ANALYZING MAIN CHANNEL AND BACK-CHANNEL TWEETS DURING THE OCTOBER CHURCH OF LATTER DAY SAINTS GENERAL CONFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate ways in which a particular new social medium may be being utilized among members and/or former members of the LDS church as a channel for outreach, as a means of internal communication, and as a tool for the expression of dissatisfaction. Using Lundby's (2011) aspects of cultural belonging, we observed Twitter traffic related to the LDS church fall conference, with particular attention to hashtags such as #exmormon, #gaymormon, and #mofem. We found that attempts by disaffiliated Mormons to gain mainstream attention were largely ignored, but that interaction among ex-Mormons disaffiliated for various reasons appeared to occur. We also noted considerable evidence of continued cultural belonging among the disaffiliated.

The advent of the internet and the widespread adoption of social media technologies have had profound impact on a wide range of social behaviors and almost all aspects of American life. Religious associations and organized religious groups have likewise been impacted. Many religious groups have seen the internet as a medium for evangelism, spreading their message and/or establishing their legitimacy among external audiences. In addition, religious groups have used the internet for internal communication among adherents, and some may find that the internet provides more direct connection between members and central authorities, helping members to bond more closely to the organization and allowing increased direct control by hierarchies. Conversely, some research suggests that new media may contribute to the undermining of religious authority by opening the possibility for communication back-channels which bypass more traditional hierarchical structures (Barker, 2005; Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011; Shirky, 2008).

Sociologists of religion have long studied the phenomenon of religious conversion and the processes through which persons affiliate with particular religious groups. At least

into the final decades of the 20th century, however, very little research had been conducted on the phenomenon of persons leaving a particular religious group. Those who renounce their religious tradition, either to embrace a different faith, or to become religiously indifferent, have received little scholarly attention (Bromley, 1988). Even now, the phenomenon is referenced by a diverse range of terms, including resignation, disaffiliation, disengagement, apostasy, or failure of religious continuity (Bengtson, 2013). This wide range of vocabulary suggests little scholarly agreement as to the precise nature of this behavior.

More recently, the overall decrease in religious affiliation in the U.S. has spurred interest in the process of disaffiliation (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012; White, 2014). Of particular interest to sociologists of religion is the process of disaffiliation among members of so-called "high-boundary" religious groups, characterized by distinctive beliefs and practices that set them apart from mainstream society (Bengtson, 2013). Of particular interest to scholars in the field of media studies is the way in which various new media channels may contribute either to the decision to withdraw, or to the way in which the decision is expressed (Cheong & Fisk, 2013). The ubiquitous adoption of internet social media platforms within the past decade is a particular focus of attention.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS or "Mormon") is a "high-boundary" religious group that has been enormously successful in attracting new members. Self-reports from LDS officials indicate that the Mormons are the fastest growing religious group in the U.S. (Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2012). More scientific surveys do confirm that the gains in Mormon membership, relative to the size of the group, are indeed impressive. However, these surveys also indicate an extremely high number of disaffiliations in the same time period, resulting in a fairly stable membership, if not a net loss (Henderson & Cooke, 2012; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to investigate ways in which a particular new social medium may be being utilized among members and/or former members of the LDS church as a channel for outreach, as a means of internal communication, and as a tool for the expression of dissatisfaction. Specifically, we examined the use of Twitter as a tool for back-channel communication during the annual LDS church General Conference in the fall of 2013, with a recheck of data in the fall of 2014.

Literature Review

Lundby has recently (2011) adapted to religious groups the concept of "cultural belonging" from the work of sociologist Göran Therborn (1991). This model offers three somewhat overlapping aspects of belonging: (1) Norms of conduct and ways of expressing emotions, (2) cognitive and communicative competencies, and (3) identification and differentiation. With this concept Lundby suggests that religious affiliation does not merely mean to join and/or call oneself a member of a particular sect or group. All three aspects of belonging apply. One learns certain modes of conduct, such as daily rituals, habits of dress, and particular ways of responding emotionally to life events (birth, death, falling in love, choosing a vocation, etc.). Similarly, religious

groups develop unique theological understandings and equally unique vocabularies for talking about these. One of the most important ways of differentiating group members from outsiders is the ability to "talk the talk," that is, to speak the language of the group. These aspects are in addition to choice to identify formally with the group and to set oneself apart from other groups.

Indeed, one may choose to renounce the group's identity, yet remain intimately familiar with the beliefs, practices, norms and vocabulary of the group. Upon disaffiliation, one does not forget how to be a member of the group. Certain ways of thinking or behaving may continue, and certainly one is still able to "talk the talk" even after ceasing to formally identify with the group. Reasons for disaffiliation are many, varied, and complex and may have little to do with disagreements over theological beliefs and practices (Albrecht, Cornwall, & Cunningham, 1988). If the issue is a matter of leadership authority or specific policies, those disaffiliating may do so reluctantly, or with most aspects of their belief and practice unchanged. Contemporary examples might include persons maintaining identity with the Latter Day Saints church's fundamental beliefs while protesting leadership decisions regarding the ordination of women or the inclusion of homosexuals (Boorstein, 2014).

Religious affiliation is a dynamic process. Individuals choose to join religious groups for a wide variety of reasons, and at the same time, others make the decision to leave for an equally wide variety of reasons. While various Protestant churches gained membership equal to roughly 8.4% of the adult U.S. population in 2008, these same churches lost membership equal to roughly 11% of the U.S. adult population in the same year, for a net loss of approximately 2.6% of the adult U.S. population. Similarly, in the same year, the Roman Catholic church in the U.S. gained new members equal in number to roughly 2.6% of the total adult U.S. population, but bid farewell to a number of members equal to a little more than 10% of the adult population. Thus, a net loss of membership equal to more than 7% of the adult population. (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). From these illustrations it can be seen that the LDS church is not unique in experiencing both a large number of affiliations and, simultaneously, a large number of disaffiliations over a given period.

The LDS church has a long history of employing media in promoting its work, both among members and externally. Considered to be at the forefront of media use among American religious groups, the church began radio broadcasting in 1922 and broadcast the proceedings of its General Conference beginning in October of 1924. These conferences continued to be broadcast annually, moving to television as early as 1949 and to international broadcast via satellite beginning in 1979. Today, conferences are live streamed online (Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 2014).

The formation of film and television viewing communities online has been long established (Baym 2000; Jenkins 1992, 2006). Members of these communities engage one another in conversation about various media programs, sharing observations, opinions and rumors. Fan cultures frequently engage in promoting variant readings of media texts, enabling and empowering individuals to make meanings from the program that were not intended by the producers (Fiske 1982; Jenkins 1992). Fiske (1982) suggested that these contested readings often remain invisible, while Jenkins (1992,

2006) suggests that the internet generally, and social networks in particular, now allow these readings to circulate visibly.

More recently, use of social networks to create a real-time backchannel of communication among viewers of television programs has been documented (Boyd 2010; Doughty, Rowland, & Lawson 2011; Ferguson 2012). This has sometimes been termed the "two screen viewing" experience (BBC Click 2011; Skates 2011) -- with one screen devoted to the program being watched and a second screen (usually a laptop, tablet, or cell/mobile phone) devoted to maintaining the backchannel.

A recent Pew Internet & American Life Project study showed that half of adult cell phone owners use their phones while watching television. The study found that, among the most popular activities, were keeping themselves occupied during commercials or breaks in a program, visiting a website that was mentioned on television, checking whether something they heard on television was true or not, or seeing what other people were saying online about a program they were watching. The study also confirmed that large numbers of TV viewers used their phone to post their own comments online about a program they were watching, or to exchange text messages with someone else who was watching the same program in a different location (Smith & Boyles 2012).

From experience with Twitter, we conjectured that viewing an event in a video live stream would be likely to generate back channel communication in ways very similar to that connected to television viewing. Understanding that Twitter would be used as an official Mormon church communication channel, and that many disaffiliated or disaffected Mormons also utilize this medium (Winston, 2014), we set out to observe these Twitter communications during the LDS General Conference. We developed three primary research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between main channel communication related to the LDS fall conference, and back-channel Twitter communication related to the same event?

RQ2: In what ways do the various backchannel Twitter streams relate to one another?

RQ3: In what ways do the main channel communications of the LDS church energize and invigorate the backchannel participation?

Method

The focus of this study was to collect tweets from both official and back-channel Twitter accounts engaging in communication around the time of the Church of Latter Day Saints' October General Conference. Our focus was to gather tweets that were about the conference itself. The time frame from which we collected tweets was October 1 - 14, 2013. Our reason for choosing these dates was that although the conference was held on Saturday, October 5 through Sunday, October 6, we wanted to include any pre- and post-conference reactions from official Twitter accounts and backchannel conversations, in addition to reactions during the conference. Official Twitter accounts included accounts from the church institution itself, such as @MormonNewsroom and @ldsofficial, as well as accounts of obviously committed and loyal members, such as

@MissionaryLDS. Back-channel conversations focused on those explicitly identified as involving ex-mormons (past members that have since disconnected for the Church of Latter Day Saints), mormon feminists, and gay mormons. These were identified not by individual Twitter user accounts, but by hashtags such as #mofem, #exmormon, and #gaymormon indicating, respectively, Mormon feminists, ex-Mormons, and gay Mormons as topics of conversation or areas of concern.

In order to obtain these tweets, we used an already developed program called ScraperWiki. This site was accessed simply through researching, testing, and eliminating several different Twitter scraping online tools and determining this was the most user friendly option, especially for someone with few coding skills. We chose to collect our data with the use of a hashtag (indicated with a # sign and a catch phrase or keyword that relates to the message of the tweet sent out by the user). A hashtag appeared to be the most efficient way to gather tweets issued by many different users with different ideas and reactions talking about the same topic. We had a total of nine datasets with the following hashtags: #exmormon, #gaymormon, #mofem, #lds, #ldschurch, #ldsconf, #ldsconference, #twitterstake, and #presidentmonson. We decided on these hashtags by observing Twitter traffic in the weeks leading up to the conference and selecting the hashtags that appeared to have the most traffic and captured the sentiments of both the main channel users and backchannel users. We didn't want to be redundant and end up having too much data to work with, but we wanted to make sure we got enough data to work with as well. On ScraperWiki, the user must enter in a keyword and the scraper will collect all tweets issued around that time. After we gathered all of the tweets from the allotted time range, and transferred the information to a spreadsheet. Scraperwiki gathered the following information which we used in our database to organize the tweets: tweet url, time and date created, the text in the tweets, language, retweet count, screen name (user), linked url, mentioned user, hashtag, search query, and linked media.

Once all our data was collected we had in total approximately 30,000 tweets. Originally, we kept the data separated into different spreadsheets according to hashtag, but then merged all of the spreadsheets into one hoping to find any patterns or main messages from the backchannel tweets.

Our next step was to identify what we called, "buzz tweets." We defined buzz tweets as tweets that generated over 20 retweets -- a somewhat arbitrary threshold creating a "buzz," or flurry of activity, within the Twittersphere. Retweets occur when a Twitter user decides to post a tweet issued by another user to their own profile as a way of affirming the original tweet or bringing it to the attention of others in their network of followers. This data set consisted of some 1,812 tweets that had been repeated across the network at least 20 times each -- some retweeted well over 500 times. In addition, many tweets were quoted. That is, a Twitter user decides to post a tweet issued by another user to their own profile, often with an additional comment or an additional hashtag, but sometimes with no editorial changes at all. Thus, when repeated through quotes, and each repeat retweeted multiple times, a single tweet may cause quite a "buzz" indeed. At least one "buzz tweet" in our sample was quoted 33 times, completely unchanged. Each quote, in turn, was retweeted 200-500 times, so that the original tweet was sent more than 15,300 times in total. It is in retweeting and quoting that not only a "buzz" is

created, but the tweet is extended to readers of other hashtags and propagated to other areas of the Twitter network, including backchannels.

Once we completed this process of identifying those tweets that received the most "buzz" during the conference, we turned attention to those that appeared in the backchannel messaging we were trying to analyze from the hashtag #mofem, #exmormon, and #gaymormon.

During the fall conference in 2014, one year later, we repeated the process for a shorter duration (only during the days of the conference itself), but found very little difference in the quantity or tone of the Twitter conversation, and even noted many of the same Twitter accounts among the most active.

Analysis

The somewhat quantitative approach initially adopted to sort through the large set of thousands of tweets didn't provide the sort of information we sought. Our research questions did not seem to lend themselves readily to a "big data" approach. So having narrowed our perspective to those tweets that generated the most "buzz" among Twitter users we began to look at the resulting, narrower data set qualitatively. Utilizing a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) we looked for ways in which tweets originating in official or sanctioned streams had made the leap into the backchannels, or vice versa. Because of our limited language abilities, only those tweets that were posted in English were considered. Tweets using the hashtag #lds, #ldsconference, #ldsconf, and #twitterstake were clearly intended for the mainstream. That is, church members themselves were expressing excitement for the conference to start and reacting positively to official posts from the Church. During the conference, it was members posting messages reacting positively to statements from the conference speakers, how much they are glad they are a part of the Church, and links encouraging their followers to go check out the conference messages themselves.

Backchannel streams such as #exmormon, #gaymormon, #mofem also became quite active, with very different sorts of messages. There was little cross-conversation or mutual engagement observed between those who appeared to be members and those on the backchannels, who are presumably no longer members or on the fringes of membership. Nevertheless, the backchannel participants were clearly following both the conference and the mainstream Twitter feeds. In the backchannel we clearly observed varying aspects of membership, as might be predicted by Lundby's characterizations..

The first of Therborn's aspects of belonging that Lundby adapts to religious groups is the concept that deals with "norms of conduct and ways of expressing emotions," (2011, p.1221). Within our back channel data sets (#exmormon, #gaymormon, #mofem), we found many examples of this first aspect of belonging. In one example, User1 tweeted the following:

> *A huge thank you to my #mofem heroes for their part in making the Priesthood Session avail to all on TV. #incrementalimprovements*

This tweet displays that this Mormon feminist who is still a part of the church, depends on the support of his or her fellow Mormon feminists in order to make "improvements" within the LDS church. Together, Mormon feminists are able to stand strong in their beliefs because they have the support of one another, they have a more specific cultural belonging with Mormon feminists within the broader culture of the LDS church.

Another example of Therborn's first aspect of belonging is a tweet of User2 that had a link to an image that said the following:

> Blasphemy is speech that has been outlawed to prevent your religion from losing arguments.

Along with the picture were the hashtags, "#Religion, #Blasphemy, #Christian, #LDS, #TwitterStake, #Atheism." This tweet had 23 retweets and 20 favorites, one of the highest number of retweets and favorites from our back channel datasets. This tweet expresses disagreement with the idea of blasphemy in religion and there is clear agreement from like-minded Twitter users. As we saw in our first example, hashtags that involved the official church (#Christianity, #Religion, #LDS, #TwitterStake) were also included with ones that involved our backchannel groups, making it clear that User2 wanted his or her ideas to be heard by people not only with similar opinions, but by people who were still a part of the church or interested in the church. User1 and User2 are still preaching their beliefs, much like LDS members commonly do to get people to join their church. They may be preaching a different message, but the bottom line still stands of getting the message out there as opposed to keeping it to oneself.

The second of Therborn's aspects of belonging that Lundy adapts to religious groups is that concept that, "Belonging to a culture means to have learnt a certain cognitive and communicative competence and to be part of a particular universe of meaning" (2011, p.1221). This aspect was demonstrated in a tweet by User3 that read as follows:

> #exmormon of twitter! I'm here! I'm new! What do we all talk about? #wannabeexmormon #alias #realfacefakename

Even though he or she has withdrawn from a religious group that is, like many, built upon the idea of community, User3 still seeks the unity of being an active part of a whole -- in this case a part of the #exmormon Twitter community. User3 still wants to engage in conversation and bond over the common experience of leaving the church. Just because this person left the LDS church doesn't mean this person doesn't have a desire to connect with others, much as one does while an active member of the LDS church.

Another example of Lundby's second aspect of belonging is from User4's tweet that read as follows:

> This talk by Elder Oaks is funny because I'm sitting here listening to it with my boyfriend. #ElderOaks #LDSconf #gaymormon

This tweet is unique in that even though User4 is gay he is still watching a conference talk, even with his boyfriend. He very well could not listen to the LDS talk because his sexuality isn't accepted by the church, but he still chooses to take part in the church's activities. Unfortunately, we don't know if he is still a part of the church or if he is a non-

active member who is just watching it because it is "funny," but although his intentions can never be known simply from this tweet, it is still a sign of his desire to interact with the church in some way despite its rejection of his sexuality. User 5 also demonstrates cognitive and communicative competence is in the following tweet:

> *Found a 'Lamanite' toy in my old boxes. What should I do with it?*
> *#exmormon #mormon #twitterstake #lds*

It is through the use of the word Lamanite that User5 is singling out members or ex-members of the LDS church and targeting them specifically with this tweet. People who don't know what a Lamanite is are outsiders. This demonstrates that User5 feels that other ex-Mormons can relate to this experience, finding remnants of their past religious beliefs and practices. There is clear intentionality, as User5 could have found the toy and discarded it, but he or she chose to share this experience on Twitter with his or her followers and directly ask for their feedback. This experience is like an "inside joke" aimed towards a like minded group of people to share with one another in a public sphere. This leads to the fact that, User5 didn't only use the hashtag, "#exmormon", User5 included "#mormon" and "#twitterstake" demonstrating that he or she wanted this to be found by people who were still a part of the church.

The third and last of Therborn's aspects of belonging that Lundy adapts to religious groups is that concept that, "Cultural belonging implies a shared identity with some people and a shared differentiation from other people" (2011, p.1221). This aspect of belonging was demonstrated in a tweet by User6 that reads as follows:

> *Obviously I'm #exmormon but I see no problems with the thinking behind*
> *the #ordainwomen movement. I'll support it.*

This tweet is unique in that it demonstrates both differentiation and shared identity with the LDS church. User6 identifies himself or herself as an exmormon differentiating himself or herself from the practices of the church. But, User6 also has a shared identity with the church and its movement to ordain women. Also, the fact that User6 is aware of the movement shows that he or she still keeps up with church happenings even though he or she has left the church. These elements of this tweet demonstrate that cultural belonging is not so black and white, that separation from a group, especially religious, does not have to be a clean break as User6 still identifies with the beliefs of some Mormons. User6 demonstrates a desire for the church to change its practices for the better, as opposed to a desire for people to just leave the church all together. Also, User6's tweet was retweeted, which shows that other Twitter users have the same complex sense of belonging.

Another example of Lundby's third aspect of belonging is an interaction between two Twitter users, User7 and User8. The following was User6's tweet:

> *I wonder if anyone would notice if they replayed last years conference. It's*
> *not like anyone actually pays attention. #exmormon*
> User8 responded to User7 with the following tweet:
> *@User7 Another #exmormon that wastes his time trying to bother #lds*
> *members that don't give a hoot. -yawn- #blocked*

This interaction is a clear example of differentiation within cultural belonging from a group of people, in this case a member of the LDS church from ex-Mormons and vise versa. In order to understand one's own identity, one must understand what they are not. Here Twitter acts as a medium to display cultural belonging through differentiation. With actions such as hashtags, one can establish themselves as a part of a group and exclude those who don't identify with the hashtag. People are purposely labeling themselves so that a third party is able to gather a hint of who they are and what they are about just from a simple tweet. Twitter is a medium comprised of categories to which people can belong or not belong. Through User7 and User 8's verbalizing of their opinions, they are further declaring themselves a part of a group (Ex-Mormon or LDS) and not a part of another. This shows that both members of differing cultures are not satisfied by knowing internally what group they are a part of, they must declare it and even initiate conversations with others in a public space. This in turn shows that cultural belonging is a collective act.

Discussion

By far, our dataset was comprised, not of backchannel messaging and interaction with the official church, but of the official messaging itself. The LDS church continues to make extensive use of media in many forms, and most of the Twitter traffic related to the conference clearly came from interested, engaged, and loyal LDS members. This reinforces the dynamic of the Mormon church itself. Many users expressed how thankful they were to have the church in their lives, prompting an outside party to find out why. The LDS church members (not just the official church accounts) used Twitter as a missionary tool. It would seem that this is their primary focus, not so much interacting with those who contradict their teachings. Although backchannel users frequently added #lds or other mainstream hashtags to their tweets, the number appearing in the overall stream was small. Further, the primary response of the loyal church members was to ignore these discontented messages. Engagement between the cheerleaders and the detractors was extremely limited, and none of these exchanges achieved "buzz" status in the data. Thus, the answer to our first research question, "What is the relationship between main channel communication related to the LDS fall conference, and back-channel Twitter communication related to the same event?" appears to be that there was little relationship at all. Or, to the extent that such a relationship existed, it was asymmetrical, with back channels reacting negatively to mainstream activity, but the main stream continuing largely unaware of, or unaffected by, the backchannel.

As for the backchannel messaging, the relative lack of data from those channels may be insight in itself. As mentioned earlier, when we narrowed our data down to buzz tweets (>20), nearly all of backchannel messages were completely eliminated from our data because they did not generate enough buzz. This leads us to believe that most of the disaffiliated are indifferent to the activities of the LDS church, or do not have a desire to use Twitter as a way to directly interact with the official messages of the church that they don't or do agree with. They could be using a different media outlet, such as blogging, and may not have a desire to counteract the church in such a direct way (ie. tweeting at them, commenting on their tweets). The sheer proportion of official church messages to backchannel messages was so small that we found it hard to compare the groups. Because there was so little "buzz" in these tweets, the relationships were not

expressed prominently in our data sets. Thus, to our second research question, "In what ways do the various backchannel Twitter streams relate to one another?" we have no conclusive answer. However, what little data we have may point to considerable overlap in backchannel messages among groups such as ex-mormons, mormon feminists, and gay mormons.

As mentioned, the relationship between mainstream and back channel Twitter activity was asymmetrical, with the mainstream largely ignoring the back channels, even as the back channels reacted to the activity in the mainstream. In a couple of isolated examples, an often re-tweeted post from the official LDS communication department, @MormonNewsroom declared, "*15 Million Member Milestone Announced at Church's General Conference http://t.co/nF52NjtWRL #ldsconf #lds #mormon.*" But in a backchannel that tweet was quoted with the additional comment, "*I wonder if they counted me?*" The unofficial, but clearly devout @MissionaryLDS tweeted, "*#WhatIfIToldYou you could be with your family forever? Cause you can. #LDS #Gospel.*" That tweet was quoted in a back channel with the added comment, "*@MissionaryLDS sadly that's not a selling point for a lot of people without the gospel in their lives.*" Thus we find, in answer to our third research question, "In what ways do the main channel communications of the LDS church energize and invigorate the backchannel participation?" that much of the conversation in the back channels was related not only to the events taking place at the conference, and being viewed in the live stream, but also considerable attention to the second screen and the mainstream Twitter comments being made.

Conclusion

Religious disaffiliation remains a complex social phenomenon that will benefit from further study. It is clear that more is involved than simply having one's name deleted from a membership roll. Those who leave a religious group take with them the internalized norms of conduct and ways of expressing emotions, their cognitive and communicative competencies, and to a greater or lesser degree maintain a sense of identification with, or differentiation from, the group they have left behind. Much of this complexity we are content to leave to the sociologists of religion. However, we have demonstrated that at least for a few individuals, modern social media are an important arena in which to demonstrate these aspects of belonging. Social media, such as Twitter, allow them to find and connect with others who share similar experiences of disaffiliation and to express their disappointment, hurt, and anger among others who speak the same language -- even if these expressions are largely ignored by the officials and remaining members of the group.

In further research it might be helpful to examine the use of social media in day-to-day interactions, rather than in the context of the two-screen viewing of a particular event. It would also be important to learn whether other media platforms or modes of internet communication are used more widely, or if we have overlooked specific hashtags. And of course, there are many other "high boundary" religious groups beyond the LDS church that might be explored.

The present study is important, however, in establishing that the activity of 2-screen viewing does extend to streamed events of religious organizations, and that these parallel conversations serve a function for religious adherents in ways similar to other fan groups, and function for the disaffiliated to create a unique back channel that allows for the performance of aspects of group membership that do not disappear, even when the group is left behind.

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