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Introduction: Small Means, Great Things

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Forum: Mormonism as Media

Introduction: Small Means, Great Things

Benjamin Peters and John Durham Peters

“And the Lord God doth work by means.” (Alma 37:7)

MORMONISM IS A MEDIA RELIGION: every contribution to this forum makes this point in some way. Of course, the same could be said of most religions, and yet the Mormon tradition in particular incorporates media. How so?

The most obvious way to make this point would be to attend to the robust historical confluence of Mormonism and the media of communication. The Mormon movement, which takes its name from a book, has used many kinds of media, modern and ancient alike, to preach the gospel and perfect the saints. From pamphlets, choirs, and manifestos to visitors centers, filmstrips, and websites, the history of the global correlated church is inseparable from mass media.

In this forum we pursue a less obvious but, we believe, equally exciting approach to Mormonism as a media religion. We argue that Mormonism can provoke new perspectives among media scholars for the same reasons that media theory can rethink basic questions in religious thought, culture, and history. Media, in our view, need not have words, images, sounds, tubes, or screens. They need not have large audiences or be *mass* in any way. Rather, media can be the metaphysical constituents

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of the cosmos. Early Mormon leaders, brothers, and writers Parley and Orson Pratt used the term in this sense—as did indeed almost everybody before roughly 1900, when *media* came to mean the agencies of mass communication. Before then a *medium* bore light, truth, heat, or magnetic force. This older, elemental meaning of *medium* has found new resonance today when so much of our lives is digitally governed, since it suggests that media not only carry signals: they create and shape the environments in which we live. A medium is not only about the transmission or storage of meaning. It also affects the ordering of time, space, and relationships. (Anyone who has misplaced a smartphone understands this.) A student of media interested in Mormon culture may be just as fascinated by granite, grids, signatures, paperwork, or microfilm as by press coverage, proclamations, or pop stars. Media scholarship need not focus alone on the accuracy of representation (think fake news concerns); it should also seek to understand the means by which worlds are organized. Media not only show: they also *are*.

The approach to media studies we pursue here is closer to the humanities than the social sciences or natural sciences, although they too play their part in understanding media.¹ But it is also a revision of the humanities. Typically, the humanities have been understood as the study of meanings made by humans in poems, songs, paintings, philosophies, and so on. Media theory rethinks both *meaning* and *humans*. A sonnet can have meaning, but so can a computer chip. A painting can overflow with data, but so can a fossil or a cloud. Clouds and fossils brim with signals: meteorologists and paleontologists know how to read them richly, even when their mode of being is relatively mute and implicit. Clouds and fossils are not like books or movies that cry out to be read or watched, and yet they reward rereading to all those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Media theory prompts us to learn to

1. John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson, eds., *Mass Communication in American Social Thought: Key Texts, 1919–1968* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

read what was never written but has long been legible. The radical move to free meaning from the domain of human-made objects grooves with Mormon theology, which allows for intelligence in a variety of embodiments, and Mormon practice, in which form and behavior often enjoy priority over content and theory. The deepest meanings are not always stated: they occur in action and repetition, ordinance and embodiment, prompting and being. Mormon thought has always been media theory, even unintentionally.

The contributors to this forum help enrich, challenge, and clarify this point. Medical humanist Samuel Morris Brown leads with a plea to take seriously the Mormon treasury of radiant objects without reducing them to magic or projection. “Wild facts,” whatever else they may or may not do, escape the reductions of Enlightenment thought. Next, literary scholar Sharon Harris and ethnomusicologist Peter McMurray call for a refreshed Mormon history through a series of objects that galvanize invention and discovery: in particular, sound. Students of sound are particularly well equipped to process plural registers simultaneously—and Mormon history offers up many pluralities (wives, books, zions, gods). Furthermore, sound’s eerie metaphysical properties—it disappears as it exists—make it rich for the religious imagination, and Harris and McMurray invite a creative resounding of the faith’s history through some of its audible objects. Film scholar Mason Kamana Allred extends this theme of radiant objects and applies it to media archaeology, a tradition of media history developed in northern Europe; in the process, he shows how media archaeology unearths, among other resonances, perhaps the most uncannily vital historical object that Mormons hold in their history: their commitment to care for their dead. Historian Kate Holbrook turns instead to a close study of an everyday cultural object—Jell-O. Her insight is subtle: derogatory attitudes about Jell-O at the turn of the last century taint the messages conveyed by Mormon and other American religious groups through a century of incorporating Jell-O in the religious culture. Sometimes a medium can obliterate (or at least obscure) the beauty of human contribution. Her implicit invitation rings clear to scholars of folk culture: Jell-O is a

counterintuitive medium par excellence. In fact, the petri dishes of the sciences typically hold such plastic and stretchy media: gels, gelatins, molds, and, indeed, *cultures*. Her essay also highlights just how much ordinary people matter (a point lost on some prominent media theorists such as Friedrich Kittler). Communication scholar and ethnographer of religion Rosemary Avance showcases how the homogenizing mass media caused the heterogeneous internet to come as a shock to Mormon institutional structures. Here her definition of media is more precise: media are institutional efforts to communicate. Her essay in turn paints an essential backdrop for media and culture scholar Gavin Feller's sketch of the church's changing relationship to the internet—from pornography panics to family history promises. Taken as a whole, these essays expand, enrich, and complicate our senses of media with visual panoramas, auditory hymnals, and even the touch and taste of wiggly desserts.

It is hard, of course, to specify what unites such a diverse set of essays, although perhaps they mostly, whether knowingly or not, partake in a media theoretic turn toward what has been called “the materialities of communication,” the “ontology of media,” or “infrastructural media.”² As such, these essays revisit not only Mormonism's media history but its deepest theological values. This revisiting opens up treasures for the media scholar, as Mormonism invites us to imagine communication not only as a struggle for hearts, minds, clicks, and likes, but as the universe-spanning linkage between the living and the dead, gods, angels, humans, plants, animals, and minerals. A media-theoretic focus on Mormonism thus invites at once an enlargement of vision and a fresh interest in apparently irrelevant minutiae. Indeed, the Book of Mormon prophet Alma notes that “means” can both be “simple” and “confound the wise” (Alma 37:6–7). (Consider how many digital media narratives

2. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, eds., *Materialities of Communication*, trans. William Whobrey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Friedrich Kittler, “Towards an Ontology of Media,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 26/2–3 (2009): 23–31; John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

follow the same line. For example, Is your router broken? Ask a ten-year-old for help!) Media may be simple, at times, but they are never easy, and their specificities speak volumes. Thus, general claims about “the media” tend to be about as useless as those about “the Mormons.” At the same time the pairing of the cosmic and the banal resounds with Mormon thought and culture, with its majestic cosmologies and busy-bee mundanities.

One of the benefits of the aforementioned material turn in media theory is an expanded menu of topics. Taking media as ontological is not only a theoretical reset—it is an explosion in the archive. There was hardly anything that Marshall McLuhan, the Catholic convert and Canadian English professor turned media theorist (and, later, media showman), would not consider a medium. His lists and enumerations sometimes verged on the silly, but they were always canon smashing and stimulating to a sympathetic ear. Media scholars familiar with his interest in media such as light bulbs, money, and bicycles will find Mormonism uniquely stocked with objects of curious workmanship: a more complete Mormon media curriculum might highlight, for starters, public and private spectacles like pageants and seer stones, sites of worship and service such as tabernacles and temples, the various channels by which Mormon modernity has extended its messages from the Erie Canal (the economic boom that brought the Book of Mormon into print) to the Mormon Channel, the historical arc of attempts to build Zion with media from Brigham Young’s ambitious Deseret Alphabet to the contemporary church-owned newspaper *Deseret News*, from Joseph Smith’s celestial bookkeeping to the embarrassingly bad film *Johnny Lingo*. Each offers a medium with a new story to tell. Perhaps we can see revelation as a media process by which things that once appeared ordinary quiver anew with significance.

Media studies is good for Mormon studies just as is the reverse—for, at the very least, they could prove therapeutic listeners to the other’s woes. In a time, for example, when the news media face waves of public incredulity and claims of fake news, Mormon history offers an alternate route for describing how strained claims can, over the course of more

than a century, slowly seed a flourishing mainstream global niche culture. At the same time, many practicing Mormons appear perturbed by the mundane materiality of seer stones; yet, as Brown argues, modern media studies offer inoculation against too-easy disappointment at such mysteries by teaching us appreciation for the odd and concrete. The mark of a medium, said media historian Harold Adams Innis, is bias. That is not necessarily its fault; that is its advantage.

All too often modern humans bring to God and religion notions of purity and objectivity— notions inherited from scientific-cum-Protestant dreams of immediacy. Both media and Mormon culture can foster apostate fantasies of vanishing mediators—as if media were a bad thing and should disappear once their work is done! Such foolishness, embraced by tech utopians, religious zealots, and public relation specialists alike, profits from the human desire for instantaneous answers. Prayer, like transfer speeds, will always take time and effort. (Neither appeal nor reply can ever be immediate, unless the answer is already stored within.) The church's efforts to construct a millennium-ready record of the human family, as Allred points out, also prompts us to acknowledge the truth that, no matter what passes, layers of media are what remain.

Both Mormonism and media, properly understood, deprive us of the very illusion that many think they provide—a quick and immediate fix. Instead, we have only what remains, and diverse media theoretic approach to Mormonism helps us celebrate the flawed labor of making sense through ongoing struggles with fragile apparatuses. Perhaps media are both the boundary conditions and the building blocks of the bridge between the here and now and the eternities; media trouble our most stubborn binaries by both bridging and complicating them—gender and sex, death and life, solitude and kinship, time and eternities. Media studies and Mormonism, in other words, present theoretically compatible practices of the limited means by which the cosmos is made.

We'll conclude this reverie with a nod to a few voices in a literature we might dub Mormonish media studies. Specialists will find many more names to add to this diverse alphabet of contributors ranging

from Leonard Arrington's works of LDS Church history; Randy Astle on Mormon cinema; Sherry Baker's essential Mormon media time line; Amanda Beardsley on Mormon sound culture; Ben Burroughs on the rituals of Mormon social media; Gideon Burton's comprehensive take on rhetoric and film; Joel Campbell on Mormon public relations; Chiung Hwang Chen on the church's online strategies; Scott Church on glitch music and grave memorials; Jared Farmer's exquisite source books of Mormon images; Elizabeth Fenton on the textual complexities of the Book of Mormon; Kathleen Flake on the hermeneutics of translation; Jacob Gaboury on the image worlds built in University of Utah computing labs; most everything by Terryl Givens; David Gore on media theology in McLuhan; Jeremy Grimshaw on world music and mysticism; Paul Gutjahr's multimedia biography of the Book of Mormon; Tona Hangen on religious radio history; Grant Hardy's close readings of the Book of Mormon; J. B. Haws on the Mormon image; Jared Hickman on race in American scripture; Michael Hicks on Mormonism and music; Jake Johnson on musical theater; Kimberly Johnson's sacramental poetry and poetics; Seth Lewis on the borders of journalism; Adam Miller's expansive theologies of matter and grace; Max Perry Mueller on racialized writing in Mormon history; Joseph Spencer on the obsessive documentary self-reflexivity in the Book of Mormon; Daniel Stout's many works on the media, Mormonism, and popular culture; Joseph Straubhaar on global media in the Americas; the late Stephen Webb on materialist theologies; and Laurel Ulrich on polygamy and textile work, among so much scholarship by so many authors.³

3. For example, Arrington, "Mormon Finance and the Utah War," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 20 (1952): 219–37; Astle, "What Is Mormon Cinema? Defining the Genre," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 42/4 (2009): 18–68, and the articles in *Mormons and Film: A Special Issue*, ed. Gideon O. Burton and Randy Astle, *BYU Studies* 46/2 (2007); Baker, "Mormon Media History Timeline: 1827–2007," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 47/4 (2008): 117–23; Beardsley, "God in Stereo: The Salt Lake Tabernacle and Harvey Fletcher's Telephonic Symphony" (Mormon Scholars in the Humanities Conference Paper, 2017); Burroughs, "And I'm a (Social Media) Mormon: Digital Ritual, Techno-faith, and Religious Transmedia," *QWERTY* 8/2 (2013): 71–81; Burton, start here: <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/> and <http://mormonarts.lib.byu.edu/>; Campbell, *Making*

A thousand new projects could—and should—be found here. We are

It Work: Improving the Relationship between Public Relations Spokespeople and Journalists (Des Moines: Kendall Hunt, 2012); Chen, “Marketing Religion Online: The LDS Church’s SEO Efforts,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 10/4 (2011): 185–205; Church, “Against the Tyranny of Musical Form: Glitch Music, Affect, and the Sound of Digital Malfunction,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34/4 (2017): 315–28; Farmer, start here: <https://jaredfarmer.net/e-books/>; Fenton, “Understanding the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 25/1 (2016):37–51; Flake, “Translating Time: The Nature and Function of Joseph Smith’s Narrative Canon,” *Journal of Religion* 87/4 (October 2007): 497–527; Gaboury, “Other Places of Invention: Utah and the History of Computer Graphics,” in *Communities of Computing: Computer Science and Society in the ACM*, ed. Thomas J. Misa (New York: ACM Books, 2016); Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Gore and David E. Beard, “‘In Jesus Christ, the Medium and the Message Are Fully One and the Same’: Deriving a Media Theology from the Works of Marshall McLuhan,” in *God and Popular Culture: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Entertainment Industry’s Most Influential Figure*, ed. Stephen Butler Murray and Aimée Upjohn Light (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), 1:165–76; Grimshaw, *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon; A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Hickman, “*The Book of Mormon* as Amerindian Apocalypse,” *American Literature* 86/3 (2014); Hicks, *Mormonism and Music: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Jake Johnson, “Mormons, Musical Theater, and the Public Arena of Doubt,” *Dialogue* 48/2 (Winter 2015): 89–114; Kimberley Johnson, *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Lewis, “The Tension between Professional Control and Open Participation: Journalism and Its Boundaries,” *Information, Communication and Society* 15/6 (2012): 836–66; Miller, *Badiou, Marion and St. Paul: Immanent Grace* (New York: Bloomsbury Atlantic, 2008); Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012); Stout, *Media and Religion: Foundations of an Emerging Field* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Straubhaar, *World Television: From Global to Local* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007); Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Knopf, 2017); see also *the Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

pleased to orchestrate a rendezvous of media theory and Mormonism and to invite media theorists to sample the treasures of a religious tradition that has a uniquely materialist media sensibility.

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John Durham Peters is the María Rosa Menocal Professor of English and of Film & Media Studies at Yale University. He taught at the University of Iowa between 1986 and 2016 and is the author of *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (1999); *Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition* (2004); and, most recently, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (2015), all published by the University of Chicago Press.