MORMONISM AND THE INTERNET
NEGOTIATING RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY
AND IDENTITY IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

MARCH 29-30, 2012
UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY ~ LIBRARY AUDITORIUM

CONFERENCE DESCRIPTION

The internet has transformed the way we access information and express ourselves. Without the constraints that have shackled traditional media in the past, it allows information to flow more freely and more rapidly than ever before. This has not been lost among religious institutions, which are increasingly adding the web to their communication strategies. In fact, in 2007, M. Russell Ballard of the LDS Church's Council of the Twelve challenged Church members to "join the conversation by participating on the Internet to share the gospel and to explain in simple and clear terms the message of the Restoration." Church members have taken up that challenge with vigor, flooding the internet with positive messages about their religion. Likewise, the institutional Church has strategically worked to positively shape its online image. The Washington Post recently called attention to the Church's online media strategy calling it "savvy and aggressive." Clearly the internet offers benefits to the Church in proselytizing and public relations. But it also presents challenges. For an institution that values single-purpose messaging, the chaotic nature of the internet defies correlation. Furthermore, the balkanized nature of the blogosphere challenges traditional ideals of religious community, permitting numerous Mormon discourse communities. And the internet allows detractors of Mormonism the same access as it does proponents. In this conference, we will reflect on evolving concepts of Mormon identity and community in the digital age.

THURSDAY, MARCH 29TH

8:30-8:45 a.m. ~ Welcome

8:45-9:45 a.m. ~ Mormon Studies and the Internet

James Faulconer, Brigham Young University
"Professing on the Internet: What’s a Guy to Do?"

Ardis E. Parshall, Freelance Writer
"Blazing a New Trail: Doing History in the Age of the Internet"

Patrick Mason, Claremont Graduate University
"Mormon Blogs, Mormon Studies, and the Mormon Mind"

10:00-11:00 a.m. ~ Keynote Address

Joanna Brooks, San Diego State University
"The Challenge of Mormon Studies for the Digital Age"
11:10-12:00 p.m. ~ **Panel Discussion**
James Faulconer, Ardis E. Parshall, Patrick Mason, and Joanna Brooks

12:00-1:00 p.m. ~ **Break for Lunch**

1:00-2:15 p.m. ~ **Journeys of Faith on the Internet**

John Dehlin, Mormon Stories  
"Why Mormons Leave, and How the Internet is Helping"

Scott Gordon, Foundation for Apologetic Information & Research (FAIR)  
"Fostering Faith and Countering Criticism: The Role of Apologetics in the Information Age"

Rosemary Avance, University of Pennsylvania  
"Seeing the Light: Mormon Conversion and Deconversion Narratives in On- and Offline Worlds"

2:30-3:45 p.m. ~ **Panel Discussion**

John Dehlin, Scott Gordon, and Rosemary Avance

5:30-6:45 p.m. ~ **Reception** for participants and invited guests

7:00-9:00 p.m. ~ **Eugene England Memorial Lecture**

Patrick Mason, Claremont Graduate University  
"Blessed Are All the Peacemakers: Toward a Mormon Theology and Ethic of Peace"

**FRIDAY, MARCH 30TH**

8:30-9:00 a.m. ~ **Welcome**

9:00-9:50 a.m. ~ **Digital Religion and the Public Face of the Church**

Buddy Blankenfeld & Lyman Kirkland, Public Affairs, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints  
"Join the Conversation: Engaging the Media and Public through LDS Newsroom"

Greg Droubay, Missionary Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints  
Who Are These People?: The Story of the ‘I’m a Mormon’ Campaign

10:00-10:50 a.m. ~ **Keynote**

Alan Cooperman, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life  
"Insights from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life’s Survey of Mormons in America"

11:00-11:50 a.m. ~ **From Blogosphere to Bloggernacle**

Jana Riess, Westminster John Knox Press  
"One Voice in the Mormon Bloggernacle Choir: A Personal Journey"

Kristine Haglund, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*  
"Homemaking as Performance Art in a Gendered Babylon"
12:00-1:00 p.m. ~ Break for Lunch

1:00-1:50 p.m. ~ Avatars and Second Life: Mormon Identity and the Internet

David Charles, Patheos.com
"Digital Religion, Convergence, and Pluralism"

Gideon Burton, Brigham Young University
"Evolving Mormon Identity in the Digital Age"

David Scott, Utah Valley University
"Seeing is Believing: The Virtual Construction of Mormon Identity and Belief in Second Life"

2:00-3:00 p.m. ~ Panel Discussion

Jana Riess, Kristine Haglund, David Charles, Gideon Burton, David Scott

**CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS**

**Rosemary Avance** is a doctoral candidate and Fontaine fellow at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication. Her research focuses on the intersection of media, religion, and modernity, and she is specifically interested in personal and institutional religious narratives, the public performance of religious identity, and processes of institutional meaning-making viewed through an interpretive cultural studies framework. Ms. Avance has focused her academic attention on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, publishing an article on Mormon conceptions of modesty and cosmology in the *Journal of Religion and Society*.

**Buddy Blankenfeld** is a media manager in the Public Affairs Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and managing editor of the LDS Newsroom website. He was a television anchor/reporter for 12 years, working at ABC4 News/KTVX in Utah before joining the Church’s Public Affairs Department in 2009. He earned a BA degree in Communications with an emphasis in broadcast journalism at Brigham Young University.

**Joanna Brooks** is a national voice on Mormon life and politics and an award-winning scholar of religion and American culture. She covers Mormonism, faith, and politics for ReligionDispatches.org and has been named one of “50 Politicos to Watch” by Politico.com. She attended Brigham Young University and received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her first book *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African American and Native American Literatures* (Oxford University Press, 2003) was awarded the Modern Language Association William Sanders scarborough Prize. Brooks has also received awards from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, and the American Philosophical Society for her scholarship on religion and American culture.

**Gideon Burton** is Assistant Professor of English at Brigham Young University where he specializes in Renaissance literature, the history of rhetoric, and Mormon literature and criticism. An advocate of online media, he considers himself a "digital evangelist." Gideon graduated from Brigham Young University in 1989. At the University of Southern California he received an M.A. in English in 1992, a Master of Professional Writing (MPW) degree in 1995, and his Ph.D in Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Literature in 1994. He joined the BYU English Department faculty in 1994.
David Charles is the Vice President of Content at Patheos.com, where he has led content and design strategy since the site's launch in 2009. With over 6 million monthly pageviews, Patheos is the largest independent website for religion and spirituality. David holds an honors B.A. in comparative literature from BYU, master's degrees in religion and anthropology from Oxford, and is currently completing doctoral studies in religion at Harvard, with a dissertation on language and belief in contemporary Mormonism. He has published in academic journals and national media, including *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Washington Post*.

Alan Cooperman is the Associate Director of Research at The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, a Pew Research Center project. Alan came to PEW after a 27-year career in journalism, the last 10 years of which were at *Washington Post*, where he was a national staff writer covering religion and politics. He served as foreign editor of *U.S. News & World Report*, as a foreign correspondent in Moscow for the Associated Press (1990-1994), and as bureau chief for *U.S. News & World Report* (1994-1996).

John Dehlin is a Ph.D. student in Clinical and Counseling Psychology at Utah State University. John's research interests center around the nexus of religion and mental health, including the following active projects: understanding the causes and psychological impact of leaving LDS church, assessing the effectiveness of sexual orientation change efforts within the LDS population, and evaluating Acceptance and Commitment Therapy as a treatment for religious OCD. John is the Executive Director of the Open Stories Foundation, and the founder of Mormon Stories podcast.

Greg Droubay is the Director of Media at the Missionary Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. He is the former Manager of Proselyting and Infield Training for the LDS Church, as well as the Director of Training for the Missionary Training Center. Greg is a certified professional in learning and performance and a certified performance technologist. He is a graduate of Brigham Young University.

James Faulconer is a professor of philosophy and Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding at Brigham Young University. He blogs at Feast upon the Word and writes a column for the Mormon portal at Patheos. He received his BA in English from BYU, and his MA and Ph.D in philosophy from Pennsylvania State University. He is the author of *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*, and editor (with Mark Wrathall) of *Appropriating Heidegger*. Faulconer is currently working on a collection of essays by various authors dealing with religious devotional practices from a philosophical point of view and a book that will give an overview on Mormon theology.

Scott Gordon is President of the Foundation for Apologetic Information & Research (FAIR), a non-profit corporation staffed by volunteers dedicated to helping members deal with issues raised by critics of the LDS faith. He has an MBA and a BA in Organizational Communications from Brigham Young University. He is currently an instructor of business and technology at Shasta College in Redding, California.

Kristine Haglund is the editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. A frequent commentator on Mormon blogs, she is currently a contributor to By Common Consent. An “early adopter” of blogging, Kristine joined Times and Seasons in 2004, before the Bloggeracle was even named. She received her A.B. from Harvard in German Studies and an M.A. from the University of Michigan in German Literature.

Patrick Mason is Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies and Associate Professor of North American Religion at Claremont Graduate University. His primary training is as an American religious historian, but he also received an MA in international peace studies, with an emphasis in religion, violence, and peacebuilding. He is the author of *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Ardis E. Parshall is a historian, freelance researcher specializing in Mormon history, a blogger and a columnist for the *Salt Lake Tribune*. She runs the highly popular LDS history blog *Keepapitchinin*. Parshall co-edited with Paul Reeve *Mormonism: A Historical Encyclopedia*, published in 2010 by ABC-CLIO.
**Jana Riess** is the acquisitions editor with Westminster John Knox Press, as well as a freelance writer and editor. She holds degrees in religion from Wellesley College and Princeton Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. in American religious history from Columbia University. She is the author or co-author of six books, and a regular contributor to Explorefaith.org, Beliefnet, and is now blogging at Religion News Service.

**David W. Scott** is chair of the Department of Communication at Utah Valley University specializing in religion and media. He is co-author of "Religious Community on the Internet: An Analysis of Mormon Websites" and of “Constructing Sacred History: Multi-media Narratives and the Discourse of ‘Museumness’ at Mormon Temple Square,” both in the *Journal of Media and Religion.*