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FEATURE ARTICLE

Media, Mormonism, and Mormon Media Studies

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Introduction

Bosco Bae has asked me to write a reflection about the Mormon Media Studies Symposia that were held at Brigham Young University in 2010 and 2012, and to provide some “general thoughts” about the relationship between media, Mormonism, and Mormons. I also will address the topic of Mormon Media Studies as an emerging discipline, and will conclude with some thoughts about Mormons, the media, and the Mormon Moment. My comments are meant only to be conversational in tone. They certainly do not purport to be definitive or comprehensive statements about the topics discussed.

Media Focus on Mormons and Mormonism in the 21st Century

When Mitt Romney ran for the U.S. presidency the first time (January 2007-February 2008), many Mormons were surprised (and often distressed) by the media coverage of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereinafter the LDS Church or the Church) that his candidacy prompted. (See Baker and Campbell, 2010). This took place five years after the Winter Olympics 2002 that were held in Salt Lake City—an event that also garnered unprecedented worldwide media coverage of Mormonism (although arguably perhaps more positive for Mormons than the coverage during the primary election period, despite the Olympics bribery scandal). (See Chen, 2003.)

Big Love, a TV series that aired on HBO between March 2006 and March 2011, also brought attention to the LDS Church because of its depiction of what was described as a fictional fundamentalist Mormon family that practiced polygamy. The headline news stories about the raid in Eldorado, Texas by Child Protective Services and law enforcement officials of the Yearning for Zion ranch in 2008 also included mention of the LDS Church because of the historical ties of members of the Texas group with the Mormons headquartered in Salt Lake City, and because of the confusion among media outlets and members of the public (domestic and international) about the differences between them.
Baker: Media continued:

These events were taking place during the same time frame in which the LDS Church was rapidly embracing new communications technologies, and producing media content in multiple formats for internal applications, as well as for external messaging. Many of the Church’s stepped up efforts to produce communications for media and public consumption clearly were related to the ways in which Mormons and Mormonism were being represented and discussed by the traditional media, and in on-line venues.

In December 2007, the Church made a call for Mormons to join the conversation about Mormonism by producing media content of their own, especially on the Internet, and by responding to what was being said about Mormons. This call was articulated by Elder M. Russell Ballard, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the LDS Church, who urged members to share their beliefs on the Internet, saying in part:

“The emergence of New Media is facilitating a world-wide conversation on almost every subject including religion, and nearly everyone can participate. ... Conversations will continue whether or not we choose to participate in them. But we cannot stand on the sidelines while others, including our critics, attempt to define what the Church teaches. ... The challenge is that there are too many people participating in conversation about the Church for our Church personnel to converse with and respond to individually. We cannot answer every question, satisfy every inquiry, and respond to every inaccuracy that exists. ...some who seek answers want them to come directly from a member of the Church, like each one of you. ... May I ask that you join the conversation by participating on the Internet, particularly the New Media, to share the gospel and to explain in simple and clear terms the message of the Restoration.” (See Ballard, 2007 & 2008.)

This call for rank and file members to create media messages about the Church (media content that was not produced or distributed by the Church itself, or pre-approved through the Church’s correlation system) was a real sea change for an organization that for so long had been vigilant about controlling its own message and image.

The response to Ballard’s call was immediate. As Kellner (2013) recently has written, “Since then, Mormon testimonies have exploded over the Internet, with the LDS Church joining in by posting hundreds of videos on its own YouTube channel. Public perceptions of the Church may well change because of the digital outreach.” (See Mormon Blogs and YouTube channel.)

This intense media activity by and about Mormons and Mormonism begged for study.
Baker: Media continued:

Mormon Media Studies as an Emerging Discipline

There is a rich academic literature about Mormons and the media that has arisen from several disciplines over the years - especially having to do with representations of Mormons in print media throughout the Church's history. For a bibliography (1898-2003) and discussion of academic studies about this topic, see Baker and Stout, 2003 (currently being updated). See also a comprehensive timeline of Mormon media history (1827-2007) in Baker, 2008 (currently being updated) which also contains numerous bibliographic references to scholarship about Mormons and the media.

Despite this academic production by scholars over the decades, and despite the development of Mormon Studies in recent years, a discipline or an academic venue specifically devoted to the topic of Mormons and the media did not exist during the first decade of the 21st century (and still does not, other than the symposia discussed herein).

The mid-20th century saw the emergence of several Mormon Studies groups or publications, such as the Mormon History Association, Dialogue, and Sunstone. There now are many more including (this is not a complete list): the Association for Mormon Letters; the European Mormon Studies Association; the Mormon Social Science Association; the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR); the John Whitmer Historical Association; the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation; the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology; and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute, including its recently announced Mormon Studies Review (see BHodges, March 25 & 27, 2013).

Members of these groups often produce scholarship with reference to media coverage of particular Mormon issues during various periods, but none of them go specifically and directly to the study of Mormons and the media as a focused discipline. They are devoted to other purposes.

In the 21st Century, Mormon Studies began to develop in academe: in 2007, the Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture was established at Utah State University; in 2008, the Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies was established at Claremont Graduate School in Southern California. Mormon Studies programs also were launched at the University of Utah and at Utah Valley University during this period of time. (I will not wade here into the current discussions and debates about what does or should constitute Mormon Studies as a discipline.)

Within the context of the historical moment, including the development of Mormon Studies on several different fronts, the intense media coverage of Mormon-related issues, the extensive efforts by the LDS Church to produce and respond to media, the presence on the Internet of wide-ranging user-produced content and discussion about all things Mormon (from its history to
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its theology to its ‘magic underwear’), and with Mormons responding to the call to make their voices heard on the Internet - the time was ripe to articulate a specific academic focus for Mormon Media Studies as an emerging sub-discipline beneath the broader umbrellas of Mormon Studies, Religious Studies, and Media and Religion Studies. (See Stout and Buddenbaum (2002) for the recent development of this latter field.)

Religion and Media

The LDS Church and its members and beliefs, have been spotlighted in the media throughout the Church’s history, and have been highly visible in recent years, as discussed above. The institutional Church and individual Mormons also have been proactive since the religion’s inception in the production of media content, and in the use of new communications technologies as they were developed. (See Baker, 2008, and Baker & Mott, 2011.) While circumstances and technologies have changed over time, the media have been central to the Mormon experience, and to the interface of Mormonism and its adherents with societies, governments, institutions, and individuals.

An argument could be made that the LDS religion owes its success in part to its history of adapting to and making use of emerging media technologies. Some scholars have suggested this cause and effect for other religions, as discussed in the following passages from Baker & Mott, 2011.

“In the book Communication and Change in American Religious History, Leonard I. Sweet discusses the “interplay in American history between the emergence of new communication forms and religious and social change” (Sweet, 1993, p. 1). He cites scholars such as Averil Cameron, Roger Finke, and Rodney Stark, who concluded that “those religious leaders who have made the biggest advances have been those who worked out of their tradition to express their faith through innovative ways and means, idioms and technologies accessible and adapted to the times in which they lived” (Sweet, 1993, p. 2).

“Sweet also cites Colin Morris’s book on Christian communications, which suggests that “many of the exciting new twists in the Christian story over the centuries have occurred because advocates for Christianity have exploited developments in communications technology” (Sweet, 1993, p. 2 citing Morris, 1990).

“Further, Sweet refers to historian Nathan Hatch, who has written that success in America’s religious marketplace is explained by “the ability of religious groups to adopt and adapt to the democratic and populist impulses of American culture, and to use popular forms of communication to reach the widest possible audience” (Sweet, 1993, p. 2, citing Hatch, 1989). Conversely, mainline Protestantism, which made excellent use of print technology throughout its history, did not successfully adapt to and exploit broadcast technologies. (Sweet, 1993, p. 61.)
“While there is no well-developed theory of media and religion, this observation of the relationship between the successful use of communications technologies and the success of organized religions is worth consideration. This relationship is consistent with the views of communications theorists like Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter Ong. They held, according to Sweet, that “communications structures are more than mediums of transmission” in that they affect “every nook and cranny of society, including the intellectual and social girders that underpin that society” (Sweet, 1993, p. 50).

“This view is summarized by Marshall McLuhan’s well-known statement that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). This means essentially that “communications media themselves, apart from their content and programming, are dynamic and even determinative forces. The medium changes and shapes history and culture; it creates and alters perceptions of reality and truth” (Baker, 2008, p. 118).

“In a related view, Neil Postman has argued that “technological change is not additive; it is ecological,” adding, “What happens if we place a drop of red dye into a beaker of clear water? Do we have clear water plus a spot of red dye? Obviously not. We have a new coloration to every molecule of water. That is what I mean by ecological” (Postman, 1998, p. 5). Postman had argued earlier: “One significant change generates total change…. A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything… After television, the United States was not America plus television; television gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry” (Postman, 1993, p. 18). Consistent with this ecological view is James B. Allen’s observation that older Latter-day Saints living in the year 2000 experienced “a different Church than they had known 50 years earlier” (Allen, 2007, p. 120)—not the same church plus new technologies but a different church.

“The assumption of the centrality of communications media to the success of religions is a useful backdrop to any narrative about use of the media, and about the progress of the LDS Church.” (Baker & Mott, 2011, pp. 340-342.)

Mormon Media Studies Symposium

Early in 2009, as a humble beginning by which to form community around these and other issues within the Mormon context, a few of my departmental colleagues and I met to begin a listserv of scholars from across the country who might have an interest in Mormon Media Studies. It was only a short time before list members began suggesting that we should hold a conference. Things came together quite quickly, and the first-ever Mormon Media Studies Symposium was held on November 11-12, 2010 at the BYU Harman Conference Center. (See Mormon Media Studies Symposium 2010.) It was sponsored by the Department of Communications and the College of Fine Arts and Communications at BYU, and co-sponsored by BYU Broadcasting
Baker: Media continued:

(which was celebrating in 2010 its 50th anniversary, as well as the 10th anniversary of BYU-TV), and by BYU Studies. The theme of the conference was “Mormon Media Studies: Across Time, Space, and Disciplines.”

For a first conference, it was surprisingly successful. There were about 1,000 seats filled on each of the two days of the event. The keynote speaker was Terryl Givens speaking on the topic “Fraud, Philanthers, and Football: Negotiating the Mormon Image.” (See Israelson-Hartley, 2010; and Givens, 2011.) The Symposium 2010 featured more than 30 academic paper presentations; multiple panel discussions on a wide variety of topics including Mormon bloggers, Church public relations, film screenings, and documentaries. (See Symposium 2010 Schedule.)

Several of the papers presented later became journal articles and book chapters, thus resulting in the symposium having fostered a real contribution to the field. The positive outcomes and responses to the conference by scholars and attendees confirmed the need for, and an interest in, the topic of Mormon media studies—so it was decided to do it again in two years.

The Mormon Media Studies Symposium 2012 was held November 8-9, 2012, again at the BYU Harman Conference center, and was sponsored by the BYU Department of Communications, and the College of Fine Arts and Communications. (See Mormon Media Studies Symposium 2012.)

Attendance was again high. The theme of the 2012 conference was “Mormon Moments(s) and the Media.” Dr. David Campbell of Notre Dame was the keynoter, speaking on the topic “The Mormon Dilemma: The Pros and Cons of Being a Peculiar People.” His presentation was based upon the research gathered for his co-authored book American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us (2012) by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell. (See Jones, 2012; also see Guibert, 2012, for related data about Mormons.)

Highlights of the Symposium 2012 included a roundtable discussion, with Dr. Campbell and other nationally recognized experts on religion and politics, sponsored by the BYU Charles Redd Center for Western Studies. There were approximately 100 named participants on the program (which included panelists and paper co-authors); 34 academic paper presentations on Mormons and the media (including several in the Young Scholars session); 9 panel discussions; 3 documentaries and 2 movies by and/or about Mormons and the media; and a special session on publishing Mormon-related scholarship. (See Symposium 2012 Schedule.)

The conference schedule was planned during the 2012 election season in which Mormons were covered extensively in political news (the conference began just two days after the election), and also during the period in which both the Book of Mormon musical and the “I’m a Mormon” advertising campaign were in full swing. The sessions related to these issues had the highest interest and attendance.
Baker: Media continued:

The Symposium 2012 had a publishing arrangement with the Journal of Media and Religion (JMR) which had expressed an interest in publishing select symposium papers in a first special edition in a planned series on media and various faith traditions. As a result, 16 symposium papers were submitted to JMR for consideration. (As of this writing, no word has yet been received as to which or how many of these papers will be accepted.) The Symposium 2012, like the one before it in 2010, was successful in promoting scholarly production. This was especially important to the organizers because scholarly production was a key element in the vision for the conference. (See Symposium 2012 Vision.)

Feedback about the conference was again positive, and discussions are now underway about the possibility of holding another in 2014.

Mormons, Media, and the Mormon Moment

The 21st Century launched the LDS Church and its members (together with the rest of the world) into a new era caused by the explosion of on-line electronic communications.

The Church and its members came into the public spotlight with increased intensity during the decade from 2002-2012, due to this technological revolution combined with various societal events such as the Winter Olympics of 2002 which were held in Salt Lake City; political events, such as the two Romney campaigns for the presidency and the Church’s involvement in California’s Proposition 8 ballot initiative; and Mormon individuals or depictions of Mormons appearing in popular culture, such as Stephanie Meyer and her top selling Twilight book series and the movies based upon them, and the Tony and Grammy award-winning The Book of Mormon musical.

Much has been written about the Mormon Moment, a term which refers primarily to the heightened visibility, participation, and representation of Mormons and the LDS Church in society and in media. (However, see Walker, 2012, for a report of Michael Otterson’s views about the Mormon Moment.) This Moment will provide fodder for scholarship for years to come.

Perhaps among the most enduring outcomes of this moment are not the ways in which Mormons and Mormonism were represented, but the ways in which the Church and its members embraced and made use of the new media environment, and developed skills and philosophies for participating in public discourse and responding to public scrutiny. While the concept of the term Mormon Moment refers primarily to the coverage of Mormons and Mormonism from an external viewpoint, this period of time also marks an internal Mormon moment with regard to LDS media activities. This includes the ways in which the Church implemented new technologies; encountered media representatives and organizations; produced content that the media
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Baker: Media continued:

The Church put in place a comprehensive media strategy for the Olympics, for example: created and attended to its online newsroom (www.Mormonnewsroom.org); produced its "I'm a Mormon" advertising campaign; initiated an online missionary program; and inspired the development of a number of blogs, including the one by Michael Otterson (managing director of Public Affairs for the Church). Additionally, the Church stayed attuned to and (sometimes) responded to the ways in which it was represented.

This statement about the Book of Mormon musical was quoted repeatedly in news coverage about the play, and it has come to be seen as a signature response from the LDS Church—one which defines the Church in a sense.

This statement served as a guiding principle for responses from both the institutional Church and its members. Two years later when The Book of Mormon musical took to the stage, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an institution did not call for boycotts, but it also reflects the reality of the strength and unity of Church members today, who are not only willing to defend the Church's right to express itself in the public arena, but who also stand behind the statement about Big Love.

In response to an upcoming Big Love episode depicting Mormon temple ceremonies, the Church issued a statement in March 2009 saying that "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an institution does not call for boycotts," that "when expressing themselves in the public arena, Latter-day Saints should conduct themselves with dignity and thoughtfulness," and that "the press and the public are free to criticize or disagree with the Church's position, so long as they do so in a civil and reasonable manner."
There is now a clamor of voices, opinions, and perspectives by and about Mormons available in an instant by simply entering a few search terms into one’s computer, tablet, or smart phone.

Baker: Media continued:

The Church’s response strategy reached what many saw as an even more surprising new level when it began buying 3-page ads in the musical’s programs with pictures of people one presumes to be Mormons stating “You’ve seen the play...Now read the book,” “I’ve read the book,” and “The book is always better.” (See photos of these ads in Biesenback, 2013.)

This ad campaign in the playbills has been referred to in the media as “turning the other cheek,” “taking the high road,” “rising above the fray,” or “taking a passive approach” to a play in which Mormons are not favorably represented. (See for example: Biesenback, 2013; Goodstein, 2011; Hicks, 2011; Larmoudin, 2013; Morain, 2013; Ng, 2012; and Nollen, 2013. See also Walker, 2013.)

Church personnel reportedly operated at a fevered pitch to keep up with everything that was happening during the Mormon Moment, and it seems to be generally agreed that the Church did a good job in its interactions with the press and in applying effective public relations strategies. Its efforts and initiatives should be studied, especially with a focus on their effects and outcomes. While a Pew Forum study concluded that “America’s ‘Mormon Moment’ is over, and public opinion appears to be little changed,” they also reported that “some attitudes have softened.” (See Pew Forum, 2012.)

The development of email, the Internet, blogs, and YouTube have allowed the media and the general public to discuss and circulate information and opinions about Mormons and Mormonism in ways that were not previously possible, and for the organizational church, and individual members as well, to join the conversation by producing and circulating their own messaging. There is now a clamor of voices, opinions, and perspectives by and about Mormons available in an instant by simply entering a few search terms into one’s computer, tablet, or smart phone.

The Church in 2013 is a different church than it was in 2000. The very experience of being a Mormon also has changed—largely as a result of new communications technologies.

Now it’s up to scholars to document and ruminate about it all.
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