

Mormon Media History Timeline, 1827–2007

Sherry Pack Baker

The widespread use of the media has been an important element in the history and experience of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members. In recognition of this fact, the Mormon Media History Timeline (1827–2007) has now been made available at <http://lib.byu.edu/sites/scholarsarchive/mormon-media-studies> for the deliberate purpose of marking a distinct branch of study. Mormon studies has come into its own in recent years as a recognized academic discipline, and while much good work already has been done in Mormon *media* studies, this area has not as yet been overtly recognized as a discipline unto itself. As the field increasingly comes into its own, it will take on a scope and characteristic that is unique from other areas of Mormon studies. There might come a time in the future when an academic journal will be needed as a forum for scholarship about Mormon media, relating, for example, to Mormon media history, content, technologies, books, films, Internet sites, public relations, biography, cultural issues, framing, media effects, theory, criticism, ethics, Mormon image and representation in the media, and all other matters related to Mormon use of the media by the official Church and its individual members, not to mention the media coverage of Mormons by those outside the faith.

In the meantime, the timeline is available as a basic reference tool to facilitate scholarship and contribute to the backbone of the discipline of Mormon media studies. It is intended to encourage and inform the development of new scholarship in this area and to provide a chronology and background for historical contextualization and juxtaposition with other Mormon media developments. It is also meant to serve as a

foundational reference resource for scholars working in other emphases in Mormon studies.

Background of the Timeline

In 2001, I participated on a panel at the Broadcast Education Association (BEA) conference to talk about Mormon historical involvement in broadcasting. For that occasion I began to construct a timeline related to the topic. The need had arisen before to compile a limited, subject-specific chronology relating to the media and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for focused academic projects. Additionally, when graduate and undergraduate students wrote theses or papers on Mormon media issues, they invariably needed to start from scratch in creating chronologies that related to their topics of interest. After the BEA panel presentation, I decided to address the need for a more comprehensive timeline by building upon what I already had accumulated. In the process of consulting various books and articles, it became apparent that a thorough bibliography of academic studies about the Church and the media also was needed. This focus resulted in the compilation and the publication in 2003 in *BYU Studies* of “Mormons and the Media, 1898–2002: A Selected, Annotated, Indexed Bibliography.”¹ Meanwhile, the timeline project also proceeded.

Although the Mormon Media History Timeline (1827–2007) is not yet a polished document and always will be a work in progress, I decided to make it available as is, to save research time for other scholars and perhaps to spark further scholarship in Mormon media studies. After consulting with John W. Welch at BYU Studies and Gideon O. Burton (then on the journal’s arts and sciences editorial review board), I determined that it should be posted on the ScholarsArchive hosted by the Harold B. Lee Library. This would have many advantages over print publication, especially in that the timeline would be searchable, updatable, and available to scholars worldwide.

Content and Criteria for Inclusion

The timeline covers 180 years (1827–2007) of key events relating to the development and use of media by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It begins with the events leading up to the printing of the Book of Mormon on a mechanical handpress and ends with the launch of BYU Television International by satellite in 2007. As with most timelines and chronologies, the emphasis is on firsts, lasts, important events and developments, and major historical figures.

Falling within the category of institutional media history, the timeline focuses on official, Church-sponsored development and use of media. This includes Church-owned print and electronic media and other media products (such as magazines) that were privately owned but Church sanctioned as outlets for the auxiliary organizations (especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries).

The timeline emphasizes the adoption of new communications technologies by the Church (such as the telegraph, film, radio, television, and Internet), the introduction of Church-produced media (such as scriptures, Mormon Tabernacle Choir broadcasts, and websites like FamilySearch), and the beginnings and endings of various Church media properties (such as newspapers and Church auxiliary magazines). It focuses on technological and organizational developments rather than on media content (what was written or broadcast *in* the media).

Generally not included in the timeline are member-produced media, whether or not they were officially Church sponsored or Church sanctioned. Local nineteenth-century community newspapers in Utah, for example, are not included.² Also, with rare exception, the timeline does not reflect books written by members of the First Presidency of the Church or the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, nor does it catalog the tracts and audiovisual and media materials that were used by the Church for missionary purposes.³ Also, with rare exception, the timeline does not cover Mormon film history.⁴

Mormon history is sometimes written as a stream of isolated events outside of a broader historical framework. While the timeline maintains its primary focus on Mormon media history, it also includes infrequent references to other significant historical events to provide a wider context for understanding of the Church's adoption and use of the media. The historical entries emphasize the dates when major communications technologies were invented (such as radio and television), key events relating to LDS Church history in the United States, and a few contextual references to key events in American political history (such as the Civil War). Also, the beginning and end of each Church president's administration is included to allow a clear picture of the media developments that took place under that president's leadership.

While some entries relating to early Mormon publications in other countries are included, major events in Church or political history outside of the United States are generally not noted. Selected early Mormon publications in England are included, however, because of their importance as firsts in Mormon media, their significance to the early missionary and "gathering" efforts of the Church, and their role in proclaiming and organizing Church doctrine. References to other selected international

publications are also provided for contextual purposes to illustrate the Church's outreach and growth through media to other countries and cultures at particular times in its history and to acknowledge the presence of the Church press and media involvement outside of the United States. I leave it to the future and to other scholars to do the important work of including missing timeline entries about Mormon media in countries and territories outside the United States.

Church efforts to document and memorialize its own history (such as the celebration of the sesquicentennial in 1980) are included in the timeline because they are examples of Church media outreach and public relations. These are also events that have received extensive coverage by non-Mormon media and therefore provide a reference point for studying these events. For more information about what is included and excluded, go to the timeline website.

Mormon Media Studies: The Example of the Telegraph

Scholars in Mormon studies often turn to historical and contemporary media as their primary sources. They might look, for example, at what was written about Mormon issues in newspapers and periodicals or at what Church leaders said and thought as evidenced by Church publications. While scholars in Mormon media studies might address topics of interest to other subdisciplines, they nevertheless will ask questions from different perspectives—and with different theoretical assumptions.

One example of a media studies perspective relates to the sharp distinction drawn in communication theory between the medium and the message—between a newspaper and its content, or television and its programming. Marshall McLuhan is well known for his statement that “the medium is the message.”⁵ Although this phrase would seem to blur medium and message, among the meanings that can be derived from (or read into) his words is the understanding that communications media themselves, apart from their content and programming, are dynamic and even determinative forces. The medium changes and shapes history and culture; it creates and alters perceptions of reality and truth. Changes in communications technology, according to Neil Postman, are ecological:

One significant change generates total change. . . . A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything. . . . In the year 1500, fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have old Europe plus the printing press. We had a different Europe. After television, the United States was not America plus television; television

gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry.⁶

The arrival of the telegraph in Salt Lake City, “the information highway of the 1860s,”⁷ is an example of just such a technological development of monumental importance to the Church, isolated as it was in the desert of the American West. The railroad did not arrive in Utah until 1869, so communications were still traveling into the area even more slowly than by train—primarily by horse—until the arrival of the telegraph. The transcontinental telegraph line reached Salt Lake City from both east and west in October 1861. Its completion “raised the question of the possibility of a Territorial line which would connect the hundred or more isolated Mormon settlements in the Great Basin with Salt Lake City and the ‘outside’ world.”⁸ Following the Civil War in 1865, when materials needed to build such a north-south line in Utah finally became available, Brigham Young wrote to Church members in the outlying areas that the Church needed to build a telegraph system so that “the center should be in position to communicate at any moment with the extremities, however remote; and the extremities be able, with ease and speed to make their wants and circumstances known to the center.”⁹ “We should bring into requisition,” he wrote, “every improvement which our age affords, to facilitate our intercourse and to render our inter-communication more easy.”¹⁰

As a result of his call, the Deseret Telegraph Company was organized, local settlements sprang into action to build assigned segments of the regional telegraph system to connect communities throughout the Mormon territory, and young people received Church assignments to learn telegraphy in Salt Lake City. “On January 15, 1867, the Deseret Telegraph was opened from Salt Lake City to St. George in southern Utah, and in December 1869, northward to Franklin, Idaho.”¹¹

Postman might well have said that the telegraph’s arrival in Utah Territory did not result in Mormondom plus the telegraph. Rather, it had become a new territory and society, changed by the ability to send and receive communications quickly, without dependence on available modes of transportation. Only time will tell if the availability and use of international broadcasting and new media technologies will have for the Church a transformative (ecological) effect, as did the printing press in Europe in the 1500s and the telegraph in the Mormon territory in the 1860s. All past history suggests that it will.

Clearly, knowledge about the introduction, adoption, and use of communications technologies—in addition to the study of media content, effects, audiences, images, and all other matters relating to media—is foundational to understanding societies, cultures, and religions. Mormon

studies will benefit greatly from the inclusion and recognition of the distinct subdiscipline of Mormon media studies under its umbrella.

As an online publication in the ScholarsArchive, the timeline is designed to be updated so new entries can be added and other changes, corrections, and improvements made. Those interested in the topic are invited to participate in the further development of the timeline by suggesting additions, corrections, or expansions of citation references. To do so, please contact Sherry Baker at sherry_baker@byu.edu. Suggested items should conform to the inclusion criteria discussed briefly above and explained more fully on the website, and full citations for the items suggested should be provided. Through a collaborative effort, this document can be improved and enriched, thus making a lasting contribution to the emergence and recognition of the field of Mormon media studies.

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1. Sherry Baker and Daniel Stout, “Mormons and the Media, 1898–2003: A Selected, Annotated, Indexed Bibliography,” *BYU Studies* 42, nos. 3 and 4 (2003): 125–81.

2. For studies of these papers, see Baker and Stout, “Mormons and the Media,” 125–81.

3. See Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 212–21, about missionary materials and early treatises on Mormonism.

4. See *BYU Studies* 46, no. 2 (2007) special issue on “Mormons and Film.”

5. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 7.

6. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books 1993), 18.

7. Miriam B. Murphy, "The Telegraph was the Information Highway of the 1860s," *History Blazer* (October 1995), available online from the Utah State Historical Society, History to Go, http://historytogo.utah.gov/utah_chapters/pioneers_and_cowboys/thetelegraphwasinformationhighwayofthe1860s.html, taken from Miriam B. Murphy, "The Telegraph Comes to Utah," *Beehive History* 8 (1982).
8. Leonard J. Arrington, "The Deseret Telegraph—a Church-Owned Public Utility," *Journal of Economic History*, 11, no. 2 (1951): 118.
9. Arrington, "Deseret Telegraph," 122.
10. Brigham Young, "Circular Letter of Instruction," November 9, 1865, as cited in Arrington, "Deseret Telegraph," 122.
11. Andrew Jenson, *Encyclopedic History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Publishing Company, 1941), 189–90.