

THE USE OF REALITY TV BY MORMON FUNDAMENTALIST GROUPS. CHANGING
REPRESENTATIONS, MINDS AND LAWS.

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1. Introduction

Over more than a decade, reality television has become a major part of the television menu. Even though the goal of some reality television programs is to entertain, other shows broadcast on specialized channels have a descriptive and educational objective – while nevertheless maintaining a certain amusement value. This is notably the case of many reality television shows shown on the TLC and National Geographic channels, which present particular groups or social phenomenon in detail; for example: children’s beauty pageants (*Toddlers and Tiaras*, TLC, 2009-), the lives of professional tuna fishermen (*Wicked Tuna*, National Geographic, 2012-), Gypsy Americans’ day-to-day (*My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding*, TLC, 2012-), or that of “little people” (*The Little Couple*, TLC, 2009-). The practices of marginal or minority groups seem to captivate the audience, as shown by the multiplication of such programs over the past 10 years. Recently, an arm of reality television has been particularly interested in the experience of specific religious movements’ members, namely certain Baptist groups (*Preacher of L.A.*, Oxygen, 2013-; *Preachers’ Daughters*, Lifetime, 2013-), Amish (*Breaking Amish*, TLC, 2012- ; *Amish : Out of Order*, National Geographic, 2012- ; *Amish Mafia*, Discovery, 2012- ; and *Amish in the City*, UPN, 2004). We will focus herein on recent reality television presenting various polygamist in the Fundamentalist Mormon culture sphere: *Sister Wives* (TLC, 2010-), *Polygamy USA* (National Geographic, 2013) et *My Five Wives* (TLC, 2014).

We will see in detail how the families depicted in these three shows have benefitted from the opportunity offered by this communication medium in order to transmit a specific message to the audience: that they are ordinary and normal, and that their particular matrimonial practice is not in itself harmful to the persons involved. As a militant effort to decriminalize plural marriage, the families which choose to broadcast their day-to-day on television wish to mark a clear distinction between certain fundamentalist groups, which engage in criminal or morally doubtful behavior, and the mores of the majority of polygamists: one of the shows aims to demonstrate that the disturbing practices promoted by Warren Jeffs, the Prophet of a particular group (the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints – “FLDS”), are not agreed upon by all polygamous groups: most of them do not marry young girls, do not arrange marriages, attempt to blend into society harmoniously and subscribe to the modern context by which they are surrounded. We will see the way the legal hijinks of Jeffs, as well as other Fundamentalist leaders such as Tom Green, have tainted the public image in the media of all Fundamentalist Mormon communities, but that this tainted image has recently by somewhat offset by the increased openness of polygamists to media inquiries. We will also demonstrate how, through reality television but also using social media, some Fundamentalists have managed to normalise themselves in the general public’s eye, where polygamy is not no longer only immediately perceived as inherently dangerous for society or for the individuals who practice it: this influence has even, in the case of the Brown family from *Sister Wives*, gone so far as to incur a change in the State of Utah’s legal code. The data presented are drawn from detailed thematic analyses of many television series, as

well as from our own survey of social media usage by the families starring in these shows, and finally from our in-depth examination of the representation of polygamist Mormons on American television since the year 2000.

2. The Demonization of Polygamy in the American Media

2.1 Mormon Fundamentalism, American Society and the FLDS Church

The term “Fundamentalist Mormon” designates a religious group that branched out from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly referred to as the “Mormon Church” or the “LDS Church”), after the latter condemned the practice of polygamy. While the Prophet Joseph Smith and his successors had encouraged the members of the LDS Church to practice polygamy, President Wilford Woodruff received a Revelation in 1890 instructing him that this form of matrimony was thenceforth undesirable (Bushman and Bushman, 2000, p. 71-72). The groups which refused to return to monogamy therefore adopted the “Fundamentalist” qualifier to illustrate their loyalty to the doctrine of plural marriage. Today, authors estimate that approximately 38,000 to 100,000¹ Americans belong to polygamist Mormon groups, which are also found in Canada (mostly in the community of Bountiful, British Columbia) and Mexico (Bramham, 2008, p.379). The largest community adhering to the culture is the FLDS Church, which has a membership of 10,000, mainly in the United States (Texas, Utah and Arizona) and Canada (Bennion, 2012, p.27; Jacobson and Burton, 2011, p.xxi). Other well documented groups include the Apostolic United Brethren (“AUB”), with approximately 8,000 members, and the Kingston group with 3,500 members (Bennion, 2012, p.34,39).

Polygamy is generally illegal in countries where it is practiced; however, laws have starting to change in recent years, as we will see. The LDS Church vehemently seeks to distinguish its public image from that of Fundamentalist groups. In pursuing this, it has included specific sections in its official websites² so interested persons can clearly understand that the practice has been forbidden by the Mormon Church for over 100 years. However, LDS authorities, in an open offer to public scrutiny, have made continuous efforts to demystify current and historical customs, including polygamy and the wearing of special undergarments. These two topics have recently been addressed directly by the Church: the first time the LDS has publicly accepted that the Prophet and founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, practiced polygamy³. Nevertheless, they continue to fiercely oppose plural unions and the groups who practice it, by insisting on them not calling themselves Mormon, as per their condemnation by the “official” Mormon Church (which they take to be the LDS Church). North American Polygamists influenced by ancient Mormon doctrines

¹ Numbers vary considerably depending on the author, as access to statistical data regarding polygamist groups is very hard to obtain, as expected for a marginal and sometimes illegal lifestyle.

² For example, <http://www.mormon.org/faq/topic/polygamy>

³ <https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>

have therefore been largely rejected not only by mainstream American society but also since 1890 by the LDS Church, which long ago supported similar beliefs.

In our many years' observation of Mormon polygamists' situation at the media level, we have noticed an important shift. In the early 2000s, Fundamentalist groups drew very little attention, despite militant decriminalization groups such as Principle Voices making their opinion heard, namely with the collective publication *Voices in Harmony* in 2000. Only with the legal and judicial setbacks of certain polygamist groups was public and media attention directed towards this unusual practice, with plural union in the Mormon context taking the stage in the public sphere. One thinks notably of Tom Green, a polygamist accused and found guilty of fraud and bigamy, as well as taking a wife aged 13 years old (Bennion, 2012, p.4,203,219), but even more so of Warren Jeffs, whose attempted arrest and ensuing manhunt generated significant interest in the United States in the early 2000s.

2.2 The Case of the Prophet Warren Jeffs

Warren Steed Jeffs (1955-) succeeded his father Rulon Jeffs (1909-2022) as Prophet of the FLDS in 2002. His coming to power hardly attracted journalists' attention, despite its being accompanied by a tightening of mores in the community (increase in underage weddings, insistence on modesty rules, ejection of young men from the group to maintain a more propitious gender balance to favor plural marriage, higher occurrence of prophecies predicting the return of Christ, *et al.*) and further withdrawal from mainstream society, hence amplifying the group's autarkic tendency (Bennion, 2012, p.30-32, 146). It is in 2004, concurrently with Jeffs being associated with cases of rape and fraud and his subsequent flight from justice, that the FLDS – and by extension other polygamous groups and families – were projected into the spotlight of public debate (*Ibid.* p.32). As a result of the manhunt, his capture in 2005, and his trial and sentencing, dozens of talk-show episodes, documentaries, newspaper articles and “true crime” type novels hit print and airwaves, promoting a generally anti-FLDS and anti-polygamy agenda. This hubbub was taken up by the major television talk-shows, including *Oprah Winfrey*, *Dr. Phil*, *Dr. Drew*, *Anderson Cooper*⁴, etc. The tone of these shows' production during the period can be considered, from our observations, as clearly negative, condemning of the practice of plural marriage, and representing polygamy as an inherently abusive form of union. The persons appearing in the reports were mainly detractors of the practice, many of them ex-members of the FLDS Church who had published books telling their personal story of abuse when they were members the group and generalizing their experience to the whole of Fundamentalist Mormon culture: we here recall Elissa Wall, Flora Jessop, Carolyn Jessop, Debbie Palmer and many others. Little or no platform was offered to polygamists with a positive view of their lifestyle and wanting to share their view with the public.

⁴ Some examples of episodes: *Oprah Winfrey Show*, “Polygamy in America. Lisa Ling Reports” (October 29, 2007) and “Lisa Ling Investigates on Polygamy” (May 14, 2008), *Dr. Phil Show*, “Inside the Cult” (May 24, 2005), “Brainwashed Brides” (August 2, 2005), “Cult Confrontations” (September 21, 2006).

We use the moral panic model, initially elaborated by Stanley Cohen (2002) and expanded upon by many authors since, namely Goode and Ben-Yehuda in their excellent work *Moral Panics* (2009), in order to explain the way intense attention was suddenly thrown onto a previously ignored phenomenon, as well as how Fundamentalist Mormon culture was demonized following the reprehensible actions of some individuals associated with it. We therefore submit that from the hubbub around Warren Jeffs came forth a demonized figure, a “folk devil” as described by Cohen (2002) as the key character to a moral panic. According to Cohen (2002), a moral panic is an episode where a group or person becomes overrepresented, often in a stereotypical fashion, and inspires true feelings of public fear:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; and other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (p.1)

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) assign more importance to the “folk devil” icon, which they define as a type of scapegoat who, as the center of the moral panic, is a threat to society at large: “A folk devil is a ‘suitable enemy’, the agent responsible for the threatening or damaging behavior or condition. To actors caught in the coils of the moral panic, folk devils are the personification of evil” (p.27).

According to our analysis, Warren Jeffs would therefore act as the “diabolical Other,” and therefore assumes center stage of a moral panic around a form of marriage that is alternative, marginal and little known by the public; it is then perceived as a threat not only to people directly involved in the lifestyle but also to the values and mores of wider society. For Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009), moral panic involves a disproportion between facts and their media representation, the latter which can be both the spark and the platform of panics (p.90). The way Warren Jeffs’ situation was generalized to the entirety of polygamist groups, most notably through the testimony of past Fundamentalists now antagonistic to the practice, might, in our view, fulfill this disproportion criterion.

This interpretation can be linked to theories brought forth in media anthropology studies, such as Coman (2005). This author, who considers mass media to be a system that constructs reality in society through symbolic rationality, considers that modern myths are spread and established by such a system, and more often so in the context of a crisis (p.46, 52, 53). According to Coman, the mythification of figures or phenomena yields a system allowing the interpretation of current events, but also restructures the system with which a society represents itself (p.54). According to Lule (2005), events presented in the news often take shape as archetypical myths, archetypes which provide frames allowing one to understand social realities: “Archetypes are original frameworks. In terms of myth, they are patterns, images, motifs, and characters taken from and shaped by the shared experiences of human life, which have helped structure and shape stories across cultures and eras.” (p.102). In a similar fashion, Bouchard (2014) presents archetypes as structures shaping the collective identity, as would the keys on a keyboard (p.38). We therefore consider the media representation of the Warren Jeffs story to be a moral panic, depicted in the public arena as a myth, and the figure of this outlaw prophet as a “folk devil,” a figure who, acting as an archetype, reactivated a structure that was already in the collective identity, that of the “dangerous Other” representing the ultimate alterity. But the archetype of the malicious prophet presiding over a “cult” is far from new: as discussed by Mayer (2001) and Wright (2011), the “cult” label as assigned to polygamist groups carries a significant stigma and promotes stereotypes, to the point where it stigmatizes the groups it so labels. This identification of minority religious communities as cults by the media and antagonistic individuals is a poignant example of the social construction of reality that can be effected in and by the media, as it is accepted that media does more than only transmit information: media connotes and interprets information according to thought schemas that are often subordinated to the moral criteria of the majority (Leblanc, 2001; Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p.33; Hall et al., 1978, p.240).

The moral panic surrounding polygamy in the early 2000s therefore tainted the way the Fundamentalist Mormon phenomenon was introduced to the public – i.e., very negatively – and led to an event that we consider to be the climax of the panic: the raid in April 3, 2008 on the FLDS community of *Yearning for Zion* in Eldorado, Texas. This robust action by the Texas State authorities, implemented in a few days in reaction to distress calls made to a women’s help line – the calls turned out to be fraudulent – resulted in the forced displacement of over 400 children from their families’ homes and criminal trials of many men because of the young age of their spouses (Wright and Richardson, 2011, p.2). But despite this event being initially perceived as a victory of American social norms over a noxious group, it also resulted – rather surprisingly – in a change in the representation of Mormon Fundamentalism in the public arena.

2.3 The Subsequent Change

In reaction to the 2008 raid, many Mormons involved in polygamous unions, such as the residents of the *Yearning for Zion* ranch themselves, decided to make themselves available to the media: the

FLDS namely opened their doors to the famous Oprah Winfrey (“Inside a Polygamist Compound,” March 5, 2009; “Oprah Goes Inside the Yearning for Zion Polygamist Ranch,” March 30, 2009) in order to demonstrate that the negative image peddled by their detractors who presented their lifestyle as abusive, did not accurately depict the reality of all polygamists. Many families that were members of various groups, despite the risks of potential lawsuits, participated in news reports, talk show interviews and reality television shows so they could demystify their customs and practices, hence introducing some balance in the representation of Fundamentalism: from then on, the audience was exposed to different messages – including from inside the communities – regarding this marginal practice. We will now have a look more particularly on the manner in which, through reality television series, some groups and families – by benefiting from the interest already garnered for their lifestyle – managed to take control of their image in the media and change the perception of the public at large.

3. The Arrival of Reality Television Series and the Process of Normalization

3.1 Reality Television

Reality television is a genre that became widespread, in its actual form, around the late 1990s and early 2000s (Hill, 2005, p.2). An effective way of describing the genre positions it as an explosive mix of information and documentary on one hand, and entertainment and drama on the other (*Ibid.*) Reality television, very popular as demonstrated by the high viewer ratings programs enjoy, also offer producers a clear advantage: very low production costs relative to fiction programs, their competition for similar time slots (*Ibid.*, p.6). Further, what gets shown on the screen captivates audiences for a different reason than what attracts fiction audiences: the subject matter is presented as real, as a true retelling of what a featured person experiences. While producers retain the power to choose what to show and how to direct a show’s action, the line between social reality and media reality can be hard to distinguish, especially for series where participants’ every move and uttering is recorded⁵ (Kavka, 2012, p.77). The series we study herein – *Sister Wives*, *Polygamy USA* and *My Five Wives* – each present the everyday lives of one or more Fundamentalist Mormon families from different groups. We can categorize these productions as “Docu-soaps” (Hill, 2005, p.47), a sub-category of shows which presents the daily lives of a group of people (hence the “docu” component), but where the episodes are generally directed in a similar manner as the “soap operas” audiences are used to watching: each one presents a specific, well-defined plot or intrigue, which is resolved within 30 to 60 minutes and sets the stage for the following week’s story. Music and other directing techniques usually included in the creative process affect the manner with which the presented events are understood by the audience.

Sister Wives, *Polygamy USA* and *My Five Wives* are three of these docu-soaps, each with a 60-minute run time (approximately 42 minutes with advertisements removed). They are broadcast on two channels specializing in the documentary and educational reality television genres: TLC

⁵ For example on competition-style productions like *Big Brother* (CBS).

(formerly known as The Learning Channel) and National Geographic, a spinoff of the famous magazine of the same name. TLC reaches 100 million US households (86%⁶) and National Geographic makes its way into 74% of households (almost 85 million⁷).

3.2 *Sister Wives*, *Polygamy USA* and *My Five Wives*: a continuum from the traditional to the modern

While at first glance these series about Mormon Fundamentalism may appear to have similar aims, that of opening the public eye while promoting the struggle to decriminalize plural marriage, a more attentive analysis highlights many differences between them.

Polygamy USA, broadcast for one season in 2013 on National Geographic, presents not just one family but three (the Thompsons, the Crawleys and the Hammons), as well as a young male bachelor (Hyrum Burton), in an overview of the various social dynamics of the Centennial Park community located in Utah, which separated from the FLDS Church in the 1980s (Jacobson and Burton, 2011, p.xxi). This series is directed from more of a documentary standpoint than classic docu-soaps: the use of a narrator along with the inclusion of “video diaries”, where characters speak directly to the camera in order to describe aspects of their lifestyle (but here, not to replace the episodes’ narration, which remains audible but off-screen). As elsewhere, the characters clearly describe a desire to transparently show us their lifestyle in order to help change mentalities around polygamy by promoting the agenda of activists fighting for the decriminalization of plural marriage. However, *Polygamy USA*’s protagonists are more reserved than those we will see in *Sister Wives*: scenes are shot in households only punctually, and no attempt is made to document the entirety of families’ daily lives. Moreover, some participants asked that their names be changed in order to maintain their anonymity, which is not the case for the other two shows. The documented events are expressly selected according to their informational value as relates to community mores: community and family activities are shown while explaining, often via the narrator, their reach, inner workings and their importance to the group’s faith. Contrary to the other series, religion is a major topic in *Polygamy USA*. While *Sister Wives* and *My Five Wives* barely address religion, the Centennial Park community opens the doors to its Church and describes many theological justifications supporting its practices; it further presents its ecclesiastical organization and the workings of its “placement” marriages. “Placement” marriages, the sole form of marriage the group recommends, occurs when a girl or woman receives a revelation from God commanding here to wed a man, be he a bachelor or already married to one or many wives. In contrast, the Browns (*Sister Wives*) and the Williamses (*My Five Wives*) favor pre-marital courtship, where two individuals (a woman and a male bachelor, or a woman and a married man) see each other platonically before deciding to get engaged and then married. However, the latter two families explain that they have no preference for the spousal future of their children, who they will be

⁶ Seidman (August 23, 2013)

⁷ *Ibid.*

allowed to choose the union parameters that they themselves prefer. This is not the case in Centennial Park: while each is free to choose, it is seen as preferable to remain within the community and live by its religious and social rules. Furthermore, in order to have as little involvement as possible with the government, the group depicted in *Polygamy USA* attempts to live as autarkically as it can and to create its own norms, often at odds with those of the rest of American society: strict modesty in garments worn (women wear only skirts that reach their ankles as well as shirts and blouses that reach their wrists and clavicles), respect for the institution of patriarchal community leadership, acceptance of the doctrine of “placement” marriage, etc.

Sister Wives, the first reality television program to show the daily lives of Fundamentalist Mormon families, started its run in 2010 on TLC and has been shown for 5 seasons already. It focuses on the life of Kody Brown and his four wives, Meri, Jenelle, Christine and Robyn, along with their 17 children. The first few episodes of the inaugural season presented not only the daily lives of the protagonists, but also their common decision to add to the family a new wife, Robyn, and her three children from a prior union. The show’s production is typical of a docu-soap: unfiltered scenes of their lives, with no mention of active camera work, are juxtaposed with “couch interviews” and “video diaries” showing the adults and sometimes their children talking directly to the camera in order to clarify or set up the episode’s narrative. The Browns are very open to sharing their experience and the workings of their lifestyle with the audience, and the show has been dubbed “the real *Big Love*⁸” from the very first television commercials promoting the series. While the Browns are ready to expose their experiences and details of their lifestyle to anyone curious enough to watch the show, the awareness that what is broadcast is part of an edited television program presenting only part of the full reality is clearly present. The characters are depicted as aware of the presence of cameras and film crews; this mediation is never glossed over. The Browns are members of the AUB Fundamentalist group – but their affiliation is not clearly stated in the series (Bennion, 2012, p.3). This rather moderate group is an example of accommodation between what is traditional and what is modern in polygamist culture: while individuals are close to their faith and might reside in neighborhoods populated only by members of their community, they nevertheless integrate with the rest of society in the same way as monogamous families. The Browns tend to respect religious guidelines on modesty with women covering themselves from wrist to ankle and avoiding revealing necklines. However, these rules do not extend to children, who dress like other young people, and religious convictions are not imposed upon them: they are free to choose their own religion and accompanying mores. On a perhaps obvious note, employers and friends of AUB members did not know of their families’ matrimonial status prior to the series airing. When the first episodes of *Sister Wives* went on air, not only did Kody’s first wife Meri lose her job, but the Browns were also investigated by the police in Lehi, Utah, where they resided at the time: this pushed them to leave the state because of the risk of imprisonment further to the illegality of the conjugal relationship. This threat did not however keep them from pursuing their

⁸ *Big Love* (HBO 2006-2011) is a fiction drama depicting the life of the polygamous Henrickson family.

mission of informing the public about the modalities of their practice: 4 seasons of the show were to follow.

My Five Wives, the most recent of the three shows studied herein, has so far been broadcast for 2 seasons in Spring and Fall 2014⁹. It presents the daily lives of Brady Williams, his wives (Paulie, Robyn, Rosemary, Nonie and Rhonda) and their 24 kids, who live in a polygamist group in northern Utah. The Williams family is clearly the most progressive of the families under examination: not only do its members not respect the rules of modesty or those related to religious affiliation, but they have distanced themselves from what they call “the religion:” they have broken direct ties with the Fundamentalist Church they attended, despite the fact that they continue to live in a neighborhood only occupied by members of that same Church. While the name of the Church is not revealed in the series, it is largely understood by specialists that the Williamses used to be part of AUB, and therefore shared the same faith as the Browns. They continue to live in strong spirituality and do not deny the beliefs and practices of their prior faith, but they incorporate ideas from others, such as Buddhism, in what is a clear example of “bricolage” (McCombs, 2013). Their moral codes are very progressive – they support birth control, do not follow any particular code of modesty¹⁰, are opposed to arranged marriage, and refuse to impose a religion or lifestyle upon their children, just as they discuss sexuality much more openly than in the other series. Their openness is such that cameras are even present in each of the wives’ bedrooms. Rest assured, the show remains appropriate for all ages: the cameras seek to capture the intimacy of Brady’s relationship with each of his wives while avoiding the distortions the presence of a production team can bring to the authenticity of discussions. As regards directing, we have noticed that *My Five Wives* is the series where minimizing the filter between audience and characters is most important: production effects are restrained, and the characters do not address the camera, neither do they visibly act as if they are aware of its presence (except in “video diary” segments where each addresses the audience to comment or narrate depicted events). We hence note the intense desire for the Williams family to be completely transparent, by offering us their best moments as well as their personal disagreements in the rawest possible form.

These descriptions allow us to place these series on a continuum: it seems that the *Polygamy USA* families, whose lifestyles and values remain rather traditional, are more reluctant to open themselves to public scrutiny. Despite allowing cameras into their intimacy and explaining that they wish to do so in order to demystify the practice of plural marriage, the incursions are limited to select moments of their lives and the use of a narrator impresses more distance than is felt in the two other series. Next on the continuum is *Sister Wives*. The values and mores of the Brown family are more liberal than those of most of the inhabitants of Centennial Park (where *Polygamy USA* takes place), but the former remain very attached to a religious group and a body of beliefs that

⁹ The pilot for the series aired in 2013.

¹⁰ This was a precept they followed previously, as can be seen from many pictures shown during episodes where the Williams discuss their prior religious involvement.

guide their choices and decisions. Its median position is also reflected in the show’s directing style: as we saw earlier, the characters admit the camera’s daily presence and thus do not attempt to pretend that the show is a raw transmission of their reality. Further, the camera work is always done by a television production crew, and they are not invited into the intimacy of the couples’ bedrooms as they get ready for bed. Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, we find the Williams family and *My Five Wives*, with their fully assumed progressive values and religious flexibility, completely detached from the constraints of the institution to which they were previously attached. We therefore link the Williams family’s liberal bias with the raw portrayal of their everyday lives in the series, acting as if the cameras were not there and letting them in for their most intimate moments. It therefore seems that as a family’s lifestyle and values migrate to the more liberal and progressive side of the social and political spectrum, they appear readier to open themselves to scrutiny, feeling no great shame about topics that might elsewhere be more sensitive. But while the Browns and the Williamses tend to put more emphasis on points they have in common with the rest of society, the inhabitants of Centennial Park choose not to hide their strong religious affiliation, which they make clearly known as central to their lives. The Browns and the Williamses, whose religion (whatever it might be) is also an important to their lives, do not go down that path, preferring to discuss very little of their beliefs and more specific practices. This last observation adds a nuance to the idea the protagonists of *Polygamy USA* are less open: they simply choose a different type of openness than that shown on *Sister Wives* and *My Five Wives*, and attempt to reaffirm their religious specificity while showing it to the audience in order to demystify it.

To us, this impression is compatible with the general trend found within the greater Fundamentalist Mormon culture, which is often perceived as comprising two main sub-trends between which groups can be located. On one side are the communities with more traditional and conservative mores and values, which often live in a more withdrawn manner and, as much as possible, autarkically; on the other side are the liberal groups and the independent families with liberal values that closely resemble those of surrounding American society. The people located on the more liberal side of the continuum are generally integrated into the modern world, often to the point that they become difficult to distinguish from their monogamous neighbors. But even if the protagonists of *Polygamy USA* are more conservative in their approach to the reality television format and more anchored in a religious rationale, they openly seek to achieve the same goals as those described by the characters of the other series: they aim to show the audience that despite certain differences, they are completely ordinary, normal, respectful and non-violent people, to which each and every one of us can identify. The three series therefore push a more or less explicit agenda of decriminalization of plural unions, and seek to portray that polygamous marriages are generally in no way abusive and are freely entered into by consenting adults who are not compelled to do so against their will.

Tradition -----Modernity
 FLDS-----*Polygamy USA*-----*Sister Wives*-----*My Five Wives*

But the representation of pluralism within Fundamentalist Mormon culture by the three series' featured families, which nevertheless share a common message, is also of interest. One of the points often made by pro-polygamy militants is that of diversity present within the various groups, and while the mores of different Churches differ, a very wide majority of communities do not encourage practices that would be seen as abusive by the standards of surrounding society: they often insist on the fact that the variability within polygamist culture is as great as with monogamists, and that the instances of abuse emerge from the individual actions of twisted and deviant persons and not from these persons' practice of plural marriage (Brown, 2012; Darger, 2011). In underlining the existence of cultural diversity, polygamists certainly seek to distance themselves from the diabolized image of the FLDS prophet Warren Jeffs: they reaffirm that they are not like him and that not all Fundamentalists should be punished or penalized in their rights and liberties because of the transgressions of a few deranged person.

4. Thoughts and Analyses: The Creation of Familiarity and the Struggle for a Place in the Public Eye.

The various attempts made to normalize the image of Mormon Fundamentalism through reality television seem to have borne results, namely when we consider the conflict between Kody Brown (and his family) and the State of Utah. While the family was forced into exile in Nevada though fear of having some of its members imprisoned, nothing could then allow us to believe that the judiciary might eventually act in favor of polygamists. This is however what happened at the end of 2013 when Judge Clark Waddoups ruled that the interdiction of plural marriage went against the American constitution – specifically its First Amendment, protecting religious freedom – and that so long as families did not demand a marriage license from the State, they should not be brought to justice (Schwartz, 2013)¹¹.

Even before this major legal decision, a real change in the representation of families practicing polygamy in the United States occurred, mainly through the success of reality television. As we have seen, a platform is now offered to the internal discourse of Fundamentalist communities, whereas previously the public mostly had access to an external point of view and most people considered polygamy an aberration. We use notions taken from reception theory, more specifically the work of Hoffner and Cantor (1991), in order to rationalize the phenomenon. It seems that after a period we find appropriate to call “moral panic,” centered Warren Jeffs and other publicized cases revolving around problems experienced within Fundamentalist groups, we are now in a moment where the representation is more balanced (i.e. it presents positive and negative points of view about the practice), but perhaps leaning even more towards an attitude of bemused curiosity.

¹¹ Persons entering into plural unions generally do not seek in any way a marriage certificate, except for wedding the first wife.

According to Hoffner and Cantor (1991), by closely following the hijinks characters on the screen, the audience can come to feel a certain familiarity with them: this process would be similar to that of making a new friend in everyday life (p.63). Moreover, many of the characteristics assigned to the protagonists of a television series or a film influence the way they are perceived: e.g. their dress, their speech, their general physical appearance or the attraction or revulsion they instigate in the spectator (*Ibid.* p.63, 66, 68, 84). Hoffner and Cantor (1991) also posit that the viewer will tend to identify with characters in which he recognizes himself, and thus to see the various events occurring in the series from their point of view (p.84-85). Empathy for the heroes portrayed tends to develop, and especially, when the audience is exposed to a series over a longer term, the feeling of attachment can be carried along outside of the viewing period (*Ibid* p.88-90).

We thereby posit that this familiarization theory explains the change in polygamists' representation: through repeat exposure to various circumstances of polygamists appearing happy, ordinary, sharing the values of the majority, and sometimes even fashionable despite the modesty constraints of some, the audience familiarized itself with a lifestyle that was until then completely unknown or (more often) presented as noxious for society as a whole. The analysis of Bennion (2012) also tends towards these kinds of conclusions in describing the manner in which Mormon polygamy is now part and parcel of popular culture, namely because of *Sister Wives* (the only reality television show on air during the writing of this work) and the fiction series *Big Love* (HBO, 2006-2011) (p.3). It is by introducing consumers of television programs to a new image presenting polygamists as progressive and ordinary that the stigma associated to the practice has been diminished in the public image, in the same way the negativity surrounding other marginal matrimonial arrangements was able to be reduced with the introduction of programs discussing them openly:

Just as the *Brady Bunch* introduced the concept of divorce and the blended family in the 1970s and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* of 2000 created more acceptance for gay professionals at the turn of the twenty-first century, the new polygamy shows, HBO's television drama *Big Love* and TLC's reality program *Sister Wives*, paved the way for a new narrative about fundamentalist Mormonism (p.163).

It is also interesting to note that the opening sequence and commercials promoting *My Fives Wives* imitate the promotional spots of the *Brady Bunch* series, with a certain intent towards connecting the dynamics of the two families, but also by playing on the immense public success of the latter show, and even including a play on words with Brady, the first name of the husband in the Williams family. Hence *Big Love*, *Sister Wives*, (and now *Polygamy USA* and *My Fives Wives*) were able to contribute, according to Bennion (2012) to making a lifestyle previously seen as exotic – or even dangerous (p.165) – more familiar. The groups practicing plural unions are no longer labelled “cult”

by default, and do not automatically suffer from the stigmatization and stereotypes associated with this categorization¹².

According to our observations, this dedramatization of the practice of polygamy, enabled by the creation of a certain familiarity towards this particular type of union, really exploded with the attention being given to various reality television shows, but began with *Big Love*, before *Sister Wives* ever aired. This popular series, which also received many nominations, awards and distinctions¹³, presents the lives of the polygamist Henrickson family (husband Bill, his three wives Barb, Margene and Nicki, and their 8 children), which resides independently in a suburb of Salt Lake City, Utah. As the first series of any genre to discuss plural unions, *Big Love* has certainly helped demystify the practice and convince the public of the immense diversity of beliefs and practices which make up larger Fundamentalist Mormon culture, namely by opposing the Henricksons (which can be compared to *Sister Wives*' Brown family) to a very conservative group with questionable practices, largely inspired by the FLDS Church at the time Warren and Rulon Jeffs were in charge (Austin, 2010, p.50). As in the reality television shows described previously, the familiarity with the Henricksons is established by contrast: the protagonist groups are generally defined by their opposition to the more conservative groups from which they seek to distance themselves. For example, the protagonists in *Polygamy USA* and *Sister Wives* insist that their not maintaining any relationship with the FLDS Church, and their condemnation of some of their values and practices, be made very clear. In contrast, the Williamses in *My Fives Wives* attempt to draw a clear line between their newfound social and religious freedom and their past within an organized Fundamentalist group presented as rigid and restrictive when compared to their new lifestyle (which happens to be within the same group as the Browns in *Sister Wives*).

However, certain groups (particularly the FLDS Church, Tom Green's group, the Le Baron group and the Kingston community) remain stigmatized in the media, according to what might be qualified as the "consensus." The image of these groups is especially hard to change, not only because their members hold customs that differ in many points with those of the majority, but also because they have little or no interest in integrating wider society nor participating in the public debate, unless they are forced to do so. By normalizing themselves in comparison with these groups, which are located at the more conservative extremity of the Fundamentalist Mormon culture spectrum, the other groups, and principally pro-polygamy media activists and families which choose to open their doors to television cameras, participate somehow in maintaining a negative image of the more marginal groups. By also using many promotion techniques, including heavy use of social media like Twitter and Facebook, the Brown and Williams families seek to communicate directly with the public in order to answer questions or receive comments on their

¹² According to Mayer (2001) and Wright (2011), the "cult" label is related to a pejorative view of the groups to which it is attached. The term "cult" inherently implies a negative view of the persons concerned as harmful, holding outlandish beliefs and dangerous.

¹³ Notably, Emmy Awards, Golden Globes and Satellite Awards.

series, sometimes during the show's broadcast with what is generally called "live tweeting." The Browns also use Facebook and Twitter to promote their online jewelry and clothing business (*My Sisterwife's Closet*), the evolution of which is documented on television. The ease with which the public can communicate directly with polygamist families and enter ever deeper into their daily lives, with access to all the photos and information they choose to share on social networks, should not be disregarded in the formation of attachment between the persons shown and the series audience. In making themselves so accessible and opening themselves so much, certain polygamists are thus gradually approaching the common We of ambient society, by normalizing in the public eye and identifying clearly what they are not: the FLDS Church, which remains the absolute Other, mysterious and secretive.

5. Conclusion

All this brings us back to all the potential mass media has for various social groups: by appropriating mainstream media formulas and accepting to follow their norms, activists can effectively succeed in making their voice heard in an exceptional fashion and access an audience that was previously unattainable. By appropriating, with different approaches, the versatile medium which is reality television, many Fundamentalist Mormon families were able to introduce to a receptive audience the various realities of American polygamists, while emphasizing their normal and commonplace character, as well as the elements differentiating them from controversial groups like the FLDS Church. By getting even closer to viewers through the use of social media like Twitter and Facebook, we consider that these standard bearers of Fundamentalist Mormon culture have truly succeeded in partly normalizing their image and inducing into the collective image the idea of variability within the practice of polygamy. They also have had some success in reducing the moral panic that took place a few years earlier, but not in completely eliminating it, by using the demonized image of Warren Jeffs and the FLDS Church to position themselves as "the good polygamists." This distinction between "good" and "bad" polygamists had already been exploited by *Big Love*, and was therefore somewhat integrated into the popular culture matrix since 2006. With the raid in 2008 and the subsequent openness of certain Fundamentalist groups, we see *Big Love* as the starting point change in the representation described.

It is nevertheless important to underline that the image of Fundamentalists in the American public and media spheres has not become uniform in any way: while the recent trend towards bemused curiosity seems rather dominant, productions with an implicit or explicit anti-polygamist stance are still aired today. This is namely the case with two reality television series recently aired on TLC: *Escaping the Prophet* (2013) and *Breaking the Faith* (2013). Produced in collaboration with ex-FLDS members Flora Jessop and Carolyn Jessop, respectively, these series present the experience of young FLDS members "saved" from their groups by deprogramming experts, with the goal of integrating them into ambient American society, by teaching them the latter's social norms and values and helping them cut all ties to their original environment, presented as

extremely dangerous and abusive. We could deduce that having seen the success pro-polygamy reality television, groups opposed to the practice of plural marriage chose the same means of broadcasting their message at large. However, the non-renewal of these shows after their first seasons, despite Flora Jessop's campaign to convince TLC to produce a second series of *Escaping the Prophet*, allows us to believe that this attempt on the part of anti-polygamist militants was a failure. Might this be because the audience is now attached to the normal and ordinary Fundamentalists shown on television for many years now? This remains to be determined, but our observations lead us to give this some further thought.

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