# The Medium Is the Institution:
# Reflections on an Ethnography
# of Mormonism and Media

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I began studying media in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 2009 as a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. The field of communication, and more specifically the disciplines of media studies and critical cultural studies, provides important frameworks for a rich understanding of the nuances of religious messaging, including proselytization, ritual, institutional control, identity, and belonging. When I'm asked why I chose Mormonism as the focus of my research, I tend to give an easy answer: Mormonism, more than any other faith, is a media religion. But the truth is more complex: I didn't know the half of Mormonism's media dependence when I first began probing its depths. Instead, what began as an inquiry into the media artifacts of a uniquely American religious institution became a deep ethnographic exploration of where media itself ends and this particular religion begins.[1]

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded when a young man claimed to pull supernatural media from the earth, then used divine artifacts to translate its unknown language. The plates no

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1. Rosemary Avance, "Constructing Religion in the Digital Age: The Internet and Modern Mormon Identities" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2015).

longer accessible, the story nonfalsifiable, early Mormons built an entire religious system around this translation, bound into books and distributed beyond the limits of the spoken word. Though Mormonism is today a global faith, its membership is quite minuscule: Official tallies of just under sixteen million Mormons worldwide put members at less than 0.2 percent of the world's population. Yet, for such a drop-in-the-bucket membership count, the LDS Church has built a media empire that rivals the world's major religious and social institutions in complexity, expenditure, and polish.

The study of Mormonism—from an academic standpoint such as mine, from the faithful and sometimes skeptical perspective of believers, from the point of view of curiosity- or antagonism-fueled outsiders, or from the spiritual vantage of millions of investigators—is necessarily a study of media. From my first missionary lesson, media artifacts were thrust into my hands: pamphlets, videotapes, magazines. The missionaries led discussions from workbooks and triple combination scriptures. I was implored with the classic challenge to read the Book of Mormon for myself to know if it was true. I soon found countless communities of faithful, heterodox, doubting, and former Mormons united online through media like email, forums, blogs, and social media feeds and groups.

That the church's primary artifacts are media and (when contrasted to other religions of the Book) not objects, relics, or icons is no coincidence. Though the original plates—the fundament of the Book of Mormon and everything that has followed—are absent, the church has moved through time and space as its media. Absent its media, there would be no Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As the faith evolved, the media artifacts used to promulgate it were both created by and creators of the institutional church itself; its forms and practices constantly replicate the media of the times.

Media scholars may argue that this is the case of any religion and, indeed, any social group where ideas must be communicated. But I mean a conservative definition of the word *media*, not its legitimate but often shapeless use among scholars. In this argument, I am not

embracing media as any meaningful gesture or symbol, whether spoken, written, created, or embodied. Instead, I refer to media as the physical artifacts of media institutions: published books, not oral stories. Pamphlets and videos, not embodied rituals. Though they are all media in the accepted theoretical sense (as too are objects like baskets and signifiers like smoke), what I meant to suggest is that unlike most major world religions, Mormonism is a religion built on—and, importantly, by—institutionalized mass media artifacts.

There was no period when the majority of Mormons practiced a purely oral faith, one that was liturgical, mythical, passed down from generation to generation in story and song. Communication historians note that oral societies in general (and, I'd argue, liturgical religious groups in particular) are marked by specific cultural and social mores: They tend to be collective yet individualistic, with context, interpretation, and lived experience mediating the individual's relationship to the group. Indeed, as societies move from oral to print cultures, they tend to become more fixed, hierarchical, bureaucratic, authoritative, and depersonalized.[2]

But Mormonism from its founding was standardized in book form. Its twentieth-century correlation passed down a one-size-fits-all faith that could not maintain its shape upon confronting the digital era. Truly, the medium is the message; Mormonism as a nineteenth-century alternative narrative developed into a bureaucratic institution that reorganized religious power, standardized the faith, and disseminated it broadly—the same aspects of print culture prominently noted by historian Elizabeth Eisenstein that fueled the Protestant Reformation two centuries prior.[3]

The end of the nineteenth century brought an audiovisual revolution: radio, cinema, and television in particular enabled mass culture, mass audiences, and mass consumption. In America, the upper middle

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2. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982).

3. Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

class secured its social hold through mediated representation. As Neil Postman famously observed, the televisual medium reshaped every other sphere with which it engaged: TV as an entertainment medium trivialized all other social institutions,[4] including politics, education, journalism, and religion. With the advent of photography, radio, cinema, and later television, audiovisual culture contributed to the birth of faith commodified, the "marketplace" of American religion.

It also enabled, in ways that mere print could not, communities of affinity and practice beyond the local village or industrial center. Audiovisual media connected disparate regions and revivified in Mormonism the idea of a global church. Even though its missionary efforts were as old as the church itself, seeing and hearing members around the world for the first time reimagined local community and, just as importantly, acculturated global members into a decidedly American faith.

The norms of the audiovisual era are key to understanding correlation, the Mormon institution's practice of policing media content through a strict process of monitoring church-related media for content cohesion. The church's global expansion from the mid-twentieth century on put control over its message and potential for cohesion among its many congregations increasingly at risk, forcing the church to consolidate the decentralized structure that had developed in the Mountain West, with church auxiliaries operating independently and manuals, lesson plans, and local practices and teachings varying widely.[5] In 1960, as a remedy to the problem of waning institutional control, then-President David O. McKay began churchwide efforts to streamline all church media with single-purpose messaging. The Correlation Committee ensured all church output would be streamlined and noncontradictory.

That is the most recited narrative around the impetus of correlation, anyhow. But it is important to note that the rise of audiovisual media

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4. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

5. Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 194.

and the move toward correlation were not unrelated. Just as Catholic boycotts of cinema led to the Hays Code in the 1930s, religious moral panics about the affordances and potential of audiovisual media, media that invaded the sensorium in ways that print did not, contributed to a need for correlation and a division between acceptable and unacceptable faith texts. The interconnection of media panic and correlation is clear in the cultural and institutional, though sometimes tongue-in-cheek, use of the term *uncorrelated* to refer to anything without institutional sanction: whatever is unofficial is both untrustworthy and sometimes dangerous.

In the decades that followed correlation, Mormon leaders at both the institutional and local levels cultivated this culture of fear of uncorrelated media, both implicitly and explicitly. After correlation, the church enjoyed a period of retrenchment and ensuing communal solidarity.[6] In his discussion of nationalism as imagined community, Benedict Anderson notes that the early days of European capitalism saw a standardization of print media that led to a homogenization of culture over dispersed geographic regions.[7] By reading the same newspaper, individuals who would never know one another could imagine themselves unified, holding important things in common. This media-induced homogenization parallels the years of strict LDS media correlation before the internet: official handbooks, teaching manuals, magazines, pamphlets, films and filmstrips, and satellite broadcasting ensured that Mormons across the globe were exposed to the same messages, often at the same times. Simultaneously, faithful Mormons sometimes looked warily upon non-church-approved publications at the behest of their leaders, as my ethnographic research found, for fear of confronting literature that would not strengthen faith. Despite geographic peculiarities or cultural disparities, Mormon imagined

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6.   Bowman, *The Mormon People*, 191, after Armand Mauss, *The Angel and the Bee-hive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

7.   Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1991).

community meant that belonging to the same church was quite easily mistaken for homogeneity of belief and practice.

Correlation also meant that in some important ways, the Mormon institution evaded much of the personalization and commodification other Christian groups experienced in this period, as denominations proliferated and various churches offered unique worship experiences and a wide range of teachings and practices. While some splinter groups did leave the mainstream church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to offer a standardized church experience determined by a ward system. Mormons don't pick and choose their church based on the type of music they like or their particular beliefs about finer points of doctrine. They maintain a broadcast model in an age of fragmentation and personalized media choice.

Today, the open text of Web 2.0 allows social media dialogue and user-generated conten, which both threatens institutional control and creates openings for new negotiations of what it means to be Mormon. The affordances of internet culture, a culture in which social relationships and texts are open for both access and surveillance, have increased voiced and visible heterodoxy, which then challenge the authority structure of the church. In turn, the institution has subtly altered emerging positions on various issues of social concern (women's roles, race, history, and LGBT issues, to name a few), enabling discourses of reimagined Mormon community among the heterodox.

But just as the printing press revolutionized lived religion throughout Western Europe, internet communication today poses an unprecedented threat to Mormon imagined community. The church still attempts to correlate its message with its own sophisticated appropriation of the internet, born from its proselytizing emphasis coupled with its need to connect with an increasingly global membership. From public relations campaigns, search engine optimization, advanced market research techniques, interactive church websites, and its ubiquitous presence on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, the institution has invested millions of dollars in staying up to date with current new media trends.

The internet has unsettled the LDS imagined community as a print- and audiovisual-based idea of homogeneity and cohesion worldwide. The digital era changed more than connectivity and the time and space quandaries of previous media eras; it changed the way the LDS institution relays information and undercut the homogeneity of previous eras' correlation attempts. The open texts of the internet and the social practices that develop around them are beyond correlation, and the church's ongoing struggle to adapt to this brave new media environment highlights the media dependence of the institution as a whole.

**Rosemary Avance** earned her PhD from the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania in 2015. Her dissertation explored new media as a tool of community building and boundary maintenance in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.