

THE CORRECT [DOMAIN] NAME OF THE CHURCH: TECHNOLOGY, NAMING, AND LEGITIMACY IN THE LATTER-DAY SAINT TRADITION

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Of all the changes made in response to the 2018 decision to emphasize the full name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, those made to the official Latter-day Saint web and digital presence stand out in particular. If the *depth* of the Latter-day Saint leadership's commitment to this emphasis is evident in changes to names of well-known institutions such as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir (now The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square), the scope of Latter-day Saint presence on the internet and in other digital spheres required a *breadth* of commitment after the 2018 decision that is worthy of attention. For example, by February 2020,¹ Latter-day Saint officials had reported renaming hundreds of web and mobile apps, making iterative changes to its social media presence, changing the name of the wireless network in Latter-day Saint church buildings, and rolling out new versions of long-existing websites.

Although Latter-day Saint authorities have insisted that these changes are not an issue of rebranding,² it seems clear that *legitimacy*

1. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Changes to Emphasize the Correct Name of the Church of Jesus Christ," *Newsroom*, Mar. 5, 2019, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/church-name-alignment/>.

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

has played a role in this increased attention to names and naming. Heidi Campbell has observed that “the legitimation of authority for specific religions . . . may rely at least partially on recognizing the fact that a particular divine source plays a role in offering external validation”;³ it is perhaps in this spirit that President Russell Nelson has emphasized his belief that the name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is of divine origin.⁴ Similarly, apostle Neil Andersen’s (re)telling the story of a Latter-day Saint who was accepted as a Christian after emphasizing his church’s full name⁵ corresponds with an understanding of legitimacy as “widespread social approval.”⁶

However, there is an undeniable tension between this bid for increased legitimacy and the necessity of realizing that bid in digital spaces. Even relatively straightforward changes (such as replacing the “LDSAccess” wireless network name with “Liahona”) are mediated by technical constraints and standards outside of Latter-day Saint leaders’ control. More dramatically, the process of replacing lds.org with churchofjesuschrist.org necessarily “invokes a hugely complex system of technical and contractual coordination.”⁷ In short, while *names* have long been associated with legitimacy in Mormon contexts,⁸ *domain names* illustrate sociotechnical complications of these associations.

3. Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 20.

4. Nelson, “Correct Name of the Church.”

5. Neil L. Andersen, “The Name of the Church Is Not Negotiable,” Oct. 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2021/10/58andersen?lang=eng/>.

6. Ryan T. Cragun and Michael Nielsen, “Fighting over ‘Mormon’: Media Coverage of the FLDS and LDS Churches,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 65.

7. Daniel Hancock, “You Can Have It, But Can You Hold It?: Treating Domain Names as Tangible Property,” *Kentucky Law Journal* 99, no. 1 (2010): 187.

8. Cragun and Nielsen, “Fighting over ‘Mormon.’”

In this article, I will examine how changes to (Anglophone-aimed) domain names of the official websites of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints extend, continue, and complicate the existing relationship between naming and legitimacy in the Latter-day Saint tradition. In doing so, I will illustrate two key points concerning the relationship between Mormonism and technology. First, as Latter-day Saint institutions use digital technologies to make claims to authority and legitimacy, they are also subject to independent processes of legitimation that exist within complex sociotechnical systems. Second, other parties that successfully navigate these same complex sociotechnical systems have an increased ability to challenge Latter-day Saint legitimacy.

Background

Conceptual Background

Drawing on sociology literature and inspired by disputes over use of the word “Mormon” in the late 2000s, Ryan Cragun and Michael Nielsen have suggested that Latter-day Saint concerns over naming are tied to legitimacy, which can be understood as an “organization’s cultural acceptance or ‘taken-for-granted’ status.”⁹ I use this understanding of legitimacy as a conceptual framework throughout this article, arguing that shifts in Latter-day Saint institutions’ use of domain names are responses to specific concerns about being accepted in particular ways. Two conceptions of legitimacy are particularly important for this article: Latter-day Saints’ acceptance as (and by) Christians and their perceived acceptability compared to other religious expressions descended from Joseph Smith Jr.

Latter-day Saint leaders’ emphasis on naming over the past several decades has largely been an effort to establish their faith’s Christian

9. Cragun and Nielsen, “Fighting over ‘Mormon.’”

credentials. Modern debates about Latter-day Saints' Christianity began in the late twentieth century and were particularly pronounced during Mitt Romney's 2008 and 2012 campaigns for president of the United States.¹⁰ In this context, the appeal of "the Church of Jesus Christ" as opposed to "the Mormon church" is clear; the first takes for granted Latter-day Saints' belief in Jesus Christ whereas the second does not. Furthermore, the word "Mormon" often invokes a range of other meanings that are unrelated to or distant from Christian credentials. Indeed, Weber describes Mormonism as a meme conveying "rich symbolic meaning," a "code word" with a variety of interpretations.¹¹

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is one of hundreds of religious expressions that make up what Steven Shields (citing other concerns about naming) has argued should be called the Smith-Rigdon movement.¹² Although Latter-day Saints make up by far the largest of these expressions, there are many others that "claim to be the 'only true church' or the 'only true way of faith,'" challenging Latter-day Saints' legitimacy as heirs to the 1830 church founded by Joseph Smith (and strongly influenced by Sidney Rigdon).¹³ Naming becomes salient here, too: In describing Mormonism as a meme, Weber noted that the term "Mormon" is often applied to other expressions of the Smith-Rigdon movement, providing specific examples related to Community of Christ and the Apostolic United Brethren.¹⁴ While Community of Christ

10. Sherry Baker and Joel Campbell, "Mitt Romney's Religion: A Five Factor Model for Analysis of Media Representation of Mormon Identity," *Journal of Media and Religion* 9, no. 2 (2010): 99–121.

11. Brenda R. Weber, *Latter-day Screens: Gender, Sexuality, and Mediated Mormonism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019), 15.

12. Steven L. Shields, "Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon: Co-Founders of a Movement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 1–18.

13. Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration: An Encyclopedia of the Smith–Rigdon Movement*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2021), 28.

14. Weber, *Latter-day Screens*, 9–10.

rejects this name, simplifying things for their cousins in Salt Lake City, many fundamentalist groups actively claim the label “Mormon,”¹⁵ complicating things for Latter-day Saints trying to escape their polygamist past and its implications for present acceptability. Thus, even if the contemporary Latter-day Saint leadership focuses more on Christian legitimacy than legitimacy within the Smith-Rigdon movement, establishing the latter is sometimes part of ensuring the former.

Technical Background

Fundamentally, a website is a collection of files hosted on a computer and made accessible to other computers through the internet. Because billions of computers are connected to the internet, users must be able to identify the computer hosting the website they wish to visit. A numeric IP address serves as the authoritative identifier for each computer connected to the internet, including those hosting websites; for example, as of this writing, the official English-language website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be accessed by entering 216.49.176.20 into the address bar of a web browser. However, because IP addresses are difficult to memorize, the Domain Name System (DNS) was developed in the early 1980s to establish easier-to-remember domain names.¹⁶ Latter-day Saints are much more likely to access their faith’s website through the domain name churchofjesuschrist.org than through the corresponding IP address. By way of analogy, IP addresses are like precise-but-unintuitive longitude and latitude coordinates (e.g., 41.625278, -81.362222), with domain names comparable to either corresponding street addresses (e.g., 9020 Chillicothe Rd., Kirtland, OH

15. Anne Wilde, “Fundamentalist Mormonism: Its History, Diversity, and Stereotypes, 1886–Present,” in *Scattering of the Saints: Schism Within Mormonism*, edited by Newell G. Bringham and John C. Hamer (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2007), 258–89.

16. National Research Council (US), *Signposts in Cyberspace: The Domain Name System and Internet Navigation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2005).

44094, USA) or distinct names given to locations (e.g., the Kirtland Temple).¹⁷

The developers of the DNS could not have anticipated the massive growth that the internet would experience over the next four decades—or the value that specific domain names would acquire because of that growth. Domain names have unexpectedly become a means of recognition and identification¹⁸ that hold considerable “economic, social, cultural, and political value.”¹⁹ Continuing the street address metaphor introduced above, the market for domain names is like the real estate market; while the same building (or website) could be constructed at any number of different locations (or domain names), some locations are more desirable—and valuable—than others.²⁰

Organizations therefore benefit from putting considerable thought into which domain name(s) to use. For example, as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was becoming Community of Christ, President Grant McMurray reported that church employees had secured several potential domain names but were still deciding which to use.²¹ This approach is related to a common strategy of picking a primary domain name but also acquiring auxiliary domain names that web users might associate with the organization. However,

17. Hancock, “Treating Domain Names as Tangible Property,” 188; Thies Lindenthal, “Valuable Words: The Price Dynamics of Internet Domain Names,” *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 65, no. 5 (May 2014): 869; National Research Council, *Signposts in Cyberspace*, 19.

18. David Lindsay, *International Domain Name Law: ICANN and the UDRP* (Oxford and Portland, Ore.: Hart Publishing, 2007), 95.

19. National Research Council, *Signposts in Cyberspace*, vii.

20. Lindenthal, “Valuable Words”; Tristan Halvorson, “Registration Intent in the Domain Name Market” (PhD diss., UC San Diego, 2015).

21. Community of Christ, “Questions and Answers on Church Name Change: An Interview with President W. Grant McMurray,” archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20010422055040/http://cofchrist.org:80/news/q_and_a-churchname.asp/.

a desired (primary or auxiliary) domain name may be difficult to come by: Multiple parties may have legitimate claim to a given domain name, bad actors may purchase domain names associated with trademarks, or investors may purchase potentially valuable domain names to resell them later at a profit.²² Although resolution mechanisms exist for some disputes, the first-come, first-served market remains the primary means of determining the legitimate owner of a given domain name.²³ Domains may trade hands for hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars; one company recently reported selling a domain name for \$30 million USD, and LasVegas.com was purchased in 2005 for up to \$90 million USD, to be paid in installments through 2040.²⁴

Data Sources

In this paper, I rely on digital methods, “the use of online and digital technologies to collect and analyze research data.”²⁵ More specifically, I consider digital data that were 1) created as a byproduct of activity within the online sphere and 2) archived by parties recognizing the value of this data. This methodological approach is necessarily

22. Lindsay, *International Domain Name Law*; National Research Council, *Signposts in Cyberspace*, 67; Halvorson, “Registration Intent in the Domain Name Market,” 15.

23. Lindsay, *International Domain Name Law*; Lindenthal, “Valuable Words.”

24. MicroStrategy, “MicroStrategy Sells Voice.com Domain Name for \$30 Million,” *Business Wire*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20190618005248/en/MicroStrategy-Sells-Voice.com-Domain-30-Million/>; Michael Berkens, “Report: Vegas.com Bought LasVegas.com in 2005 For Up to \$90 Million Dollars,” *The Domains*, Nov. 6, 2015, <https://www.thedomains.com/2015/11/06/report-vegas-com-bought-lasvegas-com-in-2005-for-up-to-90-million-dollars/>.

25. Helene Snee, Christine Hine, Yvette Morey, Steven Roberts, and Haley Watson, “Digital Methods as Mainstream Methodology: An Introduction,” in *Digital Methods for Social Science: An Interdisciplinary Guide to Research Innovation*, edited by Helene Snee, Christine Hine, Yvette Morey, Steven Roberts, and Hayley Watson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1.

incomplete; scholarly or journalistic interviews with parties involved in this process could offer insights and answer questions I am unable to address here. However, this approach remains detailed and exact where it is complete; more importantly, it also offers details into this history that associated parties have so far not made public and may not be forthcoming about. This study is therefore meant as an initial exploration of an important event in contemporary Mormon history through a sociotechnical lens—not as an ultimate and authoritative account of its details and importance.

In describing changes to the (Anglophone-aimed) domain names employed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I rely on two key sources of data. I first accessed historical versions of associated websites through the Wayback Machine (web.archive.org), a service operated by the Internet Archive that captures historical versions of web pages. However, sometime in early 2021, archived versions of another website previously found at churchofjesuschrist.org (i.e., before this domain name became publicly associated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on March 5, 2019) disappeared from the Wayback Machine. In response to my queries, an Internet Archive employee explained to me that they could not comment on any particular cases but that owners of a domain name can request that associated archives be removed from the Wayback Machine. This raises (but does not confirm) the possibility that this part of Mormon digital history was removed at the request of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Although I had already taken screenshots of key Wayback Machine captures (which I also use as reference material), I nonetheless replaced now-missing data with archived WHOIS data. WHOIS (“who is?”) is a name given to contact information provided by domain name owners to companies that manage registration of those domain names; WHOIS data can be made private, but in other cases it serves as a contact directory for website owners. Although WHOIS data are updated as changes

are made to domain names, there are services that regularly retrieve and archive these data, thereby providing an indirect record of internet history. In April 2021, I purchased from the Domain Tools service (<https://whois.domaintools.com>) a history of WHOIS data for churchofjesuschrist.org going back to January 5, 2001. I use those records to lend further insight into the history of that domain name.

Latter-day Saint Domain Names Through 2018

The relationship between domain names, names, and legitimacy in the Latter-day Saint context extends back to the early history of the World Wide Web. In this section, I show how the development of lds.org and mormon.org illustrate this relationship.

Development of lds.org

The first record of lds.org in the Internet Archive dates to November 9, 1996.²⁶ This first version of the official website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints doesn't reveal much. Two short sentences explain that the website is still under construction but that it will eventually contain information of interest to Latter-day Saints and others.

Nonetheless, it is already clear that lds.org was intended to help establish Latter-day Saints' Christian legitimacy. The banner image at the top of the page featured a then-new logo for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that placed the name "Jesus Christ" in a more prominent position. Just a month earlier, an article in the *Ensign* had introduced this logo to Latter-day Saints with explanations that would be familiar twenty-two years later: Jesus Christ is at the center of Latter-day Saint beliefs, the full name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a product of revelation, and the name "Mormon"

26. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Official Internet Site of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," Nov. 9, 1996, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/19961109080544/http://www.lds.org/>.

distracts from the first two points.²⁷ The banner image also featured the *Christus* statue, a Danish work of art that Latter-day Saints have long employed to suggest Christian legitimacy—and that would be added in April 2020 to an updated version of the previously mentioned logo.²⁸

The juxtaposition of these developments suggests that the relationship between names, domain names, and legitimacy has been present since the very beginning of official Latter-day Saint online presence. Indeed, the introduction of the 1996 logo in the *Ensign* not only noted its emphasis on Jesus Christ but also suggested that its new design made it “easier to read and to identify in the electronic media.”²⁹ Such a statement illustrates not only Latter-day Saint leaders’ early adoption of the internet as a means of establishing Christian legitimacy but also their recognition that the systems of legitimacy inherent to this medium must be navigated as part of that adoption.

Development of mormon.org

In December of 1996, as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continued to update lds.org, the Wayback Machine made its first captures of mormon.org and mormon.net. While Latter-day Saint leaders had clearly embraced the World Wide Web, the importance of managing one’s web presence by acquiring a range of domain names was not yet the established advice that it is today. Thus, in late 1996, both

27. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “New Church Logo Announced,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1996, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1996/10/news-of-the-church/new-church-logo-announced/>.

28. Florence Smith Jacobsen, “Christus Statue,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 1:273–74; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Church’s New Symbol Emphasizes the Centrality of the Savior,” *Newsroom*, Apr. 4, 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/new-symbol-church-of-jesus-christ/>.

29. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “New Church Logo Announced.”

domains were being operated privately by the same Latter-day Saint individual, the first as a host of web pages for mission alumni, wards, and other Mormon affinity groups and the second as a “Pro-Mormon” site for both Latter-day Saints and others.”³⁰ Of course, from the Latter-day Saint leadership’s perspective, this is not the worst possible outcome for a Mormon-related domain name. Indeed, mormon.com was operated for a time in the late 1990s as a pornography website that trolled any Latter-day Saints who made their way there by accident.³¹ However, as of a December 1998 Wayback Machine capture, mormon.com was being operated as a sympathetic but unofficial website in the same vein as mormon.net and mormon.org.³² The new owner of the website made it clear that he had purchased the domain name with the express purpose of improving Latter-day Saints’ online image—and that the purchase had been rather expensive.³³

In 2001, Latter-day Saint officials took steps to bring all three of these domain names under their control. Sometime between March and June, mormon.com began redirecting to the official Latter-day Saint website at lds.org; mormon.net began to do the same between April and May of the same year. However, by the time the Wayback Machine captured mormon.com in November 2001 and mormon.net

30. John D. Hays, “Mormon.ORG Site,” Dec. 28, 1996, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/19961228131851/http://mormon.org/>; John D. Hays, “Mormon.NET,” Dec. 21, 1996, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/19961225141401/http://mormon.net:80/>.

31. “www.mormon.com,” Dec. 21, 1997, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/19971221121500/http://mormon.com/>.

32. “Mormon.com—An Internet Resource for Latter-day Saints,” Dec. 5, 1998, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/19981205035658/http://www.mormon.com/>.

33. JoAnn Jacobsen-Wells, “LDS Businessman Cleans Up Web Site; Mormon.com Was Filled with Pornography, So Bishop Decided to Buy and Sanitize It,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 16, 1998, <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?itype=storyID&id=100F37CE6689D1D4>.

in May 2002, both were redirecting to a now-official mormon.org, which the Wayback Machine first captured in October 2001. Although lds.org had initially been presented as a resource for both internal and external audiences, the Latter-day Saint acquisition of mormon.org signaled a change in strategy, with the new website introducing itself as “for anyone interested in learning more about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”³⁴

Like lds.org, the establishment of an official Latter-day Saint mormon.org was driven by a concern for legitimacy. The seeming impetus for these online presence changes in 2001 was the upcoming 2002 Winter Olympics, hosted in Salt Lake City and therefore perceived by Latter-day Saint leadership as an important opportunity to build acceptance. And yet, the choice to use “Mormon”-themed domain names to put Latter-day Saints’ best foot forward stood in tension with other efforts Church leaders were making at the time. Indeed, in an interview with Dallin Oaks published in the *New York Times* in early 2001, the reporter noted that Latter-day Saint leaders would “step up efforts to discourage use of the term Mormon Church and instead emphasize the name Jesus Christ in references to the church” (though Oaks did not express the same broad resistance to the term “Mormon” that would later become characteristic of Latter-day Saint leadership).³⁵

In this same interview, Oaks also sanctioned the abbreviated name “Church of Jesus Christ.” This abbreviation has since become increasingly prominent in Latter-day Saint approaches to naming, including increased visual prominence in the faith’s current logo and forming the

34. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Official Information about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons),” Oct. 9, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20011009233416/http://www.mormon.org/>.

35. Gustav Niebuhr, “Adapting ‘Mormon’ to Emphasize Christianity,” *New York Times*, Feb. 19, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/19/us/adapting-mormon-to-emphasize-christianity.html>.

new official Latter-day Saint domain name.³⁶ This abbreviated name has obvious appeal in terms of the quest for Christian legitimacy; however, by claiming this name for themselves, Latter-day Saint leaders also make an implicit argument about their church's legitimacy within the Smith-Rigdon movement. In his 2001 interview, the reporter described Oaks as arguing that it was appropriate to refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the Church of Jesus Christ "because no other major Christian body in the United States had laid claim to it."³⁷ This line of thinking is noteworthy for how it concedes that there may be other Christian bodies that lay claim to this name but both dismisses them as serious ("major") contenders and conceals that denominations within the Smith-Rigdon movement are prominent among these dismissed churches, including The Church of Jesus Christ based in Monongahela, Pennsylvania.³⁸ By laying claim to legitimate use of the name, Oaks implicitly argued that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the sole rightful heir to the religious movement begun by Joseph Smith Jr.—but in a way that obscured even the existence of any dispute over rightful heirs to names and traditions.

The need for legitimacy within the Smith-Rigdon movement would also inform the most prominent redesign to mormon.org over its lifetime. In July 2010, the site received a major overhaul that put individual Latter-day Saints in the spotlight.³⁹ Some of these "I'm a Mormon" profiles were produced and curated at the institutional level (in conjunction with YouTube videos and other social media outreach), but most were created by individual members eager to contribute to their

36. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Church's New Symbol Emphasizes the Centrality of the Savior."

37. Niebuhr, "Adapting 'Mormon' to Emphasize Christianity?"

38. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*.

39. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Mormon.org," Jul. 21, 2010, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20100721233356/http://www.mormon.org/>.

faith's online missionary efforts. In a striking departure from previous campaigns emphasizing the full name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the official announcement of this redesign leaned into the name "Mormon," celebrating that "2,000 Mormons have completed profiles . . . explaining why they live their faith and why they are a Mormon."⁴⁰ This reclaiming of "Mormon" was part of a broader effort within Latter-day Saint public affairs that responded to increased attention in the media and in pop culture during the late 2000s to polygamous groups also claiming the name "Mormon."⁴¹ Whereas the name had previously been downplayed in order to shore up Christian legitimacy, it was now being revived in response to more urgent needs to paint perceived competitors within the Smith-Rigdon movement as unacceptable alternatives—and therefore unworthy of their shared name.

This overhaul also corresponded with the rise of so-called Web 2.0—a perhaps exaggerated shift from static web pages to interactive web platforms in the mid-to-late 2000s. That is, it is noteworthy that mormon.org shifted focus from institutional characteristics to individuals' lived experiences at the same time that "the value and usefulness of web activity" was becoming "contingent on the number of participating users."⁴² Just as the creation of lds.org suggested Latter-day Saint leaders' attention to the need for legitimate web presence, this redesign of

40. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "New Mormon.org Brings Mormons to the Forefront," *Newsroom*, Jul. 15, 2010, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/new-mormon-org-brings-mormons-to-the-forefront/>.

41. Cragun and Nielsen, "Fighting over 'Mormon'"; Tanya D. Zuk, "'Proud Mormon Polygamist': Assimilation, Popular Memory, and the Mormon Churches in *Big Love*," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 26, no. 1 (2014): 93–106.

42. Neil Selwyn, "Web 2.0 Applications as Alternative Environments for Informal Learning—A Critical Review" (paper presented at the OECD CERIKERIS International Expert Meeting on ICT and Educational Performance, Cheju Island, South Korea, Oct. 17, 2007).

mormon.org suggests continued attention to what confers legitimacy in the online sphere. However, mormon.org's life as an interactive platform also raises questions about content moderation and legitimacy. In short, the legitimacy of an interactive platform depends in great part on the perceived authenticity of individual activity on the platform; yet, this stands in tension with Latter-day Saint leaders' preference for correlation as a means of legitimation. As Tarleton Gillespie writes, no interactive platform wants to moderate content, but all must ultimately do so.⁴³ Thus, the official announcement of the mormon.org redesign noted that "profiles are reviewed, but not edited or modified;"⁴⁴ however, when an alt-right Mormon blogger began drawing attention in 2017, her profile was "quietly removed" from mormon.org.⁴⁵

Latter-day Saint Domain Names After 2018

Although Latter-day Saint officials discouraged terms like "L.D.S." and "Mormon"⁴⁶ before 2018, this clearly did not prevent them from continuing to use the domain names lds.org and mormon.org. In contrast, the renewed emphasis of the late 2010s and early 2020s signaled not only a reversal of the recent leaning into the term "Mormon" but also a willingness to go further than before in changing names—including domain names.

43. Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018), 5–9.

44. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "New Mormon.org Brings Mormons to the Forefront."

45. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Mormon Blogger Trumpets Alt-Right Racial Views, But is Out of Tune with Her Religion," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Apr. 2, 2017, <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=5116879&itype=CMSID>.

46. Niebuhr, "Adapting 'Mormon' to Emphasize Christianity."

Replacing lds.org

In March 2019, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced that it would be replacing lds.org with churchofjesuschrist.org (styled as ChurchofJesusChrist.org, though domain names are not case-sensitive). This began as a simple redirect, with the official website continuing to exist at lds.org; however, by June of that same year, churchofjesuschrist.org had become the primary domain name, with lds.org now redirecting to it.⁴⁷ The choice of this domain name was an obvious one given Latter-day Saint leaders' long-standing preference for this abbreviated name and their current priorities; however, their ability to acquire the domain name was not so straightforward.

Indeed, in 2018, churchofjesuschrist.org was operated by another Smith-Rigdon church that contested the legitimacy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion was established in 1984 by later-excommunicated Latter-day Saint Kenneth Asay, who claimed to be the reincarnation of Joseph Smith Jr.; after Asay's death the next year, fellow former Latter-day Saint Roger Billings assumed leadership of the church, which he incorporated in Missouri in 1989. Wayback Machine captures of churchofjesuschrist.org in late 1999 suggest that the organization was using the name "The Church of Jesus Christ" for a time (hence the choice of domain name); however, WHOIS records describe the "Church of Jesus Christ in Zion" as the owner of the domain as far back as January 1999, and Steven Shields suggests that this full name played an important role in Asay's founding of the church and his claims to legitimacy over The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Some sources record Billings as advocating polygamy, though he has also distanced himself from or denied such statements on other occasions.⁴⁸

47. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Changes to Emphasize the Correct Name of the Church of Jesus Christ."

48. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, 359–64.

As an offshoot expression with fundamentalist characteristics, The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion is likely seen by its Salt Lake cousins as a liability to their own bids for acceptability; however, this was clearly not enough to prevent Latter-day Saint leaders from purchasing a domain name from the other church. Apostle Neil Andersen explained in an October 2021 general conference talk that his church's Intellectual Property Office had been interested in *churchofjesuschrist.org* since 2006;⁴⁹ it is unclear how this interest manifested, but even if the Intellectual Property Office was actively offering to buy the domain name at this time, the offer did not convince The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion. Indeed, the latter denomination did not abandon or sell the domain even after it began redirecting it to a new main domain name—*churchofjesuschristinzion.org*—in 2013.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, things began to change in 2018. WHOIS data suggest that the denomination renewed their ownership of *churchofjesuschrist.org* in January 2018, giving them legitimate ownership over the domain through January 2022. However, sometime after August 15 and before August 23, 2018 (that is, likely after Nelson's August 16 announcement on naming), *churchofjesuschrist.org* was disconnected from *churchofjesuschristinzion.org* and connected with GoDaddy's CashParking service, which displays ads on legitimately owned but unused domain names. These data complicate Neil Andersen's description of Latter-day Saint acquisition of the domain name, which gives the impression that the previous owner publicly and coincidentally communicated an independent decision to sell *churchofjesuschrist.org* in August 2018.⁵¹ In contrast, The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion's renewal of the domain through 2022 before a sudden willingness to sell in August 2018

49. Andersen, "The Name of the Church Is Not Negotiable."

50. The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion, "Church of Jesus Christ," Mar. 13, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130313055339/http://www.churchofjesuschristinzion.org/>.

51. Andersen, "The Name of the Church Is Not Negotiable."

suggests that their decision to sell was more strategic and responsive. One might speculate that renewed Latter-day Saint commitment to names could have translated to higher offers for this domain name, leading The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion to reconsider their ownership. Whatever the details of the transaction, churchofjesuschrist.org became associated with servers owned by Intellectual Reserve (a legal entity that manages Latter-day Saint intellectual property) between October 10 and October 12, 2018, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced in March 2019 that it would be using the domain name.⁵²

Even after Latter-day Saint leadership had obtained ownership of churchofjesuschrist.org, the history of its transaction with The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion created potential threats to Latter-day Saint legitimacy by association. In addition to his religious leadership, Billings is the founder of the Institute of Science and Technology; references to the Institute under an earlier name appear in early WHOIS data for churchofjesuschrist.org, underlining close ties between it and The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion. The Institute is an unaccredited educational body in Kansas City from which Billings claims a doctoral degree.⁵³ Acellus Learning, an online learning platform associated with the Institute, attracted controversy during the COVID-19 pandemic: Benjamin Herold reported that schools “in at least two states have cut ties . . . over concerns about offensive curricular material.”⁵⁴ Bill-

52. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Changes to Emphasize the Correct Name of the Church of Jesus Christ.”

53. Sarah Emerson and Matthew Giles, “A Popular Online Learning Platform Was Actually Created by an Underground Religious ‘Cult,’” *OneZero*, Oct. 9, 2020, <https://onezero.medium.com/a-major-online-learning-platform-was-created-by-a-subterranean-religious-cult-whose-leader-has-cec99e7adcaf/>.

54. Benjamin Herold, “Complaints Over Offensive Content Lead Schools to Drop Online Learning Provider,” *Education Week*, Aug. 31, 2020, <https://www.edweek.org/technology/complaints-over-offensive-content-lead-schools-to-drop-online-learning-provider/2020/08/>.

ings dismissed the criticism as unfounded and at least once suggested that Latter-day Saint officials and Brigham Young University–Hawaii employees were engaged in a smear campaign against him.⁵⁵ Further reporting on the controversy included allegations of “physical and mental violence, the sexualization of minors, and the deliberate separation of families under Billings’ leadership” of The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion as well as accusations of the coercion of church members into unpaid labor.⁵⁶

In repeating these allegations, my intent is not to validate them but rather to further illustrate the tensions between naming, domain names, and legitimacy that are the focus of this paper. Indeed, based on my accessing of the Wayback Machine to explore churchofjesuschrist.org, I estimate that its Billings-era history was removed sometime between September 2020 and March 2021—that is, sometime after Billings began to receive this negative attention. If this history was indeed removed at the request of Latter-day Saint leaders—which remains the most obvious but far from conclusive explanation—this could suggest an eagerness to distance themselves from Billings and the controversy surrounding him. To be clear, the present data do not allow for such a conclusion; however, this paper’s focus on disputes over names and legitimacy as enacted in and through sociotechnical systems necessarily raises the question.

Purchasing Other Domains

Like lds.org, mormon.org was judged in late 2018 to be an inappropriate domain name in view of contemporary Latter-day Saint priorities. In March 2019, it was replaced with comeuntochrist.org until it could

55. Gina Mangieri, “Acellus Online Content Flagged as Petitions Ask DOE to Cut or Keep It,” KHON2, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.khon2.com/always-investigating/acellus-online-content-flagged-as-petitions-ask-doe-to-cut-or-keep-it/>.

56. Emerson and Giles, “Popular Online Learning Platform.”

be integrated into the new churchofjesuschrist.org domain.⁵⁷ The first Wayback Machine capture of comeuntochrist.org dates back to September 2006, when it was being run as yet another unofficial, pro-Mormon missionary site; it continued in this capacity until at least 2016.⁵⁸ Captures of the website during 2017 and 2018 are incomplete or inconclusive, lending some ambiguity to its history. However, the domain was obviously acquired by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sometime before March 2019, when it began redirecting to mormon.org. In late April 2019, comeuntochrist.org became the main domain name⁵⁹ until early February 2021, when it began redirecting to a specific subsite on churchofjesuschrist.org.⁶⁰

Apostle Neil Andersen also reported that churchofjesuschrist.com was purchased around the same time as churchofjesuschrist.org.⁶¹ Although this domain does not seem to have been associated with the Smith-Rigdon movement prior to the Latter-day Saint purchase of it, it was used off-and-on by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community between 2010 and at least 2016.⁶² Around this same time period, the

57. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Changes to Emphasize the Correct Name of the Church of Jesus Christ.”

58. ComeUntoChrist.org, “Come Unto Christ,” Sept. 2, 2006, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20060902202930/http://www.comeuntochrist.org/>.

59. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “All Are Invited to Come Unto Christ,” Apr. 25, 2019, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20190425205413/https://www.comeuntochrist.org/site/home/>.

60. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Home | ComeUntoChrist,” Feb. 11, 2021, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20210211040255/https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/comeuntochrist/>.

61. Andersen, “The Name of the Church Is Not Negotiable.”

62. Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, “Al Islam: The Official Website of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community,” Apr. 2, 2010, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20100402224946/http://churchofjesuschrist.com/>; Internet Archive, Oct. 10, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161021102655/http://www>

Wayback Machine captured the domain being offered for sale on the secondary market for asking prices of \$20,000 USD in 2017 and \$10,000 GBP in 2015.⁶³ These captures do not, of course, demonstrate that this much money ever actually changed hands, but they do suggest perceptions that the domain name was potentially valuable. By early 2018, churchofjesuschrist.com was being used to redirect to the website for a piracy-based streaming service,⁶⁴ and in late August 2018, it was used to redirect to a seemingly nonfunctioning site at the primary domain bibleonline.org.⁶⁵ However, by December 2018, the domain was clearly under the Church's control, first as a stand-alone website and eventually as a redirect to its main domain.⁶⁶

Discussion and Conclusion

Digital technologies present The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with new ways to argue for its legitimacy as a Christian institution and as the legitimate heir to the nineteenth-century church

.churchofjesuschrist.com/. Note that this URL redirects to an archived version of a post at themuslimtimes.info, demonstrating how the domain name was being used by a Muslim community at the time of the Internet Archive capture.

63. Sedo, "churchofjesuschrist.com," Sept. 13, 2017, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170913192240/http://churchofjesuschrist.com/>; Sedo, "churchofjesuschrist.com," Aug. 1, 2015, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20150801093613/http://churchofjesuschrist.com/>.

64. TVizion, "Welcome to TVizion," May 31, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180531215342/http://www.tvizion.com/member/24477/>; BehindMLM, "247 SmartLife & TVizion sued by Dish Network," May 27, 2018, <https://behindmlm.com/mlm-reviews/247-smartlife-tvizion-sued-by-dish-network/>.

65. Internet Archive, Aug. 22, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180822101409/http://www.churchofjesuschrist.com/>. Note that this URL redirects to an archived copy of a nonfunctioning site at bibleonline.org.

66. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Beliefs," Dec. 1, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181201161556/https://churchofjesuschrist.com/>.

founded by Joseph Smith Jr. Indeed, the history of official Latter-day Saint domain names demonstrates that leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been eager to embrace the internet as a means for increasing their acceptability: *lds.org* was established in the early years of the World Wide Web, the 2010 redesign of *mormon.org* demonstrated continued attention to trends in web use, and the breadth of changes made to Latter-day Saint accounts and applications after 2018 indicated the extent of leaders' commitment to an official Latter-day Saint presence on the internet.

Yet, in making this commitment, the Latter-day Saint leadership must defer to the ways that legitimacy is determined within the sociotechnical systems that govern the use of these technologies. Furthermore, individuals or organizations that can navigate those systems better or more quickly also have opportunities to challenge Latter-day Saint legitimacy—or shore up their own at Latter-day Saints' expense. Although the Latter-day Saint leadership's purchase of *lds.org* in the mid-1990s allowed it to argue for its Christian legitimacy and lay claim to a particular name, few—if any—people or organizations then understood the social importance of the web or the value that domain names would eventually hold. Thus, because the sociotechnical mechanics of the Domain Name System defined a liberal market where the first to come was the first served, other entities were able to easily lay claim to names that would later be of interest to Latter-day Saint leaders. In the case of *mormon.org* and *mormon.net*, these leaders were lucky that these other parties were sympathetic to and interested in shoring up Latter-day Saint legitimacy; however, the brief operation of *mormon.com* as a pornography site—an implicit challenging of Mormon legitimacy—illustrates the threats of failing to correctly navigate this sociotechnical system.

More recent history lends further insight into these tensions. Latter-day Saint officials' present reemphasis on their church's full name is often framed as a quest for Christian legitimacy in particular; however, this paper's focus on domain names illustrates the way in which

Latter-day Saint institutions still struggle with other Smith-Rigdon churches over the legitimacy of their claims to be Joseph Smith Jr.'s true successors. Acquiring churchofjesuschrist.org required that Latter-day Saint officials interact with an offshoot movement. Furthermore, while The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has significantly more members, deeper coffers, and greater legitimacy in the public eye, The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion effectively nullified those advantages in an online context by being the first to establish its naming claims and associated legitimacy within the constraints of the Domain Name System. While the latter church ultimately renounced its legitimate claim to the contested domain name, it may have been in a position to demand a considerable price in exchange. Neil Andersen has assured Latter-day Saints that “the Church purchased the domain name at a very modest amount,”⁶⁷ but considering both Latter-day Saint institutional wealth and reported sales of domain names for millions of US dollars, even a modest amount relative to this context could be significant in real terms.

Furthermore, there is at least one other party implicated in questions about names, domain names, and legitimacy. The Church of Jesus Christ—founded by William Bickerton, based in Pennsylvania, and representing the third-largest Smith-Rigdon denomination—has used the domain names thechurchofjesuschrist.com and thechurchofjesuschrist.org since the early 2000s.⁶⁸ Given the importance that then-apostle Russell Nelson once placed on “The” in the full name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—as well as the Latter-day Saint style guide’s capitalizing “The” even when this church’s name appears in the middle of a sentence—it is likely that Latter-day Saint officials have

67. Andersen, “The Name of the Church Is Not Negotiable.”

68. The Church of Jesus Christ, “The Church of Jesus Christ,” Oct. 22, 2003, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20031022175213/http://thechurchofjesuschrist.org/>; The Church of Jesus Christ, “The Church of Jesus Christ,” Mar. 12, 2001, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20010312005513/http://thechurchofjesuschrist.com/>.

also been monitoring these domain names.⁶⁹ Yet, no matter the level of Latter-day Saint interest in these domain names, the Domain Name System understands legitimacy in a way that will consistently favor the smaller church over the larger one so long as the former acts to maintain its ownership of the domain.

Of course, the influence of sociotechnical systems on Latter-day Saints' efforts to establish their legitimacy is not limited to the Domain Name System. Consider, for example, the official Latter-day Saint presence on several popular social media platforms. Such a presence is dependent on several layers of technical infrastructure, collectively referred to as a "stack," and at "every level of the tech stack, corporations are placed in positions to make value judgements regarding the legitimacy of content."⁷⁰ That official Latter-day Saint content published to these platforms has not—and may never—become illegitimate in the sight of these corporations does not remove its dependence on their implicit blessing to pursue legitimacy in its own way. Furthermore, to the extent that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is dependent on other digital platforms to spread its messages, it is subject to the fact that platforms shape "the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them,"⁷¹ how, for example, does tweeting support for

69. Russell M. Nelson, "Thus Shall My Church Be Called," Apr. 1990, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1990/04/thus-shall-my-church-be-called?lang=eng> (I am indebted to Kristine Haglund for calling my attention to this); The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Style Guide—The Name of the Church," *Newsroom*, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/style-guide/>.

70. Joan Donovan, "Navigating the Tech Stack: When, Where and How Should We Moderate Content?," Oct. 28, 2019, <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/navigating-tech-stack-when-where-and-how-should-we-moderate-content/>.

71. José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

a Latter-day Saint leader (as opposed to raising one's hand) change the act of sustaining?⁷²

Likewise, these same sociotechnical systems may also be advantageous to those who wish to challenge Latter-day Saint leadership—or who do so unintentionally. While the recent switch from a crowd-sourced mormon.org to a correlated subsite of churchofjesuschrist.org reduces the possibility of a controversial Latter-day Saint embarrassing the broader institution on its own website, “the complex intersection of top-down (LDS Church authorities) and bottom-up (LDS member generated) processes” continues to exist elsewhere on the internet.⁷³ For example, social media platforms allow Latter-day Saints “to present Mormon identities and approach Mormon practice in ways other than those that are typically seen (or approved of) in formal Church settings,” serve as a “tool for the expression of dissatisfaction” for former or heterodox Latter-day Saints, and can allow state actors to promote self-serving narratives about Mormonism.⁷⁴ For all the obstacles posed by the Domain Name System, the sheer scale of voices empowered by social media makes enforcing naming and promoting legitimacy even more complicated.

72. Spencer P. Greenhalgh, K. Bret Staudt Willet, and Matthew J. Koehler, “Approaches to Mormon Identity and Practice in the #ldsconf Twitter Hashtag,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 18, no. 4 (2019): 131.

73. Benjamin Burroughs and Gavin Feller, “Religious Memetics: Institutional Authority in Digital/Lived Religion,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 39, no. 4 (2015): 357–77.

74. Greenhalgh, Staudt Willet, and Koehler, “Approaches to Mormon Identity and Practice”; Mark D. Johns and Shelby Nelson, “Analyzing Main Channel and Back-Channel Tweets During the October Church of Latter Day Saints General Conference” (paper presented at the 16th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers, Phoenix, Ariz., Oct. 21–24, 2015), 2; Spencer P. Greenhalgh, “Mormonism as Meme in Government-Sponsored Information Operations on Twitter,” *Tropos: Comunicação, Sociedade E Cultura* 10, no. 1 (July 2021).

These additional examples demonstrate the continued need for understanding how Latter-day Saint conceptions of legitimacy and authority interact with developments in digital technologies. Indeed, while this article has focused on Anglophone-aimed domain names, other post-2018 changes to the Latter-day Saint online presence are worthy of scholarly attention. A number of official sources have referenced the “consolidation” of Latter-day Saint web pages and social media accounts, which apostle Ronald Rasband described as aligning “well with the First Presidency’s desire to simplify the tools that we use.”⁷⁵ This suggests that Latter-day Saint leaders have priorities for their church’s online presence that go beyond naming—but likely still touch on questions of legitimacy, opening further avenues for fruitful research. Furthermore, Rasband’s comments were in the context of Latter-day Saint web presence in languages other than English, a glaring omission from this study. An explicitly multilingual, global investigation would lend further insight into how online presence connects with other aspects of naming and legitimacy in a worldwide church.

75. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Official Social Media Accounts for Church Leaders and Groups,” <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/social-media-accounts?lang=eng>; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Eighteen Spanish-Language Global Newsroom Sites Consolidate into One,” *Newsroom*, Sept 18., 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/spanish-language-global-newsroom>.

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