has not, been supplanted by certain secular forces. One of the institutions that has had the greatest impact on religious authority, and on reshaping the way religion is thought of, communicated, and practiced is the media. In the next section, I will examine the media, its role in society, and how it has interacted with, and contributed to a reshaping of the nature of religion, religious authority, and religious practice.

**Media**

The media are central features of culture and society… shaping, being shaped by, creating, fomenting, and disseminating ideologies and world views that influence how we act and think. The media have social power. The media deal in ideas and meanings… (Marris & Thornham, 2004)

As mentioned in the previous section, this work utilizes a broad definition of media, one that encompasses not only media institutions and the information that they disseminate, but also practices, rituals, texts, objects, performances—any thing or process that transmits symbols, ideas, and messages between and/or among individuals. As Hoover (2006) states, “To the extent that a social context or practice is part of public culture, involves technological or social intervention, and is made accessible to the contexts where [I] will be looking, I will keep open the option of thinking of it as an example of media” (p. 24). I will be doing the same throughout this work. Although this research focuses largely on technological media, and more specifically on digital media, it is important to understand that technological media are only one component of the larger media landscape that will be considered in the case studies that follow. Meyer (2011) argues that an understanding of media should be built around the concept of mediation. To Meyer, mediation is communication, or cultural transmission that takes place via a *material* medium. A material medium includes, but is not limited to a physical object, such as a
newspaper, radio, television, or computer, but it can also include the body of an individual engaging in the process of human interaction. Thompson (2003) argues that, “All processes of symbolic exchange involve a technical medium of some kind. Even the exchange of utterances in face-to-face interaction presupposes some material elements—the larynx and vocal cords, air waves, ears and hearing drums, etc…” (n.p.). Thus conversations and rituals that take place without the use of technological media are also forms of media since cultural symbols and ideas are still being exchanged through the process of mediation.

Media are important to understand because they play a central role in circulating cultural symbols, forming imaginaries, establishing social norms, propagating ideology, and determining what people think about and discuss. If identity and meaning-making are outcomes of communicatively, and self-reflexively engaging with the cultural symbols and ideas that are disseminated and exchanged by individuals and social institutions, then media are, in part, the material channels through which these symbols are disseminated and exchanged in order that identities can be constructed and meanings made. Hoover (2011) states, “As cultural theory has long argued, the media stand at the center of contemporary processes of meaning-making and cultural valuation” (p. 614). Hoover (2002) argues that meaning-making and this quest for the self, “most often includes a quest for the spiritual self,” and that “the spiritual marketplace in which the quest is played out is a marketplace largely defined by the institutions, texts, objects, and practices we call the media” (p. 32). This stands to reason considering that meanings are made, and identities constructed around the information that is available to an individual or a community. When media innovations and reformulations make available new, or previously inaccessible information, then the individuals who encounter this information are potentially able
to self-reflexively reevaluate their beliefs and world views, and integrate this information into the ever-evolving narratives that they form about themselves, i.e., their identities.

In her comprehensive examination of the impact of the printing press, Elizabeth Eisenstein discusses the role that media played in the Reformation. Prior to the widespread use of the printing press for mass publication, churchgoers largely depended on the clergy for doctrine, and for doctrinal interpretations. Once publishers made scripture and other religious texts more accessible through mass printing, the laity had much greater access to this information, and they were able to form their own meanings and to disseminate their own interpretations, which led to a widespread challenge to longstanding religious authority (Eisenstein, 1979). Hoover (2013), also referring to the work of Eisenstein, discusses how in early modern Europe, publishers, in a sense, became a new class of cultural authority since they had control over which texts would be published and disseminated, which meant that they also had control over much of the information that would be consumed and discussed. Hoover points out that even though these publishers were initially controlled by the church and the state, the fact that they needed to be controlled in the first place demonstrated the potential influence that they had on public discourse. This demonstrates how technological innovations in media can play a role in subsequent social change by providing people with the information and symbols needed to reformulate their own ideas and identities; on a larger scale, this can lead to shifts in authority, and to changes in social institutions, such as religion (Eisenstein, 1979).

Nick Couldry also examines the nature of media, and its impact on society and the world. Couldry (2012) describes media as “all institutionalized structures, forms, formats, and interfaces for disseminating symbolic content” (p. 11). Although this dissertation takes a broader view of what constitutes media than does Couldry, Couldry’s explanations of symbolic content, and of
the role that the media play in society help to set the stage for a discussion on the interplay between media and religion. Symbolic content can be thought of as content that is meant to represent something else, whether that “something else” be an object, an idea, a concept, etc. For example, Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out that language itself is symbolic because the words that people speak and write (signifiers) are merely symbols for the objects and ideas that speech and writing represent (signifieds). Barthes (1957) builds upon the work of Saussure by demonstrating how entire concepts and ideologies—what Barthes refers to as mythologies—are tied up in symbols, and in how symbols are represented. Perhaps Barthes’ most frequently-cited illustration of this concept is his reading of the cover of a copy of Paris Match, which shows a young black man in a French military uniform saluting. By itself, this image is simply what one sees, a young black man saluting, but the photo is meant to symbolize something greater—allegiance and devotion to the great country of France, even if that allegiance comes from those who may feel, seem, or actually be oppressed. Here, Barthes’ concept of mythology—the representation of the young black man in the magazine (which is, of course, a medium for disseminating symbolic content), and the meaning of symbolic content itself, all come together to demonstrate what media are, and what they are capable of doing. By disseminating symbolic content—words, images, representations, ideas, conversations, etc.—media play a central role in providing individuals, communities, societies, and nations with the information that is used to shape, inform, and make assumptions about everyday life.

According to Couldry (2012), “Media enable social, economic and political processes to be coordinated over large scales. Media literally change the scale on which we can speak of societies at all… There is a long history of wonder at media’s role in transforming social scale” (pp. 65-66). Couldry goes on to describe how the impact that media have had on society and on
social processes has evolved as new media technologies have been introduced, with each new technology changing the ways in which people and communities are able to interact. For example, when newspapers were established, people were better able to engage with—and mobilize around—current events. As Gabriel Tarde notes, “While books had “made all who read [them] feel their philological identity, [they] were not concerned with questions both current and simultaneously exciting to everybody… it is the newspaper that fires national life, stirs up united movements of minds and wills” (as cited in Couldry, 2012, p. 66). Perhaps one of the greatest social transformation that media helped to facilitate was the creation of imagined communities and the shaping of national identities. With the advent of mass-circulated periodicals, such as newspapers, and then later, with radio and television, people living in different cities and towns were able to receive the same messages and cultural symbols, which allowed them to imagine themselves as part of a common community and nation. Postman (1985) also examines the socially transformative power of media, and points out how the widespread integration of television into American society, along with the accompanying rise in society’s fetishization of the image and the spectacle, created a situation where the very ways in which information is processed are drastically altered. For example, Postman points out that it is hard to imagine a person like Taft becoming a presidential candidate today:

The shape of a man’s body is largely irrelevant to the shape of his ideas when he is addressing a public in writing or on the radio… but it is quite relevant on television… for on television, discourse is conducted largely through visual imagery, which is to say that television gives us a conversation in images, not words.” (Postman, 1985, p. 7)

These examples demonstrate the impact that media can have on individuals and on societies, from perpetuating ideologies, to facilitating the conditions in which nations and communities can be formed and sustained, to providing some of the necessary conditions for legitimate and effective challenges to well-established authority, to playing a role in shaping the
circumstances that determine what and how people think. By mediating the symbols that people think about and with, media are crucial to sustaining societies, and to creating the conditions under which individuals can find and make meaning, and construct plausible narratives about themselves. This is not to be understood as an argument that media themselves are determinant of how societies and social interactions play out. Instead, I am arguing that media play a significant role in shaping the possibilities for individual thought and for individual and societal action. Social institutions can utilize their power and influence to restrain or promote the mediation of certain cultural symbols, but at the same time, individuals can utilize certain media channels to create, re-appropriate, and disseminate cultural symbols of their own.

In the introduction, I discussed how throughout most of Mormon history, LDS Church leaders have been very effective at controlling the religious symbols—and the meanings of the religious symbols—that are mediated to members of the LDS Church. As will be discussed in chapter four, this control has been possible, in large part, due to the Church’s early embrace and heavy utilization of media technologies to assist in the creation and maintenance of a strong and dedicated religious community. Early on, Church leaders understood the importance of using newspapers, books, and public speeches to frame as evil and diabolical, any messages that contradicted the doctrine and practices of the Church, while strongly promoting and encouraging members of the Church to consume the Church’s own sanctioned materials. The relative isolation of the Church in Utah, along with the strict demands of its membership, and the censorship of material that challenged or criticized its own truth claims also played a role in creating a committed and devoted community of followers, but just as had occurred centuries earlier beginning in continental Europe, advances in media and communications technologies allowed for information and ideas to spread more broadly and more quickly, which created
challenges for LDS authorities who sought to control Mormonism’s symbols and messages. For the LDS Church, this has been a particular problem with the advent and progression of information technologies, such as the Internet.

Campbell and Garner (2016) discuss some of the ways that the nature of religious practice and belief, along with the structure of religion itself, have experienced changes due, in large part, to the affordances of digital technologies, such as the ability that they give individuals to create religious networks that bypass traditional religious authority. They state that network society creates relationships that are “flexible rather than fixed,” and that these relationships are “loosely connected by needs and and preferences rather than tightly connected by tradition and institutions” (n.p.). They state that the Internet as a network, “empowers individuals and encourages new forms of interaction…” (n.p). The Internet allows those with access to communicate and share information with others in a way that transcends both time and space. Hoover (2013) describes how digital media allow people to see and hear things well beyond their local contexts. One implication of this is that as a wider array of ideas, symbols, and messages are encountered and transmitted across space by those participating in digital networks, common conceptions of otherness, difference, in-group devotion, sharing, etc. could be challenged and potentially even reimagined. On a similar note, the vast array of symbols and resources available online provide individuals with what Campbell (2012) refers to as a “rich reservoir of resources” for identity construction (p. 73). Another implication is that an awareness of the fact that space is being transcended coincides with an awareness that traditional, local religious authorities can be—and are being—transcended, as well. Digital networks make it much easier for members of a religious group to go to others within those networks—as opposed to going to their own appointed Church leaders—when they have questions or doubts about their faith.
These networks also allow information about a religion to be uploaded and widely disseminated without regard to the nature or sensitivity of that information to the religious institution. Campbell and Garner (2016) explain how the Internet “flatt[ens] traditional hierarchies,” encourag[es] instantaneous communication and response,” and “widen[s] access to sacred or once private information” (n.p.). Piff and Warburg (2005) state that “online group[s] can take discussions that are normally reserved for official administrators into a public forum and offer their own interpretations of religious beliefs” (p. 97). This, they argue, can create tensions between religious institutions and their members. That the ability for information to flow horizontally, and relatively freely, on the Internet has become a problem for the LDS Church, is evidenced by the fact that Church leaders have begun to speak more frequently about avoiding aspects of the Internet that might compromise a member’s belief in the Church. In February 2016, for example, at an address to Church Education System (CES) teachers, Elder M. Russell Ballard, one of the LDS Church’s 12 Apostles, spoke about the information crisis that the Internet has been creating for the Church, and for the many members who have been turning to the Internet for answers to their doctrinal and historical questions about the Church. Ballard instructed the CES teachers to try to get their students to go to them (the CES teachers) and to Church leaders for answers to their difficult questions, and not to the Internet. Ballard stated:

"Many of our young people are more familiar with Google than they are with the gospel, more attuned to the Internet than to inspiration, and more involved with Facebook than with faith… Teach them about the challenges they face when relying upon the Internet to answer questions of eternal significance. Remind them that James did not say, ‘If any of you lack wisdom, let him Google.’" (Ballard, 2016, n.p.)

As can be seen, the Internet has many implications for institutional and lived religion and spirituality. First, it provides a space where new sources of religious authority and interpretation can communicate their ideas to others in ways that challenge traditional sources of authority.
Second, it provides a space where members of religious institutions can discover information about their religions that was previously censored by the religious institution, hidden, or unknown to them. Third, it provides a space for individuals to openly reflect upon, and discuss their religious beliefs with others, which can cause them to question previously-held beliefs, and experiment with new ideas. This, in turn, can lead to shifts in individual religious practices, beliefs, and identities. This also has implications for the changing nature of religion (“from institutionalized religiosity to individual spirituality”), as was discussed in the section on secularization (Cloete, 2016, p. 4). Fourth, the Internet allows individuals to remain anonymous in their interactions, or to assume identities different from those that they maintain offline. Internet users who do not wish to be identified in the digital realm can select a pseudonym for their online posts and interactions. Additionally, Internet users can, to an extent, choose to keep their online interactions hidden from the general public by joining closed sites and communities that have restricted access. As Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) and Cowan (2005) argue, this allows individuals to express ideas, beliefs, and concerns that they may not be comfortable expressing with those in their offline circles. This may be particularly useful and promising for practicing Mormons who fear that friends, family members, and religious leaders may ostracize—or possibly even disown—their faith if they express doubts or concerns about the truth claims of the Church.

In this sense, the Internet provides a safe space where those with questions and doubts about their religion can find a sense of belonging among communities of like-minded individuals. This sense of belonging can help questioning and heterodox Mormons feel more comfortable in their search for meaning, and in their quest to discover and/or reformulate their identities. In short, the flattening of traditional religious hierarchies in the digital realm provides
individuals with the ability to produce and utilize new formulations of religious symbols and values, and to discover new contexts for creating relationships, communities, solidarities, and social networks (Hoover, 2011, p. 619). Finally, the Internet—and media, more broadly— WEaken the power of religious institutions by taking away some of the control that religious leaders have over their own symbols and messages. Hjarvard (2011) argues that media have developed a logic of their own, one that no longer necessarily conforms to the desires and demands of other social institutions. Media now frame and define religious issues in their own terms, which often leads to situations where religious authorities have to struggle to “resist media critique,” and to search for ways to regain at least some control of their own symbols and ideas (Cloete, 2016, p. 3).

On the other hand, digital media have provided traditional sources of religious authority with new means for disseminating, promoting, and controlling their messages. In chapter 4, I will discuss how the LDS Church has used digital media to launch public relations campaigns, conduct global missionary work, create communities for members and perspective members to interact with one another about the Church, and respond to challenges and criticism. Chen (2011) examines the Church’s extensive SEO efforts, and the work that is being done to bury potentially-damaging information under information that paints the Church in a positive light. One example of the Church’s use of the Internet to regain control over its narrative is the release of the Gospel Topics Essays to its official website, lds.org. The essays address the most controversial topics from LDS doctrine and history, topics such as polygamy, race and the priesthood, and physical evidence for the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, topics that Church leaders have commonly avoided, and even censored in the past. Due to the rapid spread of this information through digital channels, the Church was no longer able to ignore these
issues, and they had to be addressed. In this case, the essays were published with no date or author attached to them; they were simply uploaded to the website, almost as if the Church intended those viewing the essays to assume that the Church had always been transparent about the issues. This tactic is part of larger effort that has been referred to by Church leaders as “spiritual inoculation” (Ballard, 2016, n.p.). By digitally releasing the controversial information themselves—framed, of course, in such a manner that is least damaging to the Church’s credibility—Church leaders hope that they can regain control of the information, and the broader narratives that surround the most controversial issues.

Campbell (2012) examines some of the ways that the Internet has been both a threat and a tool of empowerment for traditional sources of religious authority. She describes how some authorities have begun to use the Internet to monitor the beliefs and behaviors of their members. This tactic has been employed—at least at the local level—by leaders of the LDS Church. Dr. John Dehlin, a former Mormon and religious podcaster, who will be discussed in greater detail below, is a well-known example—at least in the digital realm of Mormonism—of someone whose bishop and stake president used online content to discipline a member of the Church. When fellow members of Dehlin’s local ward discovered that he was posting podcast and blog content that questioned the Church’s official teachings, they brought the content to the attention of their bishop. Dehlin was asked to stop posting information online that could potentially damage the faith of other members. When Dehlin refused to stop posting the content, and insisted that he was helping the many members who had the same questions and doubts about the Church that he had, he was brought before an LDS Church court. In a move that has been compared on some level to the trial of Martin Luther almost five centuries prior, members of Dehlin’s ward and stake used excerpts from his blog posts and podcasts as evidence against him,
and he was excommunicated for apostasy. Several guests on Dehlin’s podcast have also shared stories about how their Facebook and blog posts resulted in their excommunication or disfellowshipping after fellow ward members brought the content to the attention of their local ward leaders.

Religion and media can no longer be thought of as separate realms. Hoover (2006) states that the two “…occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in late modernity” (p. 9). Religion has always been mediated in one way or another whether through books, art, rituals, sermons, architecture, etc., media have always been central to the practice of religion. At the same time, the media borrow and appropriate many tropes, symbols, and messages that are religious in nature. Today, the mediated nature of religion is more apparent than ever before. Religious symbols are transmitted via radio and television, sermons, sacred texts, and various instantiations of virtual religion are available online. Commercials, music videos, billboards, and television shows contain both subtle and perspicuous religious themes and messages. Some of this mediation is conducted by religious leaders who have come to accept and even depend upon modern communication channels to effectively disseminate their messages and maintain and build their congregations, but much of this mediation is now beyond the control of religious leaders—it has been appropriated by commercial interests who use it to sell and brand their products, or by individuals and communities who, as Hoover (2006) describes, are:

…thrust into the situation of the bricoleur, who in cobbling together from a variety of imageries, doctrines, texts, moral codes, and spiritual disciplines find new religious meaning and in so doing, often discover a nuance, an insight, an angle of vision that is revitalizing in its creativity. (p. 74)

The communities that will be examined in the case studies that follow demonstrate well the coalescence of media and religion. Many of the members of these communities use their
digital spaces to create, share, reassemble, and reject the doctrines, practices, and symbols of Mormonism. At the same time, the practices of the community members within these digital spaces could be argued to be a form of religion and/or spirituality in many respects, but that will be explained in the chapters that follow. In the next section, I will discuss Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, and explain how the members of Mormon-themed digital communities are using alternative forms of media to create and engage in a public sphere that has implications not only for the lives and identities of those participating in the communities, but also for Mormonism as a belief system. Here, I will also discuss how heterodox, post-, and non-Mormons in these digital communities might be considered a counterpublic, or, as Fraser (1992) describes them, members of a subordinated group who invent and circulate counter-discourses in the hopes of formulating “oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 123).

In the next section, I will also explain how alternative media play into the formation of digital LDS-themed communities and the work that their community members do, specifically when it comes to community members who desire to actively challenge certain aspects of mainstream Mormonism, or the LDS Church, as a whole. I will then discuss Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, and explain how the communities that I will be examining could be considered as contributing to the public sphere of religious discourse and action. The alternative media (blogs, Facebook pages, podcasts, etc.) used by members of these communities enable the creation of spaces that serve as a public sphere for orthodox Mormons, and for those who seek to criticize and challenge the Church and its leaders.

**Alternative Media and the Public Sphere**

For those who do not have the ability to send symbols through mass media channels, alternative media can serve as viable options for disseminating messages, building community,
and contesting and resisting dominant power regimes. Alternative media are defined by Lievrouw (2011) as media that, “employ or modify the communication artifacts, practices, and social arrangements of new information and communication technologies to challenge or alter dominant, expected, or accepted ways of doing society, culture, and politics (p. 51). Atton (2002) states that alternative media projects seek to be “participatory, emancipatory, non-commercial, authentic (i.e., faithful to a community’s point of view or experience), and anti-institutional (pp. 13-14). These technologies are called “participatory” because the barriers to participation that exist with legacy media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, do not exist in the same way with digital media. If someone has access to digital technology, then he or she can, in theory, make his or her voice heard by creating content for a blog, a Facebook group, or a podcast, or by commenting on, or circulating content created by other people and organizations. It should be noted, however, that just because an individual has a platform to make his or her voice heard does not mean that his or her voice necessarily will be heard. Many voices are blocked, crowded out, or silenced by the economic structure and nature of digital technologies, and by the sheer volume voices vying to be heard. Scholars continue to debate whether or not digital technologies have served to facilitate an increase in participatory democracy and in the ability to effect bottom-up social change—a discussion that will be taken up in the following section—but what is indisputable is that these technologies have provided new resources and channels for the dissemination of information, and that these resources and channels can potentially be used by anyone who has access to them.

Alternative media are often used to disseminate discourse that is outside the mainstream. The discourse that is created and disseminated through alternative media channels is commonly aimed at challenging established sources of power and authority; however, alternative media
channels and platforms can also be used as a means of support for established authority. Couldry (2010) describes how the spaces that are created for alternative discourse can also be considered sources of power because they give voice to those who would otherwise be silenced.

The case studies that follow will explore how alternative media are being used to both support and challenge the LDS Church, and to build up communities for post-Mormons who desire the sense of community that the LDS Church provided, but who choose not to believe or support LDS doctrines and practices. LDS-themed podcasts and podcast communities will be central to this exploration, as podcasting has become a common method for alternative sources of authority to spread their messages in the heterodox and post-Mormon realm. Podcasts are recorded audio files that are distributed on the Internet, as well as through iTunes, and a number of other apps. Podcasts are created by professional media organizations, such as CNN, BBC, NPR, etc., by other organizations, including major religious, economic, and cultural institutions, and by individuals who wish to make their voices heard. Often, podcasters monetize their podcast series through crowdfunding sites, such as Patreon, others charge a price to subscribe to the series, and others do not monetize their podcasts at all. There is a low barrier of entry to podcasting, which makes the medium appealing to amateurs. Wrather (2016) states that the word “podcasting” was first used in 2004, as a combination of the words “broadcasting” and “iPod.”

In the years since the term was created, hundreds of thousands of podcast series have been released. “The Podcast Consumer” (2018) states that there are currently over 500,000 active podcasts available in over 100 different languages on Apple’s iTunes. With such a large number of podcasts, one can find a podcast series on just about any topic, from deconstructions of every episode of the 90s sitcom, Full House (How Rude podcast), to an entire podcast (with 74 episodes and counting) dedicated to building community around the case of a young woman who
went missing in New Hampshire in 2004 (Missing Maura Murray podcast). The topic of Mormonism alone has had hundreds of podcasts dedicated to it. Podcasts contain both music and verbal information, and are often released in episodes on a regular and consistent schedule. Wrather (2016) states that “Podcasting combines radio’s intimacy with the portability and personalization of digital media forms to create a new and interesting space for media and cultural interaction” (p. 44). Berry (2006) explains that because podcasts are chosen by listeners as opposed to being offered by broadcasters, they often appeal to niche audiences, who choose the podcast content they want to listen to based upon their own interests.

Podcasts are an alternative media form that allows podcasters and their listeners to develop communities and spaces of resistance. Florini (2015) examines an informal network of black podcasters who sometimes refer to themselves as the “Chitlin’ Circuit” or “urban podcasters.” Florini describes how both the nature of the podcasts, and the podcasts themselves create “a contemporary digital iteration of enclave black social spaces” where black listeners can go to escape a hegemony that normalizes white culture (p. 209). As Florini states, “The conversational nature of these podcasts and their use of Black American cultural commonplaces, combined with the intimate qualities of radio-style audio, reproduce a sense of being in Black social spaces such as the barber/beauty shop or church (p. 209). Florini goes on to explain that these podcasts are like spaces of refuge for their listener communities—spaces where “Black Americans can gather free from the policing of the white gaze…” (p. 214). Harris-Lacewell (2004) describes how these spaces—spaces that facilitate the building of communities—provide platforms for “important ideological work, such as the construction of worldview and collective identity” (as cited in Florini, 2015). Although listening to a podcast is often an isolated, individual experience, many podcasts have corresponding digital forums where listeners can
gather together and exchange their thoughts and ideas; this is where a lot of the resistance work is done, as community members can engage in alternative discourses, and plan gatherings, protests, and other events that support and promote the themes and messages of the podcasts. Other scholars have discussed how the conversational, personable nature of podcasts can create the feeling that the listener is with family or friends (Bull, 2007; Florini, 2015).

Scholz, Selge, Still, and Zimmermann (2008) apply an analysis of the potential of alternative media to challenge hegemony and dominant discourses by examining the emergence of an online Muslim counterpublic created through listener communities that form around Muslim-themed podcasts and videocasts. At times, the digital content reinforces existing authority structures, but at other times, it challenges these structures. By granting “the possibility of self-representation not only to established groups and institutions, but also to marginalized or even persecuted groups,” these digital technologies provide an opportunity for those at the margins to challenge and deconstruct authority structures (p. 466), and “to establish new, or egalitarian structures of inner-Muslim discourses (p. 473). One Muslim-themed content podcaster, Zahed Amanullah, uses his forum to build a more independent-minded Mulism community. Like a number of other Muslim-themed podcasters, Amanullah believes that the purpose of Muslim media should be to, “…empower the Muslim community to take its fate into its own hands by generating a critical understanding of Islam and all structures related to it” (p. 505). He does not believe that Muslims need to be continually lectured week after week on ‘what they should be doing in the name of Islam…,’ this is something that they can determine for themselves through their own studies and reasoned discussions (p. 505). Scholz et. al (2008) describe how many of these podcasts focus on “concepts such as critical thinking, control from the bottom, and the right of every Muslim to determine for himself what Islam means to him…”
However, they point out that the podcasts are also “characterized by a high level of intellectual abstraction in regard to religious issues, and even relativizes Islam’s universalistic claims” (p. 506).

Podcasts, as well as other forms of alternative media, can provide a space for marginalized groups to discuss, criticize, deconstruct, and challenge the dominant structures that they feel have marginalized or “othered” them. Certain podcasts, blogs, Facebook groups, and comment sections are often rich sites of critical discourse and engagement, of counter-hegemony, and of potential grassroots movements that can confront power structures and work to incite change. In these spaces, communities often form, and within these communities, community members rethink what it means to be a Mormon, or a Muslim, or a black person living in America. Traditionally-accepted definitions and configurations are challenged, and new meanings and conceptualizations are formed. This process has important implications for the members of these communities, as it plays into how their identities are conceived, altered, and performed. Unlike traditional legacy media, alternative media can create spaces that are participatory and interactive, discursive, agonistic spaces where liked-minded individuals can connect and engage in non-mainstream, reasoned discussion about matters that have a bearing on their lives, such as religion.

The Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere is useful for explaining how publics and counterpublics are formed—whether those formations are taking place in dominant or marginal spaces. Because the public sphere depends upon communication and upon the circulation of symbols and ideas, media are essential to understanding how the public sphere operates. This research is built around the rise of a Mormon-themed public sphere—what might be called a religious public.
sphere—in the digital realm, consisting of public bodies that gather digitally to discuss the doctrines, practices, and effects on individuals and society of the LDS institution. In these digital gatherings, individuals along the Mormon belief spectrum use rational discourse to affirm, criticize, debate, and challenge various aspects of the Church. For the more orthodox Mormons, digital communities provide a space to share testimony and faith-promoting experiences with other members; to reach out to less active, inactive, and non-Mormons in what is often referred to as online missionary work; and to uplift—and be uplifted—through spiritual discussions with other members. Through these discussions, active members often reaffirm their faith in, and dedication to the Church. For many heterodox and former Mormons, digital communities provide a space where change and alternatives to traditional Mormonism can be imagined and openly discussed.

For orthodox Mormons, digital communities have served as a space for exchanging information, recruitment, discussion, and for raising awareness about both religious and secular issues. For example, orthodox Mormons used digital communities to discuss and mobilize support for the passage of California’s Proposition 8 in 2008. For heterodox and post-Mormons, online communities have served—and continue to serve as discursive spaces where grassroots movements and mobilization against certain LDS Church policies and practices can take place. Most recently, digital communities were instrumental in organizing a Protect LDS Children march, which took place on March 30th, 2018 in Downtown Salt Lake City. The march was successful enough to be covered by many of the local news outlets in Utah and Idaho. In the process of discussing issues related to Mormonism and post-Mormonism, these individuals form public opinion on certain issues, and occasionally mobilize support for their causes. Indeed,
Habermas (1962) describes how those who participate in the public sphere often use media channels as forms of subversion and resistance to authority.

Jurgen Habermas refers to the spaces where such discussion takes place as “the public sphere” because private individuals use these spaces to come together as public bodies, and engage in critical, rational discourse, and debate issues in an effort to shape public opinion, and reach consensus on issues that have a bearing on how society is governed. Habermas defines the public sphere thusly, “the public sphere consists in voluntary associations of private citizens united in a common aim, to make use of their own reason in unconstrained discussion between equals” (Finlayson, 2005, p. 10). Habermas, a second-generation scholar of the Frankfurt School, began his examination of the public sphere out of a desire to move away from the pessimism of the first generation of Frankfurt School scholars, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who believed that advanced industrial society had rendered individuals incapable of any meaningful action that might improve their social conditions under the constraints of late capitalist society. According to Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), the culture industry or, the conditions of Western capitalist society, had degraded to the point where even culture itself had been fully commoditized. In the culture industry, “everything has been subsumed under the logic of the mass market, and capitalism has begun to invent false needs so that capitalism itself can satisfy those needs…Life in the late capitalist era is a constant initiation rite. Everyone must show that he wholly identifies himself with the power which is belaboring him” (p. 17).

Although Habermas agrees that capitalism and consumer society have altered the nature and effectiveness of the public sphere, he also believes that the power of individuals to act in their own self-interests and to effect change is more nuanced than did Adorno and Horkheimer. In his work, Habermas describes the structural transformation of the public sphere in late
modernity. Ideally, the public sphere would be open to all individuals, it would be free from interference and coercion from state actors, powerful organizations, and from hierarchies; each individual engaging in the public sphere would be autonomous, and would be able to contribute his or her own rational arguments and ideas. Due in large part to the growth of private industry, the public sphere, Habermas argues, has been refueudalized, meaning that public discussion and the formation of public opinion have become largely subjected to the influence and even manipulation of powerful organizations. Examples of this influence and manipulation abound, perhaps most notably in the political economy, where, in spite of the expressed desires of the public on a variety of issues, corporations are able to use money and influence to exert power on state actors, who then implement policy that runs contrary to public opinion. Additionally, large media and marketing organizations, who are also interested in their bottom lines, have the power to set the agenda and shape the nature of public discussion by widely circulating certain messages and symbols, while neglecting to circulate others. This is particularly true for mass media that only allow for one-way communication, such as television and radio. The refeudalization of the public sphere means that there is no longer a level playing field among those who influence and contribute to discursive spaces.

Other scholars have also written about the limitations of the public sphere and of public sphere theory. Like Habermas, Fraser (1992) believes that the public sphere “is indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic political practice,” but she asserts that Habermas’ model accounted only for the bourgeois, and that a new post-bourgeois model is needed in the era of late capitalist democracy. According to Fraser, Habermas’ model of the public sphere fails to take exclusion into account. Fraser argues that Habermas’ model favors men and excludes women and other marginalized groups. Fraser describes how, in addition to the bourgeois public
sphere that Habermas’ theorizes, there were (and are) a number of other competing public spheres, which Fraser refers to as “subaltern counterpublics,” which consist of nationalists, peasants, women, the working class, etc. In order to fully understand the nature and the potential of the public sphere, it is necessary to examine these subaltern counterpublics and how they interact with—and in opposition to—the greater whole. Fraser argues that “the public sphere was always constituted by conflict,” as it is within the public sphere that reasoned debate and discussion about alternative (and potentially better) approaches to structuring and governing society clash with existing approaches. By excluding minority and marginalized publics, there is a great disparity between those who are able to participate in the shaping of society and those who are left out.

Jodi Dean’s critique of modern public sphere theory, which takes digital technology into account, is more general. When the Internet became widely available to the public in the early-1990s, scholars began to debate whether greater interconnectivity between individuals, coupled with greater access to information would provide the conditions for participatory democracy, and a once-again flourishing public sphere. Scholars on one side argued that the same social and economic imbalances would be carried over to the digital realm, and scholars on the other side argued that the Internet would provide the conditions necessary for a flattening of hierarchies, which would provide greater opportunities for unimpeded horizontal communication. Dean is skeptical about the democratizing effect of digital technologies because she believes that they simply turn communication itself into another product that becomes captured and commoditized in the capitalist system, which effectively disempowers any meaningful political action. Dean refers to this concept as “communicative capitalism,” which she believes is particularly
damaging since it creates a false sense of the liberating nature of technology when, in fact, the
technology only further alienates and entraps individuals.

Here, Dean (2010) invokes Debord’s concept of the spectacle to illustrate what
communicative capitalism looks like. She explains how the communication flows that take place
in digital networks are often nothing more than noise and spectacle, where, using Debord’s
words, she states, “the uses of media guarantee a kind of eternity of noisy insignificance… a
disintegrated, networked, spectacular circuit” (p. 112). In Dean’s estimation, the Internet has not
provided the space for the type of rational discourse, debate, and deliberation necessary for a
healthy and effective public sphere; in fact, it has done quite the opposite. Dean (2014) states:

The contemporary setting of electronically mediated subjectivity is one of infinite doubt
and ultimate reflexivization. There is always another option, link, opinion, nuance, or
contingency that we haven’t taken into account, some particular experience of some other
who could be potentially damaged or disenfranchised, a better deal, perhaps even a
cure… the very conditions of possibility for adequation (for determining the criteria by
which to assess whether a decision or answer is, if not good, then at least adequate) have
been foreclosed. (pp. 212-213)

Dean believes that there has been a decline in symbolic efficiency, and that in the digital realm,
this decline has led to a flux of uncertainty. On the Internet, it is impossible for us to ever really
know how many people are watching, or are being reached, or are following us, which makes it
impossible to form strong, enduring connections. Dean does not completely rule out the potential
of the Internet to assist in affecting positive change, but she seems to believe that if any critical
movement or cause is to develop into something meaningful and effective, it must also have an
offline component—physical bodies in the streets, so to speak, standing up to that which is
oppressing them, meeting with one another, engaging in discussions, organizing, planning, etc.
Dean believes that Occupy Wall Street evolved into the national movement that it did because it
had this physical component.
Although I believe there is a lot of validity to Dean’s critique of the potential of the public sphere in the digital realm, I do not believe that the same foreclosures she speaks of exist (at least not to the same inhibiting extent) in the digital realm of Mormonism. For one thing, Dean’s work centers largely on a critique of an entire economic and political system, rooted in capitalism and consumerism, where there are countless factors and nuances that must be taken into consideration when challenging that system, and when accounting for the efficacy of that challenge through research and critique. With digital communities and Mormonism, the area of focus is much smaller—much more concentrated. I like to think of digital communities and Mormonism as a sort of much more manageable microcosm of the political and economic structures of which Dean speaks. Where the broader economic and political systems have so much to account for, the Mormon realm is always about one thing: the LDS religion, and how that religion provides symbols and resources for meaning making in peoples’ lives, whether they use those symbols and resources to accept and integrate the religion into their sense of self, or use them to critique and challenge the religion in discovering their sense of self. In the public sphere of digital Mormonism, the online sharing, discussions, and debates lead to actual, observable, real outcomes that shape both the lives of those participating in the public sphere, and the nature of the institution around which that public sphere is built. Even if the same foreclosures and lack of symbolic efficiency that Dean speaks of did exist in the realm of digital Mormonism, the fact that many people who belong to Mormon-themed digital communities are also meeting, organizing, deliberating, protesting and effecting actual change in offline settings indicates that their public sphere is potentially effective and worth examining.

Michael Warner’s work elucidates that which constitutes a public, and explains how subaltern, or counterpublics (as described by Fraser above) can rise up to challenge a more
dominant public. Warner’s model will be especially helpful in examining how Mormon Stories—a digital and physical community consisting mostly of heterodox and post-Mormons that will be examined in depth in chapter five—formed and operates both as a space of meaning making, and as a counterpublic that has been influential enough in critiquing and challenging some of mainstream Mormonism’s practices and policies, that LDS Church leaders have acknowledged the community in private settings, modified—if slightly—some of their policies in ways that had been encouraged and desired by many heterodox Mormon community members, and even excommunicated a number of the community’s members, including its founder, Dr. John Dehlin, for apostasy.

Warner (2002), building on Habermas’ work on the public sphere, theorizes the concepts of publics and counterpublics, as well as the way that publics and counterpublics come into being. Warner describes a public as a space of discourse that is organized by nothing other than discourse itself. Like Habermas, Warner develops his work around serial publications. When a magazine, or a book, or a newspaper article is written and published, it is not addressed to anyone, and so, it is addressed to everyone, as if the article were saying, “Hey, you!”, but using “you” in the informal, plural form. Those who heed the informal address, and pick up a copy of the paper, or the magazine, or the book, become what Warner calls the “public” for that particular text; in other words, publics are formed when individuals become addressed by texts. The population as a whole is, therefore, always a potential public for any given text, and most members of a population belong to a number of different publics. Ackerman and Coogan (2010) suggest that a public consists of those who recognize themselves as being compelled by a certain text. Because the members of any given public have consumed the text—and often continue to consume the texts—that shape them into a public, they are able to engage in discourse about that
text and, in many instances, act on the information contained in the text, as well as on the
discourse that is created as a result of the continual, reflexive circulation of texts. According to
Warner (2002), a counterpublic is also a public, but one that “maintains at some level, conscious
or not, an awareness of its subordinate status” (p. 119). Warner states that counterpublics:

…differ markedly in one way or another from the premises that allow the dominant
culture to understand itself as a public… Counterpublics are publics, too. They work by
many of the same circular postulates. It might even be claimed that, like dominant
publics, they are ideological in that they provide a sense of active belonging that masks or
compensates for the real powerlessness of human agents in capitalist society. (p. 81)

According to Warner, a public meets the following criteria: first, it is self-organized;
second, it is a relationship among strangers; third, the address that forms the public is both
personal and impersonal; fourth, the public is constituted through mere attention; fifth, it is the
social sphere created by the reflexive circulation of discourse; sixth, it acts historically according
to the temporality of its circulation; and seventh, it is poetic world-making. According to
Ackerman and Coogan (2010), “Counterpublics engage in alternative rhetorical strategies while
seeking to effect change in a more-dominant public sphere” (n.p.). The first four criteria are
incontrovertibly met by the Mormon Stories podcast community (MSPC), as will be discussed in
greater detail in chapter five, but the fifth criterion, “a public is created by the reflexive
circulation of discourse,” requires a little more unpacking. According to Warner:

No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, or even a single
medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a
public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. (p. 62)

In criterion five and in criterion six, Warner discusses the concept of circulation. He states that
publics come to expect—and even be dependent upon—the punctuality of circulation. He
discusses how, in the late 17th century, Whig booksellers in London, England would receive
news reports from all over the city each afternoon. The booksellers’ clients: lawyers, ill-affected
citizens, ill-affected gentry, emissaries, etc., would be able to access these reports from a central catalog that could be ordered from the copyists. Warner explains how oftentimes, these reports would even circulate well beyond England, but whatever the variance in the reach of the circulation of these reports, the constant was the punctuality—a timing to which the public could adjust itself. This structure, this organization is what allowed for the public to grow, for the discourse to continue, and for a public sphere—such as described by Habermas—to come into being. As Warner states:

In order for a text to be public, we must recognize it not simply as a diffusion to strangers, but also as a temporality of circulation. The informer’s report makes this temporal dimension clear, calling attention not just to the (possibly seditious) connections forged among strangers, but also to the punctual circulation that turns those exchanges into a scene with its own expectations. (p. 66)

It is worth mentioning, however, that by “punctuality,” Warner does not strictly mean that a text is dated, time-stamped and disseminated to the same places at the same times at perfectly-calculated intervals. He describes, in a similar manner to Williams in his work on television flows, how punctuality has also come to include flows of prime time, the news hour, etc.

Warner goes on to describe the reflexive aspect of circulation, by which he means that members of the public are not simply passive consumers of the circulated texts, but that they relate to what is being written or stated, and that they are able to think about these things and formulate their own opinions and ideas. Warner describe how this reflexivity likely also came about in the 17th century, this time in France, when various serials began to publish reader letters and comments, so that “readers participated in the circulation of judgments” (p. 67). By participating in the discourse, members of the public began to be able to play an active role in the process of deciding what was important and what deserved to be talked about – also contributing to the idea of the public sphere, as theorized by Habermas.
Warner then moves on to the sixth criterion, which also focuses on circulation, but which expands into a discussion of the political implications of circulation. As Warner states:

Not all circulation happens at the same rate, of course, and this accounts for the dramatic differences among publics in their relation to possible scenes of activity. A public can only act within the temporality of the circulation that gives it existence. The more punctual and abbreviated the circulation, and the more discourse indexes the punctuality of its own circulation, the closer a public stands to politics. At longer rhythms or more continuous flows, action becomes harder to imagine. (p. 68)

Warner describes how, in modern times, politics takes much of its character from the temporality of the headline, not from the archive. If newspapers and magazines aren’t continually up-to-date in the headlines and messages they circulate, the issues become stale, it becomes more difficult for a public to develop a sense of urgency, let alone coherence, discourses about certain issues become outmoded before they even begin, and engaging in any effective political action becomes difficult, if not impossible. Circulation, with the right timing—dependable timing, and with a process that allows the public to reflexively become involved in the creation of discourse becoming, themselves, a part of the circulation process is, according to Warner, the only way in which a public can play an active role in politics. As atomized, voiceless, disconnected individuals, existing only peripherally to the circulation of texts, as Dean imagines is the case with the Internet, people have no way to effect change by participating in the political process.

As to the final criterion, which states that a public is poetic world-making. Warner describes this criterion as encompassing the “performative dimension of public discourse,” where those belonging to a certain public or counterpublic “…recognize themselves only as being already the persons they are addressed as being, and as already belonging to the world that is condensed in their discourse” (p. 422). In other words, publics and counterpublics shape their identities through the circulation of texts that fortify the ideals upon which they were created.

*Mormon Stories* was created for the purpose of “exploring, celebrating, and challenging Mormon
culture in constructive ways” (“Mormon Stories,” 2015, n.p.). Mormon Stories also works to validate Mormons who may have doubts or questions about their religion. By continuing to produce and circulate texts that address the fact that there are doubting, questioning, heterodox, liberal-minded Mormons who wish to see more transparency, and that address the inconsistencies in Mormon doctrine and teachings, *Mormon Stories* fortifies the ideals upon which its public was created.

Warner’s model will be helpful not only for examining the nature of heterodox Mormon digital communities, but also for examining the ways that identity is self-reflexively discussed and performed through the circulation of texts and discourses within these communities. Warner’s model also contributes to an understanding of how alternative media, in this case: podcasts, blogs, and Facebook groups, can serve to create a rich and engaging public sphere. In the final section of this literature review, I will briefly expand on Homi Bhabha’s concept of third spaces, a concept which will help to explain how digital communities become sites of cultural production, in-between spaces that allow for new ways of imagining, expressing, contesting, negotiating, and reconstructing identity and the religious.

**Third Spaces**

Third Spaces theory provides one final theoretical lens through which LDS-themed digital communities will be examined in this dissertation. Stemming from the concept of the “third place,” which is the place that exists between home and work, the third space, in this work, might be thought of as the space that exists digitally between the physical space of the LDS Church, and the physical space of the home. (see Oldenberg, 1989) Homi Bhabha’s conceptualization of the third space, which arises out of his work in postcolonial theory, imagines an ambivalent subjectivity that arises when the colonizer attempts to colonize and
subjugate the individuals of a given territory. The third space that arises is one of a continual process of cultural production distinct from both the culture of the colonizer, and the culture of the colonized; it arises from the struggle and the negotiations that take place when the culture of colonizer is resisted. The colonized subject is not complicit, but he or she is also not able to entirely disregard the power and influence of the colonizer; thus, a third space arises. Hoover and Echchaibi (2014) point out that:

Bhabha’s ‘third spaces’ suggest an ambivalent subjectivity which is a fluctuating process between...two positions...These third spaces for Bhabha are liminal and interstitial sites where cultural meaning is not simply reflected but actively produced by subjects who are constantly interpellated to resist the monolithic dominance of hegemonic power. (p. 17)

Hoover and Echchaibi remain open to the nature of the positions between which these third spaces can arise and exist. For example, they can be found between the private and the public, between institutions and individual practice, between authority and autonomy, between tradition and secularism, and even between “the first space of legacy media and the second space of entirely individual or solipsistic articulation and action” (p. 13). The important thing—the factor that remains consistent—is that these third spaces are sites of disruption and invention, “…of imagined possibilities of what values such as community, authenticity, and civility, among other could be in a presumably open terrain of non-linear thinking” (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014, p. 17). As Bhabha (1990) states, they are “new area[s] of negotiation of meaning and representation” that arise through the process of cultural hybridity (p. 211, as cited in Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014). Most importantly, they “[unsettle] the singularity of dominant power narratives and [open] up new avenues of identification and enunciation” (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014, p. 18).
The fact that third spaces are “in-between” spaces has important implications for the type of discussions, work, and play that can be carried out and performed within them. For example, Mormons who doubt or question Mormonism, but who feel pressured by family, friends, and their LDS communities to perform orthodox Mormon identities in the first space of the home, and the second space of a Mormon religious setting, can use the digital third space—their online communities—to imagine and express an identity that they believe is more authentic than the identity they feel required to perform in their offline settings. Additionally, heterodox Mormons, as well as post-Mormons can use these third spaces to find new meaning and negotiate and/or reconstruct their identities in these digital, hybrid spaces that exist between what they considered themselves to be, and what they hope to become. The freedom to play, resist, and explore new meanings that the third space provides makes this space important for self-reflexive identity construction, and for feeling a sense of belonging in the wake of losing the LDS Church as a community.

Another important aspect of third spaces is that they can be characterized by the quality of “as-if-ness.” As mentioned above, the practices that individuals engage in within their digital religious communities are reflexive. As Hoover and Echchaibi (2014) note:

There is thus an “as-if-ness” to these practices. People act “as-if” they were bounded contexts of discourse and interaction. They act “as-if” they were communities of shared experience and sentiment. They act “as-if” they were contexts of public discourse and public deliberation. They act “as-if” these were powerful media for the communication of ideas and… “as-if” the various expressions they craft in these spaces represent grounded, received truth claims for known communities of shared experience and value. (p. 13)

This quality of “as-if ness” plays a role in creating powerful imaginaries that bind community members together and give them a sense of purpose and authenticity in the work that they are doing. By imaging their digital communities as legitimate sites of struggle, production, and meaning creation, the practices that take place within these spaces may have actual, discernible
consequences for the identities, beliefs, and practices of individuals, both within the digital space, and in offline settings, as well. For example, the “as-if-ness” quality of digital communities consisting of heterodox and post-Mormons may provide some community members with the confidence to be more open with family members and friends about their challenging religious questions and their doubt.

As I will demonstrate in the case studies that follow, digital communities of heterodox and former post-Mormons constitute third spaces where alternative discourses and beliefs can be imagined, created, and practiced. These spaces exist between the Church and the home, between committed belief and outright religious disaffection, between past and future selves, in the self-reflexive reconstruction that serves as a bridge between the old and the new. Through discourse, these spaces challenge the hegemony of orthodox Mormonism, and open up opportunities for alternative sources of religious authority to emerge. These spaces also serve as a public sphere because, like the public sphere articulated by Habermas, they serve as loci where individuals come together to discuss issues of importance, form public opinion, and, in some instances, take action to challenge dominant values based on the opinions that are formed. At the center of these affordances lie the media, which provide the communicative channels necessary for these spaces and practices to be enacted.

**Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How are orthodox Mormons using digital technologies promote their religion and to express their religious identities?

2. How are heterodox Mormons using digital technologies, such as podcasts and other alternative media, to find meaning, build community, and negotiate the challenges that result from shifting religious beliefs?
3. How are post-Mormons using digital technologies, such as podcasts and other alternative media, to find meaning and negotiate their identities in the wake of their departures from the LDS Church?

4. In what ways, if any, have digital technologies, such as the Internet and alternative media, contributed to change within the LDS Church?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this study was to examine the digital communities that arise—and the practices and meaning-making that occur within those communities—at various regions along the Mormon Belief Spectrum, from practicing, self-identified orthodox Mormons to heterodox, less active, non-believing, and post-Mormons. In order to best understand these communities, their members, and their practices with regard to media, I have spent the past several years participating in a number of Mormon-themed digital and corresponding offline communities that have been created for different groups of Mormons all along the spectrum. I have attended official Church meetings and more loosely-structured gatherings, I have participated in community activities and conferences, and I have spoken with hundreds of Mormons both informally, at social gatherings and community events, and formally, during my one-on-one, in-depth interviews. Additionally, I have listened to thousands of hours of Mormon-themed podcast content, consisting of everything from Mormon history lessons, to panel discussions, to long-form interviews with everyone from LDS General Authorities, to LDS academics and public scholars, to everyday members who fell into faith crises and ended up
leaving the Church, for one reason or another. In this chapter, I will discuss, in greater detail, the methods that I used to gather and analyze the data for each of my case studies. I will begin by discussing why I chose to use a qualitative, naturalistic approach before moving into a discussion of discourse analysis, participant observation, and interviewing, and how I applied these approaches to my own work. I will conclude by positioning myself as a researcher and providing a description of how my own background and experience with the LDS faith both limited and strengthened this research.

**A Qualitative Approach**

This study utilized a qualitative, naturalistic approach to gathering and analyzing data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that the naturalistic approach is the paradigm of choice for virtually all inquiries that seek to examine social and behavioral phenomena. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to immerse himself or herself “in the details and the specifics of the data,” in their natural environment, in order to discover “important categories, dimensions, and interrelationships” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990, p. 40). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Della Porta (2014) point out, some of the words commonly used to describe qualitative research are: unstructured, emergent, orientative, and adaptable. A researcher using a qualitative approach will often modify his or her original research questions and theories throughout the data-gathering process, as new information is continually acquired. Qualitative researchers often combine multiple approaches in order to increase the reliability of their findings. In this study, I triangulated my research by utilizing three qualitative data-gathering methods: discourse analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. I will briefly describe each of these in turn and address how they were used in gathering data for each of my case studies.
Discourse Analysis

Lynch (2005) states that discourse analysis “invites us to identify how popular cultural texts reproduce, develop, or challenge particular cultural discourses, and to think critically about the implications of the discourses presented in these texts” (p. 149). Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) describe a discourse as, “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world) (p. 1). They go on to explain that “our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect our world, identities and social relations but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1). In other words, the social world is constructed through discourse; the values, mores, beliefs, and power structures of a given culture or society are built upon—and reproduced through—the dominant discourses that exist within that culture or society. Or, as Foucault states, discourses “systematically form the objects about which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). On the other hand, discourse can also serve as a form of social action used to challenge or alter already-existing dominant discourses. By examining the discourses that exist within given texts, the researcher can interpret how those texts, and the person (or people) who created them, challenge or perpetuate existing dominant discourses, and make meaning for themselves, and for the communities to which they belong.

In this study, I employed discourse analysis to determine how Mormons operating within the three broad categories along the spectrum (orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormon) create and express their identities and perpetuate, uphold, or challenge the dominant discourses within mainstream Mormonism. The texts examined in this study were drawn from a variety of sources that fell under the broad umbrella of Mormonism. In addition to searching through Mormon-themed individual and community blogs, I actively participated in several Facebook communities that had been created for Mormons of varying levels of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, from the active, faithful Mormon to the post-Mormon who seemed bent on ridiculing and
bringing down the Church. From 2013 to 2018, I received Facebook updates from these communities, frequently read through their posts and comments, and occasionally contributed to the discussion by making a comment or asking a question of my own. Additionally, I searched for common themes and narratives in material produced and endorsed by the Church, and in the comment sections on pro-Mormon and anti-Mormon blogs, websites, and YouTube videos. I also examined material from General Conference addresses, the Church’s official magazines, and other Mormon-themed magazines, such as *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*.

The greatest amount of time spent engaging with texts came in the form of listening to Mormon-themed podcasts. Hundreds of Mormon-themed podcasts have been created that target audiences all along the Mormon Belief Spectrum. There are pro-Mormon podcasts, many of which are designed to provide spiritual thoughts and uplifting messages to members, and others that provide content from General Conference and interviews with Church leaders. Many members consider these podcasts an essential, faith-promoting part of their day. The podcasts that were created for Mormons who question and/or doubt their faith are also very popular because, for many Mormons experiencing faith crises, or for those who have recently left the Church, these podcasts are the entry point for what they consider to be crucial conversations about questions and issues they would be shunned or looked down upon for asking in Church. For the post-Mormons many of these podcasts provide a breath of fresh air—a chance to make fun of, and laugh at some of the doctrines and practices they once took very seriously. From 2010 to 2017, I listened to thousands of hours of podcasts across each of the above categories. I listened to podcasts that included: panel discussions, in-depth interviews, personal stories, discussions with Mormon studies scholars and other academics, and even amateurs using the open format of podcasting as a platform for voicing their disapproval of the Church mixed with
irreverent humor. I also frequently mined the corresponding public sphere of online podcast discussion boards for any common themes and narratives that might arise in the communities that were built around each podcast. These podcasts, and the comments and discussions that they inspired, provided a rich source of texts upon which to conduct a discourse analysis.

**Participant Observation**

As part of my ethnographic fieldwork, I conducted participant observation at a number of sites, both online and offline, between 2014 and 2017. Balsiger and Lambelet (2014) describe three core aspects that, together, define participant observation. The first of these aspects is *collecting firsthand data*. Levi-Strauss (1963) said that observation is a prerequisite of theorization and, by conducting firsthand observations in the field, researchers conducting participant observations can more readily examine and describe the interactions between firsthand data and existing theory. (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014). The second aspect is *moving the observation scale*. This aspect explains how participant observation is more than just simply observing a group from a distance. A thorough, trustworthy, and accurate participant observation requires the researcher to position himself or herself within the group to observe interactions and phenomena from within so he or she can see, as Geertz (1973) describes, whether or not a participant is blinking or winking. The close scale of observation required for participant observation allows the researcher to obtain this fine-grained information. The final aspect of participant observation is *experiencing*. While interviews and focus groups seek information through inquiry, participant observation seeks information through experience, specifically, from the experiences of the researcher in his or her field observations. (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014).

This study applied these three aspects of participant observation both digitally, and offline. The digital component was conducted at many of the same sites where texts were
selected and analyzed for my discourse analysis. Facebook groups and discussion threads on blog posts and websites for Mormon-themed podcasts were an abundant source of insight and information about how orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormons interact with one another, and engage topics related to Mormonism. LDS General Conference weekends each April and October were times of particularly-heightened activity and enthusiasm at digital locations representing Mormon-themed communities all along the belief spectrum.

As for offline observations, I had the opportunity to attended several events and conferences in Utah and Colorado, a number of which were created for the communities that had formed online around various Mormon-themed podcasts. Some of these events were designed specifically for post-Mormons who were looking for community and friendship to fill the space in their lives that Mormonism once filled. Others were retreats and activities designed for heterodox Mormons seeking answers to difficult questions, or attempting to navigate through a faith crisis. I also attended LDS Church meetings and Church-sponsored events in dozens of wards throughout the Rocky Mountain and Midwest regions of the United States. Attending these events provided me with a profusion of data about how orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormons build community, navigate the various, often-contradicting aspects of their identities, and find peace with their relationships to the LDS Church. My offline observations also helped me to better flesh out the differences that exist between digital and offline practices.

**In-Depth Interviews**

Della Porta (2014) describes interviews as “the most widely used technique for gathering information of different types” (p. 228). In-depth interviews can be a very effective method for gathering meaningful empirical data because they allow the researcher to gather the reflections of the interviewees by hearing what they, themselves, have to say about their thoughts, beliefs,
ideas, and experiences. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) suggest that interviews are particularly well-suited to understanding the social actor’s knowledge and experience because interviews are ports of entry into a person’s ideologies and worldviews. For this study, I utilized in-depth interviews as the third and final method in my triangulated, qualitative approach to gathering data.

Purposive sampling was used in this study to recruit interview participants from both online and offline populations. As Patton (1990) describes, purposive sampling gives the researcher the ability to select a set of interview subjects that will provide for maximum variation, thus giving voice to the many specifics that exist within a population. By employing the use of purposive sampling, I was able to continue to select interview subjects from the various populations until I had reached the determination that redundancy had been achieved, and no new information was forthcoming. In other words, I continued to conduct interviews until I determined through a constant comparative analysis of the data, that all cases and accounts had been taken into consideration and a thick description of the communities could be articulated.

Listening to hundreds of hours of podcast interviews and panel discussions related to the topic that I was planning to study helped a great deal when it came to initially crafting my own interview guide. Even before I began recruiting interviewees, I had a pretty good idea of why more and more Mormons were beginning to question their faith, of why many of these were choosing to leave the LDS Church, and of some of the measures that the Church was taking to address and deal with these issues. In many cases, having this background knowledge allowed me to approach the interviewees with an empathy and understanding of what they were experiencing. Indeed, my own background as a believing Mormon, and my own participation in many of the digital communities across the belief spectrum also served in helping me better respond and relate to the interviewees.
Throughout the research process, I was able to interview men and women from several of the various digital communities across the Mormon Belief Spectrum. The interviews consisted of formal, in-depth interviews and also informal conversations with 19 orthodox Mormons, 25 heterodox Mormons, and 12 post-Mormons. The interviews lasted from 25 minutes to two and a half hours, and each of the interviewees agreed to participate in short follow-up questions and interviews, if needed. In some cases, these follow-ups were necessary and helpful. The interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 74. To recruit interviewees from the digital communities, I posted interview requests stating who I was, what I was doing, and what I hoped to accomplish to three discussion boards that corresponded to three popular Mormon-themed podcasts: one designed specifically for believing Mormons (and for Mormons who desired to maintain their belief and activity in the Church), one for heterodox, middle-ground Mormons (Mormons with questions and doubts about their faith, Mormons who wished to see more progressivism and inclusivity from the Church, and Mormons experiencing faith crises, whether active or inactive), and one designed for post-Mormons (Mormons who recognized that the Church, to some extent, and at some point, played an important role in their lives, but who no longer wished to affiliate with the mainstream LDS Church, whether they had officially resigned their Church membership, or not). The data from these interviews will be discussed in the case studies that comprise chapters five and six. I also recruited some of my interviewees through conversations that arose during events I attended for my participant observations, and during my visits to Mormon wards in Colorado, South Dakota, and Utah.

When possible, I preferred to conduct interviews either face-to-face, or using video chat software, such as Skype or FaceTime, but for the interviewees who did not have access to this software, or for interviewees who did not feel comfortable with face-to-face or video interviews,
phone calls, or online chat interviews were conducted. For all face-to-face, video, and phone call interviews, the interviewees agreed to have their interviews audiotaped for transcription purposes. These interviews were invaluable in helping me to better understand the experiences, beliefs, and media-related practices of those engaging in Mormon-themed digital communities. The interviews also helped me to better understand why those participating in these communities create and consume Mormon-themed texts, and what they hope to accomplish, or see accomplished from the creation and consumption of these texts.

**The Insider-Outsider Approach**

In concluding this chapter, I feel that it is important that I articulate my own standpoint with regard to Mormonism, both digitally and offline, as such an articulation will help to elucidate both the strengths and the weaknesses of my position as a researcher. Patton (1990) addresses the importance of understanding the subjective nature of qualitative research. Each researcher brings into the research his or her own biases and perspectives, perspectives which have been shaped by a variety of factors, including, but not limited to: race, gender, religious background, ethnicity, sexuality, socioeconomic status, etc. To acknowledge these factors, and to understand that each qualitative research project is one perspective, as opposed to *absolute truth*, is to establish greater trust and credibility with both research participants and readers.

Qualitative inquirers often use the insider-outsider approach to position themselves with relation to their research (McCutcheon, 1999). The insider is the researcher who, in one way or another, belongs to the community that he or she is studying, or who shares the same characteristics, roles, and/or experiences as the members of that community. Being an insider allows the researcher to more easily establish trust and legitimacy with the community’s members. As Kanuha (2000) points out, the researcher on the inside often has the advantage of
an enhanced depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding of his or her research subjects. Thus the insider often meets participants who are more open and willing to share their stories and experiences. On the other hand, the insider has the disadvantage of conducting research that may raise questions about “objectivity, reflexivity, and authenticity” (Kanuha, 2000, p. 444). One of the most common criticisms raised with regard to the work of the insider is that the insider is too sympathetic with, and/or close to his or her research subjects to view and analyze them objectively. The outsider, then—the researcher who does not belong to the community that he or she is investigating—has the advantage of producing research that does not raise the same questions about objectivity, reflexivity, and authenticity that the insider’s research often raises, and the disadvantage of being viewed as more distant and foreign to his or her research subjects.

The line separating an insider from an outsider is not always clear, and a number of scholars have discussed how it is possible to be neither, or both (Acker, 2000; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Echchaibi, 2011; Geertz, 1974). Examples abound of situations where people have been uncertain about whether they could be considered insiders or outsiders of a given community. Race, religion, gender, class, and ethnicity are just some of the identity markers that frequently problematize the insider-outsider dichotomy. Consider, for example, the religious studies scholar who is conducting research on members of the faith she grew up with, but no longer practices; labeling her an insider or an outsider would be complicated, and it is likely that just as good of a case could be made for one side as for the other. In what follows, I will explain how my own experience with Mormonism positions me as both an insider and an outsider.

**My Position as a Researcher**

Unlike many of the participants in this study, Mormonism initially came to me by chance rather than by choice, as I was born to a mother and father who were very active, orthodox
members of the LDS Church. That being the case, I attended LDS Church services on a weekly basis, and most of my friendships, my community, and my lifestyle were heavily—if not primarily—influenced by Mormonism. I participated in all the standard Mormon religious rites and passages: I was sealed to my parents in the Salt Lake City Temple when I was two years of age, baptized at eight years of age, ordained to the priesthood at twelve years of age, obtained the status of Eagle Scout through the Church’s affiliation with Boy Scouts, and graduated from four years of LDS early-morning seminary at 18 years of age, held dozens of ward callings, and even served a two-year mission to Europe between the ages of 19 to 21. I was, without a doubt, what I have referred to as a believing, practicing, orthodox Mormon.

After my mission, I attended BYU-Idaho, where I continued to be what I would consider a devoted, active, faithful Mormon. Near the end of my undergraduate studies, a couple of the courses that I was taking introduced me to information and concepts about the Church, and about religion, more generally, that I had never before considered. Through my own, subsequent research, much of it online, I discovered a number of Mormon-themed communities, platforms, and discussions that were not officially tied to, or endorsed by the Church. I began listening to Mormon-themed podcasts, participating in online discussion boards, reading Mormon-themed blogs, and having in-person discussions with others who had discovered these digital communities. I soon realized that there were many layers to Mormonism—its history, its theology, its evolution—that didn’t always seem compatible with other layers. There were difficult questions to which I realized there were likely no satisfying answers, as well as historical and doctrinal events and contradictions that I assumed Church leaders felt were better left unmentioned. I felt as if I had been lifted up from within a context where everything was painted by Mormonism, to a position several thousand feet above, where I was able to see all the
bits and pieces of the religion in their entirety. In other words, I felt as if I had shifted from a position on the inside to a position on the outside.

Since that time, I have often felt that I have been straddling a line between insider and outsider when it comes to Mormonism; or, as Echchaibi (2011) refers to it, I feel that I am half insider and half outsider. I, like many of the heterodox and post-Mormons I met and spoke with during the course of this study, have unresolved questions and concerns about LDS doctrine and history, questions and concerns that I do not believe are minor. These questions and concerns often lead me to continue to engage with members of the digital communities that exist all along the Mormon Belief Spectrum. I feel that my participation, and the discussions that take place within these communities provide a sense of fulfillment that I do not always find in an LDS congregation, and for this, many orthodox Mormons would likely consider me an outsider, while members of the heterodox and post-Mormon communities might consider me an insider because I continue to attend Church regularly (during the research and planning process for this study, I sometimes joked with my friends that by the time I finished writing my dissertation, there would be a little bit of something in it for everyone to hate). At the same time, however, many of my family members and closest friends are active Mormons, and I still often feel like I belong to the LDS culture and community that I grew up with. Even recently, I served as a secretary to the bishop in an LDS ward that I attended while enrolled in my doctoral program. This ward calling required me to attend regular meetings with ward leaders on Sunday mornings. I also continue to participate in some of the activities and service opportunities that the Church arranges outside of regularly-scheduled Sunday meeting hours. In this sense, I might even be considered an insider by orthodox Mormons.
Being half insider and half outsider had both its advantages and disadvantages when it came to conducting the ethnographic fieldwork for this research project. I came to the fieldwork portion of my research with a fairly strong working knowledge of the behaviors, practices, and discourses of members of each of the three broad regions on the belief spectrum that I planned to investigate. I had a good understanding of the commonly-cited concerns of questioning and post-Mormons, and I also had a good understanding of how orthodox Mormons would likely respond to these concerns. This knowledge helped me to quickly build rapport and legitimacy with the research participants, whether or not they were active, orthodox Mormons. On the other hand, on a number of occasions, when I disclosed my position with regard to the Church to those I was interviewing or observing, I could often sense that my disclosure left some of the participants skeptical or distrustful of the side of my positionality that was outside of the positions they inhabited. In other words, I often found that I was too Mormon for the post-Mormons and the less-believing heterodox Mormons, and not Mormon enough for some of the active, more orthodox Mormons. Yet, in spite of this, I felt it was important for the integrity of my research that I disclose my position if the participants I was interviewing or observing asked me to do so.

In the end, I feel that I was able to overcome most of the obstacles that my position as a researcher presented. I was always respectful of the research participants, and I was always willing to maintain open feedback loops so that they could add to, or modify what they had disclosed if they so desired. Most important to me was being able to convey the true feelings and meanings of the community members who participated. Like Geertz in his anthropological fieldwork, my goal as the researcher was to “interpret and understand what it is that someone might mean when they say this or do that” (McCutcheon, 1999, n.p.). I feel that my honesty and openness throughout the research process, along with my level of understanding of the
communities I was investigating, and the continuously open feedback loops with the interview participants allowed me to accomplish this goal. In the next chapter, I will begin the case studies portion of this dissertation by examining some of the ways that the LDS Church has used media and communications technologies throughout its history, and how orthodox Mormons are using digital technologies today.
At every stage of our history, the leaders of the Latter-day Saints have sought to use every communication facility that civilization afforded. (Arrington, 1989, p. 53)

While flying on an airplane over South America sometime in the late 1970s, Spencer W. Kimball, the 12th President of the LDS Church, leaned over to his secretary, Arthur Haycock, and asked, “Would you like to know why we have aircraft?” Haycock replied, “Well, yes, president, I would.” President Kimball then explained, “The Lord has created and inspired the invention of aircraft so that the servants of the Lord can go to and fro in their labors, and the missionaries can come back and forth from their fields of labor. All other uses of aircraft are extraneous to that” (“History of Media,” n.d.). After recounting this exchange between Kimball and Haycock, Tim Taggart, the Assistant Director of Production Services with the Church’s Audiovisual Department, stated that he believes Kimball’s comment “is relative to the technology of today… it’s inspired by the Holy Ghost, the Lord uses it to accomplish His purposes, and the other uses become extraneous” (“History of Media,” n.d.).

This idea shines the light on a more common and pervasive LDS narrative of Mormon exceptionalism, which includes the belief that breakthroughs in communication technologies are inspired by God for the primary purpose of establishing and building the LDS faith. Mormon exceptionalism has been taught by Mormon leaders since the Church was organized. Even the Book of Mormon, the Church’s foundational text, teaches that the American continent was set apart and blessed specifically for the eventual restoration of Christ’s one true church—the LDS Church. It should come as no surprise, then, that Mormons see media technologies, from the printing press to the Internet, as divinely inspired and rife with potential for “establishing the kingdom of God on Earth” (“Chapter 8,” 2004, p. 52).
In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the relationship between media, communication technologies, and Mormonism—a religion that has always been innovative and savvy in its use of these technologies to defend and promote itself. Beginning with the founding of the Church in 1830, I will examine how the Church has used the available mass communications technologies of each era, as they were introduced, as a means of combating critics, consolidating power, and establishing an ideal image of itself for both Mormons and non-Mormons alike. This examination will demonstrate that the three primary uses of communications technologies by the Church throughout its history have been: protection from criticism, promotion of the institution (both internally and externally), and proselytization. I will follow the examination of the Church’s uses of these technologies by discussing how the Church’s approach to media, along with the rhetoric of Church leaders regarding media, have long given Church leaders a large degree of influence over how its membership approaches, thinks about, and utilizes media. Here, I will also explore how orthodox members use media to maintain and perform their Mormon identities. I will conclude by discussing how the Internet, with its open and horizontal flows of information has played a role in diminishing the authority of LDS hierarchy, creating a challenge to the power and legitimacy of Church leaders in the 21st century by undermining the official history and truth claims that they have presented.

The majority of the data for this chapter was collected at LDS meetinghouses in the Rocky Mountain and Midwestern religions of the United States, where I frequently attended LDS Sunday services to observe how media were discussed in group settings, such as in Sunday school. Additionally, I met with the members and local leaders of several Mormon wards for formal and informal interviews in which we discussed orthodox Mormon attitudes towards media, and also the media practices of the individuals with whom I spoke. In all, I conducted
formal, on-on-one interviews with three LDS bishops, and two stake public relations representatives. I also conducted one-on-one interviews with eight orthodox Mormons in Colorado, South Dakota, and Utah. Additionally, I had informal discussions about personal media usage practices with six orthodox Mormons who were curious as to why I was visiting their wards. In total, I was able to speak—whether through formal interviews, or informal discussions—with 19 orthodox Mormons. The rest of the data in this case study came from my participation in digital orthodox Mormon settings, from participant observation, and from using social media to search for Mormon-themed hashtags related to general conference.

As contemporary LDS leaders struggle to maintain authority, regulate Mormon narratives, and control the boundaries of what it means to be “Mormon,” there has been an increase in LDS rhetoric that demonstrates an ambivalence to contemporary media technologies and the content and information that they make available. As digital technologies have become a ubiquitous and central component of daily life in many parts of the world over the past two decades, Church leaders have been put in the complicated position of having to promote and encourage the use of these technologies in the areas where they benefit the institution, and discourage—and even censor—them in the areas where they impair the institution.

The Importance of the Press in Early Mormonism

Since it purchased its first printing press in 1831, the LDS Church has published over 100 different periodicals (Moore, 1983). Peters (2015) states that the LDS Church “began with an act of publishing, and continued ever since to be actively involved in print media both for internal and external constituencies” (p. 408). The act of publishing referenced by Peters was the printing of the Book of Mormon in New York in 1830. Shortly thereafter, Joseph Smith had a number of difficulties with his publisher, Egbert Grandin, and decided that it would be best to publish future
copies of the book independently. Together with five other Church members, Smith invested in a press and created what became known as the “Literary Firm.” (Moore, 1983). Aware of the mounting antagonism against him and his followers, Smith believed an independent printing press would be beneficial for two reasons: first, it would allow the young Church to continue publishing the Book of Mormon on its own, which would allow Smith and the other investors to keep the profits from the sale of the book; and second, it would allow the Church to print additional materials that presented Mormonism in a positive light (Moore, 1983). After all, the Church had barely been established before newspapers, books, and magazines were accusing Smith of being a fraud and a charlatan. Critics of Mormonism quickly began publishing materials that promised to “unveil” and expose the religion (e.g., Howe, 1834). Referencing this barrage of criticism, Smith wrote in his journal, “So embittered was the public mind against the truth that the press universally had been arrayed against us…” (Smith, 1832), and the History of the Church stated, “[M]any false reports, lies, and foolish stories were published in the newspapers, circulated in every direction, to prevent people from investigating the work, or embracing the faith” (Smith, 1902, p. 158) As demonstrated by these quotes, Mormons dismissed the persecution as an attempt to destroy the work of God and prevent the spread of truth, a framing of anti-Morman criticism that has been commonly used in Church rhetoric and apologetics ever since.

By 1832, the Church was printing its first newspaper, The Evening and Morning Star, on a press that had been brought to Independence, Missouri, where a number of Mormons had fled due to the persecution in New York and other areas in the East (Baker, 2006). Like the Church publications that were printed in the several decades that followed, The Evening and Morning Star focused on providing information that emphasized the victimization of the Mormons.
Establishing a common narrative centered on persecution helped to consolidate and strengthen the resolve of the early-Mormons by creating a dichotomy of “us versus them.” A number of Mormon studies scholars, including Terryl Givens, Armand Mauss, Thomas O’Dea, and Jan Shipps have pointed out how the mistreatment of the Mormons in these early years played a crucial role in strengthening their faith and dedication to the Church, and in shaping them into a unique ethnic group, and perhaps even a nation.

In addition to publishing articles about the persecution of Mormons, *The Evening and the Morning Star* published information about Mormon missionaries, inspiring spiritual stories, Mormon scripture, and revelations from Smith, and, occasionally, current events. In 1833, a pro-slavery mob destroyed the paper’s printing office in response to a poorly-worded headline that led them to believe that the Mormons were abolitionists. The headline, which read, “Free People of Color,” caused many pro-slavery Missourians, who likely read “free” as a verb instead of an adjective, to assume that the Mormons were encouraging freed African Americans to migrate to Missouri to join the Church when, in fact, the article simply asserted the Mormon position on freed people of color by reprinting statutes from Missouri law to demonstrate that the Church, not wanting to escalate tensions with the locals, was fully in support of established state law regarding people of color (Phelps, 1833). The destruction of the press was not a rare incident. Brodie (1945) goes so far as to state that during the pre-Civil War Era “Burning abolitionist presses was something of a sport close to the Mason-Dixon Line” (p. 377). The event does, however, foreshadow the circumstances that led to the murder of Smith just 11 years later.

With their printing press destroyed, Smith sent one of his counselors, Oliver Cowdery, to Buffalo, New York to procure a new press, which Cowdery was instructed to bring to Kirtland, Ohio, Mormonism’s other stronghold at the time (Moore, 1983). So important to Smith was
having a means of publishing newspapers and other Church materials, that he instructed the Mormons in Kirtland to put the construction of their sacred temple on hold so that a printing house could be built (Smith & Smith, 1897). Shortly after the new press began operating, the Church changed the name of the Star to The Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate, and began publishing material similar to that which had been printed in the Star. The new periodical sometimes included reprints of articles that were critical of Mormonism from other prominent papers in the country, once again, this was done in order to build up the persecution narrative, and to allow the paper’s writers the opportunity to publicly deconstruct and rebut the criticism in a public forum, where members of the Church would be likely to see it.

The paper also sought to curry favor with the locals—or at least assuage their suspicion about a Mormon conspiracy to influence regional politics—by publishing articles that demonstrated support for local political views, particularly on the issue of slavery. Unlike the Star, which vaguely sought to demonstrate that Mormons did not have an abolitionist agenda by reprinting state statutes, the Messenger and Advocate unambiguously stated, in an article written by Smith, that the Southerners had just as much of a right to own slaves as the Northerners had to reject the practice of slavery (Smith, 1836). Some of the articles even went so far as to include biblical passages that provided support for the practice of slavery. What is important to note here is that from very early on in its history, the LDS Church used its self-produced media content to protect its image by emphasizing the ways in which it comported with public opinion, and by taking care not to offend the sensibilities of those whom it perceived as a threat to its stability.

Between 1836 and 1838, which the LDS Church refers to as the Apostasy in Kirtland, many prominent Mormons, including those from the highest echelons of Church leadership, began leaving the Church and criticizing Joseph Smith after the failure of the Ohio Mormon
Bank, known as the Kirkland Safety Society, caused them to believe that Smith was a false prophet. (Partridge, 1972). Those who remained faithful to Smith eventually settled in a town on the banks of the Mississippi river in western Illinois. The town, which the Mormons named “Nauvoo,” became the central gathering place for the Church, as Smith called for all Mormons to migrate to the town in 1839. Once again, a press was quickly established, and the Church began printing the *Times and Seasons*. The very first issue, released in November 1839, stated that the paper’s mission was to:

… a source of light and instruction to all those who may peruse its columns, by laying before them, in plainness, the great plan of salvation which was devised in heaven from before the foundation of the world, as made known to the saints of God, in former, as well as latter days; and is, like its Author, the same in all ages, and changeth not. (“Times and Seasons,” 1839, p.1)

The paper also claimed that it would “dwell at considerable length upon the fullness of the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ,” “treat freely upon the gathering of Israel which is to take place in these last days,” and “give a detailed history of the persecution and suffering, which the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, have had to endure in Missouri, and elsewhere, for their religion” (“Times and Seasons,” 1839, p.1).

Around the time the *Times and Seasons* began publication, criticism against the Church in newspapers both locally and nationally had increased significantly. Bushman (2005) points out that 1841 was a particularly bad year for the Mormons due to a flurry of anti-Mormon books and articles critical of the Church. One of the more vitriolic newspapers to attack the Mormons during the Nauvoo period was the *Warsaw Signal*, under the editorship of Thomas Sharp in Warsaw, Illinois, about 15 miles downriver from Nauvoo. Shortly after the *Signal* began its polemics against Smith and his followers, Smith wrote a letter to Sharp notifying him that he would be cancelling his subscription to the *Signal*: 

102
SIR: — You will discontinue my paper; its contents are calculated to pollute me. And to patronize that filthy sheet, that tissue of lies, that sink of iniquity, is disgraceful to any moral man. Yours with utter contempt. JOSEPH SMITH. (“Highly Important,” 1841, n.p.)

At Smith’s request, Sharp published the letter in the Signal, but he included the headline, “Highly Important!! A New Revelation, from Joe Smith, the Mormon Prophet, for the especial benefit of the Editor of the ‘WARSAW SIGNAL’” (“Highly Important,” 1841, n.p.). Sharp also wrote that “the following highly important revelation [was] forwarded to us, from his holiness, the Prophet,” after which he included the text of Smith’s letter (“Highly Important,” 1841, n.p.).

From 1840 up until after Smith’s death in 1844, Sharp was relentless in his criticism of Smith and the Mormons, warning readers of the dangers of a Mormon ascendancy, and of the threat of a Mormon political takeover:

Whatever may be thought of their present strength, it is certain, that if not checked in another year, they will have the decided majority in this county. Yes! men who have no minds of their own, but move, act and think at the bidding of one man, are to be our rulers. Now we ask the citizens of Hancock County, are you prepared for this? (“The Mormons,” 1841, n.p.)

To defend the Church against these attacks, the Times and Seasons employed a variety of tactics of which I will briefly mention three, two aimed primarily at non-Mormon audiences, and one aimed at a Mormon audience. The first tactic was to create fictionalized conversations between two interlocutors who would have a discussion about Mormonism that would always end up presenting the Church in a positive light and clearing up confusion about Mormon doctrine and practices (Bushman, 2005). The editors hoped that these dialogues would help to mitigate the concerns of the non-Mormons living in the area. The second tactic was to solicit other newspapers, both locally and nationally, to print positive articles about the Mormons. Times and Seasons would then reprint these articles in an attempt to establish credibility among non-Mormons, and to boost morale among Mormons by demonstrating that there were, indeed,
positive media representations of Mormonism. This tactic would also be employed decades later when several popular national magazines began to criticize Mormonism, but more on that below. The final tactic was to continue publishing spiritually-uplifting messages, letters from Mormon missionaries, commentary on doctrine, and revelations from Joseph Smith; this tactic was meant to strengthen the faith of those who had already joined the Church.

The constant denigration that Mormonism faced from external critics during its first 14 years as an institution caused many non-Mormons living on the western frontier of the United States to view the Church with suspicion, if not with disdain. In spite of this, the Church continued to thrive and grow, as it attracted many converts from Western Europe, where extensive proselytizing activities resulted in tens of thousands of people making the journey across the Atlantic to join the Mormons (“The Convert Immigrants,” 2013). By 1846, the population of Nauvoo had swollen to about 20,000, which caused it to rival Chicago as the largest city in Illinois at the time (“Nauvoo: City Beautiful,” n.d.).

During that same year, the Church faced a major crisis internally when high-ranking Church leaders turned against Smith and bought a printing press to make their grievances known to the Mormon community. By the mid-1830s, and possibly earlier, Smith had begun practicing polygamy, taking more than 30 additional wives who were between the ages of 14 and 56 (Brodie, 1945; Bushman, 2005; Foster, Keller, & Smith, 2010). Some of these women were reluctant to marry Smith at first, but felt compelled to do so after receiving ultimatums that threatened the eternal salvation of themselves and their family members (Bushman, 2005). Other women felt they were too young to be married, but agreed to marry Smith after he counseled them to consult with the Lord about his proposals (Bushman, 2005). Smith also asked some women who already had husbands to marry him, some of these husbands were away on missions.
at the time Smith proposed. Still other women refused Smith’s proposals outright. Smith taught that the practice of polygamy was a revelation from God, but many Mormons living in Nauvoo at the time were skeptical about the purported revelation, and William Law, Smith’s second counselor in the First Presidency, could be counted among the skeptics.

On June 7th, 1844, Law, and a handful of other men who had come to view Smith as a fallen prophet used their own press to publish 1,000 copies of what would be the first and only issue of a paper called the *Nauvoo Expositor* (Bushman, 2005). The paper was highly critical of Smith and some of the doctrines and practices he had introduced into the Church, including polygamy and the organization of a council of men who were set apart to establish a theocracy that was intended to one day govern the United States, with Smith acting as “king” (Bushman, 2005). Law and the other publishers of the *Expositor*, several of whom had been publicly excommunicated for apostasy, still identified as Mormons, and believed in the original tenets of the LDS Church, but they believed that Smith’s status and power as prophet of the Church, General of the Nauvoo Legion (the name of the army that had been organized to protect Nauvoo), and Mayor of Nauvoo had gotten to his head, and that he had begun to take the Church in a direction that was not pleasing to God (Law, 1844).

Like many of the Mormons who are experiencing crises of faith today, the publishers of the *Expositor* did not wish to eradicate Mormonism, they only wanted to reform it “by purging it of its bad parts” (Bushman, 2005, p. 538). Thus the printing of the *Expositor* is one of the earliest documented cases of Mormons attempting to use alternative media to shape the Church from within. The following three quotes from the *Expositor* will illustrate the publishers’ mindset. The first urges Mormons to realize that Smith’s teachings and doctrines have become “pernicious and diabolical,” the second briefly states the ultimate intent of the publishers, and the third takes a
more literary tone to appeal to the emotions of the Mormon community with regard to the issue of young women being asked by Smith to enter into polygamous marriages with him:

…happy will it be with those who examine and scan Joseph Smith’s pretensions to righteousness; and take counsel of the human affairs, and of the experience of times gone by. Do not yield up tranquilly a superiority to that man which the reasonableness of past events, and the laws of our country declare to be pernicious and diabolical. We hope many items of doctrine, as now taught, some which, however, are taught secretly and denied openly, (which we know positively is the case) and others publicly, considerate men will treat with contempt… (Law, 1844, p.1)

Many of us have sought a reformation in the church, without a public exposition of the enormities of crimes practiced by its leaders… (Law, 1844, p. 1)

She is thunder-struck, faints, recovers, and refuses. The Prophet damns her if she rejects. She thinks of the great sacrifice, and of the many thousand miles she has traveled over sea and land, that she might save her soul from pending ruin, and replies, “God’s will be done, and not mine.” (Law, 1844, p. 2)

According to Bushman (2005), Law became the president of a reformed version of Mormonism, one whose congregants did not adhere to the purported revelation about polygamy, nor to the grandiose political aspirations that leaders of the LDS Church were beginning to espouse, which included an 1844 bid for the Presidency of the United States by Smith. In the months before Smith’s death, the reformed Church was drawing nearly 300 people to its meetings (Bushman, 2005).

When Smith learned of the first issue of the Expositor and its content, he was outraged; it was one thing for non-Mormons to criticize his Church and his character, but for those who were closest to him—those who were once part of the inner circle of Mormon leadership—the criticism was potentially ruinous. On June 10th, three days after the Expositor was issued, Smith, acting in his position as Mayor of Nauvoo, met with his council to determine what should be done about the paper that he considered to be “a greater nuisance than a dead carcase [sic]” and a paper that caused him to claim that he, “would rather die tomorrow and have the thing smashed,
than live and have it go on” (Arrington & Bitton, 1979, p. 78). The June 10th entry from Smith’s journal describes the outcome of that meeting—I have cited it exactly as it appears in the journal:

I immediately ordered the marshal to destroy it without delay. at the same issued an order to Jonathan Dunham. acting Major Gen Nauvoo Legion—to assist the Marshall with the Legion if called upon so to do.—and about 8 o clock the Marshall reported that. he had removed the press. type—& printed papers—& fixtures into the street & fired them. This was done because of the Libellus character of the paper.—in slandering the Municipality of the city.—…I gave them a short address told them they had done right…I would never submit to have another Libellous publication established in the.—city. that I cared not how many papers there were in the city if they would print the truth. but would submit to no Libellous—or slanders from them. (“Joseph Smith Papers,” 1844, p. 151)

The *Expositor* incident is one case of blatant censorship being conducted by Mormon leaders. According to Roberts (1902), “the council’s justification for the destruction was that ‘Blackstone on Wrongs’ asserts the doctrine that scurrilous prints may be abated as nuisances” (p. 231). The City Charter of Nauvoo at the time also gave the council discretion to remove newspapers that they determined to be nuisances; however, the doctrine applied only to issues that had already been printed, by destroying the actual press and scattering its type, Smith and the council had overstepped their authority, and this overstepping would ultimately lead to Smith’s death at the hands of a mob 17 days later (Oaks, 1965). As Bushman (2005) describes, Smith, in his attempt to suppress the paper for fear that its content would cause local mobs to rise up in anger against the Mormons, underestimated the reaction that those same mobs would have to the press being destroyed in the first place.

When word of the destruction of the press in Nauvoo made it to the surrounding towns, newspapers immediately began to accuse Smith and his followers of being usurpers of property rights and of the freedom of the press. In the June 12th issue of the *Warsaw Signal*, Thomas Sharp wrote:
Citizens, ARISE, ONE AND ALL!!!—Can you stand by, and suffer such INFERNAL DEVILS! to ROB men of their property and RIGHTS, without avenging them? We have no time for comment, every man will make his own. LET IT BE MADE with POWDER AND BALL!!! (“The Time is Come,” 1844, n.p.)

Sensing the rising hostility in the area, John Taylor, who would go on to serve as the third President of the LDS Church, used his own newspaper, the Nauvoo Neighbor, to attempt to justify the actions of Church leaders, and mitigate the severity of any potential retribution for the destruction of the Expositor. In the issue published on June 12, 1844, Taylor wrote:

In removing the Nauvoo Expositor as a nuisance, let it be distinctly understood that every step taken, has been sanctioned by legal proceedings, founded upon testimony had before the City Council… and that wicked men, were conniving at the dearest rights of our city and citizens, it must be admitted on all hands that the emergency of the case, called for specific proceedings in defense of our sacred honor. (p. 2)

In spite of this and other attempts to quell the agitation, Smith was arrested on a charge of rioting, and brought to Carthage, Illinois for a hearing. Although he was released on bail for the riot charge, he was held on a charge of treason, as he had called up the Nauvoo Legion to be prepared to fight against the state militia if Nauvoo were to be attacked (Huntress, 1969). While being held, Smith and his brother were killed by a mob that stormed the jail on June 27, 1844; his role as leader of the LDS Church had begun with an act of publishing, and ended with an act of suppressing others from publishing.

As has been shown, the press was an integral medium for early Mormonism. By purchasing a press early on, the LDS Church was able to unify and condition its membership. The revelations, scriptures, inspiring stories, correspondence with missionaries serving around the world, and information about persecution and violence against the Church served to create a common culture, narrative, and identity among the early Latter-day Saints (Burroughs & Feller, 2015; O’Dea, 1957). The existing copies of early LDS newspapers and magazines also provide insight into the similarities and differences between how the Church approached media relations,
internal and external communications, and criticism then, and how they approach these matters today. For example, the LDS Church today prints periodicals, such as *The Ensign, The New Era,* and *The Friend,* which share inspirational stories and insights from Church leaders, and from members of the Church around the world.

Of course, the press was also an integral medium for those critiquing, or raising alternative voices with regard to Mormonism, and the *Expositor* is a perfect example of this. As to censorship, just as Smith halted the publication of criticism from those internal to the LDS Church during his time, at least one LDS Church leader today has stated, “We don’t care so much what you believe, just don’t go buying a printing press” (Fabrizio, 2014). In other words, members are free to have their own ideas and interpretations of LDS doctrines and practices, but if they publicize anything that contradicts official, correlated Church teachings, they are at risk of severe consequences, including disfellowship and excommunication. Like Smith’s explicit censorship of the *Expositor,* the knowledge that one’s membership in the Church might be at risk if he or she engages in public critiques of the Church and its leaders serves as an implicit form of censorship, keeping many members from sharing what they truly think or feel if it is not in line with what they believe they are *supposed* to think or feel. In discussing the September, 1993 excommunications of six Mormons who were writing articles and engaging in public discourse that strayed from mainline Church teachings, Lindholm (2010) states:

…the Church was forced to respond. In so doing, it did not distinguish between those intellectuals participating in forms of personal dissent and others engaging in academic inquiries; both were treated as apostasy because they were conducted in public. The transgression of the September Six, then, was public expression of their views which gave other LDS intellectuals certain cause to reconsider sharing either personal or scholarly critiques of Mormonism in the public sphere. (p. xii)

By censoring what is said and published by members of the Church, whether that censorship involves the physical removal of documents from the public sphere, the prevention of documents
from entering the public sphere, or the psychological fear of repercussions and sanctions with regard to membership and standing in the Church community, LDS leaders have been able to stifle much of the internal criticism that might otherwise lead to open discussions and progressivism within the Mormon faith.

In the next section, I will bridge the gap between the use of the press during the early years of the LDS Church, and the LDS Church in the digital age by discussing some of the major events and Church teachings with regard to media that have taken place since the Nauvoo Era. Because this bridge spans nearly 150 years, I will only touch upon the issues and concepts that are most consequential for the case studies that will follow.

**Mormonism and Media from 1846 to 1996**

Children, we are the pioneers of this country, with one exception, west of the Mississippi River; we established the first printing press in every state from here to the Pacific Ocean, and we were the first to establish libraries, and the first to establish good schools; we were the first to plant out orchards and to improve the desert country, making it like the garden of eden. - Brigham Young to a gathering of Mormon children in 1877. (Evans & Gibbs, 1879, p. 62)

On May 24, 1844, less than one month after Smith was killed, Samuel Morse sent the first telegraph from Washington, D.C. to Baltimore. His message asked, “What hath God wrought?” Mormons today might answer this question by stating that God hath “wrought” more evidence that He had established His Church at the beginning of a communications revolution that would allow His restored gospel to spread quickly to all the ends of the Earth. Sentiments such as these have been expressed by Church leaders, including Gordon B. Hinckley, the 15th President of the LDS Church, who once stated, “The Lord has inspired skilled men and women in developing new technologies which we can use to our great advantage in moving forward this sacred work” (Baker & Stout, 2003, p. 125). In 1846, the largest group of Mormons, under the
leadership of Brigham Young, began their exodus from Nauvoo to what would become Utah Territory, where they believed they would be able to practice their religion in isolation, without the perpetual interference of governments, militias, and mobs to which they had grown accustomed. Young, not wanting Church members to go without a newspaper even when they were underway, attempted to get the Church’s press sent from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters, Nebraska, where many Mormons spent the winter of 1846-1847 before continuing on to Utah, but there were insufficient resources to move the press (Baker, 2006). Ultimately, between 1847 and 1868, approximately 70,000 Mormons made the overland trek to the Great Basin (Thatcher, 1997), and it was during that time that LDS Church leaders truly began to demonstrate their desire and their ability to utilize media technologies to establish what might one day be considered a Mormon media empire (Burroughs & Feller, 2015; Peters, 2010).

By June 15, 1850, the Mormons in Salt Lake City had begun printing the Deseret News, now America’s oldest continual newspaper west of Santa Fe (Baker, 2006). As more and more people, not all of them Mormon, began emigrating to Utah, small newspapers began springing up in towns all along the Wasatch Range, and not all of them were friendly to the Mormons. The Salt Lake Tribune is probably the best known example of this. Schindler (1996) discusses how for the 20 years prior to the first issue of the Tribune being released in 1871, the Mormons and their Deseret News enjoyed the status of hegemon with regard to the dissemination of news and information in the Salt Lake area; although the occasional anti-Mormon paper sprang up here and there, none of these papers stayed around for very long, but once the Tribune arrived, that changed. Almost every issue of the Tribune carried at least one article critical of Mormonism, the Deseret News, on the other hand, chose not to counter-attack the Tribune until Charles Penrose took over as editor in the early-1880s, at which point it became no-holds-barred
(Schindler, 1996). For example, when Brigham Young died in 1877, an article in the *Tribune* stated, “He was blarophant, and pretended to be in daily intercourse with the Almighty, and yet he was groveling in his ideas, and the system of religion he formulated was well nigh Satanic” (“Brigham Young as a Ruler,” 1877, p. 2). And the *Deseret News* wrote of the *Tribune*, “The *Tribune* is greatly given to exhibiting strong streaks of pretended benignity of sentiment, which only serve to show the depth of the hypocrisy of its conductors” (see Smith, 2007, p. 43).

A thorough examination of the war of words that took place between the *Tribune* and the *Deseret News* up until the end of the 19th century, when the Church abandoned polygamy and began its assimilation into American culture, is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are important lessons to be learned from how the Church reacted to the criticism. For one thing, Church leaders during this time appear to have become more expressly ambivalent towards media, warning the members of the negative impact that certain mediated messages can have. Just as had been done by Church leaders half a century earlier in Nauvoo, Church leaders in Salt Lake City framed all criticism against the Church as lies and deception. During an 1884 conference at the Salt Lake Tabernacle, George Q. Cannon, the First Counselor in the First Presidency, stated:

> The age in which we live is one in which intelligence travels with great rapidity. Knowledge is communicated with ease, and by means of the newspaper, the telegraph wire, and other facilities which the age affords, everything connected with us as a people is heralded from one end of the earth to the other in common with all the acts of the children of men. Unfortunately, however, with these facilities for the transmission of true knowledge, there are also equal facilities for the transmission of falsehood and misrepresentation. We have been the victims of falsehood and slander. Herculean efforts have been made to create false impressions concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church which our father in heaven has established. (Cannon, 1884, p.183)

Similar words are spoken by Church leaders today with regard to television and the Internet, demonstrating that a strong ambivalence towards media has been a part of Mormon rhetoric and
ideology since shortly after the Church was founded. This also demonstrates that the early LDS Church was willing to use its media outlets as a method of counter-attacking those who criticized its leaders or its beliefs, but this approach is rarely, if ever used by the Church today.

In addition to continuing to use its presses to defend itself against criticism and to deliver messages and news to its membership, the Church also began to develop new media infrastructures. The telegraph was of particular interest to Brigham Young, who, at the time, was instructing members to establish settlements all throughout Utah and the surrounding areas as part of his vision of Mormon political domination of the American West. On October 17, 1861, the first telegraph line connecting Salt Lake City to the East arrived from Omaha, Nebraska (Arrington, 1951). The next day, Young sent the first message over that telegraph system, and the Deseret News began publishing information that it received over the wire. Less than one week later, Salt Lake City also had telegraph lines running west connecting the city to Carson City and San Francisco (Arrington, 1951; Baker, 2006). At a special conference held in Salt Lake City, the Church passed a motion to build a telegraph line, to be called Deseret Telegraph, which was to stretch from the Mormon settlements in northeastern Utah, near Bear Lake, to St. George, Utah in the south, in order to fulfill Young’s desire to, “…stretch a wire through our settlements in this Territory, that information may be communicated to all parts with lightning speed” (Arrington, 1951, p. 118).

Church leaders also decided that it would be beneficial for members to be instructed in telegraphy, thus in the winter of 1865-1866, every settlement that wished to have a telegraph station sent one or two young men to Salt Lake City to attend a school of telegraphy, after which they were sent back to operate the telegraph stations in their settlements (Arrington, 1951; Baker, 2006). By 1871, the same year the Tribune began publishing, Utah territory had 600 miles of
telegraph wire operating within its borders, more than any other U.S. territory; by 1877, that number had doubled (Arrington, 1985; Ashton, 1950). Gordon (2002) describes how Mormon control of the Utah railroad and telegraph system was so efficient and absolute that federal prosecutors who had been sent to Utah territory to put an end to polygamy in the 1880s were unable to do so because the Mormons were always able to stay one step ahead of them, “Before [the federal officials] even appeared in a town… the residents would be aware of their coming and would unite in their refusal to cooperate” (p. 159).

Brigham Young was an early example of Church leaders envisioning and utilizing media technologies to protect the Church, and to further its mission. Like Gordon B. Hinckley, a media innovator who would pioneer various uses of media technologies for Church public relations and missionary efforts half a century later, Young made sure that Mormons living throughout the newly-settled intermountain region would have a well-developed media infrastructure in order to connect, unify, and instruct members living in the various settlements throughout the territory. The numerous presses and telegraph stations throughout Utah Territory played an important role in helping the Church to thrive and grow during the precarious pioneer and resettlement era of the middle-to-late 19th century, when the Mormons faced both the climatological challenge of developing a previously uninhabited semi-arid desert, and the political challenge of a federal government that closely monitored, and even sanctioned the Mormons and their leaders for practicing polygamy and establishing what resembled communes (Smith, 2007). The speed at which information flowed once the Deseret Telegraph system became operational allowed Church leaders to quickly circulate important information about both spiritual and secular matters with members living throughout the territory, which allowed Church leaders to consolidate power and to remain organized and centralized. Without the intricate
communications systems developed under the leadership of Young, it is likely that the LDS Church would have become fragmented and untenable during the era of Utah settlement.

Assimilation and Mormonism on the Global Stage

A number of factors led to the Mormons beginning their assimilation into mainstream American culture, beginning around the time that Wilford Woodruff, the fourth President of the LDS Church issued the 1890 manifesto, which—at least on paper—put an end to the practice of polygamy. For one, the arrival of the railroad in 1869 and the general westward expansion of the United States led to conditions where the Mormons were no longer as isolated as they once had been. For another, pressure from the federal government, including the seizure of Mormon assets, put the Church in a desperate situation where assimilation was seemingly the only viable option. Scholars of Mormonism have focused on the various causes and impacts of Mormon assimilation. Mauss (1994) theorizes that in order for new religious movements to survive and grow to prominence, they must maintain a delicate balance between retrenchment—or maintaining a sense of uniqueness, on the one hand, and assimilation—or occasionally making accommodations to the broader culture within which they were born so as not to be altogether intolerable to that culture, on the other. As Shepherd and Shepherd (1984; 2015) approach Mormonism’s assimilation by looking at some of the broad shifts in the rhetoric of General Conference addresses delivered between 1830 and 1979. As Mauss (1989) explains, they point to a decline, after 1890, in themes such as: “kingdom-building, eschatology, missionary work, apostasy, restoration, doctrinal differences with other churches, the corruption of outside governments, and obedience to Church leaders,” and an accompanying increase in themes such as: “the greatness of American institutions, patriotism, good citizenship, and fellowship with other faiths” (p. 35). Peters (2015), focusing specifically on the role of media, points to the 1890
Manifesto as a media message meant to intervene in the public sphere, a message that marked “the point at which Mormons began to take over the institutions that had once given them so much grief—the Victorian family, American nationalism, entrepreneurial capitalism, and the Republican Party” (p. 410). The assimilation addressed by these scholars was accompanied by occasional organizational changes within the Church, and by media and public relations efforts to make the church appear more palatable to outsiders. Since the end of the 19th century, the LDS Church has endeavored to gain the approval—or at least the acceptance—of the broader culture in which it operates. In this section, I will address some of the approaches the Church has taken to accomplish this goal.

One of the Church’s greatest assets when it comes to public relations and maintaining a regular presence in the media, is the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, which Givens (2004) claims serves as “goodwill ambassadors of a Church striving for greater public acceptance” (p. 235). The choir began performing in August, 1847, when the Mormons held their first conference after arriving in Utah, but their 1893 performance at the Chicago World’s Fair was what Peters (2015) refers to as their “coming-out performance” for the broader public (p. 411). Since that time, the Tabernacle Choir has received numerous awards, including a Grammy in 1959, and performed publicly at a number of national events, including: the first public demonstration of stereophonic sound at Carnegie Hall in 1940, the memorial service for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945, the first worldwide satellite broadcast of a live television program at Mt. Rushmore in 1962, the memorial service for John F. Kennedy in 1963, the 2002 Winter Olympics, and at the Presidential Inaugurations of Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan (who referred to the choir as, “America’s Choir”), George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump (Baker, 2006). The choir also performs for weekly installments of Music and the Spoken Word,
which has been broadcast regularly on radio since 1929, and on television since 1949, making it one of the longest running programs in American radio and television history (Baker, 2006).

According to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir’s website, *Music and the Spoken Word* is now “carried to the world on radio, television, cable, and the Internet, including YouTube (“Music and the Spoken Word,” 2018). The messages shared during *Music and the Spoken Word* are non-denominational, which is a clear sign that the Church is attempting to appeal to a broader audience than its own members.

The LDS Church was also early on the scene with its film production efforts. Just as the Church had acquired a printing press, in part, to combat criticism and present a positive image of itself in the 1830s, Church leaders in the early 20th century understood that motion pictures would be a necessary component of image management, and of larger public relations efforts. Between 1910 and 1914, a number of anti-Mormon plays and films were produced in Great Britain, as many British believed that the Mormons were contributing to the deterioration of conservative Victorian values (Cannon & Olmstead, 2003). The productions mostly criticized Mormon history and culture, with a particular focus on polygamy. One film, *A Victim of the Mormons*, told the story of European women being lured away to Utah where they were forced to participate in polygamous marriages. Shortly after Great Britain began producing its anti-Mormon cinema, other European countries, most notably Denmark, followed suit (Hunter, 2013). At first, the Mormon missionaries serving in Great Britain attempted to combat the negative stage and film portrayals by standing outside the theaters and handing out pamphlets that promoted the Church, the most popular of which offered a reward of 200 pounds for anyone who could provide verifiable information about women who were actually taken away to Utah (Cannon & Olmstead, 2003). It is worth mentioning that a similar approach was used in 2012,
when the Church purchased ad space in the playbills for the *Book of Mormon* musical in Los Angeles, encouraging those attending the musical to read the Book of Mormon now that they had seen the play (Walker, 2012). In Great Britain, the tactic seemed to work for a while, but Mormon leaders eventually realized that the anti-Mormon films were leaving a lasting impression on viewers and that the missionary work in the area was beginning to stall. They decided they had to begin making their own movies that told their side of the story. In 1913, the Mormons released, *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* to audiences in Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco (Hunter, 2013). The film, a documentary of the Church’s history, focused on the story of the founding of the Church by Joseph Smith, and the trek of the Mormon pioneers to the Salt Lake Valley. In 1953, the Church established the BYU Motion Picture Studio in Provo, Utah, the studio had produced hundreds of films by the time the Church took control of it in 1994, and changed its name to the LDS Motion Picture Studio (Jones, 2012).

At the same time Mormonism was experiencing criticism through film and stage plays, what the late Church historian, B.H. Roberts, referred to as a “magazine crusade” was launched against the Church from September 1910 to August 1911 (Cannon, 2013). Four popular magazines, *Pearson’s, Everybody’s, McClure’s*, and *Cosmopolitan* began publishing articles that “purported to expose practices most Americans found distasteful” (Cannon, 2013, p. 5). Like the films in Europe, the focus of the articles was primarily on polygamy—although the Church had publicly ended the practice with the 1890 Manifesto, a number of Church leaders continued to practice polygamy in private. The articles were a major setback for the Church, as it had been attempting to assimilate into mainstream culture and distance itself from the practices that had been considered strange, appalling, and cult-like to so many Americans. In order to manage the crisis, the Church enrolled Isaac “Ike” Russell, a once-LDS writer for the *New York Times*, to
write articles with a positive tone, and to try to convince those writing the negative articles to be less critical (Cannon, 2013). Russell also managed to get former President Theodore Roosevelt to write a letter in support of the Mormons and had it published in Collier’s Weekly, which was also a very popular magazine at the time (Cannon, 2013). Russell even “ghost-wrote articles and letters for Church leaders which appeared in leading newspapers and magazines” (Cannon, 2013, p. 37).

As Cannon (2013) points out, the magazine crusade slowed the assimilation of Mormonism into mainstream culture, and gave many Americans renewed reasons to be skeptical of the religion, but it also served as a reminder to Church leaders that it is vitally important to have a solid public relations strategy in place, and to continually produce positive media messages about the Church in order to counterbalance the negative messages. Church leaders during the magazine crusade did the same thing that Church leaders had done during the Nauvoo Era—utilized non-Mormon journalists in order to appear more objective to those consuming information about the Church. During the magazine crusade, however, news traveled much more quickly and had a much broader reach than in the early 19th century, necessitating a larger and better-organized reaction, which, in this case included a letter from a former president and a series of pro-Mormon articles strategically placed in widely-circulated periodicals. As for internal changes, the magazine crusade episode demonstrates that the Church is, to some extent, willing to make adjustments to its practices in the face of public pressure and criticism, as Church leaders began to crack down on polygamists, and more strictly enforce the polygamy ban after the crusade.

As the LDS Church continued to experience rapid growth into the middle of the 20th century, and LDS leaders became increasingly aware of the importance of media in reaching
Church members, in proselytizing, in shaping opinions about the Church among non-Mormons, and even in raising capital, the Church developed and acquired more and more media outlets. In 1922, *Deseret News* received a license from the U.S. Department of Commerce to operate the Church’s first radio station, KZN, which would be “the first full-time commercial broadcasting operation between the Mississippi Valley and the Pacific Coast” (Baker, 2006, p. 41; Ashton, 1950). The first broadcast, which occurred on May 6, was a reading of Mormon scripture by Heber J. Grant, the seventh President of the LDS Church. The broadcast could be heard for 1,000 miles in every direction (Baker, 2006). In 1949, KSL began operating the first commercial television station in Utah as a CBS affiliate (Baker, 2006). Once again echoing the tone of Mormon exceptionalism, Arch Madsen, who began serving as director of KSL in 1961, stated, “God in His wisdom has given us television and radio to assist Him in His great purposes. May we be blessed and ever diligent in the use of all communications media to hasten the day of His kingdom” (Esplin, 1977, p. 30). And David O. McKay, the, ninth President of the LDS Church stated, “Today it is a simple matter for us to teach all nations. The Lord has given us the means of whispering through space, of annihilating distance. We have the means in our hands of reaching the millions in the world” (Prince & Wright, 2005, p. 124). With this mindset as a guiding principle, the Church has been using radio, television, satellite, and now the Internet to broadcast General Conference and other church-produced media content throughout the world in hopes of both spiritually enriching its members, and appearing compelling to non-Mormons. The “Homefront” campaign, for example, launched in the early 1970s, consisted of 30- to 60-second family-themed radio and television commercials that were meant not to proselytize directly, but to “…identify the name of the Church in a favorable way” so that when non-Mormons were
contacted by missionaries, they would “already have a favorable opinion of the Church” (Esplin, 1977, p. 32).

In 1964, the Church created Bonneville International Corporation, a holding company designed to merge all of its broadcasting and communications interests (Prince & Wright, 2005). The company has bought and sold dozens of radio and television stations since its inception. At the time of this writing, Bonneville International controls KSL-TV in Salt Lake City, and owns or manages 22 radio stations throughout Phoenix, Denver, Salt Lake City, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Seattle (“Our Markets,” 2018). In 1966, the ever-bureaucratizing and expanding Church (expanding both in terms of membership and in terms of holdings), further consolidated its for-profit enterprises by creating Deseret Management Corporation, which manages, among other companies: Bonneville International, Deseret News Publishing Company, Bonneville Communication (a company that provides media production, social media, and advertising consulting to both LDS and non-LDS companies), Deseret Book (the Church’s book publishing and retail book selling company), and Deseret Digital Media. In addition to these for-profit companies, the Church also has its own in-house public affairs and social media teams and has, in the past, contracted with large public relations firms, such as Edelman Agency, to bring its message to a broader audience (Baker, 2006). This extensive list of LDS communications endeavors demonstrates how seriously the Church takes the development and dissemination of messages and information, especially when they concern creating a positive image of the Church. This list also demonstrates that the Church has become very interested in expanding its wealth and secular influence. With numerous for-profit companies, and billions of dollars in liquid and non-liquid assets, it is clear that the Church desires to be more than just a religious institution. This sentiment was expressed by Time magazine, which on August 4th, 1997
published, as its cover story: “Mormons, Inc. The Secrets of America’s Most Prosperous Religion.”

**LDS Authority and the Control of Member Media Usage**

While I was attending an LDS Sunday school class earlier this year, the instructor asked the participants to list some of the evil things that exist in this world so that he could write them down on the whiteboard to instigate a class discussion about overcoming evil. The first response came from the woman sitting next to me, who raised her hand and said, “the media!” When the instructor asked her to elaborate, she said, “It seems like the only thing you see in the media today is sex, violence, and stuff that drives away the spirit.” By “the Spirit,” she was referring to the Holy Ghost, one of the three members of the LDS Godhead. Mormons believe that the Holy Ghost acts as an influence and a personal messenger for anyone who is living righteously, being obedient to LDS values, and paying attention to what members call, “the still, small voice.” Orthodox Mormons typically strive to have the spirit with them at all times, and they are taught that when they are disobedient, or caught up in the ways of the world, or when they engage in unwholesome activities, the Spirit departs and is no longer able to provide its guidance and influence. As was reflected in the comment by the woman in Sunday school class, Church leaders have long taught that media content that is sexual, violent, or unwholesome drives away the Spirit, and this is one way that Church leaders have controlled—or strongly influenced—the media consumption decisions of orthodox Mormons.

LDS indoctrination with regard to media begins at a young age. In a booklet entitled, *For the Strength of Youth*, which all members of the Church between the ages of 12-18 are encouraged by the First Presidency to read frequently because, in their words, “The standards in [the] booklet will help [them] with the important choices [they] are making now and will yet
make in the future,” there is a section called, “Entertainment and Media,” which provides guidelines for how LDS youth should approach media (“Message from the First Presidency,” 2017, n.p.). This section clearly highlights the ambivalence that Mormons feel towards media.

The section opens:

You live in a day of marvelous technologies that give you easy access to a wide variety of media, including the Internet, mobile devices, video games, television, movies, music, books, and magazines. The information and entertainment provided through these media can increase your ability to learn, communicate, and become a force for good in the world. However, some information and entertainment can lead you away from righteous living. Choose wisely when using media because whatever you read, listen to, or look at has an effect on you. Select only media that uplifts you. (“Entertainment and Media,” 2017, n.p.)

The section goes on to state:

Satan uses media to deceive you by making what is wrong and evil look normal, humorous, or exciting... Do not attend, view, or participate in anything that is vulgar, immoral, violent, or pornographic in any way. Do not participate in anything that presents immortality or violence as acceptable. Have the courage to walk out of a movie, change your music, or turn off a computer, television, or mobile device if what you see or hear drives away the Spirit. (“Entertainment and Media,” 2017, n.p.)

These excerpts help to demonstrate why the woman in Sunday school associated “media” with “evil” during the activity. The ubiquity and inevitability of exposure to media messages in contemporary society, coupled with a long history of criticism aimed at the Church, and anti-Mormon mass-mediated content has, understandably, made Church leaders apprehensive about the impact that media can have on Church members. As noted above, this apprehension runs all the way back to the 1830s, when the Church was founded; it played a role in Smith ordering the destruction of the alternative Mormon printing press in Nauvoo, and it continues to play a role in the practice of modern Church leaders excommunicating members for sharing information and ideas that run contrary to correlated, Church-authorized doctrine, history, and instructional materials. Additionally, even media content that does not directly attack or challenge
Mormonism as an institution—such as portrayals of violence or sex—can work to desensitize members of the Church to messages and doctrine that are foundational to Mormonism, which is why Church leaders have been unceasing in their efforts to ensure that members understand what sorts of media content they should and should not consume.

The George Q. Cannon quote above illustrates that LDS leaders of the late-19th century were facing the same information dilemma that LDS leaders have faced to an even greater extent as the Church has moved through the 20th and into the 21st century. The following quote, taken from LDS General Conference, will better illustrate the ambivalence that today’s Church leaders feel towards media, communications technologies, and Church members’ ability to make the right decisions when it comes to selecting media content for themselves and their families. The quote comes from M. Russell Ballard, one of the 12 Apostles, who, after explaining how the media do, indeed, offer “much that is positive and productive,” went on to state that:

The new morality preached from the media’s pulpit is nothing more than the old immorality. It attacks religion. It undermines the family. It turns virtue into vice and vice into virtue. It assaults the senses and batters the soul with messages and images that are neither virtuous, nor lovely, nor of good report, nor praiseworthy. The time has come when members of the Church need to speak out and join with the many other concerned people in opposition to the offensive, destructive, and mean-spirited media influence that is sweeping over the Earth. (Ballard, 2003, n.p.)

Ballard concludes this talk with seven suggestions for parents to “minimize the negative effect media can have on [their] families” (Ballard, 2003, n.p.). Several of the suggestions advocate self-censorship; for example, the first suggestion is to hold family councils to determine what the family’s media standards should be. The fourth suggestion is to limit the amount of time children spend watching TV, playing video games, and using the Internet. The fifth suggestion is to use Internet filters and TV programming locks to prevent children from “chancing upon things they should not see” (“Let Our Voices”, 2003). And the sixth suggestion is to place TVs and
computers in much-used, common rooms in the home instead of in private places. In his work on religious authority, Hoover (2016) discusses how today’s religions, “conceive of the human subject as culturally and morally autonomous and thus able to make his or her own decisions regarding things as mundane as media consumption” (pp. 26-27), but by suggesting that families hold family councils to set their own media standards on the one hand, and then suggesting that these same families use Internet filters, and TV programming locks, and place computers and televisions in common, much-used rooms on the other, it appears that LDS Church leaders do not fully trust that the autonomous decisions that are made with regard to media consumption will necessarily be put into practice without some intervening app, device, or room arrangement.

One genre of media content that is of most concern to Church leaders, particularly in the digital age, is what Church leaders and members often refer to as “anti-Mormon literature.” There is no concrete definition of “anti-Mormon literature,” but from what I have found, it seems that it could be classified as any information that criticizes the Church, that challenges the Church’s current, official version of its history and doctrine, or that could potentially damage the faith of a member of the Church, whether that information is factual, or not. In fact, as will be demonstrated in the following case studies, much of the information that is driving people out of the Church, or causing them to question and doubt their faith, is information about the Church and its history that is true, but that Church leaders have de-emphasized, ignored, or altogether left out of official Church books, webpages, conference talks, and instructional manuals. For example, there are historical records and journals written by past leaders of the Church that current Church leaders do not allow members—or even trained LDS historians—to view, including minutes taken from meetings that were held during the time of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young (Bushman, 2005). In one instance, a Church leader (most likely then Church
Historian and later President of the Church, Joseph Fielding Smith) even used a pen knife to cut pages out of Joseph Smith’s journal, after which he locked them away in a vault for years after he discovered that what Smith had written about his vision of God and Jesus Christ differed greatly from the Church’s official version of the same vision (Larson, 2014). It wasn’t until word of the alternate version had been leaked to Gerald and Sandra Tanner, staunch critics of the Church, that the Church leader asked religious studies graduate student, Paul Cheesman, at Brigham Young University, to write his master’s thesis on the alternate account of the vision, and how it might potentially syncretize with the Church’s official account. This was likely done to mitigate the impact of the public relations dilemma that would ensue if the public discovered that critics of the Church were publishing information that the Church itself was hiding.

Even today, over 50 years after Cheesman wrote about Smith’s handwritten version of his vision, the Church still holds strongly to the version they have taught since before the journal entry was discovered, and Church instructional manuals, Sunday school discussions, and conference talks typically avoid the matter altogether; in fact, it would not be unreasonable to assume that a majority of orthodox Mormons do not even know of any account other than the official version, and that if contradictory accounts were mentioned to them, they would assume that anti-Mormon literature was to blame. Perhaps this general lack of awareness about their own religion’s historical issues might be expected from a Church whose leaders have taught that, “Some things that are true are not very useful” (Packer, 1981, n.p.), and that, “In some instances, the merciful companion to truth is silence. Some truths are best left unsaid” (Nelson, 1986, p. 69). To many orthodox Mormons, contradictions and controversies about the Church, its history, and its doctrines, whether true, or not, are simply not important next to the perceived spiritual benefits and the sense of community that the Church provides, and cultivating this mindset in its
membership is one more way that Church leaders are able to manage and control the consumption of information.

**Mormonism in the Age of the Internet**

There are parallels that can be drawn between the impact of the introduction of the printing press and the publishing industry on Catholicism before and during the Reformation, and the impact of the introduction of digital technologies on Mormonism today. Both events drastically increased the amount of information about Church doctrine and history available to the average churchgoer. Prior to the printing press and subsequent rise of the publishing industry, members of the Catholic Church typically did not have access to the scriptures and other sacred texts; instead, religious doctrines and scriptures were read to them by those who did have access, this severely limited the amount of information available to the average churchgoer. Once the printing press and publishing industry had been established, books and pamphlets became much more abundant and accessible, and people could begin to consume this information for themselves. Eisenstein (1979), in her work on the printing press as an agent of change, explains:

Acceptance of diverse traditions, which had hitherto been transmitted by personal interchange between masters and disciples, was probably modified when one no longer needed to sit at a master’s feet before standing on one’s own…the transmission of sacred traditions was also affected and the authority of the priesthood weakened, once the laity had an opportunity to read God’s words for themselves. (p. 245)

Similarly, the Internet has vastly increased the abundance and accessibility of religiously-themed information available to churchgoers today. In the case of Mormonism, material that is critical of the Church, or that simply provides information that Church leaders have chosen to leave out of Church-approved publications, is potentially available for consumption by any member with Internet access, and the ease with which this information can be accessed, coupled with the anonymity often associated with computer-mediated communication have created a situation
where more and more Mormons are finding this information, both intentionally and unintentionally. Like the increased access to information that played a role in challenging the authority and legitimacy of the Catholic Church, the increased access to information through digital technologies is playing a role in challenging the authority and legitimacy of the LDS Church, as well.

Goodstein (2013), in an article for *The New York Times*, tells the story of Hans Mattsson, a high-ranking Mormon leader from Sweden who was given the assignment of overseeing the LDS Church in Europe. More and more Swedish Mormons began coming to Mattsson with questions about information they had found about the Church on the Internet, but Mattsson did not have the answers for them. Mattsson contacted leaders of the Church in Salt Lake City for help, but when they were unable to provide satisfactory answers, Mattsson began his own online research, which led to a faith crisis of his own. In Mattsson’s words, “I felt like I had an earthquake under my feet… Everything I’d been taught, everything I’d been proud to preach about and witness about just crumbled under my feet. It was such a terrible psychological and nearly physical disturbance” (Goodsten, 2013, n.p). Marlin Jensen, a former Church Historian, also discussed the concern that he and other Church leaders have about the impact that the Internet is having on Mormonism. During a discussion with religious studies students at Utah State University in Logan, Jensen explained how his own daughter had come to him after she had been researching the Church online with the question, “Dad, why didn’t you ever tell me that Joseph Smith was a polygamist?” (Henderson & Cooke, 2012). Jensen went on to explain that the instruction manuals that the Church uses to teach its members doctrine and Church history are “severely outdated,” and that LDS leaders are very aware that the Internet is playing a
significant role in creating situations that lead to doubt and faith crises among members of the Church.

As has been done in the past, the Church is using the communications technologies that are challenging its authority and legitimacy to combat those challenges. In December, 1996, the Church launched its official website, lds.org, where members can search the LDS scriptures, inspirational messages, past conference talks, instructional manuals, links to other LDS websites and resources, and content from the Church’s official magazines published after 1970 (Baker, 2006; “Magazines,” n.d.). Mormon.org, another of the Church’s official websites, was created specifically for non-Mormons in 2001. The website was launched as part of the Church’s public relations efforts leading up to the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City (“A Historic Look,” 2014). The website features videos and articles about the Church and its foundational teachings, an option to engage in live chat sessions with LDS missionaries, and links to blogs and testimonials about the Church written by members for those who are interested in learning more about the Church. Smith (2013) examines these blogs and testimonials and discusses how the Church is engaging in the practice of distributed communication by having non-employees (ordinary members of the Church) conduct advertising and public relations work for the Church by writing what could be considered promotional material and uploading it to mormon.org, and to their personal social media pages. The following example of a Facebook post shared by a Mormon using the hashtag “#generalconference2018” during the most recent General Conference illustrates how Mormons are using social media to proselytize and promote the Church, while at the same time signaling their Mormon identities to both known and unknown others:

Oh hey, so I'm a Mormon and part of my Mormon-ness includes General Conference, which I really love to watch every 6 months or so. (Yes, I know it's odd, but I do love it!)
It is an entire weekend, on Saturday and Sunday. I pretty much compare it to a podcast, because I am so into that. It totally FILLS my soul. Anyways, the link I'm sharing is a summary of a talk a woman gave, who inspired me to shout and scream, "AMEN" and raise my hands in "Hallelujah, praise the Lord!"

In this example, the poster, is attempting to proselytize by getting others, most likely non-Mormons who know very little about the Church, to participate in general conference. She explains that participating in General Conference is an important aspect of her Mormon identity, and shares a link so that others can have the opportunity to take part in a component of her identity that is particularly important to her. She compares the event to a podcast to make it more relatable to those who may not understand what a Mormon conference is. At the same time she is proselyting to non-Mormons, she is also signaling, or performing her Mormon identity for those who are members of the LDS Church. Mormons who see her post will immediately understand that by posting information about General Conference, she is fulfilling the counsel of Church leaders to share the message of the gospel with others, which, in turn, causes orthodox Mormons who see her post to positively acknowledge her for her outward manifestation of orthodox Mormon identity; thus, she is rewarded by the in-group for demonstrating in-group conformity to in-group standards and values. In the hundreds of orthodox Mormon social media posts that I examined, likes, praise, and other positive comments from orthodox Mormons made up a considerable portion of the responses to the original posts, demonstrating that orthodox Mormon identity performance on social media is an important way to assert and affirm oneself within the orthodox Mormon community.

In addition to its official websites, the Church also has a strong social media presence, particularly on Facebook, where the President of the Church, his counselors, and the 12 Apostles have Facebook pages where they—or their public affairs staff—regularly post inspirational, faith-promoting messages for members and non-members alike. On YouTube, the Mormon
Channel, has a collection of thousands of videos, commercials, songs, talks, and messages aimed at helping those experiencing a variety of issues, from infertility, to postpartum depression, to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Mormon Channel also has content aimed at helping those who are experiencing doubt or faith crises to renew their faith and commitment to the Church. The Church also has a variety of Twitter accounts, where spiritual messages from Church leaders, as well as information about upcoming events, such as question and answer sessions with apostles, and funeral services for Church leaders who have passed away are posted regularly. In addition to presenting a positive image of itself to Mormons and non-Mormons on its websites and social media accounts, the LDS Church also has a number of strategies for dealing directly with the release of unauthorized information about its history and institutional practices. I will briefly discuss three: search engine optimization (SEO), greater transparency, and apologetics.

**Search Engine Optimization**

SEO is one practice that the Church engages in extensively in order to maximize the favorable information, and minimize the unfavorable information that those searching online for material about the Church encounter. Chen (2011) examines three groups that carry out the Church’s SEO efforts, these include: the Church’s own IS Department, the online missionary program, and grassroots organizations, such as the More Good Foundation, which is the foundation that, although not directly affiliated with the Church, controls the videos available on YouTube’s Mormon Channel. In the early days of YouTube, 85% of all content related to Mormonism was critical of the Church, with the SEO work of the More Good Foundation flooding the Internet with pro-Mormon content, 75% of the Mormon-themed videos on YouTube now present the Church in positive light (Chen, 2011). Critics of the Church argue that the Church’s concealment of information about its history by essentially burying it under positive,
anodyne portrayals of the modern Church is unethical at best, and entirely dishonest at worst. For the Church’s part, LDS leaders and public affairs representatives are largely silent about the institution’s SEO efforts, which are so extensive and impactful that they have received praise from a Google analytics expert at an online marketing conference in 2010 (Chen, 2011).

**Greater Transparency**

More recently, the Church has released to lds.org a series of Gospel Topics Essays that address some of the more controversial issues from Church doctrine and history—issues that have caused many Mormons to question or leave the Church. These issues are the ones that are most frequently brought up by critics of the Church. The issues include: the Book of Mormon and DNA Studies, First Vision Accounts, Plural Marriage, Race and the Priesthood, and the Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham. On lds.org, the Church states the following as its rationale for publishing the essays:

Recognizing that today so much information about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be obtained from questionable and often inaccurate sources, officials of the Church began in 2013 to publish straightforward, in-depth essays on a number of topics. The purpose of these essays, which have been approved by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, has been to gather accurate information from many different sources and publications and place it in the Gospel Topics section of lds.org, where the materials can more easily be accessed and studied by Church members and other interested parties. (“Gospel Topics,” n.d.)

Critics of the Church, however, speculate that the essays were released for the same reason Cheesman was asked by a Church leader to write his master’s thesis on the differing accounts of Joseph Smith’s vision: the information was being—or was going to be—released anyway, so it would be less damaging to the Church’s credibility if the Church released the information itself. In other words, the Church was engaging in the common public relations strategy of “staying ahead of the story,” or “controlling the narrative.” This works to the Church’s advantage for two
reasons: first, it removes the appearance that the Church has something to hide, and second, it allows the Church to spin the controversial information in a way that makes it least damaging to the institution. This isn’t to say that the information does not cause some damage to the Church’s credibility; after all, it does raise questions about the Church’s willingness to pull back the curtain on controversial aspects of its history before outside sources have already begun tearing it down.

There is another reason that Church authorities sometimes choose to release sensitive information about the Church’s past, as they did when they published the Gospel Topics Essays. In February 2016, not long after the last of the essays had been published, M. Russell Ballard, one of the Church’s 12 apostles, delivered a speech to a gathering of church educators in Salt Lake City. The purpose of the speech was to let Church educators know exactly what to do when their Mormon high school-aged students came to them with complicated questions about the Church – they were told to point them to the essays (Ballard, 2016). Ballard stated:

...please, before you send them into the world, inoculate your students by providing faithful, thoughtful, and accurate interpretations of gospel doctrine, the scriptures, our history, and those topics that are sometimes misunderstood... you should be among the first, outside of your students’ families, to introduce authoritative sources on topics that may be less well-known or controversial so your students will measure whatever they hear or read later against what you have already taught them. (n.p)

Here, a Church leader is suggesting that church educators inoculate their students by introducing them to the Church’s own version of controversial issues in its history before the students inevitably encounter the secular sources that address these issues. In other words, because the Internet has made available information that Church leaders had hoped would remain out of sight, these leaders have been forced into a position where their only viable option is to try to be the first to get the information to their members so that when the members are met with the non-
LDS-sanctioned version of the information, they can think, or say something to the extent of, “I already read all about this on lds.org.”

As to the point about spinning the information, one brief example will illustrate one of the ways that this is done. Discovery of the nature of Joseph Smith’s practice of polygamy in Nauvoo is one of the most common historical issues that causes Mormons to question their faith. Of particular concern to members who discover this information, is the fact that Smith married women who were already married to other men, as well as a woman who was only 14. When the Church addresses this issue in its Gospel Topic Essay on plural marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo, it states, with regard to Smith’s wives, “The youngest was Helen Mar Kimball, daughter of Joseph’s close friends Heber C. and Vilate Murray Kimball, who was sealed to Joseph several months before her 15th birthday” (“Plural Marriage,” n.d.). Instead of just stating that she was 14 years old, the Church shifts the focus away from her actual age by using a wording that attempts to make the age more ambiguous. The essays on plural marriage also frame the practice as a “difficult task,” and something that was very “challenging,” for Smith and the early leaders of the Church, and as something that greatly tested their faith. And although the Church claims that the essays were an attempt to “gather accurate information from many different sources and publications,” all 10 of the sources for the “Plural Marriage in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” essay, and at least 43 of the 55 sources for the “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo” essay are from LDS scripture, books and articles written by prominent Mormons and LDS apologists, and journals and historical records of former Church prophets and leaders.

Apologetics

The most prominent organization that engages in Mormon apologetics online is FairMormon, which began in 1997 when a small group of Mormons participating in discussions
about online religious-themed message boards on America Online decided to group together to defend their faith from the growing number of critics and anti-Mormons online. Eventually, the group grew to the point where it was able to create its own webpage and message boards, and to train students in apologetics, while building a repository of pro-LDS answers to questions that were commonly raised by critics and those simply wanting to know more about the Church. At the 2012 Mormon Media Studies Symposium at Utah Valley University, Scott Gordon, President of FairMormon, stated that the organization was created, in part, “to share information,” and “to not allow Anti-Mormons to control the discussion in the public square” (Gordon, 2012, n.p.). According to the organization’s website, “FairMormon is staffed completely by volunteers who are students of the scriptures, ancient languages, early Christian history, early LDS history, and LDS doctrine and apologetics” (“About FairMormon,” n.d.).

Although not directly affiliated with the Church, FairMormon is very active in helping to cultivate a positive image for Mormonism. In addition to its website, the organization has its own podcast (FairCast), blog, live-streamed radio station, and online television channel. Critics argue that FairMormon is not objective—or even fully honest—in its presentation of support for LDS teachings about Church doctrine and history. Something interesting that I found while reading through FairMormon’s online content is that when a FairMormon article includes a hyperlink to one of its sources, the link will not open the page it references if the material on the page is critical of Mormonism, instead, the hyperlink uploads a page that states, “FairMormon does not provide hyperlinks to critical or anti-Mormon websites… The URL in the text allows the user to find the referenced site if desired by copying and pasting,” a design feature ostensibly intended to put one more barrier between the consumer of the content and the information that is critical of the Church (FairMormon Does Not Provide Hyperlinks,” n.d., n.p.).
Through SEO, greater transparency, and apologetics, the negative impact that the free flow of information on the Internet has been having on the authority and credibility of the LDS Church has been somewhat mitigated, but even with organizations and public relations teams working tenaciously to bury the negative information under the positive, to create positive framings of controversial aspects in the Church’s history and doctrine, and to respond to critics directly in online forums, communities, and message boards, the number of members finding online material about the Church that has not been authorized by Church leaders is, as has been stated, very large, and apart from simply encouraging members to avoid such information, or to seek answers to any questions they may have about the Church from local leaders instead of from search engines (a tactic that has also been employed), there really isn’t much that can be done to stop members from coming into contact with media that may very well lead them to question the Church, experience crises of faith, or possibly even end their activity in the Church and relinquish their membership altogether.

**Conclusion**

As Peters (2015) notes, Mormonism “has always treated the symbolic management of space, time, and human relationships as absolutely central to its experience” (p. 408). From the time the first Book of Mormon came off the printing press in New York in 1830 to the contemporary era of worldwide, online streamable General Conference talks and digital Books of Mormon, the LDS Church has been a religion deeply centered around, and dependent on media. For the Church, the three primary uses of media have always been: first, protection from critics and anti-Mormons through everything from counter-attacking detractors, to enlisting the help of other media outlets, to using both internal and external media platforms to demonstrate an assimilation into mainstream culture; second, self-promotion through the sharing of
inspirational messages, music, film, and stylish and compelling public relations campaigns; and third, proselytization through everything from sending missionaries out into the world armed with promotional videos and pro-Mormon pamphlets, brochures, and books, to having missionaries and Church members engage with those investigating the Church in digital settings. Although Church leaders have always demonstrated an ambivalence towards media—one that has seemed to become more pronounced in the digital age—it is self-evident that Mormonism would not be the global religion that it is today without the media and the communications technologies that Church members believe have been sacralized and endowed by God specifically for the establishment and expansion of their Church.

Aware of the impact that mediated messages can have on building and reinforcing the faith of the membership, as well as on establishing a sense of community among them, leaders of the Church have always utilized the available communications technologies of the time to deliver spiritual, faith-promoting stories and messages. In the early days of the Church, this was done through a series of Church-owned presses, which the leaders always considered a necessity for communicating with Church members. Today, this is done with both legacy media—newspapers, magazines, television and radio broadcasts, etc.—and digital media—podcasts, YouTube videos, tweets, and Facebook posts. For Church leaders, and for many average Mormons, these technologies provide the means for establishing and maintaining a sense of community, and continually one’s Mormon identity to non-Mormons, and to other Mormons, as well. One can see this use of digital media in the flood of tweets, memes, pictures, and status updates about the Church that are shared on many orthodox Mormons’ social media pages during, and in the days following General Conference each April and October.
On the other hand, Church leaders are aware of the role that mediated messages can play in damaging faith, challenging the Church’s legitimacy, and subverting ecclesiastical authority. For this reason, leaders of the Church have always cautioned Mormons to avoid any media that may do this, including—and perhaps especially—anti-Mormon literature. However, Church leaders also seem to suggest that they understand their warnings won’t be enough to keep Mormons away from information that may damage faith and spiritual well-being, so they have suggested Internet filters, television blockers, placing computers in public rooms where other family members can see what information is being accessed, etc. And, at times, both in the early days of the Church and today, Church leaders have engaged in censorship to keep what they consider to be potentially-damaging information out of the public view. Sometimes this censorship even extends to excommunicating—or threatening to excommunicate—those who publicly share information that has not been correlated and authorized by the Church. In this way, LDS leaders have been able to influence the flow and the consumption of information among the general membership, as well as who—at least from the Church’s perspective—can identify as a Mormon, and who cannot.

In the next chapter, I will explore identity, community, and the uses of media by heterodox Mormons—Mormons who have, for one reason or another, found themselves questioning the doctrines and/or practices of Mormonism. The chapter will focus on the Mormon Stories podcast, and its accompanying community, “The Mormon Stories Podcast Community (MSPC),” which has both digital and offline components.
CHAPTER 5

THE FIGHT FOR MEANING IN THE MIDDLE: MORMON STORIES AS A COUNTERPUBLIC AND A SUPPORT COMMUNITY FOR HETERODOX MORMONS

Over the past decade, a growing number of public and private events have been organized by heterodox Mormons and by Mormons who are experiencing doubts about their faith and about their Mormon identity. On April 4th, 2015, at the General Conference of the LDS Church in Salt Lake City, Dieter Uchtdorf, then second counselor to the President of the Church, stood at the lectern in the Conference Center auditorium, in front of a gathering of over 20,000, and presented the names of the current LDS Church authorities to the membership of the Church.
for a sustaining vote. After reading through the list of names of those to be sustained, Uchtdorf said, “Those in favor may manifest it,” at which point, nearly every person in attendance raised his or her right hand to show support for those who had been named. Then Uchtdorf said, “Those opposed, if any, may manifest it,” at which point at least seven people, scattered among the thousands, rose to their feet and loudly proclaimed, “Opposed!”

The dissenters, who were part of a grassroots movement called Any Opposed, which seeks, among other things, better treatment of, and greater inclusivity for Mormon women and members who belong to the LGBT community, drew a significant amount of media attention in the aftermath of their act of public opposition. After all, opposing the sustaining of LDS Church authorities is a rare occurrence. Prior to the incident, there had not been a recorded opposing vote cast at a general conference in nearly 35 years (Green & Boyd, 2015). In the days and weeks following the conference, local media outlets held press conferences and conducted interviews with members and critics of Any Opposed, and Mormons and LDS commentators turned to their blogs and social media sites to offer their insights on the matter, some calling the dissenters brave and revolutionary, and others accusing them of being nothing more than disrespectful rabble-rousers (Green & Boyd, 2015).

On its website, Any Opposed addressed the claim that had been made by some orthodox Mormons that the organization was created by bitter Mormons and apostates who had been deceived by Satan, and who were now seeking to harm the Church by tarnishing its image. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this is a claim that has been levied against those critical of the Church since shortly after the Church was founded; it is a claim that is often made in an attempt to discredit and to “other” Mormons who do not fall strictly in line with mainstream Mormonism’s doctrines and practices, and to draw a distinct boundary between those who
perform orthodox versions of Mormon identity, and those who do not. Well aware of this, Any Opposed made the following statement to orthodox Mormons about the identities of its own members:

> We are members of the church just like you. We have spent our whole lives in dedicated church service. We are return missionaries, Primary teachers, Relief Society presidents, and Elders Quorum instructors. We are mothers and fathers who want the best for our children. Like you, we have wrapped our entire lives and our fundamental identities around the wonderful promises of the Gospel. (Moulton, 2015, n.p.)

The group then went on to state that many of its members have long attempted to obediently follow the council of their Church leaders, but that a lack of transparency about Church history, the treatment of LGBT members, and the lack of inclusivity of women in the Church decision-making process made it impossible for them to remain silent any longer (Moulton, 2015).

The Any Opposed incident was just one in a series of recent publicly-staged events organized by heterodox Mormons and Mormon critics who desire to see change and greater levels of transparency and inclusivity in the LDS Church. For example, in April 2014, nearly 400 members of Ordain Women, a Mormon feminist organization that desires to see the priesthood extended to women, gathered outside the Conference Center in an attempt to gain admittance to the all-male priesthood session of general conference (Dicou, 2014). The women were denied entrance to the meeting, and Kate Kelly, the leader and founder of the organization, was later excommunicated. Once again, however, local and national media outlets, including KSL, *The Salt Lake Tribune, Deseret News, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Atlantic,* and *Huffington Post* published stories about the events, bringing widespread public attention to the burgeoning Mormon identity conflicts that are being experienced by more and more members of the Church.
More recently, on March 30, 2018, close to 1000 Mormons and other supporters marched to LDS Church Headquarters in downtown Salt Lake City in what was called the Protect LDS Children march. The event was organized and led by Sam Young, a former Mormon bishop and member of the Mormon Stories Community, which will be discussed below. Those participating in the march demanded an end to the Church practice of allowing local ecclesiastical leaders to interview LDS youth about sexual matters in one-on-one settings. The marchers demanded that the Church require parents and guardians to be present whenever their children are interviewed by ecclesiastical leaders. When the group reached the Church Office Building on North Temple Street, they delivered a petition with 55,000 signatures demanding that the desired changes be implemented.

Additionally, a corresponding website, protectldschildren.org, was launched as a digital gathering place where Mormons who are concerned with LDS policies regarding ecclesiastical interviews of LDS youth, or who have experienced negative consequences as a result of these interviews, can share their stories, and read and respond to the stories of others. Those sharing their stories are invited to select from a list of ten “consequences suffered (CS)” so that their stories can be categorized appropriately. For example, the list includes items such as “inappropriate shame and guilt,” number one, and “impaired sexual relations after marriage,” number six. Many individuals who shared their stories marked several numbers, indicating that they have experienced a wide range of consequences. Interestingly, at a news conference that took place just days prior to the Protect LDS Children march, LDS leaders announced that they would be making a change to the ecclesiastical interviewing policy and that LDS youth would now be permitted to bring an adult into their interviews with them. While pleased that the Church was making progress, members of Protect LDS Children, including Sam Young, did not
believe that the policy change went far enough in addressing the issue, because they believed that it was also the nature of the interview questions themselves that created a problem.

The United States is not the only country where groups of concerned and/or heterodox Mormons are coming together in an attempt to discuss and challenge certain aspects of LDS history, doctrine, and practice. In 2010, Hans Mattsson, who was mentioned in the previous chapter, was serving as an area authority for the LDS Church in Europe, organized a discussion group with 600 Mormon Swedes who had doubts and serious questions about the Church (Goodstein, 2013). Mattsson explains in a *Mormon Stories* podcast episode how more and more Mormons began coming to him with questions about the authenticity of the official version of Mormon history, based on information they had found online; eventually, the questions began to affect Mattsson’s own beliefs, and that is when he organized the discussion group. Mattsson arranged to have two Church officials from Salt Lake City, including the LDS Church historian, visit members of the group in Stockholm, Sweden to answer questions and respond to member concerns. A number of those attending the meeting believed that the Church officials would be able to satisfactorily answer their questions and assuage their concerns, but in the weeks and months after the event, many participants, including Mattsson, became disaffected.

The increase in the number of these events in recent years correlates to greater levels of access to sensitive information about the Church and its history. This information has become more easily accessible through digital technologies, such as the Internet, podcasts, video-sharing platforms, and blogs, all of which have played a role in flattening institutional hierarchies and in facilitating the creation of digital networks and communities that are able to bypass traditional sources of religious authority. The increase in such events also correlates to broader secularizing forces, including a decline in the scope of religious authority (see Chaves, 1994). These events
signify that more and more members of the LDS Church are, for one reason or another, becoming dissatisfied, or disenchanted with what mainstream Mormonism claims and offers. Many of these members leave the LDS Church and disassociate themselves with Mormonism altogether, leaving behind the orthodox Mormon aspect of their identities, and experimenting with, and adopting new identity constructs and practices; these individuals will be the focus of the next chapter.

For others, relinquishing an LDS identity and walking away from Mormonism altogether is not so simple. Among those who wish to preserve their Mormon identity, some wish to remain LDS, but to disregard or set aside any orthodox practices, historical facts, and doctrines that provoke cognitive dissonance. For these members, Mormon-themed digital communities serve as a safe space where other members are open to, and understanding of the performance of non-mainstream Mormon identity. These communities also serve as a space where doubts, questions, and faith struggles are deliberated through empathetic, compassionate, and often cathartically humorous discourse. Others choose to work at refining Mormonism from the inside, actively advocating for policy changes and progressivism within the institution, even when doing so may potentially grieve or offend ward and family members. For these members, the digital communities can serve as a space where people and resources are mobilized in an attempt to effect change. Still others are experiencing what is often referred to in heterodox Mormon culture as a “faith crisis,” or a struggle to reconcile well-established religious beliefs with information that challenges those beliefs. Oftentimes, these struggles are bitter and painful, and they can lead—and have led—to deep bouts of depression and even suicide. For these members, the digital communities serve as a vital component of the coping and healing process that takes place during the precarious time when Mormon identities are being reexamined and renegotiated.
For example, one member of the *Mormon Stories* Podcast Community (MSPC) wrote to the founder of the community, John Dehlin, on the community’s Facebook page:

You don’t know me, but I feel like I know you. You don’t know it, but you’ve spent hours upon hours with me in my home, in my car, talking to me and your guests about a trial close to my heart. Your work got me through the roughest time of my life last year when I went through my faith crisis. I don’t know what I would have done without your endeavors. Hearing those you interviewed seemingly connected me with others who knew exactly what I was going through. It reassured me that what was happening was not my fault, but the church’s. It helped me to see that things could get better. You brought hope to me. You provided people to look up to so that I could realize that I too can still be admirable despite Mormons seeing me as shameful. You [gave] me the gift of seeing possibilities. You humanized ex Mormons which gave me confidence to embark on the same path without fearing I was losing my goodness.

Finally, there are the heterodox Mormons who are comfortable with the shifts that have occurred in their belief systems. They are at ease in the liminal space between orthodox Mormonism and post-Mormonism. Some of them continue to attend Church, while others do not. Some will claim to be Mormon in certain social settings, but not in others. Some will claim to be Mormons culturally, but not theologically. What these members hold in common is that they all recognize the impact that Mormonism has had—and perhaps continues to have—on the narratives out of which their identities are constructed.

The category, “heterodox Mormon,” is broad and not easily definable, as it encompasses a wide range of Mormons with a wide variety of approaches to Mormonism, whose Mormon identity can be located anywhere in the space between mainstream, Orthodox Mormonism, and post-, or ex-Mormonism. Therefore, in this chapter, the term “heterodox Mormon” will be applied to any individual who identifies with Mormonism, but who does not consider himself or herself a traditional, orthodox LDS Mormon. The key here is that the individual self-reflexively acknowledges that Mormonism continues to be an essential component of his or her identity, whether or not he or she continues to actively participate in formal LDS rituals. Heterodox
Mormon author and San Diego State University professor, Joanna Brooks’ statement to
Mormons gathered at a Mormon Stories conference in 2011 best illustrates how heterodox
Mormon identity will be conceived of in this chapter:

Surely there is a place in the Mormon story for all of us… If you identify as a Mormon, I
hear you, I recognize you, I claim you. I claim you gay or straight, liberal or
conservative, white, black, brown, perfect, imperfect, active, less-active, post-, present-,
literal, non-literal, agnostic, atheistic, your story matters, you belong. We are Mormons.
We may be uncorrelated, but we are still Mormons. We are open. We are open to each
other. We are open to difference. We are open to the beautiful and the difficult facts of
our Mormon history, and we are open to the potential of Mormonism in the 21st century.
Let’s see what beauty we can make of our Mormon identity together. (Dehlin, 2011)

This chapter will examine the intersection of digital technologies and heterodox
Mormonism by focusing on Mormon identity and meaning-making within the MSPC.
Throughout this chapter, I will use Warner’s work on publics and counterpublics to illustrate
some of the ways that heterodox Mormons are negotiating their post-orthodox Mormon identities
and finding meaning through their engagement in heterodox Mormon public spheres and digital
communities. I will begin by providing an overview of the focus of this case study, the Open
Stories Foundation and the Mormon Stories podcast with its corresponding worldwide digital and
offline communities. I will use Warner’s (2002) work on publics and counterpublics to discuss
how the podcast and its corresponding heterodox Mormon communities could be considered a
counterpublic to mainstream LDS Mormonism. I will discuss some of the different ways that
heterodox Mormons are using the digital community to connect with others, reconstruct their
identities, and find meaning during a crisis of faith or a spiritual transition.

This chapter will focus on a wide range of heterodox Mormons, from those who continue
to attend Church, to those who claim to no longer believe in the Church, but who still identify as
culturally Mormon. The data in this chapter was gathered from 25 email, Skype, telephone, and
in-person interviews with heterodox Mormons that took place over the spring and summer of
from listening to thousands of hours of Mormon-themed podcasts; from participant observation at live *Mormon Stories* gatherings, retreats, and workshops; and from several years of participation in the digital MSPC on Facebook, as well as in other digital heterodox Mormon communities.

**Mormon Stories**

In 2005, John Dehlin, a Mormon intellectual who had had his faith shaken while studying early Church history during the time he was serving as an LDS youth seminary instructor, created a podcast called *Mormon Stories*, which shines the light on LDS-themed topics that are typically avoided in orthodox Mormon settings. These topics include: in-depth examinations of LDS Church history, LDS faith crises, abuses of power by LDS authorities, feminism, and LGBT issues within the Church. Each podcast episode consists of Dehlin interviewing a guest who he feels has something important to contribute to the discourse of Mormonism and Mormon identity, whether the guest is an academic, a former Mormon leader, or an everyday heterodox Mormon who has an important story to share. Thus far, Dehlin has interviewed everyone from homosexual Mormons who are struggling to find their place in the LDS Church, to former LDS ecclesiastical leaders who lost their faith, to authors of Mormon-themed books, to Mormon feminists, etc. As of this writing, the *Mormon Stories* podcast has close to 1,000 hours of content covering over 100 topics. The *Mormon Stories* website has had over 37 million visitors, and the podcast has over 100,000 listeners (“Mormon Stories,” 2018). Additionally, Dehlin recently began broadcasting some of his podcast interviews live, using Facebook’s live video feature. The format allows MSPC members to comment and ask questions during the interview, which Dehlin can then choose to pass on to the interviewee for live reactions and responses.
In response to the popularity of the podcast, and desiring to bring about real change within the Church, Dehlin decided to create a non-profit organization called the Open Stories Foundation. The foundation is home to six Mormon-themed podcasts created by Dehlin, each targeting a different Mormon audience. These podcasts include: Mormon Stories, A Thoughtful Faith, Mormon Matters, Mormon Transitions, Gay Mormon Stories, and Mormon Studies. The foundation’s webpage also has links to the digital communities that correspond to the various podcasts, as well as information about offline events, retreats, and workshops. In addition to serving as a third space where heterodox Mormons can come together to share their stories and challenge authorities within the LDS Church to bring about change, The Open Stories communities also serves as spaces where former Mormons, current Mormons, and anyone in between can share ideas with one another and lean on each other for support. The Open Stories states that its mission is, “To promote understanding, healing, growth, and community for people experiencing or impacted by religious transition” (“The Open Stories Foundation,” 2017, n.p.). Dehlin himself has experienced several faith shifts since he began the podcast over ten years ago. He has oscillated back and forth between being active in the Church and being inactive. He ultimately stopped participating when he was excommunicated for apostasy in early 2015. All the while, Dehlin has worked to build heterodox Mormon support communities by connecting those with doubts and questions about the Church. During the Mormon Stories’ ten year anniversary celebration in 2015, Gina Colvin, host of the podcast A Thoughtful Faith, paid tribute to Dehlin’s work by stating:

Ten years ago [Dehlin] posted the first of hundreds and hundreds of podcast interviews with Mormons who have over the last decade shared their own stories, narratives, and experiences, that have been painful, beautiful, angry, disillusioned, searching, or reconciled to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints…where Mormon public knowledge had been largely controlled and managed by the central body of the Church, John did something unique, he allowed everyday folk to tell their stories, and what
emerged was a progressive Mormon movement that has, over the years, grown exponentially. For the first time, available to Mormons all over the world, who had the technology to listen, were volumes of compelling and heartbreaking personal stories, narratives that assured questioners, doubters, and those with failing faith that they weren’t alone. A language was offered the questioners that brought their own experiences into sharp relief, like faith crisis, and TBM, and this caused people to feel that their experience mattered, that they were relevant and noticed. Through social media, Mormons who have felt that they were at the periphery, found each other, and a new Mormon sub-culture was born… (Colvin, 2015)

This chapter will examine the podcast and corresponding community that Dehlin created by utilizing Warner’s public sphere theory to take a closer look at the practices and identities of MSPC members.

The Mormon Stories Community as a Counterpublic

Much like the Mormons in Nauvoo who began printing the Expositor to challenge and raise questions about Joseph Smith’s brand of Mormonism in 1844, as well as those who chose to consume and engage with the discourse that the paper espoused, the Mormon Stories community can, in many regards, be considered a counterpublic, as many of its members create and circulate discourse that runs counter to the sanctioned, correlated discourse of the dominant group, or mainstream, orthodox Mormonism. According to Warner (2002) a counterpublic can be thought of as:

A scene in which a dominated group aspires to recreate itself as a public and, in doing so, finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group, but also with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public. (p. 80)

The stated purpose of Mormon Stories is to create a space of community and understanding for those who have experienced, or are experiencing, some level of dissatisfaction with their faith. As was discussed above, much of this dissatisfaction stems from what might be considered ruptures in an orthodox approach to Mormon identity. Many Mormon Stories community members feel left out by mainstream Mormonism; they often describe feeling discriminated
against, lied to, ostracized, and manipulated. Of course, addressing these issues in orthodox Mormon settings comes with a steep social price, as we have seen in the examples of Mormons who have been disfellowshipped or excommunicated for publicly asking the wrong questions and starting the wrong discussions. Within the *Mormon Stories* community, individuals who are unable to effectively resist the dominant group in traditional Mormon settings can find and participate in a flourishing public sphere where the ruptures that they experienced in their orthodox Mormon identities can be openly examined and discussed. In this sense, they are creating conflict with the dominant group by circumventing its established norms and culture; in fact, in a PowerPoint document that was leaked to the public through *MormonLeaks*, John Dehlin is specifically identified by LDS authorities as someone who is addressing issues and spreading ideas that are “leading people away from the gospel” and causing harm to the Church (“Area Business Weekends,” 2015, n.p).

Warner’s (2002) model for assessing publics and counterpublics begins with the premise that the public is self-organized, and that it becomes self-organized by virtue of being addressed through discourse. When the individuals who constitute the public are addressed by a certain text, they understand that that text is addressing them. Members of the *Mormon Stories* community are addressed by the *Mormon Stories* podcast, and also by the regular stream of comments, memes, pictures, and videos that are posted to the MSPC Facebook page on a daily basis. When Dehlin releases a new episode of his podcast, or when community members share their thoughts, insights, and concerns in the community forum, the community members understand that the discourse is intended for them (as well as for unknown others), and that it is also the discourse that enables the existence of their community in the first place. In this sense, the *Mormon Stories* community is self-organized; it exists independent of an external entity or
framework, such as the LDS Church, with all of its governing structure and rules. Without the podcast or continual stream of discourse on the community page, the public would not exist, and without the public, there would be no end for the podcast, or for the stream of discourse.

The second premise in Warner’s model is that publics are a relation among strangers. The texts that address a public are thus addressing a social imaginary, and they are always disseminated as a “condition of possibility” (Warner, 2002, p. 56). Because the boundaries of a public are defined solely by the discourse that constitutes them, the people who come together to form a public for a given text cannot be known in advance of their participation in the discourse related to the text. When an episode of Mormon Stories is released, its public is comprised of all the individuals around the world who listen to it. Because it is unfeasible for all of these individuals to know one another, it can be said that their only association is the solitary act of consuming the text. The MSPC is, for the most part, also a relation among strangers. Even though it is a defined Facebook group, the fact that it consists of close to 11,000 people who came together solely as a result of their consumption of Mormon-themed texts, such as the Mormon Stories podcast, allows it to meet the criteria for Warner’s second premise; after all, Warner (2002) states that:

In modern society, a stranger is not as marvelously exotic as the wandering outsider would have been in an ancient, medieval, or early modern town… In the context of a public… strangers can be treated as already belonging to our world… We are routinely oriented to them in common life.

In the MSPC, individuals typically address the public as unknown others participating in a common discourse within a unique public sphere. This is often done through use of the plural pronoun “you” to address everyone, but no one in particular. For example, one woman wrote in 2016:
If you are new to the faith crisis/transition, this post is [to] tell you that it really can all be okay someday. My transition started a little over 2 years ago. It was pure anguish for me, because I truly loved my church. I couldn’t fathom all that I’d lost and how much my life was changing. I was consumed by my loved ones new pitiful opinions of me and completely unable to trust myself.

She closes her post:

So, if you are stuck in the dark part of this journey, know that it won't last forever. Be as honest and respectful as possible with loved ones, get support if you need it (I cried my eyes out to a room full of strangers 2 years ago, and they were wonderful), and trust yourself.

This woman’s post indicates that she is addressing a public. Like the author of a book, or an advice columnist, there is no way of knowing at the point the text is mediated who will or will not read it, yet it is there for everybody within the public sphere to read and react to, and it serves to perpetuate the heterodox Mormon discourse out of which the public is formed, and through which it is sustained.

Warner’s third premise states that the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal. When individual members of the MSPC engage with a text, they understand that the text was not addressed solely to them, but to anyone else in the community who happened to be addressed by it by also engaging with it (See Warner, 2002, p. 57). Warner (2002) explains how discourse that is addressed to a public is disseminated in a “venue of indefinite address,” and that the person disseminating the text “hopes that people [in the venue] will find themselves in it” (p. 58). This is an important element for understanding the impact that a public sphere can have on the shaping of individual identity, as well as on the shaping of social and political institutions more broadly. As Warner explains, “The benefit in this practice is that it gives a general social relevance to private thought and life. Our subjectivity is understood as having resonance with others, and immediately so” (p. 59). When heterodox Mormons are addressed by Dehlin’s podcast, or by the posts of other individuals in the MSPC, or by potentially any heterodox
Mormon text, their subjective questions, doubts, and struggles are validated by the public discourse that demonstrates to them that they are not alone—that there are untold others questioning, doubting, and struggling, as well. With the support of others—even when those others are unknown to them—Mormons experiencing dissatisfaction with the Church, and who desire to break with an orthodox Mormon identity construct so that they can develop and experiment with new identity constructs, are more inclined to do so. Several of the heterodox Mormons who I interviewed, as well as numerous conversation threads on the MSPC Facebook page, bore this out. Jane, a 36-year-old mother of three from England, and a member of the MSPC posted to the digital community:

Can I ask how you have managed to process the feelings of anger that if you hadn’t been raised in the Church your life would look different? I never wanted the whole marriage and pumping out a million kids thing. But I felt like that was the only path available to me as an obedient Mormon woman. I fell crazy in love with my husband, I still am crazy in love wth him. But that doesn’t change the fact that I shouldn’t have been married at 21 and had 3 kids by 27. I was utterly miserable. I spent my twenties severely depressed and isolated, at times suicidal as my depression was so severe. I was trapped in a life that wasn’t right for me. There is no way for me to claim my twenties back. I believe I could have been great at something, I am not well suited to raising a big family. My instinct told me that. But I didn’t know that I was entitled to choose my own path, that I could listen to my needs and live a life that might meet them. I now have a crazy amount of anger that I actually want to feel. It is the first time that an emotion feels like it is truly mine. I refuse to bury it or silence it. My poor husband is suffering as [a] result and is really struggling to understand my anger. Any advice welcome, or actually just some people to tell me that I am not alone.

Here, Jane’s address to an indefinite “you” has both a personal and an impersonal designation. While she is clearly speaking to all of the heterodox Mormons who occupy the MSPC public sphere, she is also speaking to specific individuals within that public sphere. All members of the community could potentially engage with Jane’s post, but the message is intended for those who, like Jane, have had to confront the painful realization that the orthodox Mormon identity construct that they once felt compelled to adopt and perform for much of their lives actually
suppressed their capacity to explore what they now believe could have been more fulfilling identity constructs. As of this writing, over 110 community members have engaged in the discussion that was initiated by Jane’s post, many of them women and mothers who have expressed feelings similar to Jane’s. For example, one woman, Christine, replied:

Thank you for this post. I have also felt that my youth was hijacked by the Church and wondered if I was alone in these feelings of anger. At a time when we should be exploring our options, taking risks, having adventures, and figuring out who we are and what we want out of life, we are becoming mothers. Instantly, our lives are about everyone else and our own needs are shoved by the way side. I’m 48 and finally looking at going back to school so I can pursue a career and I’m really excited about it! I have not completely worked through my feelings of anger, but am trying not to let them keep me from moving forward. You are most definitely not alone! Don’t lose sight of your dreams. It isn’t too late to make them come true!

Like Jane, Christine believes that the orthodox Mormon identity script that she had ascribed to for much of her life prevented her from exploring the various options available to her, and thus held her back from focusing on her own needs and desires. Once Christine read Jane’s post, she (Christine) became one of its addressees, and she was able to contribute to the public discourse, which in this case touched upon several issues related to identity, including feminism, motherhood, independence, and the perceived restrictive nature of orthodox Mormon life scripts.

As Warner (2002) argues, texts like these create a public (or a counterpublic, in this case) by addressing, both personally and impersonally, an undefined group of individuals, and by showing these individuals that their subjective thoughts and beliefs are, in many instances, resonate with thoughts and beliefs of many others, as was seen in the example above. Once these texts enter the public sphere, they contribute to and build upon the discourse that carries with it the potential to incite action at both the individual level—such as when the discourse helps to guide an individual towards the process of self-reflexively making changes in his or her life, and at the societal level—such as when the discourse contributes to the formation of groups that
actively seek change within society’s institutions, like the groups mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Warner’s fourth premise states that a public is constituted through mere attention. Warner (2002) argues that, “Attention is the principal sorting category by which members and nonmembers [of a public] are discriminated,” and that, “The cognitive quality of that attention is less important than the mere fact of active uptake” (p. 61). In other words, the members of a public do not necessarily have to pay attention to every symbol that is mediated through the public sphere in which they are participating in order to be considered members of that public. To this point, Warner gives the example of an individual sleeping through a ballet performance; even though the individual is not actively paying attention, the fact that he or she is willingly and voluntarily attending the performance is “enough to create an addressable public” (p. 61). The important thing to note here is that some degree of active uptake is essential. Additionally, it is important to understand that publics are places of “active participation” as opposed to places of “ascriptive belonging,” which means that unlike states and social institutions, to which membership is often ascribed, publics are “virtual entities” that only exist through the continually renewed attention of their members (pp. 61-62). Warner also describes publics as having an “appellative energy,” meaning that the individuals within a public can self-reflexively choose which texts to devote their attention to, and which texts to disregard. As Warner puts it, “the direction of our glance can constitute our social world” (p. 62).

Members of the MSPC constitute a public because they voluntarily and actively engage with the texts and symbols that constitute their community. Of course, not all members participate or pay attention to the same extent as other members. While members like Karolyn, a 51-year-old woman from Tucson, Arizona who says that she “want[s] to see the Church stop
hurting so many people,” listens to the *Mormon Stories* podcast and actively participates in the MSPC on a daily basis by responding to posts and making comments of her own, Josh, a 38-year-old lawyer from Southern California explained that he rarely participates in the discussions that take place in the MSPC anymore:

I think just with where I’m at in my [faith] transition now, I don’t need to participate as much as I used to. I mean, occasionally, I’ll still jump in there and comment on something if I think it’s interesting, or if I feel like I can help someone out, but mostly I just kind of observe from a distance what the other members are talking about. It’s interesting to see a lot of them going through the same steps in their faith transitions that I went through: from the anger, to the sadness, and the acceptance…

Because Josh still pays attention to what is being said and done in the community, he is still a member of the MSPC’s public. If he were to drop out entirely, and stop giving the community any of his attention, like many others have, then he would no longer be considered a part of the public. What is important to note here is that there are always community members coming and going, actively and regularly participating in the discourse, and then pulling back a little bit, or halting participation altogether, but continuing to pay attention to what is happening within the community from the sidelines. Each member participates and gives attention to the community based on his or her needs. As Josh mentioned, the amount of attention, and the degree of participation often coincides with where the individual is at in his or her faith transition, and in the process of reshaping his or her identity with regard to Mormonism.

One practice that was referred to occasionally, both in my interviews and in the posts and discussions taking place in the MSPC, was the practice of “retiring from the community” once one felt that he or she had gotten everything out of it that he or she could. Some members even post a parting message, or a “goodbye” before leaving the MSPC; this post often includes a “thank you” to the other members for their kindness and support during a difficult faith crisis and transition. For example, one member from Denmark wrote in 2016:
Dear Mormon Stories Podcast Community! I just want to say goodbye to all of you. *Mormon Stories*, and John in particular, has been a very great part in my way out of Mormonism, and in my life as a whole, but I think it’s time for me to move on now… I hope everything works out for all of you in the community, especially those who suffer and are left socially isolated and emotionally hurt… Thank you all of you and goodbye.

By stating that *Mormon Stories* has helped him on his way out of Mormonism, and that it is time for him to move on now, this member demonstrates that, for him, the community was a space of transition; once his needs as a disaffected Mormon had been met, in large part by Dehlin and the MSPC community, he was ready step away, to stop giving his attention to the community’s symbols and participating in its discourse, and to move on to the next phase of his life, one in which Mormonism was no longer necessary in his continued search for meaning.

Voluntarily ending participation in the heterodox Mormon digital communities is often tied to self-acknowledged shifts in one’s identity construct. Andre, a former member of the MSPC, explained to me in an interview that his departure from the community was the inevitable next step in his life journey. Interestingly, in explaining why he left the community, he borrowed a metaphor from an episode of the *Mormon Stories* podcast that featured an interview with Richard Dutcher, a former Mormon who once wrote, directed, and acted in independent Mormon films. In the podcast episode, Dutcher uses the metaphor, which he attributes to Buddhist teachings, to explain his own departure from the LDS Church. In Andre’s words:

I felt like I had reached the point where I was done with Mormonism, like, I had gotten past it, you know? I had gotten past being sad about it, I had gotten past being angry about it, and it felt like it was time to for me to untie myself from all of that and to try something else… In one of the older podcasts, I like how Richard Dutcher talks about how he viewed the Church as being like a canoe, it was something that was needed to get him across the river on his journey through life, but then once he got to the other side, he could leave it behind and continue on without it. That’s how I’d explain how I felt about the community, it was something I needed in my journey until it got me across the river.
Warner’s fifth premise states that a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse. This is similar to Warner’s sixth premise, which states that publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation. I will examine these two premises together. Warner (2002) argues that because a public is “an ongoing space of encounter for discourse,” no single text, no single voice, and no single medium can “create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public” (p. 62). Instead, publics come into being only when they engage with recurrent, pre-existing discourses, and when those discourses become interactive through a continual process of circulation, feedback, discussion, and deliberation. The individuals who constitute a public are more than passive observers of the texts that are circulated; they are also participants in the circulation, and in the perpetuation of the discourse. As Warner (2002) states, they “understand themselves as directly and actively belonging to a social entity that exists historically in secular time and has consciousness of itself…” (p. 75). This self-awareness creates the potential for action and change, as was demonstrated when members of the MSPC counterpublic who had been circulating texts and deliberating about the nature of ecclesiastical interviews with children eventually marched in the streets and circulated petitions with the intention of initiating changes in Church policy. The content of the texts that were circulated regarding the child ecclesiastical interviews was not dissociated from other issues that had been present in the MSPC public sphere; indeed, it was rooted in pre-existing heterodox Mormon discourse about progressivism within the Church, and in discourse about the rights of marginalized Church members, including women and members of the LGBT community.

In order for a healthy public sphere to be sustained, the discourse within it must also occur in what Warner refers to as “punctual rhythms” (p. 68). This does not necessarily mean that a text must be disseminated precisely at a given time each day, week, or month. Instead, it
means that in order for texts to create a sustainable public, that public must be able to depend upon “distinct moments and rhythms” that work to create a continual flow of discourse. These rhythms allow the members of a public to view their public sphere as more than just a series of intermittent and erratic exchanges; it allows them to develop expectations, and a sense of organization within their sphere. Although Dehlin doesn’t seem to have a precise schedule for releasing his *Mormon Stories* podcast episodes, listeners have come to expect that new episodes will be available approximately every week, which allows them to maintain a public that is rooted in sustained discourse—and in the continual expectation of sustained discourse—surrounding heterodox Mormon texts and issues. Additionally, there are expectations that have been formed around the flows that occur in the MSPC itself. For example, General Conference weekends, the release of *Mormon Stories* podcast episodes, LDS policy changes, and major Church news releases customarily coincide with corresponding themes in the comments, memes, jokes, stories, and discussions that are taking place in the digital community.

A couple of texts taken from the MSPC during past LDS General Conference sessions will provide some insight into how this major event in Mormonism provides both a recurring and expected source of discussion for the public, as well as an opportunity for heterodox Mormons to discuss and display their shifting identities and beliefs with regard to Mormonism. Prior to several General Conference sessions, including one in April 2012, and one in April 2015, Dehlin has initiated discussions that have included dozens of community members by posting, General Conference “open threads.” MSPC members view these threads as an opportunity to critique the messages that are shared by leaders of the Church, as well as the structure of General Conference itself. Many of the members participating in these threads are sharing their feelings about General Conference for the first time since experiencing a faith crisis, or leaving the Church
altogether. Others who participate in these discussions no longer believe in Mormonism, but watch the conference sessions strictly for entertainment value; they remember the days when they took General Conference very seriously, and enjoy the opportunity to watch it from a critical perspective, and to make jokes about the content of the talks and the speakers. Still other MSPC members participate in the threads because they feel coerced into watching General Conference by their orthodox Mormon family members; to these community members, the discussion threads provide much-needed, real-time relief from having to participate in a ritual that, for one reason or another, they feel is required of them.

Nick, a 23-year-old engineering student from the Midwest has not yet told his orthodox LDS family or friends that he no longer believes in the Church, though he plans to do so sometime after he graduates in 2019. Because he is living with his parents while he finishes school, he does not feel that he has the space needed to tell them how his beliefs with regard to Mormonism have changed. He said that his parents would be “devastated” and possibly even “angry” with him, and that they might even make him find another place to live if they find out that he is not a “TBM.” In Nick’s words, “I’m pretty much trapped in this position where I have to do everything my TBM family expects of me when it comes to church.” Nick described how his family has recently begun a tradition of inviting his siblings and their families over to his parent’s house for the concluding, Sunday afternoon session of General Conference. They all gather in the living room to watch the two-hour broadcast together, and then they eat a big lunch that his mother has prepared while going around the table and taking turns sharing their favorite quotes and insights from the conference. Nick said that while his family is watching conference, he has his laptop with him, and he periodically checks in to the MSPC, as well as other live.

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1 TBM or “True Believing Mormon” is an acronym that is used frequently by members of heterodox and post-Mormon communities to refer to orthodox Mormons.
digital conference feeds for heterodox and former Mormons, just to see what other people in his situation are writing about conference:

It’s nice to know that there are other people going through the same thing I am. It does make conference a lot less boring [laughs], and it also helps me realize I’m not the only one in this crazy situation, like I’m not the only one who has to pretend I’m all into it just to make my TBM family happy… My favorite community conference experience was during the last conference. Someone started a thread for people to use Snapchat filters on the conference speakers. It was pure genius. Here you have these Church leaders that we’re taught to obey and respect every word that comes out of their mouths, and there we were bringing them down a level by messing with them… giving them sunglasses, and wigs, and long noses, and stuff. Yeah, on one hand you could say it was pretty immature, but it actually felt kind of empowering, too.

Another text that was posted by Chelsie, a young wife and mother, during the Sunday session of a recent General Conference, consists of a photo with the caption, “Happy General Conference sabbath, bitches!” The photo is a split image: on the left side of the photo is a close-up image of a mug filled with coffee, resting on a table with a small bottle of Bailey’s alcohol lying face-up next to it; on the right side of the photo is an image of the woman’s husband leaned over the table pouring some of the Bailey’s alcohol into the coffee mug with a mischievous grin on his face. On its surface, the post is clearly intended as a humorous jab at orthodox Mormon General Conference traditions. During General Conference weekend, many orthodox Mormons use their social media platforms to share inspirational quotes, spiritual messages, and pictures of family traditions that typically take place during the event. For example, one orthodox Mormon I spoke with told me that every six months, before the conference begins, she posts an image of her scriptures, a notebook and pen, and a batch of orange-glazed cinnamon rolls that she bakes especially for the occasion. As a caption for the photo, she always writes something like, “The orange cinnamon rolls are back, that must mean it’s General Conference time!” The photos signal her orthodox Mormon identity, and connote that she will be watching conference, enjoying her rolls, and taking notes about what is said during the conference. By posting the
picture of the coffee and alcohol on conference Sunday, Chelsie appropriated the Mormon practice of using social media to show others what she would be doing during the conference, while at the same time giving a clear signal that she was no longer an orthodox Mormon.

In another post from just before the October 2017 General Conference commenced, David, an 18-year-old practicing Mormon from Arizona who is preparing to serve an LDS mission, wrote, “I’m looking forward to General Conference. I always enjoy the process of listening to the speakers, gaging what they are saying, determining whether or not I agree with them, and engaging in a dialectic with the Spirit throughout.” In a community where a majority of the members have stopped actively participating in the Church, and many of these are troubled with the Church’s doctrine, practices, and culture, David is much closer to the orthodox side of the Mormon belief spectrum than the typical MSCP member. This quickly becomes apparent when reading through the comments left on David’s original post; many of them deride David for choosing to watch conference, others use quotes from past and present LDS authorities to explain how David’s willingness to question the validity of what Church leaders are saying is a form of apostasy, still others share examples of the secular things they will be doing during General Conference, like taking “a motorcycle ride up to Snowbird for Oktoberfest during both Sunday sessions [of conference]”

Nick’s comments, along with the posts from Dehlin, Chelsie, and David demonstrate that the MSCP is, indeed, a space where discourse is reflexively circulated. The community has its own punctual rhythms, and community members are well aware that the anticipated moments and events that create these rhythms are an opportune time for specific discourses to take place. In many cases, these discourses are related to shifting identities, and a desire for change within the LDS Church. Additionally, David’s post, and the comments of those who chose to respond to
his post, demonstrate how broad the heterodox Mormon portion of the belief spectrum is. There are a wide array of identity types being negotiated and performed among those who are no longer—or perhaps never have been—orthodox Mormons. Some put on an orthodox Mormon facade in front of orthodox family members and friends—some have been doing this for years, not quite knowing how to—or not wanting to—explain to those closest to them that orthodox Mormonism no longer works for them as a viable belief system.

Others, like David, are still content with being active in the LDS Church, even if they choose to disregard the aspects of Mormon practice and doctrine with which they disagree. Others no longer have anything to do with the LDS Church, but enjoy the culture of heterodox Mormonism because it provides them with meaning and support as they negotiate their post-orthodox Mormon identities. As I learned from participating in a variety of digital heterodox Mormon communities, including the MSPC, many heterodox Mormons, particularly those who have recently ended their activity in the LDS Church, practice what might be considered an inverse approach to Church behavioral guidelines in their quest for post-orthodox self-discovery. Indeed, some of the more common conversations that arise in heterodox and post-Mormon settings center around activities that the LDS Church explicitly discourages, such as coffee drinking, alcohol consumption, and engaging in non-sanctioned Sunday activities—it is as if heterodox Mormons enjoy exhibiting to each other all of the ways that they are no longer orthodox Mormons.

Warner’s final premise asserts that a public is poetic world-making. Warner (2002) states that, “There is no speech or performance addressed to a public that does not try to specify in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation” (p. 82). In other words, those who create and circulate the discourse that forms and sustains a public do so in such
a manner that speaks to the distinctive nature of that public. Publics, like the MSPC, are their own lifeworlds—they have their own shared history, behavior patterns, experiences, metaphors, ways of expressing themselves, etc. Members of the MSPC typically have a solid understanding of the beliefs and culture of mainstream Mormonism, which frames most of the discussions that take place within their community. MSPC members understand what a faith crisis is; they probably have friends and family members who are orthodox Mormons; at some point, they have probably experienced humiliation, shame, guilt, and even depression over their decisions to step away from orthodox Mormonism; they enjoy using humor for catharsis, and as a coping mechanism, especially when the target of the humor is orthodox Mormonism. Additionally, members of the MSPC frequently use their own jargon from what might be considered a heterodox, or post-Mormon lexicon, which includes words and phrases like: “TBM,” as mentioned above, “Closet Doubter,” for those who no longer believe in the Church, but continue to “attend and pretend,” “Courts of Love,” for the LDS disciplinary courts where members are sometimes disfellowshipped or excommunicated, and “the shelf,” which will be described below. These practices and characteristics are part of what form the lifeworld of the MSPC counterpublic. Thus, when the MSPC is addressed, it is addressed in such a way that the nature of its lifeworld is perpetuated. As Warner (2002) puts it:

Public discourse says not only: ‘Let a public exist,’ but: ‘Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way.’ It then goes out in search of confirmation that such a public exists, with greater or lesser success—success being further attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world-understanding it articulates. (p. 82)

In describing his “poetic world-making” premise, Warner also points to a limitation in the rational-critical nature of the discourse articulated in the Habermasian model of an ideal public sphere. Habermas theorizes a public sphere where participants engage in deliberate and rational discourse about a given issue, and where desired outcomes are achieved through a sustained,
reflexive, critical discourse that serves as a check on the state. Warner explains that many publics, particularly counterpublics, which typically consist of individuals who gather around social and political issues that exist on the periphery of the more predominant issues discussed by the broader public, “lack the power to transpose themselves to the generality of the states,” and so adopt a creative, instead of a political, approach to sustaining themselves (Warner, 2002, p. 84). For these publics, attention is often limited, and the individuals who form these publics tend to have a more difficult time getting their voices heard and building support for their causes. For these publics, creative agency, or what Warner refers to as “poesis,” and not rational-critical discourse that rises to the level of politics, is what fuels the nature and lifeworld of the individuals who come together to form the public. In Warner’s estimation, publics that do transpose themselves to the generality of states—publics that, for example, become social movements—lose, or perhaps cast aside their creative agency by instead adopting the rational-critical approach so pervasive in modern politics (see Pietrucci, 2010).

In the final section of this chapter, I will shine some light on the lifeworld of the MSPC by examining the poetic world-making that takes place within the community. To do this, I will explore how LGBT Mormons and LGBT rights are being discussed by heterodox Mormons in the MSPC. In my interviews and participant observations with heterodox Mormons, the treatment of the LGBT community by LDS leaders and by many orthodox Mormons was one of the most-commonly cited reasons for heterodox Mormons disagreeing with the Church, and beginning to question the Church’s culture and policies. Many members of the MSPC have friends and family members who identify as LGBT, which shapes the perceptions of community members with regard to LGBT issues. The treatment of the LGBT community and the way that this treatment is discussed by the heterodox Mormon community gets to the core of what this
chapter seeks to uncover, as it provides a lens through which overarching concepts such as identity, secularization, lived religion, mediation, and the nature and power of counterpublics can be more closely examined. By examining the community’s discourse surrounding LGBT issues we can better understand some of the reasons why many members of the MSPC have put this particular social issue before their religious beliefs, how members of the MSPC use LGBT issues to critique the Church, and how the MSPC has done actual work to challenge Church policies regarding LGBT members, in hopes that Church leaders will change these policies and become more accepting of the LGBT community. Each of these elements will provide a better understanding of the lifeworld of the MSPC, and demonstrate how the community is important both in the shaping of individual identity, and in the work that is being done at the group level.

In a post to the MSPC on May 29, 2017, Shane, an active member of the community from Iowa, conducted a poll, in which he asked, “What was the last straw for your shelf? Add your own if you don’t see it. Add your reasoning if you feel like it!” The “shelf” that Shane refers to is a metaphor. When members of the LDS Church encounter information that could potentially damage their faith in the Church (this could include anti-Mormon reading material, scientific evidence that contradicts official Church history and doctrine, plausible arguments against their beliefs, and any other seemingly insoluble religious questions they may encounter), they are typically instructed by Church leaders to set the information/questions aside and wait for them to be addressed in the Lord’s time, which they are told might not be during this lifetime. Members of the MSPC refer to the space where these questions are set aside while one patiently awaits an answer as “the shelf.” Once too much challenging information, or too many important questions about the Church are placed on the shelf, the shelf collapses, and this is the point when an individual experiences a faith crisis and/or leaves the Church—f fittingly, the main image on
the MSPC’s group page is a picture of a shelf that is buckling under the weight of too many books. Thus, what Shane is asking is, “At what point did the critical information about the Church and/or the unanswered questions simply become too much for you?” When taken together, the issue of the Church’s treatment of the LGBT community (including the November 2015 policy change that, among other things, prohibited the children of same-sex couples from being baptized until they reached adulthood and denounced same-sex marriage in front of their local leaders, and Proposition 8) was the second most-commonly-cited response (next to perceived problems with LDS Church history) as to why their shelves broke.

The following comments, taken from the comment thread corresponding to Shane’s original post, show how MSPC members perpetuate their lifeworld, in part, through dialogue related to the Church’s involvement in LGBT issues. The first comment, posted by Cameron, a man in his 40s from northern Utah, references both “Prop 8,” by which he means the Church’s financial and political involvement in attempting to block same-sex marriage in California during a statewide ballot measure in 2008, and a General Conference talk given in 2010 by the late LDS Apostle, Boyd K. Packer, in which Packer implies that homosexuality is a personal choice since a loving God would never make a person gay. Before the talk was printed, Packer’s statement was edited to remove the implication that homosexuality is a personal choice. Many have speculated that the change was made in response to the backlash the original wording received from active Mormons, heterodox Mormons, and from local and national media outlets. Cameron’s comment states: “Church involvement in Prop 8 caused me to stop tithing in 2008. BKP’s talk two years later is when I told the wife I would no longer attend or support the church in any way.” In a response to Cameron’s comment, another member asked for clarification about the talk, “Is that the one where he said something like ‘why would heavenly father make one of
his children gay? Why would he do that to them?’ Then later in the print version it was lightly edited?” To this question, Cameron replied, “… yep. Why would a loving God do that (create someone who is gay)? Later edited to clarify that the Spirit was asleep at the wheel during conference and caused him to misspeak.” The other commenter then replied:

I remember watching that with my family live. I was still probably 60% in at that point, and I remember making a puzzled face while my family was all nodding and agreeing. That was such an odd thing to say, and then odd that the church softened it up a little in the print version.

A third commenter added, “I was fuming over that one as I watched live.”

Thousands of other posts, including memes, videos, artwork, and songs created by members of the MSPC dealt directly with the November 2015 policy change, an issue that greatly angered and saddened many members of the heterodox and post-Mormon communities, and even left many orthodox Mormons scratching their heads. I will quote at length a post from Kim, a woman in her 40s from California who posted her thoughts on November 5th, 2016—the one-year anniversary of the policy change:

I just posted this on my personal page. I wonder if I’ll get called into the bishop’s office:

A year ago today, my heart was broken. The LDS Church’s November Policy, as it came to be known, was made public to the world… This broke my heart because the church that had raised me, who taught me to love one another, to leave the 90 and 9 and seek out the 1 lost sheep, was alienating children, the most vulnerable of their members.

Many would say that this policy is no big deal, that it only affects a few. But didn’t Christ teach that all were precious unto Him? I learned of the parable of the lost sheep while sitting in the pews of an LDS church as a child. Wasn’t I taught that Christ loved all his children so much, that as the Good Shepherd, he would leave the flock to seek out the one lost sheep?…

It has been one year since this policy came to light. Another year of gay Mormon teenagers committing suicide out of feelings of hopelessness. One year of children disavowing a parent because they think this is what God wants them to do. Another year of confusion and hurt for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters who know in their hearts that God loves them, but don’t hear it from the pulpit of His servants…
After one year, I have heard no answers, only the pain of my fellow brothers and sisters. In response to Kim’s post, several members of the community stated that Kim had articulated perfectly what they had been thinking, other members asked for Kim’s permission to share the post to their own personal Facebook pages. One member, attempting to mobilize support for a grassroots heterodox Mormon movement called “Common Consent,” which actively opposes Church policies at ward, stake, and general conferences, posted a link to a petition to join Common Consent in the comment section of Kim’s post; as of this writing, just under 500 people have joined the movement.

In another post, from December 12, 2016, Alex, a gay member of the MSPC, shared a cover of a song that he had recorded after the November policy change was leaked and made public. In his post, which included a link to the song, Alex wrote:

I just wanted to share with this group. Shortly after the November policy came out, I went into the recording studio and recorded this song as “studio therapy” as I tried to come to terms with the pain that I was feeling. Having been born into the church as one of “those homosexuals,” I have never been able to feel like I belonged, but I tried. In college at BYU in the early 2000s one of my closeted friends in the ward killed himself because the closet he was in proved to be too much, but I couldn’t fully grieve out of fear that others in the ward might realize I was just like him!

Fast forward a decade and the church ups its game in their perpetual war against LGBT members, and they proved that they don’t care [about] the collateral damage that occurs. Even in the face of an epidemic of suicides, the church would rather blame it on the altitude than their own actions…

Alex covered the song, “Say Something” by A Great Big World. To him, the words:

And I am feeling so small.
It was over my head.
I know nothing at all.
And I will stumble and fall.
I’m still learning to love.
Just starting to crawl.
Say something I’m giving up on you.
I’m sorry that I couldn’t get to you.
resonated with the pain he was feeling after the Church he had dedicated his life to essentially told him that he was an apostate and a sinner because of his sexual identity. Alex explained that when he covered the song, he took the word “you” to mean the LDS Church. He stated that he had devoted his “entire existence” to the Church, which claims to be the mouthpiece of God, but in the end, the Church never really said anything at all, so he chose to give up on it.

Some members of the community chose to use artwork to make a statement about the November policy change. In a piece entitled “Rainbow Girl,” created by an artist who chose to remain anonymous, several young girls clad in white dresses, reminiscent of the clothing that Mormon girls wear when they are baptized, smile complacently as they surround a girl in the middle of the photo, dressed in grey, who looks lost and dejected. The girl in the middle is wearing a rainbow patch near her right shoulder, and she is the only one looking directly at the viewer, as if to say, “Help me find a way out of this situation.” A few of the comments posted on the photo help to illustrate how many MSPC community members feel about the Church’s marginalization of LGBT members. One commenter wrote, “I just want to hug this cartoon child. Heartbreaking.” Another wrote, “Not that different than the yellow star of the past,” still another commenter wrote, “…The way they have formed a circle reminds me of the pioneer wagon trains. The girl in the middle is supposedly being protected by the curve of the wagons around her, but she clearly does not feel safe.” This last comment speaks to the way that Church leaders have framed the policy change, which prohibits the children of same-sex couples from getting baptized. Elder D. Todd Christofferson, one of the Church’s apostles stated about the policy change:

It originates from a desire to protect children in their innocence and in their minority years. … We don’t want the child to have to deal with issues that might arise where parents feel one way and the expectations of the Church are very different. (Weaver, 2015, n.p.)
But members of the MSPC, like the artist who created “Rainbow Girl,” are using their creative agency to demonstrate that some policies that are allegedly intended to protect Mormon children are actually doing more harm than good by making these children believe that they are personally unfit for, or underserving of some of the most important rites and rituals in the LDS Church because of the actions and choices of their parents.

I spoke with Angie about the November policy change, about how the change personally affected her and her family, and about how heterodox Mormon communities helped her to find meaning and peace after her personal struggle with her LDS identity. Angie is a 48-year-old mother and physical therapist from the Pacific Northwest who said that she never really fully embraced Mormonism, but in order to please her family, and to obtain the social benefits of being an active Mormon, she continued to attend Church, and even married an orthodox Mormon man in an LDS temple. Angie talked about the perpetuation of lies and abuse that occurs in orthodox Mormon culture. She said that when her two sons were born in what were back-to-back pregnancies, the local ward leaders called her husband to serve in a ward role that required him to spend a lot of time away from the home. She said she does not understand how the Church can “tout family all the time” when, at the same time, it “fights gay marriage” and “calls men to these positions where they’re never home to support and spend time with their families.” Angie talked about how her family situation and underlying doubts about her faith caused her to become increasingly resentful towards the Church. At one point, her husband accused her of being a “fake believer,” and complained that not once during their marriage had she stood in front of the congregation to bear her testimony, and that not once had she wanted to participate in LDS temple ceremonies with him. Eventually, Angie and her husband were unable to reconcile their faith differences, and they divorced.
When Angie’s daughter was 14, she told Angie that she was gay. In spite of the Church’s unambiguous denunciation of homosexuality, Angie’s love for her daughter and her liberal, heterodox approach to Mormonism caused her to remain entirely supportive of her daughter. At the same time, however, Angie continued to remain active in the Church and to support it through tithing and service. Supporting her gay daughter, while at the same time supporting an organization that strongly disapproved of her daughter’s sexual identity, created strong feeling of dissonance for Angie. When the November policy change was leaked, Angie knew she could no longer support the Church. Angie described the lead-up to her decision to stop attending and supporting the Church as follows:

I had a really, really intense ‘voice-in-my-head’ experience—okay, I guess I can say I heard a voice, I mean, we’re Mormons, that’s part of what we do, but anyway, I heard this voice in my head that said, ‘You will never heal here. So leave.’ And it was really the week before the policy came out that I felt that, that I will never heal in the Mormon Church, and then the next week the policy came out, and I think two or three weeks went by, and I didn’t go to Church, and I was really struggling with this question, ‘Who am I if I’m not a Mormon mom?’ Ultimately, I made the decision, ‘that’s it, I’m not paying tithing anymore. I’m not going back.’

Angie stated that the posts and discussions in the online heterodox and post-Mormon communities, as well as the friendships she developed with other members of the communities (Angie met her current boyfriend in one of these communities) helped her with her decision to transition out of active participation in the LDS Church by helping her to realize that she was not “alone, abnormal, or crazy.” Posts like the ones shared by Cameron, Kim, and Alex helped to give Angie the emotional support that she needed to say “enough is enough,” and to “walk away from the constant guilting and shaming towards something much better for [her] and [her] family.” Angie identified the Mormon Stories podcast, the MSPC, and a group called “Mama Dragons,” which consists of the Mormon mothers of LGBT children, as being particularly helpful in her transition. Almost three years have now passed since Angie last attended an LDS
Church meeting. She still occasionally participates in the heterodox and post-Mormon digital communities where she once received so much support, advice, and friendship during a difficult transition, but her participation now is less for her own emotional and spiritual wellbeing, and more out of a desire to help other transitioning Mormons who are in the same difficult situation that she was once in.

Conclusion

The conversations, jokes, memes, poems, artwork, songs, and comments that members of the MSPC post for other members of their public to see and engage with, work together to create a unique lifeworld that is specific to the MSPC counterpublic. Those who become a part of the counterpublic by addressing, and by being addressed by other members of the community share a common heterodox Mormon vocabulary, similar struggles, similar desires, and similar attitudes about the LDS Church, and about what they desire to see changed in the LDS Church. Additionally, most members of the counterpublic are going through—or have gone through—significant changes in their religious identities. These changes are often triggered by an event, such as an online encounter with alternate versions of LDS history, or the announcement of a new Church policy, that causes an orthodox member to reflect on how the Church’s doctrine, policies, and culture substantiate or conflict with who he or she desires to be. Oftentimes, this reflection period is long and painful, and the lifeworlds and the support that exist in heterodox Mormon communities, like the MSPC help these individuals to better cope with their faith crises, and with their religious and identity transformations.

In the case of the MSPC, and other heterodox and post-Mormon communities, rational-critical discourse between members of these publics and Church leaders is not a viable option since Church leaders claim to get their revelations for the Church through divine inspiration. This means that petitions for change from ordinary Church members are unlikely to lead to any
meaningful action by those who determine Church policy. Although members are asked to participate in a sustaining vote when new Church leaders are called, members of the Church have almost always indicated full support for the names that have been proposed to them for a sustaining vote, as was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. In the recent small-scale acts of opposition during the sustaining votes at General Conference, the few who opposed the appointment of new leaders were instructed to speak with their local leaders about their reasons for their opposing votes. The nature of these almost-always unanimous sustaining votes in LDS Church settings has led some to compare them to the rubber stamp elections that take place in countries like North Korea. Thus, counterpublics like the MSPC depend on the creative agency of the individuals who comprise them when it comes to working towards—or building support for—change in the LDS Church.

Although LDS Church leaders have typically been reluctant to change Church policy with regard to social issues, history demonstrates that modifications are made from time to time, especially when social pressure, or the evolving social and political climate of the United States necessitates some form of accommodation—at least if the organization desires to remain socially relevant in any meaningful way. Josh, the lawyer from Southern California, expressed this viewpoint when I asked him if he thought the Church would ever reverse its position on same-sex marriage:

I think it’s going to eventually happen, yeah. I imagine it’s still a long way off, but if we look at what’s happened in the past with blacks and the priesthood in the seventies after the civil rights movement, and ending polygamy around the turn of the century after pressure from non-Mormons and the government, and now, with them letting women play a larger role in General Conference. I mean, yeah, they may always be ten or 20 years behind the rest of the country, but they seem to get there eventually, even if they have to be dragged there kicking and screaming.
Josh’s reading of the situation coincides with Mauss’ (1994) theory of assimilation and retrenchment outlined in chapter two, which proposes that the LDS Church, in a continuous effort to maintain a balance between uniqueness and broader societal acceptance, goes through periods of assimilation (like allowing African Americans to have full membership privileges in 1978), and retrenchment (like issuing the the policy change on same-sex marriage in 2015).

Because one of Mormonism’s foundational doctrines is a belief in continued revelation from God, LDS leaders can occasionally make changes to Church doctrines and practices while still maintaining its theological integrity. Interestingly, however—or perhaps not—is the fact that over the last century, the Church has increasingly adapted to Western capitalist ideology, bureaucratizing and centralizing its leadership structure, purchasing stocks and commercial real estate, building malls, establishing for-profit companies, and investing more and more resources into marketing and public relations efforts. In its desire to maintain a favorable, inoffensive public image, and to appeal to as many of its members and potential converts as possible, it seems much more reactive to social pressure than it has been in the past. Ultimately, it appears that social and secularizing forces have a much greater influence on Church policy and culture than its leaders, and many of its orthodox members would like to believe. Clearly, much of this can be attributed to the affordances of digital technologies, and the ability that they give people to communicate horizontally, to form publics and mobilize support for certain causes, and to reveal and spread critical, potentially-damaging information about the Church.

In addition to serving as a forum where support was mobilized for the Protect LDS Children march, the Any Opposed incident during General Conference, and the events planned by Ordain Women founder, Kate Kelly, in which hundreds of Mormon women and their supporters marched to Temple Square during the all-male priesthood session of General
Conference in an attempt to gain admittance to the session for the women, the MSPC was also a major contributor to the support that was rallied for the mass resignation and protest in downtown Salt Lake City after the November policy change was leaked in 2015. In that event, thousands of orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormons and their supporters gathered near LDS Church Headquarters to circulate petitions calling for a repeal of the policy. 1500 participants in the protest officially resigned their membership in the Church at the event (Moyer, 2015). The event gained attention from local, national, and even international news outlets. Many members of the MSPC counterpublic believe that the widespread media attention, which they helped to garner, is what ultimately caused Church leaders to backpedal on the stated intent of the policy. As Josh stated in his interview, “The Salt Lake hierarchy, in my view, only responds to public embarrassment.”

This chapter examined heterodox Mormon digital communities and the nature of heterodox Mormon identity through the lens of Warner’s theory on publics and counterpublics. Warner’s work on publics and counterpublics focuses primarily on print media, leaving the nature of publics and counterpublics in the digital realm open for exploration. This chapter sought to conduct some of that exploration by examining how members of the MSPC counterpublic use digital technologies to first, engage in discourse about their shifting perceptions of Mormonism, and about how those shifting perceptions have caused them to reflect on, and adapt their identities to their changing religious beliefs; second create a safe space—or a third space—that exists apart from the Church and apart from the home, where heterodox Mormons can share their stories and concerns about their faith and identity transitions; and third, use their creative agency to create and perpetuate a lifeworld that utilizes poesis to sustain the
counterpublic, and to challenge and critique the LDS Church in an effort to bring about policy changes on a variety of social issues, and in an effort to bring about greater transparency.

For these heterodox Mormons, the digital MSPC community provides new ways of expression and coming together; it provides a space where real work can be done, both at the individual and societal levels. Many of the members of the MSPC, including all of the ones I interviewed, described the digital community as a place of transition, hope, relief, and possibility, where those who feel confused, rejected, judged, and dispirited can find support, meaning, the freedom to be who they want to be and say what they want to say, and the ability to freely reflect on, and experiment with their shifting identities. One member, who claimed to live in fear and isolation for several years due to the fact that he was a closeted homosexual who belonged to a religion that considered homosexuality a grievous sin, explained how the community helped to remove a weight from his shoulders; the community helped him to finally realize that he was important, and that he was loved, and that, at least among them, he would never be judged for who he was. He told me that he took comfort in the words borrowed from John Steinbeck’s, *East of Eden*, in a TEDx talk delivered in 2017 by another disaffected gay Mormon, Tyler Glenn, who was speaking about his own faith transition. Those words were, “Now that you don’t have to be perfect, you can be good.”
CHAPTER 6

POST-MORMONS IN THE VIP LOUNGE: SATIRE AS A TOOL OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND COMMUNITY BUILDING AFTER A DEPARTURE FROM THE LDS CHURCH

A discussion of Mormon identity, and the mediation of Mormon identity, would be incomplete without an assessment of those who occupy the final region of the Mormon belief spectrum—the post-Mormons. As I have discussed at various points throughout this work, it is not always a simple and straightforward task to place individuals into definitive categories, as people are continuously evolving as they discover new truths and sources of meaning. Indeed, Hoover (2006), citing Wade Clark Roof, describes how the conditions of late-modernity have “[altered] the very notion of the self,” and how, “…under contemporary conditions the self becomes fluid, improvable, adaptable, manipulable, and above all else, something to be satisfied” (p. 53). This fluidity and adaptability are likely due to the contemporary self’s insatiable appetite and, as Roof (1993) describes, these conditions de-monopolize any one version of religious truth and make “a wide variety of religious options open to everyone” (p. 195). These fluid conditions cause some overlap between the regions on the belief spectrum, as those who occupy one region of the Mormon belief spectrum may consume mediated content, and participate in digital communities that are created principally for those occupying other regions of the spectrum. Additionally, orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormons may shift to other regions of the spectrum as their continued search for meaning leads to changes in their spiritual beliefs and practices—it is not unheard of for heterodox and post-Mormons to return to active,
faithful participation in the Church, just as it is not unheard of for orthodox Mormons to leave the Church.

For the sake of clarity, when I use the term “post-Mormon,” I am referring to those who, during my interviews and participant observations, specified that they no longer identify as Mormons. When asked if they are Mormons, instead of the responses that I typically heard from heterodox Mormons, responses such as, “sort of,” or, “yes, but it’s complicated,” or, “I’m culturally Mormon, but not theologically,” these individuals simply say “no,” or “not anymore.”

Many, but not all of these individuals have officially resigned from the Church. For these individuals, the term “post” signifies a having moved beyond, a search for something “new” and “other” than the LDS Church—new identities, new meanings, new structures of fulfillment, and new communities of belonging. This is not to say that Mormonism no longer contributes anything to their senses of self; as will be described below, many post-Mormons enjoy participating in digital communities where humor and satire are used unapologetically to lampoon the Church, its leaders, and its culture, and to juxtapose their now post-Mormon identities with their once orthodox-Mormon identities. Additionally, some of the offline communities that post-Mormons participate in regularly hold meetings that are structured similarly to LDS Church meetings, with opening songs, occasional prayers, assigned speakers, and opportunities for community members to come forward and share personal stories, much like what occurs in LDS testimony meetings. One post-Mormon identified her participation in these communities as a way for her to “continue to be spiritual, without being religious.” Another post-Mormon described her experience in post-Mormon communities as, “…being in a different kind of religion, one that fills my spiritual needs without having a bunch of old men constantly telling me what to do, and making me feel guilty if I don’t do it.”
In this chapter, I will discuss the results of my examination of the post-Mormon listener community built around the award-winning, now defunct, Mormon-themed podcast, *Mormon Expression*. This podcast consisted of panel discussions hosted by post-Mormon, John Larsen and his then wife, Zilpha, and typically utilized humor to build community and deconstruct Mormon doctrine and culture. The predominant digital community for *Mormon Expression* is a Facebook page called the Mormon VIP Lounge, although many of the community’s 2,600+ members have joined the group since *Mormon Expression* ended production in 2014, the community was originally built for the podcast listeners, and these listeners—whether they listened to the podcast during its original run, or whether they now listen to episodes purchased from the podcast’s archives—form the bulk of the community. Towards the end of *Mormon Expression*’s five-year run, several regular members of the podcast formed their own podcast aimed at deconstructing Mormonism called, *Infants on Thrones*, with the tagline, “The philosophies of men mingled with humor,” an appropriation of a line from an LDS temple ceremony. Although this podcast does not have an organized listener community, like *Mormon Stories* or *Mormon Expression*, it was helpful to listen to most of the episodes, as it also illustrates how post-Mormons commonly use humor and satire to discredit Mormonism, and, as one interviewee put it, “…to laugh together about how crazy it is that we once believed in that stuff.” *Infants on Thrones* listeners also participate in the Mormon VIP Lounge. Another thing that I quickly realized in my study of post-Mormon digital content and communities is that there is a lot of overlap in the post-Mormon communities that post-Mormons participate in.

This chapter will examine the use of satire—more specifically, satire that is created to address—or appropriated from—Mormon doctrine and culture—in post-Mormon podcasts and in the digital community, Mormon VIP Lounge. This section will begin with an overview of the
*Mormon Expression* podcast, and then move into a discussion of the uses of satire along with an examination of how satire is being used to deconstruct Mormonism and reconstruct post-Mormon identities among some of the members of the Mormon VIP Lounge digital community. In preparation for writing this chapter, and out of a personal curiosity in the types of discussions taking place with regard to these podcasts, I listened to all 285 episodes of the *Mormon Expression* podcast, and about 70 percent of the *Infants on Thrones* episodes. I have also been a member and observer of the Mormon VIP Lounge community since June 24, 2013. I also conducted in-depth interviews with twelve members of post-Mormon digital, and offline communities.

**Mormon Expression and the Significance of Satire in Post-Mormon Communities**

On April 15, 2012, on a stage in one of the rooms at Salt Lake City’s downtown library, a fog machine sprayed mist onto two empty tables surrounded by plastic ionic Greek columns. After Heather Clarkson announced the topic of the evening’s *Mormon Expression* podcast episode, “The Mormon Pre-existence for Dummies,” the episode’s panelists, and the teenage daughter of one of the panelists, emerged from stage right clad in white togas, sandals, laurel leaf crowns, and brass cuff bracelets as the live audience, consisting mostly of post-Mormons, laughed and applauded. Among the panelists was the host and creator of *Mormon Expression*, along with his wife and co-host, Zilpha, also post-Mormons. After taking their seats, John explained the reason for their choice of attire:

> We are in Greece—we are in Rome. For some reason, whenever you watch Church productions of the pre-existence, and BYU productions in the 60s, they always had the pre-existence, and they’re always set in Rome for some reason. So, we have the columns, we have the togas, and we’re here to discuss the Mormon pre-existence.
After John’s explanation, the panelist who brought her daughter on stage with her said, in a tone signifying authority and formality, as her daughter rose to her feet, “This is my spirit daughter, Dupree, and she is ready to take her place on Earth.” Dupree then left the stage as the audience laughed and applauded again at this humorous nod to Mormon culture’s pre-existence send-off motif, so common in older LDS and Mormon-themed films, such as in the opening scene of the classic 1989 production, Saturday’s Warrior.

By the time this live episode of Mormon Expression was recorded, the podcast had been in production for nearly three years. It had amassed a listenership of post-Mormons from around the world, many of whom had recently left Mormonism and were now in search of a community of other like-minded individuals to whom they could relate. In 2009, the podcast won the Brodie Award—an annual award named after Fawn Brodie that honors the best Mormon-themed digital content—in the “Best Podcast” category (Hanson, 2010). As the podcast community grew, Larsen began to build the offline component of the community by hosting more live events, such as podcast recordings, weenie roasts, picnics, and even a cruise. In one event co-organized by Larsen in the summer of 2012, Larsen and over 120 others hiked to Ensign Peak in Salt Lake City to officially resign from the Church. Ensign Peak holds a special significance to Mormons because it is the place that Brigham Young saw in a vision before leading the Mormon pioneers to Utah territory following the death of Joseph Smith. Upon arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, Young saw Ensign Peak and stated that it “was a proper place to raise an ensign to the nations” (Wright & Westrup, 2011). This fact was not lost on Larsen, who selected the location for his mass resignation event because, as Young had climbed to the peak 165 years prior to plot out the future of Mormonism in the valley, the post-Mormons could climb to the peak to signal and plot out their lives after Mormonism (May, 2012).
One of the most important elements of the podcast for post-Mormons looking for consolation and community after leaving the LDS Church was its use of humor. Larsen and his panelists understood that humor could be used as an effectual tool when deconstructing powerful institutions. Larsen also understood the important role of laugher in bringing individuals together and in helping them to move past a distressing life event, like the loss of one’s religion (Zekavat, 2017). Thus, all of the podcast’s episodes, which deconstruct Mormonism issue by issue, included jokes, witty remarks, and plenty of sarcasm from Larsen and his panelists. To better paint a picture of the podcast’s content, a few of the episode titles, taken from the podcast’s archives, are: “Alcohol 101 for Mormons,” “The Top 10 Goofiest Things in the Book of Mormon,” “Mormonism vs. Voltaire,” and “John Delivers a Message to your Mormon Loved Ones.” Towards the end of the podcast’s run, Larsen rented studio space so that listeners could would always be able to attend recordings if they so desired. He referred to the studio as, “Studio Fist-in-Your-Face” or, “The Den of Debauchery”— signaling that the podcast had no intentions of showing deference to Mormonism or its rules—, and always made sure to remind his listener community that they were invited to attend live recordings. He also allowed listeners to ask questions and share comments during the live recordings. In an interview on John Dehlin’s podcast just five months before he, Larsen, recorded the final episode of Mormon Expression, Larsen explained what he had always hoped to accomplish with the podcast, and how his original goal for the podcast shifted as he saw the needs of his listener community:

From the very first time when we did that first live show, and just saw the hunger and the need… it was [about] trying to help people connect. Mormon Expression’s message for me changed from being, ‘Isn’t Mormonism weird and funny?’ to ‘It’s not you, it’s this. This is demonstrably ridiculous, and you’re not the one to blame, because the Church has been putting the blame on you. And that was the underlying tone for the next three or four years of Mormon Expression. The deconstruction was about helping people regain their own sense of identity, at least that was my hope. (Dehlin, 2015)
Satire as an Instrument of Critique, Identity Construction, and Group Cohesion

Through my interviews with post-Mormons and my examination of the discourse in the Mormon VIP Lounge, I found that humor and satire were crucial elements in one’s quest to reestablish a sense of identity in the post-Mormon world. Satire is the critique of individuals and institutions through the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, and derision. Miazhevich (2015) defines satire as “a rhetorical strategy which employs ridicule, irony and other means to offer social criticism and potentially trigger an improvement of individuals, societies, and so on” (p. 425, see also Elliott, 2004). Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman (1960) also emphasize the aspects of societal and individual improvement in their explanation of satire, which they define as, “a literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humor and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved” (p. 436). Satire can be an effective tool in helping to promote personal and social improvement because it points out the flaws, weaknesses, and inconsistencies in individuals and institutions that might not otherwise be recognized. Once recognized, individuals can reflect on the object of the criticism and modify their opinions about, and behaviors towards that object. Additionally, when we criticize a person, a belief, or an idea through humor, we are shining a light on its vulnerabilities, which opens up a space for its legitimacy to come into question; this, in turn, may cause the object of the criticism to seek to improve. In this way, satire can present a challenge to the status quo, which is why it is often feared by those in power (Miazhevic, 2015). One example of this fear can be taken from Nazi Germany. Greenstein and Holland (2015) state:

There are many examples in history of the power or, at least, the perceived power, of humor. In Nazi Germany, for instance, jokes were taken so seriously as a threat that telling anti-Nazi or “defeatist” jokes was a capital crime. (p. 89)
According to the documentary, *Laughing with Hitler*, a Catholic priest named Joseph Müller was executed by the Nazi regime for spreading a political joke critical of Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring. The joke was about a dying soldier who asked to see the people for whom he was laying down his life. A picture of Hitler and a picture of Göring were placed on either side of him, causing him to proclaim, “Now I can die like Jesus Christ, between two criminals” (“Joseph Müller,” n.d., n.p.).

LDS Church leaders also recognize the potential of critical humor to disrupt the power and legitimacy of their institution. In the PBS Documentary, *The Mormons*, LDS apostle, Dallin H. Oaks, stated, “I also said something else that has excited people: that it’s wrong to criticize leaders of the Church, even if the criticism is true, because it diminishes their effectiveness as servants of the Lord” (“Elder Oaks Interview,” 2007). In a similar quote, Harold B. Lee, who served as the 11th President of the LDS Church, stated, “I want to bear my testimony as well that those who in public seek by their criticism, to belittle our leaders or bring them into disrepute, will bring upon themselves more hurt than upon those whom they seek thus to malign” (“Elder Harold B. Lee,” 1947). And in an article entitled, “A Serious Look at Humor,” from the August, 1974 edition of the Church’s *New Era* magazine, LDS author Peter B. Rawlins cautioned:

> To avoid using humor as a dangerous weapon, we must be compassionately considerate of all that is frail, and humbly mindful of all that is sublime… When humor is such a powerful tool in building subtle bonds of brotherhood, in cheering those who suffer, and in teaching profound and memorable lessons, why should it be used to belittle and discourage? Those who profess belief in Christ should shape their humor in the light of Christ’s teachings. Being rejected from his Kingdom because of a warped sense of humor would not be funny. (n.p)

Satire provides post-Mormons with a critical lens through which they can deconstruct and disempower the institutional forces that once defined them, and reevaluate what is important when it comes to reconstructing a sense of self after Mormonism. Zekavat (2017) describes how
satire “contributes to the construction of social subjects’ identities” (p. 2). He argues that because satire is a discourse in the Foucaultian sense, in that it is “a group of statements that belong to a single system of formation,” it plays a role in the construction of a subject’s identity, which is ultimately discursively constructed” (p. 3). When post-Mormons encounter satirical texts that were created with the intent of critiquing Mormon leaders, doctrine, and culture, they are encountering elements of a broader discursive system that has been used for centuries to demonstrate the inconsistencies and follies of well-established power regimes. Just as Martin Luther and his followers used satirical texts disseminated on woodcuts and other media to satirize Catholicism in the 16th century, post-Mormons are using satirical texts disseminated digitally to satirize Mormonism today; and just as the individuals who encountered these texts in the 16th century could subsequently reflect on their meaning and make decisions about their own beliefs and identities with regard to Catholicism, post-Mormons today can use the satirical texts that they encounter to help inform their decisions about their own beliefs and identities post-Mormonism. As described in chapter two, individuals self-reflexively construct their identities from the narratives, symbols, and discourses that are available to them through their social interactions (Goffman, 1959). The satirical texts encountered in post-Mormon digital communities provide post-Mormons with additional narratives, symbols, and discourses that can contribute to the ongoing process of identity construction.

Another reason that those in positions of power fear satire is that it can create group cohesion. In addition to potentially altering the way that individuals view and think about those in power, satire can also work at the collective level. Zekavat (2017) describes how satire is used—often by marginalized groups—to create a sense of opposition between themselves (the marginalized group) and the individual or institution that is the object of the satire. As Zekavat
describes, “… this opposition is the necessary and common property of both satire and identity. Therefore, otherness, incongruity, and discursive opposition in satire can coincide with (or/and bring about) the opposition seminal to the process of othering” (p. 4). By othering certain individuals, institutions, ideas, etc., satire can create an “us vs. them” mentality among the members of the marginalized group, which can subsequently lead to “…a sense of belonging for certain social segments” (p. 5). And, “in case satire is wisely employed, it can be used to give a voice to the less vibrant or suppressed identities, it can bring people together and facilitate mutual understanding and respect” (Zekavat, 2017, p. 5).

In his examination of French Renaissance author, Francois Rabelais’ work, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes how laughter brought people together during the festive folk carnivals of the Middle Ages. At these carnivals, people who were otherwise customarily separated by socioeconomic factors, such as age, ownership of property, and profession came together for one day of Church-sanctioned merry-making, laughter, and chaos. It was during these carnivals that power relations were inverted, if temporarily, as the collective masses were permitted to engage in behavior that was prohibited under normal circumstances. During carnival, no royalty or member of the clergy was free from mockery or ridicule. Carnival surely served as a means of cathartic expression for the gathered masses, but it also accomplished two other important tasks: first, it brought the people together and allowed them to develop and maintain their folk culture; second, it allowed the people to satirize the individuals and institutions that held power over them, which, in turn, allowed them to imagine alternatives to the power relations of their times; in other words, their laughter was a form of liberation, even if only temporary. Bakhtin (1984) states:

However, medieval laughter is not a subjective, individual and biological consciousness of the uninterrupted flow of time. It is the social consciousness of all the people. Man
experiences this flow of time in the festive marketplace, in the carnival crowd, as he comes into contact with other bodies of varying age and social caste. He is aware of being a member of a continually growing and renewed people. This is why festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power of earthly kings, of the early upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts… This laughing truth, expressed in curses and abusive words, degraded power. (p. 92)

Other contemporary scholars have examined the unifying capacity of satire through mass media, such as television and film, as well as through digital platforms. In her book, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*, Amber Day, examining the use of irony, satire, and parody in political news reporting, documentaries, and activism, discusses how otherwise-separated individuals often find common ground in satire, and then use that common ground to coalesce into communities. Day states:

> And though the use of irony may appear trivial to some, it is in the service of deadly serious aims. Irony is used not only to attract attention to the cause, but to actively call upon audiences’ shared assumptions and predilections in an attempt to make members of existing discursive communities present to one another and, ideally, to turn those communities into actively politicized ones. (Day, 2011, p. 145)

In an examination of online political satire in post-Soviet states, Ukraine and Belarus, Miazhevich (2015) describes digital satire as one manifestation of participatory popular culture. She states that this genre of satire “…is capable of revealing shared understandings of inner ideological contradictions and can therefore potentially challenge established power structures” (p. 426). And, in an ethnographic study of the role that humor plays in the process of collective identity formation among anti-Capitalist groups in Spain, Fominaya (2007) concludes that:

> … humour can play a significant role in generating a sense of common identification and solidarity, defining and critiquing the “opposition”, integrating new and marginal group members, releasing tension and negotiating conflict, and expressing an alternative opposing political identity. (p. 257)

As will be demonstrated in the following section, each of these functions of satire: critiquing institutions and individuals, playing a role in the identity construction of social subjects, and
generating a sense of group cohesion and collective identification are implicated in the use of satire in the Mormon VIP Lounge.

The Importance of Satire in Post-Mormonism: The Mormon VIP Lounge

After a decision to part with Mormonism, post-Mormons are often left with the difficult task of “reorienting [their] moral compasses” (as one post-Mormon put it), and deciding which components of the Mormon belief system they want to hold on to, and which components they are willing to let go of. In spite of the fact that post-Mormons typically perceive Mormonism’s core truth claims to be spurious, most of them do not equate denouncing Mormonism with denouncing all of Mormonism’s values and moral guidelines. As one post-Mormon put it:

Giving up on Mormonism doesn’t mean giving up on everything Mormon. A lot of my friends and family who are still believers have suggested that I left [the Church] so I could go party and sin, as if people only leave because they don’t like all the rules. Well they’re wrong. I still follow a lot of the rules—like not drinking—because I happen to think they’re good rules to live by.

For many post-Mormons, this reorienting of the moral compass begins with an evaluation of common activities that are prohibited by the LDS Church, for example: consuming coffee, tea, alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs; getting tattoos and multiple body piercings, watching R-rated movies, shopping on the Sabbath, and engaging in premarital sexual activity. While some post-Mormons see no problem with participating in any of these activities, others have a difficult time getting past the fear, guilt, and stigma that have always been associated with them. This is especially true for the post-Mormons who have spent years in the Church, surrounded by orthodox friends, family members, and Church leaders who have repeatedly told them that these activities are sins, and that committing these sins can prevent them from entering the LDS temple and, ultimately, the highest kingdom of heaven. For other post-Mormons, some—or all—of these activities are simply unappealing; it’s not that these post-Mormons are trepidatious about the
morality of these activities (though, that may also play into it), it’s that they simply are not interested in them. John Dehlin, for example, now drinks coffee, but he has stated on several occasions that he has no interest in drinking alcohol. Other post-Mormons, upon leaving the Church, heavily engage in activities that are explicitly prohibited by the Church because they want to “catch up on what [they’ve] been missing out on,” or because doing so demonstrates to others, and to themselves, that the Church no longer has control over their lives. To these post-Mormons, engaging in activities prohibited by the LDS Church is largely an identity signal. Still other post-Mormons are deeply uncertain about how to approach the reassessment and redefinition of their moral boundaries. For all of these different categories of post-Mormons, humor and satire play an important role in helping them to examine and reconstruct their identities, define new boundaries, and find meaning after a break with their faith communities.

Taylor, a 31-year old post-Mormon attending graduate school in the Midwest claimed that he was very nervous in the months after he discovered that the LDS Church “was not what it claims to be.” Taylor and his older brother, Geoff, left the Church around the same time in 2013. Geoff had stumbled across information that shook his faith while he was researching Church history as a ward Sunday school teacher. He shared the information with Taylor, which launched several discussions, and a journey out of the Church for both of them—a journey which Taylor said, “…involved a lot of my own online research, long discussions with Geoff and people I’d meet online, and listening to a bunch of really interesting podcasts about the Church, most of aimed at exmos (Ex-Mormons).” According to Taylor, the journey out of the Church was much easier for Geoff than it was for him. Within a few months of losing his faith, Geoff’s girlfriend had moved in with him and they would occasionally go to bars on the weekends, or drink alcohol
at parties. Taylor, on the other hand, was more apprehensive about giving up his LDS values. In his words:

Even after I realized the Church was something that would never work for me, I felt like I still had this obligation to act like a Mormon. I didn’t know anything else. Those were the values I had lived by, unquestioningly, for my entire life; what would I have left if I threw that away? On top of that it’s not easy—at least it wasn’t for me—to suddenly just disregard all these commandments that have been pounded into your head all your life…It was one thing to turn my back on a Church that I found out had been lying about so many things, but it was a whole other thing to turn my back on who I was, and who I had always been. I wasn’t able to just walk out on all of it like Geoff; I had to think through each individual thing; it was agonizing.

Taylor credits the humorous posts and discussions from the Mormon Expression podcast, and from the Mormon VIP Lounge with helping him along with his reevaluation of his Mormon values.

The more I listened to the podcast and the more I read the posts and discussions that are always happening in the Lounge, the more I realized I was taking it all way too seriously…for me, laughing about all that stuff we used to believe in was the best way to divorce it from the threats and warnings that the Church tied it to, like I guess it helped me to see each issue—coffee, alcohol, a little weed now and then, certain movies—more objectively…

I asked Taylor if he could remember any funny memes or discussions in particular that played a role in his reassessment of his Mormon values. He explained how the memes that stood out to him the most were “always the ones that dealt with Word of Wisdom² issues.” He said that the memes that critiqued the Church’s strict condemnation of alcohol and coffee consumption helped him to “change [his] mind about their (the substances) sinfulness by showing [him] how absurd the Church’s position on them was.” Taylor explained a particular meme that he had once come across in the Mormon VIP Lounge. The meme shows Jesus Christ embracing a man who

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² The “Word of Wisdom” is how Mormons refer to the LDS scripture (and subsequent interpretations of that scripture by LDS leaders) that prohibits coffee, tea, tobacco, alcohol, etc. It comes from the Doctrine and Covenants (a canonized book of scripture in the LDS Church) section 89, which begins: “A Word of Wisdom, for the benefit of the council of high priests, assembled in Kirtland, and the church, and also the saints in Zion—” (D&C 89:1).
has just returned to heaven after his life on Earth. The caption on the meme reads, “Welcome home. I’m so glad you didn’t drink coffee.”

Taylor explained how this simple image, with only a few words, “…captured perfectly the Church’s fixation on trivialities when it comes to judging others.” He went on to say that, “The picture is funny to me because it shows how Mormons think—in a world full of murder and corruption and everything else, Jesus is somehow keeping a tally on how many cups of coffee you’re drinking. It just kind of pinpoints how absurd it is.” Taylor, who now drinks coffee on occasion, said that it wasn’t any one specific meme that caused him to change his opinions and behavior with regard to the Word of Wisdom, but the overarching discourse that the memes helped to create and perpetuate:

I won’t say that one meme suddenly changed my entire outlook on the Word of Wisdom and got me to start drinking the forbidden substances, it’s more complex than that. I can say that that fun, anything-goes atmosphere in the Lounge—helped me to laugh, and to relax a little bit, and to look at my past Mormon beliefs from a different perspective… I can always count on going in there and seeing clever jokes and things that other ex-mos like me are posting about their own paths out of Mormonism, and it helps me to realize I have this group of people and we’ve all moved on, and we’re able to laugh about it now.
In scrolling through the posts on the Mormon VIP Lounge’s wall, it becomes apparent that the Word of Wisdom is one of the primary targets of the satire created, or shared by post-Mormons belonging to the community. One meme, an image created to look like a digital story from the Deseret News, shows a cup of hot chocolate, under which a headline reads, “Mormon Church adds hot cocoa to list of items forbidden by Word of Wisdom. The revelation is expected to strengthen each member’s faith and help bring them closer to Christ.” In the meme, the name of the newspaper has been changed to “Deserter News,” signifying that it is intended for people who have left the Church. By claiming that the LDS Church has banned hot cocoa, the meme is satirically bringing attention to how irrational many post-Mormons believe the Church’s ban on coffee to be. In response to the meme, one commenter posted, “Why not? If the Church banned a drink as common and benign as coffee, why not just ban hot cocoa, too?” Another commenter posted, “Haha!! Exactly. We laugh at this, but when you think about it forbidding hot cocoa makes as much sense as forbidding coffee and tea.” Another commenter wrote:

LOL the Deserter News. Yeah, I wonder why they made such random rules about what should be banned and what shouldn’t. I bet you hot cocoa is worse for your health than coffee. I’ve been out of the Church and drinking coffee for three years now and I’m not dead yet.
One active member of the community has adopted a persona known as “The Preacher.”

The Preacher has created an ongoing series of posts that utilize satirical appropriations of Mormon culture to critique everything from the Word of Wisdom to the way that LDS leadership handles the Church’s finances. In his posts, The Preacher is often wearing a baseball cap, and glasses with the right lens blacked out, while smiling and holding up a coffee mug, or a bottle of beer. In some of his photos, he is standing in front of well-known LDS sites, like the Salt Lake City Temple. Many of The Preacher’s posts consist of brief explanations of the activities that he is able to enjoy now that he is no longer an orthodox Mormon. For example, he begins one post, “It’s Sunday and I’m rejoicing in my freedom. No suit and tie and polished shoes; it’s Levis, t shirt and sneakers. No racing around the house for [a] quad⁴; just a quiet morning eating a good breakfast, drinking coffee, smoking and enjoying music…” But The Preacher’s most popular posts are his mock testimonies—which he refers to as “testimonkeys.” He typically posts these on Sunday mornings, when orthodox Mormons are sharing their testimonies in physical Church settings. The Preacher borrows many of the phrases commonly used in orthodox LDS testimonies, such as: “My brothers and sisters,” and, “I know with every fiber of my being,” and, “I say these things in the name of…”, etc., but The Preacher typically changes the wording slightly to make the ritual of LDS testimony bearing appear laughable. For example, instead of closing his testimony with the name of Jesus Christ, as is customary in orthodox LDS testimonies, The Preacher closes his “testimoney” posts with a variety of different names; in one post, for example, The Preacher closed with, “I say these things in the name of Professor Irwin Corey, amen!”

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³ A “quad” is what Mormons typically call the four LDS canonized scriptural texts: the bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price, when they are all combined into one easy-to-manage book.
By re-appropriating and satirizing the sacred elements and rituals of Mormonism, The Preacher is demonstrating that, for him, nothing is off limits when it comes to critiquing the institution that he believes has misled him and so many others. The Preacher’s posts, along with his responses to those who comment on his posts, demonstrate that he is self-reflexively using a satirical approach to disseminate his ideas to other community members because he understands that the satire he creates resonates with them, and that, in addition to providing them with content that they can laugh at, the material also provides a compelling lens through which they can examine their own evolving identities and beliefs in the wake of their disaffection from Mormonism. The Preacher’s posts also create a sense of cohesion among the post-Mormons who have come to expect and depend on his weekly mock testimonies as part of their ongoing community experience. In one of his more recent mock testimonies, The Preacher discussed the importance of hard work, and suggested that work is much more meaningful when it is done for its own sake and not for the sake of a religious institution. He closes his testimony by stating, “I say these things in the name of Lincoln the Emancipator, amen and amen!” In response to this post, one woman wrote, “Your Sunday morning testimonkeys are part of my weekly rituals. Thanks for your thoughts.” Another woman wrote, “Love your posts! I’m also retired from paid work, and thankfully [also] from LDS, inc! Thanks so much for putting so eloquently into words what many of us feel.”

In addition to satirizing the Word of Wisdom and Mormon culture, post-Mormon digital communities are also typically rife with satire that is directed at Church leaders. For the post-Mormons who were once dedicated to the Church, criticism aimed at Church leaders is one of the most unequivocal ways to signal that one has truly departed from orthodox Mormonism, as criticism of Church leaders is widely known to be a serious sin within the faith. In fact, Mormons
are instructed that God will not tolerate “evil speaking” against the “Lord’s anointed.” In a talk given by LDS Apostle, Dallin H. Oaks in 1986, Oaks stated:

Criticism is particularly objectionable when it is directed towards Church authorities, general or local… Evil speaking of the Lord’s anointed is in a class by itself. It is one thing to depreciate a person who exercises corporate power or even government power. It is quite another thing to criticize or depreciate a person for the performance of an office to which he or she has been called of God… ‘When we say anything bad about the leaders of the Church, whether true or false, we tend to impair their influence and their usefulness and are thus working against the Lord and his cause.’ (Oaks, 1986, n.p.)

Post-Mormons—many of whom understand how seriously Mormons take criticism of their leaders—are making a bold statement by creating and sharing satirical texts that directly ridicule these leaders. Darren, a member of the Mormon VIP Lounge who claimed to both circulate existing texts, and personally create texts that satirize Church leaders stated:

I know making fun of Church leaders takes it to a whole new level for some people because they’re supposed to be off limits or something, but in my opinion, anything that has to do with the Church is fair game. These guys need to be exposed when they say or do something crazy, which happens to be all the time. Holding back from what I think needs to be said would be like giving power back to the Church, and I’m not going to do that… Also, why shouldn’t we make them look foolish? These are the same leaders that have no problem making fools of millions of us by hiding information from us and lying to us; I hope the content we’re making and sharing is helping more people to realize that.

To Darren, it does not matter if there is an expectation that LDS leaders be safe from criticism; as a post-Mormon, and as someone who no longer identities with Mormonism or its truth claims, he believes that any aspect of the Church is a “fair” target for satire and ridicule. Additionally, Darren justifies his criticism of Church leaders by stating that the leaders engage in a similar tactic—making fools of the Church membership—when they withhold important information from them about the institution and its history. Darren hopes that the humorous nature of his—and other satirical content creators’—approach to criticism will be instrumental in helping others
to better understand the position of post-Mormons, and in helping orthodox and heterodox Mormons to reach similar conclusions about the Church and its leadership.

Much of the post-Mormon satire that is aimed at LDS Church leaders is created to highlight discrepancies between progressivism and secularism and the Church’s adherence to conservative values and literalist interpretations of scripture. In the wake of their disaffection from Mormonism, many of the post-Mormons in the Mormon VIP Lounge have embraced atheism, agnosticism, humanism, and other belief systems that tend to deny or disregard deities. Instead, these post-Mormons tend to favor empiricism, science, and rationality. Thus, when LDS leaders make statements that are based in metaphysics, speculation, or scriptural literalism, post-Mormons often see an opportunity to satirize these statements as a way to signal their post-Mormon identities and build group cohesion by othering those who take the Church leaders’ statements at face value. To this point, Darren stated:

One of the craziest things that I can remember a Church leader saying recently is when Uchtdorf said that the peep stone that Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon could be compared to a smart phone. He said something like, ‘If people can create a device that is capable of accessing all the information that humans have ever discovered, and connect people from all around the world, then why couldn’t God help Joseph translate the Book of Mormon with a seer stone.’ It’s crazy—and kind of sad—because I could see TBMs totally falling for that logical fallacy. When word of that comment started making its way into the ex-mo forums, I got to work making graphics about it that I thought were pretty funny, and that I hoped would get the point across that they can’t just keep saying indefensible things and expect to not have to defend them.

The quote that Darren was referring to came from a Facebook post that was posted by Dieter Uchtdorf, then 2nd counselor to the President of the LDS Church, on June 21, 2016. At the time Uchtdorf made the post, the Church had been experiencing criticism for its recently-published photos and information about the seer stones that Joseph Smith used to assist him with the translation of the Book of Mormon. This information, which was ostensibly published by the Church in an attempt to be more transparent about its history, caused some Mormons to become
concerned about the plausibility of using a small stone to translate into English a record that had purportedly been written in reformed ancient Egyptian. In response to these concerns, Uchtdorf stated:

…People have asked me, “Do you really believe that Joseph Smith translated with seer stones? How would something like this be possible?” And I answer, “Yes! That is exactly what I believe.” This was done as Joseph said: by the gift and power of God. In reality, most of us use a kind of “seer stone” every day. My mobile phone is like a “seer stone.” I can get the collected knowledge of the world through a few little inputs. I can take a photo or a video with my phone and share it with family on the other side of our planet. I can even translate anything into or from many different languages! If I can do this with my phone, if human beings can do this with their phones or other devices, who are we to say that God could not help Joseph Smith, the Prophet of the Restoration, with his translation work? If it is possible for me to access the knowledge of the world through my phone, who can question that seer stones are impossible for God? (Uchtdorf, 2016, n.p.)

Not too long after Uchtdorf posted this statement, post-Mormons began to discuss the statement, and to create and circulate memes that satirized what many of them considered to be a false comparison between an intangible, unprovable, supernatural occurrence and a tangible, science-backed, ubiquitous communications device. In one image that was created in response to Uchtdorf’s post, Joseph Smith is made to look like Steve Jobs, wearing a black turtle neck and standing in front of the iconic white Apple logo as if presenting the next big item at a company product launch. In his right hand, Smith is holding up the brown seer stone for the imagined audience to see. This satirical image is designed to demonstrate the perceived absurdity of Uchtdorf’s statement by furthering the analogy between the seer stone and a smart phone. By turning Uchtdorf’s statement about the seer stone into an Apple product launch parody, the graphic highlights—and expands—the incongruity between the supernatural and modern-day technology. To this point, one post-Mormon from the community stated:

The image was made to be funny, but it’s really not that far off from what Uchtdorf said. I mean, he literally said Joseph’s Smith’s seer stone can be compared to a smart phone, so the image just brings the craziness of that claim to light by adding in some other elements that we associate with smart phones, like Apple, and Steve Jobs, and we
just know a seer stone doesn’t belong in a picture with Steve Jobs—well, we know that, I guess we’ll see if the TBMs do, too.

![Steve Jobs](image.jpg)

**FIGURE 4: iSTONE**

In addition to explaining why this image works as satire, this member’s comment also highlights the unifying and othering potential of satire—she emphasizes the “we” when explaining that her fellow post-Mormon community members realize that a seer stone doesn’t belong in a picture with Steve Jobs, and then expresses skepticism as to whether or not the others—the TBMs—will come to the same realization. In response to this text, some post-Mormons in the community began referring to the seer stone as the “iStone.”

Another graphic satirizing Uchtdorf’s statement about the seer stone appropriated MORMONAD a well-known campaign from the Church’s *New Era* magazine. The ads are often turned into small posters, or removed from the magazine and pinned up on the bulletin boards in LDS meetinghouses. Typically, the ads feature a colorful border, a large, bold statement at the top of the page, and an accompanying full-page image with a smaller sentence at the bottom that ties the image and the bold statement together. Most Mormons will likely immediately recognize
a *MORMONAD* when they see it. A typical *MORMONAD* looks like the image in Figure 5 below, and the appropriated *MORMONAD* that was created to satirize Uchtdorf’s statement looks like the image in Figure 6 below: In the appropriated image, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson is embracing an enlarged version of Joseph Smith’s seer stone. The quote at the bottom of the image states, “Thanks be to God that we, as Latter-day Saints, are founded upon a rock,” which is a line taken from a General Conference talk given by then LDS apostle, Bruce R. McConkie in 1981. The quote, itself an appropriation from Christian scripture, has a double meaning in this image: in McConkie’s usage, “founded upon a rock,” means that the Church is established upon a firm foundation that cannot be shaken or destroyed, but in the satirical usage, “founded upon a rock,” refers to the “rock” that Joseph Smith placed in a hat to receive inspiration while translating the Book of Mormon—a book which is considered to be the foundation of Mormonism. By framing his critique of Uchtdorf’s statement as an LDS *MORMONAD*, consisting of an image of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson embracing the seer stone, along with a
quote from an LDS leader that, in this context, holds a double meaning, the creator of this text—who clearly does not ascribe to the legitimacy of the seer stone narrative—utilizes a mix of LDS culture and pop culture to suggest that the LDS Church is built upon an implausible myth.

Other members of the community critiqued the statement by formulating satirical analogies of their own; one such member stated:

If I can travel literally thousands of miles in one day, 35,000 feet in the air at over 500 miles per hour, in a pressurized fuselage that rests on two sophisticated wings, and that depends on complex hydraulics and electrical systems, and that can even sometimes be programmed to fly on its own, then I don’t understand why Aladdin flying on a magic carpet is so incomprehensible to people.

This analogy is structured similarly to Uchtdorf’s in that it uses a complex modern-day invention—the aircraft—to support the argument that a mythical, supernatural item from Disney’s take on a centuries-old Arabian folk tale must then also be feasible. Like the image of Joseph Smith in front of the Apple logo, this text works as satire because, through exaggeration, it highlights the incongruity that exists in Uchtdorf’s original statement. This post also contains an element of mainstream Mormon culture, as Uchtdorf, who was once a pilot for Lufthansa, is widely known to frequently use airplane metaphors in his communications with members of the Church. This fact was not lost on the post-Mormons who responded to the post. One commenter wrote, “Perfect! This is right up Uchtdorf’s alley. He’s always loved a good airplane story.” Another commenter wrote, “Good, you used an airplane to explain this, maybe Uchtdorf will actually understand it now.” Finally, one commenter wrote:

Hahaha! Genius, man. You just demonstrated everything that is wrong with Uchtdorf’s seer phone-smart phone comparison without even having to explain it, AND it’s hilarious, AND you even brought in airplanes for Uchtdorf. Can I share? I think my TBM friends will love this!

This post and the comments that I have included further illustrate the importance of satire as a tool of critique in post-Mormon digital communities. By satirizing Uchtdorf’s statement, these
post-Mormons are demonstrating that they are no longer identify as part of the orthodox Mormon community, and that they are willing to play with, and appropriate certain elements of LDS culture in their deconstructions of Mormonism, and in their signaling and forging of new identity constructs in the wake of their departures from the LDS Church.

Conclusion

For post-Mormons searching for meaning and community in the wake of a departure from Mormonism, digital technologies, including podcasts and the Internet, provide forums where these individuals can examine and deconstruct the narratives that, at one point, significantly contributed to their sense of self. Just as the Mormon Stories podcast served as the impetus for the creation of a digital community that would cater to the needs of heterodox Mormons experiencing religious doubts and faith crises, the Mormon Expression podcast served as the impetus for the creation of a digital community that caters to the needs of post-Mormons experiencing loneliness, struggles, and hopes of their own.

In the Mormon Expression podcast that originally launched what would become the Mormon VIP Lounge, and in the digital community as it stands today, humor and satire have proven to be important elements of critique, community building, collective identification, and identity construction in the post-Mormon world. Although an analysis of all the various uses of satire in post-Mormon digital communities is beyond the scope of this research, the background and the examples that were provided in this chapter have demonstrated how satire is being used by post-Mormons to deconstruct and disempower the institutional forces that once defined them, and to reevaluate what is important when it comes to reconstructing a sense of self after Mormonism. Taylor’s comments demonstrated how some post-Mormons view satire as a lens through which to examine and negotiate the values that one wishes to hold on to, or disperse with.
after a departure from Mormonism. Like Taylor, some post-Mormons are not desirous—or ready—to do away with the moral compass that Mormonism provided for so many years; to these members, satire is one way to examine LDS values under a new light.

For other post-Mormons, like The Preacher, critical satire that appropriates LDS culture and religious symbols aids in the deconstruction of Mormonism both at the institutional, and at the individual level. At the institutional level, satire helps to expose the inconsistencies, and delegitimize the doctrines and practices that form the core of Mormonism. At the individual level, satire has helped post-Mormons in the process of reconstructing their identities after leaving the Church by providing them with symbols, discourses, and rituals out of which new meaning can be found, and new relationships can be formed. One example of this was found in The Preacher’s weekly mock testimonies, which, as some members of the Mormon VIP Lounge described, had become ritualistic for them. By critiquing and deconstructing the orthodox Mormon way of life, these satirical mock testimonies have helped some post-Mormons to find new opportunities and possibilities for living and finding new meaning after the loss of their Mormon communities.

Additionally, this chapter has demonstrated how satire is being used by post-Mormons to form a collective identity by othering orthodox Mormonism. By satirizing LDS culture, doctrine, and Church leaders, post-Mormons are demonstrating to each other that they belong to a community that has moved past Mormonism—a community that is willing to satirize any aspect of the LDS Church in its ongoing effort to justify and reaffirm its members’ identities as post-Mormons. By sharing laughs with others members of the community at the expense of the LDS Church, post-Mormons are engaging in the process of building systems of support with other like-minded individuals who have undergone similar faith journeys. The satire is just one
important way that these systems of support are being built and strengthened. As one post-
Mormon put it:

Humor has been important in my dealing with my changing views of Mormonism. Humor has allowed me to blow off steam and negotiate sensitive topics with believers while still keeping things friendly. Above all, humor has helped me to feel supported and validated after the loss of my Mormon community, and I can’t thank you all enough for that.
This study introduced the Mormon Belief Spectrum model, to examine the intersection of identity and digital technology usage across the wide array of beliefs and attitudes held by those who, in one way or another, self-identify as Mormon, or post-Mormon. The three broad regions of the Mormon Belief Spectrum, which include orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormons, were each examined in turn to determine how the individuals who occupy that particular region of the spectrum are using digital technologies, such as podcasts, blogs, Facebook groups, YouTube channels, etc. to find meaning, and to express, deconstruct, and construct their identities through the creation, appropriation, and mediation of texts and narratives by way of their respective digital communities and platforms. Each region of the Mormon Belief Spectrum was treated as an individual case study, and each case study utilized a different theoretical approach to examine identity and meaning-making among the individuals occupying that specific region of the belief spectrum.

This research put me into contact with hundreds of Mormons and post-Mormons from around the country. I spent many Sunday afternoons visiting with orthodox Mormons and their local leaders in various chapels throughout the Midwest and Rocky Mountains. I attended workshops, retreats, and live podcast recordings with heterodox Mormons in several cities and towns in the Western United States. I also attended organized secular communities with post-Mormons in Provo and Salt Lake City, Utah. In addition to these in-person meetings and activities, I also spent many hours listening to orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormon podcasts, reading orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormon blogs and social media posts, and engaging with orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormons in a variety of digital communities, some of which were described in the case studies put forth in this research. These experiences provided me with a
better understanding of how digital technologies are impacting the LDS Church and playing a role in the shaping and the expression of the identities of its members and former members.

In this chapter I will review what this dissertation examined and respond to each of the research questions that were laid out in chapter two. After addressing these questions, I will provide some concluding thoughts about the project, and offer some suggestions for future research, but I would first like to briefly address how my position as a heterodox Mormon was both a strength and a weakness throughout this research. As someone who was raised as an orthodox Mormon, I felt that I had a much clearer understanding of how the LDS Church operates, both locally and centrally. This gave me the ability to speak with orthodox Mormons in such a way that many of them saw me as a member of their own communities. I fell that this helped them open up to me, and to be more honest with me about their thoughts and concerns. At the same time, my position as someone who has seen and studied the problems that the Church is facing—problems with lack of transparency, problems with history, problems with the treatment of certain marginalized communities—helped me to relate to heterodox and post-Mormons on a level that seemed to increase their trust in me, as well. Whether I was speaking with orthodox Mormons, heterodox Mormons, or post-Mormons, I was always honest and open about my position and beliefs with regard to the LDS Church. I felt that the greatest strength my position as a researcher provided me was the ability to understand and empathize with individuals no matter where they fell on the Mormon Belief Spectrum. At the same time, my position as a heterodox Mormon may have also been a weakness in the sense that I may have not treated certain issues with as much depth and sensitivity as I would have had I been completely on the inside, or the outside of the communities that I researched. Although there very well may be criticisms about the way that I approached or treated certain issues, I feel that my position served
as more of an advantage than a disadvantage because my life experiences have given me what I would consider to be a well-rounded view of the entire Mormon Belief Spectrum.

**RQ 1: How are orthodox Mormons using digital technologies to promote their religion and to express their religious identities?**

In order to provide a frame of reference for how LDS leaders and orthodox Mormons have come to view and think about media and digital technologies today, the first case study focused largely on the LDS Church’s media usage throughout its nearly 200-year history. This case study examined the words of past Church leaders and historical LDS documents and newspapers, which revealed three general purposes for which media has been used by the Church and by its orthodox members. These purposes are: first, the protection of the Church’s integrity by combatting and responding to both internal and external challenges, such as was outlined in the example of the Church’s production of films and magazine articles that portrayed Mormonism in a positive light in response to the harsh portrayals of Mormonism that were mediated through films, magazines, theatrical productions, and other pop culture platforms in Europe and North America in the early-20th century; second, the promotion of the Church through positive messaging and public relations campaigns, such as the “I’m a Mormon” campaign which was launched in January 2011; and third, proselytization through the printing and dissemination of missionary tools, and through direct missionary work, such as the kind of work that is being conducted by the Church’s social media missionaries today.

From the printing presses that the Church purchased shortly after it was established in 1830 to the films, radio programs, YouTube videos, and digital marketing campaigns that the Church funds and produces today, media have always been treated as vital components of the
Church’s efforts to expand its membership, and to unify, strengthen, and preserve the members that it already has. Peters (2015) explains that, in Mormonism, “Media are understood both as modes of communication to spread the word and more abstractly as forms of cultural organization; in this latter sense, media matter profoundly for religious practice and inspire theological reflection” (n.p.). This understanding ties into the “Mormon exceptionalism” view of communications technologies that I outlined in the introduction to chapter four. When a new communications technology is introduced, Mormons tend to view that technology as being inspired by God to aid in the growth and internal effectiveness of the Church. At the same time, Mormons tend to view these technological advancements as tools that will allow Church members to become better, more faithful members of the Church. In addition to their commonly-accepted social functions, to many Mormons, each of these technologies was also created to serve a religious function, for example, social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, are seen as missionary tools, rife with potential for spreading messages about the Church to non-Mormon friends and strangers; tablets are seen as tools for more easily storing, marking, and accessing LDS scriptures and Church publications; smartphones are seen as tools for reaching out to other members, and for storing apps that allow Mormons to listen to past conference talks, share spiritual messages with friends and family, and even pay tithing.

On the other hand, Mormons also understand that media technologies can harm the Church, and challenge the faith and commitment of Latter-day Saints. LDS leaders from Joseph Smith in the 1830s and 1840s to the current LDS President, Russell M. Nelson, have expressed ambivalence towards media, lauding the “God-inspired” advancements in communications technologies due to their potential to aid in the spreading of the gospel message, while at the same time warning members not to consume certain mediated materials, such as “anti-Mormon
literature,” pornography, R-rated movies, and anything that could be considered “unwholesome.” From the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*’s printing press at the command of Joseph Smith, to the censoring of various Church historical documents, to the counsel given to Church members to utilize filters on televisions and computers, to the excommunication of members who broadcast and publish certain content, Church leaders have consistently demonstrated that they understand how detrimental to the stability of the Church certain messages can be, and that they are willing to discipline those who attempt to spread these messages to broader audiences.

In my research, this ambivalence was manifested repeatedly by orthodox Mormons who routinely used tablets, smartphones, and laptops to access the Internet during Church meetings, and to show certain YouTube clips as part of their Sunday school lessons, but who also commonly described media as “evil” and “dangerous.” To orthodox Mormons, then, it would seem that media are viewed as a double-edged sword, and each orthodox Mormon family and individual is expected to follow whatever counsel Church leaders have given on what constitutes appropriate media usage—as far as such counsel exists, and to use his/her/their own best judgment as to what constitutes appropriate media usage where counsel has not been given. These leaves open the possibility for a wide range of interpretations by orthodox Mormons when it comes to what media are appropriate to use, and how these media are to be used appropriately.

This research revealed that, for the most part, when it comes to religious issues, orthodox Mormons are using digital technologies for the same purposes that the Church and its members have always used mass communications technologies: to protect the Church, to promote the Church, and to proselytize for the Church. Of course, digital technologies offer numerous novel possibilities for fulfilling these purposes, and many orthodox Mormons take advantage of these possibilities, from following Church leaders and sharing their posts on Facebook, to creating
question-and-answer videos about Mormonism on YouTube, to tweeting General Conference, to uploading their faith testimonies to mormon.org, the Church’s official webpage for those interested in learning more about Mormonism. Since the rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, Church leaders have occasionally encouraged Mormons to use these tools to promote the Church and to let others know that they are Mormons so that Mormonism can continue to become more and more normalized in the public view. By posting scriptures, quotes from LDS leaders, videos from the Mormon Channel on YouTube, and other inspirational LDS messages, orthodox Mormons are not only protecting the Church, promoting the Church, and proselytizing for the Church, they are also signaling their Mormon identities to their LDS friends, family members, and also to any non-Mormon who may come across their content. At the same time, sharing these messages, and signaling their Mormon identities to others, gives orthodox Mormons a deeper sense of purpose that comes with the knowledge that they are doing exactly what orthodox Mormons should be doing, and this helps to bring meaning to their lives.

**RQ 2: How are heterodox Mormons using digital technologies, such as podcasts and other alternative media, to find meaning, build community, and negotiate the challenges that result from shifting religious beliefs?**

Chapter five examined the shaping and manifestation of heterodox Mormon identity by examining a digital community of heterodox Mormons that formed around the *Mormon Stories* podcast, which was created to address the difficult questions that are typically set aside in traditional LDS Church settings. In this study, “heterodox Mormon” was the broadest region on the Mormon Belief Spectrum, as it encompasses all those who occupy the space between
“orthodox Mormons” and “post-Mormons.” Some heterodox Mormons are much closer to the orthodox side of the spectrum, while other heterodox Mormons are much closer to the post-Mormon side of the spectrum. Some heterodox Mormons attend LDS Church meetings regularly, and, to the best of their ability, follow LDS rules and guidelines, while other heterodox Mormons haven’t been to Church in years and don’t actively try to—or even care to—follow Mormon rules and guidelines. While the broadness of this category may raise questions as to who should be included and who should be left out, and while it may even raise questions about the usefulness of such a category altogether, I feel that I have effectively demonstrated the importance of this category. This is the region of the spectrum that is set aside for those who are struggling with their faith. Many of them question their faith and their Mormon identities. They are unsure about how to answer the difficult questions that deal with Church history, LDS doctrine, LGBT issues, feminism, etc. They exist in a liminal space. They can’t claim full allegiance to the Church as it is, but they also are not ready, willing, or desirous to say that they are not Mormons.

This case study on heterodox Mormon identity utilized Warner’s model of publics and counterpublics to examine the Mormon Stories podcast community. Warner’s model was an ideal lens through which to examine heterodox Mormon identity issues because it allowed me to address specific, individual components of identity and meaning-making, while at the same time exploring how the community, as a whole, is working to bring about change in the Church, particularly when it comes to what could be considered progressive issues, like LGBT rights and women's’ rights. Warner’s model allowed me to examine how the Mormon Stories podcast led to the creation of a counterpublic, which now utilizes its digital space as a public sphere where members strive to achieve collective goals through reasoned discussions, but where individuals
are also able to work out their identities and find meaning through the symbols and discourse that is mediated through their digital space. By sharing stories, memes, jokes, words of encouragement, and criticisms of LDS doctrine and culture, the digital community provides its members with ideas, language, and narratives from which they can glean new meanings in their continuous search for who they want to be, and for what they want Mormonism to mean to them.

At the same time, all of the individual interactions taking place within the public sphere leads to the creation of a unique culture. For several of the MSPC members I spoke with, the culture and community that has been created within the MSPC serves as a sufficient—if temporary—replacement for the LDS Church. They no longer feel like an immediate answer to their questions, or an immediate resolution to their faith crises is necessary, because their digital community—their third space—which exists somewhere between being an active, faithful Mormon, and leaving the Church altogether is, for now, at least, enough for them. The digital community is also a third space in that it exists between the expectations and judgments of orthodox Mormons in Church settings, and the expectations and judgments of orthodox family members in the home. In this digital third space, heterodox Mormons can say what they want to say and be who they want to be—without having to feel silenced or judged—while continuing along their path to discovering who they are. This case study demonstrates that for many Mormons who are experiencing religious doubts, or struggles with identity and faith, digital technologies can provide some of the resources necessary to negotiate these doubts and struggles, and to find community and renewed meaning.
RQ 3: How are post-Mormons using digital technologies, such as podcasts and other alternative media, to find meaning and negotiate their identities in the wake of their departures from the LDS Church?

Chapter six examined post-Mormon identity and meaning-making through the lens of satire. When I began researching how post-Mormons are utilizing alternative media and digital spaces, I soon realized that humor and, more specifically, satire directed at the LDS institution and all of its components, is one of the primary elements that bonds post-Mormons together and fuels much of the discourse in their communities. I noticed that, in addition to being a form of catharsis, humor helps post-Mormons to make sense of their changing religious identities by helping them to sort out the elements of Mormonism that they still find valuable, and to let go of the elements of Mormonism that they no longer find useful or meaningful. By highlighting the perceived inconsistencies and problems with Mormon doctrine and culture, satire that is directed at the LDS Church helps post-Mormons to feel a sense of validation for their decisions to leave the Church, and to more-readily let go of many of the beliefs they held when they were Mormons.

Satire directed at the LDS Church also helps to foster the growth of relationships at the post-Mormon community level because, upon entering the community for the first time, the one thing post-Mormons know that they share is dissatisfaction with the Church. Although each post-Mormon has his or her own reasons for leaving Mormonism, post-Mormons seem to understand that nearly all reasons for leaving the Church can be placed into a few broad categories (e.g. dissatisfaction with lack of institutional transparency, dissatisfaction with historical issues, etc.), and that post-Mormons who are upset about an issue in one of these categories will likely be upset with issues in the other categories, as well—or, at the very least, they won’t likely be upset
if other post-Mormons satirize the issues in one of the other categories. Over time, the pointing out, satirizing, and discussion of the issues that they feel delegitimize the Church causes post-Mormons to develop group cohesion, to share in their frustrations, ideas, opinions, and hopes, and to develop a group identity.

Post-Mormons who belong to the VIP Lounge have come to know what to expect from the culture that exists in the VIP Lounge, and for those who continue to participate in the community, the VIP Lounge provides a support and a sense of meaning. One thing that I feel is worth mentioning is that many heterodox and post-Mormons who participate in these digital spaces are fully aware that each digital space has its own unique culture. Often, I would see comments posted in a community that didn’t seem to quite fit with the culture and discursive patterns that had been established in that community over time. Other members of the community would comment on these posts and direct the person who posted towards a digital community that would better suit his or her needs. For example, if somebody posted something in the MSPC that was too harsh or critical of the Church, a community member might comment, “I think you might be better off in the Mormon VIP Lounge.” Or, if someone posted a comment in the Mormon VIP Lounge about how they were somehow hoping to remain faithful and active in the Church, a community member might comment, “You might want to check out the ‘A Thoughtful Faith’ community.”

Like heterodox Mormons, post-Mormons have experienced a shift in their religious beliefs and, in most cases, no longer feel at home in their LDS communities. For those who have spent years attending Church and developing relationships with the other Mormons in their area, this shift away from the Church can be—and often is—very difficult. When leaving the Church, many post-Mormons immediately lose the community that has supported them for most of their
lives; they lose friends, they lose babysitters, job connections, workout partners, and, in many cases, they even lose the respect of their families. For many post-Mormons, the ability to quickly find a support community to replace the one that was lost after LDS disaffection is essential to finding peace and moving on. Digital spaces like the Mormon VIP Lounge provide some of the support that these post-Mormons are in search of. By being able to come together, share their stories, help each other understand that everything will be alright, and create, disseminate, and laugh at satirical texts that highlight some of the aspects of the LDS Church that played a role in their leaving, post-Mormons can continue along the unending pathway of self-discovery.

RQ 4: In what ways, if any, have digital technologies, such as the Internet and alternative media, contributed to change within the LDS Church?

As I mentioned in the introduction to chapter one, I originally came to this research with the intention of discovering how digital technologies have shaped or altered the doctrines and/or the structure of the LDS Church. Although I shifted the focus of my study to an examination of identity and meaning making in Mormon-themed digital communities, I remained interested in discovering how the Internet, and its many affordances, have been affecting Mormonism. In researching the history of media in the LDS Church, along with modern day Mormon identity and media practices, I have made some discoveries about how digital technologies have been impacting Mormonism, and I will briefly describe a few of these discoveries here.

Just as the creation and eventual widespread use of the printing press played a role in shaping the social and political institutions of the 15th and 16th centuries (and beyond), by leading to the creation of a print culture, by making information more widely available to the general public, and by sowing the seeds for an eventual Protestant Reformation, the Internet has
played a role in creating what might be described as a reformation within contemporary Mormonism. People think, form opinions, and act based upon the information that they consume, and the information that they consume is, in many ways, determined by the availability of information. In chapters one and two, I described how LDS leaders have always—to some extent—attempted to influence and/or limit the information available to members of the Church, particularly when that information conflicts with the official religious narratives espoused by the Church. Prior to the advent of the Internet, information that challenged or contradicted what LDS Church leaders taught was much more difficult for Mormons to access. While alternative accounts of Church history, and challenges to Mormonism’s core beliefs certainly existed, this information had to be actively sought out by Mormons who wanted anything other than official, Church-sanctioned accounts of Mormonism’s history and beliefs.

Once digital technologies became widely embedded in the information infrastructure, all of this once difficult-to-access information became much more readily available to Mormons and, as former Church Historian, Marlin Jensen stated, the Church began to experience an information crisis that led to almost unprecedented levels of disaffection and apostasy (Henderson & Cooke, 2012). With the Internet readily accessible to most members of the LDS Church, Mormons can access information that challenges official Church narratives with relative ease—sometimes without even intentionally searching for it. Additionally, digital technologies allow members of the Church to bypass Church authorities and to communicate horizontally with other Mormons around the world, many of whom are more than willing to discuss perceived problems and inconsistencies in official Church narratives. This, as we have seen in this study, has played a role in the formation of digital communities of heterodox and post-Mormons who have discovered—and who want to discuss and expose—alternative versions of Church history,
documents that Church leaders had hoped would remain hidden, inconsistencies in Church
doctrine, and the perceived problems with Mormon culture.

In recent years, the Church has experienced a slowing in membership growth, and in
some areas, such as Western Europe, there are reports that wards and stakes are being combined
with other wards and stakes, or that wards and stakes are being closed down altogether due to
large numbers of resignations by Mormons living in that area; no doubt the information crisis
created by the Internet and other digital technologies has helped to contribute to this decline in
growth, as was attested to by Hans Mattsson, the former high ranking Mormon leader from
Sweden, who dealt directly with hundreds of Mormons who came to him with their concerns
about information they had found about the Church online—all this before Mattsson himself
expressed his own deep concerns with the Church. Additionally, as more and more Mormons
have turned to online resources for information about the Church, and as more and more
Mormons have begun to discuss their concerns about the Church with other Mormons in online
settings, Church leaders have experienced a decline in their ability and authority to control the
situation, as evidenced by Elder Ballard’s plea to Church educators to encourage their students to
turn to Church leaders, and not to the Internet, for answers to their religious questions and
concerns (Ballard, 2016).

At the same time, the Church has always been media savvy, and Church leaders and
public relations specialists have dedicated a lot of time and money to utilizing digital
technologies to combat the negative consequences of digital technologies. Some of the things the
Church has done to address these negative consequences are: launched its own official websites;
created digital media campaigns aimed at normalizing Mormonism; employed SEO experts to
boost positive LDS content in Mormon-themed Internet searches; began utilizing social media
and video sharing platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube to spread positive information about the Church; encouraged Mormons to share their own faith testimonies and inspirational religious messages on their social media platforms, as well as on mormon.org, the Church’s website for those interested in learning more about Mormonism; began to be more transparent about its history and controversial doctrines by releasing essays about these topics to its official website; and began employing social media missionaries to promote and answer questions about the Church in online settings. Whether these efforts will have any measurable impact on strengthening the Church, or on mitigating the negative consequences of digital technologies is something that will have to be examined in greater depth in future research.

In her examination of the implications of digital technologies for religious authority, Campbell (2007) describes how some have argued that the Internet will bring about the end of institutionalized religion because religious authorities will no longer be able to control their messages. While she acknowledges that the Internet has—and will continue to—play a role in bringing about various changes to institutionalized religions, she also argues that those who contend that the Internet will bring about the demise of institutionalized religious authorities are neglecting to consider how the Internet can also support and reinforce institutionalized religious authorities. During my research, I occasionally heard heterodox and post-Mormons suggest that eventually, all Mormons would discover the truth about the Church and its history, and they would then either leave the Church, or experience faith crises of their own. Many of these heterodox and post-Mormons expressed the belief that at some point in the future, enough people would discover the truth about the Church that the Church would either become essentially irrelevant, or dissolve altogether. Similar to what Peter Berger predicted in his original
secularization thesis, these Mormons and post-Mormons believe that the social forces that are already in play will lead to the eventual demise of Mormonism.

Like Campbell in her study on religious authority, I believe that these heterodox and post-Mormons are neglecting to full picture into account. While the Internet, and other digital technologies certainly have contributed to changes in the LDS Church, they have also been vital tools in helping the LDS Church to find new members, and to strengthen the faith of many of its current members. For many orthodox Mormons, like those I met in LDS chapels in Colorado, Utah, and South Dakota, the Internet has been as much of a tool for strengthening the faith as it has been for challenging or shattering the faith of so many heterodox and post-Mormons with whom I met. For these orthodox Mormons, the Internet is viewed not as some great arbiter of truth that will eventually expose all of the perceived faults and fictions of the LDS Church to Mormons all around the world, but as a resource that, among other things, helps them to stay up-to-date on Church news, watch General Conference from home, research information for Sunday school lessons, and chat with their orthodox Mormon friends and family members.

I believe that the Church will continue to evolve and adapt over the years, just as it always has done in the past. And as it evolves and adapts, it will do so in such a way that critics of the Church will be able to claim that the Church is selling out, or giving up on its foundational beliefs and tenets, while those who are dedicated to the Church will be able to claim that the wisdom of Church leaders and continuing revelation from God are responsible for the changes. Through the years, the Church has abandoned or discontinued some of its core doctrines (such as polygamy), altered a variety of other doctrines and practices (such as how tithing is paid), survived the assassination of its first leader, endured a series of schisms, turned a barren, semi-arid landscape into a flourishing city, and reversed its position on blacks and the priesthood.
Through all of this, the Church has continued to grow. If the LDS Church had to be described in just one word, adaptable might be the correct choice. Scholars such as Armand Mauss and Thomas O’Dea have described the adaptability and resilience of the LDS Church and its members. This adaptability has played a key role in the survival and growth of the Church since its inception in 1830, and it will likely continue to play a role in its survival for many years to come.

**Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research**

This dissertation examined how orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormons are using digital technologies to construct and express their identities through the mediation of narratives and symbols on their social media platforms, and within their digital communities. The Mormon Belief Spectrum served as an organizational tool for dividing the various groups of Mormons and post-Mormons according to the way that they claim to identify with Mormonism. Through a historical examination of LDS media usage that related to how orthodox Mormons are using media today, an examination of heterodox Mormonism through the lens of Michael Warner’s public sphere theory, and an examination of the use of satire, this dissertation explored how identity and meaning are being constructed and negotiated in various Mormon-themed digital communities. The research found that for religious purposes, orthodox Mormons are continuing to use media in the same ways that orthodox Mormons have always used media, namely to protect the Church from attacks on its credibility, to promote the goodness of the Church through the sharing of personal stories and testimonies, and to proselyte to non-Mormons. Additionally, the study found that orthodox Mormons often express and reinforce their Mormon identities by sharing pro-LDS message on their social media platforms.
The study found that for heterodox Mormons in the Mormon Stories Podcast Community, who are often experiencing faith crises and feelings of loss and confusion about their religious beliefs, digital spaces serve as a sort of “third space” that exists between Church settings and the home, or between orthodox Mormonism and post-Mormonism. In these third spaces, heterodox Mormons can work out their identities and find meaning in the liminal spaces they inhabit by reaching out to other similarly-situated individuals and engaging in reasoned discussion about the Church, about what it should mean to be Mormon, and about what they wish to see change in the LDS Church. These spaces are also a rich public sphere, where heterodox Mormons have long been engaging in sustained discourse that has led to the development of a unique heterodox Mormon culture. Occasionally, these heterodox Mormons come together in organized physical marches, rallies, and protests to challenge aspects of the Church that they feel need to be reexamined and changed by Church leadership. The Church’s treatment of LGBT members is one example of this.

The study also found that post-Mormons in the Mormon VIP Lounge digital community, many of whom are also experiencing a loss of their LDS communities after leaving Mormonism, are using satire as a way to find meaning and negotiate their identities in the wake of their departure from the LDS Church. For post-Mormons, satire is not only a tool that is used to criticize and lampoon Mormonism in an attempt to validate a decision to leave the Church, but it is also a tool for examining previously-held Mormon values, and determining how these values may or may not fit into the identity that the post-Mormon individual wishes to maintain going forward. At the community level, satire helps post-Mormons to bond and build group cohesion by helping to create a culture and atmosphere where post-Mormons know what to expect from the community, and where they can begin to feel at home after leaving Mormonism. Post-
mormon digital communities also serve as a third space for post-Mormon individuals searching for spaces where they can continue to discuss Mormonism, but where they can do so on their own terms. Additionally, this research examined some of the implications of digital technologies for the LDS Church as an institution.

Although I used a broad definition of the term “religion” throughout this project, my exploration of religion and religious practice among members of Mormon-themed digital communities was largely grounded in Geertz’s (1966) definition of religion, which emphasizes belief and how belief is manifested through the moods and motivations of individuals in response to their exposure to, and their interactions with certain systems and symbols. In Geertz’s estimation, these systems of symbols help individuals to organize and make sense of their world, thus, we could say that, according to Geert, Mormonism is a religion because it provides individuals with a system of symbols that helps to shape their moods and motivations; in other words, if people believe in the system of symbols provided by Mormonism, then they could be considered Mormon. However, throughout this research, particularly in the case study on heterodox Mormonism, it became clear to me that one does not necessarily need to believe in—or accept—the system of symbols provided by Mormonism in order to claim and practice Mormon identity. As we have seen, some individuals who self-identify as Mormon do not believe in many—or any—of the core doctrines and faith tenets (the system of symbols) espoused and disseminated by the LDS Church. To these individuals, being Mormon, or belonging to the Mormon faith is rooted more in the culture and community that Mormonism provides. For these individuals, believing that God restored His one and only true Church through Joseph Smith, and that prophets continue to lead the Church is unimportant; regardless of their belief or disbelief in this narrative, they still consider themselves Mormons. To these
individuals, religion is more than accepting and making life changes around a certain system of symbols. Future research might examine how Mormonism is continuing to evolve as a result of these individuals who are pushing the boundaries of what it means to be a Mormon.

Future research might examine how the LDS Church’s efforts to utilize digital technologies to promote and strengthen the Church are faring in light of a growing number of Mormons who are encountering material online that challenges their faith in the Church. Future research might also examine what becomes of members of heterodox and post-Mormons digital communities when and if they feel that the community has served, or no longer can serve their needs. For example, are heterodox Mormons eventually returning to orthodoxy? Are they becoming post-Mormons? Or are they comfortable remaining in the liminal space between orthodoxy and post-Mormonism? If they are shifting their positions and entering either end of the belief spectrum, what causes these shifts? Family? Positive messaging from the Church? Fatigue from remaining in the in-between? Future research might also examine the nature of orthodox, heterodox, and post-Mormon identity in areas of the world with far less access to digital technology. How, if at all, are people in these areas developing support communities? Is the Church continuing to grow in these areas, or is it also experiencing a slowdown in growth like it is in areas with higher levels of access to digital technologies? Finally, future research might take a more in-depth examination of how the LDS Church is being impacted by greater levels of access to sensitive information. How will the LDS institution be impacted as time goes on, and more Mormons are exposed to sensitive information about the Church, and as the Church has more time to develop strategies to address this issue?

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