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Face to Face Interaction

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# **“And I’m a (social media) Mormon”: digital ritual, techno-faith, and religious transmedia**

*Benjamin Burroughs\**

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## **Abstract**

Digital religion seems like a brand new phenomenon but it is actually best conceptualized by historically grounding these mediated practices within technological and cultural practices. Digital ethnographic observations are used to investigate the role of digital rituals in developing religious techno-faith surrounding Mormon social media usage. This paper seeks to apply a transmediated religious framework to understanding how digital religion works in the daily lives of religious congregations. Digital rituals are offered as a sub-category of media rituals, which serve as a lynchpin to inter-animate digital and face-to-face religious practice as techno-faith. Techno-faith mediates the central authority of the Mormon Church with the publication of individual, personal worship. Live-tweeting during Mormon General Conference, LDSTech, and the “And I’m a Mormon” campaign are the major sites of inquiry. Three major themes are identified in the data on Mormon social media: the role of ritual in digital ethnography, the role of publication and exposure within religious identity, and the role of techno-faith.

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**Keywords:** techno-faith, digital religion, Mormon, digital ritual, social media, Mormonism and media, digital ethnography, #ldsconf

Digital religion seems like a brand new phenomenon but it is actually best conceptualized by historically grounding these mediated practices within technological and cultural practices (Campbell, 2010). This paper seeks to apply a transmediated framework to understanding how digital religion works in the daily lives of religious congregations and peoples, constructing places and life events through technologically mediated digital rituals. This research employs a model of ritual to investigate religious social media and technology. Rooted in a neo-Durkheimian tradition, digital ritual (Burroughs, 2008), as a sub-category of Couldry's media ritual (2003), is conceptualized through a lens of communication studies and anthropology to refer to a continuum of actions that vary from habitual repetition to formalized action and behaviors linked to transcendental values. Each step in the process is seen as deepening participants' ritual involvement and connecting the face-to-face, everydayness of religious practice with digital space.

Digital ethnographic observations are used to investigate the role of digital rituals in developing religious techno-faith surrounding Mormon social media usage and digital technology. To what extent can you belong to a group, generating a sense of proximity at a distance? In the deterritorialization of the phantasmagoric global, to what extent can ritual participation alleviate the supposed disjunctures of proximity and place? Can the online and offline coalesce through digital ritual participation and what does this say for how we interact with new technology and religion? To what extent can a "real" sense of belonging be forged through ritual action, and what are those implications for religious communities? Digital rituals are offered as the lynchpin that mediates real and virtual, online and offline identity formations. Three major themes are identified in the data on Mormon social media: the role of ritual in digital ethnography, the role of publication and exposure within religious identity, and the role of techno-faith. We compare official Mormon church media usage with lay membership use of social media (live-tweeting general

conference, blogs, etc.) and then look at the LDSTech (Latter-Day Saints) movement, which has open-sourced the church's new media outreach to member volunteers, substantially reorganizing the church's own IT (Information Technology) department. How do multiple mediated platforms assemble what can be understood as techno-faith and how is this an extension of older Mormon media practices? Applications of these findings to the Internet, religion and ritual literatures are discussed.

### *Religious transmedia*

Up until now transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2009) has primarily been used to describe the ways that television shows, movie franchises and advertisers are weaving together multiple media platforms to tell stories and engage fans, while tapping into the participatory potential of a convergence culture. This is a theoretical framework that can help portray how technological shifts in the digital era have impacted religious expression and can be expanded beyond mere popular culture. Transmedia is understood simply as the navigation of multiple media platforms to tell potentially deeper and more meaningful stories. However, when we expand our thinking of what constitutes a medium to include material culture or artifacts such as buildings, paintings, taco trucks (Burroughs, 2009), or rituals, transmedia can extend beyond our modern convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006). Transmedia storytelling leverages these different platforms as transmediated religious practices attempt to connect communities of worship to the transcendental. This provides opportunities to intertwine new mediated technologies and religion, as well as cultivating articulations of faith that bridge online and offline disjunctures and legitimizes religious authority in what may be termed techno-faith.

While the speed and ubiquity of digital religion, when enmeshed with social media, is distinctive (concomitant with the rise of "networked individualism", Rainie, Rainie & Wellman, 2012), these religious practices can and should be historically rooted. A myriad of ancient religious practices might be conceptualized as incorporating multiple media platforms into worship. Egyptian ceremonies that

integrate murals, smoke, and smell are inherently transmediated experiences designed to ingrain religious practice into the everyday. Murals were public reminders of Egyptian duty to deities, which seamlessly studded religious ritual into daily life. The burning of incense and smoke animated the gods in ritual ceremonies (Wise, 2009). The utilization of bells, flags, ram horns, clocks, and pillars (Peters, 2013) can all be thought of as historical religious media. Mormon media systems can also be conceptualized as using a religious transmedia framework, augmented by the use of social media and technology today.

Mormonism historically posits a tension between centralized hierarchical authority and individual "members" working out their own salvation. Within the central organization of the Church are divinely appointed "general authorities" (comprised of a prophet/president and his two counselors, twelve apostles, and multiple "quorum of seventies" and area authority presidencies that oversee the operation of the church worldwide, Oaks, 2010) contrasted with an unpaid, volunteer clergy pulled from the general membership of the church. Peters (forthcoming) productively situates this tension within a media history of publication and exposure, publicness and privacy. Peters sees any "institution concerned about maintaining its logistical hold on time, space, matter, hearts, and minds will have to deal with media as agents of entertainment, ideology, and indoctrination". The Mormon faith has a history of being early adopters of modern mass media and communication, which is continually bound up in this tension. For every call to use media liberally to preach the gospel to all corners of the earth there is an equal mistrust of media as "moral ills" from jazz and television to pornography and the Internet. For every call to fill the world with the Book of Mormon as a message to "all nations, kindreds, tongues and people" there is the destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor printing press for publishing critical statements against Joseph Smith in 1844 (one of many events that led to his assassination).

This continues to be the case in the Mormon Church today. The limited space of this article does not allow a more complete treatment of Mormons and media (see Givens, 2007; for a history of Mormons



and music, see Hicks, 2003 and Case, 2009; and on the Tabernacle, see Peters, forthcoming). Digital space has continued, if not amplified, this struggle over centralized power and publication with individual autonomy and exposure. The live tweeting by members of the Mormon Church during the semi-annual General Conference and use of blogs and Facebook to express personal faith through technological platforms is considered as digital ritual, juxtaposed with the official “I am a Mormon” social media campaign. LDSTech is then situated within this tension as the Church crowd-sources “the work” from volunteer members as a kind of techno-faith practice.

### *Method*

Transmedia, understood as a heuristic, can be applied not only to religious media usage but also the religious and cultural identities interwoven in the production of techno-faith. The affordances of technology need to be integrated as another level of ethnographic analysis that weaves together multiple mediated platforms and identities—both online and offline. By linking old religious practices with new innovations in religious worship we hope to show certain continuities that should be acknowledged and remembered as we continue to pioneer the growing study of digital religions.

Ethnography “permits the theoretically informed observation of the social practices of cultural production” (Schlesinger, 1987, p. XXXI) through a long-term engagement amongst people. This principle is especially important when doing Internet based research that has the propensity to become what some have labeled “quick and dirty ethnography” (Slater & Ariztia-Larrain, 2009, p. 100). As a lifelong practicing Mormon I am deeply conversant with Mormon religious practice and have been a member/participant in the expansion of the churches’ online presence. This research advocates for a multi-sited digital ethnography that positions the author at multiple levels of digital engagement. Within digital anthropology there is an acknowledgement that ethnography is always already mediated from top to bottom (Horst & Miller, 2012). This means that face-to-face interpersonal communication is another layer of mediation. We

might think of the translation of face-to-face interaction into digital ethnography as positioning the author as transmediated. Multi-sited digital ethnography includes (but is not limited to) embedded participant observation, lurking, platform analysis, and discursive digitality. Through a reflexive unpacking of each of these mediated layers, digital ethnography is able to account for the re-articulation of face-to-face interaction within digital space.

### *Techno-faith and digital ritual*

In the landmark publication entitled *Media Rituals*, Nick Couldry (2003) attempts to transcend gaps in the neo-Durkhemian approach by avoiding an overtly functionalist approach to ritual but also not succumbing to post-structuralist claims that overestimate the very destabilization of social order (p. 10). Couldry wants to move the debate forward by offering his own melange that he titles post-Durkhemian. In an analysis of power, Couldry proposes an emphasis "on the process of social *construction* that underlies the *apparent* fit with modern societies of Durkheim or neo-Durkheimian analyses of ritual" (Couldry, 2003, p. 7 original emphasis); instead "media rituals should not be interpreted as subservient to an existing society, but as active constructors of social order" (Reijnders, 2007, p. 225). The enacting of mediated rituals helps to legitimate that myth and instigate its accompanying symbolic power. Put in another way Couldry, drawing from Bloch (1989, p. 130) and Barthes' (1972) turnstile metaphor of myth claims that it is the nature of rituals' ambiguity, "'rituals' oscillation between timeless history and contingent adaptation that allows us to believe in their overriding 'truth'" (Couldry, 2003, p. 28). This symbolic power is what intertwines digital space with the everydayness of practiced faith and forges a kind of techno-faith where institutional authority is merged with technology and individual religious worship. Elsewhere I have argued that digital rituals are a sub-category of Couldry's media rituals (Burroughs, 2009), and would include Cheong's (2010) microblogging rituals or "faith tweets" as a category under digital rituals.

The Mormon Church holds a semi-annual General Conference that is broadcast around the world from the Conference Center in Salt Lake City, Utah. This mediated ritual is an important part

of constructing a cohesive religious identity for both the church and its members. The prophet and all of the apostles address the entire membership. All of the membership of the church is expected to watch and the Church has gone to great lengths to broadcast the proceedings globally. General Conference was first broadcast on television in 1949 (Olsen, 2000), and later the church became an early adopter of satellite technology (attached to most meetinghouses), cable, and now web streaming. In 2010, the conference was posted to the “Mormon Messages” Youtube channel of the church. Conference itself has always been systematic and controlled as the hierarchy of the church disseminates instruction to the entire body of the church.

Live-tweeting during General Conference, however, has injected regular members into the production and circulation of the religious text. Since the advent of Twitter members have constructed their own digital space for processing their relation to the talks and working out their own conceptions of faith. Just like other unsanctioned Mormon media, such as *Sunstone* magazine and networks of Mormon blogs, early live-tweeting was often critical of speakers’ positions on hot button topics such as gender and sexuality. As the practice has become more widespread and Twitter more popular, the hashtag #ldsconf has become standardized and even promoted by the church. What started out within the lay congregation as faith tweeting has been turned into techno-faith as the centralized control of the church formalizes the tweeting by encouraging the use of the hashtag #ldsconf and posting it to their website. While the hashtag #ldsconf doesn’t control the message, it does implicitly bring the cultural practice of live-tweeting during General Conference under the purview of the official church. Where once there was a more affective relationship with technology amongst members, the hashtag reinforces pre-existing ideological constraints that form this techno-faith.

Techno-faith is the practice of inscribing mediated spaces with religiosity but also how religious institutions work to structure that practice. This is the role of digital rituals. In a transmediated religious ecology where multiple media platforms and texts are open to construct notions of faith, digital rituals intervene in the struggle between institutions and individuals and mediate face-to-face and

digital disjunctures. During this past April 2013 General Conference a member in the live, physical audience at the Conference Center gave an uncharacteristically loud "amen" (audible on the worldwide broadcast) after the end of the talk by Apostle Jeffrey R. Holland. This "amen" was a rupture in the social order in the material space but was immediately tweeted and turned into a circulating meme amongst members on Facebook and other social networking sites. The tweet was incorporated into collective expressions of faith, an extension of the broadcast, as the vocal and digital "amen" affirmed religious worship and ideology.

The institutional assemblage of transmediated religion is not exempt from the risks of exposure and deception (Avance, 2013; Burroughs & Burroughs, 2012; Burroughs, 2007), as demonstrated by the "Mormons and Magnets" Internet meme. At the same time that the hip-hop group Insane Clown Posse (ICP) released their 2009 single "Miracles", the Mormon church began an initiative on Mormon.org where Mormon missionaries could live chat with those wanting to know more about the faith. The site became a popular destination for trolls (primarily from 4chan) but the lyrics to the ICP song augmented the trolling. "Miracles" contains such anti-science gems as:

Water, fire, air and dirt

F\*cking magnets, how do they work? And I don't wanna talk to a scientist

Y'all motherf\*ckers lying, and getting me pissed.

The two worlds collided as unsuspecting Mormon missionaries were continually (and humorously) berated with questions about magnets and how they worked. The production of techno-faith into digital spaces is not without the perils of exposure, in this case the desire to attract followers was repelled literally by magnetism.

The LDSTech movement gets situated between the "And I'm a Mormon" official public relations campaign by the church and the informal enactments of technoculture by members. The "And I'm a Mormon" campaign attempts to bring non-Mormons face-

to-face with short Youtube videos of actual Mormons living normal lives. This humanizing of the institution mediates the digital with the everydayness of represented Mormon life. You connect not to the institution but through the digital face of the church as a social media Mormon.

This is connected to the theological open-source Mormonism that Benjamin Peters talks about in relation to family history and temple work as “divine databases” – actionable scripts to save humanity. LDSTech is pragmatic. Activity in LDSTech can be likened to a kind of accounting for Mormons as evidence of proselytizing and doing “the work” of the Lord. Faith is understood in this context as labor – to build up “the kingdom”.

The label of open-source is appealing; members contributing to LDSTech perform a variety of technical services from programming and web development to quality assurance and data warehousing. There were over 30,000 volunteer hours donated to LDSTech in 2012 (Maxwell, 2013) from the membership of the church developing the transmediated religious infrastructure and social media to circulate techno-faith. You can even be called as a digital service missionary. LDSTech exists as a hybrid form of religiosity between central authority and individual worship as techno-faith. Echoing a call from apostle John A. Widtsoe in 1923, Elder Russell M. Ballard admonished the church today, “Now, may I ask that you join the conversation by participating on the Internet to share the gospel and to explain in simple and clear terms the message of the Restoration... The challenge is that there are too many people participating in conversations about the Church for our Church personnel to converse with and respond to individually. We cannot answer every question, satisfy every inquiry... our position is solid; the Church is true. We simply need to have a conversation, as friends in the same room would have” (Ballard, 2008, pp. 60-63). Digital rituals mediate the central authority of the church with the publication of personal worship, which inter-animate to develop the requisite techno-faith for systems of transmediated religious practice. In this way, face-to-face communication becomes digital and divine.

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