

The Dilemmas of Interpretive Communities: Implications for Mormonism



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Aloha!

Thank you so much, Vice President Bell for that wonderful introduction. I want to hear it again. Thank you also to President Tanner for supporting this great BYU tradition and our celebration of scholarship in the name of David O. McKay a very salient name in our community. Thanks to the past McKay lecturers. It's quite an honor to be numbered among you.

My subject this morning is interpretive community as it applies to media studies, so permit me to draw from an example from late nineteenth century Mormonism to tease it out. The Church sent its finest artists to Europe; this came to be known as the Paris Art Mission. They were to study the art of the time, impressionism, and return to enrich the Saints. Not only did they paint, they immersed themselves in impressionist philosophy in the spirit of Monet, Renoir, and Degas. It was about immediacy and freedom. Like the spontaneous splashes of color, it's about the moment. They had their Church community (that was their center of gravity), but also had this interpretive community of artists and they benefitted immensely from both. They both strengthened their commitments and beliefs. On the subject of interpretive communities of entertainment there are many dimensions and controversies. '

But I want to say that my comments today flow from my personal experience. I am certainly a child of pop culture. A New Jersey boy, I am. A convert to the Church from a family that subscribed to seven newspapers; my father took us to Manhattan several times a week for movies. Broadway, museums, professional sports, and the largest TV market in the world – that was my growing up.

Now, I was twelve years old when the album, “Sargent Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” by the Beatles came out. I couldn’t get my mother to take me to the record store for some reason. She had something going on. So I trudged three miles each way in the Jersey humidity, mostly along the shoulder of a four-lane highway to make the purchase. At fifteen I organized a youth fireside, with the Bishop’s blessing on Andrew Lloyd Weber’s “Jesus Christ Superstar” three weeks before the letter came saying that it wasn’t to be played in church meetings. I owned over a hundred albums and hitchhiked across the state in search of rock bands like “Canned Heat,” “Rhinoceros,” and “Iron Butterfly.”

At my Rutgers PhD graduation, I sat next to a fellow earning his doctorate in theoretical physics.

I asked, “What’s your dissertation about?”

He replied something like, now my colleagues in hard sciences know that I’m butchering this, “Physiologic Functions of the Proteolytic and Diaphoresis Activities of Dihydrolipoamide Dehydrogenase.” Then he said, “What’s yours about?”

I said, “Well, three types of Mormon television audiences.”

He said, “Wow! Really? They really have dissertations like that, huh?”

Well, of course there are. What could be more relevant than media effects, especially in this information age?

Returning to the lecture, I’d like to read three quotes from LDS young adults:

“I felt the spirit like no other time in my life...”

Second quote, “It was like an awakening or something like that. I’m not a doubter, but at that moment, I believed. I got it.”

“I sat there and absorbed the words,” goes the third quote, “I needed that message. So glad I was there.”

Was the first member in Sacrament Meeting? Sunday School class perhaps? No, at home watching Netflix. Is the second person listening to testimonies? Actually, this comment is about the person’s favorite rock song. And a movie theater is the setting for the third comment.

My argument is that secular entertainment media, while traditionally considered apart from religion, is more closely related to it than it used to be. That is, media and religion are practically becoming the same thing in some contexts. Today more than ever, we see personal autonomy in the exercise of faith. It’s no longer the old dualism of us vs. them. Popular culture also contributes much to young peoples’ belief systems often in positive ways. Our students are seekers, and media adds much to their journeys. As sociologist of religion Wade Clark Rook declares, we are in a religious marketplace of ideas.

Let’s explore the theoretical and theological bases of this assertion, and figure out what it means to us as members of the Church.

Interpretive community cannot be understood without attention to community itself. While community is commonly associated with neighborhoods and town hall meetings, for the first time in history it is synonymous with audience. Not just any audience, but those with the distinct patterns of behavior and approaches to life.

Now, in her heyday, Oprah Winfrey was one of the most influential women in the world. Still is, many believe.

After recommending Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" on her immensely popular daily TV talk show, hundreds of thousands of copies were sold the next day. Totally took book publishers by surprise. They couldn't meet the demand. Lady Gaga's website visitors and Twitter followers number about 30 million. Cheeseheads, or followers of the Green Bay Packers, are so devout a church in Milwaukee erected the following stained glass window. Legendary coach Vince Lombardi is their prophet. And Parrotheads, the undying supporters of singer Jimmy Buffett, raised 42 million for charities since their existence and invested more than three million hours of volunteer time to their communities. But, don't forget the Trekkies, followers of the television show Star Trek. They hold a convention somewhere in the world every week.

The term interpretive community was coined, as best as I can verify, by the great literary scholar Stanley Fish, who observes that readers share strategies of interpretation. Romance novel readers, for example. Or Harry Potter book enthusiasts. They have shared view points and perspectives. Sociologists of community developed the idea more fully, arguing that the days of neighborhood community, where the person next door brings chicken soup when you're sick, have largely vanished. Robert Putnam's book, "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community" embraces this idea. Others claim community is alive and well however; they just appear in different forms, such as media audiences. These postmodern communities even have quasi or religion-like qualities. A recent article, for example, noted the religiosity of Mac Users, and I quote:

"Thus, while Barton Springs, as a transcendent space, brings people from the Austin community together, the Macintosh computer, which symbolizes a spiritual passage to a utopian future, also ties its followers together."

This is my central argument. Interpretive communities can have a religious aspect. On her show, Oprah urged guests to confess wrong doing. The Parrotheads are dedicated to reclaiming the spontaneity missing from the nine-to-five, overworked society. Elvis fans stress friendship and honoring parents as did the singer himself. Each year 10,000 carry candles at his grave in Nashville, Tennessee. I observed this on one occasion five years ago. The Official Elvis Presley Fan Club of Great Britain has 20,000 members. Trekkies believe that science and the imagination combine to do great things. Egalitarian values are also stressed by Trekkies.

Take an example in the Church, where members are also Trekkies. Let me introduce Whitney, who proudly states, "Hi I'm Whitney. I'm a trekkie, an animal, sea creature and bug enthusiast and a student, but most importantly I'm a Mormon!" Let's recognize Seth who says: "Hi I'm Seth. I'm a trekkie, a gamer, but most importantly, I'm a Mormon."

Compelling is the "Star Trek Family Home Evening Group," where LDS Trekkies translated the Book of Mormon into Klingon, the distance out-of-space language:

"As we finished watching yet another fun-filled episode of Star Trek, we found ourselves with little to do... So Beth whipped out her two volumes of the Klingon Dictionary and James pulled out his scriptures... Some may not approve of this project, but...someday, this crazy project will lead some Trekkie to read the Book of Mormon in their native Klingon language."

We're having fun at the expense of Trekkies and interpretive communities, aren't we? But it's not a trivial phenomenon; it's a societal trend driven by the rise of personal autonomy in religious worship. Millennials are willing to have religious experiences through media. This is you! You are the millennials. You grew up with computers, and popular music comforted you during your difficult teen years. Such is a manifestation of the individualism noted by preeminent sociologist Robert Bellah: "Our highest and noblest aspirations," he said, "not only for ourselves, but for those we care about, for our society, and for the world, are closely related to our individualism." At times this is so strong that youth reject institutions flat out. Such is the case with the cross, the crucifix; a religious symbol in many denominations. Youth for example choose to incorporate the cross into their own rituals.

We knew this was coming; philosophers and theorists predicted it. Walter Benjamin of the Frankfurt School of sociology argues that all mediated messages are inherently impressive and creative. Unlike his colleagues Adorno and Horkheimer, Benjamin sees popular culture as opportunity, not necessarily control or suppression.

LDS member Arthur "Killer Kane" illustrates how the gospel works in harnessing individualism optimally in the religious context. In the punk rock band, the "New York Dolls," Arthur was an admitted hard drinker and drug abuser. Some of you are already acquainted with Arthur through the documentary film, "New York Doll." When his career hit rock bottom, he fell from his second-story apartment in a drunken stupor. Then the sister missionaries arrived, and he was baptized! Soon he was working as a librarian in the Los Angeles temple. Then, the invitation came to play bass guitar again for the Dolls in a reunion of the band. Could he go? Should he go? That was the great drama of this film. Is he going to go? Is he going to step back into that world of the New York Dolls? Well, his guitar was in the pawn shop; he had very little money. That didn't stop his Bishop and home teacher; they made sure that Arthur made it to London. They could have said, "We can't endorse a rocker, a punk rocker, for that matter." Before the concert, Arthur asked the band if they could have prayer. They agreed, and what ensues is a very rare moment in rock 'n roll.

This story helps clarify another benefit of interpretive communities, that of revitalization. Another way of putting this is the fusion of past and present religious' traditions. Because what Arthur returned to is actually a festival. It took place at, what is called, the Meltdown festival; a mix of music, art, performance and film.

Celebratory dance has reemerged. Just teen fun or something more? In the last decade we have seen the recovery of numerous lost and suppressed movements surfacing in the form of techno music, trance music, flash mobs, and sports. Is this so different than the times of Ecclesiastes that speak of a "time to dance?"

Interpretive communities also have their challenges. Make no doubt about it. Do they inflate the importance of technology at the expense of face-to-face communication? Will we become as Thoreau predicts, "tools of our tools?" and ultimately "amuse ourselves to death" borrowing Neil Postman's phrase? Now, when Neil Postman's book came out, one of my fellow graduate students asked me, "Hey have you heard about this book, 'Amusing Ourselves to Death?'" I said, "No! 'Amusing Ourselves to Death?' Great!" I'm not so sure Elder Oaks would have been entirely happy with me at that point. You see, he has also used that phrase in a number of talk in warning us about what is admittedly so the triviality of much of media out there. Even so, there may be value in cutting away from the past, stretching ourselves, and choosing with more latitude the groups with which we want to associate.

The dilemma of interpretive communities is the reduction of certainty. They interrupt our personal information-spheres into areas we may not want to confront. The Amish, Orthodox Jews, and some Muslim factions are remarkably adept at keeping the world and specifically media at a distance. It depends on how one feel about the world. This is the paradox of the world: how do you simultaneously embrace it and reject it? How do you explore it in its fullest sense, yet be selective? Participation in interpretive communities will likely threaten our

peace of mind and security, if we mask and shield its opportunities. But, I resist this position. It's comparable to the abstract expressionism movement in twentieth century American art. Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Martha Graham, and Barnett Newman ushered in a period of creativity and perspective previously unknown. New choices. Fresh viewpoints.

With a careful, cautious eye, we may find that media enhances our personal lives and our religious experience. But, reconciling sacred and secular in an optimal way is a daunting task. We're not likely to see Young Men's and Young Women's meetings beginning with a rock song accompanied by electric guitar. Nor will we view secular movies in Sunday School any time soon. Such blending is likely to occur informally. Allow me to share an experience I had at the University of South Carolina with an Evangelical professor. He was asked to teach Sunday School in his church and he grew up watching the Andy Griffith show. About 20% of us in this audience will remember this show. Now Andy Griffith, in making this situation comedy, insisted that there be a moral theme in all the episodes. Now I asked this Sunday School teacher how it was working having this television show in Sunday School. He said that attendance tripled. Such is the power of television!

It's interesting to see the larger religious world wrestle with this. Evangelicals in the conservative Protestant tradition, have little problem with using things like "Wrestling for Jesus" or "witness wear" to spread the good Word. Mainline Protestants, on the other hand, are uneasy about too much popular culture intrusion, but yet they advocate for national public radio, PBS, and those media that promote the things that ultimately support religion, education, and the arts. In Judaism, it depends on the sub-denomination. My friend's Reformed synagogue in Las Vegas has a scholar-in-residence year round. Catholics have fought this battle of entertainment media with mixed results. They tried the rock mass only to find it had pushed them so far into the secular that some youth forgot about what it actually meant to be Catholic. "Wine tasting religion," the Pope lamented.

Is there theological language supporting the incorporation of popular culture? Some site the final chapter of Luke and the story of the road to Emmaus. Although the apostles knew who Jesus was they failed to recognize this stranger on the road, you'll recall. But, when he breaks bread with them, it all comes back. Familiar symbols make it all clear again.¹ Mary Hess of Luther Theological seminary, says it's this way with young people. Trigger something familiar and the moral message comes through.

It behooves us to apply this principle of familiarity in our classes at Brigham Young University Hawaii. As teachers we must demonstrate our familiarity with students' lives, and that includes popular culture. We need to break down stale notions of culture. We must get beyond our own particular interest or bailiwick and teach within the context of whole societies. Make no mistake about it, interpretive communities are overlapping with our classrooms.

Colleagues, when you encounter students in divergent interpretive communities how will you speak to them? Will you chastise or encourage? As we navigate the borders of sacred and secular one thing is certain: We need each other. Dignity and respect should be afforded those with a media milieu not necessarily our own. Hopefully, students will only feel love as they share personal experiences with and attitudes about media. Higher education is not so much about particular books or courses, but about priorities and goals.

And students, I urge you to pursue media literacy. Develop critical skills as you use the Internet, watch movies, and listen to music. Make the exploration of new media genres a part of your rigorous education. Use media optimally toward your destiny and on your journey.

This is what I ask of you today. Press your professors to talk about your media. Converse and listen. Dare to disagree, but listen with the spirit as you participate in interpretive communities. By doing so, you'll strengthen yourselves and others and you'll have many hours like Phillip McArthur and I have, talking about rock 'n roll

into the night. Thus is my conviction in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

[1] see [Luke 24](#)