Navigating the Landscape of Online Mormonism

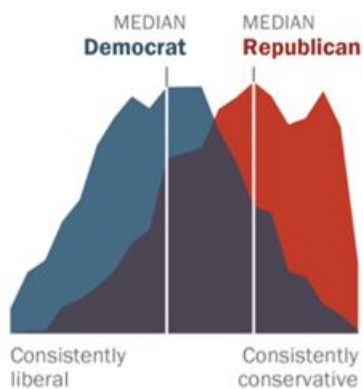## Benjamin Knoll, Thomas Hatton, and Brian Dillman

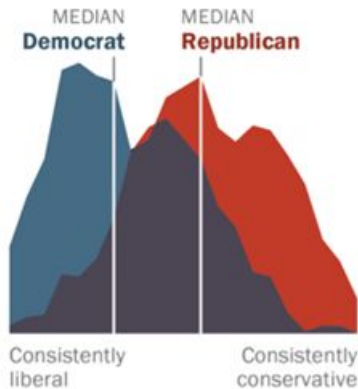# Polarization Surges Among the Politically Engaged

Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values, by level of political engagement
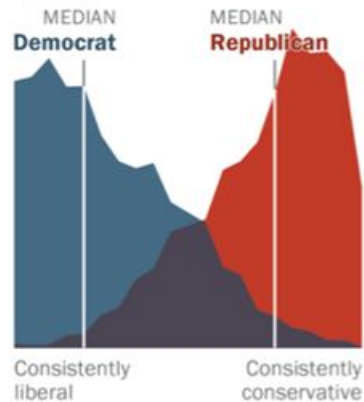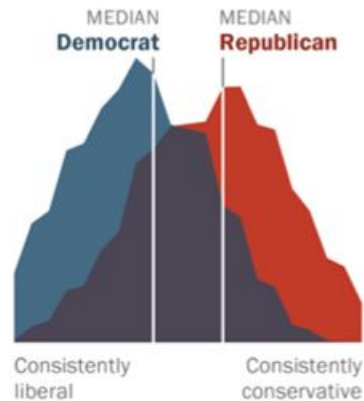
Among the politically engaged

1994

MEDIAN **Democrat**   MEDIAN **Republican**

Consistently liberal — Consistently conservative

2004

MEDIAN **Democrat**   MEDIAN **Republican**

Consistently liberal — Consistently conservative

2014

MEDIAN **Democrat**   MEDIAN **Republican**

Consistently liberal — Consistently conservative

Among the less engaged

MEDIAN **Democrat**   MEDIAN **Republican**

Consistently liberal — Consistently conservative

MEDIAN **Democrat**   MEDIAN **Republican**

Consistently liberal — Consistently conservative

MEDIAN **Democrat**   MEDIAN **Republican**

Consistently liberal — Consistently conservative

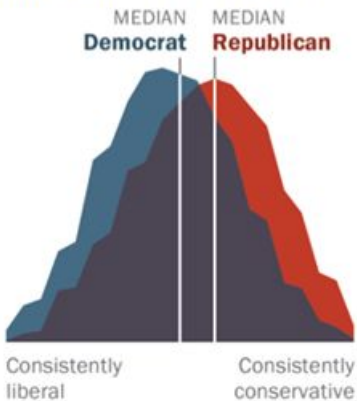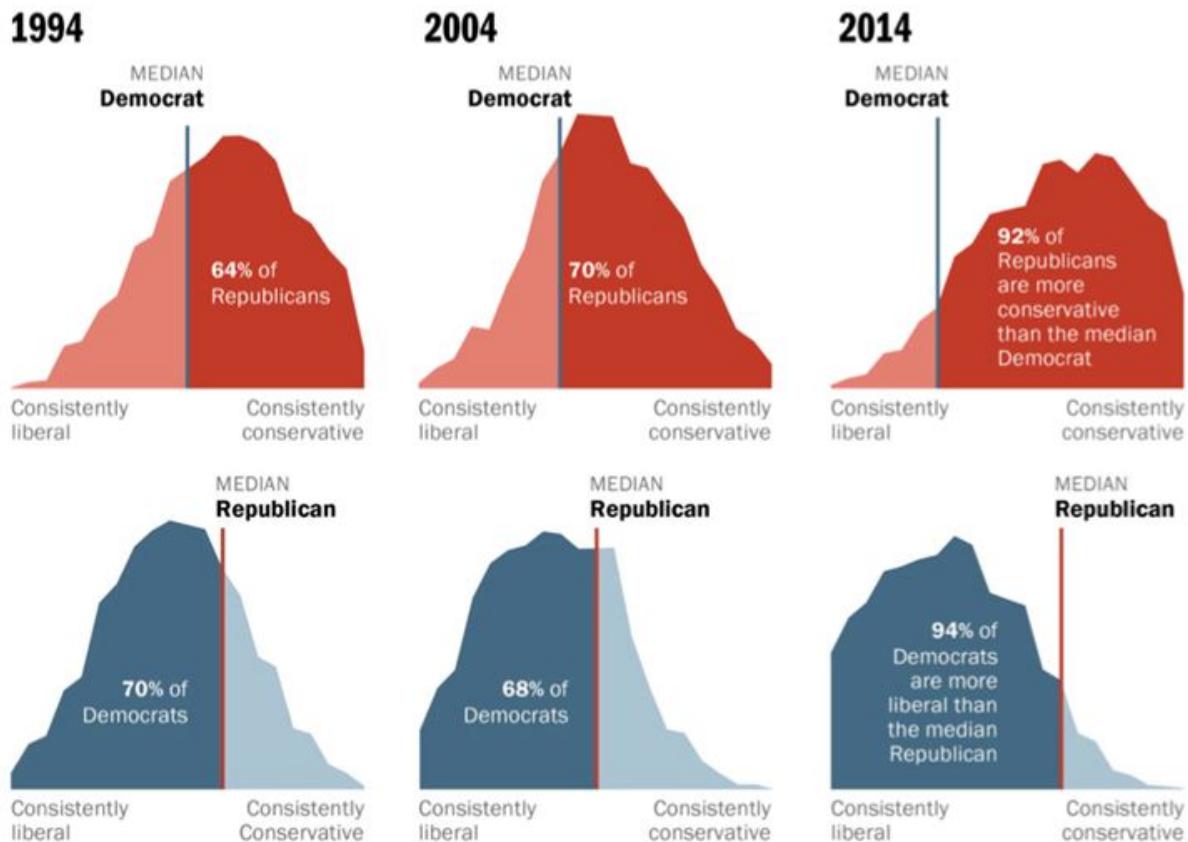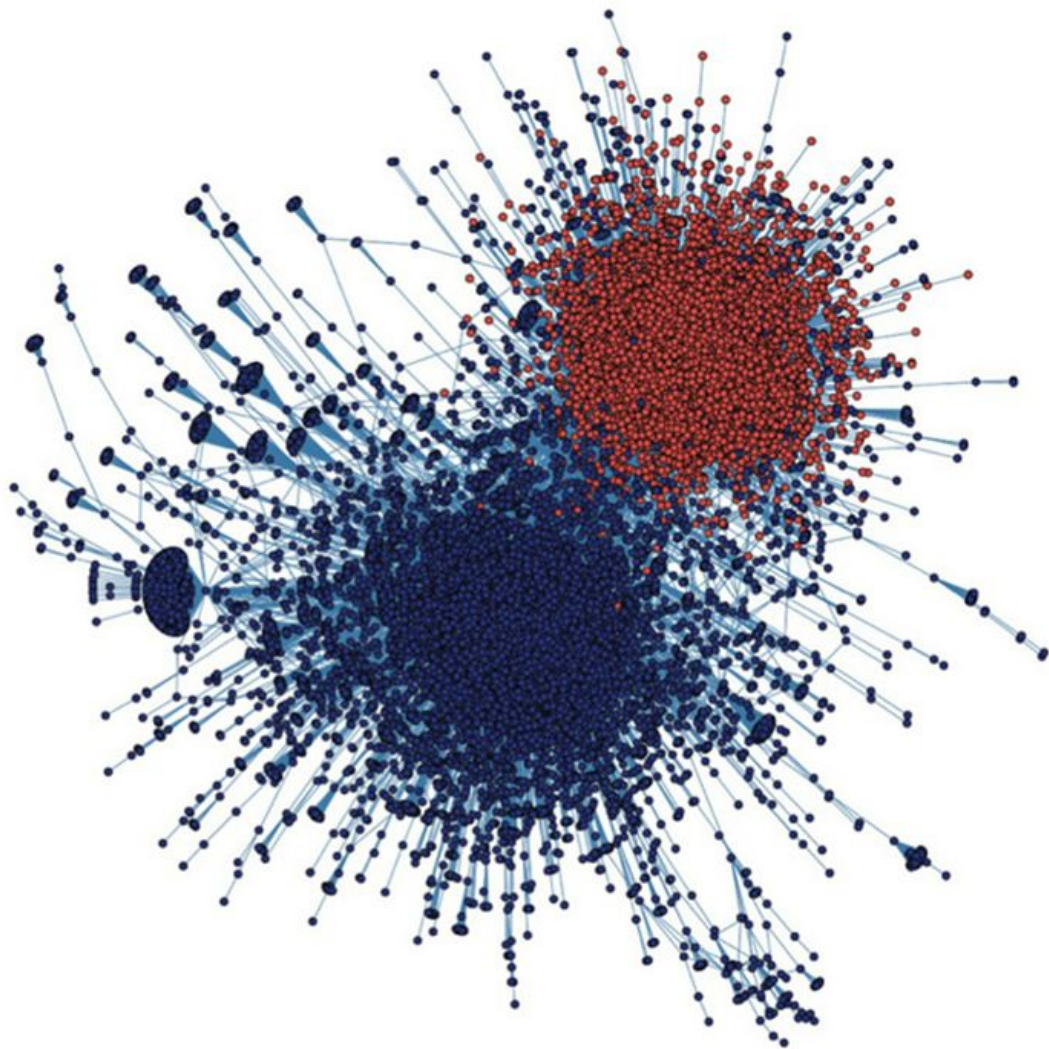# Republicans Shift to the Right, Democrats to the Left

Distribution of Republicans and Democrats on a 10-item scale of political values

1994

MEDIAN
Democrat

64% of Republicans

Consistently liberal — Consistently conservative

MEDIAN
Republican

70% of Democrats

Consistently liberal — Consistently Conservative

2004

MEDIAN
Democrat

70% of Republicans

Consistently liberal — Consistently conservative

MEDIAN
Republican

68% of Democrats

Consistently liberal — Consistently conservative

2014

MEDIAN
Democrat

92% of Republicans are more conservative than the median Democrat

Consistently liberal — Consistently conservative

MEDIAN
Republican

94% of Democrats are more liberal than the median Republican

Consistently liberal — Consistently conservative
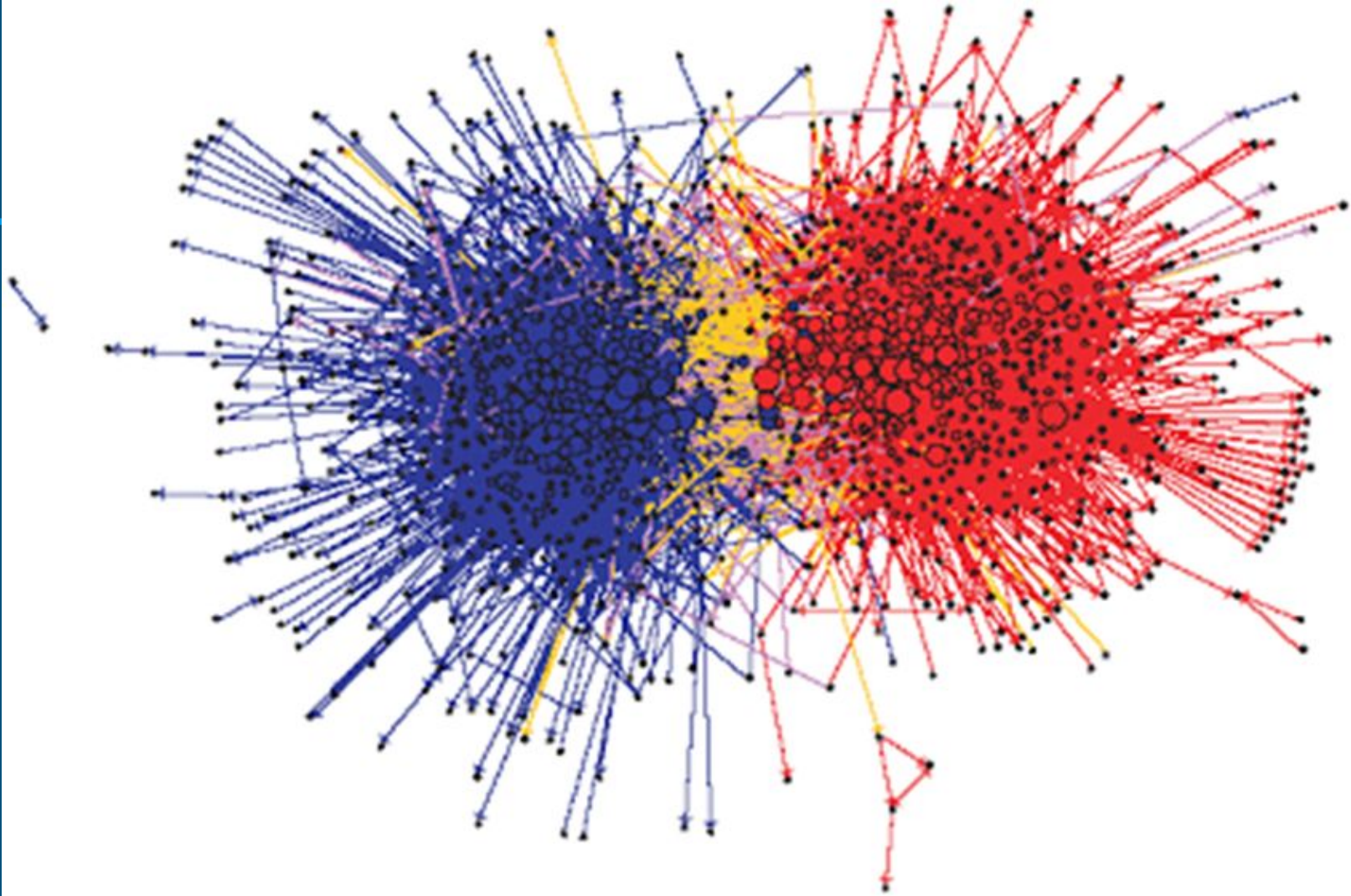
A Rising Tide of Mutual Antipathy

Democratic *attitudes about the* **Republican Party**

100%

79%
Unfavorable

57%

38%
Very
unfavorable

16%

0

1994   2014

Republican *attitudes about the* **Democratic Party**

100%

82%
Unfavorable

68%

43%
Very
unfavorable

17%

0

1994   2014

Beyond Dislike: Viewing the Other Party as a 'Threat to the Nation's Well-Being'

Democratic *attitudes about the* **Republican Party**

Republican *attitudes about the* **Democratic Party**

38% Very unfavorable

27%
of Democrats see the Republican Party as a threat to the nation's well-being

16

29

1994   2004   2014

43% Very unfavorable

36%
of Republicans see the Democratic Party as a threat to the nation's well-being

17

21

1994   2004   2014
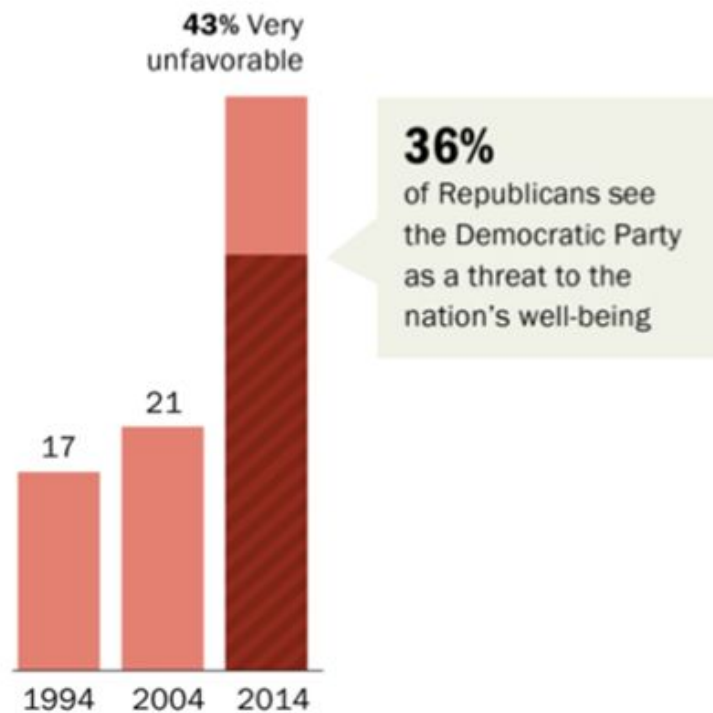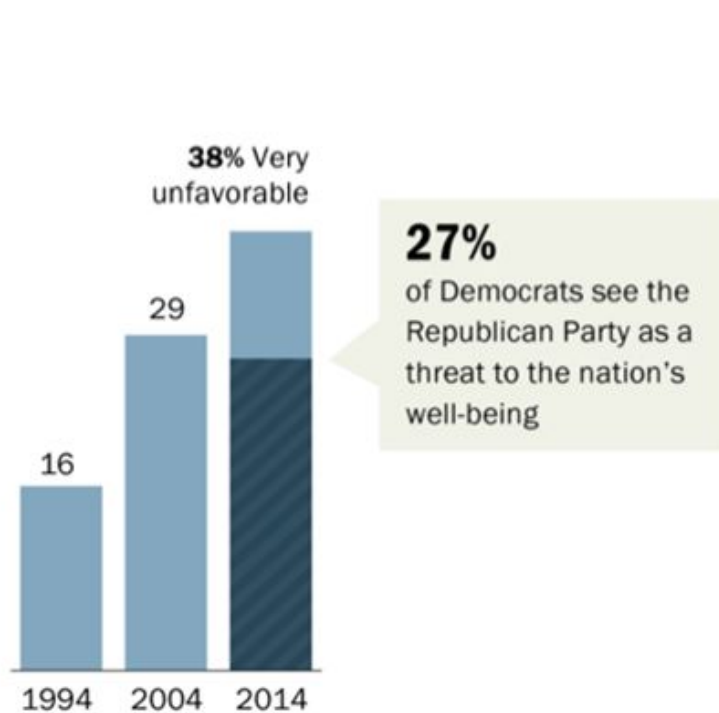
Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
Notes: Questions about whether the Republican and Democratic Parties are a threat to the nation's well being asked only in 2014.
Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).
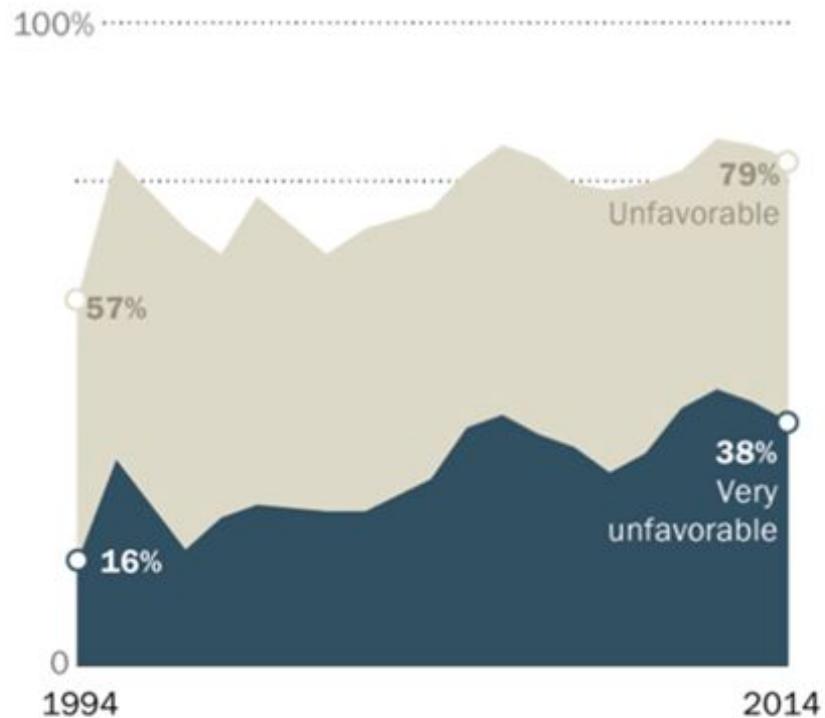
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

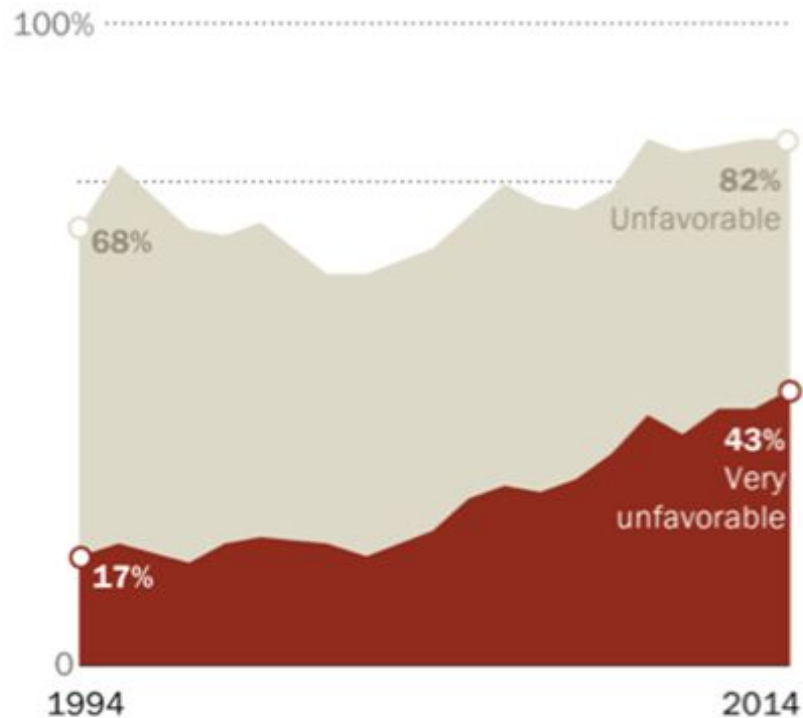# Thomas Hatton

Online Mormonism in a Nutshell

My own faith crisis

- Born into a family where faith issues were explored/discussed
- Exposed to online mormonism from an early age
- Crisis began as harmless exploration, followed by realization...

Church art is totally bizarre

So...many...mullets...

So...many...mullets...cont'd

- Sought out others
- Created 'Coming to Terms With The Abundance of Mullets in Church Art' and Mormons and Mullets Tumblr
- Created an online community

Traditional Narrative for Faith Crisis

- Faith or beliefs are challenged
- Seek out explanations online
- Find out unfavorable information
- Feel lost/alone
- Seek support or help

Online Communities and Resources for Mormons Experiencing a Faith Transition

- Online Mormonism provides a space for:
  - Community
  - Validation
  - Support

Online Mormonism

- Podcasts
- Blogs
- Message Boards
- Facebook Groups

Online Communities- Beneficial or Counterproductive?

- General positive outcomes for issues of mental health (1)(2)
  - Online faith communities- still an area of study
- Online disinhibition effect
  - Positives
    - More prone to share
    - More open, less judgemental
  - Negatives
    - Lack of face to face interactions/social mores
    - Flame wars/exceeding rudeness

1. Omega, Vol. 57(3) 217-243 2008. INTERNET SUPPORT GROUPS FOR SUICIDE SURVIVORS: A NEW MODE FOR GAINING BEREAVEMENT ASSISTANCE (n. d.): n. pag. Web.
2. Suler, John. "Psychology of Cyberspace -Online Therapy and Support Groups." Psychology of Cyberspace -Online Therapy and Support Groups. Rider University, Aug. 2007. Web.

Online Mormonism- Anecdotal

- All resources have difficulty with tone and perception
    - Rational Faiths Survey
    - Various Facebook Groups
- While situations are similar, faith journeys are individual
- In many ways, active online communities function as "wards"
- Parallel with humor writing

Faith Crisis = Identity Crisis
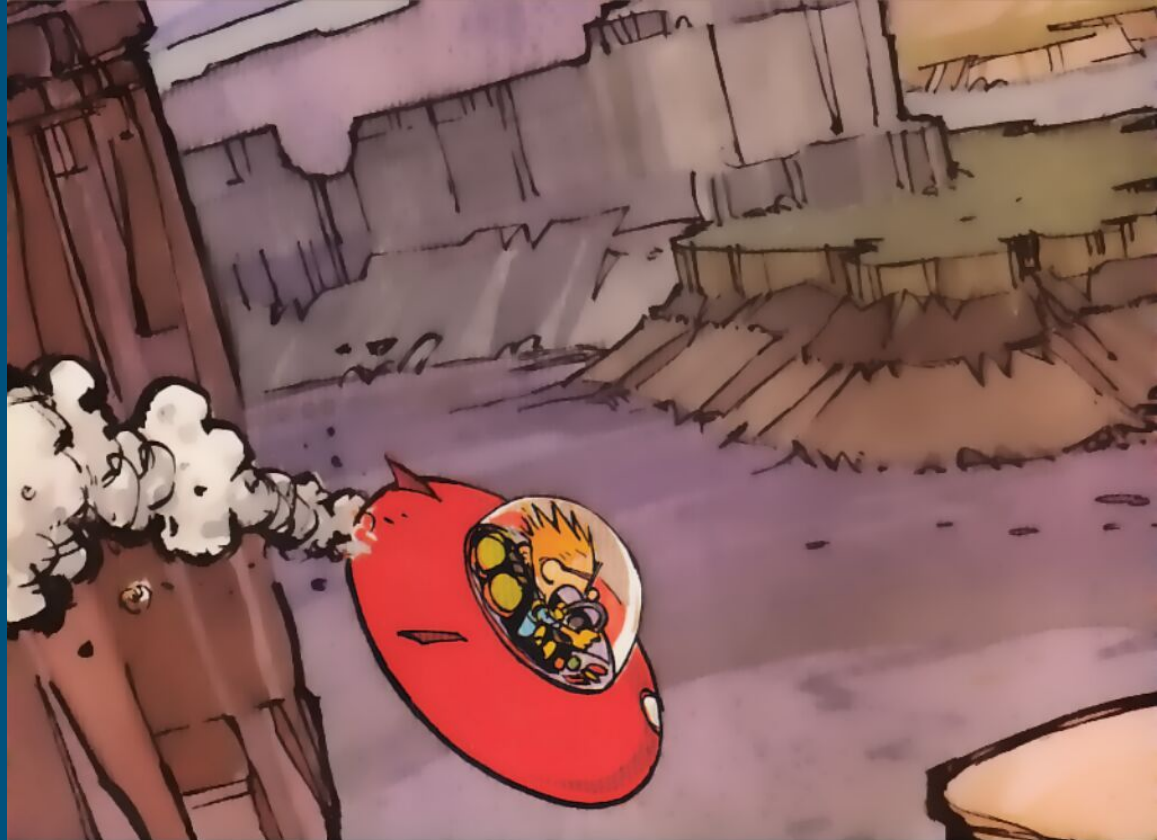
Faith Crisis = Identity Crisis

An identity helps us navigate the harshness of life.

Faith Crisis = Identity Crisis

An <u>identity</u> helps us navigate the harshness of life.

When it is broken or otherwise non-functional we feel and really are vulnerable.

The Function of Identity

What does <u>identity</u> do for us?

"Identity provides a deep sense of ideological commitment and allows the individual to know his or her place in the world. It provides one with a sense of well-being, a sense of being at home in one's body, a sense of direction in one's life, and a sense of mattering to those who count. Identity is what makes one move with direction; it is what gives one reason to be."

Sokol, Justin. "Identity Development Through the Lifetime: An Examination of Eriksonian Theory." Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology 1.2 (2009): 139-48

Faith Crisis : Identity Disruption

Often brought about through a new awareness of conflicting information regarding beliefs and/or a discrepancy between expectations of ambassadors of faith (leaders and members but mostly leaders) and perceived or actual behavior of those ambassadors.

Faith Crisis : Range of experience

Rapid/Violent Crisis of Faith

Often precipitated by: CES Letter, Mormonthink.com. New Atheist books/speeches, Enhanced Gospel Topics essays, Prop 8 actions, City Creek Mall and other real estate investments

Slow (supported) Crisis of Faith

Student of history, scripture, or religion in general; perhaps also long time subscribers of Sunstone and Dialogue

Faith Crisis : Online Expressions of Faith or Doubt Receives Mixed Responses

Why? Why don't people get us? Why do even those with similar conclusions respond so differently?

Why are some told (i)'they have been reading anti-mormon literature' (ii) they haven't read deeply enough, or (iii) they have/had the wrong expectations?

"Many things can be true and yet still harmful to man. Not all truth is useful."

–Immanuel Kant

Kant, Immanuel, and J. Michael Young. Lectures on Logic. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992. pp. 43.

Identity Development

Crisis: "In a developmental sense [connotes] not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential."

"I shall present human growth from the point of view of the conflicts, inner and outer, which the vital personality weathers, re-emerging from each crisis with an increased sense of inner unity, with an increase of good judgement, and an increase in the capacity to do well according to [the individual's] own standards and to the standards of those who are significant to [them]."

Erikson, Erik. Identity, youth, and crisis. New York: Norton, 1968. pp. 91-92, 96

Identification

Identification

Identification

Identity Formation

Who am I and what is my place in the world?

What does the ideal 24 year-old Mormon believe and how do they behave?

a. thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent
b. believes in God
c. believes in intervention via priesthood and via spirit
d. believes the bible and BOM are God's word
e. believes prophets since Joseph have a special connection to God (were/are likely visited by God) and they give god's teachings to us
f. believes in a divine historical narrative.
g. believes prayer can be and has been answered by God

Identity-Forming Events are Not Always Ideal

- ○ Reading the BOM and Bible

- ○ Spiritual experiences in church

- ○ Interactions with leaders

- ○ Serving a proselyting mission

- ○ Marriage in temple

- ○ Parents/youth leaders views of the church

Identity Disruption (Faith Crisis)

It causes one to seriously question one's:

- essential personality traits or character
- view of oneself
- perceived view of others
- meaning and purpose of existence

- "Mr. Mattsson said he felt that the foundation on which he had built his life began to crumble."

- "Sometimes, being wrong really does feel like being exiled: from our community, from our God, even-and perhaps most painfully-from our own best-known self.

GOODSTEIN, LAURIE. "Some Mormons Search the Web and Find Doubt." The New York Times 21 July 2013, New York ed., U.S. sec.: A1. Web. 21 Sept. 2015. <http://nyti.ms/1AKXReY>.

Schulz, Kathryn. "Chapter 2: Two Models of Wrongness." Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error. New York: Ecco, 2010

Talking Past Each Other Online

Why do we talk past each other?

i. Differences in original adult Identity Formation

ii. Differences in Identity Disruption/Faith Crisis

iii. Differences in Identity Reconstruction

It Is All About Belief

". . . recognizing our errors is such a strange experience: accustomed to disagreeing with other people, we suddenly find ourselves at odds with ourselves. Error, in that moment, is less an intellectual than an existential one—crisis not in what we know but who we are. We hear something of that identity crisis in the questions we ask ourselves in the aftermath of error: What was I thinking? How could I have done that?"

". . . [errors] **represent a moment of alienation, both from ourselves and from a previously convincing vision of the world**."

Schulz, Kathryn. "Chapter 1: Wrongology." Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error. New York: Ecco, 2010.
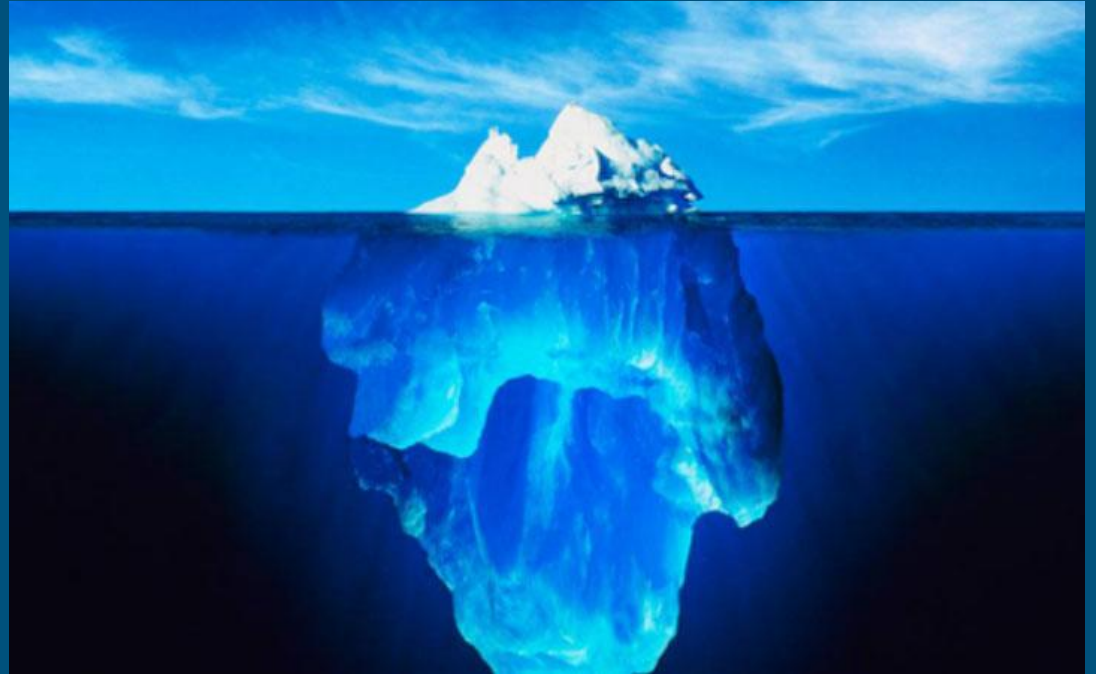
People who Disagree with Us

(1) ignorance, (2) idiocy or incompetence, (3) evil

"These tendencies are most troubling for the way they fuel animosity and conflict. But they are also troubling because they make it extremely difficult to accept our own fallibility. If we assume that people who are 'wrong' are ignorant, or idiotic, or evil—well, small wonder that we prefer not to confront the possibility of error in ourselves."

Schulz, Kathryn. "Chapter 5 Our minds, Part Two: Belief." Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error. New York: Ecco, 2010.

'I Know You Better than You Know Yourself!'

The Illusion of Asymmetric Insight

Pronin, E., Kruger, J., Savitsky, Kenneth., and Ross, L. **"You Don't Know Me, But I Know You: The Illusion of Asymmetric Insight."** Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 2001, 81.4, (2001) 639-56

Online Communication: Pleasures and Pains

- We are not limited to our local community
    - We can find people who think like us!
- Communication over faith/identity issues is hard
- Viewing a faith crisis as an identity crisis helps us:
    - see it as a normal part of adult development
    - understand the strong defenses and arguments