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Modern Reports of Prophetic Succession: A Study of the Interpretation of Discourse Biases

Doris R. Dant

Introduction and Justification

Eugene England notes the following:

Mormonism has been called a “new religious tradition,”¹ . . . different . . . in ways that make Mormons much more like ancient Jews and early Christians and Muslims than, say, Baptists or even Lutherans.

Mormonism is also growing rapidly, with the highest convert rate among religious groups larger than one million. . . . Harold Bloom, the distinguished literary and cultural critic, has recently noted Mormon group cohesion and growth in numbers and accompanying economic and political power and . . . predicts that it will become the equivalent of a state religion in some parts of America within a few decades.²

In such a situation—where one group is markedly different from another and where in addition it makes incursions into the membership and power of another—we should, according to critical discourse analysis theory, expect conflicting discourses³ and should be able to observe how a dominant “discourse disciplines a population.”⁴ These discourses should be discernible in news media reports from both groups as media reports are “the main form of public discourse that provides . . . the pervasively dominant knowledge and attitude structures.”⁵ Thus reports from both groups can serve to highlight their biases—the existence and operations of their competing picture of, interpretations of, and underlying assumptions about reality.

Although media reports “do not necessarily prescribe the concrete opinions of readers,” according to van Dijk, they are of particular interest in such a situation because they “condition the readers to develop [the dominant] interpretation frameworks rather than alternative ones, in which other goals, norms, values, and ideologies are used to provide counterinterpretations of news events.”⁶

The more hidden the workings of bias are, the more effective they are.⁷ Nevertheless, recipients sometimes do perceive the biases of reports, and when they do so, they can distance themselves, reject the interpretive frameworks, or struggle against them. For a group on the receiving end of media attempts to discipline or at least achieve commonality, the ability to perceive bias and resist conditioning is crucial to maintaining the group’s own set of discourses.

How do college students who are not trained in rhetoric perceive the operational discourses and the resulting bias? Specifically how will they interpret religious bias both in reports by members of their own religion and by members of other beliefs? I conducted an experiment to begin answering those questions.

This study will analyze some BYU students’ interpretation of the discourses operating in the *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Church News*, and *New York Times* accounts of the 1973 prophetic succession of Spencer W. Kimball and in the *Time* and *Newsweek* accounts of the 1985 succession of Ezra Taft Benson. (See the appendices for the six excerpts used in the study.)

The Instructions and Setting

In two of my classes, I told a story about my treatment from a biased press. Then I asked the students to do an exercise in bias. The instructions for each excerpt read as follows:

Please read the following excerpt and determine whether or not it is biased. While you read, please underline or circle anything that helps you determine the bias. You may also make notes in the margin, since some clues may not be the type that you can underline.

After reading an excerpt, the students were asked to rate its overall bias on a scale ranging from

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very negative through neutral to very positive. The order of the reports was randomly varied from student to student to offset the effect that comparing the news stories in a specific order might have had on the ratings.

The Sample

The sample consisted of 33 technical writing students at Brigham Young University. Most of the students were from the sciences or engineering, but 4 were English majors, and 1 was a journalism major.

All were active Latter-day Saints; in fact 28 were life-long members. Twenty-seven rated themselves as very active, and 5 as moderately active. Most were three or four at the time Spencer W. Kimball became president, so what they know of the event would be what they learned later. However, those students would have been fifteen or sixteen at the time of President Kimball's death, so the event, since all are active, would probably have made an impact on them. One would expect them to know a fair amount about both presidents by which to judge the bias of the media treatment of the two men. They should also know the teachings and practices of their church well enough to judge bias in those areas.

The students were most familiar with the LDS Church publications, but over two-thirds were also familiar with *Newsweek* and *Time*. Thus they could be expected to have some experience with the biases of those magazines and of the *Church News*.

Correlations

Majors did not correlate with ratings. For instance, three of the four English majors rated the *Church News* as neutral; one rated it as moderately positive. The journalism major rated it as neutral.

The vast majority (30) of the students rated themselves as conservative or moderate. However, political beliefs did not correlate with the way students ranked the articles. For example, the two liberals, who might be expected to applaud the traces of the political discourse occurring in the 1974 *Times* and 1985 *Newsweek* articles, rated them as moderately negative, but so did many of the conservatives. In the schema of the reports, these discourses are located in the background sections. Apparently, these LDS students accepted this ordering of significance and focused on the religious discourse, although the instructions did not specifically direct them to do so.

Overall Ratings of Bias

Table 1 lists the ratings. Although I asked for a single rating, some students orally objected, saying it was impossible to give a single rating to the 1985 *Time* and *Newsweek* articles, which seemed to them to be positive about President Kimball and negative about President Benson. Other students simply gave split ratings. Out of 33 ratings each, the *Time* article received 6 split ratings and the

Newsweek article 5. Student comments included "positively biased towards Kimball negatively towards Benson," "slam on Pres. Benson" but "only praise for Pres. Kimball," or simply "pos Kimball, neg Benson."

One student's split rating of the 1974 *Time* excerpt, which received the highest number of very negative ratings, presents an interesting anomaly. The student seems to have missed the implications of the conjunction of the words *self-perpetuating gerontocracy* with *by tradition* and interpreted them as positive. The student also missed the innuendo of "a spiritual WPA—a task that keeps older Mormons both busy and feeling needed." This inability to see how words may change their connotations when in a different context led the student to rate the article as being very positive about President Kimball. Interestingly, the student seems to be one who does not read as broadly as the majority of the sample. Of the 9 periodicals listed, the student had read only 5. However, for the whole sample, there is little correlation between breadth of reading experience and the ability to make fine distinctions in bias.

The other students primarily emphasized the negative and rated the 1985 *Time* and *Newsweek* excerpts accordingly, although in the case of the *Newsweek* article, some noted positive elements in their comments. For example, one who rated the article as very negative nonetheless commented that *white suits* and *gentle* have positive connotations.

The rest viewed these two articles as neutral, even though they commented that some of the articles' observations were biased. One student noted afterwards that he determined neutrality by adding up the number of negative and positive comments. This approach to neutrality at first seemed odd to me, but it may reflect the assessment that no text is bias free and that, therefore, the only way neutrality can be achieved is to balance the negative and positive. I wanted to see if this hypothesis held true for the times when many in the class considered the more positive articles to be neutral. I also wanted to determine how the neutrals rated the other article receiving a split vote. None of the five rated the *New York Times* report neutral. Only two rated the *Church News* report as neutral. (See table 2.) These numbers are too small to be statistically significant, but they do suggest a hypothesis for future research.

A fairly positive report, the *New York Times* article, was seen as neutral by almost a third of the students. In addition, the story that reflects the students' own discourses, the one from the *Church News*, was rated as neutral by the vast majority of the students, who, remember, are all LDS. Apparently for these students, the *Church News* discourse has been naturalized and become common sense. Because LDS discourse is the dominant religious discourse at BYU, it no longer seems to them to be part of the discourse of a specific institution, their

Table 1. Rated Bias of News Reports about the Prophetic Successions

Rating	Number of Students Giving Each Rating					
	Time 1974	Time 1985	Newsweek 1974	Newsweek 1985	N.Y. Times 1973	Church News 1973
Very negative	18	11	1	8		
Moderately negative	9	11	11	18	3	
Neutral	1	3	11	2	10	27
Moderately Positive		0	9		12	3
Very Positive		1			5	2
Between Mod. Neg. & Very Neg.	4	0				
Between Mod. Pos. & Neutral		1	1			
Between Mod. Pos. & Very Pos.						1
Mod. Neg. + Neg.*						
Neutral + Mod. Neg.						
Neutral + Very Neg.				1		
Mod. Pos. + Very Neg.		1		1		
Mod. Pos. + Neutral					1	
Mod. Pos. + Very Pos.					1	
Mod. Pos. + Mod. Neg.		3		2		
Very Pos. + Very Neg.	1	2				
Mod. Pos. + Neutral + Mod. Neg.				1		
Total number of Responses	33	33	33	33	32	33
Rating Mean**	4.5	3.9	3.1	4.1	2.4	2.7
Rating Mode**	5	4.5	3.5	4	2	3

*The "+" indicates a split rating

** Rating scale: 5=very negative, 4=moderately negative, 3=neutral, 2=moderately positive, 1=very positive

Table 2. Ratings by Those Rating the '85 *Times* or *Newsweek* as Neutral

1985 <i>Time</i>	1985 <i>Newsweek</i>	N. Y. <i>Times</i>	Church <i>News</i>
3	3.5	2	1
3	4	1	3
3	5	1	1.5
4	3	1	2
4	3	1 + 2	3

church, and is thus free of the implications of bias, positive or otherwise.⁸ The discourse of the *New York Times* story apparently is similar enough to LDS discourse that for several students, it, too, seemed "matter-of-fact."

Items Used in the Rating Process

Significantly, in light of the common-sense nature of LDS discourse at BYU, students specified fewer biased items for the *Church News* excerpt than they did for any other article. Certainly part of the explanation for this low number is the short length of the excerpt. However, length does not entirely account for this phenomenon, as few students specified any rating criteria—only 4, as opposed to 17 for the short *New York Times* excerpt and 25 for the equally brief 1974 *Newsweek* excerpt. Phrases such as "set apart" and "prophet, seer and revelator" and titles such as "elder" and "president" appear bias free, even though they are not standard terminology for many other denominations.

Text items selected by a third or more students are shown in table 3. Loaded phrases, such as "divisive Benson," "abrasive utterances," and "bounce to his walk" were picked up fairly readily. In fact, the most frequently cited items, "wave-making," "right-winger," "fear of accession," and "controversial arch conservative," were marked by 26, 26, 26, and 30 students respectively. But omission and innuendo were more difficult for these students to see, especially when the omission falls into the category of common sense, such as the omission of a discussion of President Benson's politics from the *Church News*. Innuendo that succession in the LDS Church is determined through naturalistic, not divine, means was unevenly noticed. For example, the various forms of *elect*, *election*, and *select* in the 1974 *Newsweek* article were underlined by only 6, 8, and 2 people respectively. However, the more explicit "outcome never in real doubt" (seen as negative) and "self-perpetuating gerontocracy" were selected by 19 and 23 students. Likewise, the innuendo of strict obedience created by the military metaphors *corps*, *troops* and *enroll* was picked up by few although the innuendo of "virtually absolute doctrinal powers" was noticed by 16 students.

Students seemed to be fairly sensitive to the underlying politically liberal and democratic discourses. One student noted that the 1985 *Newsweek* report "focuses on Benson's political controversies, not religious background" and that it "portrays church as government and business—not as a church." Many phrases indicting Benson for his conservatism ("attacked the civil rights movement") and the Church for its antidemocratic stance ("regime," "reign," "Mormon empire") were marked as rating factors.

Conclusions

The student sample were able to pick up explicit bias, as they did with the 1974 *Time* article, which twenty-seven rated as negative, and as they did with loaded words located elsewhere. The more subtle forms, such as innuendo and omission, seemed to pose more difficulty, as they were noted by fewer students. The most subtle form of all, text reflecting naturalized discourse, was picked up by only six students. Three of those students may have recognized the positive bias of the *Church News* story because they operate on the belief that all texts are biased in some way.

I am concerned that several of the students, who had every reason to detect the bias in these news reports, had difficulty except when it was blatant. (Only rarely did more than two-thirds of the students point out the same item.) All the students were LDS and were active, lifelong members except for two. Most were familiar with the papers and magazines the reports came from. Yet they failed to see the more subtle bias in articles written about their own religion. Such blindness makes the workings of bias more effective and puts the group at risk of being conditioned by alternative discourses. I suspect the students would have even more difficulty in detecting bias in articles about other religions. If that is the case and these students are somewhat representative of the general student population, other students could have considerable difficulty detecting the bias in reports about Mormons. This possibility would certainly hinder the development of mutual understanding.

Publication	Subject	Text Item	Total Times Selected	
<i>New York Times</i>	Kimball	bounce to his walk	17	
		wear a perpetual smile	16	
1974 <i>Newsweek</i>	Kimball	a bit more surprising	12	
		virtually absolute doctrinal powers	16	
1985 <i>Newsweek</i>	Benson	outcome never in real doubt	19	
		reputation as ideological scrapper	17	
		hard-line conservative	16	
		income tax as Marxist	16	
		attacked civil-rights movement	18	
		communist-inspired	14	
		praised the right-wing John Birch Society	14	
		sought to allay fears	11	
		chose two moderates	15	
		Hinckley a pragmatist	16	
		management trinity	16	
		Mormon empire	19	
		1985 <i>Time</i>	Kimball	reign
triumph	23			
Benson	controversial arch conservative		30	
	energetic activist		13	
Benson	most successful religion		12	
	wavemaking, pepper-tongued		26	
Kimball	right-winger		26	
	was reported		15	
1974 <i>Time</i>	Kimball		to have reprimanded	14
			self-perpetuating gerontocracy	23
	Benson	was deceptive	13	
		health as an excuse	12	
		real reason	12	
		fear of accession	26	
		flustered	14	
		abrasive public utterances	17	
		so heavy	14	
		right wing	17	
Kimball	political overtones	17		
	embarrass	17		
	conservative hierarchy	16		
	divisive Benson	16		
	next in the wings	13		
	spiritual WPA	17		
	busy and needed	15		

Appendix A: Excerpt from "Smooth Succession?" *Time*, January 14, 1974.

The leadership of the Mormon Church is a self-perpetuating gerontocracy. By tradition, the presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints, whenever there is a vacancy, falls to the senior member of the church's governing Council of Twelve Apostles. Last week, following tradition, the council "invited, sustained and ordained" Spencer Woolley Kimball, 78, as the church's new president.

Kimball thus became the fourth “prophet, seer and revelator” of the Mormons in as many years. . . .

The apparent smoothness of the latest succession was deceptive. In 1972 Spencer Kimball had open-heart surgery; 15 years before that an operation for throat cancer left him with only a part of a vocal cord. Although he arrived at the decisive meeting of the twelve with a doctor’s certification that he was in good health, many Mormons were naturally concerned about Kimball’s longevity. Some even would have liked to use his health as an excuse to change the line of succession. The real reason: their fear of the accession to the presidency of Ezra Taft Benson, 74, when Kimball dies.

Eisenhower’s former Secretary of Agriculture, who is now senior apostle and head of the council, has flustered many Mormons with his abrasive public utterances, some of them to John Birch Society audiences. His benediction at the funeral of President McKay was so heavy with right-wing political overtones as to embarrass even the conservative Mormon hierarchy. Now the divisive Benson is next in the wings, as amiable President Kimball begins his regime.

Kimball takes an equally pragmatic view of other Mormon practices. One remarkable doctrine, for instance, holds that the dead as well as the living can be offered baptism as Mormons. This sends troops of elderly members to the church’s temples to enroll ancestors. Kimball sees the work as a sort of spiritual WPA—a task that keeps older Mormons both busy and feeling needed.

Appendix B: Excerpt from *Newsweek*, January 7, 1974

Following a tradition begun by Brigham Young, the elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints met early last week to elect a new “president, prophet, seer, revelator and trustee-in-trust” for the world’s 3.3 million Mormons

The new leader of the church is a former banker, real-estate man, and insurance executive in Arizona.

For the Church’s No. 2 job, the presidency of the Council of the Twelve, the elders selected Ezra Taft Benson, 74, who served as Secretary of Agriculture in the Eisenhower Administration. Kimball’s election, however, was a bit more surprising. Although he had been president of the council (and thus heir apparent), he had also undergone operations for throat cancer and a heart condition. But once he was elected, Kimball took an unusual step to assure the faithful that he was capable of wielding his virtually absolute doctrinal powers. At a news conference in Salt Lake City, he produced a letter from his physician stating that Kimball is stronger now than he has been in twenty years.

Appendix C: Excerpt from *Church News*, January 6, 1974

President Spencer Woolley Kimball of the Council of the Twelve Apostles was ordained

prophet, seer and revelator of the church in the Salt Lake Temple Sunday, December 30.

Elder Ezra Taft Benson was set apart as president of the Council of the Twelve by President Kimball.

President Kimball, 78, is assuming his responsibilities as president of the church after having been a member of the council of the Twelve since July 8, 1943. He has served as the council’s president since July 7, 1972.

President Benson has been a member of the Council of the Twelve since July 8, 1943, the same day as President Kimball.

Appendix D: Excerpt from *New York Times*, December 31, 1973

Spencer Woolley Kimball, who became President of the Mormon church on Sunday has a bounce to his walk and seems to wear a perpetual smile, as one colleague put it, although his work day often begins at 5 a.m. That is hardly the image of a 78-year-old man who has survived, among other things, throat cancer and open heart surgery.

A specialist in missionary and American Indian affairs. Mr. Kimball has headed the Mormon’s Council of the Twelve Apostles and thus has been expected to succeed Harold B. Lee, who died last Wednesday.

Ezra Taft Benson, Secretary of Agriculture in the Eisenhower Administration, was named President of the Council, succeeding Mr. Kimball. The selections were made by the council on Sunday in the Salt Lake Temple in Salt Lake City and were announced yesterday.

After graduating from the University of Arizona, he went into business in Arizona, spending eight years as a banker and 16 in the insurance and real estate business. He helped organize the Gila Broadcasting Company and raised cotton and alfalfa on a farm.

Appendix E: Excerpt from “Awaiting the 13th Prophet,” *Time*, November 25, 1985

By any statistical measure, Spencer W. Kimball’s reign as President, Prophet, Seer and Revelator of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was a triumph. During his twelve-year ministry, the Mormon church nearly doubled its world membership (to 5.8 million) and its force of short-term missionaries (to 30,000). He ordered the addition of 31 temples to the 16 that stood when he took charge. Kimball, who had been an invalid for four years, died in Salt Lake City last week at the age of 90. Certain to succeed him is the senior among the church’s twelve apostles who govern with the President and his counselors: Ezra Taft Benson, 86, a controversial archconservative who served eight years as President Eisenhower’s Secretary of Agriculture.

Kimball had only a modest business career in Arizona before he became an apostle in 1943. His self-effacing manner and sieges of heart trouble

and cancer led many to believe that he would be a caretaker President. Instead, he proved to be an energetic activist who toured 85 nations and spurred the international growth of the most successful religion ever born in the U.S.

Some Mormons are ... anxious about the intentions of Benson, the 13th Prophet-President. A wavemaking, pepper-tongued right-winger, Benson acquired some notoriety in the 1960s for praising the John Birch Society and calling the civil rights movement Communist influenced. Other Benson targets: the U.N., the Supreme Court and disarmament negotiations with the Soviets. Speaking at the church-run Brigham Young University in 1980, Benson asserted that the Prophet-President speaks authoritatively on civil as well as religious matters, and that his pronouncements supersede the words of the Mormon scriptures and founders. Kimball was reported to have reprimanded Benson after that speech.

Appendix F: Excerpt from "A Time of Testing for the Mormons," *Newsweek*, November 25, 1985

Five days after the death of Spencer W. Kimball, president, prophet, seer and revelator of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the church's 12 apostles donned white suits and assembled in the fourth-floor Council Room inside the Mormon temple in Salt Lake City to select a successor. There, beneath three life-size pictures of Jesus depicting his death, resurrection and calling of Peter, they prayed to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Breaking a 24-hour fast, they shared sacramental bread and water. Then, after more prayer (though the outcome was never in real doubt), the apostles laid their hands on the head of the eldest among them: Ezra Taft Benson, 86, who by right of seniority last week assumed spiritual leadership of the world's 5.8 million Latter-day Saints.

Management trinity: Benson brings to the Mormon presidency a reputation as an ideological scrapper and a hard-line conservative even by the standards of a church where liberals are a lonely crowd. Early in his career as an agricultural marketing expert, he denounced the graduated income tax as "Marxist." As secretary of agriculture under President Eisenhower, he fought to limit price supports for farmers, nearly causing his own dismissal. In later decades, as one of the church's 12 apostles, Benson attacked the civil-rights movement as communist-inspired and praised the right-wing John Birch Society, in which his son, Reed, once served as a national director. And when he declared that the Mormon prophet "speaks for the Lord in everything," he set off alarms that as prophet himself he would demand political as well as spiritual obedience.

Last week Benson sought to allay such fears. He made overtures to "all our Father's children of every color, creed and political persuasion." And he chose two moderates to join him in the

church's First Presidency: Gordon B. Hinckley, 75, a pragmatist who has been supervising daily operations of the church, and Thomas S. Monson, 58, a former publisher. Together they, like others before them, form a management trinity devout Mormons believe mirrors the heavenly teamwork of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. . . .

. . . The Mormon empire Benson will direct is significantly larger than the one his predecessor inherited in 1973. Under Kimball, the church nearly doubled its cadre of missionaries and added almost 2 million converts. Sixty percent of the church's 938 stakes (dioceses) were created during the Kimball presidency; 21 new temples were dedicated, bringing the total to 37 around the world. But the gentle Kimball's most significant gift to the church was the revelation in 1978 that God now wanted black as well as white males to hold the Mormon priesthood—a prerequisite not only for enjoying full membership in the church on earth but also for advancing to the highest reaches in the Mormon heaven.

End Notes

¹ Citing Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

² Eugene England, "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects," in *Mormon Americana*, ed. David Whittaker, forthcoming. England is citing *Time*, 5 April 1983, 46–47, and Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

³ Discourses are defined by Gunther Kress as "systematically-organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. . . . It provides descriptions, rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual actions" (*Linguistic Processes in Sociocultural Practice* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1985], 7).

⁴ Paul A. Bové, "Discourse," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 63.

⁵ Teun A. van Dijk, *News as Discourse* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988), 182.

⁶ van Dijk, *News as Discourse*, 182.

⁷ Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, Language in Social Life Series (New York: Longman, 1989), 85.

⁸ See Fairclough's chapter 4 for a more complete discussion of common-sense discourse.