

WHAT WOULD JESUS DO IN CYBERSPACE?: A COMPARISON OF ONLINE AUTHORITY APPEALS ON TWO LDS WEBSITES TARGETING BELIEVERS AND NON-MEMBERS

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Religious practice is shifting from churches to the internet in what some critics call a “post-denominational era.”¹ One early commentator predicted that “the web would reduce us to a virtual community of believers practicing a kind of ‘McFaith’—fast, convenient, but hardly nourishing.”² These concerns were driven in part by the internet’s ability to undermine traditional religious authority.³ In today’s religious sphere, the web shifts the locus of power from clergy to the individual in much the same way the printing press empowered individualism and gave rise

1. Lori Leibovich, “That Online Religion with Shopping, Too,” *New York Times*, Apr. 6, 2000, G1, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/tech/00/04/circuits/articles/06reli.html>.

2. Butler-Bass, “Internet Religion Just Doesn’t Compute as Lent Begins: People of Faith Realize That Only Human Bodies Can Touch the Divine,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Mar. 8, 2000, A-19.

3. Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth, and Alvin Toffler, “Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age,” The Progress and Freedom Foundation, Aug. 1994, accessed Mar. 9, 2015, <http://www.pff.org/issues-pubs/futureinsights/fi1.2magnacarta.html>.

to the Protestant Reformation.⁴ It encourages new religious movements and compels clergy in established traditions to reconsider the way they interact with followers.⁵ Religious organizations are also increasingly turning to the web to attract followers.⁶ But entering cyberspace creates new challenges. Online forums allow detractors or the uninformed to propagate misinformation about church teachings.⁷ Furthermore, religious organizations face an uphill battle to appeal to a generation that seeks religious or spiritual fulfillment beyond denominational worship.⁸

How then does an international church use the internet to maintain authority when communicating to its flock? How does it use authoritative appeals to reach a generation of outsiders who often eschew denominational religion? This paper addresses these questions by analyzing how authority is constructed on two websites operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Introduction

Mainline churches have been losing followers since the end of World War II.⁹ Wade Clark Roof suggests that this transition was propelled by

4. Paul A. Soukup, "Challenges for Evangelization in the Digital Age" (presented at Continental Congress on the Church and Information Society, Monterrey, Mexico, 2003).

5. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, eds., *Religion and Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 2005).

6. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, eds., *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

7. Lorne L. Dawson, "Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies," in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, edited by Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: JAI, 2000), 25–54.

8. Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

9. Ibid.

postmodern values favoring “personal, deeply felt spiritual concerns.”¹⁰ Because individual spirituality is preferred over dogma,¹¹ personal autonomy becomes a more prevalent feature of worship.¹² The preponderance of recent studies of US religious practice finds a growing distrust of religious authority claims, skepticism of scripture, suspicion of “absolutes,” and religion valued for its “instrumentality” rather than its theology.¹³

This distrust of religious authority is exacerbated by the rise of religion on the web. Yet, a recent review of 109 studies of online religion found that only nine examined the relationship between discourse and religious authority.¹⁴ The internet challenges religious authority in a number of ways. It “poses a radical challenge to the restrictive control imposed by [church] leadership” by allowing communities to converse outside the vertical channels imposed by leaders.¹⁵ One example of this is evident in a study by David Piff and Marit Warburg finding that a Baha’i online forum encouraged discussants who challenged the official positions of church leaders.¹⁶

10. Ibid., 58.

11. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since WWII* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

12. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

13. Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*.

14. Heidi Campbell, “Religion on the Internet: A Microcosm for Studying Internet Trends and Implications,” *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (2013): 680–94.

15. Eileen Barker, “Crossing the Boundary: New Challenges to Religious Authority and Control as a Consequence of Access to the Internet,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, 67–85.

16. David Piff and Margit Warburg, “Seeking the Truth: Plausibility Alignment on a Baha’i Email List,” in *Religion in Cyberspace*, 86–101.

The internet also creates “instant experts” who, despite lacking the credentials of traditional church leaders, are often quite influential.¹⁷ In some cases, communal support establishes online religious commentators as authoritative.¹⁸ Others may subvert traditional religious authority figures by claiming to have their own supernatural connections.

While informative, these inquiries limit the definition of authority to Max Weber’s notion of “pure legitimate authority.” Heidi Campbell argues that scholars studying the impact of the internet on religious authority should determine how authority is conveyed rather than just its outcome.¹⁹ She identifies four types of online authority: 1) hierarchical (religious leaders); 2) structural (official organizations or community structures); 3) ideological (shared beliefs, ideas, or identity); and 4) textual (recognized teachings and creeds or religious books).²⁰

Recognizing these authority types is particularly useful when examining authority claims within the LDS Church because the institution’s distribution of power is somewhat paradoxical. It has a top-down priesthood hierarchy at the institutional level, while also including a “grassroots” organization comprised of all “worthy” males who receive priesthood authority at the age of twelve.

The Church’s emphasis on authority is also tied to the teaching that it is the only “true and living” church.²¹ And most of the religious teachings

17. Marilyn C. Krogh and Brooke Ashley Pillifant, “The House of Netjer: A New Religious Community Online,” in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, 205–19.

18. Debbie Herring, “Virtual as Contextual: A Net News Theology,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, 149–65.

19. Heidi A. Campbell, “Religious Authority and the Blogosphere,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 15, no. 2 (2010): 254.

20. Heidi Campbell, “Who’s Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3 (2007): 1043–62.

21. The Church’s prophet-founder, Joseph Smith, wrote (and subsequently canonized as scripture in the Church) that this new organization was “the

and directives come from the Church's semiannual general conference meetings that feature sermons by General Authorities. According to Gordon and Gary Shepherd, "it would be difficult to propose a modern religion in which the rhetoric of religious leaders plays a more significant role than in Mormonism."²²

Another authoritative source unique to the LDS Church is its open canon of scripture, along with other sources of textual authority including correlated LDS publications,²³ the Handbook of Instructions, books by General Authorities, and the LDS.org website.

Since the 1960s, the Church's correlation program has controlled the information that is distributed to members,²⁴ resulting in a standardized instructional curriculum that, according to some critics, marginalizes intellectuals who might challenge the claims of Church leaders.²⁵ This emphasis on correlation encourages a fundamentalist acceptance of Church authority.²⁶

The popularity of online faith discussion groups challenges this fundamentalist trend. Blogs and websites such as xnmormon.org and affirmation.org create space for people to question LDS teachings. Church

only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth," in *Doctrine and Covenants* 1:30.

22. Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, "Mormonism in Secular Society: Changing Patterns in Official Ecclesiastical Rhetoric," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (1984): 30.

23. These are all approved by leadership at the highest levels and include periodical magazines, Sunday School manuals, missionary discussions, and seminary and other Church Educational System (CES) curriculum.

24. Peter Wiley, "The Lee Revolution and the Rise of Correlation," *Sunstone* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1984–85): 18–22.

25. Richard D. Poll, "The Swearing Elders: Some Reflections," *Sunstone* 10, no. 9 (1985): 14–17.

26. Armand L. Mauss, "Assimilation and Ambivalence: The Mormon Reaction to Americanization," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 1 (1989): 30–67.

reactions to such sites are mixed. Kate Kelly, the founder of *ordainwomen.com* (an internet forum advocating for the ordination of women to the LDS priesthood) was met with resistance from Church leaders, culminating in Kelly's excommunication in 2014.²⁷ Furthermore, John Dehlin's *Mormon Stories* podcast questioning LDS teachings and practices regarding same-sex marriage—and reaching thousands of listeners—likely contributed to his excommunication in 2015.²⁸ The Church's strategy isn't limited to punishing cynics. During the initial US presidential bid by Mitt Romney, the Church launched a multi-million dollar "I'm a Mormon" advertising campaign featuring an internet presence accompanying over ninety different ad executions across the globe.²⁹ This campaign depicts Church followers acting as the public face of the institution, with videos featuring everyday Latter-day Saints sharing their faith.

The paradoxical and diverse sources of authority within the Church, the rise of the internet as a means of transmitting information, and the cultural shift away from denominational religion create growing challenges and opportunities for the LDS Church in its online messaging strategy. How does the Church use authority to appeal to LDS members versus non-members?

Research Questions

Here I apply a close reading of two LDS websites. The first, *LDS.org* (hereinafter *LDSO*), reaches practicing Latter-day Saints; the second,

27. Laurie Goodstein, "Mormons Expel Founder of Group Seeking Priesthood for Women," *New York Times*, Jun. 23, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/24/us/Kate-Kelly-Mormon-Church-Excommunicates-Ordain-Women-Founder.html>.

28. Laurie Goodstein, "Mormon Church Expels Outspoken Critic," *New York Times*, Feb. 10, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/11/us/mormon-church-expels-critic-for-apostasy.html>.

29. Chiung Hwang Chen, "Marketing Religion Online: The LDS Church's SEO Efforts," *Journal of Media and Religion* 10, no. 4 (2011): 185–205.

Mormon.org (hereinafter MoOrg), targets non-members. Guiding the analysis are the following research questions:

1. Which of Heidi Campbell's authority types are most prevalent in the lead articles of each website?
2. How is religious authority manifest in the design elements of each site?
 - What do the layout, visuals, and interactive features suggest about authority types?
 - Which types of authority are evident and/or taken for granted in the narration and text regarding key theological claims?

Procedures and Limitations

This study is grounded in the close-text method outlined in Stuart Hall's introduction to *Paper Voices*, which approaches media content as a text: a "literary and visual construct, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions, and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in the widest sense."³⁰ This approach extends the scope of scrutiny beyond a content-analysis approach that examines the "manifest" text, seeking also to unearth "the latent, implicit patterns and emphases" that underscore authority claims on each website.³¹

Beginning with the lead topics and stories, the manifest discourse is determined by tallying the sources of authority claims in photographs and visual links, topic titles, and references within the written and video narration linked to these subjects. Next, the use of authority appeals on fundamental topics highlighted in MoOrg and central to the denominational practice of Latter-day Saints (prophets, the Bible, family and temples, the Word of Wisdom, and baptism) are compared. When a

30. Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change 1935–1965*, edited by A. C. H. Smith, Elizabeth Immirzi, and Trevor Blackwell (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), 17.

31. Hall, "Introduction," 15.

MoOrg topic is not on the homepage of LDSO, the analysis centers on the leading LDSO page following a search for the subject.

This investigation is premised on observations that are fixed in time and place, despite the fact that cultures “do not hold still for their portraits.”³² Furthermore, this analysis is not comprehensive in time or scope, nor is it intended to predict future LDS communication strategies.

Findings

Across all the areas analyzed, LDS.org emphasizes the institutional Church by stressing hierarchical and structural forms of authority. However, Mormon.org favors ideological authority premised on shared values.

Authority Sourcing in Feature Stories

In the feature stories, LDSO references or portrays sources of authority sixty-six times (figures 1 and 2). Of these, 71 percent (n=47) reference hierarchical or structural authority (these often overlap in the context of LDS authority), 21 percent (n=14) feature textual authority (most of which is tied to scriptures unique to LDS canon), and 8 percent (n=5) allude to ideological claims. The MoOrg website reverses this pattern. Its lead articles feature forty-four authoritative support references, with 7 percent (n=3) featuring hierarchical proof, 17 percent (n=7) offering textual support (linked primarily to the Bible), and 76 percent (n=32) backed by ideological proofs (all of which are tied to shared beliefs).

The disparate authority appeals are manifest in both the subject matter and sourcing of lead stories. Five of the seven feature stories on LDSO either source or are about hierarchical or structural authority:

32. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 10.

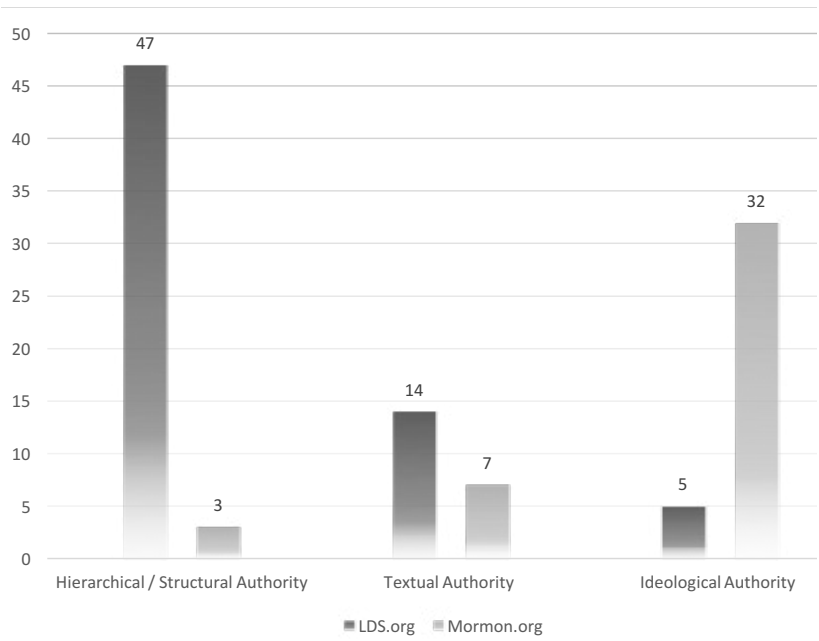


Figure 1. Number of lead story authority references by website

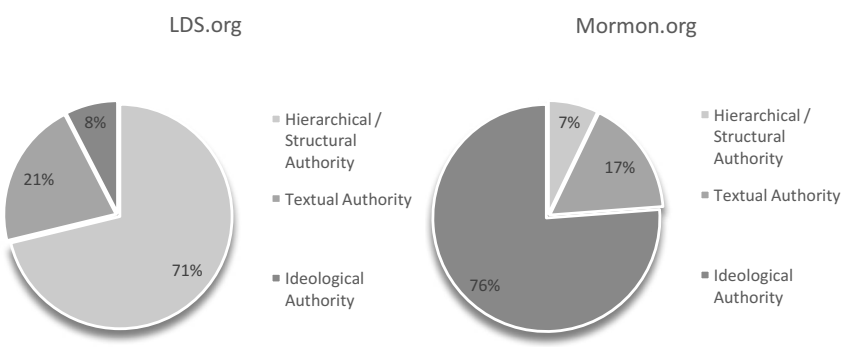


Figure 2. Distribution of authority appeals in lead stories within each website

- Prophets: The Way God Shows His Love (by the First Presidency)
- Worldwide Devotion: How to be a Strong Link in your Family (by an apostle)
- President Monson: Follow His Example of Kindness (by the prophet)
- First Presidency Encourages People to “Just Serve” Storm Victims (by the Church News)
- Discover Deep Learning (by a General Authority)

Conversely, MoOrg leads with uncited conversation starters: Who are Mormons, Jesus Christ’s Church, 10 Things About Missionaries, The Book of Mormon, and Jesus Christ, followed by articles that rarely make hierarchical claims.

This pattern is further evident in additional supporting material linking to the main stories on LDSO. These added articles and features are also tied to the institutional Church by way of structural/hierarchical and textual authority:

- Scriptures (links to the LDS canon)
- Prophets and Church Leaders (linking to articles and talks by prophets and apostles, other leaders, and a book titled Teachings of the Presidents of the Church)
- Learning Resources (subsequent links to five sources of correlated Church manuals and the Church’s newsroom)
- Teaching Resources (material from correlated instructional material)

This finding is further evident in our topical analysis. On LDSO, the lead articles regarding key theological claims discussed on MoOrg (the Bible, baptism, the Word of Wisdom, temples, prophets) yielded fifty-six additional links to hierarchal authority (talks by General Authorities), twenty-seven to the canon, and twenty-eight to LDS instructional material (figure 3). These are in addition to the other articles and authority references within each article.

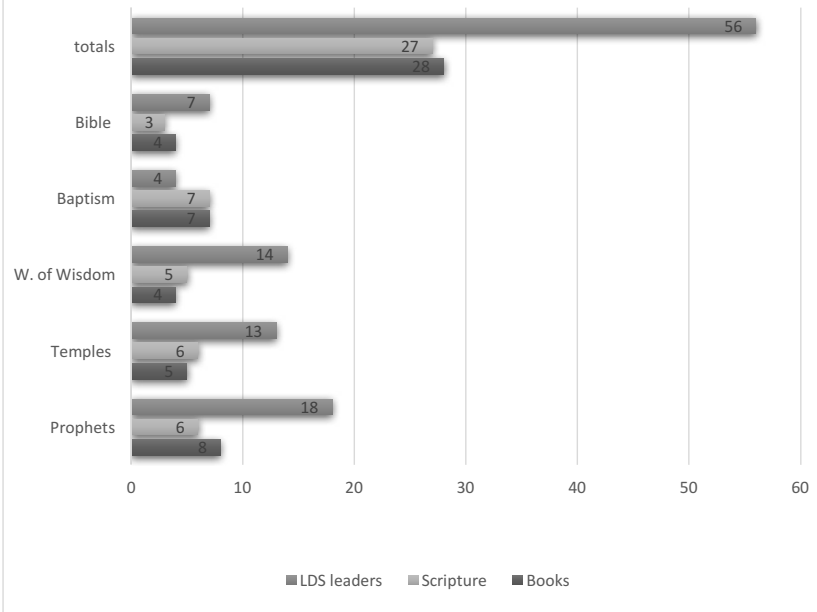



Figure 3. Additional authorities linked to primary LDS.org topical search pages (using Mormon.org lead stories as topics)

The first article linked to a search of “prophets” on LDSO was backed by the most hierarchical proofs (n=32), with over half drawn directly from talks by LDS leaders (figure 4). This circular strategy of promoting hierarchical authority figures by citing hierarchical authorities suggests that leadership power is less taken for granted than may otherwise be assumed. Conversely, the topics with the fewest hierarchical proofs were “baptism” (eighteen references with only four general conference talks) and “the Bible” (fourteen references with seven general conference talks).




Scriptures


SCRIPTURE REFERENCES
2 Chronicles 20:20
Amos 3:7
Ephesians 2:19-20
1 Nephi 22:1-2
D&C 107:91-92
Articles of Faith 1:6

SCRIPTURE STUDY RESOURCES
"Topical Guide, "Prophets, Mission of"
Bible Dictionary, "Prophet"
"Guide to the Scriptures, "Prophet"


PROPHETS AND APOSTLES




Follow the Prophets
President Thomas S. Monson




Why Do We Need Prophets?
President Dieter F. Uchtdorf




Hear the Prophet's Voice and Obey
Elder Robert D. Hales




Prophets, Seers, and Revelators
Elder Jeffrey R. Holland




Learning from Living Prophets
Elder Neil L. Andersen




The Case for a Living Prophet
President Hugh B. Brown




Seeing God's Prophet
Elder Kim B. Clark




Live according to the Words of the Prophets
Sister Carol F. McConkie




Obedience to the Prophets
Elder Claudio R. M. Costa




Heeding the Voice of the Prophets
President Dieter F. Uchtdorf




Sustaining the Prophets
President Russell M. Nelson




Prophets in the Land Again
Elder Jeffrey R. Holland




Give Heed unto the Prophets' Words
Elder Quentin L. Cook




Prophets and Spiritual Mole Crickets
Elder Neil L. Andersen




The Profile of a Prophet
President Hugh B. Brown



A Reason for the Repetition
Elder Scott D. Whiting



Our Prophet Thomas S. Monson
Elder William R. Walker



His Servants, the Prophets
Elder F. Michael Watson

Figure 4. LDS.org authorities cited on subject of prophets

Web Design and Visuals

LDSO is organized as a space where Church members can access information to not only assist them in their spiritual pursuits, but as source material for participating in ecclesiastical service (such as teaching Sunday School or giving “talks” during local Sunday worship services). It is structured like an encyclopedia: formal, content-heavy, with much

of the material emphasizing institutional sources and authority as well as instructions. Furthermore, unlike its sister site, it offers few interactive features. Its emphasis on content creates a significant amount of clutter (figure 5). The homepage has five pull-down tabs³³ linking to fourteen topical headings with over sixty-two more links (totaling eighty-one links). The seven articles on the homepage are also content-heavy, featuring sixteen text-based “Quick Links,” eight more thumbnails, and thirty-one other links.

MoOrg offers little by way of in-depth answers to religious questions, instead directing visitors to seek additional information from LDS representatives offline. The site itself is also less formal and includes more streaming video and interactive content. It features only three pull-down tabs (Beliefs, FAQs, and Contact) linking to eighteen articles or interactive features. Half of the main page is devoted to answering “Who Are the Mormons?” with one video and four links, followed by six thumbnail links and five text links.

The visuals on each site further illustrate their conflicting authority appeals. Even the trademark of the Church, embedded at the top of both sites, is noticeably larger on LDSO than it is on MoOrg, conveying the centrality of the institutional Church’s trademark for LDS visitors while downplaying it for non-members.

Dominant on LDSO are photographs of Church leaders, Church buildings, or people involved in religious worship. Additionally, the typical streaming videos are general conference talks by Church leaders. MoOrg, however, presents streaming video and photographs that never show LDS leaders and seldom portray people participating in religious activities.

These differences are most evident in content accompanying the five key MoOrg topics. Each LDSO article on these subjects includes a photographic illustration—four of them tied to institutional religious

33. Scriptures and Study, Families and Individuals, Share the Gospel, Inspiration and News, Serve and Teach.

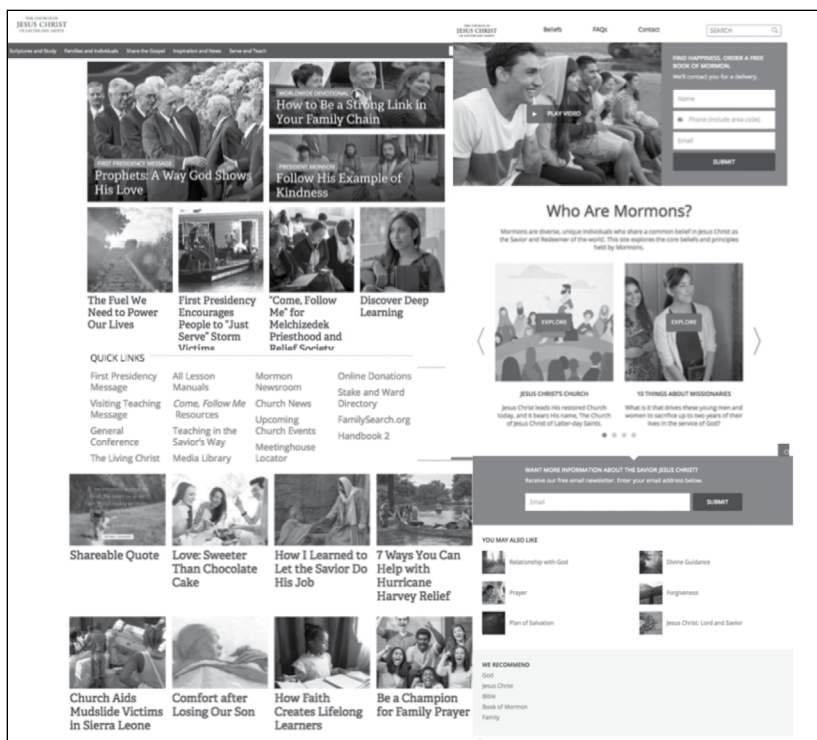


Figure 5. Layout comparison of first page of LDS.org (left) and Mormon.org (right)

practice.³⁴ MoOrg's only photograph shows people playing backyard football. The remaining MoOrg pages are supported with clip art, interactive quizzes, animated videos, or links to the "I'm a Mormon" campaign. These distinctions are telling because, as noted by Roland Barthes, unlike other illustrative forms, photography tends to limit

34. These photos show a person holding a Bible, a boy being baptized in an LDS font, an LDS temple, and the Church's current prophet.

potential interpretations of the image because photographs are understood by people to be objective representations of reality.³⁵

LDSO video content not drawn from general conference addresses is scarce and difficult to find. These alternative video streams are buried in the Media section at the bottom of the Topics pages, requiring viewers to scroll past numerous banners and links emphasizing institutional authority before locating them.³⁶ Furthermore, the thumbnails linked to this streaming content are not only comparatively small, but they are embedded in a back-page location next to a few streaming audio samples of children's Sunday School songs—suggesting perhaps that adding them to LDSO was an afterthought.

Conversely, MoOrg features a plethora of entertaining streaming video content. The most common have catchy jingles, anonymous (i.e., no official authority) narrators, clip-art graphics, and inclusive language. The language and structure of these videos highlight ideological (shared) beliefs. The Book of Mormon video leads with the narrator suggesting that “practically everybody” (shared authority) wonders what this book is, especially those who saw the play (cut to playbill in Manhattan). Its authority is tied to its populist appeal—the “millions” of people whose lives have been impacted by its message. “Who are the Mormons?” focuses on worship as shared experience. A narrated animation describes Latter-day Saints as “an extended family of faith” who interact with one another throughout the week because “God doesn’t love us only once a week.”

Structural elements of the LDS Church such as the women's Relief Society and its youth programs are divested of their institutional nature in animations showing LDS women “putting together care packages for neighbors in need” and youth programs that “reinforce values and let

35. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

36. These links or headings to be bypassed include scriptures, talks by the first presidency, talks by other leaders, articles in correlated books, Church magazines, CES material, and even stories from the Church's Newsroom.

the kids know they are not alone.” Additional animations show Latter-day Saints helping others move, participating in family activities, and throwing neighborhood parties. Local Church members, not leaders, are shown teaching in Church because, the narrator says, “there is no paid clergy” in the Church. This emphasis on local congregant service is finally linked to the textual authority of the Bible, noting that members do these things because “it’s what Jesus did. And that’s why it’s what Mormons do, wherever they are, all over the world.”

The contrasting emphasis on shared experience rather than Church authorities is most evident in the “Jesus Christ” sections. MoOrg makes no reference to LDS leaders, emphasizing instead shared beliefs (“nearly everyone has heard the name Jesus Christ”). Its animated clip ends with inclusive pronouns and language typical among Christians:

Jesus’ greatest miracle is giving every human being the opportunity to have life and happiness beyond mortality. All we have to do is believe in Him, and try our best to follow his example and teachings. Sometimes we fail, but that’s exactly why Jesus came to earth in the first place.

However, the LDSO page “Who is Jesus Christ?” emphasizes LDS leadership. This page is broken down into eight segments about Jesus, seven of which link directly to talks or articles by the Church’s highest leaders:

- The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles (a signed proclamation by LDS apostles and the First Presidency)
- Who is Jesus Christ? (by late apostle Boyd K. Packer)
- Special Witnesses of Jesus Christ (linking to talks by each of the Quorum of the Twelve and three members of the First Presidency)
- Jesus the Christ (linking to a book of that title by a late LDS apostle)
- He Lives! Witnesses of Latter-day Prophets (linking to written testimonials of all sixteen LDS prophets dating back to Joseph Smith)
- We testify of Jesus Christ (testimonial of the late President Gordon B. Hinckley)

- The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom He has Sent (video of general conference talk by apostle Jeffrey R. Holland)

These segments include fifty more links to statements, talks, or books by LDS presidents or apostles. They reinforce the “prophet, seer, and revelator” status of the Church’s top fifteen leaders by excluding comments by other Church members (including general authorities), referring to the top leaders as “special witnesses,” and by presenting a testimonial signed by them (The Living Christ) in the form of a legal document (thereby reducing the likelihood of resistant readings). Interestingly, despite the title, this content reads more as a treatise about the special status of those within the Church who are authorized to speak of Jesus than as a commentary about Jesus himself.

Only in the final segment, titled “What do Latter-day Saints believe about Jesus Christ?,” are LDSO visitors presented with the experience of everyday Latter-day Saints. However, here, visitors are sent to “I’m a Mormon” campaign videos located on the MoOrg website. Hence, people on LDSO seeking an understanding of LDS beliefs about Jesus beyond those made by the First Presidency and apostles are ultimately ejected from the website.

The Narrative Construction of Authority

Religious information on LDSO is typically prescriptive—framed as a warning—with emphasis placed on obedience to Church authorities. MoOrg narratives are more affective, placing emphasis on shared experience and pastoral religion.

Apostasy and the role of prophets

A central teaching of the Church is of a universal apostasy shortly after Jesus’ death, necessitating a prophetic restoration by Joseph Smith.

On MoOrg, a feature video explains that after Jesus was crucified, “people split off and didn’t always stay true” to his message, stating that

eventually, “people only had parts of Christ’s original teachings.” This language about “people” and “teachings” reinforces personal religiosity versus the institutional Church. The narrator uses a passive voice that emphasize the earnestness of believers and the value of teachings, rather than priesthood authority:

After Christ’s Resurrection, there was considerable chaos and dissent; apostles were martyred, and the foundational principles of Christ’s Church became diluted. As a result, the members of His Church were scattered. Left with only remnants of the original truth, each generation of earnest followers strayed further from the true teachings and doctrine of Christ’s Church.

The LDSO passage on this subject uses an active voice with emphasis on hierarchy and structural authority:

After the deaths of the Savior and His apostles, men corrupted the principles of the gospel and made unauthorized changes in Church organization and priesthood ordinances.

This notion of “unauthorized” changes, “Church organization,” and “priesthood ordinances” reinforces the dominant narrative throughout LDSO underscoring the authority claims of Church leaders.

The pattern continues in the discussion of prophets. MoOrg frames LDS prophets as pastoral ministers. Here, they “give instructions and counsel,” and “advise” on “social issues such as marriage . . . , practical matters such as education and financial prudence, and spiritual subjects that help us overcome personal trials.” Prophets are not portrayed as authority figures, but are instead shown to be concerned helpers: “Truly God knows our deepest concerns and wants to help.” MoOrg further appeals to shared experiences, again using first-person pronouns: “We” will learn the value of a prophet’s words when “we apply them in our personal lives,” adding, “Those who hear these messages often comment, ‘It was like they were speaking to me!’”

Rather than functioning as pastoral ministers, LDSO leaders “speak boldly and clearly, denouncing sin and warning of its consequences,”

and “their teaching reflects the will of the Lord.” Furthermore, LDSO visitors are warned of dire consequences should they disregard the decrees of Church leaders:

What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and excuse not myself. . . . [W]hether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same. (D&C 1:38)

Though shalt give heed unto all of his [Joseph Smith’s] words and commandments. . . . For by doing these things the gates of hell shall not prevail against you. (D&C 21:4–6)

The Bible and Family Roles

When discussing the Bible, LDSO stresses prophetic authority and “revelation,” while noting the canon’s limitations. This emphasis highlights the need for continued “revelation” through current leaders. According to LDSO, the Bible contains “revelations written by prophets,” though it is “not God’s final revelation to humanity.” However, MoOrg avoids hierarchical authority figures in its presentation of the Bible. Instead, it democratizes the canon, stating that the Bible “tells of the Lord’s interaction with his people” (emphasis added).

LDSO visitors learn that “parents have a sacred duty” to care for their children and “to teach them to love and serve one another [and to] observe the commandments of God.” Furthermore, they have “a solemn responsibility to care for each other and for their children” (emphasis added). These directives come from the first link on the LDSO Family page, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” a 1995 statement signed by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. Although the document allows for extenuating circumstances that impact parental roles, it ends by warning that failure to follow its edicts will bring about “calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.”

MoOrg’s narrative about family matters is more pastoral and positive. It acknowledges that “Mormons are family oriented,” but that they “demonstrate this family focus” by conducting weekly family activities.

Missing here is the LDSO emphasis on obedience, Church leaders, or calamities. Instead, visitors learn that LDS family members gather together and “share music, lessons, scripture, stories, fun activities, and prayer, with the goal of strengthening their relationships.” Finally, rather than emphasizing solemn duties, MoOrg readers are told that family roles are fluid and grounded in shared responsibilities: “Whether parent, child, sibling, or spouse, every one of God’s children has a role in taking care of one another.”

The Word of Wisdom

The Church’s health code, the Word of Wisdom, is also an important aspect of LDS worship. Commitment to its precepts is a prerequisite for baptism into the faith, and obedience is required for members wishing to participate in the Church’s highest sacraments in the temple. How the two LDS websites approach this topic offers a unique litmus test of how contemporary authority is framed within the Church because, historically, this code was interpreted in a less confining manner than is currently practiced. This canonized revelation by Joseph Smith in the early nineteenth century stated that it was not a commandment.³⁷ Unlike the modern emphasis on abstention from tobacco, alcohol, tea, and coffee,³⁸ early Latter-day Saints viewed it as a call for moderation.³⁹

Both websites state that the Word of Wisdom is a law given for “physical and spiritual” well-being. After this, they part ways. MoOrg again uses inclusive language, explaining that “we are counseled to eat meat sparingly and to avoid addictive substances,” while LDSO readers are told that “the Lord revealed that . . . alcoholic drinks; tea and coffee . . . are harmful.” MoOrg visitors are told that Church leaders have “added

37. “To be sent greeting; not by commandment or constraint, but by revelation” (D&C 89:2).

38. Some Latter-day Saints today believe all caffeinated drinks are proscribed.

39. Robert J. McCue, “Did the Word of Wisdom Become a Commandment in 1851?,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (1981): 66–77.

counsel to abstain from using illegal drugs, abusing prescription drugs, and overeating.” This counsel is supported by “a wide range of studies by esteemed scientific and medical institutions and schools unaffiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” LDSO visitors, however, learn that “illegal drugs can especially destroy” them, and that disregarding the Word of Wisdom is “destructive spiritually and physically.” These declarative statements from LDSO, offered without the need of scientific support, underscore the taken-for-grantedness of the Word of Wisdom as a signifier of one’s faithfulness in the Church and of the divine source of authority through which it is currently interpreted. It is also telling that the LDSO language is the most forceful regarding a subject that, at least historically, was not an important signifier of one’s commitment to the faith.

Conclusion

Given the democratizing power of the internet to challenge religious authority, it is not surprising that the LDS Church would emphasize its authority claims to believers. This analysis of LDSO demonstrates that the Church approaches this challenge head-on by constantly reaffirming its hierarchical and structural authority when speaking to its followers. This strategy of frequently sourcing, depicting, discussing, and quoting Church leaders, while also emphasizing their divine calling, suggests that the retrenchment phase of the Church that was articulated in Armand Mauss’s treatise has transitioned from traditional correlated material to the internet. These findings also buttress the Gordon and Gary Shepherd finding that much of LDS identity and belief is tied to the rhetoric of General Authorities. This appears to be equally relevant on the internet.

It also makes sense that to appeal to non-members, MoOrg would emphasize shared beliefs rather than hierarchical authority. Given the growing aversion to denominational religion in the United States, a strategy of emphasizing absolutes and institutional authority figures

would likely be ineffective in gaining converts. The MoOrg website illustrates how shared religious values can be used as a means of supporting religious claims by emphasizing what people already believe.

However, this study also indicates that the Church has created a contradictory rendition of itself on the web. In terms of authority appeals, these two sites seem to speak for two unrelated faith traditions. A visitor to LDSO would believe that the Church is comprised primarily of powerful leaders who speak authoritatively and often about matters of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and faith. The idea of local worship or shared values at the community level is overshadowed by emphasis on the institutional Church and a religion grounded by theological absolutes. To be a Latter-day Saint, then, is not primarily about individual worship but is instead valued within the context of one's membership in the tribe and obedience to Church leaders. Most (if not all) theological claims have merit only within the confines of structural and hierarchical authority.

MoOrg offers a counter-version of the faith. Here, the Church is lauded for its instrumentalism rather than its theology. It is not a top-down organization but is instead comprised of a community of local believers with shared values. Members do not belong to the institutional Church as much as a community that meets regularly to participate in spiritual quests and to contribute to the good of society. Church leaders on MoOrg, especially apostles and prophets, function largely behind-the-scenes, offering pastoral service, advice, and counsel only when needed. Here, the Church is fiercely personal. It is also less absolute, less rigid, more interactive, and more entertaining.

These findings beg the question as to what happens when converts transition to the next phase into the Church. What happens if, after visiting Mormon.org, instead of contacting the Church to send missionaries, these potential converts find the LDS.org page? Does this bombardment of hierarchical proofs sit well in the minds of seekers who are apprehensive of religion practiced at the denominational level? Does LDS.org's emphasis on hierarchy and structure resonate with a

visitor who learned about the Church by watching whimsical videos depicting local worship on Mormon.org? What happens to new LDS converts who experience this rhetorical shift after joining the Church and conversing with their new LDS friends, who, as insiders, are familiar with a faith tradition that constitutes one's place in the tribe in relation to commitment to hierarchical and structural authorities?

These questions suggest a need for additional explorations of how LDS authority is discursively constructed and negotiated in the blogosphere, where Latter-day Saints can find an alternate space to discuss matters of faith, authority, and doubt. How are believing Latter-day Saints or those who are experiencing a faith crisis negotiating these issues of authority in the blogosphere? Do they find solace in the Church's emphasis on hierarchy, or is it a source of tension in their spiritual lives? Until further studied, God only knows.

A final note. After this study was completed, President Russell M. Nelson became the new prophet and president of the Church. One of his first major public statements was to condemn the use of the term "Mormon" in reference to the Church and its followers. He not only condemned the use of the term but in subsequent addresses told his followers that the name "correction" was a revelation from God, and that Jesus Christ was offended when the term was used.⁴⁰ Subsequently, the Church has been renaming many of its iconic organizations and reconfiguring both of its websites to align with this new teaching, including removing the "I'm a Mormon" videos from the Mormon.org website.⁴¹ These changes on the websites, once fully developed, beg for additional investigation.

40. Russell M. Nelson, "The Correct Name of the Church," Oct. 2018, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2018/10/the-correct-name-of-the-church?lang=eng>.

41. For example, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir was renamed The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square, and though the URL for Mormon.org remains the same, the masthead and lead banners have replaced "Mormon" with other terms.