

ON DIGITAL DOCTRINE  
THE MEDIATIZATION OF RELIGIOUS CUTLURE

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Media is a constant feature in our modern lives, transforming and influencing society and culture. This study examined how increased participation in digital media has changed the nature of religious representation, culture, and practice. Data was collected from both secular websites and religious media spaces where people post information about religion. This discussion is a necessary step in determining how media has not only become embedded in religious culture but has influenced the transformation of American religious culture.

The first part of this analysis concentrated on uncovering rhetorical strategies in religious digital spaces. I assumed that organizational identification would be a common approach used on the Mormon.org member profiles. The data collected verified this assumption. The second part of this analysis compared collaboratively produced articles in wiki-spaces that described Roman Catholicism and Mormonism. The goal of this part of the analysis was to determine how faith organizations are represented in digital spaces that are situated outside church authority.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## Project Overview

The goal of this study was to understand how increased participation in digital media has changed the nature of evangelization and religious community building. Specifically, this analysis facilitates an understanding of how religious media inform and persuade those that identify as religious and as non-religious. Data was collected from secular websites where people post information about religion, organizationally sponsored religious web spaces, and volunteer based web spaces that were situated outside of organizational authority, all with the aim of uncovering rhetorical strategies involved in the production of religious media.

My intention was to initiate a greater conversation within the field of rhetoric that considered how digital media practices become embedded in the cultural shifts that shape society. By identifying these shifts I will expose how rhetorical strategy transforms with the increasing presence of digital technology. I believe that the success of all organizations relies heavily upon society's perceptions, and those perceptions are often influenced through the use of rhetorical strategy. This research centered on religious organizations and how media produced in digital spaces has formed both religious organizations and societal perceptions of religion. Through my own experience as a member of the Roman Catholic Church, I have often seen how media provides a gateway for both those inside and outside faith organizations to produce and share religious content. The ease of accessing or distributing information about faith groups – some of which may be false or misleading – impacts religious representation and culture in the United States.

Expansions in communication technology and applications have enabled users to be actively engaged in dialogue with people all over the world. The convenience and accessibility



of these technologies have triggered a rapid shift from reliance on prior mediums of communication (print, television, and radio) to receiving information online and participating in digital networks. Communication through social networking, television, radio, videogames, music, the Internet, and all the other various forms of media have become natural, even habitual, modes of communication for the average American (Anderson 2016). These and other forms of media have become so far entrenched in our communication practices and interactions that we can no longer study a culture without considering media as part of that culture (Hjarvard 2008).

Many have investigated how media influences groups and culture. Some recent examples include Poell (2014) who examined how social media extended the reach of activist communication, Toscano (2011) who presented a study on literacy acquisition and practices shaped by video game culture, and Armstrong and Mahone (2017) who conducted surveys in 2014 and 2015 to examine the impact social media has on young adults' concern with rape culture and sexual violence. These scholars verify that media has become a constant feature of our modern lives, transforming and influencing society.

The rhetorical strategy involved in creating messages in digital spaces differs significantly from traditional text or oratory based communication because a message produced in a digital space has fewer obstacles related to distance and time of distribution. Throughout this research I was specifically looking at how representations of religious organizations are influenced by the extension of technological literacy and the resulting media portrayals that are constructed. This contributes to the discussion of how media impacts organizations by focusing on the effects of media technology extending and increasing communication. Joseph Schafer (2002) organized an exploratory study of how the Internet facilitates the extended reach of extremist ideologies. He focused on how extremist organizations could manage and shape their

own identities through the Internet. To do this, he looked at strategies and processes of communication used by those organizations. Schafer claimed that extremist groups had historically struggled with recruitment and communication; however, the proliferation of digital communication and Internet use in America has facilitated the spread of these organizations messages and has shifted perceptions of the groups. Additionally, Schafer found an increased frequency of communications that were multimodal and more engaging to those outside the organization (Schafer 2002). Studies like Schafer's reveal a multitude of conditions, behaviors, and rhetorical features useful to academics in the field of rhetoric. Other research considering how cultural representations are influenced by media include Rich (2013) who determined that narratives on terrorism and warfare have shifted as a result of media framing, and Osuala, Deeko, and Omele (2015) who examined the unequal representation of women in media. My study included a close reading of officially sponsored religious media spaces that produced and constructed their own content; religious media that was published by religious volunteers situated outside the authority of the church, and media about religion published in secular spaces by a variety of contributors.

Advances in popular media technology influence and transform cultural communication practices. As more and more people become actively engaged in digital media each year it becomes increasingly important to consider how these influences are transforming various subcultures within our society. Modern religious organizations are among the affected subcultures, so rhetorical strategies involved in developing their web presence is a significant area to consider.

## **Problem Statement**

The Pew Research Center has conducted numerous surveys and polls through the *Internet and American Life Project* to determine the extent to which social networking services and digital communication plays a role in the lives of average North Americans. One survey completed in 2013 showed that 73% of adults with Internet access are subscribing to at least one social networking service, while 42% of that same group reported maintaining accounts with multiple social networking sites simultaneously (Duggan & Smith 2013). The most recent Pew surveys verify that young adults - ages 18 to 29 at the time of the survey - were the most likely age demographic to subscribe to social media; however, it was not only young adults that had increased their Internet usage, a similar report showed that in 2005 only 2% of those 65 and older used social media, but that number has jumped to 35% in 2015 (Perrin 2015). What these numbers should represent to us is that this highly interactive and communal phase of Internet evolution has resulted in increased digital media participation, particularly social media. This is an important consideration for two reasons. First, because it demonstrates that Internet users desire more than just a tool for communication and basic information dissemination (Kessler 2013). Instead, it seems that users are searching for a way to actively involve themselves in a larger web based community where they can engage with others, distribute their own content, and even work in collaborative production teams. This is especially relevant to those situated in the millennial cohort, a large population of which have been active participants in digital communities their entire lives (Perrin 2015). For religious groups this means establishing an interactive space where participants become engaged in faith dialogue and are encouraged to create and share content rather than a space that simply distributes information. Second, it verifies that a relationship must exist between the religious and digital rhetoric studies if the goal

of modern religious organizations is to have their faith practice understood and culturally accepted.

Religious leaders are tasked with persuasively framing information to an audience that is engaged in technology and receiving messages from numerous - sometimes opposing - sources. These opposing sources could come from anywhere and the intentions of those who produce them may not always be malicious. For example, religious leaders must also contend with false representations of their faith that could potentially be produced or shared by those supportive of the organization. While there have been numerous studies within the field of rhetoric and composition considering how messages are constructed in digital environments (Hunter 2014, Tere 2012, Zuckerman 2013), there are far less that assess how people use these tools to create and share evangelical messages. There are even less that assess how these messages are received.

In 2014, the Pew Center *Religion and Public Life Project* published a study called “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.” This report compared the results of two identical studies - one completed in 2007 and one in 2014 - to observe trends in American religious participation. For this study 35,000 American adults (ages 18 and over) participated in a phone survey and were asked to describe their religious affiliation. The results of this study showed that there was an 8% decrease in the number of those that identified themselves as Christian between 2007 and 2014. As the Christian population fell, the unaffiliated group (Atheist, Agnostic, nothing in particular) grew from 16.1% to 22.8%. Catholics saw the largest decline of any single denomination falling 3.1%. Protestants (Evangelical, Mainline, and Historically Black) fell 4.8%. Another trend revealed by this study was that the average age of those in the unaffiliated cohort was dropping and comprised now mostly millennials (Cooperman, Smith, & Stencel 2015). This generation includes those born between the early 1980’s and the early

2000's (Lundin 2016). As a practicing Catholic I am not surprised by these statistics because I have perceived the decline of my own millennial cohort over the past ten years.

A 2010 Pew survey revealed that the millennial cohort is less religiously affiliated than previous generational cohorts. The question, "What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion or no religion?" was given to members of five generational cohorts – millennial, generation X, Baby Boomer, Silent Generation, and the Greatest Generation – and found that approximately 25% of Millennials self-describe as religious. This survey assumed that the increasing numbers of religiously unaffiliated millennials was related to young adults choosing to not seek out a new faith organization after leaving the tradition that they were raised in. It is important to note that this survey also found that the number of religiously affiliated millennials that describe their faith practice and belief as "strong" remained consistent with numbers reported by Generation X who were born between 1965 and 1980, and was 6% higher than numbers reported by Baby Boomers who were born between 1946 and 1964. Targeted questions assessing specific beliefs on topics like miracles and life-after-death showed religious young adults to share the same beliefs as older generations of religious adults. This report also revealed that the young adults within the mainline Protestant and historically black Protestant subgroups were actually more likely to believe in these topics than older generations. While young adult cohorts are statistically less religiously affiliated than previous generations those already associated with a faith organization appear to be as intensely religious, if not more so, than previous generations (Clement, Pond, Smith 2010). This signifies a cultural shift away from religious practice.

Between the publications of 2007 and 2014 Religious Landscape surveys, the Pew Research Center published "None on the Rise," in 2012 and this work has been the foundation of

many recent research studies regarding religion and American culture. This 2012 report which included data assessing religious participation found that a significant driving force in the decline of religious influence in the United States was the rising number of young adults (between the ages of 18 and 29 at the time of the survey), almost 75% of which were raised in religious traditions, that identified themselves as members of a religiously unaffiliated cohort. This same report found that the average age of ‘Nones’ were far younger than the average age of those who identified themselves as religious. A sizable portion of this group did not have a completely secular outlook – Atheist or Agnostic – but instead characterized their faith as “nothing in particular.” A surprising finding was that, though the number of people no longer identifying with a religion had increased, a substantial number of those surveyed still perceived religion in a positive way and believed religious organizations had the potential to strengthen communities (“Nones” on the Rise 2012). This positive outlook seems to be in direct contrast with the drastic decline the population of religious in the United States is experiencing. The millennial cohort was statistically less religious than previous cohorts and declines in religious membership seem to be driven by this generation in particular. For any organization to thrive over time a generation of new members must step into replace the older membership. With only one quarter of millennials reporting that they participate in regular religious practice it seems unlikely that generations like the Baby Boomers, a generational cohort that reported an approximately 60% membership in regular religious practice, will be replaced by this new cohort of young adults (Cooperman, Smith, & Stencel 2015).

There have been two significant cultural shifts verified by the Pew Research Center that have had an influence on American society as a whole. The first was that American adults have increased Internet and media participation. As a culture, we are more drawn to communication

media and participate in both the production and dissemination of content using media technology (Perrin 2015). Second, though participation in large religious organizations continues to be viewed favorably by most Americans, the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study found a clear decline in Americans that participate in traditional religious practice. This decline corresponds with an increase in the share of the American public that claims to have no religious affiliation at all (Cooperman, Smith, & Stencel 2015).

### **Research Questions**

This study assesses religious information on both religious media sites and on sites that are not religious in nature. Participants on religious media spaces have a sincere interest in engaging in testimonial and evangelical practices with few – if any - additional motives. It can be assumed that other motives governed the participation of users on non-religious sites. The distinct aims of authors in diverse digital spaces support a consideration of how the rooting of media in religious culture has influenced representations and practice of religion.

My study seeks to answer two questions:

- (1) Which rhetorical strategies are being used in religious digital media spaces and why?
- (2) What representation of these religious organizations – Roman Catholic and Mormon - are media producers constructing for their audience?

These questions were designed to uncover how the insertion of digital media in the practice of two large denominations of Christianity have transformed both the religious culture and society's reception of the religious institutions and practice. To do this I collected data that represented (1) how rhetorical strategies – usually those involved in evangelization and framing the organization – are incorporated in officially sponsored religious media, and (2) how religious representation has been impacted by media's influence. This study involved a textual analysis of

religious information collected from both religious media sites and non-religious sites where religion is discussed. I believe that these representations of religious culture and practice – whether initiated by outside media or by the religious institutions themselves – may have a direct impact on the downward trend of religious membership noted in Pew research studies.



## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*“Contemporary society is permeated by media, to an extent that the media may no longer be conceived of as being separate from cultural and other social institutions” - Stig Hjarvard*

Christianity has had an unquestionable social, cultural, and educational influence on western society. Kenneth Burke even argued that the existence of people praying to a God was enough justification to consider the rhetorical practices involved in religions and religious practice (*Rhetoric of Motives*, 1969, p. 26). Burke was not the first to tie rhetoric and religion together. The close relationship between rhetoric and Christianity can be observed as far back as the early church when Augustine of Hippo, a Catholic Bishop and 5th century teacher of rhetoric, composed the 4th book of *On Christian Doctrine* intending the text to be used as a tool for promoting eloquent speech practices among Christian evangelists.

Augustine was born in 354, the son of a pagan father and devout Christian mother, and did not convert to Christianity until the late 4th century. Reflecting on his own conversion and first time reading holy Christian scripture, Augustine recalled how, “When I first read those Scriptures, I did not feel as I do now. They appeared unworthy to be compared to the steadiness of Cicero. My inflated pride was repelled by their humble style, and my refined gaze and sharp wit could not penetrate their meaning” (*Confessions* 118). Augustine’s initial reactions to Christian texts are valuable because they verify how important it has always been – even in the 5<sup>th</sup> century for a man that would eventually become a Saint – for persuasive media to be attractive to someone outside the faith. This memory of the early stages of his own conversion process and difficulties may very well have triggered his own desire to use his education and skills in rhetoric to promote practices of effective evangelization among Christian evangelists. Supporting this, Augustine claimed that, “as the hearer must be pleased in order to secure his

attention, so he must be persuaded in order to move him to action” (148). He is very careful to express that truth itself is persuasive even when the speaker does not know how to use speech in a way that is eloquent; however, when the speaker is able to join truth and eloquence together in speech, then he should. Through *On Christian Doctrine* Augustine became one of the first Christians to actively encourage rhetorical strategy as a tool for teaching people about the Truth of Christianity.

Throughout the text he explained the stylistic techniques of both early Christian leaders and the pagan priests whom he studied with when he was young. After acknowledging that there were countless ways that faith and love could be communicated depending on the audience and orators preferences, he went on to discuss the various speech styles that he observed and in what situations he believed that they would be most effective. Augustine comes back to two major points throughout the 4th book that supported his vision for the evangelical use of rhetoric and oratory. First, he argued that, because eloquent speech could be used as a tool for doing good as much as it could be used as a tool to support evil, it was incumbent upon those with a thorough understanding of scripture to hone their persuasive skills for the purpose of evangelization and teaching. His priority was scriptural understanding and he argued that, “the man who cannot speak both eloquently and wisely should speak wisely without eloquence, rather than eloquently without wisdom” (176). His other point was that, once both wisdom and eloquence had been achieved, the orator should make sure that their own behavior was in alignment with their speech so that they could not be accused of hypocrisy. In addition to these points, Augustine also offered his readers examples of the three persuasive styles that he found in scripture. These three styles included the temperate style, the subdued style, and the majestic style, and he makes a point that the Christian teacher should be prepared to use all three styles interchangeably depending on the

situation. Majestic is associated with a forcefulness of speech that excited the audience and can silence them with its impressiveness (170). The temperate style convinces the listener that the speech is true, and through that verification of truth the speaker can secure compliance from the listener (172). The subdued style is intended to assist the listener in unraveling questions and complications that they have found with scripture and religious teaching (169). He argues that each style should be used at the appropriate time to maintain a grasp on the listener's enthusiastic attention and should be brought forth for this purpose so far as is “consistent with good taste” (168). This technique remains the same even as communication technology changes. These styles can even be perceived in modern religious media and are making an impact on the way Christians evangelize significant to this day.

If you compare Augustine’s strategies to the practices we often see employed in modern Christian evangelization it is easy to observe that not much has changed. His goals, though focused on the technologies of his time, were the same goals religious groups have today. It could very easily be argued that, just as the power of speech was necessary for evangelization in the time of Augustine, having a firm understanding of how media communication works within our own culture is necessary in today's religious world. Augustine’s claim that, “the one who would both know and teach should learn, of course, all he has to teach, and should acquire such skill in speaking as becomes an ecclesiastic,” reinforces the obligation religious members, especially those in evangelical or missionary roles, have to develop media competence among the members of their church (Augustine 369). While Augustine established this strong foundation, we must also look at scholars promoting theories appropriate for our day and culture – as Stig Hjvard is through his research on the mediatization of religious culture – to continue any conversation that considers modern evangelical rhetoric.

## **Mediatization**

Mediatization is a concept that argues that advancements in media technology influence institutions and cultures. This concept investigates the connection that exists between media and communication and argues that media is part of a mutual shift in both communication practices and societal constructs (Hjarvard 2008). It is a highly interdisciplinary concept that continues to evolve as the increasing significance of media communication motivates researchers from a variety of disciplines to question what the consequences of an expanding media presence may be. The mediatization of culture is a significant factor for digital rhetoric researchers because it reveals both how multimedia platforms influence and inform audience, and also considers the role of cultural transformation on the production of content and information through multimedia platforms. The earliest applications of this framework were used to uncover how media influenced, and were in turn influenced by, political communication. Stig Hjarvard, a scholar leading research on the mediatization of culture, found that most studies examining media and culture are concentrated on asking one of two questions: (1) how does media influence individuals, or (2) how do individuals produce, adapt, and use media? (Hjarvard 2013). Mediatization theory steps outside the limitations and boundaries of traditional frameworks allowing researchers to examine how cultural transformation occurs as a result of the inescapability of widespread media. Mediatization views media as part of an evolving culture rather than simply positioning media as a variable that works upon, or is worked upon by, an individual or society (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 2-7). This framework is an avenue for cultivating a comprehensive understanding of media as part of a complex network of social processes and cultural practices. This makes it the ideal framework for observing how religious culture and practice have responded to the integration of media.

Hjarvard (2008) explained that Kent Asp was among the first scholars to explore mediatization as a framework for understanding the societal and cultural changes that resulted from the immersion of media in politics. Asp observed how politicians shaped messages, framing statements to either be more uniting or even to be more divisive, so that their messages would have the best chance of gaining more media visibility (Hjarvard 2008). The scope of Asp's observation was limited to media's influence on political communication (Asp 2014). It was not until scholars like Winifried Schulz (2004) broadened the term to include all institutions affected by media that applications for the theory began to find more than just political and sociological phenomena (Schulz 2004). This helped form mediatization's role as an interdisciplinary study that effectively examines media influence on culture and society. For Schulz, mediatization could be defined as the evolution and transformation of communication media among all institutions and cultural groups. His understanding distinguished media as an actor capable of enabling social change through extension, substitution, amalgamation, and accommodation. These four processes involve: (1) Extension - removing distance barriers from communication - enabling global communication, (2) Substitution, which represents media's ability to substitute traditional forms of communication, (3) Amalgamation, when media and non-media activities are combined with media at least partially substituting or building upon a traditionally non-media activity, and (4) Accommodation, which considers how people adapt and change along with, and in reaction to, media (Schulz 2004). These processes can often be observed in media induced changes to religious communication practices. Schulz uses these four processes of media change to describe and define mediatization.

In these next sections I give an overview of Schulz's four processes of media change and also provide examples showing how these processes are shaping the communication practices of religious groups and leaders.

### *Extension*

In a speech celebrating the 48th World Communication Day on Sunday June 1, 2014, Pope Francis (2014) stated "media can help us to feel closer to one another, creating a sense of the unity of the human family which can in turn inspire solidarity and serious efforts to ensure a more dignified life for all. Good communication helps us to grow closer, to know one another better, and ultimately, and to grow in unity. The walls which divide us can be broken down only if we are prepared to listen and learn from one another." In this section of his speech the Pope is referring to extension (Francis 2014).

Through the act of extension media removes time and distance communication barriers and facilitates global communication because, "media technologies extend the natural limits of human communication capacities" (Schulz, 2004, p.88). Examples of communication extension being used as a tool for evangelization can be seen throughout modern digital evangelization. A great example of how extension impacts modern evangelization is the Missionary Chat application on the Mormon.org website. Mormon.org launched their chat room in 2008, and at least 5,000 people are estimated to sign on each month to engage with missionaries. This feature extends communication in many ways, but possibly the most intriguing way is that it allows Mormon missionaries to connect with people in countries where Christian evangelization is illegal (Pellet, 2013).

### *Substitution*

The media also has the potential to – either entirely or in part – substitute traditional forms of communication. The Daughters of Saint Paul, a congregation of Catholic sisters founded in 1915, see the potential of media as a means of evangelizing to masses. On a website explaining their mission as “Media Nuns,” the Daughters of Saint Paul express that their founder, the Blessed James Alberione, viewed communication technologies as an opportunity to teach people about Christ. The early days of their mission proved that people could be reached and influenced through newspapers. For that reason, the Daughters of Saint Paul and Pauline family used media literacy as a tool for effective evangelization. Today, the Daughters of Saint Paul have become proficient in substituting practices that would have required face-to-face interactions with religious practice through digital spaces. For example, on October 5 through the 13th of 2016, the Daughters of Saint Paul hosted a daily live web-a-thon Novena prayer service. Participants only had to download the prayers and tune into the live feed to participate. The Daughters of Saint Paul have learned to effectively substitute media for face-to-face interaction, enabling and accelerating their evangelical reach.

### *Amalgamation*

Results when media and non-media activities are combined to at least partially substitute or build upon a traditionally non-media activity. Schulz explains that “Media use is woven into the fabric of everyday life; the media pervade the professional sphere, the economy, culture, politics and the public sphere” (Schulz, 2004, p. 89). By extending into our day-to-day traditionally non-media activities, media becomes a more inherent function of our lives. Many evangelists have realized this and have made access to religious media easier. Organizations like Catholic News Agency produce podcasts, Android Apps like Bible.is provide dramatized audio

of Christian scripture and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir creates albums of religious music that can be purchased or streamed for free through Spotify.

### *Accommodation*

Through the act of accommodation, people adapt and change along with, and in reaction to, the media that they experience. The Daughters of Saint Paul, as a congregation of women religious whose entire vocation centers on communicating through media, are a perfect example of how an organization will shift with, and as a result of, media. The development of an online mission through Missionary Chat on Mormon.org is another example. These organizations have adopted popular media technologies and have found opportunities to evangelize.

### **Religious Mediatization**

Hjarvard (2013) views extension, substitution, amalgamation and accommodation as important processes in mediatization; however, he also describes mediatization as involving a duality of social processes in our modern society. The first is how media have become autonomous in our society. The second is determining the extent to which media become part of the institutions themselves. It is essential that the process of mediatization not be separated from other processes of social change because their influence upon each other is constructed through their interactions. He argues that an effective sociological concept of mediatization must take this duality into account and define the relationships between institutions and media interaction (Hjarvard 2008).

The mediatization of religion takes all the above considerations into account, but also observes three forms of mediatized behaviors that are specific to religious communication. The first is *religious media* which includes the production of media content by religious actors - authorized church leaders and individuals - in media spaces. The second is *journalism on*



*religion* which involves the promotion and distribution individual journalists or publishing news sources religious perceptions as a whole. The third form of mediatized religion is *banal religion*. This form is based off of the theory of banal nationalistic identity and focuses on how everyday representations of religious culture - through print, movies, television, plays, social media, etc. - and provides a foundation for our understand of what religion is and religious identity formation.

### *Religious Media*

Hjaravard defines *religious media* as media practices executed by either religious members or by the religious institutions as a whole. This encompasses various forms of media, for various purposes, including personal social media accounts, web spaces that encourage religious teaching and/or discussion, and evangelical television programs sponsored by televangelists like Joel Osteen, Benny Hinn, and Mother Angelica. One social media platform that has become extremely popular for the distribution of religious media is Twitter.

Twitter is a micro-blogging social networking site that allows users to create messages within a 140-character limit to share with other users of Twitter. Twitter was founded by Jack Dorsey in 2006 and users connect with each other by “following.” It has become one of the most popular social media sites used today (Twitter 2016). Twitter is viewed by many as one of the least restrictive platform because users are able to follow the content of other users that may not have agreed to share their content with them specifically. Engagement on twitter is practically unlimited compared to other social networking sites and may be providing one of the only opportunities for the non-religious to engage with the religious leaders of most mainstream religious organizations. For example, Twitter offers Catholics and non-Catholics alike the opportunity to follow, retweet, and comment to Pope Francis (the leader of the Roman Catholic Church). People outside of the Mormon faith can do the exact same with President Monson who

leads the Church of Latter Day Saints. Currently, the official Twitter page of Pope Francis has 10.4 million followers and President Thomas Monson has 207 thousand followers. Sister Miriam Jones, a sister of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity and the 2017 “Habited Hipster” (an honorary title for the “latest and greatest in Catholic cool” awarded by the Catholic Hipster Weblog), currently has 22 thousand followers.

### *Journalism on Religion*

The *U.S. and Religious Landscape Survey* in 2012 found that 54% of Mormons in the United States felt that media representations of their church were damaging the image of Mormons. This study that focused on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was conducted in 2012 to expand the scholarship of media and religion by performing an empirical study on how the highly religious evaluate how they feel their faith organization is portrayed through media. The results verified a steady decline in the overall trustworthiness of modern media. Survey participants expressed that their perception of mainstream media’s coverage of the Church of LDS was negative overall. The researchers felt that these findings may have been prompted by the 2007 election and popular attacks on Mitt Romney’s faith and controversy over Proposition 8 (Golan, G. J., & Barker, S.). Research like this helps establish a foundation for understanding the attitudes of those who are devout about their faith towards mass media and mainstream media groups.

Most misconceptions regarding the LDS (Mormon) Church stem from false representations publicized through journalistic media so it is not surprising that the *U.S. and Religious Landscape Survey* in 2012 found that 54% of Mormons in the United States felt that media representations of their church were damaging the image of Mormons. Days after the 2007 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney gave a speech in an attempt to calm voter’s

apprehensions about his religion when a Gallup poll found that nearly one in every six Americans (survey results divided almost equally among both Democrats and Republicans) would not vote for a candidate if that person were a Mormon (Saad, “Percentage Unwilling to Vote for a Mormon Holds Steady”).

### *Banal Religion*

Hjarvard adapts Michael Billig’s theory of ‘banal nationalism’ a concept of how cultural identity - whether expressed through a shared nationalistic ideology or symbolic representations - promotes a shared national culture and identity, to consider how similar practices will influence religious culture and identity. He makes the argument that “the study of religion ought to consider the fact that both individual faith and collective religious imagination are created and maintained by a series of experiences and representations that may have no, or only a limited, relationship with the institutionalized religions” (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 8). Banal religion is used to describe how media do more than just report on doctrinal and established religions; media also share and move information on religion as it is perceived and understood through the media producer’s frame of reference. This is often seen when media producers and distributors frame a religious in a way that will more or influence an audience. These various interpretations of religious practice may lead to differences and separation between banal religious representations and the institutionalized representation of official faith organizations.

Mediatization has emerged as a conceptual framework that supports discussions considering how religion has been restructured and shaped by media. The theory distinguishes media as being independent of both culture and society. Rather than situating media within religious culture or practice, this theory integrates media into the institution itself. By this

definition media is not working upon religion. By this definition media is not being worked upon by religion. Media has become part of religion.

The processes involved in religious mediatization have helped normalize and spread religious ideology in a time where less people practice religion. This is perhaps because religious experience is no longer confined to the physical world but can also be experienced through a digital lens.

My goal throughout this chapter was to illustrate the role media has played in both religious evangelization and in faith organizations societal representations. Mediatization makes this process clear in our modern digital society. By providing examples of how the mediatization framework (Asp 2014, Hjarvard 2008, Schulz 2004) has influenced religious communication, I have shown some ways media is transforming religious practice, culture, and communication.

Hjarvard's three forms of religious mediatization – religious media, journalism on religion, banal religion – provided a channel for identifying how the multifaceted cultural and social characteristics of media interact with and influence religious systems. I use this framework to isolate diverse representations of religious culture and practice in digital spaces. As religion becomes mediatized it is important to analyze how it is portrayed in these three distinct areas to establish a method for understanding of how these representations transform religious doctrine, practice, and culture as a whole. In my next chapter I will demonstrate how this framework aligned with the analysis of data and structure of this study.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

As I expressed in the introduction, this study examined the involvement of media users within the context of religious organizations, culture, and practice by analyzing the content created by users both within and outside the organizations. My analysis of these profiles was derived from contextual rhetorical analysis theory, through which communications are examined using a cultural and environmental lens to better incorporate outside factors and influences into the analysis of data (Selzer 2004 p. 292). A close reading and qualitative rhetorical analysis of digital texts produced in both official and unofficial spaces revealed the influence of mediatization on religious culture.

Throughout this study, I examined how religious organizations are represented in a time where religious leaders and evangelists have had to adapt to social and cultural changes influenced by the mediatization of religion. I selected diverse digital representations of two – Roman Catholic and Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS or Mormon) – distinct Christian organizations. I intentionally reduced the amount of data I would collect to two denominations of Christianity for this analysis to more effectively compare the digital content produced by and about Christian organizations that have diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and authoritative structures. Additionally, I considered Stig Hjarvard's (2008) three forms of religious mediatization – religious media, journalism on religion, and banal religion – throughout this study. The primary goal of this analysis was to determine how these faith groups are framed by media through a close reading of digital text. I examined media that was constructed both by religious members and by those that were not affiliated with the religious organizations. This analysis serves the

function of uncovering how persuasive digital text has both beneficial and detrimental consequences for religious organizations representation in culture.

### **Data Collection**

This study centered on four sites of study where digital text was collected for analysis. Together these sites represent both officially and unofficially sponsored religious spaces. For the purposes of this study I defined official religious digital spaces as those recognized by organizational leadership. These would likely be classified as “religious media” productions under Hjarvard’s mediatization framework. Contributors to these spaces are ordained or consecrated members of the official organization whose actions are situated within the boundaries of church authority. Unofficial digital spaces are those produced either by laypersons or by a combination of laypersons and ordained/consecrated religious members. These volunteer based structures create and manage religious digital content as a means of acting out their missionary role through digital evangelization movements. These open spaces are important to this portion of religious membership because missionary work and giving testimony are established features of religious identity for many people. Secular spaces are those that were not necessarily intended to be used as a religious platform, but here religious information can be created and shared.

The four sites of study included Mormon.org, MormonWiki, WikiChristian, and Wikipedia.

#### *Mormon.org*

Mormon.org is an official website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The website was launched in 2000 with a focus on the organization, but was temporarily closed and relaunched in 2010 with a new focus on promoting the testimonies of individual members.

The website has collected testimonies of over 2,000 active members of the Church of LDS. My analysis of Mormon.org will involve evaluating these profiles. This has the potential to be a very large corpus because all participants were encouraged to include *About Me*, *Why I am a Mormon* and *How I live my faith* sections on their profile pages. For that reason, I limited the size and scope of this corpus to the top 35 profile pages randomly generated by Mormon.org.

### *MormonWiki*

MormonWiki has 3,619 articles as of early 2017. The page describes itself as, “The free encyclopedia about Mormons from the perspective of faithful members.” This particular wiki space is framed as an encyclopedia of the Mormon faith and has a similar format to Wikipedia. In a style similar to Mormon.org, MormonWiki uses text, video, images, hashtags, and embedded URLs throughout each page of their website.

MormonWiki has a stringent set of requirements - similar to Mormon.org - that a user must meet before being granted access to edit content. While most wiki-spaces lack supervisory authority, the More Good Foundation ensures that all participants are members of the Church of Latter-day Saints and blocks members who vandalize or compose misleading information. The top right corner has a “log in” tab that only registered users with credentials approved through the More Good Foundation can access pages that enable content modification. A consequence of these controls is that there is less participation, peer-review function, and collaborative authorship on MormonWiki than on other wiki-spaces like Wikipedia.

### *WikiChristian*

WikiChristian was developed in 2004 and is currently the largest exclusively Christian active wiki-spaces on the internet. WikiChristian has 349,901 pages and over one million edits as of early 2017. WikiChristian actively seeks editors and participation on their homepage.

The set of requirements are less stringent than those on MormonWiki. Any and all Christian members can contribute to and edit articles as long as they personally reach out to one of the two co-founders via email. When I personally reached out to the founders of MormonWiki I was instructed to send my “salvation story” via email in order to obtain editing credentials. Their site claims to require this to avoid trolling and false information on their page.

### *Wikipedia*

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that originated as a completely open-source platform where all visitors could engage in the collaborative process of creating articles. While Wikipedia is the least restrictive wiki examined in this project, changes have been made to the site that require “editors” to register an email address and some personal information with Wikipedia.

As of early 2017 Wikipedia has over 5,339,000 articles published in the English language. The site is maintained and hosted by the non-profit organization, the Wikimedia Foundation (Wikimedia Foundation Wikipedia). The goals of Wikimedia are expressed through a statement on their main page that asks users to, “Imagine a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge” (Wikimedia Foundation *Wikipedia*).

### **Data Analysis**

My decision to use the Mormon Church as an institution for observation is based largely off of their impressive growth in membership, while my decision to use the Roman Catholic Church for comparison is based on them experiencing the largest decline in membership of any single Christian denomination (“Nones” on the Rise 2012). I conducted a close reading of digital text produced in religious spaces and in secular spaces where religious content is sometimes published. The practice of close reading as a rhetorical analysis model allows both text and



context to be considered. This aids researchers in using text driven data to make claims about society and culture (McKee 2003 p64). Central to this methodology is the critical approach to textual analysis that views text as “powerful and extremely complex” (Jasinski 2001 p92). This method is often used by researchers interested in the characteristics of a message that has been produced. Thus, through close reading I was able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the religious media content being produced in digital spaces.

An analysis of the text published on these sites makes observation of the tones, practices, and tools that are used in digital spaces possible. This method of examining features and textual patterns supported a comparison of how and why both those positioned within and outside religious organizations create and publish religious content to online spaces. A large portion of my analysis was quantitative as I analyzed features and patterns embedded in religious outputs of communication. I selected text samples, developed a system for coding information, and then examined the data. While much of this analysis was quantitative I was also interested in context and cultural characteristics found in text samples.

I considered 2 questions throughout my analysis:

- (1) Which rhetorical strategies are being used in religious digital media spaces and why?
- (2) What representation of these religious organizations – Roman Catholic and Mormon - are media producers constructing for their audience?

The websites were split into two categories: religious media about religion and general (secular) media about religion. The content, structure, and perceived purpose of the messages were reviewed to determine the nature of the text.

### **Data Coding**

The first part of this analysis focused on my collection of data from the “Meet Mormon” profile pages. The individually produced profile pages supported an analysis of Mormons faith

representations produced in an official space that is sanctioned and sponsored by the official Mormon organization. This analysis sought to discover how the religious institution customized religious content to persuade audiences that may be outside the organization to begin identifying with the Church of Latter-day Saints by considering common writing and rhetorical characteristics used throughout the individual profile pages and Mormon.org's deliberate arrangement and framing of member content. This approach also enabled me to answer the first research question: Which rhetorical strategies are being used in religious digital media spaces and why?

I began by reading the collection of profiles and uncovered consistent themes and categories represented. My analysis was directed by an open, data-driven coding method that was both critical and interpretive. The process for determining codes was a close textual analysis. I considered Lucas's (1989) approach to close reading which examines "individual texts with an eye toward explicating their rhetorical artistry" (Lucas 1989 p.254). My prior understanding and exposure to Mormon.org allowed me to create initial codes derived to answer my research questions. These initial codes were location, family, career, "I am a Mormon", membership, belonging, missionary service, instructional/teaching service, church leadership. Secondary codes emerged out of the data collected from the initial codes. The secondary codes were acts of normalization, expressions of belonging, religious experiences, and personal transformation sharing. These selections were based off of patterns that continued to emerge throughout my analysis of the data and they reveal how rhetorical context and strategy are adapted to church sponsored media content about religion.

Acts of normalization comprised any time in which the profile author discusses everyday things that they do outside of their religious community. An example of this might be, "I am a

college student,” or “I love playing the piano.” I looked for moments in which these members are trying to identify with the person that is reading their page.

Table 1: Acts of Normalization

Final Code 1	Acts of Normalization			
Initial Codes	Location	Family	Career	Other
Examples	<p>“I’m French-Swiss. I live in Switzerland.”</p> <p>“I have lived in the UK all my life.”</p> <p>“I was born in the Crimea and grew up in Ukraine. I completed my education in St. Petersburg, Russia.”</p> <p>“I live in France in a city surrounded by mountains.”</p> <p>“I went to school at BYU, and ended up staying in Utah.”</p>	<p>“I’m a mother and grandmother.”</p> <p>“Together with my dear wife I have three children who are an especially important part of my life.”</p> <p>“I am an aunt.”</p> <p>“My wife and I have 3 children, who have all grown up and left home.”</p>	<p>“I work as a doctor.”</p> <p>“I talk for a living.”</p> <p>“I play the drums for a living.”</p> <p>“I’m a medical student. I am a community activist.”</p> <p>“I am a professional rugby league player for the Manly Sea Eagles in Australia.”</p>	<p>“I’m a 9-11 Survivor.”</p> <p>“I really enjoy reading and love to cook and bake.”</p> <p>“I love extreme jeeping.”</p> <p>“I am a three-time cancer fighter.”</p> <p>“I love live music, and swim in Puget Sound.”</p>

Expressions of belonging covered any reference to community, family, friends, or fellow missionaries.

Table 2: Expressions of Belonging

Final Code 2	Expressions of Belonging	
Initial Codes	“I am a Mormon”	Other
Examples	<p>“I’m a Mormon”</p> <p>“I am a member of the Mormon Church.”</p> <p>“I am a member of the Church of Latter-day Saints.”</p>	<p>“I have a real belief and faith in Jesus Christ and God.”</p> <p>“My membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints brings me great joy.”</p> <p>“I am a Mormon because I know that God lives, he loves me and has a plan for me. I know that I really can be with my husband forever.”</p> <p>“I immediately recognized what I had been longing for as soon as I found it: the gospel principles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”</p> <p>“I love being a Mormon. I feel like I am in a big family and we protect and care for each other regardless of where we are.”</p> <p>“I’ve been able to get through with God’s support, a community willing to provide babysitting, meals, and prayers, as well as a wonderful husband and extended family, and a faith made solid by my first experience with cancer twelve years ago.”</p>

Religious experiences were a little bit broader. When searching for instances in which a member tells stories that were only possible because they were members of the Church of LDS. An example of this might be a baptism, or a missionary experience.

Table 3: Religious Experiences

Final Code 3	Religious Experiences			
Initial Codes	Missionary Experience	Instructional Experience	Church Leadership Experiences	Other
Examples	<p>“Serving as a missionary in inner city New Jersey.”</p> <p>“I worked as a full time missionary in Melbourne, Australia.”</p> <p>“I served a mission in Frankfurt, Germany.”</p> <p>“Soon I will also begin my two year mission for the Church.”</p> <p>“I played football for a year before serving a mission in Korea.”</p>	<p>“I teach the 3-year-old children in primary.”</p> <p>“The current role I am in at the moment involves me assisting, and delivering training to teachers in the church who have been assigned to teach children in the Primary Organization.”</p> <p>“I also teach the women in our church on the last Sunday of the month.”</p> <p>“I teach the youth in our church.”</p>	<p>“I have recently been given the assignment of being Bishop responsible for congregation of approximately 300 families.”</p> <p>“I support my husband as he serves our congregation as the Bishop.”</p> <p>“I am the ward clerk.”</p>	<p>“At church I’m responsible for planning fun social events for young people.”</p> <p>“The Church provides structure and gives us an opportunity to learn about God and to serve others.”</p> <p>“Being part of the Church gives me the opportunity to serve and I love to visit the other women members of the Church, help in young women’s organization by studying gospel, principles and doing manual activities.”</p>

My last code included examples of personal transformation sharing, and I looked for illustrations of how they have been impacted by their church in a major way. This would include statements like, “and then I knew the Gospel was true” or, “I realized that I could no longer live without a relationship with our Father in Heaven.”

Table 4: Personal Transformation Sharing

Final Code 4	Personal Transformation Sharing		
Initial Codes	Finding Happiness	Finding Truth	Finding Lifestyle
Examples	<p>“I feel fortunate to have been born into my faith. That said, at some point I made a conscious choice to be Mormon. This came in my early twenties when I realized that the lifestyle I had been leading was not bringing happiness into my life. That choice got me back to church regularly, it started me on the path to where I am today.”</p> <p>“Simply, it helps me make sense of a messed up world, gives me hope, and makes me happy!”</p> <p>“I am happy because being Mormon is being able to overcome our difficulties and being happy in this world. It was for this that I came!!!”</p> <p>“I’m a Mormon because it brings happiness into my life and those around me.”</p> <p>“I don’t think that without the Church it would have been possible for me to be the happy person I am today.”</p>	<p>“I felt the influence of Heavenly Father and how the gospel worked in my life, so of course I wanted to be baptized.”</p> <p>“I believe in the tenants of my religion. The evidence that I have seen supporting this belief vastly outweighs the evidence otherwise.”</p> <p>“When I started reading the Book of Mormon seemed like an incredible story of fascinating people, but then grew in my heart a feeling of gratitude to God to know that everything I read is true, and that each of the written words are a help in my life and a wealth of knowledge and valuable lessons. It is a magical book that every time I read teaches me new things.”</p>	<p>“I was 20 when I decided again, that a life within the gospel was the life I wanted.”</p> <p>“I have been a Mormon for twenty years. Back then I came to the realization that this is the Church that meets all the requirements for bringing us closer to Jesus Christ. It is now my way of life; in other words, I feel that the Gospel is a part of my life.”</p>

The second part of this analysis compared articles describing the way that Roman Catholicism and Mormonism are defined and represented on three different wiki-spaces: Wikipedia, MormonWiki, and WikiChristian. This aided me in answering the second research question: What representation of these religious organizations – Roman Catholic and Mormon - are media producers constructing for their audience? This question was answered by analyzing how text was collaboratively produced in unofficial spaces. I closely read the text for accuracy,

detail, and searched for potentially evangelical content that suggested the faith organization was a True faith. For this section I also applied Lucas's (1989) conceptualization of close reading which operates as an analytical model for uncovering the aims of the content producer, the immediate rhetorical situation, and the effect (Lucas 1989 p249). This methodology is worked well with my examination of wiki-spaces because it centralized the text produced through these platforms in the analysis.

I also examined the revision histories and conversations among collaborators. This allowed me to sense how interested the wiki collaborators were in producing as authentic a representation as possible. This revealed the intentions, influences, and explicit arguments being made through the text. All three spaces – even those that were defined as religious media – were unofficial spaces without the influence of official church authority.

My initial codes focused on patterns that I found while reading the collected text samples. These initial codes included truth, defining faith, claims about faith group, beliefs and practices of the membership, historical dates, biographical information, and church history. I will also consider the number of collaborators, number of edits, and vandalistic attempts and content.

Table 5: Representations of Faith Group

Final Code 2	Representations of Faith Group			
Initial Codes	“Truth”	Defining Faith	Claims About Members of the Faith Group	Beliefs and Practices
Examples from MormonWiki	<p><u>Mormonism</u> “The true name of the Church is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, signifying that Christ directs the Church, not only through His prophet, but by bestowing authority to act in His name.”</p> <p>“When Christ’s apostles were martyred, authority to act in His name was lost. There were no prophets who could receive direct revelation from God in order to reveal true doctrines.”</p> <p>“Through time, there were schisms even in the orthodox churches, and eventually many sects evolved, none guided by pure revelation, and none having the true authority to act in the name of Christ.”</p> <p><u>Catholicism</u> NA</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u> “Mormon is a nickname for a member of the Church of Latter-day Saints”</p> <p><u>Catholicism</u> “The term ‘catholicism’ is the English form of Late Latin <i>catholicismus</i>, an abstract noun based on the adjective catholic. The Modern Greek equivalent καθολικισμός (<i>katholikismos</i>) is back-formed and usually refers to Roman Catholicism.”</p> <p>“In Roman Catholicism, the term “catholic” is understood as to cover those who recognize and are in good standing with the Magisterium.”</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u> “Mormonism answers the important questions of existence: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?”</p> <p>“Mormons should be ethical, honest, morally pure, chaste, kind, hopeful, family-oriented, healthy (see Word of Wisdom), self-reliant, and the happiest people on earth”</p> <p>“Worthy members of the Church enjoy the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost.”</p> <p><u>Catholicism</u> NA</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u> “The Lord has promised to reveal more scripture as His children prove themselves worthy to receive it. Parts of the Book of Mormon have been held back, because men aren’t prepared to receive the revelations therein. The “Ten Lost Tribes” will also bring scriptures with them when they return.”</p> <p><u>Catholicism</u> “Belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the belief that Christ is made manifest in the elements of Holy Communion.”</p>
Examples from Wikipedia	<p><u>Mormonism</u> “They maintain that other religions have a portion of the truth and are guided by the light of Christ.”</p> <p>“Mormons thus believe that their Church is the “only true and living church” because divine authority was restored to it through Smith.”</p> <p>“In Mormon theology, many lost truths are restored in the Book of Mormon, which Mormons</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u> “The Latter-day Saint movement is the collection of independent church groups that trace their origins to a Christian primitivist movement founded by Joseph Smith in the late 1820’s.”</p> <p><u>Catholicism</u> “Catholicism (from Greek καθολικισμός, <i>katholikismos</i>,</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u> “Based on the name of that book, early followers of Smith were more widely known as <i>Mormons</i>, and their faith was called <i>Mormonism</i>. The term was initially considered pejorative, but Mormons no longer consider it so.”</p> <p><u>Catholicism</u></p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u> “Mormons believe that Smith and subsequent church leaders could speak scripture ‘when moved upon by the Holy Ghost.’ In addition, many Mormons believe that ancient prophets in other regions of the world received revelations that resulted in additional</p>



Final Code 2	Representations of Faith Group			
Initial Codes	“Truth”	Defining Faith	Claims About Members of the Faith Group	Beliefs and Practices
	<p>hold to be divine scripture and equal in authority to the Bible”</p> <p>“The important consequence of this is that each person may receive confirmation that particular doctrines taught by a prophet are true, as well as gain divine insight in using those truths for their own benefit and eternal progress.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Catholicism</u></p> <p>“Catholics claimed to teach the whole truth, and to represent the whole Church, while heresy arose out of the exaggeration of someone truth and was essentially partial and local.”</p>	<p>"universal doctrine") is a term which in its broadest sense refers to the beliefs and practices of Christian churches that understand and describe themselves as being <i>Catholic</i> within the universal and apostolic church.”</p>	<p>“The sacrament came to be known as "Extreme Unction", i.e. "Final Anointing", as it still is among traditionalist Catholics.”</p> <p>“The Catholic Church considers only those in full communion with the Holy See in Rome as Catholics.”</p>	<p>scriptures that have been lost and may, one day, be forthcoming.”</p> <p>“Mormonism shares a common set of beliefs with the rest of the Latter Day Saint movement, including use of and belief in the Bible, as well as in other religious texts including the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. It also accepts the Pearl of Great Price as part of its scriptural canon, and has a history of teaching eternal marriage, eternal progression, and polygamy (plural marriage).”</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Catholicism</u></p> <p>“Churches in the Catholic tradition administer seven sacraments or "sacred mysteries": Baptism, Confirmation or Chrismation, Eucharist, Penance, also known as Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony.”</p>

Final Code 2	Representations of Faith Group			
Initial Codes	“Truth”	Defining Faith	Claims About Members of the Faith Group	Beliefs and Practices
Examples from WikiChristian	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Mormonism</u></p> <p>“Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, claimed to have received a series of visions in which he was told by God that all the churches were "wrong", their "creeds were an abomination in his sight", and all their "professors were corrupt". He was told that God would restore the true New Testament church using him as a mouthpiece.”</p> <p>“They prefer to say that all churches contain some truth, but that all truth may be found only within Mormonism.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Catholicism</u></p> <p>NA</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Mormonism</u></p> <p>“The term Mormonism is also often used to refer specifically to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is by far the most numerous and well-known sects claiming derivation from Joseph Smith.”</p> <p>“The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a conservative branch that continues to practice polygamy.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Catholicism</u></p> <p>“The Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination, with over a billion members.”</p> <p>“It is often erroneously referred to as the Roman Catholic Church or Romanism.”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Mormonism</u></p> <p>“Despite Smith’s clear affirmations, Mormons generally minimize statements about other churches being false. They prefer to say that all churches contain some truth, but that all truth may be found only within Mormonism.”</p> <p>“It has been widely known that Mormonism has a history where polygamy has been accepted, although today most mainstream Mormon denominations do not advocate polygamy.”</p> <p>“Mormons believe in the existence of multiple gods.”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Mormonism</u></p> <p>“Mormons believe in the existence of multiple gods.”</p> <p>“Mormons believe that the original teaching of Jesus Christ was lost after his death and that Christ’s teaching and church was restored by Joseph Smith and his followers.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Catholicism</u></p> <p>“The earthly leader of the Roman Catholic Church is the pope. The pope governs from the Vatican City in Rome, a sovereign state of which he is also the civil head of state.”</p> <p>“The Catholic Church considers only those in full communion with the Holy See in Rome as Catholics.”</p>

Table 6: Establishing a Historical Foundation for Faith

Final Code 3	Establishing a Historical Foundation for Faith		
Initial Codes	Dates	Biographical Information	Church History
<p>Examples from MormonWiki</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u>                      “The restoration of the gospel began in the early 1800s, in New York, through revelations given to Joseph Smith.”                       “The Book of Mormon is a history of Israelite families who were led to the Americas just before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians (about 600 B.C.)”</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u>                      “The Lord revealed to Joseph Smith the hiding place of an ancient scriptural record and gave him the means to translate it.”</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u>                      “The martyrs of the reformation prepared the way for the restoration planned by the Lord since the apostasy first occurred.”</p>
<p>Examples from Wikipedia</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u>                      “Mormonism originated in the 1820s in western New York during a period of religious excitement known as the Second Great Awakening”                       “After he was killed in 1844, most Mormons followed Brigham Young on his westward journey to the area that became the Utah Territory, calling themselves The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church).”   <u>Catholicism</u>                      “The 431 Council of Ephesus, the third ecumenical council...”                       “In 1438, the Council of Florence convened...”</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u>                      “Mormonism represents the faith taught by Smith in the 1840s. After he was killed in 1844, most Mormons followed Brigham Young on his westward journey to the area that became the Utah Territory.”   <u>Catholicism</u>                      “Pope Julius I, who spoke of such appeals as customary, annulled the action of that council and restored Athanasius and Marcellus of Ancyra to their sees.”</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u>                      “The word <i>Mormon</i> originally derived from the Book of Mormon, a religious text published by Smith, which he said he translated from golden plates with divine assistance.”                       “During the 1830s and 1840s, it distinguished itself from traditional Protestantism.”                       “Violence between the Missourians and church members resulted in the governor of Missouri issuing an "extermination order," again forcing the church to relocate.”   <u>Catholicism</u>                      “According to the theory of Pentarchy, the early undivided church came to be organized under the three patriarchs of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, to which later were added the patriarchs of Constantinople and Jerusalem.”                       “Rome claimed special authority because of its connection to Saint Peter and Saint Paul, who, all agreed, were martyred and buried</p>

Final Code 3	Establishing a Historical Foundation for Faith		
Initial Codes	Dates	Biographical Information	Church History
	“Another major division in the Church occurred in the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation...”		in Rome, and because the Bishop of Rome saw himself as the successor of Saint Peter.”
Examples from WikiChristian	<p><u>Mormonism</u></p> <p>“The Mormonism movement began in 1820 near Palmyra, New York”</p> <p>“Mormonism is a religion originating in the early 1800s as a product of the teaching of Joseph Smith and the Latter Day Saint movement.”</p> <p><u>Catholicism</u></p> <p>“It claims to have an unbroken leadership first from Jesus Christ, through the Apostle Peter to the Pope by Apostolic Succession”</p> <p>“The Protestant churches split away from the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century based on differences in opinion of doctrine, especially the issue of Justification by faith alone versus Justification by faith plus works.”</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u></p> <p>“Smith reported several angelic visitations, and was eventually told that God would use him to re-establish the true Christian church, and that the Book of Mormon would be the means of establishing correct doctrine for the restored church.”</p> <p><u>Catholicism</u></p> <p>NA</p>	<p><u>Mormonism</u></p> <p>NA</p> <p><u>Catholicism</u></p> <p>“The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, or Vatican II, was the twenty-first Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church. It opened under Pope John XXIII on 11 October 1962 and closed under Pope Paul VI on 21 November 1965.”</p>

### Limitations

The size and scope of my analysis has been limited by both time and by my own stated research objectives. Future research with a larger sample size that more fully assesses religious representations produced on both the religious and non-religious media spaces would likely yield more significant data.

Another limitation is that a portion of this analysis would be dependent upon data that I collect myself through a close reading of digital text. Data may contain sources of personal bias. I inevitably draw upon some of my own experiences as a Christian as I analyze and interpret these texts. Quantitative information – data including text length, article revision history, the frequency of page vandalism, the articles date of origin - was collected in addition to qualitative data that assess the framing and intent of each article. I did this to foster a less subjective interpretation of data and to root the analysis in the text itself rather than on my own religious experiences and opinions.

### **Delimitations**

Mediatization supports meso-level analysis of cultural groups and societies. The scale of this study is influenced by both the mediatization framework and by the research goal of observing a selection (Catholic and Mormon) of religious subculture. For that reason the scale is small and the analysis only includes sections of data from Mormon, Christian, and Secular digital spaces.

This study was designed to determine the rhetorical strategies used in religious media places and what representation of religious organizations are being constructed through media. This study illuminated the persuasive intent of media produced by and about religious culture and the selected sites of study were chosen to support these research objectives. The results of this study have the potential to be generalizable to scholars who are interested in how media influences, and is in turn influenced by, culture. It also revealed the persuasive intent of media produced by and about religious culture. This is a significant consideration for those who study the rhetoric of multimedia and digital spaces because the shaping of attitudes and beliefs about particular groups through the strategic use of digital rhetorical practices is examined.

This chapter has detailed the methods used to collect and analyze data for this study. In the next chapter I discuss findings that demonstrate how attitudes and beliefs about a particular organization or group can be shaped by the rhetorical strategies used to create digital content. I show how the process of mediatization – advancements in media technology that have a direct influence on institutions and cultures (Hjarvard 2008) – have influenced how information about institutions and organizations are produced, shared, and received.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Mormon.org

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) is a Christian organization that follows the teachings of the American prophet Joseph Smith. They are a global organization that can be found on six continents with 15 million members worldwide. While their organization is smaller than most other denominations of Christianity they have had an impressive growth in membership. This church has gained 10 million members in the past 25 years alone. The Church of Latter-day Saints was founded in April of 1830 and had only grown to 5 million by 1982 (“Religion and Electronic Media”). Even more impressive is the digital involvement of Mormons and non-Mormons on officially sponsored Mormon media spaces. The Mormon.org Facebook page has over 5.1 million likes, their Instagram has over 201 thousand followers, and their twitter has just over 33.5 thousand followers.

When you open the homepage of the Mormon.org website a video with the caption “Mormons in 90 seconds” is embedded on the top with an information box that can be filled out to receive a free copy of the Book of Mormon. The information box takes the users name, phone number, and email address and opens with the line “Find happiness, order a free Book of Mormon.” The opening line of the “About Us” section of the Mormon.org website reads “Mormons, for all the other things that set us apart, believe first and foremost that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Redeemer.” On the bottom of the “About Us” page, Mormon.org describe their purpose as a way “to introduce our Church to the world. Through these pages, we hope to give accurate information, answer your questions, and provide ways to learn more. We hope this site will be a good beginning to your investigation of our faith.” They close with an invitation for readers to contact missionaries to learn more about the faith.

Throughout this section, they explain that their purpose is to answer the questions that people visiting the page may have about the church. They also say that they will provide the most accurate information about church teachings and will provide ways for anyone interested in their church to learn more (About Us, Mormon.org). This website is an example of religious media sponsored by the official organization. The goal of Mormon.org is to represent the Mormon faith to those outside the organization in a positive way and to dispel some of the banal and journalistic representation that many outside the Mormons faith have accepted as true.

An aspect of the Mormon.org website that I like – one of the reasons that I selected this particular website for analysis – is that they embed several social and media functions within the website itself including a chat room, an original video series with open comment space that encourages audience communication, and “Meet Mormons” profile pages that are created by practicing members of the Church of Latter-day Saints and then published by Mormon.org. They apply text, video, images, interviews, hashtags, embedded URLs, and retweets of other official church digital campaigns in their communications. They also encourage users to share Mormon.org content for evangelical and educational purposes. There is even a list of “Mormon Hashtag Recommendations” that members of the church can access to find the best hashtags to add to their social media posts. The groups of hashtags are broken down into categories like *general hashtags*, *events*, and *general church leadership*. My analysis only included a small selection of the Meet Mormons profiles but future research that considers the many other media functions within Mormon.org would aid scholars in understanding how the process of mediatization through Mormon.org is influencing the perception of Mormons in Western society.

The stated purpose of the “Meet Mormons” campaign is to encourage networking and communication between Mormons and non-Mormons. For this reason, I anticipated that much of



the data I would collect would represent instances of organizational identification among members that have created profile pages. My reason for making this assumption had been that publishing a profile page indicated that a member was willing to outwardly identify themselves as a member of the organization and would likely express the impact that their membership had on their lives.

The “Meet Mormons” campaign presents every Mormon with an opportunity to evangelize while simultaneously giving curious onlookers an honest and personal look into the lives of Mormons. Practicing Mormons were urged to sign on to Mormon.org and create profile pages that include *About Me*, *Why I am a Mormon* and *How I live my faith* sections. The profiles may be created by any Mormon that remains in good standing with the church. Mormon.org encourages members to create profiles saying, “By creating a profile, you can share your feelings about your faith, shed light on who we are as a people and demystify our most commonly misunderstood beliefs” (“What is the Mormon Church and Religion?” Mormon.org). By publishing a profile page a member is able to outwardly identify themselves as a member of the organization and express the role that their faith plays in their lives.

One pattern that I found throughout the profiles I examined was that it did not seem that Mormons were trying to directly convert their audience to their church. Of all the profiles that I collected data from, not one suggested that the reader should join the Church of Latter-day Saints. Instead, they seem to be using this digital platform as a way of establishing an initial connection with non-Mormons that are curious about their faith. The members use their profiles to discuss their jobs, families, schooling, and hobbies. Key terms and phrases like *happiness*, *I am a Mormon*, *truth of the Gospel*, and *mission* were found in most of the profiles that I examined. This is a strategic function modeled by Mormon.org and adopted by individual

members that created profiles on the Momron.org site. While the profiles are not outwardly evangelical, members still –whether with rhetorical intention or unconsciously – are identifying themselves as members of organization that provides truth, happiness, and a purpose through missionary work.

I collected samples of profile pages from Mormon.org and critically examined the text to unearth *acts of normalization, expressions of belonging, religious experiences* and *personal transformation sharing*. These codes were selected after a careful examination of the text samples. Through this method I was able to find how religious content and information was framed by members on a sponsored platform. This allowed me to analyze how the process of mediatization has influenced the ways that religious represent their faith and also determine how this shift has transformed cultural understanding of faith practice and membership.

### **Acts of Normalization**

Acts of normalization were described as everyday experiences that the member has that is not related to their organizational membership. I looked for moments in which members used their profile content as an instrument for identifying with their audience.

It is easy to find examples of the Mormon faith being misrepresented, or represented in a way that the church does not support, in Western media. Television shows like *Big Love*, which depicts church members living as modern day polygamists, and South Park, with an entire episode titled *All About Mormons*, promote misleading and sometimes false representations or Latter-Day Saints teaching and doctrine. More recently *The Book of Mormon*, a religious musical satire, has become popular on Broadway and in London's West End. These often false or exaggerated accounts of the Mormon faith have led to wide-ranging uncertainty and mistrust of Mormons, with many people calling their religion cultish or weird. Mormon.org's goal of using

member profiles to clarify and explain the most commonly misunderstood beliefs to those outside their faith makes sense in this light.

Whether intentionally being used as a strategy or not, Mormon members opening their profile pages with short statements about their everyday interests allow them to normalize their faith based lifestyle to those outside their church. This is particularly beneficial for readers whose only exposure to their faith has been through media they have experienced. The normalizing introductions are part of a suggested format because so many members open their profile in this style; however, the content is still original and produced individually by each member. Each member is responsible for creating their own content and choose to incorporate behavior that I would classify as normalizing as part of their profile. Of the 35 members examined, all but one discussed their profession or an activity that they enjoy in their introductory statement. Members discussed various topics ranging from loving to dance, playing music, collecting comic books, and one member even mentioned Chinese calligraphy as a hobby.

I also noticed that many members used the opening lines to discuss personal information like where they live, what they do professionally, and/or whether they are married and if they have children. After reviewing the 35 sample profiles I found that 24 mentioned where they lived or grew up, 31 mentioned what their profession was, and 25 mentioned a spouse or children. I also found that 12 members included all three of these topic areas in their introduction statement. While this number is interesting it could be misleading because it is impossible to know how many of the 35 members did not mention spouses, children, or professions because they may be unmarried or unemployed. Some that did not mention being married or having children did make nonspecific comments about family life, loving family, or the value of family to those who practice Mormon faith. One member made a specific mention of loving their sister's children

while another claimed, “The emphasis on family in the Church has helped bring my family together to become stronger and support each other.”

### **Expressions of Belonging**

Expressions of belonging seem to be such a major part of Mormon culture that community becomes an essential feature of Mormon practice. There is even a page of the Mormon.org website dedicated to explaining what being part of the Mormon community is like. They explain that “Church communities offer valuable opportunities for Church members to put the things we learn into practice by helping others and serving God” (Church Community, Mormon.org). Members made at least one expression of belonging to the Mormon community in 34 out of the 35 profiles examined.

I described expressions of belonging as any time that a member mentions their Mormon community, family, friends, or fellow missionaries. Only one of the sampled profiles made no mention of belonging to the Mormon community or communities within the Mormon organization. The most frequent statements that expressed belonging was “I love being a Mormon” and “I love being in the truth.” Members often strengthened or supported these statements by following them up with their own individual experiences within their church community. An example of this practice from one member was, “I love being part of a church community and really enjoy spending time with other church members.” Another member built upon their statement of being part of a True faith by claiming, “I know without a shadow of a doubt that I belong to the true Church of Jesus Christ.”

### **Religious Experiences**

Religious experiences were one of the broader practices that I was assessing the sample profiles for. A religious experience was defined as any experiences that the member had as a

direct result of being a member of the Church of Latter-day Saints that they may not have had if they were part of any other faith group or non-religious. In other words, experiences that I may not have had as a Catholic, or experiences you may not have had if you were not a Mormon. These experiences are usually used to set the Mormon member apart from non-members, using human experience as a medium for promoting the benefits of being a member of the Mormon Church.

The most commonly discussed experience throughout the profile pages is the Mormon mission. Mormon Newsroom, another official website of the Church of Latter-day Saints, describes missionaries as young adults - usually under the age of 25 - that participate in over 400 different mission locations throughout the world. Missionaries travel to teach about their church and baptize people into their faith. Mormon Newsroom claims that there are currently as many as 75,000 active Mormon missionaries sharing the Gospel globally (Mormon Missionary Program, 2014). With such a large population of their church participating in missions it is no wonder that many members reflect on this experience in their own profile pages.

Other common experiences shared by members included participation in the Relief Society (an organization for Mormon women that meets to assist those in need and evangelize) teaching Sunday school, and holding official offices within the church structure like Bishop or Ward Leader. Religious experiences are often expressed or explained in the “How I live my faith” sections of the profiles. One member stated that “I worked as a full time missionary in Melbourne, Australia and have since worked as a leader and mentor with the Latter-day Saint and Non-Latter-day Saint youth in my local community.” Of the 35 profiles, 26 members referenced their membership in an activity that they could only participate in as a Mormon.

## Personal Transformation Sharing

Personal transformation sharing is the moment in time where a shift or change occurs and a person believes that they have found the absolute “truth” through that change. Augustine spends pages and pages of his autobiography *Confessions* describing his own transformative moment. For him it was as he sat in a garden, pulling his hair out and wrestling with the decision to embrace the Christian faith. He described his as a moment when “All shadows of doubt were dispelled” (153). Augustine wrote *Confessions* in part as a platform for personal transformation sharing. As an evangelist, Augustine shared his “truth” through strategic communications with the purpose of converting his audience to Christianity. Mormon members discussing their own transformative moments are engaging in the same strategic communication that Augustine used to convert their audience to Mormonism.

A significant number of Mormon members use their profiles to engage in similar acts of personal transformation sharing. I had described this act as illustrating ways in which faith had had a significant influence on the life of the member. I noted that 34 out of 35 member profiles discussed a transformative moment that impacted their life that could not have happened had they not been members of the Church of Latter-day Saints. One member described coming into their faith over the course of their first experience with cancer. They described how the church community they found through their faith, in addition to the support from God, enabled them to get through their diagnosis and treatment. Another member discussed their conscious decision to become a member of the church and how “This came in my early twenties when I realized that the lifestyle I had been leading was not bringing happiness into my life. That choice got me back to church regularly, it started me on the path to where I am today.” Another member very simply claims, “I prayed, the Lord answered, and I followed.” Personal transformation sharing seems to

be in line with the Mormon practice of giving testimony. Most Mormons have their own testimony story prepared and practiced. It is an evangelical tool and used by Missionaries and church members when they are asked about their faith.

In the next section I discuss the construction of religious media through wiki-spaces. While the Mormon.org member profiles are created by individuals, these wiki-spaces were created collaboratively in a digital space where authors, editors, and readers only interact through comment and discussion pages. This part of the analysis examined the way that Catholicism and Mormonism is defined and represented in spaces that are not sponsored by a religious organization. This examination was designed to answer the second research question: What representation of these religious organizations - Catholic and Mormon - are media producers constructing for their audience?

### **Religious and Secular Wiki-spaces**

Throughout this portion of this analysis I am attempting to answer how representations of Catholics and Mormons are being constructed in digital spaces. Unlike Mormon.org, the two sources of religious media are considered unofficial religious spaces – publications situated outside of religious authority – and may be produced by those within the faith but outside the authority of the organizational structure. I consider WikiChristian and MormonWiki religious media under Hjarvard's (2008) definition of religious media because content is produced by religious actors – with the exception of spam produced by outsiders that have created false user accounts – and content is often framed in a way that supports the image that the organization is trying to sustain. The third source of analysis – Wikipedia – is a secular space positioned entirely outside of any religious authority. Wikipedia is more complex and all three forms of mediatized

behavior may exist depending upon the behaviors, beliefs, and experience of each individual content editor.

Using data collected from all three sites I examined how Catholics and Mormons are portrayed on each of these websites. I compared the text produced through the use of codes focused on prior analyses of articles about Catholicism and Mormonism on each wiki space. I found statements about truth and/or validity, definitions of the faith, claims about each faith group, beliefs of the participating members, important dates, biographical information of church leaders or members, and church history. I also considered the number of collaborators that participated in the creation of each article, the total number of edits, and vandalistic attempts and content. This data is valuable to the overall analysis because it illustrates how many collaborators were involved in the production of material, how quickly inconsistencies in information produced about a faith was found and edited, and the general diversity of authorship per wiki-space.

### *Wiki-spaces*

A wiki is an open source Web page that users can read and modify. In that sense, it is much like a blank page that can be written on, edited, and changed by you and countless other collaborators that are all working on the same project. When Jimmy Wales launched Wikipedia in 2003 as an open source encyclopedia, 1,500 articles were created per month on average for the first year that the site was up. Compare this to his previous project, Nupedia – a non-wiki mediated encyclopedia with rigid content controls – which only published 24 articles over the course of its first three years, and you begin to see the value of open source spaces for knowledge creation and dissemination (Barton & Cummings, 2008, p. 2-4). The benefit of religious discussion and teaching through wiki-spaces is that wikis are among the most efficient means of producing and/or obtaining information in the 21st century; however, many people



view information found on wikis as unreliable or fake due to the collaborative nature of their production. In *Wiki Writing*, Barton and Cummings detail the history of wiki-spaces and introduces readers to scholarship that shows information found on Wikipedia to be as accurate as information from the Encyclopedia Britannica Online (14). Considering the validity of information found on most wiki-spaces and through other collaborative digital spaces is valuable when we consider how the mediatization of religious culture and practice has transformed the most common methods of religious information production and distribution. Prior to the digitization of religious media it was far more difficult for the average person to create or access religious materials.

### **Representations of Faith Groups**

On Wikipedia's page covering Catholicism there is an entire bulleted section that explains the beliefs and practices that set Catholics aside from other denominations of Christianity and other religious faith groups. This entire section makes claims about the Catholic faith that form a representation of Catholicism in modern culture. The line that claims that Catholic practice includes, "The use of sacred images, candles, vestments and music, and often incense and water, in worship" – while accurate in its representation of Catholic worship – is often used in popular media as a way of portraying and identifying Catholics in film and television (Catholicism Wikipedia). This relates to Hjarvard's (2008) definition of banal representations of faith in media.

Sr. Helena Burns, fsp, is a Catholic nun and blogger. Through her blog – Hell Burns – she reviews films and television shows for her readers. Her July 25, 2013 post reviewing the film "The Conjuring" discusses how the use of Catholic imagery can simultaneously be both banal and theologically sound representations of a faith group. She describes the film as "a scary Mary,

based-on-a-true-story, supernatural thriller about demonic entities harassing a family in Rhode Island in 1971” (Hell Burns, 2013). She calls the theology in the film, “both accurate and squishy at the same time,” providing readers with the following examples:

Accurate: Laypersons are not authorized to do exorcisms.

Squishy: In an emergency, laypersons are authorized to do exorcisms.

Accurate: Phenomena such as cold rooms, bad smells and things going bump in the night can accompany the presence of evil spirits.

Squishy: All kinds of ghosts, demons, birds, destruction, storms, possessions and other paranormal incidents happening wildly all at the same time in the same place.

Accurate: It’s good to have your kids baptized.

Squishy: The Vatican needs to give permission to do an exorcism for the unbaptized (???)

Accurate: The devil doesn’t possess things, things are only vessels in order to be able to possess humans.

Squishy: The house still needed an exorcism because the evil entities attached to “the family” and would follow them wherever they go (???) (Sr. Helena Burns 2013)

This is just one example of an accurate but exaggerated use of religious imagery in media. WikiChristians focused attention on the practice of polygamy in Mormonism offers a similar – accurate but exaggerated – account of a faith practice used by members of a religious organization. WikiChristian uses the exact phrase, “The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a conservative branch that continues to practice polygamy” twice in the same article (Mormonism, *WikiChristian*). The words polygamy and/or plural marriage were used 5 times on WikiChristian, were never used on MormonWiki, and were used 16 times on Wikipedia.

## **Historical Foundation for Faith**

I decided to examine instances in which wiki collaborators gave faith a historical context through the inclusion of dates, biographical information about church leaders or members, and church history. Throughout my close reading analysis I considered historical elements because I believed that they were used as a strategy to establish authorial credibility. These platforms were designed and intended to be encyclopedic in nature; therefore, historical details like important dates, biographical information, and general church history should have been a substantial part of each article. Coding for instances in which a historical foundation was established through the text revealed much about the goal of each page. For example, it revealed whether the collaborators were interested in establishing credibility as an academic source or creating a more evangelical resource. The encyclopedic structure of the three platforms should have made the historical foundations of these organizations a propriety for article collaborators, but historical context is neglected in the two religious media representations leading the reader to believe the intent is more evangelical than informative. The two religious media sources are a less than ideal resource for someone trying to learn about the particular faith groups. For this reason, those users will likely seek out the secular site to learn more about the faith.

WikiChristian does provide historical details about Mormonism (ex: “The Mormonism movement began in 1820 near Palmyra, New York”); however, most facts presented about the founding of Mormonism were framed in a way that downplayed the validity of this religious group. Statements like, “teachings of Joseph Smith,” used in place of claims that the faith was based on a commandment of God or a teaching of Christ, intentionally minimized the credibility of Mormonism.

## **Collaborative Writing, Editing, and Page History**

All three sites are similar stylistically and both MormonWiki and WikiChristian clearly imitated the style of Wikipedia. Each page has a “page history” that allows any user to view the order in which an article has been created and changed. This is a beneficial tool for the audience because it allows them to discern whether or not they feel that the information is credible based on when and how the article was produced. Additionally, edit summaries allow users to track the specific changes and compare one version of the article to a revised text. On a page like MormonWiki, where membership requirements limit participation to those within their own faith group, I found far less edits than on a truly open-source page like Wikipedia.

A review of the edit history on MormonWiki showed no indication that members had to revise or delete false information, spam, or other forms of vandalism on their article about Mormonism. This is in all likelihood due to the safeguards that the founders of the website have put in place to avoid those very situations. Many of the edits I reviewed on the history pages of Wikipedia and WikiChristian did show a substantial number of users having to revise or delete false information, spam, or other forms of vandalism.

On December 12th of 2010 the WikiChristian user “Dirty gay slut” made numerous offensive revisions to the Mormon page including embedding pornography and contributing anti-Semitic commentary to the text. These revisions to the page were edited and the user was blocked within 10 hours.



Figure 1: Clip of 12 Dec 2010 Vandalism on WikiChristian

Source: "Mormonism" <http://www.wikichristian.org/wiki/en/index.php?title=Mormonism>

The Catholic article underwent similar vandalism on WikiChristian as what appeared on the Mormonism page. In 2010, the user "El Vandallo" erased all page content and wrote two lines of bold text. The first was a racial attack and the second read "Glory to Vandalism," The edit was reverted within seven hours. This page was also hit by user "Dirty gay slut" on the 10th of December 2010, and the same act of vandalism that occurred on the Mormonism page happened on the Catholic page. These revisions were undone within 8 hours.

The Wikipedia page on Mormonism was vandalized and then had all content deleted on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March, 2017, by user "0524hi0524hi." The content was restored and the vandalism revised within seven minutes of user "0524hi0524hi" making changes to the page. This user is

now blocked from making changes to Wikipedia articles. So while Mormonwiki does not experience vandalism as a result of their tight control, the open-source feature of Wikipedia has allowed the site to grow so large that participants can detect and reverse vandalism in a matter of minutes.

## **Wikipedia**

### *Mormonism*

The Wikipedia page for Mormonism originated on January 18, 2002, and there have been 6,248 total edits to this page. Wikipedia provides a Pageview Analysis tool that allows users to find statistics of pages that they are viewing. Using this tool I found that there are 923 people with editing access that have watched or participated in the construction of this page since its initiation. The daily average of pageviews is 1,870 and the total number of pageviews is 1,166,685.

This page defines Mormonism as “the predominant religious tradition of the Latter-day Saint movement of Restorationist Christianity.” In addition to having the largest edit history and number of contributions, the Wikipedia article on Mormonism is by far the largest and most detailed with 4,608 words. The page reads like an encyclopedia entry and has no evangelical or persuasive content. You can see examples throughout the history page of information being removed or revised due to lack of sources or because the information is inaccurate or misleading. I found more attention to detail and accuracy of information on the revision history of the Wikipedia pages than I did on those of the other two sites. I also observed that most Wikipedia sub-sections were more comprehensive than those found on the other two wiki-spaces. The introduction alone includes information about restoration, prominent church leaders like Brigham Young, other denominations and sects of Mormonism that have separated from the

Church of Latter-day Saints, and a basic overview of their beliefs. Other subject headings within the article include *Brief History*, *Theology*, *Relations to Other Faiths*, and *Theological Divisions*.

I was surprised to find the Wikipedia page to have more embedded supplementary media than any of the other pages. While all three pages use hyperlinks and inserted at least one image, the Wikipedia page has a variety of pictures (historical paintings, pictures of stained glass, theological paintings, a picture of a baptism, and an image of one of the earliest prints of the Book of Mormon), external links to documentaries, suggestions for further reading, and links to the official websites of the different denominations of Mormonism.

### *Catholicism*

The Wikipedia page for Catholicism originated on October 27, 2001, and there have been 6,125 total edits to this page. Through the Pageview Analysis tool, Wikipedia reports that there are 417 people with editing access that have watched the construction of this page. The daily average of pageviews is 1,964 and the total number of pageviews is 1,225,704.

Through this page, Catholicism is defined as “a term which in its broadest sense refers to the beliefs and practices of Christian churches that understand and describe themselves as being *Catholic* within the universal and apostolic church.” The article is 6,229 words long. Divisions make up a large part of Catholic history and there is an appropriately sized summary of divisions from Catholicism early in the Wikipedia article. This includes an entire paragraph on the 16th century Protestant Reformation. Article headings include *History*, *Beliefs and Practices*, and *Interpretations* (Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodoxy, Oriental Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Independent Catholicism, and Views of individual scholars).

Transparency and attention to detail are observable in the “Beliefs and Practices” section where listings of beliefs are explained as being specifically Eastern Catholic, Eastern Orthodox,

Oriental Orthodox, or Roman Catholic. They also explain teachings and practices that are observed by all divisions of Catholicism. This focus on accuracy is also perceivable – like the page on Mormonism – in the revision history page.

There are far more instances of vandalism on this page than there was on Mormonism. In March of 2017 alone vandalism was reverted on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> of March. Other changes in March of this year involved clarifying terminology like “Catholicism,” adding details about Lutheranism, and contributions to the “Beliefs and Practices” section. Overall, the Catholicism Wikipedia page had a detailed revision history with attention to accuracy and historically verifiable facts.

## **MormonWiki**

### *Mormonism*

The MormonWiki page on Mormonism defines Mormonism as “a restoration of the ancient Church of Christ, with a prophet of God at its head. As Christ organized the early Church with Peter, James, and John as its ‘First Presidency,’ and twelve apostles and seventy other worthy men as their emissaries, so is the Mormon Church organized.” MormonWiki’s article on Mormonism includes the topic headings *Mormonism, Why a Restoration?, More Scripture, Spiritual Gifts, A Plan for Mankind, Temples, and Lifestyle*. In the opening line they describe Mormonism as “a restoration of the ancient Church of Christ, with a prophet of God at its head.” The article length is 1115 words with an evangelical style. Scripture is weaved into the text to support Mormon teaching and doctrine, particularly in the section titles “Why a Restoration” where four verses of Christian scripture (Acts 20, 2 Thessalonians 2, 2 Timothy 4, and 2 Peter) were used to support the Mormon teaching that Christians could not receive revelations from God between the martyrdom of the Apostles and the restoration that began with Joseph Smith in



the 1800's. Following the "Why a Restoration" section Christian and Mormon scriptures were quoted and used interchangeably to strengthen arguments and validate teachings.

The Mormonism section is a short paragraph with a brief explanation of the Mormon organizational structure, introduction to their prophet Joseph Smith, explanation of where and how the church was named, and an embedded photo of a Mormon temple. Descriptions throughout are very religious in nature. For example, teachings specific to Mormon theology are presented as factual like "The Lord has promised to reveal more scripture as His children prove themselves worthy to receive it" or "Worthy members of the Church enjoy the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost."

### *Catholicism*

Mormonwiki has not produced an article on Catholicism, reducing my ability to fully compare how this faith organization presents other faith organizations. This is a serious limitation but not one that made it impossible to answer the research question because Catholics are mentioned in articles that concern Mormon teaching and faith practice. So while MormonWiki does not have an article defining Catholicism or explaining Catholic faith as a whole, they do mention Catholic faith and doctrine in articles explaining their own faith. In an article titled "A Mormon Discusses Indulgences," there is an entire section of the article regarding the Catholic teaching.

Catholics view purgatory as a place where the essentially righteous are refined in preparation for resurrection and salvation into a place of glory in heaven. This idea is based on ancient truth, in which part of that truth has been lost over the millennia. Because Mormons have modern prophets to guide them, and these prophets receive truths through revelation, Mormons know more about the space between death and resurrection (A Mormon Discusses Indulgences *MormonWiki*).

Statements like these seem to be in alignment with Mormon members who discussed the Truth of their own faith and their passion for being part of Christ's true church. Overall, there is

an underlying presumption in all MormonWiki articles that the Mormon faith is “True” that do not exist on the other two websites. This is likely because MormonWiki is a Mormon specific space for religious media while ChristianWiki involves contributions from numerous Christian denominations each with some extent of doctrinal differences.

While my assumption was that both religious media sources would produce evangelical messages, and represent their organizations as True faith, the analysis only showed MormonWiki to construct message in this way. An example of this can be seen in the way that MormonWiki introduces the teaching that Joseph Smith received religious revelations from God. While MormonWiki structures the message as factual by saying “revelations given to Joseph Smith,” this was positioned as Mormon ideology on Wikipedia that framed the statement “Joseph Smith, Jr. said he received a vision in the spring of 1820,” and on WikiChristian that explained, “Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, claimed to have received a series of visions.”

A difference in the way religious history is discussed is also apparent by comparing how the three sites approach the topic of Mormon sects. On MormonWiki the topic only receives a line that claims, “Through time, there were schisms even in the orthodox churches, and eventually many sects evolved, none guided by pure revelation, and none having the true authority to act in the name of Christ.” Wikipedia dedicated an entire section titled “Theological Divisions” to this very topic. In this section they discuss Mainstream Mormon theology, Mormon Fundamentalism, and Liberal Reformist theology. WikiChristian also dedicates a section to this topic, though it is much shorter and only discusses the Fundamentalist sect which still practices polygamy and is often featured on television shows about polygamy.

## WikiChristian

### *Mormonism*

The WikiChristian page on Mormonism defines Mormonism as “a religion originating in the early 1800s as a product of the teaching of Joseph Smith and the Latter Day Saint movement. The term Mormonism is also often used to refer specifically to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is by far the most numerous and well-known sects claiming derivation from Joseph Smith.” The article on Mormonism published on WikiChristian is almost half the length of the article by the same name on MormonWiki. The article, which is 589 words in length, had the feature that enables future revisions shut off due to problems the page has had with vandalism. This leaves many topic headings either empty or unstructured with vague explanations. One example of this is the text that following the topic heading “Polygamy.” This section of the article only received a one line explanation, “It has been widely known that Mormonism has a history where polygamy has been accepted, although today most mainstream Mormon denominations do not advocate polygamy” (Mormonism, *WikiChristian*).

This article cannot be interpreted as evangelical by any definition. The introductory paragraph on WikiChristian is much the same as MormonWiki though somewhat less detailed. Both sites refer to the faith originating with restoration in the 1800’s and they both also allude to Joseph Smith being the prophet of the Church of Latter-day Saints. One significant difference is the closing line of the WikiChristian opening paragraph which expresses that the Mormon faith “has had uneasy relationships with mainstream Christianity” (Mormonism, *WikiChristian*).

### *Catholicism*

The WikiChristian article on Catholicism originated on January 17, 2005, and has approximately 60 edits. This article defines Catholicism as the largest “Christian denomination,

with over a billion members.” The article is 524 words long and lacks detail about the teachings and doctrine of the Catholic faith. There is a short introduction, a paragraph with a quick description of the First Vatican Council and a second paragraph explaining the Second Vatican Council, and a concluding paragraph that discusses the Catholic Pope and organizational hierarchy.

Some information on the Catholic space is outdated. For example, a line claiming that Pope Benedict XVI is the most recent Pope is false. An explanation for why such basic information is out of date is that the latest revision to the Catholicism page on WikiChristian was made on December 12, 2010, while Pope Francis, the 266th Pope of the Catholic Church, was elected to the Papacy in 2013.

Both the Mormonism and Catholicism pages on WikiChristian appear to be incomplete in large part because the editing function was shut down due to vandalism and spam attacks to the website in 2012. Since that time there have been few edits throughout WikiChristian. In an explanation of why the page had remained stagnant for some time the two co-founders of WikiChristian explained “spammers who nearly choked the capacity of the server making it impossible to manually revert all the changes bringing WikiChristian to a virtual standstill. About 2 years ago, we decided to keep the project dormant until we figure out a solution on how to delete all the spam content and bot created users.” As the two founders of the site removed spam content from their site the size of the database shrank from 600 GB to 20 GB. They used the opportunity to upgrade their software and began asking for new users to join WikiChristian and contribute to articles in 2015. They post a letter to potential contributors on their Wiki under a section called “WikiChristian needs your help!” and they ask those who are interested to email

them with a full name, brief testimonial, areas of interest where they can contribute, and what their level of Christian study has been.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study examined how religious organizations are represented through media as the Internet shifts American communication practices (Perrin, 2015). I collected data and evaluated the digital representations of two – Catholic and Church of Latter-day Saints – distinct denominations of Christianity. These representations included information published in secular spaces and religious media. I defined secular spaces as media that was not intended to be used for religious information sharing, but where religious information is produced and distributed. I used Hjarvards (2008) definition of religious media to describe media that was produced either by those recognized as religious authorities or those acting in an evangelical or missionary role on behalf of the religious organization. Religious media was further split into two categories: officially recognized religious media and unofficially recognized religious media.

Table 7: Religious Media Categorizations

<b>Secular Media</b>	<b>Religious Media</b>	
<b>Unofficial Media</b>	<b>Official Media</b>	<b>Unofficial Media</b>
A media platform not designed with religious communication in mind; however, religious discourse and the production and publication of religious information may appear on these platforms. Spaces like Wikipedia would be considered secular media.	Religious content produced and maintained by official organizations and organizational authority. Spaces like Mormon.org would be considered official media.	Religious content produced by volunteers that are situated completely outside the control of the official organization and organizational authority. Spaces like WikiChristian and MormonWiki would be considered unofficial.

For the purposes of this study I defined official religious media as any content produced and maintained by the organization. This information was framed in a way that allowed the organization to represent themselves through media. Unofficial media was media produced by those outside the controls of religious authority. This information would likely be in alignment with the goals of the larger organization, but its unofficial position may make it appear less

reliable. Additionally, these spaces may – like secular spaces where religion is discussed – contain information and teachings that are influenced by banal and journalistic media (Hjarvard, 2008). I also observed that these spaces – in many instances – validate existing banal and journalistic religious constructs.

### **Explanation of Results from Mormon.org**

An analysis of both the official and unofficial religious media spaces allowed for several important observations to be made about how mediatization influences both the representation of religious culture and practice and the strategies involved in creating those representations. First, I found organizational identification to be widespread practice used on the website Mormon.org. George Cheney (1983) believed that large organizations communication was most effective when identification formed the connection between the organization and the individual. Cheney observed that this process began when the organization initiated the individual's process of identifying (Cheney, 1983). For example, Mormon.org encouraging members to create profile pages about their Mormon experience serves as the organizations invitation to members to outwardly identify themselves as Mormons. This benefits the organization because once individuals begin to identify with the organization they are more likely to act as a positive representative of the group, demonstrating characteristics that align with those of their organization (Cheney, 1983). This example shows how Mormon.org had used religious media for the dual purpose of evangelizing and promoting identification among their membership.

Acts of normalization were described as everyday experiences that the member has outside of their membership in the Church of Latter-day Saints. These activities would support identification between the Mormon profile author and potentially non-Mormon reader. Of the 35 members observed, all but one made a statement that I would characterize as an act of

normalization. By discussing family, culture, work, and other general interests, the Mormon member creating a profile is able to become “substantially one” with the audience (Burke, 1950, p. 21).

Expressions of belonging included member references to belonging to a community, family, friends, or fellowship of missionaries within the church. Of the 35 profiles, 34 members made an expression of belonging to a community within the organization. This act of organizational identification shapes the way that individuals perceive their own membership in their organization. When their self-perception, goals, and values become aligned with those of their organization they can become more committed and there is an increased likelihood that they will communicate the significance of membership to those outside the organization. Cheney (1983) used Burkean identification as a method of understanding organizational rhetoric. He argued that individual’s associations with large groups, cultures, and organizations are valuable because they aid in the construction of personal meaning (145). Cheney claims that identifying as a member of an organization supports an individual in setting themselves apart from larger society. He uses the phrase “I’m a New Yorker” as an example of how an individual will separate themselves from large society to identify as part of a named, smaller group (Cheney, 1983, p. 146). This is very similar to how individual Mormons use the phrase “I am a Mormon” on their personal profile pages.

While acts of normalization establish a foundation for the audience to identify with Mormons – a culture that they may not have understood or associated themselves with prior to viewing the profile pages of individual members – the religious experiences were used to set Mormons apart from their audience. Religious experiences were defined as experiences the member had that they could only experience through their Mormon membership. Out of the 35



profiles 26 members referenced their membership in an activity that they could only participate in as a Mormon with the Mormon mission cited most frequently as an activity the member enjoyed participating in. Through this act the Mormon member becomes a medium for promoting the benefits of membership in the organization.

Personal transformation sharing had been described as the member's recognition of faith's influence in their life. I observed that 34 out of 35 profiles noted a transformative moment that forever impacted the member's life. This code described experiences a member had where they felt as though their life was transformed by their faith. When Mormon members use their profile as a platform for discussing their own transformative moments they are engaging in a strategic communication – whether intentionally or unintentionally – that is evangelical in nature and intended to aid in converting their audience to Mormonism. While members never directly invite their audience to join the Church of Latter-day Saints, this strategy is a move to represent how the audience's life could be transformed by associating themselves with the organization.

Cheney calls identification strategies both “intentional and unintentional attempts by the organization to induce identification” (Cheney, 1983, p. 156). This assessment accurately represents the instances of both organizational identification and Burkean identification that I observed on the Mormon.org website. First, Mormon.org encourages members to identify outwardly with the organization by providing a digital platform for them to discuss their Mormon identity. Mormon.org benefits from this in two important ways: (1) by producing their own religious media they are able to fashion a positive representation of their faith and culture, and (2) it promotes organizational identification among their existing membership. These members will in many cases align their communication with that of the organization because they want to represent the group that they associate themselves with in the most positive light

that they can. Second, the members, now acting in the role of missionary or evangelist through their profile, discuss their personal interests and values as a way of identifying with those who are outside of the faith group.

Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley (2008) discuss the connection between organizational identification and member loyalty. They point to the importance of cultivating organizational identification by offering four answers to the question, “why does identification matter?”. The first reason that they give is that a member that identifies as part of the organization makes the organization – and all of its values – part of their own personal identity (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008, p. 334). You can see this in the way that most Mormon members weave the values of the Church of Latter-day Saints into their own personal profiles. The second was the essential motivation to belong and “self-enhance” by identifying as being part of a membership (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008, p. 335). This is a common feature that I identified in most Mormon profiles where members made outward expressions of belonging. One example of this that I found on a member’s profile page was, “I love being a Mormon. I feel like I am in a big family and we protect and care for each other regardless of where we are.” The third reason that they gave was that there are great organizational outcome related to having members identify with the organization like “cooperation, effort, participation, and organizationally beneficial decision making” (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008, p. 336). This benefit for the Church of Latter-day Saints is apparent by the number of members who enthusiastically gave their time to create profiles on Mormon.org. Their last point is that organizational identification promotes and supports organizational behavior (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008, p. 338). For example, a Mormon that has created a profile page about living their faith is more likely to remain loyal to their church teachings and doctrine.

An unanticipated finding was presented when I compared this data to other data that I collected in 2015 using an almost identical coding system. In 2015, I completed a close reading of 35 randomly selected Meet Mormon profile pages. This shows a constancy of member's rhetorical strategy on Mormon.org even as changes are made to the platform itself. My overall observation of practices on the Meet Mormon profile pages remains much the same even though there have been drastic changes made to the website since my first analysis.

Since 2015, Mormon.org has undergone a complete redesign. While the Meet Mormon campaign and member profile pages still exist, the way a user navigates the information has changed. In 2015, thousands of member profiles were randomly listed and an option to filter content by gender, age, ethnicity, previous religious affiliation, or location was made available to the user.

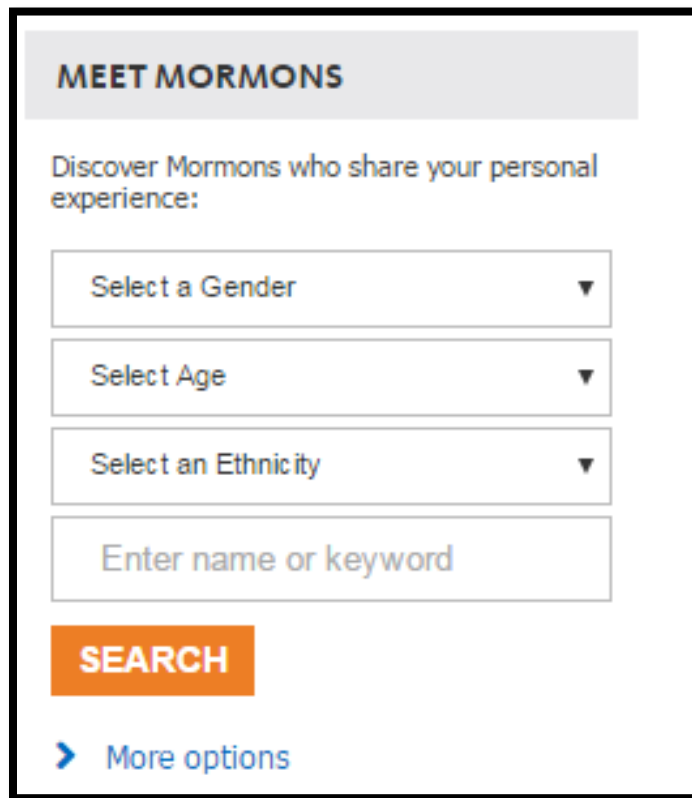


Figure 2: Screenshot of Meet Mormons filter prior to Mormon.org Redesign

The filter promoted Identification because someone like me – a Catholic – could choose to view the profiles of former Catholics that had converted to the Church of Latter-day Saints and created evangelical profiles pages. This approach fit perfectly within the Burkean concept of identification as a community building technique. When I would make the selection to filter to former Catholics I would be able to access hundreds of ex-Catholic profiles. In a *Rhetoric of Motives* Burke claimed, “Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division” (Burke, 1969, p. 22). As a Catholic searching through the profiles of Mormons that were once also members of the Catholic Church I was able to simultaneously separate myself and come together. This has filter has been removed and made identification in that way impossible on the 2017 website.

While the removal of the filtering system was a notable change, the way that members represent themselves and structure their individual profiles has remained much the same. In 2015, Mormons still used the platform as a way of establishing an initial connection with non-Mormons that were curious about their faith. They still discussed their jobs, families, schooling, and hobbies. Key terms and phrases like *happiness*, *I am a Mormon*, *truth of the Gospel*, and *mission* were also found in more than half of the profiles that I observed at that time. These are all consistent terms that were also found in my most recent examination of Meet Mormon profiles.

Because the filter has been removed, today's Mormon.org presents the profile pages in a seemingly random order that does not change. The first profile on the page is always the first profile, the second is always second, and so on. You cannot filter profiles by location, sex, previous faith, or any other category and instead must go through profiles in the order that Mormon.org presents them to you. Of the 35 profiles surveyed there was a close distribution of

male and female profiles. There were 16 female profiles and 19 male. I found that 15 different countries and locations were represented including Guatemala, Chile, the United States, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Austria, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Crimea, France, Australia, Nigeria, New Zealand, and England. Of the 35 sample profiles, only 6 members did not indicate their location. I feel that the diversity of members through the first 35 profiles is an act of framing on the part of Mormon.org. This assumption is supported by the fact that my previous randomized collection of 35 profiles in 2015 had far less diversity with only one member claiming to live outside of the United States. Mormon.org moves to ensure that there is diversity represented in the profiles viewed by those outside the organizations. This is an example of an organization that has responded to the mediatization of society by adapting their rhetorical strategies.

### **Explanation of Results from Wiki-spaces**

Data and analysis of religious media content produced on wiki-spaces verified that the variance in size and diversity of authorship in a collaborative and interactive space influenced the content that was produced. In turn, diversity and total number of contributors also influenced perceptions of the contents reliability.

As was expressed earlier in the chapter 4 comparison between Wikipedia and Nupedia, there is value in open-source collaborative space that have few – if any – controls over content production. (Barton & Cummings, 2008). In general, media extends and increases the sharing of religious material (Schulz, 2004) so these collaborative wiki-spaces offer a great opportunity for users to work together and produce new religious content. This is an important consideration because, unlike previous forms of writing and digital writing where an author maintains control over the content that is produced, wiki-writing is comprised of an audience that has the “hybrid

literate identity” of being both a potential producer and consumer of content (Hunter, 2014). A downfall of this technology, particularly for the smaller spaces like WikiChristian and MormonWiki, is that incidences of vandalism and spam are difficult to manage in such open areas. These two websites have tried to limit these behaviors by regulating authorial participation to include only those who provide evidence that they are members of the organizations overseeing the spaces. MormonWiki has a stringent set of requirements – similar to Mormon.org – that a user must meet before being granted access to edit content. While most wiki-spaces lack supervisory authority, the founders of MormonWiki ensure that all participants are members of the LDS and blocks members who vandalize or compose misleading information. While this strategy may be effective in controlling the amount of false information and vandalism on MormonWiki, it is not an effective tool for establishing trust among the audience. Helland (2005) argues that the purpose of establishing web-based platforms for online dialogue is so that organizational controls can be limited and discourse can be open. Unrestricted participation encourages authentic online discourse communities (Helland, 2005). The top right corner has a “log in” tab that only registered users with credentials approved through the More Good Foundation can access pages that enable content modification. WikiChristian, while more flexible than MormonWiki by allowing various denominations of Christianity to participate, require all interested contributors to email the founding members with personal details including name, testimony, and areas where the user can add to the site. Once a WikiChristian user has been credentialed then they can sign on through the “log in” tab just like Mormon members would do on MormonWiki.

The limited number of participants on these religious media spaces and the lack of general diversity may support the illustration of religious culture that the organizational structure

desires, but they do not come across as well-rounded or as having encyclopedic characteristics. The content appears controlled by the organization and is often more evangelical than informative. This is arguably a primary aim of these sites so it may not seem like a limitation in the eyes of their producers; however, outsiders may perceive the articles to be disingenuous and consequently prefer the larger and more secularized media sources like Wikipedia for information. Kent and Taylor (1998) examine how communication technology used without strategy can cause an organizational membership to decline rather than establishing a stronger connection with users. They claim that it is not the media technology that is at fault, but an absence of open communication and participation. Restrictions often cause users to perceive communications through the technology as controlled by the organization and lacking authenticity (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The effect is that users will select a less restricted – often secular – resource. This eliminates most of the control the religious organization had to influence its own image and instead gives authority to journalistic and banal representations of faith groups

Another finding was that both the official and unofficial Mormon space constructed messages that were evangelical in nature. Mormons often described their own faith as the one True faith. More than any other unofficial space, MormonWiki users produced content that was in alignment with content produced by the official organization. I had originally assumed that this would also occur on ChristianWiki but was surprised to find that that religious media space was corresponded with Wikipedia more than it did with MormonWiki. This may be because ChristianWiki is a space that involves the cooperative collaboration of multiple denominations of Christianity. Articles on ChristianWiki never claimed that one denomination of Christianity was Truer than another unlike MormonWiki which frequently claims to be more True than other denominations.

## **Contributions to the Field and Suggestions for Future Research**

The findings from this study further the understanding of religious representation through digital spaces in modern American society. The two main findings of this study were:

1. Organizational identification was a common rhetorical practice observed on the website Mormon.org. This strategy enabled the Mormon organization to form a representation of their own faith and culture through digital media.
2. Social institutions and organizations are subject to journalistic and banal representations of their group if there is a general lack of diversity and collaborative authorship because the perception of content reliability will be reduced.

The first part of this analysis concentrated on answering the first research question:

Which rhetorical strategies are being used in religious digital media spaces and why?

Organizations practices are influenced by the mediatization of communication technology. This question enabled me to examine how organizational rhetorical strategies shift in response to changing communication practices. I accomplished this by analyzing data from the “Meet Mormon” profile pages I collected from the Mormon.org website. I found that, by creating a digital space for individual members to construct their own profile on Mormon.org, members outwardly identified as Mormons using key phrases like “I am a Mormon” through their profile. Because they were outwardly identifying themselves as members, they created opportunities to communicate the organizational values and benefits of membership through individual their pages. The data provided evidence to support the assumption that organizational identification was a key rhetorical strategy used throughout the Meet Mormon profile pages.

Additionally, I observed a mostly equal distribution of male and female profiles (16 female and 19 male) and that there was a large range of member nationalities represented (15 different countries and locations) among the 35 profiles. I do not believe that this is coincidental and the diversity of members found through the first 35 profiles is a rhetorical strategy on the



part of Mormon.org. Mormon.org, like many other large organizations, value diversity because they understand that many potential members value diversity of membership. Future research that assesses more profile pages may be able to better indicate whether the diversity presented is a rhetorical strategy used by Mormon.org.

The second part of this analysis compared articles produced collaboratively in wiki-spaces that described the Catholic and Mormon faith groups. Wikipedia and ChristianWiki were both more encyclopedic than evangelical. The significant difference between these two spaces was the amount of participants working collaboratively to create content. ChristianWiki has less contributors than Wikipedia so the articles are far less informative and there are gaps throughout.

In wiki-spaces sponsored by religious organizations, trolling, spam, and page vandalism appeared to be an influential condition that forced the founders of these spaces to change the way that content was produced and shared on their sites. Consequently, phenomenon such as the limited production of original content, claims of absolute truth, and slower corrections of false information were observed on both MormonWiki and WikiChristian.

The two religious media sites both had a limited number of contributors participating in the construction of their articles. Initially, I believe that these sites intended to be open-source platforms, but vandalism and spam influenced the founders of these sites to add restrictions that would prevent damaging attacks on their spaces by outsiders. Inactivity and a lack of diversity in authorship make the information seem one-sided and contrived. Only Christians can participate on these sites, so Christianity is never portrayed in a negative light. This is a serious limitation for these organizations because users may choose to go to an outside media source that they perceive as more well-rounded. In many cases this will be a secularized source like Wikipedia instead of a religious media source for information. This takes away the organizations ability to

form their own representation and instead gives the power to those outside, some of which may have malicious intent or simply do not understand the faith.

Further exploration of the phenomenon facilitated by digital media and communication technologies continues to be critical for fields of communications, religious studies, and the digital rhetorics. The goal of this study was to assess how the embedding of media technology in religious culture has influenced and changed societies understanding of religion. The Pew Research Center verified that American religious participation is steadily declining and most Millennials would classify themselves as having no religious affiliation (Cooperman, Smith, & Stencel, 2015). In consideration of that decline, this analysis was intended to observe how religious media inform and persuade those that identify as religious and as “non-religious.”

Media has that ability to transform culture and society in significant ways. As media becomes embedded in religious communication it is important to observe how religious culture is impacted. The data collected for this study was a small and limited sample of a much larger corpus. For that reason, my claims about rhetorical strategies in digital spaces serve only as a stepping stone towards a more thorough understanding the influence of mediatization on organizational representation and the rhetorical strategy involved in forming an identity. Future research that considers issues of access, strategy, and efficiency in religious media spaces and religious identity formation would facilitate a more complete understanding of the impact of mediatized religion. Additional areas that should be explored are how the cultural representations of other faith organizations, religious extremist organizations, and antireligious organizations transform as a result of media. Other areas of future research that would enhance current scholarship would be further analysis considering how digital media users contribute to the

representation of religious culture in society through education, evangelization, social media participation, and relationship building in digital communities.

While my study was designed to observe how the process of mediatization has transformed beliefs about religion in modern American culture, only two faith organizations were discussed and this makes generalizations about the influence of media on religious culture impossible. While the study has reached its initial research aims, the data uncovered more complex digital practices in both official and unofficial spaces where religion is discussed and further analysis of those practices could contribute to existing scholarship on religious mediatization and digital evangelization practices.

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