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**TWITTER HASHTAGS AND RELIGIOUS
LEARNING: MORMON IDENTITY AND
PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE IN #LDSCONF**

LITERACY



LITERACY

“...IT [IS] COMMON TO THINK OF LITERACY AS A ‘TOOL’ OR ‘TECHNOLOGY’ —A WRITING SYSTEM—THAT PRODUCES VALUABLE OUTCOMES WHEN PEOPLE APPLY IT”

Lankshear & Knobel (2006), p. 65

“AGAINST THIS VIEW, SCRIBNER AND COLE CONCEPTUALIZED LITERACY AS ‘PRACTICE’”

Lankshear & Knobel (2006), p. 65

“THE CARRYING OUT OF A GOAL-DIRECTED SEQUENCE OF ACTIVITIES, USING PARTICULAR TECHNOLOGIES AND APPLYING PARTICULAR SYSTEMS OF KNOWLEDGE”

Scribner & Cole (1978), p. 457

“a [literacy practice] is a sort of ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (Gee, 1989)

Let’s go back to Scribner and Cole for a bit. Their definition provides us with some features of a literacy practice, and we can play with these features to see how rich and diverse this concept is.

“A [LITERACY PRACTICE] IS A SORT OF ‘IDENTITY KIT’ WHICH COMES COMPLETE WITH THE APPROPRIATE COSTUME AND INSTRUCTIONS ON HOW TO ACT, TALK, AND OFTEN WRITE, SO AS TO TAKE ON A PARTICULAR ROLE THAT OTHERS WILL RECOGNIZE”

Gee (1989), p. 7

Gee technically uses the term “discourse” here instead of literacy, but the two are so intertwined (and Gee is so particular about his words) that the paraphrase is appropriate.

Important—even if we aren’t looking specifically at “identity,” practice tells us something about the role or roles that people are taking on.

“THE CARRYING OUT OF A GOAL-DIRECTED SEQUENCE OF ACTIVITIES, USING PARTICULAR TECHNOLOGIES AND APPLYING PARTICULAR SYSTEMS OF KNOWLEDGE”

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LITERACY



RELIGIOUS LITERACY

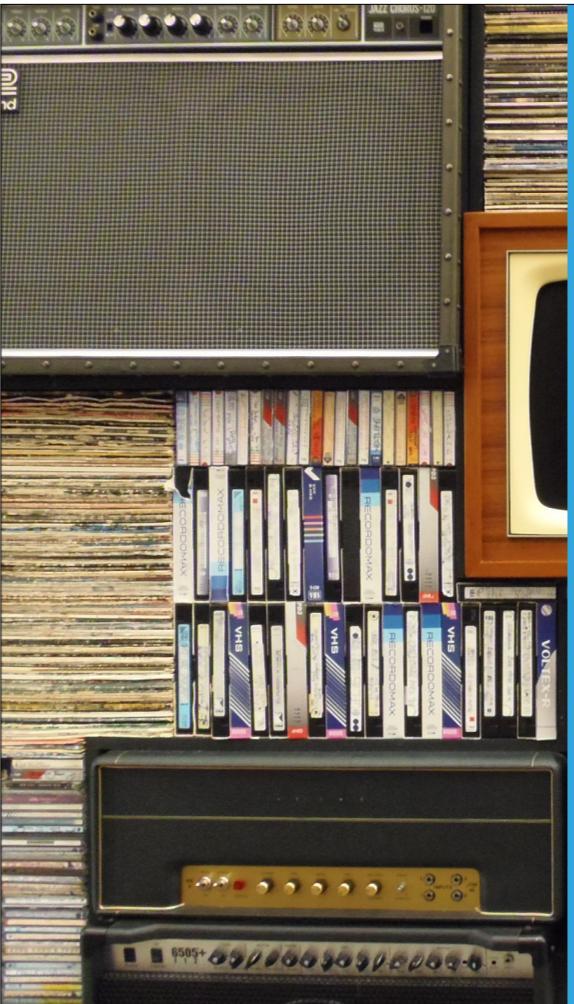
“PURPOSEFUL SEQUENCES OF
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Skerrett (2014), p. 8

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Skerrett (2014), p. 8

We can't necessarily take for granted this assumption that people are using multimodal tools to carry out religious activities and religious practices. On one hand, media have always been central to religious practice, but on the other, modern digital media provide opportunities to ask new questions about religious practice.



"AMONG YOUNGER GENERATIONS THE MEDIA IS A MORE FREQUENT ARENA THAN FAMILY AND CHURCH FOR CONTACTS WITH RELIGIOUS IDEAS AND VALUES"

Lövheim (2012), p. 151

Note that Lövheim is summarizing research carried out in Northern Europe



**"STORIES OF THE AFTERLIFE,
SUPERNATURAL, AND
PARANORMAL IN THE
ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA BECOME
AN IMPORTANT CONTEXT
THROUGH WHICH CONTEMPORARY
TEENS UNDERSTAND RELIGIOUS
BELIEFS"**

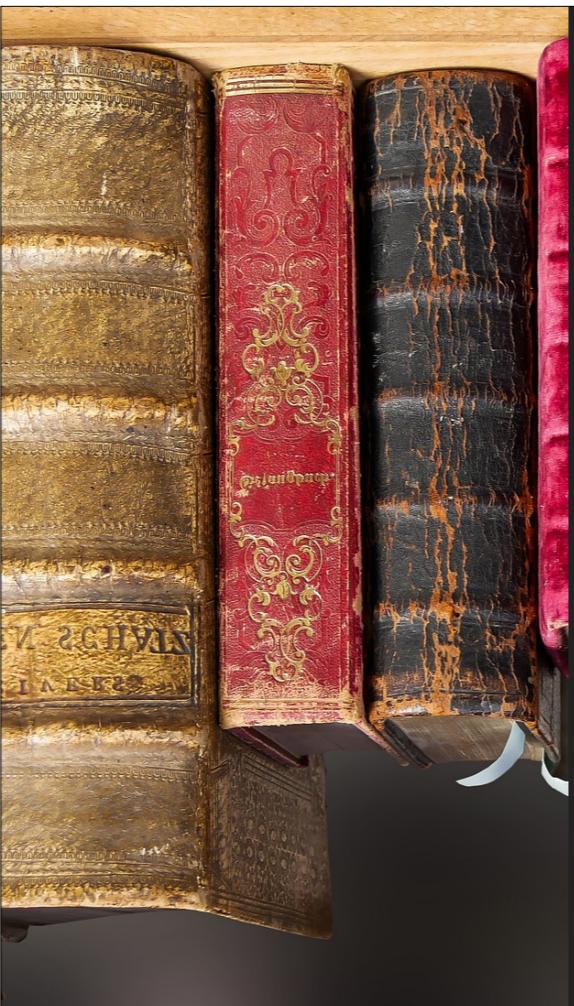
Clark (2002), p. 794



AN ONLINE LENTEN
RETREAT

JONVEAUX
(2007)

« L'évolution de la situation religieuse : recul des pratiques régulières, exculturation du catholicisme (Hervieu-Léger, 2003: 87), difficultés d'accès à la religion dans certaines régions où la baisse des vocations laisse de nombreuses églises sans prêtre (Pelletier, 1997), a conduit les dominicains à utiliser d'autres outils pour se rapprocher de ceux restés loin de la religion »



MEDIA AS AGENTS OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

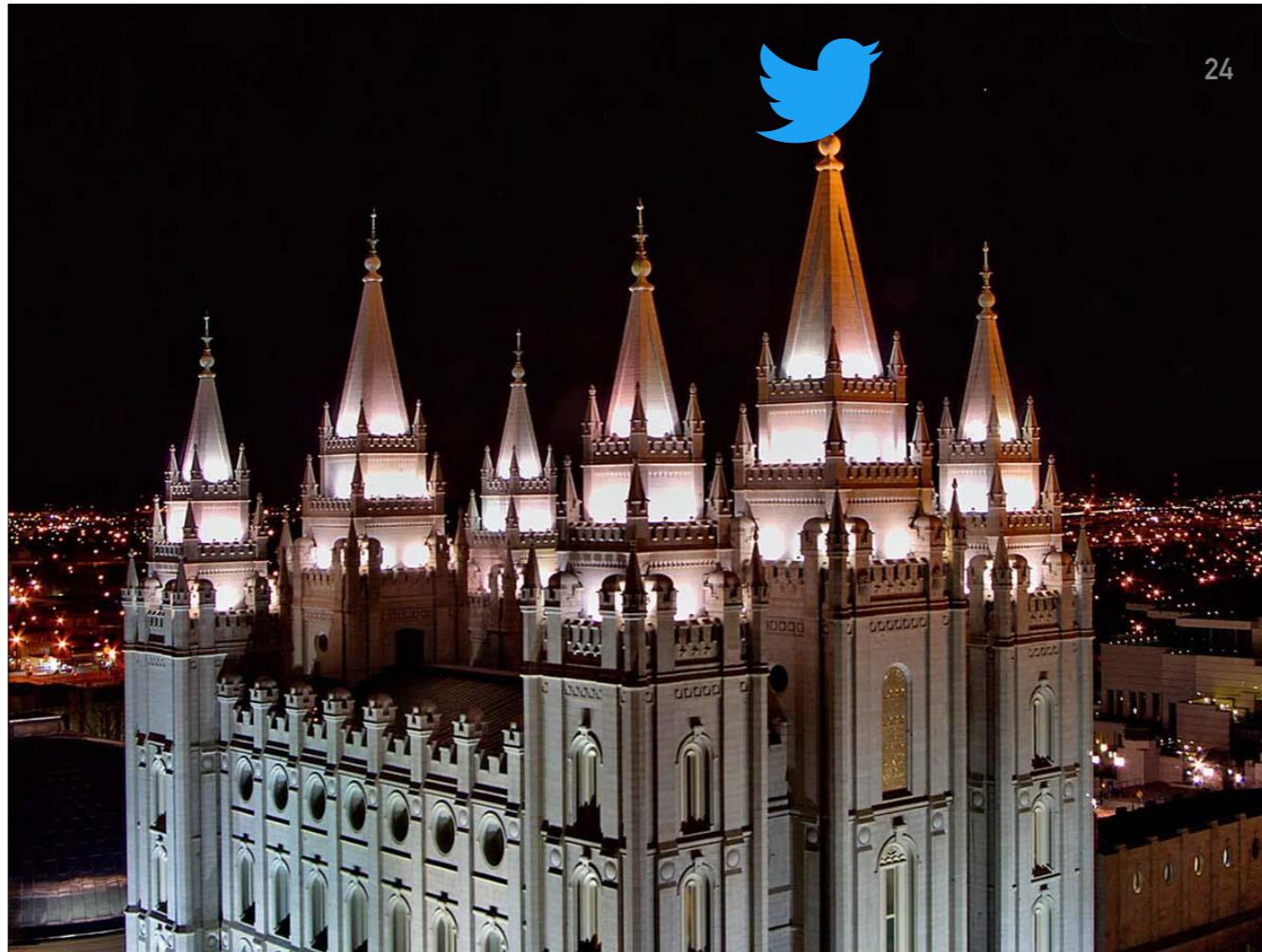
HJARVARD
(2008)

"The article presents a theoretical framework for the understanding of how media work as agents of religious change. At the centre of this theory is the concept of mediatization. Through the process of mediatization, religion is increasingly being subsumed under the logic of the media. As conduits of communication, the media have become the primary source of religious ideas, in particular in the form of 'banal religion'. As a language the media mould religious imagination in accordance with the genres of popular culture, and as cultural environments the media have taken over many of the social functions of the institutionalized religions, providing both moral and spiritual guidance and a sense of community. Finally, the results of a national survey in Denmark are presented in order to substantiate the theoretical arguments and illustrate how the mediatization of religion has made popular media texts important sources of spiritual interest."



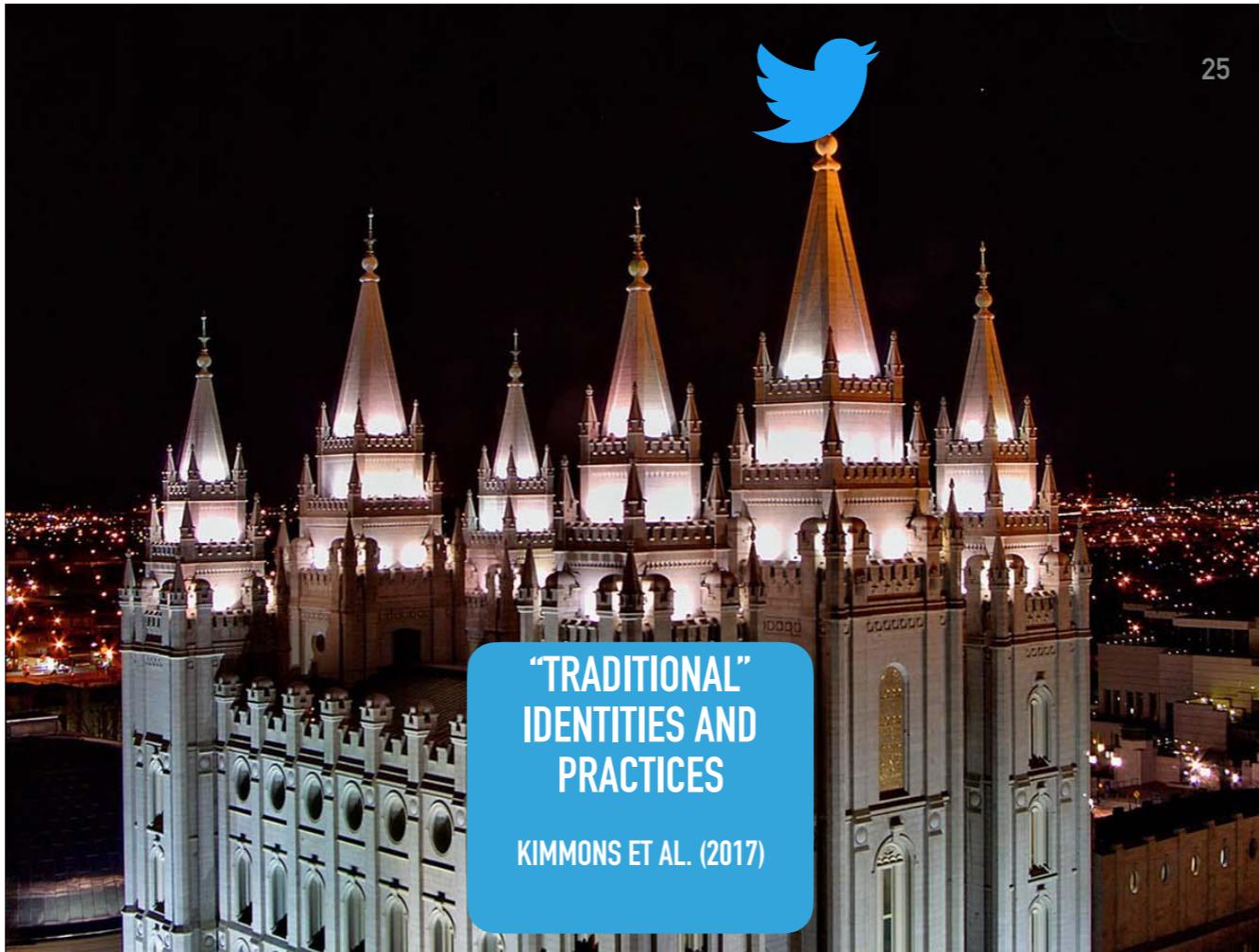
in this study, we're interested in religious literacies in the context of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

- restorationist Christian church founded in New York in 1830
- it is the largest of several Latter-day Saint denominations to emerge after the death of the church's founder in 1844
- it is headquartered in Salt Lake City, UT, but is increasingly international, with over half of its ~16 million members now residing outside of the United States

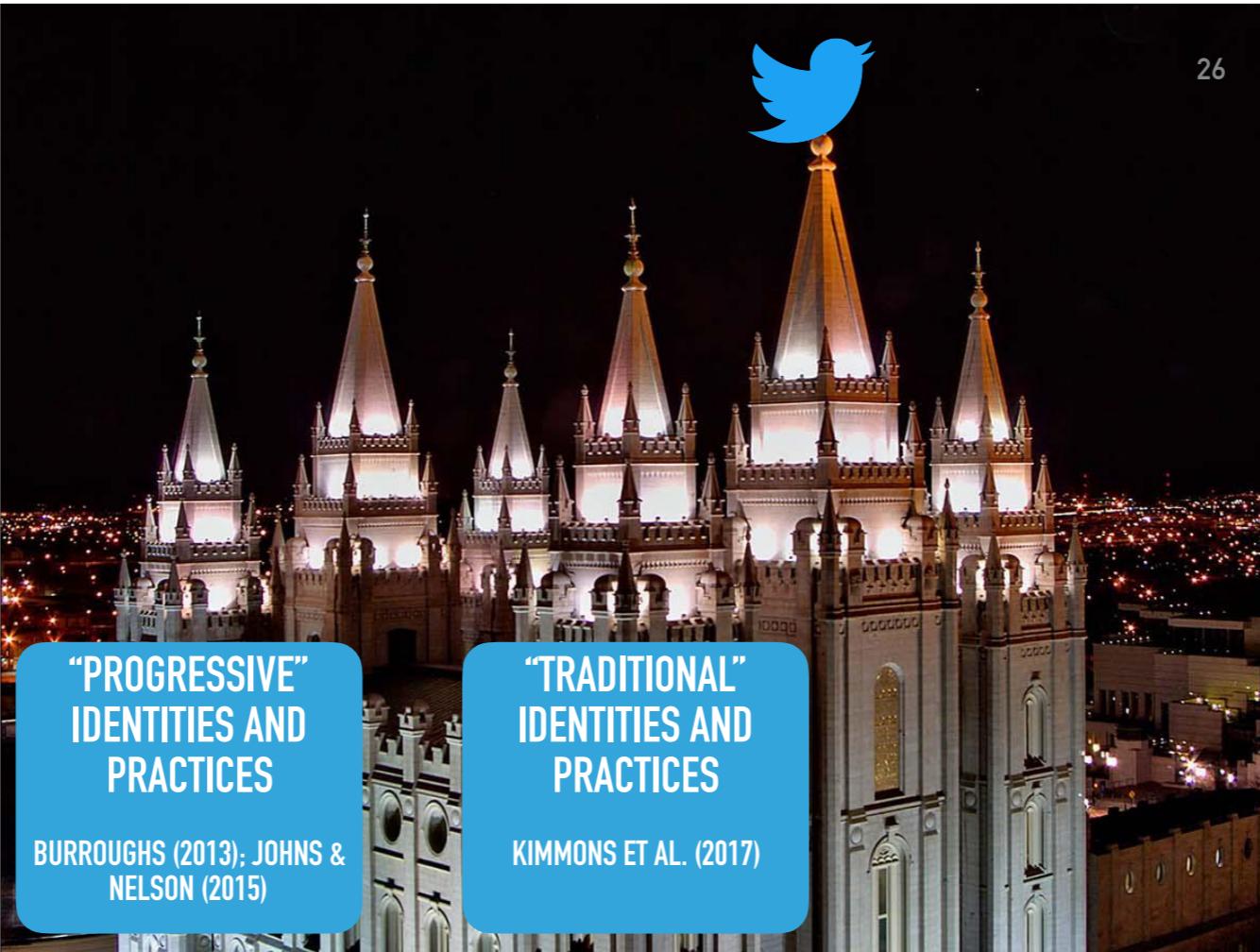


More specifically, we're interested in how this plays out in the context of "Mormon Twitter."

Now, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is actively encouraging its members and everyone else to stop using the word "Mormon" to refer to the Church, its teachings, its members, etc., so I'd like to make it clear that my deliberate use of the terms "Mormon Twitter," "Mormon identity," etc. during this presentation is not a sign of disrespect so much as it is an acknowledgement that the phenomenon being studied here goes beyond the boundaries of the institutional Church.

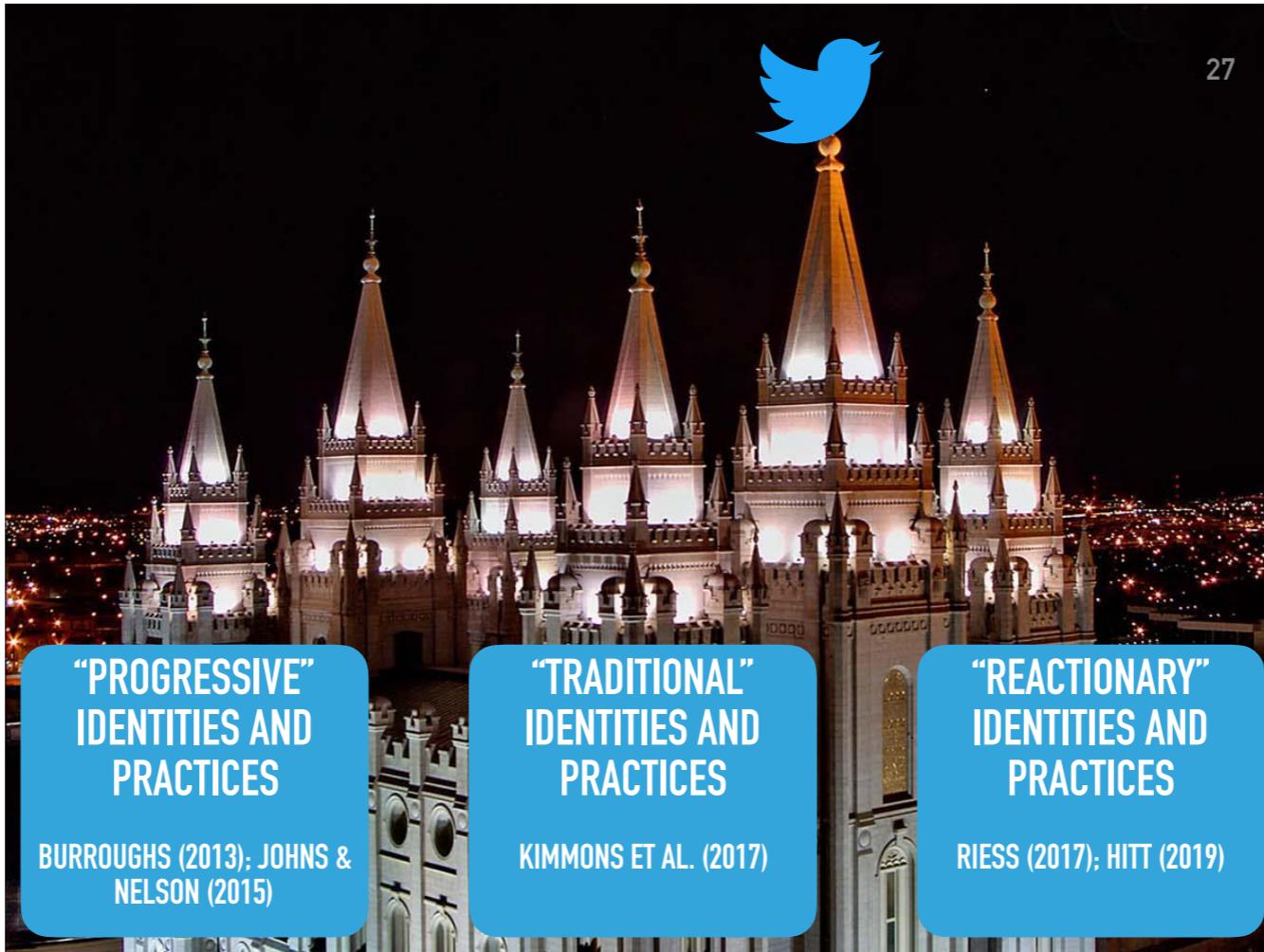


"As might be expected, self-identified LDS users posted religious tweets more frequently than non-self-identified users, with 16.4% of self-identified tweets conveying overtly religious content as opposed to only 5.7 percent of tweets from non-self-identified users. Among these religious tweets, 21.3% [~3%] included a personal witness or testimony about a religious belief"



“Just like other unsanctioned Mormon media, such as Sunstone magazine and networks of Mormon blogs, early live-tweeting was often critical of speakers’ positions on hot button topics such as gender and sexuality” (Burroughs, 2013)

Johns & Nelson (2015): #exmormon, #gaymormon, #mofem



accounts that flirt or outright embrace alt-right and white nationalist tropes

Now, I can't speak for the institutional church, but I would guess that it approves of this middle category, but isn't a big fan of these categories on the side. We use the term "Mormon Twitter" to reflect a connection with the Latter-day Saint movement without suggesting that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints necessarily approves of or endorses everything that happens within this space.

Now, this is clearly an oversimplification of what Mormon Twitter looks like: There are way more categories than this, many participants in Mormon Twitter would reject these labels, and they aren't neat silos that people never venture out of.

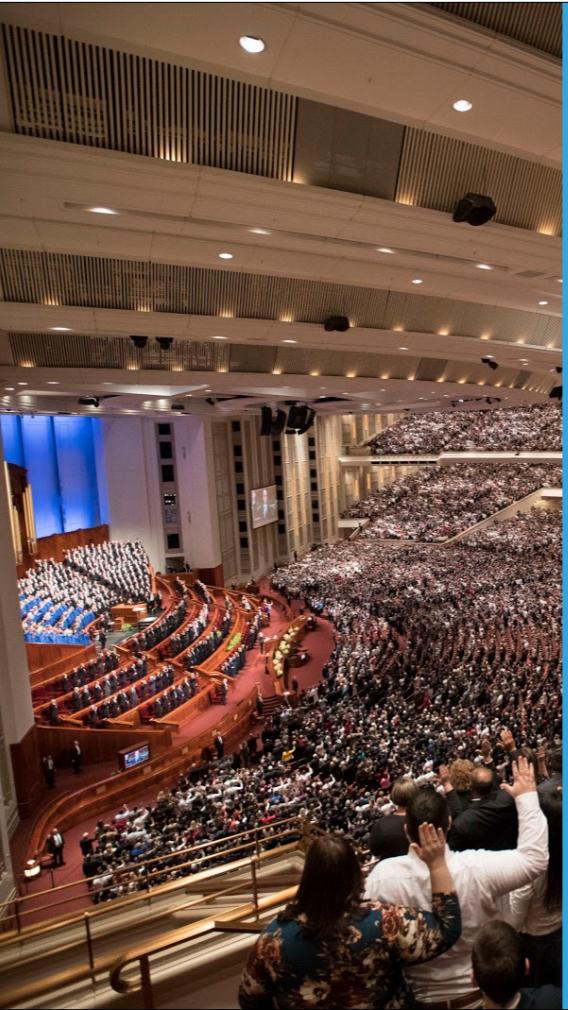


That said, there is one time of year that all (or at least most) of Mormon Twitter comes together, and that's during the Church's semi-annual General Conference. Kimmons and colleagues (2017) note that Mormon Twitter accounts are noticeably more active during these April and October conferences than any other time of year, and up through October 2018, Mormon Twitter tended to use a single hashtag to livetweet the conference, meaning that wherever you were on the Mormon Twitter spectrum, you were likely to run into everyone who is everywhere else on the spectrum.

And this unifying effect makes #ldsconf a particularly interesting context for studying religious literacies in Mormon Twitter.

THE PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT STUDY IS TO INVESTIGATE THE EXTENT TO WHICH ONE PARTICULAR MORMON PRACTICE—THE ACT OF “SUSTAINING”—IS ENACTED DIFFERENTLY WITHIN #LDSCONF THAN IN TRADITIONAL LATTER-DAY SAINT CONTEXTS.

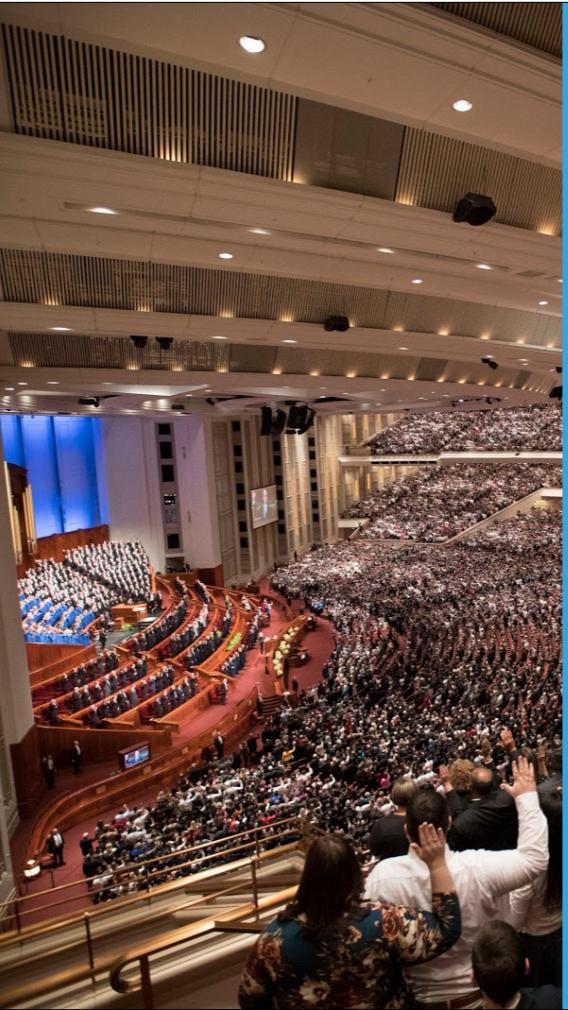
#ldsconf is a Twitter hashtag that people use to coordinate tweeting about the Church's semi-annual General Conference; a hashtag is really interesting because it transcends networks—so regardless of whether your approach to Mormon practice is traditional, progressive, or reactionary



“THE CARRYING OUT OF A³⁰
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**Scribner & Cole (1978),
p. 457**

Let's go back to Scribner and Cole's definition of a practice, or a literacy to review what “sustaining” is.



**"THE CARRYING OUT OF A³¹
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**Scribner & Cole (1978),
p. 457**

sustaining is a formal, symbolic vote by which members of the Church express their approval for the general leadership of the Church, most notably the president of the Church

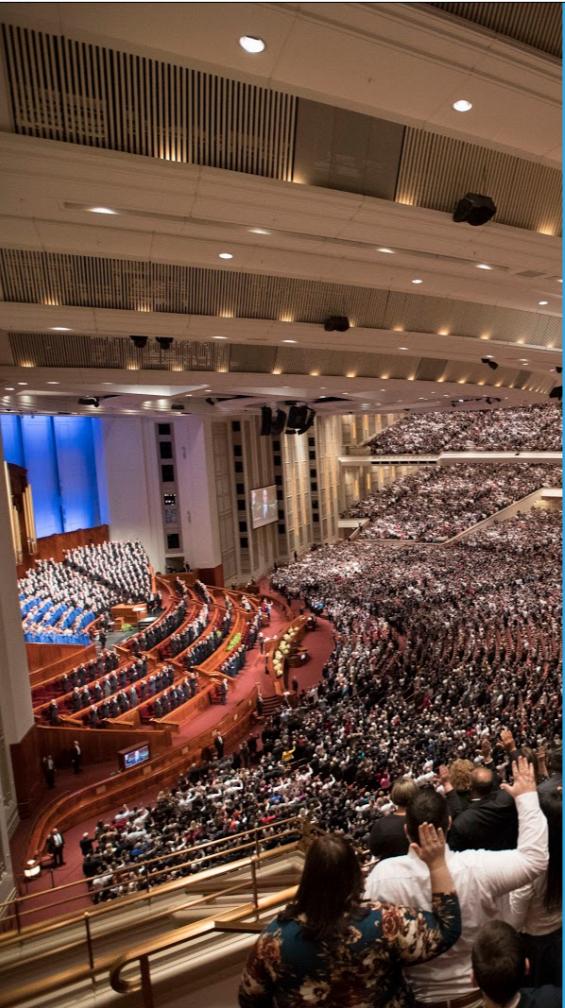


**"THE CARRYING OUT OF A³²
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**Scribner & Cole (1978),
p. 457**

Sustaining is carried out by raising one's right hand—this isn't the kind of technology that we are used to researching, but you'll remember that Scribner and Cole's original example of a technology is a written language, or a symbol system. Raising one's hand is a symbolic act, and if we use

Nickerson (2005): "Technology, broadly conceived as the building of artifacts or procedures—tools—to help people accomplish their goals, predates recorded history." "amplifiers of human capabilities"



**“THE CARRYING OUT OF A³³
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p. 457**

the entire practice of sustaining is built on a shared system of knowledge, in particular, the Latter-day Saint belief that the president of the Church is a mouthpiece for God in a literal sense and that the most senior leaders of the Church can be considered “prophets, seers, and revelators.” The act of sustaining is to express support for—and a willingness to listen to—God as God speaks through these leaders.

This description of sustaining as a Mormon practice assumes that it’s happening “by the book” in a formal religious context.



**"THE CARRYING OUT OF A³⁴
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**Scribner & Cole (1978),
p. 457**

So, what happens when we add Twitter into the mix? If we look at the use of the #ldsconf hashtag during a sustaining vote, does the sequence of activities change? we know the technologies do! what about the systems of knowledge that are privileged during this time?

DATA COLLECTION

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- ▶ resulted in 280 tweets

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- ▶ insider/outsider pair (Cornish, Gillespie, & Zittoun, 2014)
- ▶ reported the resulting themes and agreed examples

EIGHT THEMES RELATED TO SUSTAINING PRACTICES IN **#LDSCONF**

we try to describe these themes thoroughly, but we also know that there are ethical issues, so we only share when we have received permission to do so



SUPPORT AND APPROVAL

This emphasis should come as no surprise, given that the entire purpose of the solemn assembly is for members of the Church to sustain their leaders. Indeed, some tweets associated with this theme used the phrase “I sustain” in their tweets to indicate via Twitter what participants were also indicating by raising their hand as an official part of the ceremony. Similarly, some participants used their tweets to express personal conviction that Russell Nelson is a prophet of God. Others used the #ldsconf hashtag to say that they were crying during the ceremony, which in Mormon culture suggests spiritual experiences confirming participants' beliefs.



"#ELDERGONG AND
#ELDERSOARES AS
NEW #APOSTLES!
LOVE IT. #LDSCONF"

SUPPORT AND APPROVAL

For example, whereas the practice of sustaining typically frames Church members as obediently supporting of the changes and nominations already approved by the leadership, one participant tweeted "#ElderGong and #ElderSoares as new #apostles! Love it. #ldsconf", which reframed him as a more active participant in the process with the agency to express personal approval of the new apostles (rather than approve of the leadership's choice by default).



marla muppets
@marlamuppets

Following

GUYS I POPPED OUT OF MY BED W NO PANTS AND RAISED MY HAND SO FAST
#ldsconf

GIF

12:19 PM - 31 Mar 2018

3 Likes

HUMOR AND INFORMALITY

 **marla muppets**
@marlamuppets

Following ▾ 49

GUYS I POPPED OUT OF MY BED W NO PANTS AND RAISED MY HAND SO FAST #ldsconf


A small yellow Minion character with two large black eyes and a single brown arm is walking across a blue surface. In the background, other Minions are visible. A large blue play button icon is overlaid in the center of the image.

GIF

12:19 PM - 31 Mar 2018

3 Likes 

First, many contributors to the #ldsconf hashtag during the solemn assembly noted the informal contexts in which they were participating in this practice (e.g., while watching General Conference from bed).

Second, many participants expressed themselves in ways that draw more from Internet culture than Mormon culture (e.g., using abbreviations, informal expressions, and all capital letters). Tweets associated with this theme also used slang expressions, emojis, and informal punctuation (such as the use of several exclamation points to express emotion).

Third, some participants used pop culture references in their tweets about the solemn assembly (e.g., the animated image of a Minion). Other examples of this included a joke that referenced the 2000 American rap song The Real Slim Shady (which includes the repeated line “please stand up,” echoing the standing during the ceremony) and a tweet that embedded a clip of actress Maya Rudolph’s exaggerated Brazilian accent in a scene from the television show Saturday Night Live (in reference to new apostle Ulisses Soares’s native country).



DIVERSITY AND EQUITY

Much of the #ldsconf activity surrounding the solemn assembly commented on the call of the Chinese-American Gerrit Gong and the Brazilian Ulisses Soares to the (previously) all-white, predominantly-American Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Most of these references approved of increased representation, but a small number of comments were mixed (approving of their appointment but suggesting that their diversity shouldn't matter as much as their ecclesiastical authority) or outrightly dismissive (suggesting that "Social Justice Warriors" could now stop complaining about lack of diversity in Church leadership). This theme also encompassed tweets that commented approvingly on the more prominent role of women within the 2018 solemn assembly (as compared to previous assemblies).

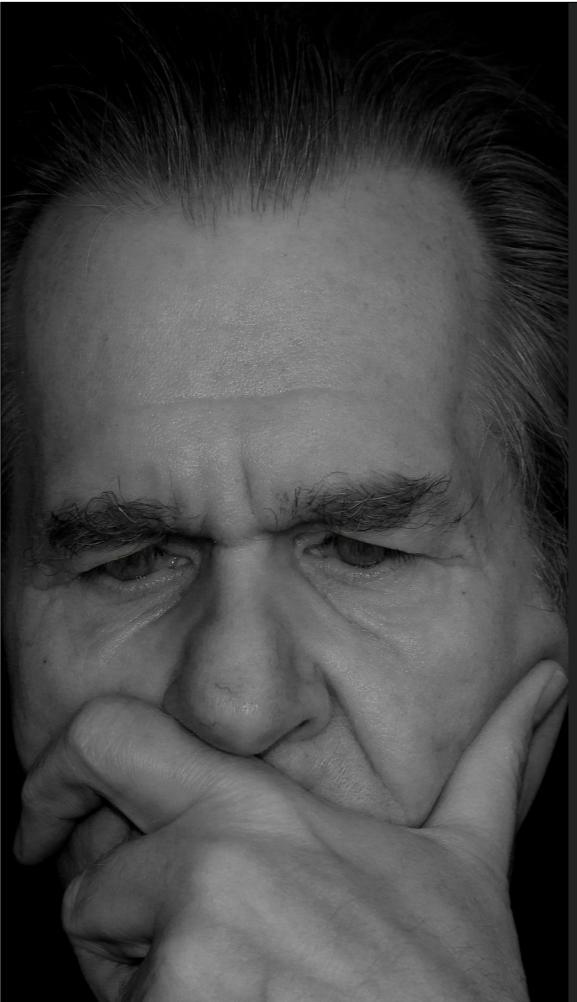


A number of #ldsconf tweets commented on the historic nature of this particular solemn assembly. The vast majority of these comments were directly connected to the last theme; that is, they noted the historical importance of the sustaining of the first Asian-American and Latin American apostles in the church or expressed relief that the Church had “finally” taken this step. However, one tweet noted another first, that this represented the first solemn assembly in the era of Mormon interaction on Twitter.



PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

This theme is associated with tweets in which #ldsconf participants expressed a personal connection with the Church leaders being called and sustained during the solemn assembly. For example, upon hearing the names of the new apostles, some participants shared that they personally knew them or had met them at some point. The connection that other participants felt was less direct but still personal. One Asian-American convert to Mormonism described the pushback she received from friends when joining the predominantly-white Church and expressed her excitement that the Church now had a Chinese-American apostle. Other connections were even more distant, such as when participants tweeted about the excitement of Brazilian or Chinese members of the Church they had contact with.



SPECULATION AND EXPECTATION

Although most members of the Church do not play any role in the decision of who will fill leadership positions, that does not prevent them from engaging in speculation about who might be called to fill a vacancy. We found that this speculation was also expressed in #ldsconf tweets, largely in the form of acknowledging whether previous guesses had been proven right or wrong.

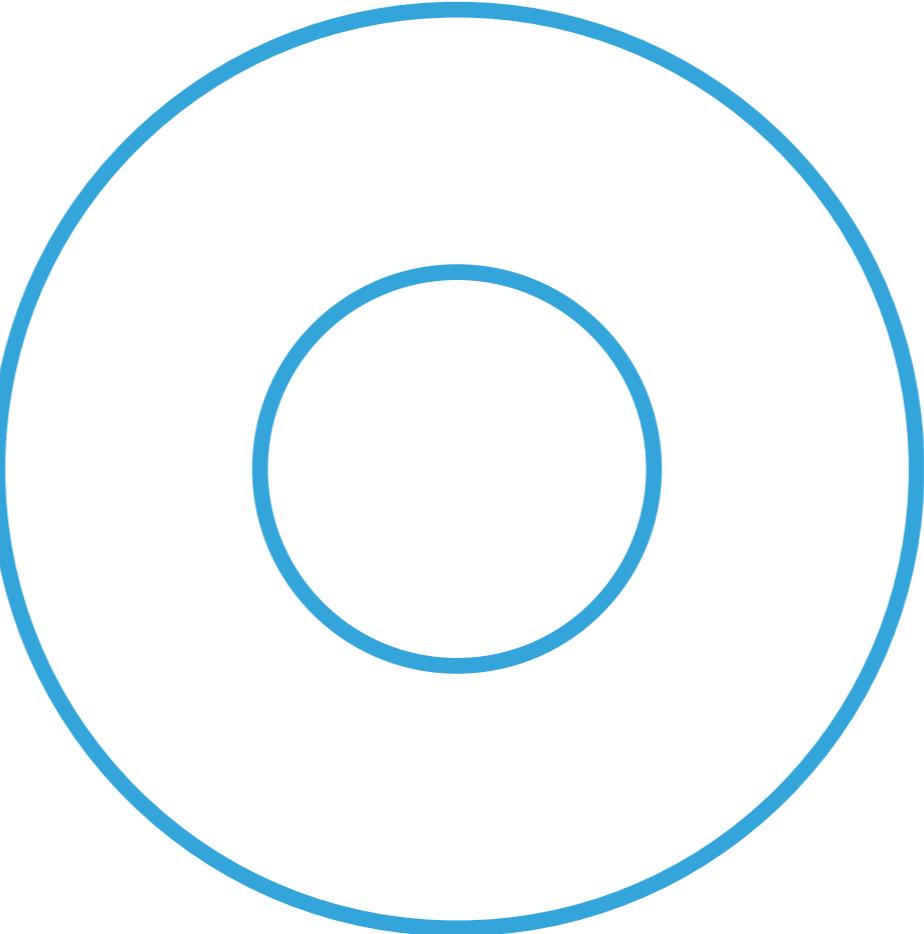


PROCEDURAL DIFFERENCES AND MISTAKES

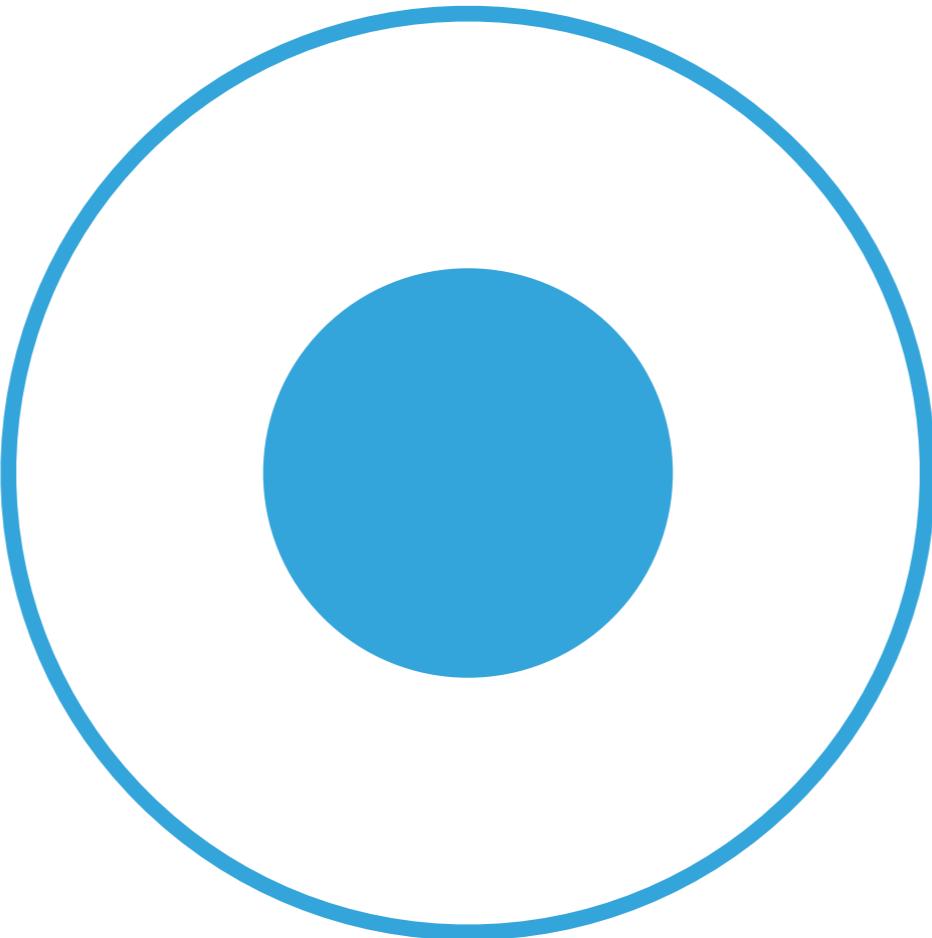
Our final theme represents an abstraction of and reflection on the practice of the solemn assembly itself. While sustaining happens frequently within the Church, solemn assemblies happen relatively rarely and involve the addition of new elements to the practice. As a result, some of the #ldsconf tweets composed during the solemn assembly consisted of questions about or comments on changes in the ceremony.

Some of the tweets associated with this theme also commented on procedural mistakes that individuals made during the ceremony—an inevitable result of the contrast between familiarity with the general practice and the rarity of this specific context. These tweets included some in which contributors observed through the live broadcast that even high-ranking Church leaders (including new president Russell Nelson) seemed to stand, sit, or vote out of place.

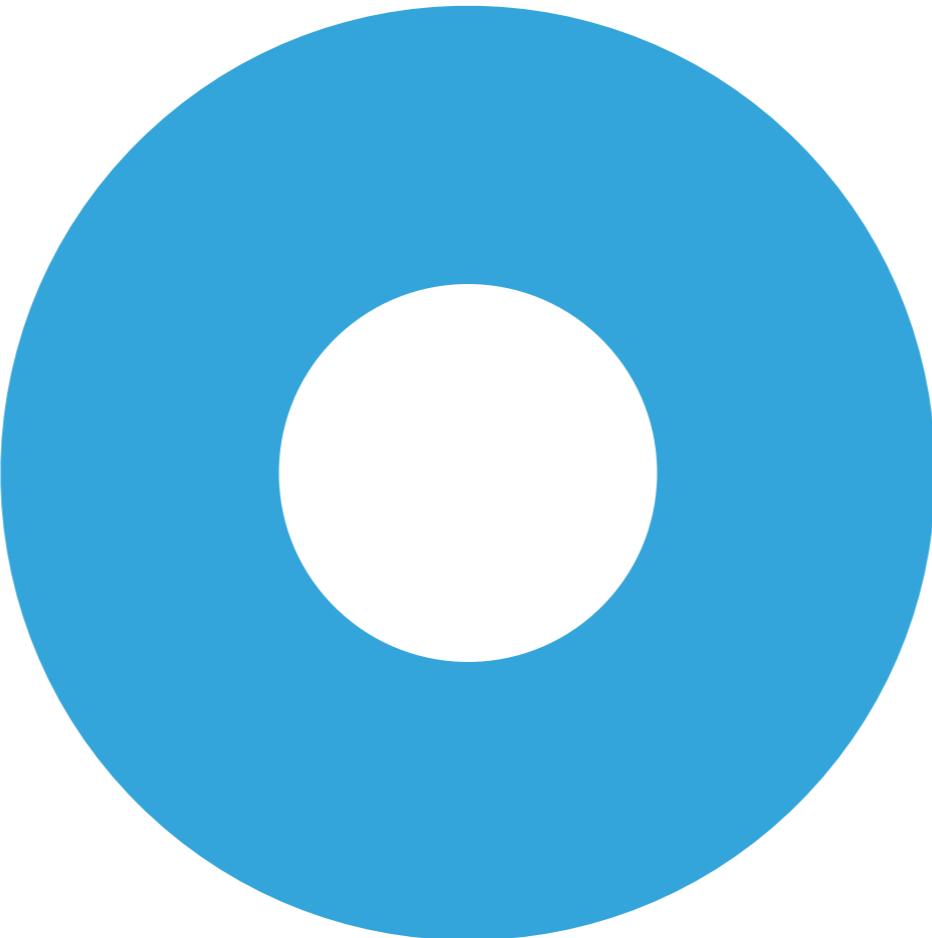
**WHAT DOES THIS TELL US
ABOUT RELIGIOUS
LITERACIES?**



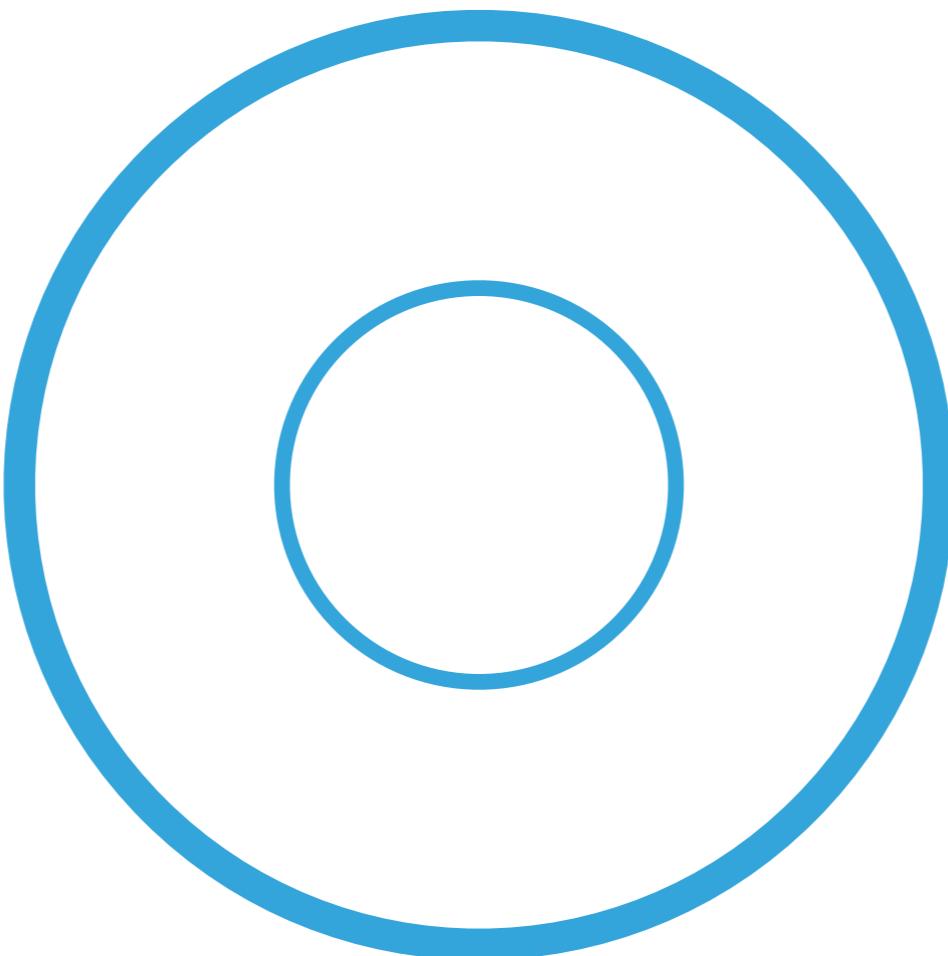
In the early 1990s, Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger proposed a theory of “legitimate peripheral participation” in “communities of practice.” If I can radically oversimplify their work, Lave and Wenger’s thinking suggests that in any community,

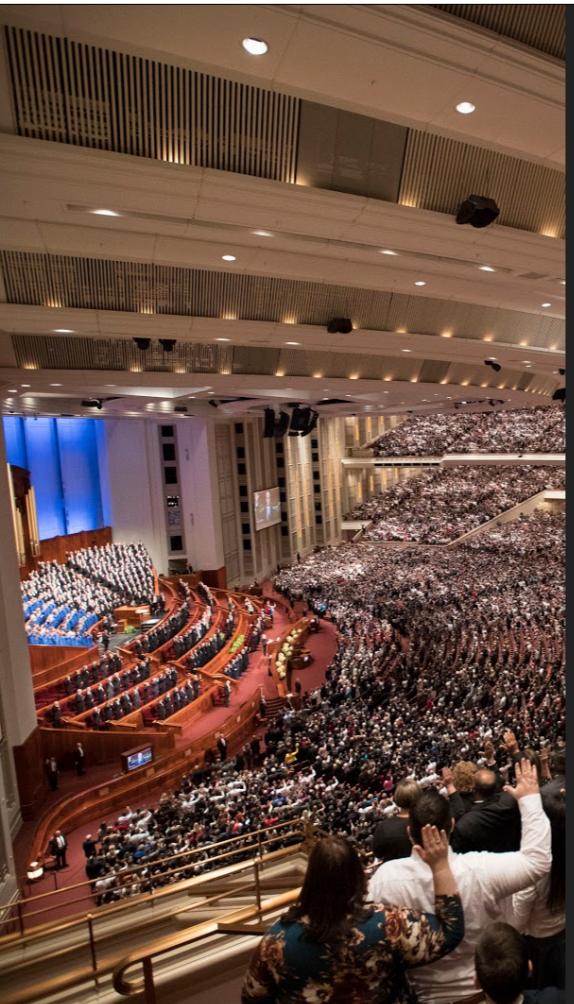


there is a core of people who define what acceptable identity and practice are...



and a periphery of people who must accept those definitions in order to be accepted by the community. This was an innovative model for learning, it has been a useful model for learning over the past decades, and it also fits nicely with what we would expect in a highly-structured religious community like the one that we're studying.





"#ELDERGONG AND
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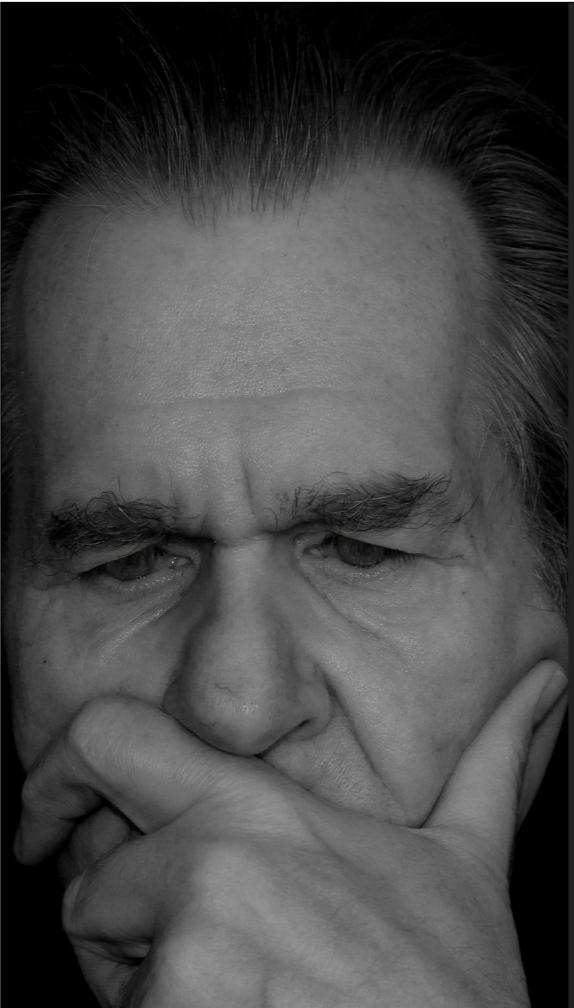
SUPPORT AND APPROVAL

However, what we see in #ldsconf is a little more complicated than that. For example, even as those on the periphery vote in support of those at the core, their tweets allow them to take a more active, less peripheral role in the process. They offer personal commentary and voice personal approval instead of merely voting in favor.





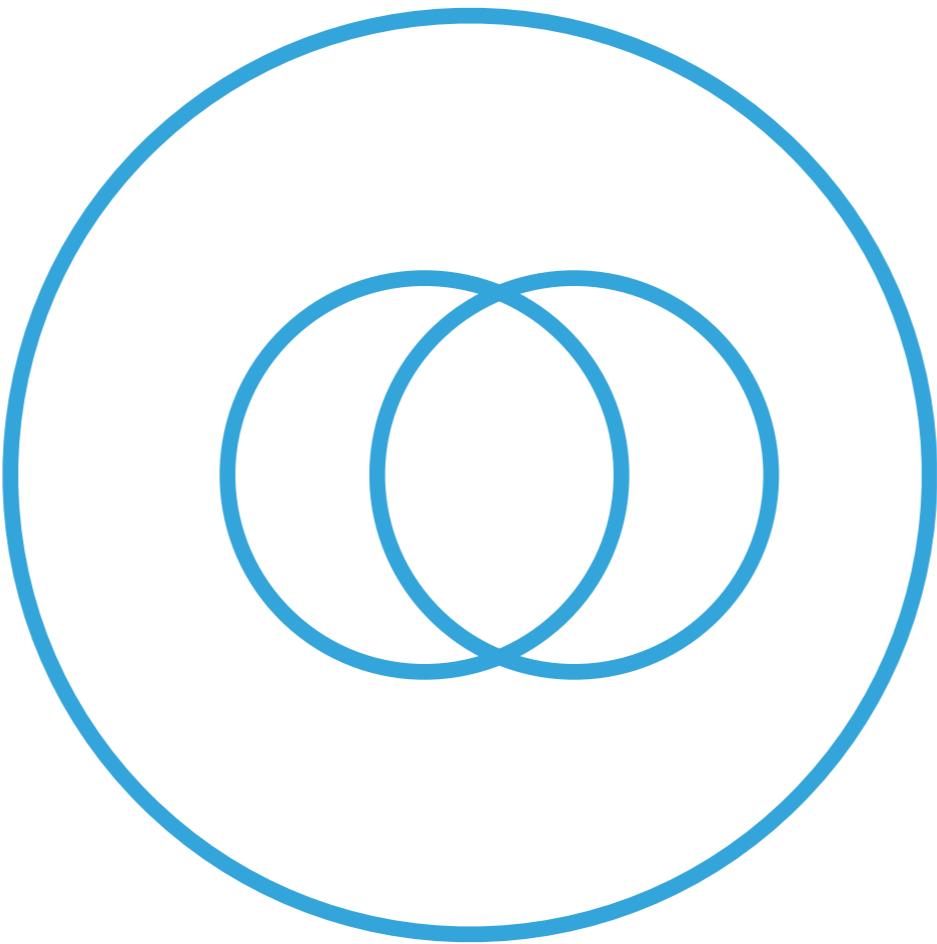
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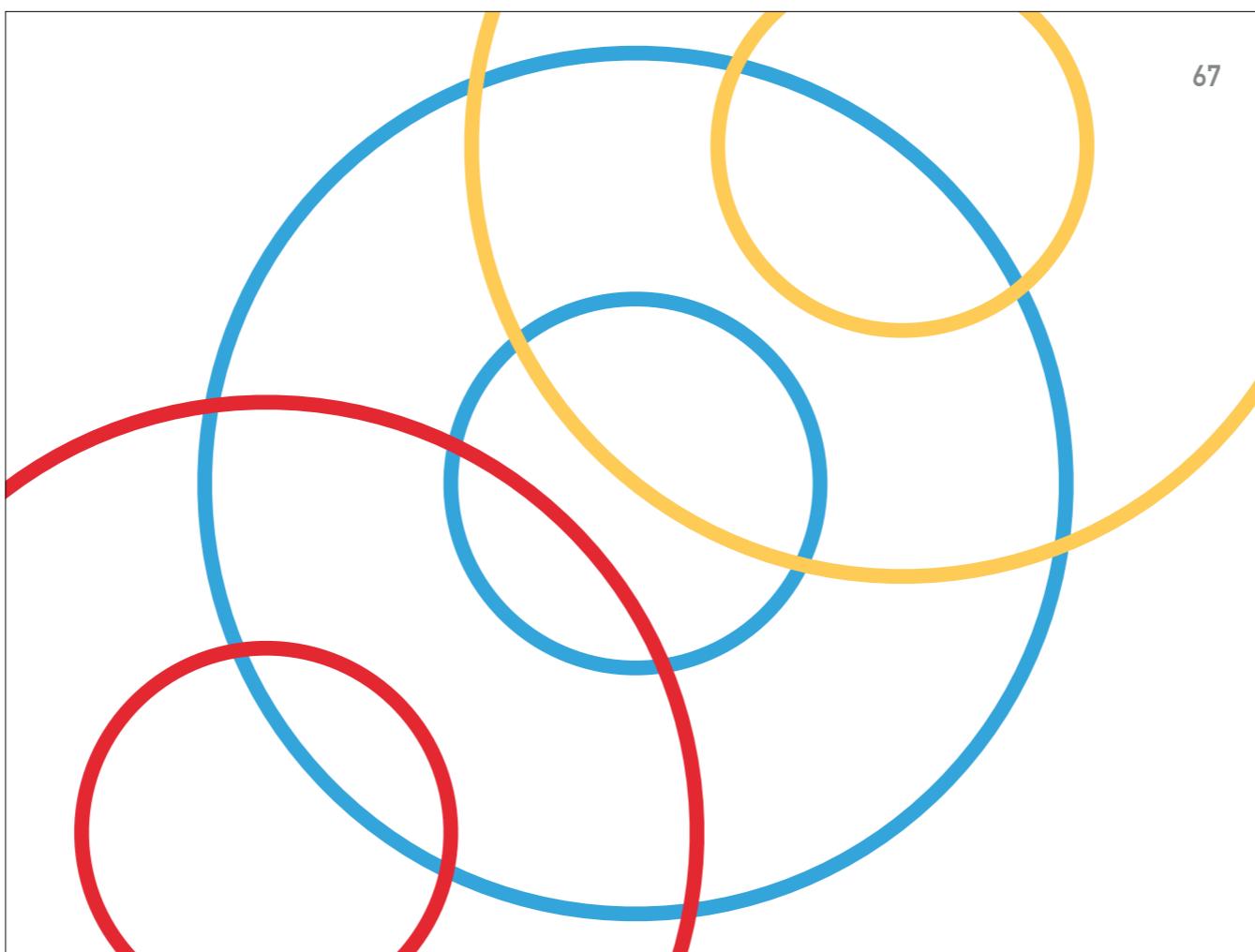




DIVERSITY AND EQUITY

Let's take our diversity and equity theme for example. The vast majority of #ldsconf tweets that we looked at described the addition of a man of color to the highest ranks of Church leadership as an unqualified good thing. One tweet complained instead about Social Justice Warriors in the ranks. The Church itself seems to take a position that's distinct from either of those; the current president of the Church has commented that people shouldn't expect Church leadership to be a representative body, and another senior leader has even suggested that race is ultimately unimportant in the grand scheme of things.

In this case, the core of the Church is leading in one direction, and #ldsconf participants aren't tracking perfectly, instead offering at least two different alternatives. So,

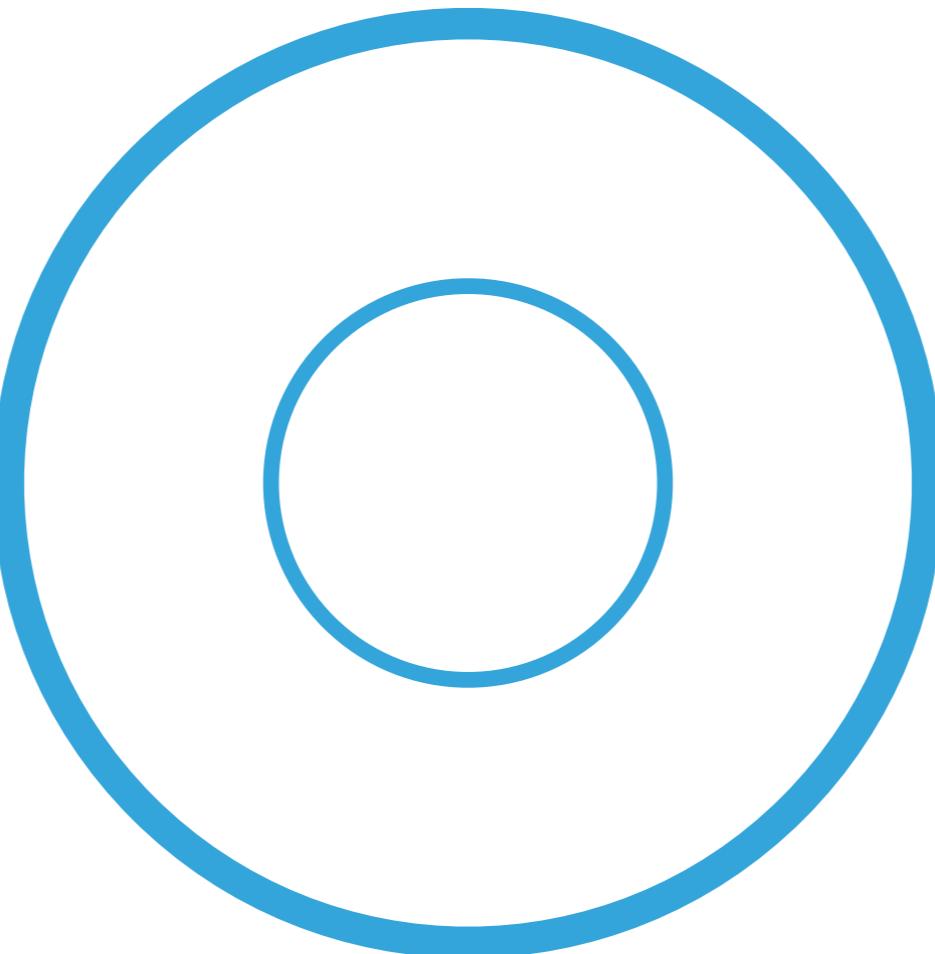




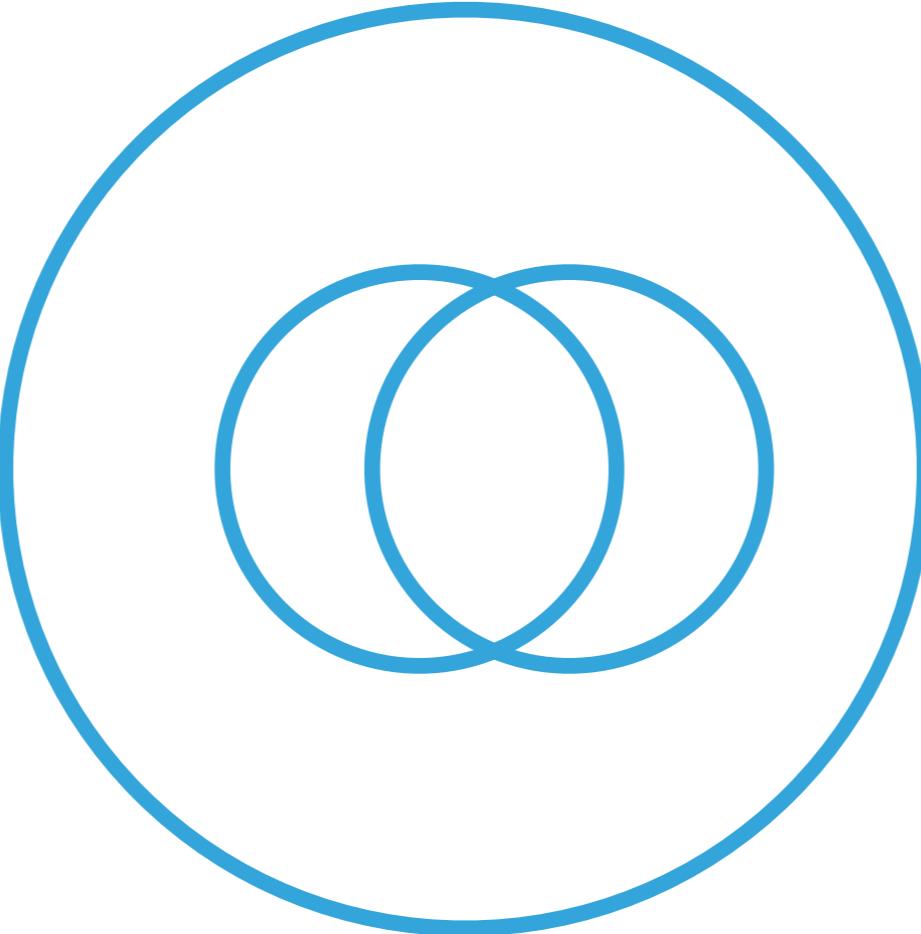
HUMOR AND INFORMALITY

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING

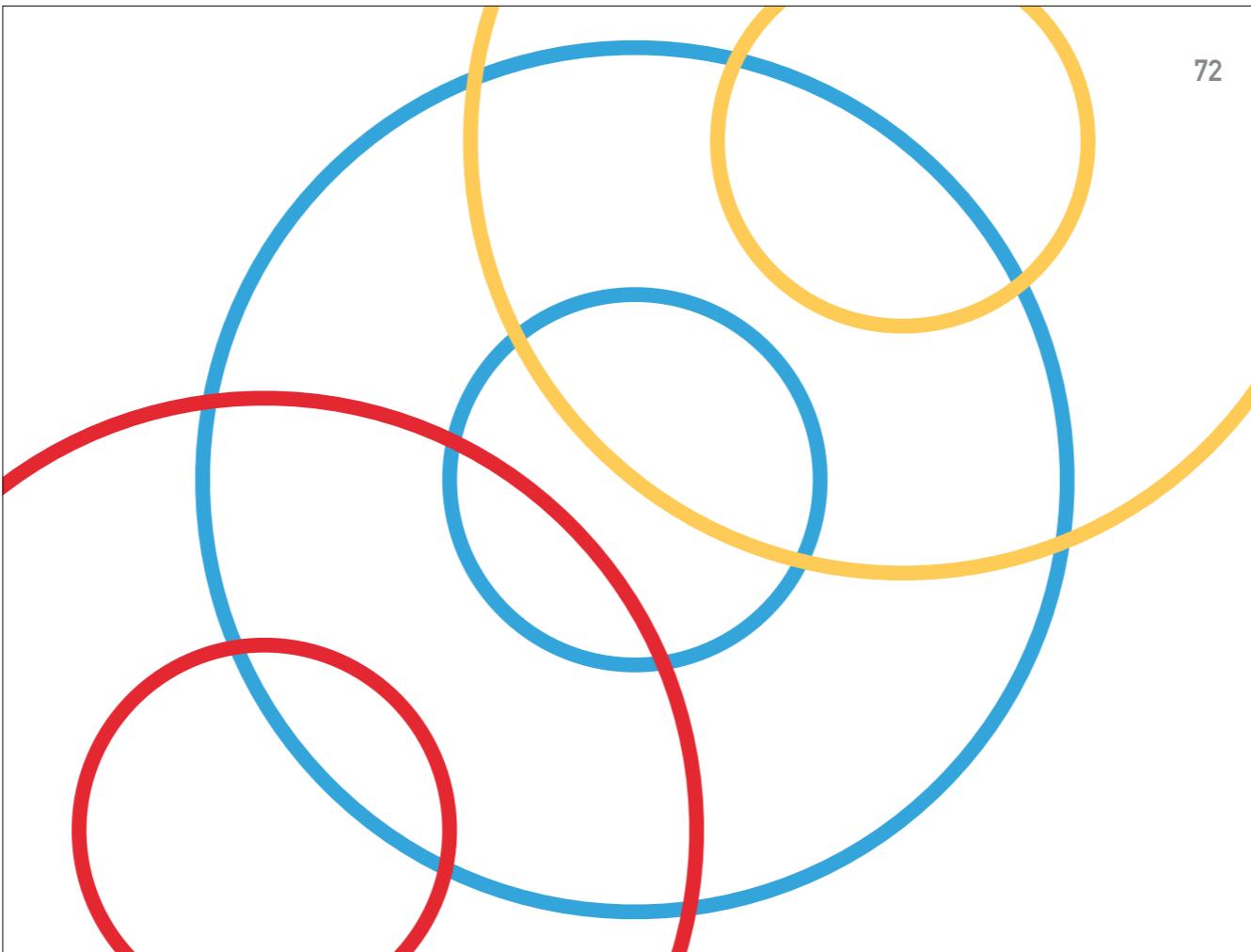
technology *can* tear down some of the structures that we expect to exist within learning settings, and this continues to create big questions for those of us who are interested in this work



- technology makes it so that knowledge creation is not as concentrated among a core of elites
- this can be very exciting in tearing down power structures, but it can also be terrifying—just look at the problems that we're having with fake news!



- it's also important for us to figure out how to work through disagreements



- as literacies and knowledge systems converge, that forces us to consider which ones are really important and which ones are compatible
- choosing which literacies and knowledge systems to privilege risks creating unequal power structures—to accept all literacies risks lending value to conspiracy theories

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THANK YOU! QUESTIONS?