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Communing with Compromise:
Mormonism and the Early Internet

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As an emerging technology, the internet stirred a fascinating brew of excitement, anxiety, and fear for Jew and Gentile.[1] It challenged both grassroots and top-down notions of intimacy, authenticity, and control. For Mormonism, a religion whose chronology parallels uncannily the development of electronic communication technologies, the internet joins a host of media dripping with ambivalence. In tracing the contours of Mormonism's evolving and uneasy relationship with the twentieth-century internet—from early listserv communities to institutional web development—this brief essay presents only a morsel of the richness the religion offers for the study of technology, culture, and power.

Before the bloggernacle

One of the first hubs for discussion of religion on the internet was through the mailing list UseNet, which by the early 1980s had developed into several forums, including net.religion, alt.religion, soc.culture,

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1. For an extended treatment of Mormonism and media, see Gavin Feller, "Media as Compromise: A Cultural History of Mormonism and New Communication Technology in Twentieth-Century America" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2017).

soc.religion, and talk.religion.[2] Thrilled to connect with others of their same faith, Mormons began creating their own news groups, forums, and listservs as early as 1986, starting with LDS-L: the "Internet First Ward." Before long, dozens of networks emerged engendering varying shades of Mormon orthodoxy and interest: ZION-L, EYRING-L, ALMA-L, SAMU-L, and most notably MORMON-L, to name a few.[3]

A group of Mormon women particularly put off by, as one user put it, the "extreme hostility" they experienced from men on platforms like MORMON-L created the Electronic Women's Caucus (ELWC) listserv as an alternative gathering space.[4] As "the only ward in the church that is led by mostly women," ELWC gave its participants "a place to say what is sometimes difficult in a ward setting."[5] Lynn Mathews Anderson, the listserv's creator, said the "virtual ward" reproduced "what goes on in the hallways [of an LDS Church]. We can go from the heaviest doctrinal discussion to fluff."[6] Though geographically separated, ELWC participants felt part of a powerful feminine community safe from the threat of ecclesiastical discipline.

Once closely connected through niche (and sometimes exclusive) forums, many look back on the pre–World Wide Web days of the internet with romantic nostalgia. For these users, the bloggernacle—an emic term used to describe contemporary internet spaces by and for Mormons—could never replace the early years of online community.[7]

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2. Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

3. Bryan Waterman, "A Guide to the Mormon Universe: Mormon Organizations & Periodicals," *Sunstone Magazine*, December 1994, 44, https://www.sunstonemagazine .com/pdf/097-44-65.pdf.

4. White professional men with access to expensive computer technology tended to dominate the internet up until the mid-1990s.

5. ELWC was later changed to ELWC-plus to accommodate suitable men. See "The Sacred and the Mundane: Mormon Feminism on the Internet" (audio recording), *Sunstone Magazine*, January 1, 1997, https://www.sunstonemagazine.com /the-sacred-and-the-mundane-mormon-feminism-on-the-internet/.

6. "The Sacred and the Mundane: Mormon Feminism on the Internet."

7. The term *bloggernacle* is an evocative portmanteau of the words *blog* and *tabernacle*, alluding to the mundane and the miraculous that accompany the wandering

Ordering the cosmos

While some Mormons anxiously engaged the technical affordances of the internet, imbuing cyberspace with a utopian rhetoric of sublime, many within the institution trembled. According to Richard E. Turley, managing director of LDS Public Affairs, accounts of pornography destroying marriages and children being lured into virtual chatrooms frightened church administrators to the point that many referred to the internet ominously as the "I word."[8] For several years, in LDS general conference, the church's semiannual worldwide gathering/public broadcast, the term *internet* was nearly synonymous with pornography, and pornography was a poison to be avoided like the plague.[9] After its timid launch in 1996, the LDS Church's primary website LDS.org remained nearly unchanged for three years. It was as if the institutional church was dipping its toes into the ocean of the internet before running out of the water again, even as some Mormons swam and others sank in the depths.[10]

The creation of FamilySearch.org in 1999 brought a sea change in how LDS leaders perceived the internet. Instead of pornography, pedophilia, and a counterculture ethos, leaders gradually began seeing technologies capable of fulfilling Joseph Smith's cosmological visions of an interconnected human family extending to back to the biblical Adam and forward into eternity. The church began moving forward precisely by looking backward. If pornography stained the internet for church administrators, it was online genealogy that slowly sanitized it.

Even after deciding to move forward, however, there were other problems the institution faced: with most virtual real estate already purchased, there was little room to put down new stakes in cyberspace.

search for a place set apart for believers, both anciently and today. On nostalgia for the early years, see Clair Barrus, "Why We Blog," *Deseret News*, February 26, 2011, http://www.deseretnews.com/article/705367545/Why-We-Blog-Mormon-Internet-origins.html?pg=all 2011.barrus.

  8. Richard E. Turley, interview with author.

  9. See Gordon B. Hinckley, "A Conversation with Single Adults," *Ensign*, May 1997.

  10. Lynn Mathews Anderson, interview with author.

For instance, when Warren Osborn, a Utah Valley Mormon bishop, stumbled upon Mormon.com in the mid-1990s and found "a Web site filled with pornography and vile alterations of scriptures," he was understandably appalled.[11] After negotiating with a site owner "more interested in annoying people with the site than selling," Osborn spent "tens of thousands of dollars" to buy the domain name, which he ultimately donated to the LDS Church. There were several tech-savvy Mormons with enough foresight and benevolence to give up domain names they'd purchased and developed to assist institutional church web growth without a hint of recognition or praise.

As the new millennium approached, accompanied by the apocalyptic rhetoric of the Y2K scare, the LDS Church established a for-profit tech start up called Millennial Star Network (MSTAR).[12] The company president described MSTAR as an effort to "colonize an electronic global community of members and friends of the church."[13] Soon the LDS Church began shutting down local ward websites and chasing after copyright infringers. With infrastructural controls taking root, the seeds were planted for a new vision of Mormonism online, and the creation of Mormon.org in 2001 was the first harvest—a site whose name, which signals an awareness of search engine optimization (SEO), came about through unexpected revelation.[14]

Today, the LDS Church sponsors dozens of websites, which often appear curiously unaware of each other. With seemingly innumerable

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11.   Steve Fidel, "Bishop Pays Big Bucks to Clean Up 'Mormon.com' Web Site," *Deseret News*, May 9, 1998, http://www.deseretnews.com/article/629041/Bishop-pays -big-bucks-to-buy-clean-up-Mormoncom-Web-site.html.

12.   Larry L. Richman, interview with author. See also Gregory P. Kratz, "A Net Link for LDS Members: New Company to Form 'Digital Community,'" *Deseret News*, October 3, 1999, http://www.deseretnews.com/article/720864/A-Net-link-for-LDS -members.html?pg=all.

13.   Kratz, "Net Link."

14.   See "Michael Hemingway," interview by Jordan Watkins, History of Media in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, folder 2, 21, Church History Library.

sites competing for eyes and clicks, the goal to colonize has perhaps backfired.[15]

Mormonism as media

At the heart of both heterodox listserv communities on the early internet and the LDS Church's institutional goals to develop effective websites are fundamental concerns with authenticity and control. ELWC participants sought authenticity through disclosure, of their best and worst selves. Their "skinny-dipping," a metaphor they used to describe their experience on the listserv, made them "both daring and vulnerable," and therefore able to form meaningful interpersonal bonds.[16] For the institutional church, sanctioned sex was threatened by digital pornography—the devil's counterfeit to authentic sexuality and a destroyer of marriages, families, and ultimately community.

Those who felt marginalized by Mormon culture or church policies found a new level of personal control over their identity on ELWC.[17] Participants felt they could finally speak their truths, with no hierarchy or patriarchy to stop them. LDS leaders, weary from painful public relations blunders, hoped the internet would allow them to "set the record straight."[18] They wanted control over information, over copyrighted materials, over the news media narrative. One sought control through isolation, creating invitation-only groups to foster intimacy; the other through publication, hoping accurate information from an official source would protect its public image and its members. Both

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15. Peggy Fletcher Stack alluded to this in "The Changing Role of the LDS PR Office: How Spokesmen and an Occasional Woman Have Often Become the Voice of the Church" (address at Mormon Media Symposium, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, Laie, Hawaii, November 3, 2016).

16. "The Sacred and the Mundane."

17. Hugo Olaiz, "One Lord, One Faith, Many Chatrooms: Mormons, the Internet, and the Complexities of Open Spaces," *Sunstone Magazine*, December 2002, 36–46.

18. Jennifer Toomer, "To Get It Right, LDS Delayed Web Site," *Deseret News*, February 1, 1997, http://www.deseretnews.com/article/540930/TO-GET-IT-RIGHT-LDS -DELAYED-ITS-WEB-SITE.html?pg=all.

underestimated the stubbornness of technology and its inseparability from culture.

Mormon internet history is another iteration, building on earlier efforts to adapt radio and television to the religion's needs, of the unsuccessful struggle to separate medium from message. The ultimately futile effort to control the internet, whether through isolation or publication, whether in the name of intimate dialogue or of impersonal dissemination, is a reflection of the paradox of all media. We often wrongly believe media are conduits—neutral channels for the content we hope to push through them—but their enabling power is always accompanied by constraint. Media give and media take away.[19] The media with which Mormonism has repeatedly compromised—from telegraph to TV to Twitter, as friends or as enemies or as both at once—are privy to the best and worst the religion and its people have to offer. The more we converse with them, the more they will reveal.

Gavin Feller recently completed his PhD at the University of Iowa. Last year, he was the Mormon studies fellow at the University of Utah's Tanner Humanities Center. He is currently an assistant professor of media studies at Southern Utah University, working on several projects at the intersection of technology, culture, and religion.

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19. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964).