Mediated Constructions and Audience Responses to Polygamist Controversies

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Heather M. Stassen
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This dissertation titled
Mediated Constructions and Audience Responses to Polygamist Controversies

by
HEATHER M. STASSEN

has been approved for
the School of Communication Studies
and the Scripps College of Communication by

______________________________
Roger C. Aden
Professor of Communication Studies

______________________________
Gregory J. Shepherd
Dean, Scripps College of Communication
ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores 14 publics that emerged throughout three polygamist controversies from 2006 through 2008. The first two chapters seek to establish a framework through which each controversy is explored. Specifically, warfare, pathogen stress, male absenteeism, and labor distribution are identified as plausible and possible rationales for the practice of polygamy. Subsequently, the history and contemporary role of polygamy in the United States is traced back to Native American culture and the contemporary practice of polygamy within the United States to members of the Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints (FLDS). Additionally, key terms such as controversy, abductive criticism, textual fragments, and publics are defined and situated within the literature.

The three analysis chapters reveal 14 publics that emerged throughout the polygamist controversies. An exploration of responses to the premiere of HBO’s fictional drama about polygamy, *Big Love*, reveals six publics. These six publics include members of the Mormon Church, those engaged in polyamorous relationships, polygamists, gay marriage opponents, those who believe polygamy has inherently bad consequences, and those who believe that polygamy itself is a neutral practice. An examination into the Yearning for Zion raid reveals four publics. Included among those publics are those who attempt to shift attention away from the controversy, those who blame the raid on Child Protective Services (CPS), those who blame the raid on the FLDS, and those who
criticize newspaper coverage of the raid. The final analysis chapter delves into audience responses of photographs taken of former FLDS leader, Warren Jeffs, kissing underage girls. In this analysis, four publics emerge including those who are repulsed by the photographs, those who believe the photographs are evidence of the raid’s necessity, those who are opposed to the FLDS, and those who believe that the photographs should not be understood as evidence of abuse. The final chapter draws connections across the analysis chapter in terms of implications for the larger polygamy controversy, the difficulty of using textual fragments, and limitations in existing theory. A writing story concludes the dissertation.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Roger C. Aden

Professor of Communication Studies
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CHAPTER 1: DISSERTATION RATIONALE & POLYGAMY OVERVIEW

As a fan of the television show *The Sopranos*, I was intrigued about *Big Love*, another HBO drama about a family with a twist. The show depicts the fictional Henrickson family living in picture-perfect suburban Utah. Bill Henrickson, the patriarch of the family, attempts to navigate challenges unique to his own marital situation – he has three wives and, at the start of the first season in 2006, seven children. However, *Big Love* was just the starting point for a rash of controversies regarding polygamy in the United States. As *Big Love* was winding down its first season, the manhunt for Warren Jeffs, leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints (FLDS), was undertaken. Jeffs’ arrest, trial, and conviction were followed by a raid on a polygamist compound in Texas during which pictures of Jeffs kissing underage girls were released to the media. My interest in *Big Love*, along with the nearly unavoidable news coverage of Jeffs’ arrest and the Texas raid, piqued my interest into the subject of polygamy. Knowing very little about the topic, I began to investigate the issue.

Surprisingly, very little information was available about the practice of polygamy in academic book form. The information that I found primarily addressed either anthropological accounts of the practice outside of the United States or “escape narratives” (stories of women who fled from polygamist marriages in the United States). In addition, electronic searches provided very little information about the practice of polygamy in the United States. Although polygamy is predominantly practiced in the Middle East and Africa, information about the practice in the United States is minimal. Within academia, discussion of polygamy has been predominantly relegated to cultural
anthropology (e.g., Bruner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1994; Mahmood, 2001; Price, 1995; Zeitzen, 2008), but often within those ethnographic studies polygamy is treated as an embedded component of larger cultural phenomena. The limited amount of general information and academic research regarding polygamy, not to mention the lack of research addressing polygamist representations in the media, is only a small fraction of the rationale behind my desire to explore polygamy in this dissertation.

Research Questions

While the coverage of the recent polygamist controversies served as the catalyst for my own research into the subject, I found that audience responses to coverage were varied among and between the three events I identified in the opening paragraph. This led me to several overarching research questions that will guide this dissertation.

RQ1: In what ways does coverage invite multiple publics?

RQ2: In what ways do publics respond to the representations of polygamists constructed through coverage of polygamist controversies?

RQ3: In what ways do the construction of representations and audience responses help to explore, illustrate, and expand the notion of controversy?

Polygamy is an alluring topic because my own research interests are at the intersection of rhetoric, marginal public culture phenomena, and women’s issues. Understanding the ways in which media depict polygamists and in which audiences respond to those representations, addresses fundamental issues concerning marriage, women’s rights, the sexualized nature of objectification through photography, and the construction of “other.” Therefore, I argue, in terms of a rationale, that academia’s neglect of the topic is ultimately secondary to the rich symbolic issues articulated through
the representation of polygamists. I restrict my analysis of polygamist depictions specifically to those images and rhetorics concerning polygamists associated with the FLDS or in the case of *Big Love*, implied and understood by audience members to be associated with the FLDS.¹ The emphasis of this research on polygamy within FLDS is due to the critique of FLDS in recent years. However, polygamy within the FLDS is just one of many strands of polygamy practiced across the globe.

Definitions and Cultural Understandings of Polygamy

Polygamy, an overarching term referencing both polygyny and polyandry, is frequently used in the vernacular to solely reference the practice in which one man simultaneously has more than one wife, as is the case with polygamists within the FLDS. Polygyny, the practice of having more than one wife, and/or polyandry, the practice of having more than one husband, has been practiced at nearly every corner of the world.² Polygyny is commonly nonsororal (the wives are not sisters), although some instances of sororal polygyny (in which the wives are biological sisters) have been recorded in some parts of the world including Indonesia and Ghana (Ember, Ember, & Low, 2007; Zeitzen, 2008). Moreover, sororal polygamy is most commonly found among polygamists in matrilineal kinship systems (Zeitzen, 2008).

Polygamy, in its vernacular understanding, is a fairly common practice around the world—and has been for quite some time. In fact, Stollenwerk (2008) argues, “although it may be true that the percentage of men who have more than one wife is small, still it has been estimated that polygamous societies are about four times more numerous than monogamous ones” (p. 75; see also Kraft, 1996). Both the Old Testament and the Koran discuss instances of polygyny in ancient times. Moreover, ethnographic records reveal
that the “majority of the world’s societies . . . allowed a man to be married to more than one woman at the same time” (Ember et al., 2007). In 2007, Ember et al. explored and evaluated theoretical explanations behind polygyny. They found that two previously negated theories, the male urge to “collect females” and the postpartum sexual taboo, should continue to be rejected. However, they noted that two other factors, pathogen stress and high male mortality during war, help to explain the existence of polygyny. In particular, they asserted that pathogen stress, particularly in the form of malaria and leprosy, led to women selecting men who had one or more wives already rather than disabled or diseased men. Furthermore, male mortality during warfare resulted in a population consisting of more females than males. While these are two contributing factors, the authors note that additional factors such as the integration of the plow may have created an economic exigency for polygyny. For instance, the introduction of new technology reduced the time it would take males in a society to harvest crops and hunt for food. However, a woman would not be able to produce food and goods from crops and animals at the pace with which her husband could harvest or hunt. Therefore, men needed more than one wife to produce foods and goods from the crops and animals (this is speculatively the case with the American Great Plain Indians, particularly with the introduction of the horse) (Wishart, 2004).

The explanations behind the existence of polygamy point to the practicality of the practice. As Coontz (2005) argues, marriage, although it has evolved, was initially designed as an institution to enable the family to function as a labor force. Polygamy reflects the foundations of marriage because the choice of spouse in polygamist marriages is predominantly one of practicality, not love. Accordingly, the decline of polygamist
cultures could perhaps be explained by the increase in medicine used to reduce pathogen stress and changes in warfare.

Polygamy remains most prevalent among individuals in Sub-Saharan Africa, yet research does not address polygamists’ perspectives in the region. This lack of scholarship reinforces the western conception that polygamy is a developing world problem. Moreover, in developed societies the practice of polygamy has become taboo and associated most prominently with fundamentalist strands of Islam and Mormonism (Ember et al., 2007). In particular, the practice of polygamy within the United States is primarily associated with Mormonism. However, Mormons were not the first Americans to engage in polygamy; polygamy was observed in Native American culture including sororal polygyny among Plains Indians (Wishart, 2004).

So while polygamy is discussed in relation to fundamentalist Mormonism, the roots of polygamy in the United States were planted prior to European colonization. The Great Plains was not only home to Native American cultures most prone to polygamy, but also served as a safe-haven for those who left the Mormon Church after polygamy was officially denounced by church officials in 1890 (Bluementhal, 2008b). The Mormon Church chastised polygamy only after the United States Congress passed anti-polygamy legislation in 1887 and seized the church’s property (Merriman, 2007).3 Those who still believed in the polygamy principle after the church’s denunciation fled west to Utah (and in some cases north to Alberta, Canada) to avoid persecution by the church and prosecution by authorities (Thompson, 2004).

While today the FLDS articulates a religious calling for polygamy, other cultures justify the practice based on historic practice and economic need. Moreover, in some
instances the practice is privileged over religious beliefs. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly among the Kaguru, some women report favoring polygamy over monogamy because men who have more than one wife tend to be wealthier and because domestic labor is shared (Meekers & Franklin, 1995). Although the Kaguru have adopted Christian values and polygamy is illegal in Tanzania, polygamy remained prevalent as recently as 1995; Meekers and Franklin (1995) noted that 22.5 percent of Kaguru women were in polygamous relationships. The adoption of polygamy in opposition to religious beliefs, in juxtaposition to the religious calling for polygamy within FLDS, reveals that rationales for practicing polygamy vary across cultures.

Polygamy in the United States

Polygamy, as this brief overview suggests, is evaluated and justified on the basis of legal, moral, and/or pragmatic foundations. Unfortunately, most of these evaluations and justifications are reported from the male perspective. Reporting of polygamist women’s thoughts and beliefs is nearly non existent in the U.S., with the exception of a few ethnographic texts and documentaries (e.g., Meekers & Franklin, 1995; Ware, 1979; Wittrup, 1990). Although few texts incorporate the voices of polygamist women, several have discussed the consequences of polygamy on women’s rights, mental health, and self-esteem (e.g., Al-Krenawi, 1999, 2001; Chaleby, 1985). For instance, a 2008 text addresses the most prominent arguments and perspectives concerning polygamy within the United States and Canada including a discussion of women’s health and safety in polygamist marriages. In Lankford’s edited text (2008), part of the “At Issue” series on contemporary controversies, individual authors on opposing sides of issues surrounding polygamy discuss the legality of polygamy, the role of polygamy in restricting freedom
of choice, the ability of jealousy to be overlooked in polygamist marriages, and the slippery-slope of legalization of polygamy to the legalization of gay marriage. The text offers perspectives on the role of polygamy and women’s rights, the idea that serial monogamy and promiscuity should be considered polygamist practices, and the relationship between democracy and polygamy. Overall, the text offers a myriad of perspectives surrounding polygamy from those with expertise in the subject area. While one could argue that these perspectives fail to incorporate voices from those actually engaged in polygamist marriages, the fact remains that practicing polygamists rarely speak out due to fear of prosecution. Perhaps because of a lack of polygamist voices in the media, polygamy within the United States has often remained under the public radar and, prior to the recent controversies centered on polygamy, had not been subject to scrutiny by those unfamiliar with the practice.

Those who practice polygamy, especially within the United States, do so in closed communities ranging from compounds to gated suburban neighborhoods (Adams, 2007; “Polygamy in America,” 2007). Those unfamiliar with polygamy make sense of the practice through media gatekeepers. In this way, the meaning of polygamy for those who do not practice it is a rhetorically constructed and mediated concept. Moreover, because polygamy is a practice that connects one man, or woman in the denotative sense of the word, to more than one spouse the moral, ethical, and even legal implications of the practice are attributed to it by the audience. Furthermore, the practice itself is the product of a rhetorical construction. Since polygamy is illegal, a man can only “marry” one wife, subsequent brides are “brides” in a rhetorical, religious, and perhaps emotional, but not legal, sense. Moreover, polygamy should be understood as rhetorical in the ways in
which polygamy is represented by the media and popular culture forms. In this study, I seek to understand the ways in which polygamy within the United States, particularly as practiced among members of the FLDS, is constructed in the media. Additionally, I expand the analysis to gain an understanding of the ways in which multiple publics are invited to respond by the representations of several controversies surrounding the FLDS since 2006.

The practice of polygamy in the United States has made rare appearances in the media, appearing mostly in escape narratives. However, since 2006, several social controversies surrounding polygamy have ignited an interest in the practice, in particular polygamy within the FLDS. In contrast to some polygamists who have spoken out through lecture formats, some of which have been remediated as YouTube videos, and through talk-show platforms such as the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, practicing members of the FLDS have selected to have less of a voice in the public sphere because of potential prosecution. However, the *Big Love* premiere, the Yearning for Zion Ranch raid, and the release of photographs depicting Warren Jeffs kissing underage girls brought forth discussion and mediated representations of polygamists within the FLDS.

The premiere of *Big Love* evoked responses from polygamists via Web sites (e.g., “Polygamy Rights,” 2006) and newspaper articles (e.g., Lee, 2006). The premiere was followed shortly by the capture and trial of FLDS leader Warren Jeffs, and only a few months later by state agencies’ invasion of the Yearning for Zion Ranch (YZR) in Eldorado, Texas. As children taken into custody during the YZR raid started to be returned to their parents, pictures of Warren Jeffs kissing underage girls were released to the media, sparking yet another controversy. These events generated public response in
the form of newspaper accounts, online message boards, documentaries, talk show interviews, and YouTube videos.\textsuperscript{5}

Selection of Textual Fragments

Very few practicing polygamists, particularly within FLDS, have come forward to discuss their lifestyles, however, and those who have spoken out have had to do so through media gatekeepers. Therefore, this research seeks to explore the mediated construction of polygamists as a marginal(ized) group through depictions of polygamists in the \textit{Big Love} premiere and newspaper coverage of the show’s premiere, newspaper accounts from the raid on the YZR, and photographs released from Warren Jeffs’ trial. Furthermore, audience responses called forth by the depictions are analyzed in order to explore the multiple voices that emerged during the polygamy social controversies. The three events were selected for analysis because of their scope, form, and intertextuality.

\textit{Scope}

The premiere of \textit{Big Love}, the raid on YZR, and the photographs of Warren Jeffs became hotbeds of conversation within the media. For instance, the YZR raid was discussed across a variety of platforms including morning shows such as \textit{Good Morning America}, the evening news, newspapers, and radio. Moreover, the scope of such controversies prompted responses more readily available for others to view than those generated by other polygamist representations, such as escape narratives.\textsuperscript{6} However, \textit{Escape} (2007), which tells the story of Carolyn Jessop’s flight from a FLDS sect, will be incorporated into discussions of the controversies because she is evoked, particularly during the YZR raid, as an expert on polygamy within FLDS. Moreover, the selection of textual fragments constituting the larger representation of polygamy and those who
engage in the practice is influenced by DeLuca and Peeples’ (2002) notion of the public screen.

Form

DeLuca and Peeples (2002) argue that the traditional understanding of the public sphere has become insufficient in the current media age and offer the public screen as a supplement. They contend that the public screen “recognizes that most, and the most important, public discussions take place via ‘screens’ – television, computer, and the front page of newspapers” (p. 131). They further assert that the public screen is “an alternative venue for participatory politics and public opinion formation that offers a striking contrast to the public sphere” (p. 145). This striking contrast is that the public screen, in comparison to the public sphere, affords “dissemination, images, hypermediacy, spectacular publicity, cacophony, distraction, and dissent” (p. 145).

According to DeLuca and Peeples, the public screen offers a place for “participatory democracy” in our “techno-industrial corporate controlled culture” (p. 146) and allows individuals to perceive screens as “new modes of intelligence, knowledge, politics, rhetoric, in short, new modes of being in the world,” rather than maintaining the notion that media and technology are leading to a “decline of civilization” (p. 147). Therefore, in consideration of the public screen, the selection of textual fragments for this dissertation is, in part, based on their mediated form. As noted above, polygamists’ voices are contained in mediated forms such as message boards, Web sites, newspaper articles, thus their voices are components of the public screen. Moreover, the selected textual fragments’ mediated nature enables audiences to respond through either the same medium or through an alternative screen and are easily identifiable for analysis.
Intertextuality

In addition to scope and form, intertextuality is a contributing factor for the selection of representations for analysis. The three controversies were selected, and will be treated in chronological order, because of references contained in news coverage and audience responses to the previous controversies. For example, audience responses to the photographs of Jeffs kissing underage girls references both the YZR raid, during which the photographs were released, and in several instances make comments about Big Love’s standpoint on polygamy. The ways in which texts reflect components of other texts is known as intertextuality. According to Fairclough (1992), “intertextuality is basically the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts” (p. 84). Moreover, Fairclough indicates that “the concept of intertextuality sees text historically as transforming the past … into the present” (p. 85). In the case of the controversy surrounding the photographs of Warren Jeffs, we see that previous polygamist controversies including YZR raid and Big Love shape and are included in coverage of the photographs’ release.

Unselected Texts

Overall, the textual fragments selected for this study were identified based on scope, form, and intertextuality. As an important note, polygamy within the United States could be explored from alternative perspectives. In particular, throughout the 1960s and onwards, communities and compounds, unaffiliated with the FLDS and often without specific religious orientations, have sprung up across the United States. These communities have practiced variations of polygamy. One specific instance of this sort of polygamous compound is the Source Family. In the 1960s, Jim Baker, who later took the name of Father Yod, was a notorious polygamist. While incredibly interesting from my
own perspective, these types of polygamist relationships fall outside the scope of the current investigation into religion-based polygamist controversies, in particular the FLDS, within the United States. However, an examination in the rhetoric surrounding Father Yod and the Source Family would, undoubtedly, be of importance for a more holistic understanding of polygamy in the United States as well as counter-culture movements.

Polygamy, in a variety of forms, is rampant across cultures – as explained, polygamy is even highly variant within the confines of the United States. This chapter seeks to explore those cross-cultural perspectives while simultaneously presenting a gap in the current literature; examination of polygamy within the FLDS. Now that polygamy has been defined and the specific controversies for analysis identified, chapter two will present the methodological and theoretical underpinnings for the study.

Footnotes

1 The polygamist compound in *Big Love* is never directly identified as a sect of FLDS. However, the rhetoric used by those on the compound as well as a fictional depiction of the Yearning for Zion raid in the series implies a relationship to the FLDS. Moreover, the FLDS was discussed by audience members in light of the polygamist representations on the program because the show’s creators noted conducting research by driving past FLDS ranches (“Big Love,” 2007).

2 While an argument could be made that cohabitation with multiple sexual partners, e.g. Hugh Hefner, in definition fits within the practice of polygamy, that particular form will not be discussed. Similarly, alternative marriage and relationship styles such as serial monogamy and pansexuality are outside of the scope of this research.
Although the 1887 legislation gave the government the right to seize property from the church, initial legislation in 1862 made polygamy illegal in the United States.

YouTube videos of lectures given by polygamists can be viewed via the following URLs:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mI_3BWMaMq4

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bM_1GXx5CE

Moreover, Oprah conducted two separate interviews of polygamists. On October 26, 2007, Oprah conducted an interview with a suburban polygamist family, showed footage of an FLDS compound, and interviewed Carolyn Jessop, a woman who fled from an FLDS compound. On March 30, 2009, in recognition of the YZR raid anniversary, Oprah accepted an invitation to YZR and interviewed several individuals on the compound.

Both newspaper accounts and online message boards will be discussed within the dissertation. Talk show interviews include, but are not limited to, The Oprah Winfrey Show (see note 4), Larry King Live on April 6, 2006, and The Today Show on April 16, 2006. I consider YouTube videos to constitute a response because they are remediated from other sources, include a message board for responses, and are posted by individuals. Some examples can be viewed through the following links:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t502voADIaM

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OEaRn3uHsc

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnGi_82Z32Q

A review of escape narratives reveals that the novels and memoirs are responded to only somewhat through booksellers’ Web sites such as Amazon.com. For instance, Escape (2007), which garnered media attention through author Carolyn Jessop’s
appearances on television programs such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, is discussed through 384 message board postings on Amazon.com. However, *Escape* is a rarity in that other escape narratives did not generate online discussion, but rather are being discussed through interpersonal communication such as book clubs and reading circles. Moreover, the *Escape* phenomenon could be explained in part because of the media attention the book received subsequent to the premiere of *Big Love* and in conjunction with the YZR raid rather than the novel constituting a separate controversy.
CHAPTER 2: RHETORICAL & METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

In this chapter, I situate the analyses of recent FLDS polygamist controversies within larger theoretical and methodological frames. In particular, I first explore several rhetorical concepts such as controversy, public, audience conjecture, and textual fragments. Second, I place the analyses within an interpretive framework. Finally, I offer chapter outlines for each of the three analysis chapters and concluding chapter.

Theoretical and Methodological Underpinnings

In this dissertation, I enhance our understanding of the rhetorical dimensions of social controversies by offering a more complex conceptualization of polygamist controversies, one that relies upon rhetorical analysis of both mediated texts and audiences’ responses to those texts. Goodnight (1991) made the initial call for study in the realm of social controversies. Derived from that call, Olson and Goodnight (1994) explored the controversy over fur. Their argument assumes that, following the binary approach embedded in debate, social controversy consists of two sides in a conflict. I contend, however, that exploration of a public controversy should examine the multitude of voices engaged in debate (Ono & Sloop, 1999). Thus, while Olson and Goodnight offer controversy as an open-ended argument between two opposing sides, I seek to expand the notion of social controversy to incorporate the multiple voices that emerged in each of the three recent social controversies regarding polygamy.

In this regard, I draw upon Warner’s (2002) distinctions between the public, a kind of “social totality,” a public, “a concrete audience” to an event, and what he calls a third understanding of public, as “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (pp. 49-50). While Warner does indicate that a public may
emerge in light of a text, he does not take into account that multiple publics may emerge in response to a text. Specifically, Warner acknowledges that two publics may emerge, but only insofar as these publics are in opposition of one another. Although Warner’s third sense of publics enriches an understanding of controversy by revealing that a group may be rhetorically generated by a controversy, we must refine and expand Warner’s public to account for the multiple publics that may emerge.

Warner’s work regarding publics enhances Michael Calvin McGee’s scholarship discussing the “the people.” In particular, Warner’s “publics” refines McGee’s notion of “the people” by pointing out how “peoples” are rhetorically constituted in social controversies. Through an organic approach to understanding “the people,” McGee (1975) argues that “they [the people] are conjured into objective reality, remain so long as the rhetoric which defined them has force, and wilt away, becoming once again merely a collective of individuals” (p. 242). As is the case with social controversy and the polygamy controversies to be discussed, collectives of individuals, albeit diverse, are responding to and invited by the polygamy representations. They are, as McGee (1975) asserts, “more process than phenomenon” (p. 242, emphasis in the original). Moreover, as Hauser (1999) notes a “plurality of publics” emerges from individuals engaged in debate and opinion development within the “multiple arenas” of the public sphere (p. 12).

In this dissertation, publics are identified through close textual analysis of the discourses surrounding the polygamist controversies. As McGee (1975) notes, publics are a process. Additionally, Hauser (1999) encourages scholars to look at the discursive nature of publics (p. 32). Placing these two scholars in conjunction with one another, I argue that publics emerge or come into being as a result of the discourse. Through close
readings of the letters to the editor and message board responses, publics emerged based on their polyvalent interpretations of the controversy.

According to Condit (1989), polyvalence describes “the fact that audiences routinely evaluate texts differently, assigning different portions of a text and hence to the text itself” (p. 108). While Condit describes these varying viewpoints as groups within and constituting an audience, I reference these varying viewpoints as publics – publics which ultimately constitute the overarching audience. Although this label has not previously been used to identify varying perspectives within a given audience, Hauser (1999) and McGee’s (1975) identification of publics as both procedural and discursive allow the label to be appropriate for the responses emerging from the social controversies.

As Hauser (1999) notes, “collective participation in rhetorical processes constitutes individuals as a public” (p. 34). Moreover, he argues that publics coalesce around an issue/problem and maintain different points of view. Therefore, while the publics could be referenced as subsets of the audience based on polyvalent interpretations of the controversies, their varying viewpoints, participation in the rhetorical process as a component of the controversy, and the emergent process by which they are invited to participate enable these groupings of the audience to be referenced as publics.

Hauser’s plurality of publics, McGee’s “the people,” and Warner’s “publics” are especially important for rhetorical analysis of mediated images because rhetorical critics tend to impose their interpretations of mediated representations upon the audience rather than explore the audiences called forth by the text. As Schiappa (2008) notes, “one cannot rely solely on a critic’s interpretation of what a film, song, or television show may
‘mean’ to its various audiences” (p. 6). Those who do, Schiappa argues, engage in what he calls “audience conjecture.” Since rhetoricians have an argumentative burden, Schiappa urges rhetorical critics to look for audience responses to mediated texts rather than rely upon conjecture to reveal and support interpretations of a given text. Schiappa’s argument that claims about mediated representations should be bolstered by audience analysis recognizes both the possibility of polysemic texts and polyvalent interpretations of those texts. Hauser (1999) reflects the necessity to turn to audience responses rather than relying on the critic’s point of view.

The meanings a critic finds in a text are not necessarily those found by its consumers. The empirical attitude of asking whether there is evidence of symbolic exchange indicating that a segment of society was actively engaged by a public problem, participated in a sphere of discourse in which the problem was explored, and formed a prevailing opinion about it requires going beyond the critic’s reading of the discourse to inquire about how citizens who were addressed and addressing one another read it. (pp. 276-277)

While Hauser and Schiappa both point to the need to explore audience responses to texts, Condit (1989) notes that audience responses are not solely derived from texts.

However, as Condit (1989) argues, polyvalent readings do not necessarily emerge from the polysemic nature of texts. She notes that “audiences are not free to make meanings at will from mass-mediated texts” (p. 103). Instead, audience members’ abilities to create meaning “is constrained by a variety of factors … [which] include access to oppositional codes, the ratio between work required and pleasure produced in decoding a text, the repertoire of available texts, and the historical occasion” (p. 103).
With an understanding that interpretation emerges from the interplay of the text, audience, and situational factors, I analyze a variety of textual fragments that constitute representations of polygamists and responses to those representations.

This approach is rooted McGee’s (1990) notion of rhetorical fragments. He argues that what rhetorical critics traditionally refer to as “texts” are not nearly the discrete objects that they seem to be. Instead, he asserts that the traditional triumvirate of text, context, and audience merge into what he calls “apparently finished discourse” that is an accumulation of rhetorical fragments that compose and surround the text as well as the rhetorical fragments that individual audience members bring to their interpretation of the text. Thus, speeches (and other objects of rhetorical criticism) “are simultaneously structures of fragments, finished texts, and fragments themselves to be accounted for in subsequent discourse” (p. 279). Moreover, in an argument that bears heavily on my approach to rhetorical analysis, McGee (1990) posits that “text construction [has become] the primary task of audiences, readers and critics” (p. 274, emphasis in the original). By looking at multiple fragments, while understanding that a text is never truly complete, I approach the social controversies regarding polygamy as both collections of fragments and as fragments of a larger discourse. Each controversy consists of multiple mediated representations of polygamy and the publics that form around those representations. Additionally, each of the proposed analyses serves as a fragment of the larger question of polygamy. Building on the notion of publics, an analysis of textual fragments may be able to more fully illustrate the audiences/publics being invited to respond.

Although publics are invited by constellations of textual fragments, text construction is constrained by a combination of factors, including personal beliefs and the
nature of the prompting text (Condit, 1989). Constraints on text construction are also evident in the three structural relationships as posited by McGee (1990). In particular, McGee offers three structural relationships including “between an apparently finished discourse and its sources, between an apparently finished discourse and culture, and between an apparently finished discourse and its influence” (p. 280). Restrictions on audience responses are perhaps most evident in the relationship between an apparently finished discourse and culture. As McGee notes, “since all apparently finished discourses presuppose taken-for-granted cultural imperatives, all of culture is implicated in every instance of discourse” (p. 281). Therefore, culture is inextricably linked with fragments and thus influences how audiences are invited by the texts and, in some ways, dictates the range of acceptable responses. However, each of the three structural relationships are important considerations for scholars. Aden et al. (2009) offer a suggestion for enacting McGee’s concept of rhetorical fragments.

We stress that the interrelationships among McGee’s three structural relationships precludes a unidirectional investigative process; one need not begin with the first structural relationship and move forward, nor does one necessarily need to follow an inductive or deductive logic. Instead, we urge that one may enter into [a set of fragments] at any of three structural relationships and that one should move abductively, tacking back and forth among the relationships. (p. 315)

As Aden et al. assert, rather than engaging with textual fragments at one of the structural relationships or working through each relationship in order, we should move between texts and relationships.
Overall, these theoretical and methodological perspectives enable a rhetorically rich exploration of these moments in the social controversy of polygamy. Moreover, by moving between theories and objects, I enact Jaskinski’s abductive conceptually oriented criticism which enables theory building and advances audience research methodologies. As Jaskinski (2001) writes, “conceptually oriented criticism . . . proceeds more through a process of *abduction* which might be thought of as a back and forth tacking movement between text and the concept or concepts that are being investigated simultaneously” (p. 256, emphasis in the original). Through the adoption of Jaskinski’s abductive approach, additional theoretical concepts inform analysis in each chapter to make sense of the fragments that constitute the texts, contribute to audiences’ formation of shared positions, and generate discussion about polygamy.

**Approach to Analysis**

Jasinski’s approach also helps me in achieving my goal of publishing each of the three analysis chapters separately. Incorporating unique concepts (or combinations of concepts) within each of the three chapters will allow for the chapters to be read as self-contained products suitable for publication. While each chapter is approached slightly differently because of the distinct textual fragments and rhetorical concepts involved, they are similar in terms of structure. Each chapter begins with a summary of the media representation and theoretical underpinnings influencing the research. Subsequently, each chapter then explores audience responses to the representations while simultaneously discussing the ways in which the representations invite responses from different publics.

First, each chapter delves into the representation of polygamy associated with the given controversy through a variety of textual fragments constituting an apparently
finished discourse. Representational texts include the premiere of *Big Love*, information discussing the show’s creation, newspaper articles discussing the show, newspaper coverage of the Yearning for Zion raid (photographs, news articles, front page blurbs, and editorials), and photographs posted to online message boards containing pictures of Warren Jeffs, FLDS leader, kissing underage girls. Photographs from the YZR raid and the photographs of Jeffs all include a visual element.

Due to the prominent visual elements of the mediated events, summaries of the representations rely on scholarship in visual communication and visual rhetoric. Sontag, a noted activist and photography critic, argues that analysis of photography should include looking at absences (1973/2001), and that the merit of a photograph, and subsequently the photographer, is determined by the viewers (Sontag, 2003). Although Hariman and Lucaites (2007) disagree with Sontag’s (2003) assertion that captions are needed to help viewers understand the message, their work is also beneficial for understanding the ways in which photographs serve as “fragmentary representations of events” (p. 2). They assert that “photojournalism is a patently artistic form of form of public address” (p. 27). In terms of the representations of polygamists, Hariman and Lucaites’ assertion serves to place the photographs of polygamists as rhetorical constructions. However, as Hariman and Lucaites note, audience responses to images enable the images to become a component of public discourse and of a culture as a whole.

In addition to the summary of representations, audience responses are subjected to several close readings. Form of audience responses differ by chapter, but include online message board postings concerning *Big Love*, letters to the editor discussing the YZR raid, and message board postings following the Jeffs’ images. I identify responses that
constitute varying and multiple publics who are responding to the representations. While some responses explicitly identify an audience member’s identification with a particular organization or group of people, exploration of the responses revealed that most responses do not express identification. Therefore, when available I use established labels to identify publics (e.g., LDS member), but in most cases construct names of emergent publics based on their responses (e.g., the repulsed public, raid supporters, coverage critics, etc.).

Third, each chapter explores how mediated representations speculatively invite the publics identified through analysis of audience responses (e.g., speculatively the lack of discussion of males in media coverage surrounding the YZR raid invited audiences who are advocates of the rights of women on the ranch). The links between the representations and responses are preempted and framed via a variety of theoretical constructs. These theoretical constructs vary across the analysis chapters, but include rhetorical controversy, iconic photography, stasis, and modes of cognitive conflict resolution. However, these concepts and theories in most instances are utilized to situate, rather than explain, the emergence of multiple publics.

Chapter Outlines

*(De)Constructing Divergent Voices in the Big Love Controversy*

HBO’s *Big Love* sparked controversy since it first premiered in 2006. *Big Love* is a fictional program that depicts the life of a polygamist family, the Henricksons, residing in a suburban area outside of Salt Lake City, Utah. The storyline follows one man (Bill), his three wives (Barb, Nicki, and Margene), his children, and his in-laws (leaders of a nearby polygamist compound). This chapter focuses on the rhetorical dimensions of the
premiere episode; specifically, the ways in which the premiere episode invites both multiple audiences (publics) and particular responses.

In terms of structure, this analysis chapter first gives a summary of the television program in terms of individuals responsible for the show and the content of the premiere episode. In this summary section, I explore the ways in which the main characters – who are polygamists – and the subject of polygamy are introduced. Incorporated within the summary of the premiere episode will be a discussion of the presence of two radically different representations of polygamy. Additionally, I will explain several key features that impacted the show’s creation including the openly gay status of the show’s creators as well as disclaimers that emphasized both the fictional nature of the program and that the Henrickson family should not be inferred to be members of the Mormon Church. Moreover, some newspaper articles about the program serve as textual fragments for description of the show’s premiere and creation. In particular, I have compiled 25 unique newspaper articles that appeared surrounding the March 12, 2006 premiere of Big Love. Specifically, I conducted a search for articles containing the search terms “Big Love” and “Polygamy” between January 12, 2006 and May 12, 2006 from Lexis Nexis, Academic Search Complete, and America’s Newspapers. As the next paragraph explains, the identified articles incorporate and invite a number of publics within the discussion of the premiere of Big Love.

Second, I explore audience responses to the Big Love premiere. I primarily use postings from three online message boards between January 12, 2006 and May 12, 2006. Specifically, 330 message board postings between the selected dates from The Coffeerooms, TV Squad, and HBO Web sites are discussed. Additionally, a press release
from polygamy.com is included into the audience responses because it offers a polygamist voice. Furthermore, some of the 25 aforementioned articles utilized to describe the show are also incorporated into the emerging publics section.

Six publics emerged from these textual fragments including LDS members, individuals engaged in polyamoric relationships, practicing polygamists, and gay marriage opponents. The additional two publics strive to (dis)prove the relationship between the practice of polygamy and negative outcomes associated with the practice such as child brides and molestation. On one side of this battle emerges a public that seeks to position these negative outcomes as a direct and inherent consequence of the practice. In contrast, another emergent public attempts to separate polygamy from these negative outcomes and in some cases argues that polygamy is a more advantageous marriage practice than monogamy. While these two publics are in direct opposition to one another, the emergence of the four aforementioned publics illustrate that binary conceptualizations of publics are inappropriate for the Big Love controversy.

Third, I analyze how the premiere episode as well as the newspaper coverage surrounding the episode elicited the responses indicating the voices of six publics as identified in the thematic analysis of audience responses. Those who seek to differentiate Mormons from polygamists do so in fear of Mormonism becoming conflated with polygamy due to the geographic location in which the show takes place and the history between Mormonism and the practice. The show takes place near Salt Lake City, Utah which is the geographic center of the Mormon Church. The relationship between the show’s location and the Mormon Church’s history led to outrage and fear of condemnation by Mormons and Church officials because polygamy was repudiated by
the church in 1890. Gay marriage opponents are called forth by the show in part because of the show’s openly gay creators. Both gay marriage and plural marriage, as polygamy is addressed in the show, are considered by some to be “alternative” family structures and the link between the two also led to increased speculation concerning the show’s public agenda by those in opposition to gay marriage. The two distinct representations of polygamy on the show caused concern for both opponents and supporters of polygamy based on their perceived outcomes of the practice. The suburban representation, the Henrickson’s, invited polygamy opponents who feared that the show would not accurately depict the negative consequences they perceive for women and children in polygamist families. However, those who support polygamy, based on the positive outcomes they perceive, were uneasy about the representation of Bill’s family who lives on a polygamist compound in the desert.

The Debate over Yearning for Zion Ranch

On April 3, 2008, Texas law enforcement officials and Child Protective Services (CPS) entered a polygamist compound in Eldorado, Texas. The compound, known as the Yearning for Zion Ranch (YZR), is one of an undisclosed number of polygamist compounds in the United States and Canada associated with the Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints. The YZR raid was incited by a phone call from a teenage female alleging to have been physically and sexually abused by her much older husband (the call was later determined to be a hoax). During the course of the raid, over 500 women and children were removed from the ranch. Children taken were eventually separated from their mothers and placed in foster care and state run institutions. However, on May 23, 2008, the Texas Appellate Court ruled that the wholesale removal of children from the
ranch was illegal; a decision that was affirmed on May 29, 2008. Although many children were returned to their mothers, several individual custody disputes persisted, particularly among mothers who were deemed by the state to be minors (Blumenthal, 2008b).

In this chapter, I offer an overview of newspaper coverage between April 3rd and May 29th from five newspapers: The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today, The Dallas Morning News, and The Houston Chronicle. The date range reflects the initial raid until the ruling that children be given back to their parents. The New York Times, The Washington Post, and USA Today were selected because they are three of the five highest circulating newspapers in the United States and offer divergent viewpoints (“Top 100 Newspapers,” 2006). The Dallas Morning News and The Houston Chronicle were included because they are the highest circulating newspapers in Texas, the state in which YZR is located. A total of 360 pieces of coverage are identified from the five newspapers. Newspaper coverage consists of front page news articles (n = 48), articles that appear on pages other than the front page (n = 126), news blurbs that appear on the front page of the newspaper (n = 14), photographs (n = 133), images (n = 21), and editorials (n = 18) from the five aforementioned newspapers.

Initial analysis of news coverage from the first two weeks of the raid reveals that the media: (1) made mention of Warren Jeffs, (2) discussed child abuse and molestation, (3) discussed the role of CPS in the case, and (4) constructed members of YZR as outsiders to mainstream society. However, as facts were revealed about the raid and the court cases regarding the custody of children taken during the raid neared, newspaper coverage included several points of contention surrounding the raid.
Specifically, three points of contention were articulated in the media’s coverage of the controversy. First, the caller who instigated the raid was identified as Rozita Swanson, a woman who was notorious for filing false claims and lived, not in Texas, but in Colorado Springs (Fahrenthold, 2008). Second, it was concluded that some of the children taken into custody were adults. For instance, one of the alleged minors who gave birth while in state custody was later deemed to be of legal age to marry (Garrett, 2008). Third, the actual number of individuals displaced was around 550 (416 children and 139 adult women), rather than the initially reported 52 (Johnson, 2008a). These points of contention, primarily arising from those who believed that the raid was illegal and/or unnecessary, were incorporated into coverage of the raid and the court hearings.

Following a summary of the newspaper coverage during the raid, I examine the responses from audience members of the newspapers via letters to the editor. A total of 40 letters to the editor have been identified from the aforementioned newspapers during the course of the raid. Additionally, the Forum Section of USA Today during the time frame contained five invited editorials from individuals outside of the immediate editorial staff. These articles are also identified as responses rather than coverage because they indicate an opinion not necessarily held by the newspaper’s editorial staff.

Through a close textual analysis of responses to the controversy and the reporting of the events, four publics emerged. The first public, attention shifters, contextualize the raid in relation to other societal issues thus redirecting attention away from YZR children in favor of issues concerning children in mainstream society. Some responses engage in the placement of blame – some indicate that the problem lies within the sect, others blame officials. The placement of blame reveals two publics based on the allocation of
blame. Those who place blame on sect members are opponents of polygamy who use the raid as evidence of the negative consequences of polygamy. Alternatively, those who blame CPS, while not necessarily polygamy supporters, are those who support individuals’ rights. While they may not be supporters of polygamy, they question the legality of the raid because of perceived rights violations. A fourth public, coverage critics, focus not on the raid or the exigency for the raid, but rather newspaper coverage of the events including a lack of discussion surrounding the actions of polygamist men. Taking into account media representations of the raid and publics identified through an analysis of audience responses, I analyze how newspaper coverage evoked multiple publics.

Newspaper coverage, both text and images, invite and restrain responses from emergent publics. Attention shifters are responding to the magnitude of coverage concerning the raid; they would like similar or more attention paid to issues plaguing mainstream society. Those who blame FLDS members and the public that blames CPS for the raid both argue that members of the FLDS should be treated the same as those in mainstream society. However, they differ on how members of society should be treated given the circumstances. According to those who support the raid, the children were in imminent danger and needed to be removed from the compound. For those opposed to the raid, the courts, law enforcement, and CPS violated sect members’ constitutional rights. Finally, coverage critics are responding to the newspaper coverage as a whole by both pointing to the absence of sect males in the coverage and condemning newspapers for showing the faces of alleged victims.
Exploring Audience Responses to the Warren Jeffs Photographs

Coming on the heels of the *Big Love* controversy was the manhunt, arrest, and trial of FLDS leader Warren Jeffs. Jeffs, known for having multiple wives and child-brides, was placed on the FBI’s Top Ten Most Wanted List in May 2006 (‘‘Polygamist Added,’’ 2006). During Jeffs’ 2008 trial, images of the FLDS leader kissing and embracing preteen and teenaged girls were included in the prosecution’s evidence. The images were again used as evidence during the trial concerning custody of children taken by state agencies during the YZR raid. Although the arrest and trial of Warren Jeffs is intertwined with the YZR raid, as indicated by audience responses to the raid, the two events are not the same. Jeffs was convicted in September 2007 in Utah whereas YZR raid occurred in April 2008 in Texas. However, during the YZR trial, the images of Jeffs kissing underage girls were leaked to the media (‘‘Warren Jeffs Kissing,’’ 2008). The photographs were subsequently posted on a number of Web sites. In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which the photographs invited multiple audiences and specific responses.

First, I provide a summary of the photographs, the context, and the Web site content surrounding the images. The photographs are of Jeffs with two girls who appear to be under the age of 18. Moreover, articles accompanying the photographs reveal that one of the females was a 12-year-old girl. The photographs take the form of collages; each collage represents his anniversary with one of the two girls. Moreover, each of the collages contains an evidence tag in the corner indicating that photographs served as evidence for the prosecution. While the evidence tags do not indicate that the
photographs were used as evidence by Texas in the custody hearings surrounding children taken in the YZR raid, texts accompanying the articles articulate that usage.

Second, I examine threads of three online message boards that follow articles containing the photographs of Jeffs with underage girls. A total of 774 postings were collected across three Web sites including the Huffington Post Web site (n = 407), Democratic Underground Web site (n = 347), and Sacred Monkeys Web site (n = 20) spanning from May 24, 2008 until May 31, 2008. Although 774 postings appear on the Web sites, not all directly discuss the photographs. The Web sites were selected because they are accessible, contain the photographs, have multiple responses, and—because I wish to focus more on the images than the content surrounding the images—have limited content addressing the photographs.

The Jeffs photography controversy overlaps with the controversy surrounding the raid on YZR; a number of posts following the Jeffs photographs address the YZR controversy. While these posts could be considered extraneous to the exploration of the photographs, I find that they serve as one of four publics. The first public, the repulsed public, responds directly to the photographs by expressing their disgust for the photographs and resulting to ad hominem attacks against Jeffs. Second, raid supporters indicate that the photographs are evidence of the immediate danger the children faced on the YZR compound. Specifically, they argue that Jeffs’ actions, since he was (is) the prophet (leader) of the FLDS, are indicative of actions by all sect members. Third, an anti-FLDS public emerges which contends that the photographs are evidence of the negative outcomes of polygamy within the FLDS as a whole. Finally, rights protector public stands in opposition to the raid supporter and anti-FLDS publics. This public
asserts that the photographs are outside the scope of the current custody trial and of the raid in general since Jeffs is already imprisoned, in part because of the photographs.

Third, I analyze the ways in which the images and contextualizing text invite the different publics that responded to the photographs. Since the photographs could be considered instances of child pornography, the repulsed public exists in part because of the ways in which society is conditioned to treat child pornography and pedophilia as one of the greatest societal taboos. The responses that indicate an anti-child abuse public is invited by the pornographic perception of the images. While some responses stop at illustrating disgust, others move beyond the immediate meaning and affect derived from the photographs by perceiving the photographs as a depiction of the immorality of the FLDS as a whole and as justification for the YZR raid. The evidence tags placed on the photographs and contextualizing text on the Web sites may play a role in evoking responses regarding the legal and moral issues surrounding Warren Jeffs, polygamy, and YZR. The final public, the rights protector public, provides legal arguments counter to the YZR raid. This public is in direct opposition to those who extend the meaning of the photographs to the raid and sect as a whole. Interestingly, this public is not attempting to deny that the images are of Jeffs with minor girls. Rather, the rights protector public is responding to other publics more so than the photographs or coverage.

Discussion & Conclusion Chapter

The concluding chapter of the dissertation serves two primary functions. First, the chapter ties together the three analysis chapters by exploring implications emergent from considering the three analysis chapters in combination and in juxtaposition with one another. Second, a writing story concerning my role as a researcher is discussed and
several additional implications and questions for future research are revealed. The three
analysis chapters, while exploring different controversies, point to larger considerations
within the topic of polygamy, the abductive interpretive approach to rhetorical criticism,
and extant theory regarding controversy and audience responses.

In terms of the topic of polygamy, the analysis chapters illustrate that polygamy is
a highly contentious subject. Furthermore, the coverage of the controversy including the
photographs used in coverage during the YZR raid and the photographs of Jeffs with
underage girls enables the publics’ ability to move beyond the initial coverage to make
larger claims is, in part, afforded to publics through the marginal status of FLDS within
mainstream society. Moreover, the traditional marginal status of the sect in conjunction
with publics’ claims indicates that sect members are an Other and that this Otherness is
perpetuated by the FLDS.

Finally, two theoretical concerns are discussed. First, a call for research that
focuses on the interplay between audience and text is articulated. Second, when looking
at the analyses in conjunction with one another, the overlaps among publics insinuates a
larger social debate. Rather than referencing this overarching issue as a controversy, I
assert that the issue be labeled a debate. I contend that this label is more appropriate
given the lack of new emergent publics in the debate aside from the individual
controversies explored and the inexistence of a prime peak in the overarching polygamy
debate.

Overall, my Big Love fandom initially led me to the topic of polygamy. However,
the increased media exposure has sustained my attention to the issue. Understanding the
ways in which mediated constructions of polygamists draw forward specific audience
responses will enable me to continue to refine my research interests at the intersection of popular culture, women’s issues, and rhetoric.

Footnotes

1 Please note that this number changes in the newspaper reports frequently with a count as high as 463 children who were removed. However, the 416 children and 139 mothers were the most common numbers reported across the newspapers.

2 These were dates during which all posts occurred, not just the dates I selected for analysis.
CHAPTER 3: WHEN ONE WIFE JUST ISN’T ENOUGH: (DE)CONSTRUCTING DIVERGENT VOICES IN THE BIG LOVE CONTROVERSY

Premiering on March 12, 2006, HBO’s Big Love sparked controversy and served as a catalyst for invigorating debate regarding polygamy in the United States. Polygamy, as an alternative marriage and family structure, has primarily remained under the mainstream media’s radar. However, it was brought to the forefront of conversation as HBO’s family drama premiered. Although illegal, polygamy is practiced in nearly every corner of the world. However, until the onslaught of media attention paid to Big Love, the practice has remained relatively out of the general public’s attention. Therefore, polygamy, as a practice, does not exemplify the characteristics of a controversy. However, bounded within the time surrounding the premiere of Big Love, a controversy emerges in which voices from multiple sides of the polygamy debate emerge and reframe their arguments in light of the show. In this chapter, I engage in a close textual analysis of publics who respond to the show via message board postings. Through this close textual analysis, I identify six emergent publics who are responding to the pilot episode, factors concerning the show’s creators, and news coverage surrounding the show’s premiere.

The multiple sides of the Big Love and polygamy debates can be found in a variety of textual fragments including, but not limited to, newspaper coverage, online message boards, and magazine articles. These fragments combine to construct an apparently finished discourse; “a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made” (McGee, 1990, p. 279). Because textual fragments join to create an “apparently finished discourse,” a combination of theoretical strands, including controversy and stasis, rather than a single frame is essential for understanding the Big
Love controversy as a component of an increasingly fragmented culture (McGee, 1990). This chapter seeks to explore the multiple textual fragments surrounding the premiere of Big Love and audience responses to the show’s creation.

Through an exploration of multiple textual fragments, the following analysis identifies and deconstructs arguments forwarded by all sides of the controversy. The particular date range selected, January 12, 2006 through May 12, 2006, reflects the Big Love controversy, because polygamy, to a large extent, managed to stay out of the media until just a few months prior to the show’s premiere – while some news stories did have content concerning polygamy well before the premiere, the audience and attention paid to these stories was minimal in comparison to the Big Love controversy. Similarly, the buzz surrounding the premiere of the show had subsided in early May for two reasons. First, by late April, HBO had renewed Big Love for a second season; leaving those opposed to the show defeated (Martin, 2006, p. 4). Second, the topic of polygamy was making headlines for reasons other than the show.

Specifically, in May an arrest warrant was issued for Warren Jeffs, a prominent leader of the Fundamental Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS). At that point, the voices from the Big Love controversy subsided and new voices entered. While early articles concerning Big Love concentrate almost exclusively on the show and the show’s creators, later articles add another twist – the manhunt for polygamist leader Warren Jeffs. For instance, a May 9, 2006 article in USA Today that focuses primarily on Big Love begins with a discussion of Warren Jeffs:

The HBO drama Big Love, about a polygamist and his families, is clearly fiction.

But recent news stories, including one about a polygamist sect in Utah and
Arizona whose leader has been placed on the FBI’s 10 Most Wanted Fugitive list, have brought new attention to the practice. (Jayson, 2006, p. D2)

As a May 12, 2006 article in The Desert Morning News notes, the conflation of the FLDS and mainstream Latter Day Saints (LDS) churches is problematic in light of the negative publicity during the manhunt for Jeffs and “comes on the heels of another media headache for the [LDS] church just weeks ago with the premiere of the HBO TV series, ‘Big Love’” (Moore, 2006, p. A1). While Big Love was still mentioned in the media, it ultimately became secondary to the manhunt for and subsequent trial of FLDS leader Warren Jeffs.

While both the controversy surrounding the show and the Warren Jeffs manhunt include the element of polygamy, some different arguments are made in light of each controversy. In this essay, I maintain a focus on the Big Love controversy independent of Jeff’s manhunt and subsequent capture because the show’s premiere invited some unique publics and responses. However, it should be noted that overlap, due to the subject of polygamy, surely exists to some extent between the two controversies. Olson and Goodnight (1994) assert that “a social controversy is an extended rhetorical engagement that critiques, resituates, and develops communication practices bridging the public and personal spheres” (p. 249). While they do not indicate that a controversy must be bound in any given time frame, in order to explore a given controversy one must establish a start and end point. In the case of the Big Love controversy, the boundaries drawn above illustrate that, for the most part, the arguments emerged during a particular time frame. While a multitude of voices emerged regarding the polygamy debate, the media depicts the arguments as a dichotomy: you are either for polygamy or against it. However, in the
controversy surrounding the premiere of *Big Love*, six publics emerge; not just two publics in opposition of one another. These different publics are engaged in debates surrounding the definition of polygamy, the interconnectedness between gay and polygamist marriages, and the outcomes of polygamy. The lack of social change regarding the issue of polygamy demonstrates that the controversy did not yield a “winner.” While calls for *Big Love* to be taken off the air are still being asserted, the main controversy has subsided. If the show were to be taken off the air, I contend that it would be for issues outside the boundaries of the controversy surrounding the premiere. Although the controversy to a larger extent has passed, the premiere of *Big Love* generated substantial debate.

How can a television show reinvigorate debate on a social issue that has existed in the United States for hundreds of years? Frank (2006) notes the show’s role in (re)constructing the polygamy debate.

Most people believe that consenting adults should be free to do anything they please, provided they do not cause unacceptable harm to others. The difficult question, of course, is what constitutes unacceptable harm. The debut…of “Big Love,” the new HBO series about a polygamist fictional family in Salt Lake City, has touched off renewed debate about this question. (p. C3)

Frank is not alone in his belief that the show has the ability to prompt debate and controversy. As alandry722 notes on HBO’s *Big Love* bulletin board, “I think this show is so controversial, but that’s what makes it so appealing” (“Pilot,” 2006). Similarly, Toto (2006) indicates, “HBO needs a big hit to replace ‘The Sopranos,’ currently winding up the first of a two-stage final season. Enter ‘Big Love,’ an oddity even by cable standards
about a Utah man and his three wives” (p. D1). Moreover, Peyser (2006) identifies *Big Love* as just one of many HBO programs that stretch the traditional boundaries.

It’s ironic that cutting-edge HBO is staking its future on a variant of the old-fashioned family drama, but since television is dominated by crime and reality shows, ‘Big Love’ might just be great counterprogramming. The fact is, HBO’s most successful franchises have been family shows with a twist: the undertaker family, the gal-pal family, the Hollywood buddies. They’re exotic, but relatable – didn’t you ever fantasize about living with your best friend’s family? (p. 56)

But, what exactly is the show about? Take the suburban setting of *Desperate Housewives* complete with SUVs, swimming pools, contemporary houses, picture-perfect lawns, and friendly neighbors. Then add the spice of an HBO drama. While the typical suburban neighborhood in Salt Lake City appears normal at the outset, the viewer of *Big Love* knows differently. One side of the street hosts three houses, unremarkable at first glance. In the first home, Bill Henrickson lives with his wife Barb and their three children. Next to the Henricksons lives apparently single mother Nicki and her two elementary-school aged boys. Next to Nicki, lives Margene, another apparently single mother with her two children. A peek behind the three houses reveals that the houses all share a back yard – but that’s not all they share. Bill, not only plays husband to Barb, but to Margene and Nicki as well (Caulfield, 2006).

The show features Bill and his three wives as they struggle to work as a cohesive family. Bill, a businessman, constantly fights to maintain peace among his three wives and seven children. In order to maintain peace among his wives, Bill turns to a small blue pill – a detail prominent in the news coverage of the show is Bill’s Viagra use. “Armed
with his faith in the Lord, an overworked cellphone and a daily little blue Viagra pill,” Lacey (2006) notes, “Bill stays marries to three women” (p. R1). Likewise, Lee (2006) refers to Big Love’s patriarch as “The Viagra popping Bill Henrickson” (p. E1). In the third season, Margene, Bill’s third wife, discovers his secret stash of Viagra. Comically, her attempt to cover-up Bill’s use of Viagra results in speculations about her and Bill’s sex life by the other wives. However, turmoil is not confined to Bill’s households. Bill engages in battle with his father-in-law, Roman Grant, the leader of a nearby polygamous compound where Bill’s parents and brother still live. Meanwhile, Bill and his family all try to remain innocuous to neighbors, Bill’s employees, and the general public. Although the show is interesting in itself, the specific content appears almost lost in the controversy that emerged from the show’s premiere.

While the family struggles with potential financial ruin, deals with issues of raising teenage children, and manages difficult family relationships, these specifics receive little attention in the media. Rather, the controversy surrounding Big Love centers on the alternative marriage structure. In this way, the show not only renewed the polygamy debate, but served as the exigency for new voices to be heard regarding the issue. The show provides the opportunity for the voices of multiple factions to be heard in the media and through audience response channels such as message boards. Without the premiere of Big Love, the debate may well have stayed under the public radar as it had done before. Moreover, the show’s premiere allowed for arguments to be (re)constructed and new voices to be heard – particularly from proponents of polygamy. The arguments made are not new, but rather are reframed in light of the premiere of Big Love. In other
words, the show’s premiere serves as a medium by which publics are afforded the opportunity to speak on the subject of polygamy.

Theoretical Framework

Two strands of theory, when explored in conjunction with one another, help to frame the *Big Love* controversy. These two strands of thought include the rhetorical convention of stasis and the rhetorical arguments concerning social controversy. With roots tracing back to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, stasis has long been a term in the rhetorical tradition – and one that has been heavily debated (Thompson, 1972). Stasis, with its origins in judicial rhetoric, consists of four stases including: (1) the conjectural stasis (Did the person actually commit the crime?), (2) the definitional stasis (What exactly did she do?), (3) the qualitative stasis (Did she have a reason for committing the crime?), and (4) the translative stasis (Is this the proper place for the trial?) (Braet, 1987; Dieter, 1950; Thompson, 1972). In the controversy surrounding *Big Love*, polygamy and any group affiliated with polygamy became indicted on charges based on the public’s preconceived notions of the practice. The overarching notion of stasis contends that the argument will essentially boil down to a disagreement over a single stasis (Zarefsky, 1990). In other words, stasis, as conventionally associated with judicial rhetoric, will come to one of the four types of stasis (Did the person commit a crime?; If the person committed a crime, what exactly was the crime?; If he or she committed a crime, did they have a reason?; Is a particular setting the proper place for the argument to be decided?). I argue that the concept of stasis as the “resting place” of an argument is accurate in more traditional or judicial rhetoric, but is violated when multiple voices emerge in a social controversy. Stasis, since its inception, is a binary concept – once consolidated to a single stasis,
arguments appear in support and in opposition (i.e., we have one of two choices), but does not account for multiple perspectives. Therefore, stasis is limited in its ability to describe arguments constructed by multiple emerging publics in the "Big Love" controversy.

Stasis is a binary concept which helps to account for our continuing conceptualization of non-judicial controversy in binary terms. For instance, Goodnight (1991) made the initial call for study in the realm of social controversies. Following that call, Olson and Goodnight (1994) explored the controversy over fur. They assert that a social controversy enables the parameters of debate and argumentation to be stretched. However, and in relation to stasis, they explore the controversy over fur in a binary fashion – those engaged in the controversy were either for the use of fur or against the use of fur for clothing. Although it may appear as though this conventionally binary construction of controversy is not useful for understanding the multitude of emergent voices in the "Big Love" controversy, extensions of the concept provide some tools for exploration. In particular, Ono and Sloop (1999), in response to Goodnight (1999) and Phillips (1999), assert that the voices of the individuals being impacted must be taken into consideration – not just the opinions and voices of institutions such as newspapers and government agencies. Overall, the two aforementioned theoretical strands, stasis and controversy, help frame exploration of the "Big Love" controversy by situating "Big Love" as a controversy in which multiple publics emerged centering on several forms of stasis.

In this chapter, I first offer an overview of the textual fragments constituting "Big Love". Second, through an analysis of audience responses, I identify six publics that emerge in response to both the premiere episode and news coverage surrounding the
premiere. Embedded in the discussion of emergent publics, I explore the ways in which publics may have been drawn to the Big Love phenomenon.

Premiere Episode of Big Love

In order to explore publics that emerge during the Big Love controversy, we must first explore a variety of textual fragments that constitute the exigence, the premiere of Big Love, of the controversy. In particular, this section identifies and offers an overview of the Big Love phenomenon by exploring the premiere episode. Additionally, newspaper coverage that discusses the show is interwoven with discussion of the show’s premiere. Coverage was identified via a search for articles containing the search terms “Big Love” and “Polygamy” between January 12, 2006 and May 12, 2006 from Lexis Nexis, Academic Search Complete, and America’s Newspapers.

The pilot episode of Big Love premiered following HBO’s popular drama, The Sopranos, on March 12, 2006. As the opening credits roll, a middle-aged man and woman are ice skating on a pond. The man then begins to skate with a younger blonde woman and then again changes his skating partner to a third, even younger woman. Ultimately, the four individuals hold hands and skate together in a circle. However, the ice suddenly begins to crack and the man, who we later learn is Bill Henrickson, is separated from the latter two women, Nicki and Margene, but is left skating with the first woman, Barb. The scene then flashes over to Bill, Barb, Nicki, and Margene navigating their way through white curtains and eventually all are reunited. The final image of the opening credits shows Bill and the three women sitting together at a table having a meal – but, with a noticeable three extra seats at the table.
After the opening credits, the first scene of the pilot episode takes the viewer down a garden path concerning the show’s premise. Bill is in bed with a woman who is at first unrecognizable. He leaves the bed, enters the bathroom, looks into the mirror, begins reflecting on having intercourse with the woman, and subsequently leaves $100 bill under a water glass next to the nightstand. The woman, who the viewer later learns is Nicki, is shown in bed, lying on her side, facing away from the man, her facial expressions communicating shame and embarrassment. This first scene implies that the man, Bill, is paying for sex, rather than leaving an allowance for his second of three wives. As Bill skips to his car, a blonde teenaged girl knocks on a window from a house two doors down. Bill returns a wave and drives to work.

Following this opening scene, the viewer is introduced to each of the three wives. Barb hustles to prepare her three children, Sarah, Ben, and Tancy, for school after being called in to substitute teach. Margene calls her mother while her newborn cries in her arms, her house in disarray. While watching her children play in the pool, Nicki is ordering merchandise from a catalogue. Bill, while driving home from work, checks his cell phone and appears unfazed by the fact that he has sixteen new voice messages asking him to perform a variety of tasks including picking up both the dry cleaning and grubs. As the women are introduced, the viewer learns that there is a special sort of relationship among the women. Margene, alone in her bedroom, is trying on clothing when Nicki comes into her room. After telling Margene to put on a robe, Nicki calls her son, Wayne, into the room.

“This is a present for mother. Be happy, Margene,” says Wayne as he hands Margene a large box.
“Really?” asks Margene excitedly.

“You’ve been dying for a good sound system for the house. Bill asks, don’t tell him it’s from me. You’d better not mention it to the boss lady,” Nicki notes authoritatively.

While it is not entirely clear at this point that the women are all married to the same man, it is apparent that there is a relationship between the women. However, when Bill returns home from work it becomes clear that the Henricksons are a polygamist family. Bill walks into the house balancing a plastic container of grubs, dry cleaning, and an oversized fountain drink cup. As he walks through the house he kisses each of the three women who had been introduced in earlier scenes. First, Bill kisses Barb – his first wife. Second, Bill kisses Nicki – his second wife. Third, Bill kisses Margene – his third wife. As he releases from an embrace with Margene, the blonde teenaged girl that appeared in the window that morning, is reintroduced as Bill and Barb’s daughter, Sarah.

“You were bad this morning,” says Sarah to her father about leaving out the front door of Nicki’s house.

“I’m sure no one was looking,” replies Bill.

After Bill says a prayer ending in the words “sealed together for all of eternity,” the family sits down for dinner together in the backyard that runs across all three of the houses.

That night, Bill sleeps with Margene. The following morning, Bill’s attention is again divided among the demands of his wife, children, and business. As Bill negotiates business dealings, his three wives, led by Barb, are meeting to plan Bill’s rotation for the upcoming month. In other words, the women are meeting to decide on which days each
wife will have Bill in her home. While it surely could be considered extreme to have to hash out your husband’s sleeping arrangements, the idea of a rotation is common among practicing polygamists. Jeanne Tripplehorn, the actress playing the first wife in *Big Love*, cites a polygamist in the ’40s whom she read about:

> She was asked how she could actually be in this type of relationship, how subservient it must be. And she said, “Actually it works quite well for me. One week out of the month I am a wife and the other three weeks I get to do what I want to do, no compromising.” (as cited in Deizel, 2006, para. 5)

As the women meet, they each work to negotiate a schedule that will meet their needs and insure that Bill is present for important days in their children’s lives.

As the women meet, the scene changes to Bill at a meeting. However, Bill’s meeting is interrupted by a phone call from his sister-in-law notifying him that his father is ill. Later that evening, Bill receives a similar phone call from his brother. When Bill tells Barb that his father is sick, she responds, “Maybe he’ll just drop dead. Don’t go. Don’t do it. Once you open that door…” However, the next morning Bill, Nicki, and Barb drive to Juniper Creek, a polygamist compound, even though Nicki argues that Barb should not go because she doesn’t fit in on the compound.

As they enter Juniper Creek, the roads are lined with old-fashioned looking women in long skirts and conservatively braided hair. Lois, Bill’s mother, is excited to see Bill and his two wives. Even though it is clear her husband, Frank, is very ill, she yells, “No doctors. They only draw attention to us.” The images of the compound – the women working and then men clearly in positions of power – presents a stark contrast to
the Henrickson family where the patriarch isn’t above holding babies and picking up the
dry cleaning.

As Bill argues with his mother about the need to take Frank to the doctor, the
scene flashes over to Sarah who is working her part-time job at a fast food restaurant. She
is on break with a group of friends when, Heather, a new employee at the restaurant asks,
“Can I sit with you guys?” After a discussion about celibacy, one of the girls reveals that
“Sarah has three mommies.” This poses a danger to the Henrickson family because, as it
is later revealed, Heather’s father is a state trooper.

Back at the compound, Roman Grant – Nicki’s father, the prophet, and the leader
of Juniper Creek – arrives with his son Alby at Lois and Frank’s house. Also with Roman
is Rhonda – a young teenaged girl. After Rhonda asks Barb about Sarah, she notes that
Barb “can’t have anymore babies.”

“No, honey. I had cancer,” Barb responds.

“When?” Rhonda asks.

“Six years ago. I had a hysterectomy,” she replies.

“Is that when you said Bill could marry Nicki?” she continues to question Barb.

“Well, there’s a little more to it than that, sweetie,” notes Barb.

“I’m married to the prophet now,” Rhonda announces.

After Barb expresses astonishment and unhappiness about the girl’s marriage to the much
older man, Rhonda walks into the kitchen. Rhonda then proceeds to tell a boy that Barb
cannot have babies because she is being punished by God. The next day Bill takes his
father to the doctor while his mother is working at a gas station just outside the
compound. At the doctor’s office, Bill learns that his father has been poisoned. During the final scene of the pilot episode, Bill tells Barb, “I think mom’s trying to poison dad.”

The episode over, the screen goes black and writing comes across the screen:

According to a joint report issued by the Utah and Arizona Attorney General’s offices, July, 2005, approximately 20,000 to 40,000 people currently practice polygamy in the United States. The Mormon Church officially banned the practice of polygamy in 1890. (Caulfield, 2006)

Although the credits identify the names of those involved with the show’s creation, the names – other than producer Tom Hanks – are unrecognizable to the average viewer. In other words, the status of the show’s creators – two openly gay men who are in an ongoing partnership – do not emerge through the credits. However, this fact did not go unnoticed by those reporting on the show’s premiere. Frei (2006) asks, “Will gay audiences fall in love with a show about a Viagra-popping polygamist juggling three wives in suburban Salt Lake City?” (p. 66). Frei’s question points to the openly gay status of the show’s creators, Mark V. Olsen and Will Scheffer, which is a featured topic across the news coverage.

The gay status of the show’s creators is more of a discussion point in coverage than the fact that acclaimed actor, Tom Hanks, is the show’s producer. In the aforementioned Frei (2006) article, the author asks Mark V. Olsen, one of the show’s creators, “Can the struggle of polygamists be compared to the challenges facing gay people?” (p. 66). A question to which Olsen has an answer:

We have no agenda on this show. There were things we wanted to dramatize – self in marriage, self in family, and self in society: What is it like to be
marginalized and deemed off the table for legitimate discussion for who [sic] and what you are? Some of the struggles of the characters are analogous to the [gay] community of 15 or 20 years ago. These characters are dealing with a lot of self-loathing. And it’s ingrained by a society that says you are freaks. (Frei, 2006, p. 66)

Since Frei is writing for The Advocate, a gay and lesbian centered magazine, it is not surprising that the reporter asks about the influence the creators’ sexual orientation had on Big Love. However, Frei is not the only reporter taking into account the homosexual orientation of the creators. Lacy (2006) notes that “the show’s creators, Mark Olsen and Will Scheffer, who are gay Californians, are out to have some fun with the idea of alternative marriage in the heart of red-state America” (p. R1). Moreover, Toto (2006) asserts that “Big Love’s creators, openly homosexual partners Mark Olsen and Will Scheffer … have denied in print that the series aims to mainstream homosexual ‘marriage’” (p. D1). Overall, the creators’ relationship status served as an additional component of controversy in addition to the show’s overarching premise and presentation of polygamy.

Emerging Publics

Big Love sparked controversy on the issue of alternative marriage. Yet, nobody seems happy with the show. As one of the show’s creators, Mark Olsen, noted in a 2006 interview with The New York Times, “the pro-polygamists think it’s too dark … The anti-polygamists don’t think it’s dark enough” (Lee, 2006, p. E1). The above quotation along with newspaper and magazine coverage of the show presents the polygamy argument as a two-sided debate – proponents and opponents of polygamy. However, a review of
audience responses reveals six publics centered on the polygamy debate. These six publics include LDS members, polyamory participants, practicing polygamists, gay marriage opponents, those who believe polygamy leads to negative social outcomes, and those who articulate polygamy as a positive or neutral practice.

In this section, I explore the aforementioned publics who emerge during the *Big Love* debate by exploring a number of textual fragments that compose audience responses to the controversy. In particular, audience responses emerged through a variety of forms including through message board posts, a press release from pro-polygamy.com, and through interviews published in newspaper and magazine coverage surrounding the *Big Love* premiere. These publics were identified via several close readings of the message board postings, press release, and newspaper articles. After a close reading for general tone, a secondary reading was conducted to identify publics. Publics were then reconstructed, modified, added, and deleted during subsequent readings. For example, after the initial reading, polyamory participants and polygamists were lumped under one heading. However, after a second reading they were deemed to independent publics. Moreover, the public of gay marriage opponents was identified through the second reading.

Although a number of textual fragments are incorporated, audience responses are primarily garnered through three *Big Love* message boards consisting of 330 unique posts. The first message board is hosted by The Coffeerooms and consists of approximately 111 posts within the four month time frame, between January 12, 2006 and May 12, 2006, surrounding the show’s premiere (“The Coffeerooms,” 2006). The second message board, hosted by TV Squad Web site, follows a four paragraph article
about the *Big Love* premiere and contains 16 posts (“Real-life polygamists,” 2006). The third message board is HBO’s bulletin board concerning the pilot episode of the show and consists of 203 postings within the selected time frame (“Pilot,” 2006). These message boards were selected primarily because of their availability – not all *Big Love* message boards contain postings surrounding the time of the premiere.

Additionally, a second set of textual fragments comprising audience responses is derived from the 24 pieces of newspaper and magazine coverage identified in the previous section. Although the news coverage, in part, constructs the controversy, some articles also consist of audience responses (see Tierney, 2006). In particular, some newspaper articles include interviews with stakeholders in the polygamy debate, including polygamists and former practicing polygamists.

Remaining out of the mainstream media, polygamy proponents generally have not had voice(s) in the conversation. However, *Big Love* provided them a platform through which to articulate their arguments. The attention, although somewhat minimal, paid to polygamists in this instance reflects the ability of a social controversy to expand the public sphere to incorporate those who may have been marginalized in the past (Ono & Sloop, 1999). Therefore, in addition to message board postings and news coverage, a press release from pro-polygamy.com is incorporated in order to garner audience response from polygamy advocates.

Through a close textual analysis of audience responses, six publics emerge as being most predominant among the responses. These different publics are engaged in debates pertaining to the relationship between polygamy and gay marriage, the definition of polygamy, and the effects of polygamy. In what follows, I explore the emergent
publics and the ways in which these publics are responding to the premiere episode and news coverage surrounding *Big Love*.

In particular, I first identify the question to which the public’s claim might correspond. As noted earlier, conventional understandings of stasis limit our ability to understand contemporary public controversy because stasis is generally understood in binary terms (two sides of a debate). However, contemporary conceptions of controversy reflect the understanding that multiple sides exist in any given debate. I propose that we conceptualize stasis, not as a binary concept, but rather as one in which each public believes a claim in relation to a question. Some of the questions to which publics are responding are articulated in the show’s premiere, newspaper coverage, and message board postings; others more implicitly derived from the events surrounding *Big Love*.

*Defining Polygamy & Polygamist*

The first three publics’ arguments center on the questions: What is polygamy?; Who are polygamists? Audience members answer these questions in a variety of ways. In particular, analysis of audience responses reveals three publics that attempt to negotiate the definitions of polygamy and polygamists in order to either reduce or create distance between themselves and the practice. The first public consists of members and representatives of the mainstream LDS church attempting to create a distance between themselves and polygamy. Second, those engaged in polyamory, independent of religious beliefs, seek to define themselves within the polygamist movement. Third, practicing polygamists, those with religious rationale for the practice, seek to define themselves apart from the representations of polygamists on *Big Love*. 
LDS Members

LDS members seek to define polygamy in order to separate themselves from their fundamentalist, polygamy practicing, counterparts in the FLDS. In other words, LDS members appear to be responding to the question, “Isn’t this a show about Mormons?” by fervently arguing that the show is not about their religious group. Moreover, they could be seen as addressing the question “Who are polygamists?”; “We aren’t!” being their answer. LDS members may see this question about the relationship between polygamy, Big Love, and the Mormon church as deriving from a variety of factors surrounding the show’s premiere, including the show’s setting in Salt Lake City, responses from other message board respondents insinuating the relationship, and the historical roots of polygamy within the Mormon church. As an important note, members of the LDS have continued their crusade against Big Love subsequent to the first season, particularly due to an episode which shows the inside of a Mormon temple.

News coverage surrounding the show’s premiere indicates that LDS members and spokespersons seek to define polygamy and polygamists in opposition to the church. Wheat (2006) indicates that Big Love has “just one commandment: Thou shall not call them Mormons” (para. 1). Similarly, Moore (2006) refers to Big Love as “another media headache” for LDS (p. A1). Moore (2006) further argues that the “church fielded myriad inquiries and sent a letter to local church leaders across the country warning of the potential confusion [between polygamists and LDS] and asking for help in clarifying its position” (p. A1). Otterson, a spokesperson for LDS, in an interview with USA Today indicates that “we don’t like the program. There is nothing about the program for us to like” (as cited in Jayson, 2006, p. D2). Otterson adds that “because Mormons have been
historically associated with polygamy in the 1800s, we tend to be caught in the wake of it. From our point view as a church, that was over a century ago. We’ve moved way beyond this” (as cited in Jayson, 2006, p. D2).

In addition to news coverage, message board responses also demonstrate the desire by LDS members to distinguish themselves and their practices from polygamy. R. Cass, posting on the TV Squad message board, argues that “as a member of the REAL Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, I have to say that first, we do NOT condone polygamy! Second, we do not condone this show!” (“Real-life polygamists,” 2006). While R. Cass articulates a dislike for both polygamy and the show, not all LDS respondents indicate a dislike for the show based on the depiction of polygamy. George Costanza asserts alternative reasons for his dislike, “I too am a member of the LDS church; but unlike most members, I have HBO and actually watched the show. I think it is boring. I think HBO is going for cheap entertainment and focusing too much time on viagra [sic] and sex” (“Real-life polygamists,” 2006). GR in an open letter to HBO posted on the TV Squad message board traces the roots of polygamy in Mormonism:

There are apostate Mormons that do practice polygamy, primarily in Utah. But even if you take inflated estimates of up to 50,000 apostate Mormons polygamists and compare that to the main body of Mormons that do not practice polygamy, it is less than one half of one percent. Yet due to shows like “Big Love,” the perception remains that polygamy is rampant in the Mormon church, and that most Mormons embrace polygamy as acceptable, when the opposite is true. (“Real-life polygamists,” 2006)
As GR’s post notes, the media often conflates Mormonism with polygamy. Moreover, poterr on HBO’s bulletin board asserts that “placing the series in Salt Lake City, the international headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is enough to blur the line between the modern church and the program’s subject matter” (“Pilot,” 2006). Although the LDS church swore off polygamy in the 19th century, members of the church appear concerned about HBO’s portrayal of polygamy on Big Love – regardless of the disclaimer at the end of the pilot.

LDS audience members who are attempting to create distance between polygamy and their faith are, in part, responding to postings by other audience members. ButterfliesnPro argues that the church does not (did not) feel polygamy is wrong, but rather “the reason for the church not continuing the practice was … [that] the Church believes in honoring the law of the land and so they had no other choice but to discontinue polygamy” (“Pilot,” 2006). As such, LDS members defend the church by asserting that the church does believe in its stance. As angelique5 indicates, “I just want to throw out, that I’m LDS…Do I believe the LDS current stand on it [polygamy], yes” (“Real-life polygamists,” 2006). In other words, the LDS members’ desire to distance themselves from polygamy may be a response to other audience members who insinuate – or say directly – that the church does not believe its own stance towards polygamy.

Polyamory Participants

While members of LDS attempt to create distance between themselves and polygamy, those practicing polyamory seek to place their lifestyles under the umbrella of polygamy. While polygamy is predominantly understood to be a spiritual marriage between one man and multiple women, polyamory is a relationship in which multiple
partners with varying, non religious rationales are in relationships. Although LDS members are responding to the question, “Isn’t this show about Mormons?” those engaged in polyamory appear to be responding to the question, “Isn’t polygamy based on religion?” Moreover, these particular individuals might be answering questions about the rationale for engaging in polygamy such as “Isn’t it self-centered to be in the middle of a polygamous relationship?” This particular public could be seen as responding to other publics who make claims about the religious aspects of polygamy, the moral aspects of the practice, and the negative consequences for those involved in polygamy relationships.

On HBO’s bulletin board, several individuals define themselves as polygamists. However, none of these individuals believe or practice polygamy for religious reasons. Charlayned in a March 20, 2006 post first indicates her role in a polyamorous relationship when she explains, “their [the Henricksons] poly relationship is MUCH different than ours. They have three houses with three separate families linked by one male and a big back yard. Our is one male with two wives” (“Pilot,” 2006). She goes on to note that “we’re not Christians” (“Pilot,” 2006). Jbdenny notes that he is the patriarch in a marriage including two women and himself. Similarly, Trillian3 notes that she is currently practicing polyandry (“Pilot,” 2006).

These individuals define themselves as being in polygamous relationships although they explicitly argue that they have non-religious reasons for their relationships. Charlayned explains that she encouraged her husband to take a second wife because she suffers from fibromyalgia. Jbdenny offers no rationale behind his polygamous relationship, but notes that he is “not religious” (“Pilot,” 2006). Moreover, Trillian3 notes
that her polyandry derived from meeting a man, other than her husband, who she “fell head over heals [sic] for” (“Pilot,” 2006).

The individuals who divulge their polyamory both define themselves as polygamists and seek to defend their lifestyles. While others on the bulletin board argue that the relationships described should be considered an “open marriage” or “threesomes,” those involved argue that religious rationale is not the only justification for polygamy. Moreover, the polyamory respondents appear to be drawn to the message boards to reveal their identity in hopes of defending their lifestyles. On the HBO bulletin board those practicing polyamory directly refute the claims of others who have posted on the Web site. As Jbdenny argues, “if I were using polygamy as an excuse to have a new cute lady to have convenient sex with then I would expect to take grief for it” (“Pilot,” 2006). Alandry722 claims that “marriage is a commitment between TWO people … If you were totally and completely satisfied with your relationship with your wife – why would you even seek out a second wife?” (“Pilot,” 2006). To alandry722’s argument, Jbdenny replies “do not pretend to tell us what our level of commitment is … I have not slammed your lifestyle choice so do not slam ours” (“Pilot,” 2006).

Those engaged in polyamory may be responding to the claims made by others about the practice of polygamy. Although these individuals could, and are encouraged to, define themselves using other terms (e.g. threesomes, open marriages, etc.), they choose the term polygamists. The rationale behind identification as a polygamist is unknown – one could only speculate why the choice of label. However, rhetorically, identifying one’s self as a polygamist has legal and moral implications. Identifying oneself as a polygamist certainly risks conflation with polygamists within the FLDS who are
perceived not only as Other, but, in the wake of recent polygamist controversies, as child molesters. Moreover, placing oneself within the realm of polygamy is also making an open statement about the illegality of one’s lifestyle. These implications are the exact implications LDS members are attempting to avoid by defining themselves and their religious beliefs in opposition of polygamy. Overall, those who seek identification as a polygamist differentiate themselves from the polygamists depicted in *Big Love*, but remain adamant in their claims about the practice of polygamy as a whole.

*Practicing Polygamists*

Those engaged in polygamist marriages, similar to LDS members, articulate a desire to distinguish themselves in opposition to both of the polygamist representations on *Big Love*. Polygamists are claiming that *Big Love* stereotypes, misrepresents, and sensationalizes polygamy. Evidently, polygamists appear to be responding to questions about polygamy including: “Isn’t polygamy, for the men, all about access to women for sexual pleasure?”; “Isn’t the depiction of Juniper Creek the normal polygamist situation and the Henrickson women an exception?” This particular public clearly is responding to particular components of the show including sex scenes among Bill and his wives, the lack of religion incorporated in the show’s premiere, the depiction of polygamists at Juniper Creek, and the openly gay status of the show’s creators.

Lee (2006) sat down with a group of polygamist women to view the premiere episode of *Big Love*. In regard to *Big Love*, the polygamist women Lee (2006) interviewed “did have some worries” (p. E1). As one interviewee noted, “my concern is that this will stereotype and cause more prejudice from the mainstream Latter-day Saints
Church” (p. E1). Polygamists were concerned before and after the premiere of Big Love because of the way their lives had been depicted in the past.

While the women said that “Big Love” had too much skin and not enough religion or humor for their taste, they agreed it portrayed the Henricksons [sic] like any other American family, especially in an era of mixed marriages of all sorts, gay partnerships, single parents and serial monogamy. (Lee, 2006, p. E1)

Lee (2006) further argues that “despite the show’s flaws, these women called ‘Big Love’ a cultural benchmark, one with the potential to cast a warmer light on their lives” (p. E1). In other words, polygamy proponents construct Big Love as a more favorable, and more accurate, account of their lives compared with stereotypes propagated by the mainstream media. However, even as a “cultural benchmark,” polygamists assert that Big Love does not show or tell the complete story.

A response to the show from Polygamy.com (2006) contends that the publicity surrounding Big Love has “caused some concern for actual polygamy rights activists” (“Polygamy Rights,” 2006, para. 2). The response further indicts the show’s openly gay creators, arguing that Big Love “does unnecessarily succumb to the occasional use of gratuitous sex scenes” (“Polygamy Rights,” 2006, para. 7). They further assert that the show “includes a ridiculous sexual sub-plot of unrealistic flirting between the adult youngest wife and the first wife’s young teenage son. Such erroneous focus could also be reflective of the sexual-based aspect of the show’s homosexual creators’ own minds” (“Polygamy Rights,” 2006, para. 7). Overall, while appreciative of the show’s ability to shed light on the rights of polygamists, actual practicing polygamists express concern for the show’s depiction and the potential agenda of the show’s creators.
Gay Marriage Opponents

As noted above, a major concern for polygamists is the agenda of Big Love’s openly gay creators. Both gay marriage and plural marriage, as polygamy is addressed in the show, are considered by some to be “alternative” family structures and discussed in conjunction with one another. The alternative nature of both marriage structures constructs a link which led to increased speculation concerning the show’s public agenda by those in opposition to gay marriage. In addition to practicing polygamists (as discussed above), an additional public, gay marriage opponents, emerges in the argument concerning the relationship between polygamy and gay marriage. Gay marriage opponents argue that if gay marriage were legalized then polygamy must be as well – and, in some cases, vice versa. Speculatively, this public is responding to the question, “Aren’t Big Love’s creators trying to mainstream gay marriage by making polygamy a more tenable concept for the average person?” This particular question concerning the show’s agenda is undoubtedly in relation to the show’s openly gay creators.

Through the use of a slippery slope argument, opponents of polygamy cloud the ongoing social debate influencing the Big Love controversy. While those in favor of polygamy (who do not appear to be polygamists themselves) use rhetoric similar to those in favor of gay marriage, opponents of polygamy also appear to oppose gay marriage. These individuals and organizations construct the “what’s next” argument through their rhetoric. By arguing that the legalization of gay marriage will lead to the legalization of polygamy, proponents are engaged in a slippery slope argument. Contending that one thing (legalization of gay marriage) will lead to another (legalization of polygamist
marriage), the practice of polygamy is placed as a worst-case scenario in the current marriage debates.

The real issue at play in these arguments does not appear to be polygamy, but gay marriage. In relation to *Big Love*, conservative journalist Stanley Kurtz argues that popular culture has a strong influence in setting the social agenda. In responses to Kurtz, Toto (2006) also promotes caution of the media’s influence.

National Review’s Stanley Kurtz contends the series is bent on normalizing polygamy, a precarious point along the “slippery slope” that traditional marriage supporters invoke in voicing their opposition to same-sex “marriage.” Mr. Kurtz’s specific interpretation of “Big Love’s” agenda is debatable. But the larger fear it represents – that popular culture continues its inexorable defining-down of deviancy – can’t be easily written off as mere conservative paranoia. (Toto, 2006, p. D1)

In general, Kurtz and Toto are arguing that popular culture plays a role in what is deemed acceptable and, in their opinion, often sets standards of acceptability that are below their conservative views. However, the gay marriage debate is linked with the polygamy debate even outside of the realm of popular culture’s “defining-down of deviancy” (Toto, 2006, p. D1).

Krauthammer (2006) argues that those in favor of gay marriage (in particular homosexuals) do not want to be lumped with polygamists. He argues that homosexuals “do not want to be in the same room as polygamists,” but notes that the rhetoric used by the two groups is strikingly similar (p. A11). While Krauthammer (2006) claims to be ambivalent about gay marriage, he does command “don’t tell me that we can make one
radical change in the one-man, one-woman rule and not be open to the claim of others
that their reformation be given equal respect” (p. A11). This argument asserts that if gay
marriage were to be legalized, polygamy could be next. Similarly, Urbaeterna, in a March
17, 2006 post to HBO’s bulletin board, defends his stance on traditional family units
when he argues “I’m not [singling out Big Love as a negative influence]. I have made the
same observations about many other popular entertainment programs that promote the
gay agenda … I believe Big Love is going to be a vehicle to promote ambiguity about the
family” (“Pilot,” 2006). Moreover, Don Wilson writing on the TV Squad message board,
contends that “if you allow gay marriage than you must accept polygamy, too” (“Real-
life polygamists,” 2006). This sentiment is repeated by The Jeremy when he notes, “if
gay marriage becomes legal, it opens the door to legalizing polygamy” (“Real-life
polygamists,” 2006).

While not identifying specific groups or individuals, Jayson (2006) contends that
“some opponents of same-sex marriage say Big Love’s gay creators are making a
statement with a show about polygamy” (para. 17). Although the show’s creators assert
that the show was never an attempt to help normalize same-sex marriage by normalizing
plural marriage, the co-creators’ openly gay status served as evidence for those opposed
to gay marriage and polygamy. Overall, it is apparent that some members of the public
who assert that legalizing gay marriage will lead to polygamy are truly opponents of gay
marriage rather than polygamy. However, this particular argument functions to “redeem”
those against gay marriage by allowing them to (re)define the problem as polygamy, not
same-sex marriage; insinuating that legalizing gay marriage will be the equivalent of
opening Pandora’s box in terms of acceptable marriage arrangements.
While the gay marriage debate has claimed headlines and has reached new heights of social acceptability, polygamy has not. Yet, only one post seeks to create distance between the two. Alandry722’s March 22, 2006 posting on HBO’s bulletin board asserts:

I was very upset when gay marriage was banned because when there are two people very in love and want to show their commitment to one another – why should their gender stop them. But legalizing polygamy relationships would totally disgust me…not only because I personally don’t believe in them, but because of how the world would just go to shit because of it. You’d have stupid women everywhere allowing their husbands to have multiple wives for fear of losing them. (“Pilot,” 2006)

Alandry722’s posting illustrates the desire to differentiate polygamy from gay marriage based on the notion of commitment. However, her statement stands alone among those that mention gay marriage. As Olsen, one of the co-creators of *Big Love*, argues “if there is a group more ostracized than polygamists, then I don’t know who it is” (as cited in Moylan, 2006, para. 3). The ability of opponents of gay marriage to (re)construct their arguments as being against polygamy further demonstrates the general standing of polygamy as being socially unacceptable. Polygamy as a worst-case outcome of the legalization of gay marriage provides justification for some individuals who oppose gay marriage. Opponents of gay marriage are not necessarily redefining their position, but rather are providing justification for their stance.

*Polygamy Outcomes*

The final set of publics emerging from audience responses concerns the implications of polygamy. In particular, two broad publics emerge – those who believe
that polygamy is not inherently negative and those who argue that polygamy is intrinsically problematic. Importantly, these publics along with the four that have been previously discussed, consist of members who appear in multiple publics. For instance, a member of the public who believes that polygamy has negative consequences may also be a member of the LDS and a member of the public in opposition to gay marriage. However, the arguments crafted by the aforementioned publics do not fully explore the consequences that do, or do not, reside within the practice of polygamy. These publics are responding to the question of the inherent nature of polygamy itself. Therefore, while some individuals will be members of multiple publics, just as in all public controversies, the theme consisting of the consequences of polygamy should not be conflated with previously mentioned publics.

**Negative Outcomes**

Those in opposition to legalization of polygamy express direct concern about the practice. This particular audience may be responding to the question, “What is so bad about polygamy?” This particular question arises, in part, because of the mainstream depiction of the Henrickson family. These individuals are depicted as being the typical suburban household with a twist. However, this particular audience may also be drawn in by the depiction of Juniper Creek, the fundamentalist polygamist compound on Big Love.

One of the major concerns expressed is in relation to forced and underage marriage. Nathan Mordecal argues on the TV Squad message board, “the polygamists abuse marriage by forcing little girls to marry old men and practicing incest” (“Real-life polygamists,” 2006). Mention of this concern is in part a response to the Big Love premiere and the show’s overarching subject, as an April 2, 2006 post notes:
The [LDS] church has long been concerned about the illegal practice of polygamy in some communities, and in particular about persistent reports of emotional and physical child and wife abuse emanating from them … it will be regrettable if this program … minimizes the seriousness of that problem and adds to the suffering of abuse victims. (“Pilot,” 2006).

The notion that polygamy leads to abuse is prominent among audience members who oppose polygamy – many of which may have been alarmed by *Big Love*’s Juniper Creek compound and the character of Roman Grant. ShivasGhost, in light of the fictional Juniper Creek polygamists, postulates “the other thing I did not find [in the premiere] is that the children do not show the effects of the inbreeding that plagues these isolated societies. One only has to visit large polygamist communities” (“Pilot,” 2006).

“Polygamy is very much like it is on Roman's compound and you would be real pressed to find anyone living in Utah that lives the way Bill and his lovely wives do,” Lilmonkey81 notes (“The Coffeerooms,” 2006). Still, others contend that the number of children produced in polygamist marriages leads to neglect. “Too many children get left behind,” asserts alandry722. She then adds, “there are already too many men making their contribution and bailing, those numbers would drastically increase if you gave them the right to have multiple wives” (“Pilot,” 2006).

Athenaxx, unhappy by the Henrickson depiction of polygamy, argues that the show “is a very sanitized look at the practice. Its [sic] a patriarchal practice with men hold[ing] all the power. Wives do not access to their own earnings like Barb, and certainly never use their husbands [sic] credit cards” (“Pilot,” 2006). Moreover, meadowlight notes “polygamy isn’t just another lifestyle choice. It inherently favors
some men over many other men. It encourages the elder males in a society to run off the younger males” (“Pilot,” 2006). In meadowlight’s case, (s)he states that (s)he is responding to the character of Roman Grant, Nicki’s father and leader of Juniper Creek because (s)he notes, “it is easy to see how Ramon [sic] got his power and how he uses it” (“Pilot,” 2006). “I too am on the side of being against it [polygamy],” writes Kanbi, “especially with the things I have seen in the news recently of one of the leaders [Warren Jeffs] of a sect of that church (a true Roman if you will), who is currently on the FBI's most wanted list for multiple crimes” (“The Coffeerooms,” 2006). Although recognizing the possibility of polygamy occurring without child abuse and neglect, grizzlyjohnson believes there is a strong link, “the reality of it is that the practice of polygamy around here [Utah] is nearly always inseparable from the abuse and neglect inherent in the religious philosophies that invariably accompany it” (“Pilot,” 2006). He further notes that “reality is much closer to what was shown [on Big Love] in the ‘compound’” (“Pilot,” 2006). In the case of Kanbi and grizzlyjohnson’s posts, they are calling on both the show and their knowledge of polygamy through news and first hand experiences.

In addition to concerns about child abuse, forced marriage, and neglect, some opponents of polygamy indicate that jealousy is a consequence of polygamy. Alandry722 notes, “of all the polygamist relationships I have witnessed – at least one person is completely dissatisfied and stays in the relationship just for fear of losing the one they love the most” (“Pilot,” 2006). In a similar post, she notes, “I believe that women and men who accept polygamy are weak. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know that anyone who is truly unconditionally in love would never be happy knowing that the person you love is being intimate with someone else” (“Pilot,” 2006). “I do like seeing
the [Henrickson] wives act up because I think realistically, they would act out and get jealous,” notes seedparty (“Pilot,” 2006). This “acting up” may be based upon the actions taken by Barb and Nicki in the premiere episode during which Barb initially refuses to turn her paycheck over to Bill, and Nicki racks up an exorbitant credit card bill.

Those who oppose polygamy use the negative outcomes associated with the practice to construct an argument about polygamy as a whole. These arguments, one could argue, would be no different if Big Love did not exist. However, Big Love serves as the exigency and provides a space for the argument to be articulated. Moreover, as noted above, audience members utilize the show’s premiere and news coverage either as evidence or as a point of criticism within their posts.

Neutral or Positive Outcomes

In terms of the debate surrounding the implications of the practice of polygamy, a public emerges which sees polygamy as either neutral or positive. This broad public consists of polygamists, those in polyamorous relationships, and individuals not in a plural relationship (at least not explicitly) who argue for the neutrality of the practice. Their claim that polygamy does not necessarily have negative outcomes or that the outcomes can be positive is in response to the question, “Doesn’t polygamy hurt women and children?” Those who speak to the neutral or positive nature of polygamy appear to be responding to the negative depiction of Juniper Creek on Big Love, news coverage that discusses the negative elements of polygamy, and by other message board postings.

Appearing to respond to the Juniper Creek depiction, Trillian3 asserts that “you need to understand that polygamy cannot be defined and understood by the very narrow view of 1 controlling man, 6 wives and 18 children living on a compound” (“Pilot,”
In Trillian3’s post she is defending herself and her polyamorous lifestyle against claims by other message board participants concerning child abuse in polygamist relationships. Similarly, polyamorous participant Jbdenney attempts to break the link between polygamy and abuse when he asserts, “there is always the argument that if we allow anyone to determine what is an acceptable relationship animals and children are always brought up … there is an easy answer to this. It is Consent” (“Pilot,” 2006). He further notes, “multiple partner, same sex or group marriages are not by their very form abusive or bad” (“Pilot,” 2006).

However, even some audience members who do not associate as polygamous or polyamorous argue against postings by those in opposition to polygamy. BigLoveMormonFan writes, “whether a marriage is successful all depends on the participants … be they monogs or polygs” (“Pilot,” 2006). Similarly, BookWoman56 argues, “polygamy does not have to involve older men taking child brides, welfare abuse, and the other charges usually discussed when polygamy is denounced” (“Pilot,” 2006).

Those who attempt to acquit polygamy also demonstrate that plural relationships do not necessarily create hard feelings among those involved. Dras, who explicitly notes that he is not in a plural relationship, takes on the jealousy and commitment argument made by polygamy opponents:

Once again, the only argument I’m seeing about the negatives of polyamorous relationships is ‘it doesn’t seem like love/commitment to me.’ Which is fine, it doesn’t have to. However, for some people it is both love and a relationship. For them, it works. There is nothing inherent to a poly relationship that doesn’t exist in a monogamous one. Concerns of fidelity, jealousy, commitment … I’ve known
poly families. They have the same issues as regular families. There are concerns about manipulation, abuse, etc. as any other relationship. (“Pilot,” 2006)

Moreover, BipolarBear contends, “I know many married couples and at least one person in each of these couples has expressed unhappiness” (“Pilot,” 2006). CalamityDan reiterates BipolarBear’s belief when he facetiously notes, “as opposed to monogamous relationships, where everything is just ducky all the time ☺” (“Pilot,” 2006).

Whereas some audience members attempt to demonstrate that monogamous marriages are susceptible to the very same pitfalls of polygamist marriages, others seek to position polygamy as a superior lifestyle. Dras indicates, “I’ve got some friends who are polygamist and some who are polyandrous. They’ve been together longer than 90% of the marriages in the US. Healthier and better adjusted to boot” (“Pilot,” 2006). Additionally, charlayned finds that her polygamist marriage favors both her and the other woman in her plural relationship, “I am grateful that my husband is happy with our second wife. I am too. We have a very solid relationship. We each have our time with our husband, and we have time with each other as well” (“Pilot,” 2006). Furthermore, PrincessKeona notes, “I can see [polygamy] being beneficial to both the woman and the man … the wife gets to share the burdens of wifehood and motherhood with other women who might potentially become best friends with her” (“The Coffeerooms,” 2006). The notion that the women can become best friends may be drawn upon the depicted relationship among Bill Henrickson’s wives – particularly at the start of the premiere episode in which Nicki gives Margene a lavish gift.
One audience member neither promotes nor talks about the neutrality of polygamy, but rather asserts that underage marriage is perhaps cultural rather than explicitly negative. Kami offers a culturally based reading of the consequences:

Lots of cultures around the world are different. In some cultures that 20 or 21 year old girl would be considered an old maid; a spinster, if you will, if she had not yet married and had kids by now. I'm not saying that it's right or wrong. But leave it up to us, in the western part of the world, to only focus on what we think is right or wrong, in the eyes of God, in our own back yards. (“The Coffeerooms,” 2006).

While Kami stands alone in providing cultural justifications for the marriage of young women in polygamist marriages, her response fits, albeit loosely, within the public which attempts to break the intrinsic claim proposed by those in opposition of polygamy.

Overall, two general publics emerge surrounding the debate over the consequences and implications of polygamy. Within each of these publics there exist variations of stances taken. While the large number of deviations makes it nearly impossible and relatively useless to address each one as a separate public, it should be noted that the variations among the publics – particularly within this theme – exist. Those opposed to polygamy articulate the negative outcomes as a way to show disapproval for the practice as a whole. Those who argue that polygamy is not intrinsically or inherently bad, has benefits, or should be understood within a cultural context, may not necessarily desire to be polygamists or promote polygamy. Rather, they express a desire for polygamy to be understood without making generalized judgments about the practice. Both sides develop their arguments based in part on the depiction of polygamy in the show, but also appear to be responding to one another in order to defend their positions.
and argue their beliefs. Since no agreement was reached in the heated debates both on HBO’s bulletin board and The Coffeeroom’s *Big Love* message board, the verdict over the guilt of polygamy remains unknown and becomes a resting point for the larger *Big Love* controversy as well as the polygamy debate as a whole.

Implications

Through the exploration of the six prominent publics emerging from audience responses in the Big Love controversy, theoretical implications can be drawn. Theoretically, we can expand the notion of controversy, challenge the traditional conception of stasis, and (re)interpret the voices present in a controversy.

*Expanding Controversy*

Controversy has previously been presented as having only two sides of an argument. As demonstrated in this chapter, that is an overly simplistic understanding of controversy. Across the three broad themes (defining of polygamy, gay marriage, and consequences of polygamy), six publics emerge. However, even within these six publics each response reflects a variant of a public. While the media presents the issue as being pro-polygamy and anti-polygamy, this is simply not the case. Moreover, an individual audience member may be a member of multiple publics. For instance, one could be a member of LDS, a gay marriage opponent, and a polygamy opponent simultaneously. Controversy and debate is messy. The ease of defining publics as anti and pro has clear advantages for media and others reporting or exploring a given controversy, but are unrealistic. Rather, researchers need to reinterpret the ways in which they express and identify publics engaged in debate.
Challenging Stasis

Since multiple publics engage in the Big Love controversy, the reflection of multiple stases in audience responses should be expected. Yet, the rhetorical convention of stasis has previously been relegated to the discussion of two opposing sides. Moreover, as Zarefsky (1990) indicates, a central component of stasis is that it is “the ‘seat’ or ‘resting place’ of the argument” (p. 137). However, Big Love puts all publics on the defensive, forcing audience members to take action to defend their own identities and practices. Interestingly, those responding to the premiere and news coverage then invite others to defend themselves and their beliefs. In other words, this particular controversy has a number of publics simultaneously acting as prosecution and defense. In the Big Love debate, no single stasis serves as the primary point of contention. In fact, connections to conventional definitions of stasis would be, at best, superficial. Rather, the multitude of voices from both sides suppresses any single argument from emerging to dominate the controversy’s discourse. In social controversy, the use of traditional rhetorical devices for understanding a phenomenon is challenged by the various voices and platforms. However, controversy also opens doors for previously muted voices – in this case, proponents of polygamy.

(Re)interpreting Power Relationships

The theoretical concept of controversy has previously been expanded to include the exploration of power relationships. As mentioned previously, this often includes garnering responses from those who are affected by the controversy (Ono & Sloop, 1999). Although multiple publics emerge throughout the debate, one must ask: Is there a public absent that was assumed to be present? In this case, the answer is yes. Polygamists
who provide a religious justification for their lifestyle were nearly absent among audience responses. Religion-based polygamists, such as members of the FLDS, were not represented on the message boards; only Lee (2006) spoke with polygamists who have a religious calling or prophecy. However, Lee only interviewed women and these women were not directly identified as members of an FLDS compound community. Moreover, the press release from pro-polygamy.com is, at best, vague about the constituency which it represents.

The lack of voice from religion-based polygamists is cause for concern – the lack of voice indicates a missing crucial body of textual fragments. *Big Love* brought their lifestyles out of the shadows and into the media spotlight. The important question, however, is not “Whose voice is missing?” but rather “Why is a certain public not represented?” The answer to this question, while speculative, concerns the legality of polygamy and the tradition of the FLDS. Male FLDS members who practice polygamy could be prosecuted and, traditionally, FLDS women are generally not vocal. Those individuals, whose voices are perhaps most important in the debate, are relegated to the sidelines because of the very premise for the debate – the illegal status of polygamy in the United States. Polygamist males, in particular, do not speak out for fear of being arrested whereas polygamist women do not speak out, it appears, by choice. For polygamist males, we cannot begin to guess if they would speak out if able. The choice to speak out does not exist because of the coercive circumstances of the law – if they were to speak out, they could potentially be arrested. However, polygamist women, under the definition of the law, cannot be arrested and tried for polygamy in a court of law. The responsibility
for the act is on the individual who has more than one spouse. Therefore, the lack of
voice from polygamists appears to be simultaneously one of power and avoidance.

Concluding Remarks

Although this chapter offers insight into the *Big Love* controversy, the polygamy
debate, and challenges and expands current theory, it only represents a small fraction of
the overall *Big Love* phenomenon. Future research concerning the show should move past
the premiere episode and explore the changing characterization of polygamy in the
remainder of the first season as well as the second and third seasons. Moreover, audience
research could be gathered through the use of viewing sessions with focus groups and/or
one-on-one interviews. Garnering further audience research may help to gain a greater
understanding of the ways in which, particularly after the Yearning for Zion raid and
Warren Jeffs’ trial, individuals not engaged in polygamy come to interpret and make
sense of the *Big Love* premiere.
CHAPTER 4: THE DEBATE OVER YEARNING FOR ZION RANCH

On April 3, 2008, after an alleged phone call to officials from a 16-year-old girl claiming to have been beaten and raped by her 49-year-old husband, the Texas Rangers entered a Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints’ (FLDS) compound and removed an estimated 416 children (Brady, 2008). The compound, known as Yearning for Zion Ranch (YZR), located in Eldorado, is one of an unknown number of polygamist compounds in the United States (“Mothers of Some,” 2008). During the course of the raid, children living on the compound were removed from the community and placed in foster care and state-run institutions. On May 23, 2008, the Texas appellate court ruled that the children must be returned to their mothers (“12 Polygamist Sect,” 2008). This decision was confirmed on May 29, 2008, when the Texas Supreme Court ruled that the children were illegally removed from the compound (Blumenthal, 2008b). The controversy surrounding the investigation into child molestation and forced marriage at YZR garnered tremendous amounts of local, state, and national publicity through a variety of media including radio, television, newspapers, and magazines. Moreover, the coverage of the event served as the exigency for audience responses to the Yearning for Zion controversy as a whole.

In this chapter, I first offer an overview of newspaper coverage between April 3rd and May 29th in five newspapers including USA Today, The Dallas Morning News, The Washington Post, The New York Times, and Houston Chronicle. The Washington Post, The New York Times, and USA Today were selected because they are three of the five highest circulating newspapers in the United States and incorporate divergent viewpoints (“Top 100 Newspapers,” 2006). The Dallas Morning News and Houston Chronicle were
included because they are the highest circulating newspapers in Texas, the same state in which the YZR compound was located.

Second, I identify four publics that emerge in responses, via letters to the editor, to the coverage. Some respondents engage in contextualization. In particular, attention shifters point to issues in mainstream society. A second emergent public takes up the notion of blame. Specifically, individual rights supporters do not take a clear stance on polygamy, but articulate disapproval for the raid. In other words, this particular public places blame on Child Protective Services and law enforcement officials. Contrastingly, anti-polygamists utilize the raid as proof for the immorality and illegality of the practice of polygamy. A fourth public consists of coverage critics. This audience contends that newspaper coverage of the raid is incomplete, in part, because the coverage does not focus specifically on the accused polygamist men.

In conjunction with discussion about the emergent publics, I articulate the ways in which newspaper coverage may have served as the basis for the identified publics to articulate their positions. In other words, I seek to answer the question: In what ways does newspaper coverage provide the grounds for specific arguments, reflective of different publics, to be articulated? The changing nature of the newspaper coverage in addition to the variety of viewpoints taken in the articles and editorials creates a complex controversy thus providing space for publics to emerge.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The enormity of the raid and the charges leveled seem rather incomprehensible and led to the need for those outside of the ranch to make sense of the situation. The ways in which publics make sense of the allegations and the raid are perhaps best understood in
this analysis as “sensemaking devices.” That is, when something strikes us as “wrong,” we try to make sense of it whether we’re experiencing cognitive dissonance, trying to manage a damaged public image, or sorting through a seemingly overwhelming number of women and children treated like property (either by the “husband/fathers” or by the state “fathers” of the CPS).

Weick (1995) in a brief analysis of the sensemaking incurred in light of “The Battered-Child Syndrome” (BCS) indicates criteria by which sensemaking is characterized. First, he notes that an incident occurs in which “something in the form of a surprise, a discrepant set of cues, something does not fit” (Weick, 1995, p. 2). Second, sensemaking is reflective. Third, once an incident occurs and is reflected upon, plausible explanations “are offered to explain the cues and their relative rarity” (p. 2). Fourth, the speculations are brought to the attention of others. In the case of BCS, findings of child injuries were published in a journal article, as for the FLDS controversy the news media serve the information dissemination role. Finally, Weick (1995) asserts that “issues of identity and reputation [being] involved” are essential components of sensemaking. Weick’s general ideas are specifically evident in two particular forms of sensemaking including modes of cognitive dissonance resolution and apologia.

Weick’s understanding of the process of sensemaking is rooted in cognitive dissonance theory which itself is based in Abelson’s modes of cognitive conflict resolution (Weick, 1995). Cognitive dissonance addresses the ways in which individuals attempt to negotiate their own actions with their sense of self – negotiating to maintain consistency between our actions and presentation of self. However, through sensemaking we strive not necessarily to deal with our own actions and self, but rather, according to
Weick, to understand our role in organizational settings. In terms of the YZR controversy, instead of sensemaking to find our role/identity/place in an organization, publics do so to find their role/identity/place as citizens in a polity faced with a controversy. Through the modes of cognitive dissonance resolution, individuals try to make sense of their own reactions to the raid. The four publics’ responses are articulated in contrast and/or in support of newspaper coverage in terms of both images and print. The responses demonstrate interplay between an audience member’s articulated beliefs and that individual’s reaction to the coverage. At times, sensemaking occurs as a form of conflict between the respondent’s beliefs and the coverage.

Conflict between some individuals’ beliefs and newspaper coverage materializes in tangible form in letters to the editor. This conflict might be best understood by understanding it as a form of dissonance. Abelson (1959) discusses four ways in which individuals respond to cognitive dissonance incurred through intrapersonal conflict. These four methods include denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence.

(1) Denial is understood as a direct disconfirmation. For instance, a woman who cannot afford a pair of Jimmy Choo shoes may resolve dissonance by arguing that the shoes are ugly.

(2) Bolstering is a “playing up” of the positive aspects of a certain object, belief, or practice in order to subordinate the negative aspects. For instance, a young woman could play up the belief that her boyfriend is attractive to subordinate his inferior qualities, such as a lack of ambition.

(3) Differentiation is when “an element may be split into two parts with a strong dissociative relation between the parts” (Abelson, 1959, p. 345). An example is when an
individual claims to be a vegetarian, but later decides to eat free-range chickens. For this individual, it is not acceptable to eat animals that have been poorly treated, but consumes animals that have been treated humanely (e.g. free range chickens).

(4) The final mode of cognitive conflict is transcendence; when an individual combines the dissonant elements into a larger unit with “some higher purpose” (Abelson, 1959, p. 346). A classic example of transcendence is in reference to “judgment day” aftermath rhetoric. A cult leader who prepares followers for God’s fury would need to rationalize the situation when no evidence of God’s divine intervention took place. Leaders often explain away the absence of God’s fury by stating that the devotion led to salvation for all of society. While a circular argument, this aftermath rhetoric is also reflective of transcendence.

Abelson’s modes of cognitive conflict resolution have been addressed and modified in the rhetorical tradition of apologia (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). As Ware and Linkugel (1973) indicate “we borrow certain concepts and terminology from his [Abelson’s] work, but we often adapt the meanings of those terms for better usage in speech criticism” (p. 275). So while the initial perception of Abelson’s four modes of cognitive conflict resolution may seem intrapersonal, adaptations of his research carry over to the public sphere. Moreover, Ware and Linkugel (1973) argue that the four modes of cognitive conflict resolution should be “considered a factor commonly found in speeches of self-defense” (p. 275). Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) adaptation of Abelson’s modes is important for recognizing the ability of the modes to resonate with modes of public address and interpersonal – rather than intrapersonal – forms of communication.
Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) continued adaptation of Abelson’s modes in terms of apologetic speech forms, reflects the forms’ manifestation in public communication. In this chapter, I position Abelson’s modes of cognitive conflict resolution and apologia as theoretical constructs that do not necessarily help explain the stances taken by audience members, but show how responses are rhetorical constructs. Through the modes, individuals make sense of their own reactions. However, through apologia, publics attempt to convince others how to frame the alleged wrongdoings that occurred on the ranch. In controversy, we need to look at how the multiple opposing sides negotiate spatially, temporally, and conceptually with one another. The four modes of cognitive conflict resolution are not evident in each of the four publics discussed, but illustrate how the publics negotiate elements of the controversy. Specifically, the modes and apologia situate the letters to the editor and invited editorials as responses that move beyond the coverage either through disagreement with editorials or by offering opinions to the events covered in the articles.

However, not all responses emerge as a way to alleviate cognitive dissonance or are engaged in apologia. For instance, individuals in the attention shifter public (discussed below) aren’t accused of doing anything wrong nor do their words offer any evidence that they are sorting through cognitive dissonance. Rather, they engage in a resistance-style strategy which indicates that conditions of children within mainstream society should be reflected upon prior to jumping to conclusions regarding the safety and wellbeing of children at the ranch. The modes and apologia do not necessarily explain the rhetorical function of the publics’ sensemaking devices, but rather situate the ways in which publics responded to the events.
Summary of Newspaper Coverage

The subject of polygamy primarily remained under the public radar prior to the April 12, 2006 premiere of *Big Love*, HBO’s fictional drama about a suburban polygamist family. As the controversy over *Big Love* subsided, FLDS leader Warren Jeffs was placed on the FBI’s most wanted list. In August 2006, Jeffs was arrested and then sentenced to prison on November 20, 2007 (Gaynor, 2007). Subsequently, media attention shifted away from polygamy and the FLDS. However, on April 3, 2008, YZR was invaded on allegations of child abuse. The raid drew media attention not only to the event, but also to the subject of polygamy as a whole. The raid, removal and housing of children taken during the raid, and litigation concerning the raid all led to media attention. On May 29, 2008, the Texas Supreme Court affirmed a May 23rd appellate court ruling that the children be returned to their parents, and the YZR raid faded from the media spotlight. Therefore, the coverage and responses collected represent the time from the initial raid until the Texas Supreme Court’s ruling that the children be returned. However, it must be noted that as of the spring of 2009, the effects of the raid still plague FLDS members who are fearful of another raid (Tresniowski, 2009). An eight page spread in the March 23, 2009 edition of *People* reports that one-third (approximately 200 women and children) have not returned to the ranch for fear of another raid. While ranch members still are affected by the raid, other than a few major pieces of media coverage including the *People* article and a March 30, 2009 Oprah interview with polygamist women, little national coverage exists of the raid and its aftermath.

Throughout the selected dates (April 3, 2008 through May 29, 2008), a total of 360 pieces of newspaper coverage were published in the aforementioned newspapers.
Newspaper coverage, as I am defining it in this chapter, consists of news articles contained or beginning on the front page of the newspaper \((n = 48)\), articles located in sections of the newspaper other than the front page \((n = 126)\), news blurbs that appear on the front page of the newspaper \((n = 14)\), editorials \((n = 18)\), photographs \((n = 133)\) and images such as maps \((n = 21)\). These articles, photographs, and images construct a representation of polygamy in light of the raid on the Yearning for Zion Ranch. News articles discussing the events of the raid were contributed to by staff writers and newswire services such as the Associated Press. In addition to newspaper articles, *The Dallas Morning News* and *The New York Times* also published front page blurbs that gave a brief account of the situation and directed readers to another section of the paper. While one could argue that editorial staff responds to news coverage, they contribute to the media framing of the controversy for their readers. Additionally, photographs and images accompany some news articles, blurbs, and editorials. A total of 154 photographs and images were used to illustrate and give a visual representation of both the raid and polygamists. While the blurbs, articles, photographs, editorials, and images construct the representation, the letters to the editor constitute the audience responses. Once collected from the aforementioned five newspapers, letters to the editor were subjected to several close readings through which four publics emerged.

News coverage of the event changed as the details of the raid became available to the press. For instance, on April 5, 2008, *The Washington Post* and *The Dallas Morning News* reported that a total of 52 girls were removed from the compound (Brooks, 2008; “Texas Takes,” 2008). Similarly, *USA Today* on April 7, 2008, the first day the newspaper covered the raid, reported that 219 women and children were taken from the
compound (Roberts, 2008). However, on May 23, 2008, *USA Today* indicated that “about 450 children” had been taken into state custody (Koch, 2008, p. 3A). While the initial reports centered on the exigency for the raid, child abuse and child molestation in the compound, and polygamy in general, news coverage expanded to also include points of contention concerning the raid and subsequent events.

Initial news coverage of the raid made mention of Warren Jeffs, discussed child abuse and molestation, showed praise for CPS, and explicitly constructed members of YZR as outsiders to mainstream society. Warren Jeffs, former leader of the FLDS, had, at the time of the raid, been captured, put on trial, convicted, and imprisoned for child abuse. The association of Jeffs’ atrocities with the YZR raid undoubtedly contributed to negative connotations for the YZR inhabitants. For example, a front page blurb in *The Dallas Morning News* on April 5, 2008, indicates that “child welfare officials and state troopers took custody of 18 girls who lived at a West Texas religious retreat built by polygamist leader Warren Jeffs, follow[ing] an abuse complaint to state officials” (“Girls at Compound,” 2008, p. 1A). Moreover, an article on April 5, 2008 in *USA Today* notes that “state authorities took custody of 18 girls who were removed with others from a secretive West Texas religious retreat built by polygamist leader Warren Jeffs” (“Texas Takes,” 2008, p. 7A). Additionally, *The Washington Post* asserts that “the sect has been led by Warren Jeffs … In November, Jeffs was sentenced … for being an accomplice to the rape of a 14-year-old girl who wed her cousin in an arranged marriage” (“Officials Face,” 2008, p. A3). Jeffs’ crimes as well as the rationale behind the raid centered on child abuse including underage marriage, physical abuse, and molestation.
The initial coverage concentrated on the rationale behind the raid. Child Protective Services and state authorities indicated suspected child abuse, underage marriage, and molestation in order to achieve the warrant necessary to enter the ranch (“Officials Face, 2008, p. A3). As an April 5, 2009 article in *The New York Times* notes, the girls were removed because law enforcement officials and CPS “had reason to believe they [children] been abused or were at immediate risk of future abuse” (Blumenthal, 2008a). Similarly, a spokesperson for Texas CPS during the raid, indicated in an interview published in the *Houston Chronicle* that “The actions we’ve taken today have nothing to do with religion or lifestyle …. The pure interest is in protecting children from abuse and neglect. That’s what we have done” (Elliot, J., 2008, p. A10).

Little evidence of abuse was found during the initial raid. However, newspaper editorials praised law enforcement officials, CPS, and those who helped to house children and women taken from the ranch. On April 10, 2008, an editorial in *The Dallas Morning News* indicates that “officials didn’t go willy-nilly onto the ranch. They acted on a specific call to a violence shelter from a 16-year-old girl at the ranch…Child Protective Services had the duty to act” (“Valid Investigation,” 2008, p. 11A). The actions of CPS were considered positive, rather than intrusive, because, as editorials indicate, these children were (potential) victims of abuse in part because they lived on the margins of society. Moreover, coverage demonstrated praise for those who helped to house and care for children who were taken from the ranch:

The neighbors they’ve [Eldorado residents] whispered about and worried about from afar are front and center – living in their community centers, eating in their churches and bathing at their local high school. The reaction has been an
outpouring of support: Convenience store owners donating shopping carts full of diapers and dry goods. Church congregations providing three meals a day. Residents with their own financial woes handing the mayor $20 bills to help offset the cost. (Meyer & Ramshaw, 2008a, p. 1A)

Likewise, one Eldorado resident asserts, “they couldn’t have picked a better community for this to have happened” (Elliot & Scharrer, 2008, A1). These initial editorials and coverage demonstrated support for the raid and argued that the children were in a safer environment.

In drawing opposition between sect members who needed taking care of and the heroic mainstream society, *The Dallas Morning News* on April 9, 2008 contended that “rescuers [CPS] found two worlds at ranch” (Meyer & Ramshaw, 2008b, p. 4A). Helen Pfluger, a church leader in Eldorado, reported to the *Houston Chronicle* that “our food made some of them sick … when they had clothing needs, it was impossible to give them what they needed. Where are you going to find a long-sleeve, high-neck, loose-waist, long dress for a 3-year old girl?” (MacCormack & Elliot, 2008, p. A1). Moreover, Carolyn Jessop, author of *Escape*, which tells the story of her own flight from a polygamist marriage, told *The Washington Post* that sect children “have no concept of mainstream society, and their mothers were born into it and have no concept of mainstream culture [sic]” (Slevin, 2008, p. A2).

The contrast between sect members and mainstream society is also reflected in the photographs accompanying newspaper articles. Very few pictures of male sect members were published. However, photographs often included women (who were neither the victims nor accused), and some female children were included (see Image 5). The
photographs were predominantly taken from a distance showing the full length dresses and dark boots worn by the majority of female sect members (see Images 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6).

Image 1. Female members of the FLDS leaving courthouse. Image taken from *Dallas Morning News* Web site.

Image 2. FLDS women talking on cellular phones. Image taken from *Dallas Morning News* Web site.

Image 5. FLDS women entering courthouse. Image taken from USA Today Web site.

Image 6. FLDS women and children leaving YZR. Image taken from USA Today Web site.
Each of the seven photographs above was shown in at least two newspapers during the raid. Moreover, while 133 photographs (many of which are duplicates) accompany news stories, photographs of women and primarily female children being removed during the raid and, later, women entering the courthouse are depicted across all five newspapers. The distance and angle in which the photographs were taken may or may not have been due to photographers’ intentions; there were restrictions on how close to the compound news media were allowed. However, the distancing also occurs at the
court – no explicit regulations concerning space from the women at the courthouse were articulated in news coverage. These image, undoubtedly, reinforce news content which indicated the difference between mainstream society and sect members. The women are shown at a distance illustrating their archaic dress and are often depicted against modern architecture and objects. The physical distance connotes a symbolic cultural difference between polygamist women and mainstream society. This cultural difference is also reinforced in the contrast between modern architecture and the old-fashioned apparel and hairstyle. For instance, Images 1 and 6 are photographs of sect women with their pastel dresses in opposition to the stark contrast of the cement courthouse. Moreover, in Image 2 the women are shown using cell phones, in Image 5 they are boarding a school bus, and in Image 6 a woman is carrying a water bottle. These modern objects and technology, in juxtaposition against the women’s clothing, helps to visually depict the stark contrast discussed in the newspaper articles and editorials. While the distance and background architecture depict the difference between the women and mainstream society, items within the women’s possession suggest that they are simultaneously in two worlds. The women chose to have and utilize the items. The two sides of this difference – being of a separate “world” or maneuvering between two very different “worlds” – are not in complete opposition to one another. Rather, the women who predominantly were absent from mainstream society were drawn out into mainstream society due to the controversy and these modern objects have a place in the other “world.” For instance, cell phones, while a contemporary object, were utilized on the ranch prior to and subsequent of the raid (Thompson, 2009a). Additionally, the women are shown in contrast to male authority figures (see images 6 & 7). These images show the men looking after the
women and children. However, the males shown are most often law enforcement officials while polygamist men are nearly absent in the photographs; only 11% \( (n = 17) \) of all photographs and images depict an adult male sect member. Law enforcement officials are figures of modern authority whereas the absent FLDS males reference the absent polygamist husbands. Although early coverage attempted to create distance between polygamists and mainstream society, coverage of the events expanded over time to include additional elements of the controversy.

While early coverage and editorials focused on Jeffs, child abuse, the marginality of those living in YZR, and the positive nature of CPS’ actions, newspaper coverage changed as the controversy continued. Specifically, rather than just reporting on the raid as an act taken to ensure the safety of children, points of debate within the controversy were discussed. This occurred as more evidence and information became available, and as the trial came nearer. First, the caller who instigated the raid was identified as Rozita Swinton, a woman who was notorious for filing false claims, living in Colorado Springs (Fahrenthold, 2008). Swinton’s record of previous false reports appears in The Washington Post:

The affidavit said that in previous years, Swinton had been linked to other tales of terrifying abuse. In one, a woman calling herself Dana Anderson phoned a hot-line to say that she was 13 years old and had been locked in a basement and sexually abused by her father. In another, a girl calling herself Dana said she was abused by a youth pastor at a Colorado church. (Fahrenthold, 2008, p. A2). Swinton not only made the phone call that led to the raid, but had been making calls indicating that she was an abused sect member to Flora Jessop, a former FLDS member.
who helps women and children escape the sect (Scharrer & Sandberg, 2008). Although little is reported about Swinton, there is evidence indicating that she garnered information about the sect from published escape narratives (Farenthold, 2008). The evidence revealing that that the phone call behind the raid was a hoax led to speculation about the legality of the raid.

A second point of contention highlighted by the media concerns the ages of alleged minors who were removed from the ranch. A month after the initial raid, CPS concluded that some of the children taken into custody were adults. For instance, one of the alleged minors who gave birth while in state custody was later deemed to be of legal age to marry (Garrett, 2008a). Only a few days after the new mother was found to be an adult, a second woman, Louisa Bradshaw, was able to prove that she was 22-years old, rather than a minor. *The Houston Chronicle* takes note of the mistakes made by CPS: “It [Jessop’s age dispute] was the second admission this week by an agency official acknowledging that a pregnant female once considered in a ‘disputed age’ category was now deemed to be an adult” (Sandberg, 2008, p. B6). The ages of some of the women who were taken away from the ranch during the raid served as a point of contention just as the reported total number of children removed climbed over the course of the reporting on the controversy.

The third point of contention concerns the total number of displaced sect members. As mentioned previously, the actual number of individuals displaced was around 550 (416 children and 139 adult women), rather than the initially reported 52. [Please note that the total number continues to be disputed]. As *The Dallas Morning News* reported on April 12, 2008, “the raid’s scale … and that the 16-year-old has not
been identified, have sharply eroded the trust in the government” (Johnson, 2008a, p. 3A). The number of children in state custody also raised questions about the resources required to care for the children. As Elliot, Langford, and Sandberg (2008) note, “the removal of the more than 460 children living there has cost the state at least $10 million dollars in sheltering and legal costs” (p. B1). Moreover, brothers and sisters were displaced from one another due to the large number of children in custody and the complexities of finding adequate housing and facilities (Johnson, 2008b). However, the male children, like FLDS male adults, are pictured infrequently and overall coverage reinforces the notion that female children were the alleged victims.

A fourth point of contention concerns the role of foster care placement subsequent to the children’s removal from the ranch. For instance, a May 12, 2008 article from The Dallas Morning News reports that mental health workers “described child welfare workers as high-handed, rude and uncaring toward the mothers” whereas the mothers were perceived as “incredibly loving and patient with the children” (“Mental Health,” 2008, p. 3A). Additionally, USA Today on April 14, 2008, notes that women from the ranch were seeking help after “some of their children have become sick and even required hospitalization” after being taken by CPS (Dobner, 2008, p. 9A). Other articles point to the exorbitant expense, 21 million dollars, associated with the cost of caring for sect kids in custody (Garrett, 2008b). Moreover, coverage articulates the concern that “CPS’ preoccupation with the polygamist case may leave other youngsters unprotected” (“Focus on Sect,” 2008, p. 3A). As the courts ruled that children be given back to their mothers and the appeal denied by the Texas Supreme Court, coverage subsided. While the custody trial by no means ended the events surrounding the YZR raid, particularly for
FLDS members, the public controversy desisted as evidenced by the lack of public responses to the events via letters to the editor.

Emerging Publics

A total of 45 responses to newspaper articles that both covered and comprised the YZR controversy were identified throughout the five newspapers explored between April 3rd and May 29th. Responses included 40 letters to the editor as well as five invited editorials from individuals outside of the immediate editorial staff. These invited articles are also identified as responses rather than coverage because they indicate an opinion not necessarily held by the newspaper’s editorial staff.

Through a close textual analysis of responses to the controversy and the reporting of the events, four publics emerged from the multiple responses that have gained voice through the newspapers’ opinion sections. First, letters attempt to contextualize the event and the allegations in relation to other societal issues. Those who seek to contextualize the raid, attention shifters, use a variety of mainstream examples as counterpoints to FLDS. Second, the placement of blame for the events leading to the raid and the ways in which the raid was enacted emerges as a point of contention revealing two publics. Some responses place blame on CPS, others FLDS members. The fourth public consists of responses from individuals, coverage critics, who argue that the news coverage of the controversy is problematic. While these three themes emerged through an examination of responses, it should be noted that some responses (n = 7) indicate membership in more than one public – a point that will be discussed among the implications of the analysis.
Attention Shifters

The first public, attention shifters, constitutes sixteen percent \( (n = 7) \) of responses and attempts to contextualize the raid in light of some other societal issue. This public encourages others to look at issues within mainstream society before making claims about the occurrences at the ranch. Contextualization occurs in two ways. First, some respondents include a comparison to children outside of the sect. For example, a letter to the editor in *The Dallas Morning News* on April 12, 2008 questions the amount of attention being paid to the sect youth, “Where is the outrage in this great city of Dallas over the obscene number of children born to unwed minors all over Dallas?” (Riel, 2008, p. 16A). An editorial in *The Dallas Morning News* on April 30, 2008 echoes the thoughts of the April 12 letter:

> How could responsible and loving parents willingly permit 34 percent of their young women to become pregnant before the age of 18 or stand by when four children die every day from child abuse? More than one of four children engage in episodic binge drinking, and more than 4,000 of children under the age of 18 try marijuana every day for the first time. Oh, wait, those statistics reflect the society we live in. From what I’ve read about the polygamist ranch … they [children] are forced to eat fresh food, most of it homegrown, are home-schooled, do chores, pray two times a day and sing hymns. I just hope we saved them in time. (Elliot, A. R., 2008, p. 14A)

In these instances, the responses to the constructions indicate that the real problem needing to be addressed is not found on polygamist compounds, but rather in mainstream society.
While some responses contextualize via a comparison to children living outside the sect, a second contextualization method is through mention to current ideological and political ecology. References to the larger political landscape include a redefinition of “conservative,” comparison of responses to polygamy and gay marriage, mention of other instances of child abuse (in particular within the Catholic Church), questioning of the rights of children, and an articulation of anti-cult stereotypes in the United States (specifically in Texas since the Waco incident). For instance, Rhone (2008) in a letter to the editor in *The Dallas Morning News* attempts to establish distance between the incidents at the polygamist ranch and conservative values:

> If the authors and their editors really believe that locking children in closets, depriving them of food, and forcing them into underage sexual relationships are consistent with “deep social conservatism,” then they can hardly be faulted for having a liberal bent. I’d be liberal, too, if that’s what social conservatism was truly all about. (p. 3P)

While Rhone sets to redefine conservatism as not encompassing polygamy, Alejandro makes mention of the gay marriage debate.

> There’s not been word one in this paper speaking out against this horrible situation from those who would deny the rights of two people of the same gender to enter into a caring, supportive, legal relationship. I haven’t heard the bellowing against Adam and Eve and Eve and Eve and Eve. (Alejandro, 2008, p. 18A)

Moreover, McCarthy (2008) notes that “hardly a week goes by that the news doesn’t reveal incidents in other [than the Catholic Church] religious groups whose clergy and
lay leaders have exploited the power and authority of religion for sexual purposes” (p. 11A).

First, contextualization strategies indicate that the controversy should be placed in a larger societal frame and are reflective of differentiation. Contextualization is similar to distancing strategies observed in early coverage. However, respondents’ contextualization serves a very different function. Discussion of the contrast between the sect and mainstream society constructs polygamists as “other” whereas contextualization enacted by respondents is used to reflect on the flaws of mainstream society. In fact, as mentioned previously, early coverage attempts to place distance between sect members and mainstream society through references to Jeffs and indicating that the compound was a “different world” (Meyer & Ranshaw, 2008a, p. 1A). However, respondents engage in contextualization to address issues prevalent in society.

Responses noting ideological and political issues contextualize the issue as a way to construct a forum for debates outside of the immediate issue, the raid on YZR. The contextualization strategies enacted by respondents are roughly reflective of differentiation and transcendence. Respondents embrace the difference constructed by coverage – they are pointing to issues in mainstream society rather than within the FLDS. They recognize and perpetuate the difference between the two in order to help situate and make sense of the events on the compound and mainstream society. However, some attention shifters then use transcendence for condemnation purposes ulterior to the polygamists. For instance, letters to the editor addressing child pregnancy and issues plaguing children in mainstream society recognize the differences between mainstream society and the FLDS. Subsequently, they subordinate the alleged abuse at YZR by
highlighting the faults within mainstream society. However, the responses do not stop there – attention shifters then make larger claims about mainstream society aside from just alluding to the problems. These leaps in logic are loosely reflective of transcendence as responses justify the FLDS by pointing to societal issues. Contextualization of the sect and raid in respect to larger societal issues is one theme that emerged from the responses, revealing a public consisting of attention shifters. However, those that seek to divert attention from the raid and the sect are only a small fraction of the responses.

Seventy-eight percent of responses (n = 35) place blame, to one extent or another, for the controversy on FLDS sect members (n = 15) and/or CPS (n = 20). The placement of blame does not directly correlate with the newspapers’ inclusion of points of contention after revelations about the caller and true ages of “minors” were discovered. However, the placement of blame on various parties reflects the multiple publics who voice concern during the controversy. The ways in which blame is articulated is important for understanding the ways in which responses are rooted in coverage of the raid.

**Blaming FLDS**

First, 33% of respondents blame sect members for the controversy. While different individuals within the sect are being blamed – some blame men exclusively, others blame both men and women – as a whole, this public believes that the raid was justified due to the actions of FLDS members. As an April 26, 2008 letter to the editor articulates, “FLDS members must accept responsibility if they have violated state laws regarding marriage and physical and sexual abuse of children” (“Decision Protects,” p. 19A). Responding to Strange’s (2008) invited editorial, Pramberger (2008) argues that
“we need to stand up and protect those children who are sexually abused according to our laws – not that of the Maasai (an African tribal group documented by researchers and noted in Strange’s editorial, in part because of their polygamist marriage structure) or any other group” (p. 18A). Cagle (2008) reflects this sentiment when he argues that the “abomination going on in Eldorado makes my blood run cold … this place has nothing to do with religion. It is no more than an incubator for little girls whose destiny is to satisfy the needs of old perverts” (p. 14A). Like Cagle, Montes (2008) argues that religion should not be taken into consideration, “I believe that there should be no government interference in the practice of any religion so long as no laws are being broken … What gives any of these [FLDS] members the right to operate outside the law?” (p. B8). King (2008) also discusses the illegal nature of the supposed underage marriages occurring at YZR when he notes that “FLDS girls are expected to become the mothers to children sired by older men while the mothers are in their mid-teens. Texas laws prohibit that” (p. 12A). On April 14, 2008 a letter to the editor in *The Dallas Morning News* notes “we are already taking care of them [polygamist women via welfare], so we may as well take the children from them and take back the money being used to support them. I’m sure that will hamstring the cult” (McFalls, 2008, p. 16A). Not only does this quotation reflect the blame placed on FLDS members, but it also reinforces the aforementioned notion that polygamists are outsiders. Moreover, an April 18, 2008 letter to the editor in *USA Today* indicates that while the mothers may not necessarily be at fault, they should be denied access to their children until the truth is revealed:

It’s questionable whether the mothers who are part of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints were protecting their children from possibly
being abused. If mothers were being complicit, then they failed their children. The separation should continue until a full investigation is conducted. (Thacker, 2008, p. 12A)

Thacker’s presumption that women should essentially be punished first (separated from children) until proven innocent is counterintuitive to the criminal justice system, but remains reflective of the controversy as a whole.

While women are certainly being blamed by some respondents, sect men are also being indicted via responses to coverage. Audience responses that specifically place blame on men tend to identify polygamist women as victims rather than as accomplices to male FLDS members. An April 13, 2008 letter to the editor in The Dallas Morning News exemplifies this trend when the author states “isn’t it wonderful how we can get involved in trying to dictate how other governments should act, but can sit idly by and watch hundreds of women and children be abused: Shame on us for even thinking that these men have any constitutional rights left” (Holmes, L., 2008, p. 3P, emphasis added).

Likewise, a May 18, 2008 letter to the editor in The Dallas Morning News asks, “ Wouldn’t it have been easier to remove one man or a few adults, rather than all those poor kids and their moms? … With no men … on the ranch, everyone would be safe and comfortable until while the allegations were investigated” (Palmer, 2008, p. 3P).

Similarly, an April 30, 2008 letter to the editor asks, “Since it’s the FLDS men who are accused of sexual abuse, shouldn’t the state remove them from the FLDS compound and leave the children with their mothers?” (Ebling, 2008). Furthermore, in an invited editorial in The New York Times, Harrington (2008) inquires, “Why do Texas officials, especially Child Protective Services, seem so intent on punishing the mothers and
children of the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints ranch in Eldorado?” (p. B9, emphasis added). These excerpts are unique in that they place blame on two parties. First, they clearly place blame on the polygamist men and appear to place women in the victim category. Since women are perceived as victims, the separation of women and children is seen as problematic. In that way, responses that illustrated FLDS women as victims also blame CPS – the letters engage in a denunciation of CPS’ actions resultant from allegations of child abuse in the sect.

**Blaming CPS**

While CPS and polygamist men are blamed simultaneously in a number of letters, CPS is also blamed independently from polygamist men. In fact, 44% of all responses place blame on CPS. A letter to the editor on May 16, 2008 in *USA Today* argues that “dismissing the mothers as robots and ripping families apart wholesale don’t solve the problem. Surely, we can muster more dispassion and legal nuance in dealing with this complex issue” (Maas, 2008, p. 18A). Likewise, McElfresh (2008) notes that “there is something wrong with this picture. There must be a better way to deal with religious/legal differences” (p. 14A). This sentiment is also reflected in an April 17, 2008 response in *The Dallas Morning News*:

CPS had to admit the minor who gave birth April 29 and has been detained in state custody since early April is actually an adult. She is free to leave the shelter at any time, but she must leave her newborn behind in CPS custody if she does. While any allegations of child abuse should be investigated, the state is obligated to protect citizens’ constitutional rights. The whole community shouldn’t have to
be destroyed in order to save it. I wonder if Judge Walther thought this through before she handed a blank check to CPS. (Jameson, 2008, p. 16A)

These responses illustrate a theme of discontent among audience members regarding the wholesale removal of children from the sect. Similarly, a letter to the editor on April 26, 2008 argues that “[Judge] Walther’s order that nursing mothers not be allowed to breastfeed their babies and toddlers – 77 under age 2 at last count – while in State custody seem unwarranted, even heartless” (“A Heartless Ruling,” p. 19A). Geyer (2008) also sees the separation as problematic, “if [separating the women from their children] that isn’t child abuse, I don’t know what is!” (p. B8). Dicken (2008) repeats this belief when she argues that “it is a mother’s worst nightmare to have her children taken away, and to see women who have been victimized all their lives suffer this horrible separation from their babies is disturbing” (p. 2P). These responses distribute blame to law enforcement and judiciaries (Judge Walther and state agencies) for providing CPS with the authority to remove children from YZR.

The overarching theme among those who take issue with CPS’ actions during the course of the raid, tend to be those who support individuals’ rights rather than the rights of polygamy practitioners. Following the court decision that children be returned, D. Holmes (2008) articulates his position concerning the rights of FLDS members:

After 26 years of law practice, I can finally draw a breath of pure air. It seems the constitution may still be a living document despite the mix of idiots and mischief-makers who have trampled on it. Any judge who would blithely grab up every kid in sight and scatter them to the far corners of Texas needs some tar and feathers. (p. B6)
Coty (2008) echoes Holmes when he asks, “What on earth is going on with Child Protective Services? They are running roughshod over people’s rights and costing taxpayers millions, and the end is not in sight” (p. B19). Jameson (2008) indicates that “while any allegations of child abuse should be investigated, the state is obligated to protect citizens’ constitutional rights” (p. 16A). Additionally, Reid (2008) articulates contempt for the lack of rights demonstrated during the raid:

An animal control officer is not authorized to take a dangerous dog away from its owner without the owner’s permission, even if the dog is known to have bitten one or more people. Yet Child Protective Services can remove children from the care of their parents on the thinnest, unproven suspicion of a problem in the home.

Do dogs have more rights than children in Texas? (p. 22A)

Furthermore, Strange (2008) in an article in the “Forum” section of *USA Today* references the larger political landscape when she contends that “the raid was spurred more by negative stereotypes about FLDS and members’ practice of polygamy than by a thorough investigation of evidence” (p. 11A). In other words, she argues that the stereotypes of polygamists and other private groups, particularly prevalent in Texas since the Waco debacle, may have been a contributing, if not primary, factor in the exigency for the raid.

The placement of blame emerges as a debate among publics and is often, though not always, reflective of transcendence. The lack of explicit opinion on the event in coverage results in responses from multiple publics – one could infer that no voice feels represented in the coverage. Since the newspaper coverage is not placing blame, audiences wrote letters indicating who they felt was responsible for elements of the
controversy. In this way, the audience helps to fill in a gap. Letters that place blame on CPS often engaged in a level of transcendence by subordinating the current situation to discuss larger issues such as rights. However, letters that place blame on polygamists engage in bolstering activities set on justifying CPS’s actions. While loosely related to transcendence and bolstering in their pure definitional form, the placement of blame undoubtedly serves as a way for audiences to make sense of the controversy. Although the publics deviate in where they place blame, the very notion of placing blame is a sensemaking device. Overall, responses attempt to place blame on a number of different actors in the controversy including polygamist women, polygamist men, and CPS. Moreover, it should be noted that five audience members place blame on more than one party. In light of the ways in which publics identify men as blameworthy, a third theme emerges regarding the role of men and media’s attention to the polygamist men.

Coverage Critics

In addition to attention shifters, those who blame CPS, and those who place blame on members of the FLDS, the final theme reveals a fourth public – coverage critics. Eighteen percent (n = 8) of all responses articulate criticism of newspaper coverage concerning the exigency for the raid and the events that occurred subsequent to the raid. As one letter noted, “it seems that the American public cares more for the entertainment value they get from the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints than about fair reporting of events and individual rights of American citizens” (Kelsch, 2008, p. 3P). This indictment of the media is also present in an attack on The Dallas Morning News regarding the use of photographs containing images of children who had been removed from the compound:
I am offended by the picture of the women and children on the front page of Tuesday’s paper. Normally, you do not print the name of possible victims of sexual abuse, let alone run their pictures. But you displayed prominently the photos of possible victims of sexual abuse and of circumstances beyond their control. It is a gross violation of privacy. Shame on you. (Riddle, 2008, p. 3P)

Responses reprimand newspaper coverage because the coverage became sensationalized, in part, because of the extensive use of photographs depicting the “otherness” of polygamist women.

In addition to problematizing sensationalism in newspaper coverage, others take issue with specific aspects of coverage. Bartholomew (2008) expresses concern about a recent editorial in the *Houston Chronicle*:

I found this column to bigoted and incorrect. A pedophile is defined as someone sexually attracted to a prepubescent child. Although some of the girls were married at a very early age, they were all physically mature, and although there may be grounds for statutory rape, there is no evidence of pedophilia … I am dismayed that this article made it past the editorial board. (p. B8)

While Bartholomew believes that pedophile is the incorrect word to describe male FLDS members, Shepherd (2008) takes issue with the coverage of the raid in relation to home schooling: “I am ashamed of the Chronicle for making homeschooling [sic] an issue in the polygamist abuse case” (p. B8). Moreover, Maas (2008) in response to the newspaper coverage argues that “something does, indeed, stink here. The news media’s zealotry resembles that of Christian missionaries who often have warred on polygamy” (p. 18A).
A prominent component of coverage critics’ arguments centers on the lack of newspaper articles and photographs concerning or depicting polygamist men. In the previous discussion of blame being placed on polygamist males, several quotations are offered in which respondents point to the absence in coverage. This absence, coverage of males, is brought forth from the lack of mentions and photographs of male FLDS members, the individuals who allegedly committed the acts leading to the raid. The articulation of men as the problem behind the exigency for the raid enacts a (re)presentation of women as victims of the patriarchal structure within YZR. Women are not treated as victims by CPS; at one point during the crisis CPS mandated that all women leave their children. However, the public’s accusations against polygamist men tend to present women as victims.

By placing emphasis on the actions of men, responses articulate contempt for CPS. As mentioned earlier, several letters to the editor contending that the fault resides with polygamist men, not women, argue that women have been unconstitutionally and immorally separated from their children by CPS. Responses emphasizing the role of polygamist men in the controversy implicitly indicate a desire for greater coverage of polygamist men. As discussed earlier, one response indicated repulsion toward *The Dallas Morning News* for including pictures of children and women who could be considered victims. Implicit in this argument is the guilt of polygamist men – if the author of the letter refers to the women and children as victims, then the men must be guilty of the allegations against them.

Lack of coverage concerning polygamist men leaves a gap for publics to consider. Since the men were accused of sexual abuse, one would think that coverage would center
on them. However, as noted earlier only 11% (n = 17) of all photographs and images depict an adult male sect member. Perhaps this gap in visual coverage is due to the lack of opportunities available to photograph men; after all, men were not paraded in front of the media circus during the raid and were absent during the trial for fear of prosecution. An alternative explanation could be that polygamist men, due to their dress, are not as visually other as polygamist women and girls. However, the lack of coverage, as pointed out by the letters to the editor, indicate that publics are able to identify what is missing, articulate a concern about the missing component, and attempt to refocus the controversy on the absence.

The missing coverage regarding polygamist men could be perceived as a form of denial via the newspapers, yet one could argue that men became external to the custody debate that emerged. However, responses that indicate the lack of coverage transcend the raid and custody issues to place blame on the newspapers and CPS. As letters questioned: Why are the children removed and not the men? Those who argue for the removal of men chastise CPS’s actions as counterintuitive to the situation – some respondents even charge CPS with being unimaginative. Moreover, respondents note that this lack of common sense plagues CPS as a whole, not just in this situation.

Implications

The four publics identified and discussed in this chapter offer not just four interpretations of the raid, but rather a myriad of nuanced understandings regarding the significance of and responsibility for the events. While members within each public share commonalities thus constituting them as a public in the first place – and at times overlap with other publics – each response, in its own way, is an individual public. However,
after identification and discussion of the four publics addressed in this chapter, three implications emerge through engagement with the responses. First, the form of the responses, particularly the letters to the editor, allow the linkages between responses and controversy coverage to be more clear than the previous chapter discussing the premiere of *Big Love* and the following chapter exploring the Jeffs photographs. Second, newspaper coverage including photographs enables readers to draw contrasts between mainstream society and members of the YZR sect. Third, returning to apologia, Abelson’s modes of cognitive conflict resolution, and sensemaking, we can see that this controversy defies, supports, and expands these theoretical strands.

*Form of Response*

The two primary forms of responses used for analysis throughout this dissertation are online message board postings and letters to the editor. In all three analysis chapters, the links between the responses and coverage or artifacts of the controversy are uncertain. In other words, I am only able to see how the publics might be responding to certain components in coverage of the controversies. However, both letters to the editor and message board responses have unique qualities that both hinder and allow connections between coverage and responses to be formulated. In terms of hindrances, letters to the editor are much more difficult to locate – in a technological era, letters to the editor are often not catalogued in online newspaper banks and microfilm and microfiche are becoming scarcer. In terms of benefits, letters to the editor enable connections between coverage and responses to be much more explicit and precise because of their form. Letters to the editor often start with a line indicating the exigency for the letter – the author of the letter most often indicates the article or editorial to which he or she is
responding. In message board postings, respondents often only make direct refutations to one another rather than coverage of the controversy itself. Moreover, authors of letters to the editor make claims in direct support or refutation of the article or editorial to which the letter is written in response. Therefore, the interplay of publics and coverage is much clearer.

However, similar to message board postings, these responses may be, and likely are fueled by other instances of coverage and based on an individual’s personal experiences. So while it may be more clear in terms of the authors’ positionality in conflict to coverage, the author(s)’ claims may be composed and developed through multiple sources – not just the coverage to which it is responding. Undoubtedly, the authors of the letters to the editor are responding, at least in part, to newspaper coverage. One particularly interesting insight into the coverage surrounding the raid concerns the sensemaking devices utilized in responding to the news’ construction of sect members as Other.

**Sensemaking Devices**

Newspaper coverage and photographs construct and reflect sect members as Other. However, logics employed by each public seek consistency in treatment of others despite the Othered visuals used. Since coverage and the photographs draw a stark contrast between sect members and mainstream society, one would not be surprised if publics also attempt to paint a similar picture. However, instead of supporting this line of thinking perpetuated by the news media, publics accessed different “logics” or sense-making devices to respond rather than perpetuating the Otherness illustrated by the media.
All four publics attempt to place the sect within the legal boundaries of society while simultaneously refuting the Otherness constructed by news coverage. Different sensemaking devices resulted in a myriad of beliefs, reflected in the publics, about how those involved in such a case should be treated. For those who blame sect members, allegations of such magnitude including child abuse, molestation, and forced child-bride marriages, the raid is warranted. For those who blame CPS, sect members deserve to have their constitutional rights upheld.

Returning to the modes of cognitive conflict, the most evident form throughout the publics is transcendence. Both letters to the editor and invited responses move a step further than the coverage to provide beliefs and commentary regarding the raid. While transcendence is generally understood as reducing cognitive conflict by blaming some higher power or moving beyond the immediate conflict, Ware and Linkugel’s apologia demonstrates the ability of the modes to be seen in conflicts among more than one individual and within the public sphere. Each public is engaged in sensemaking to alleviate the discomfort they may feel in regard to the events surrounding the raid. Each public’s claim is different, but serves as a sensemaking device. For attention shifters, they reflect inwards on the challenges and issues posing children in mainstream society as a benchmark and previous to making claims about FLDS members. For those who place blame, either on CPS or FLDS members, they make sense of the controversy by identifying those at fault for the raid and subsequent events. Moreover, coverage critics turn to the source of their information for critique. Coverage critics take note of absences and privacy violations in newspaper coverage rather than making sense of the raid as a
whole. For each of these publics, the sensemaking devices help to identify their own role or identity within the controversy.

Other than transcendence (loosely interpreted) and to a lesser extent differentiation, neither apologia nor the modes of cognitive conflict resolution are purely reflected within the emergent publics – the links could be argued, but are superficial at best. In particular, there is no apology nor any direct response from any individual immediately affiliated with the raid. Nearly two years later, neither CPS nor the sect has taken responsibility in terms of wrongdoing. However, the battles over the legality and morality of the events leading to the raid, the raid itself, and subsequent events are being fought through letters to the editor (and on message boards as will be seen in the following chapter).

*Patriarchal Undercurrents*

Much of the debate surrounding the YZR controversy centers on the patriarchal undercurrents throughout the raid and subsequent events. In particular, the absence of polygamist men (the alleged predators), the distancing/othering of women and children, and the actions taken by CPS and Texas law enforcement agencies all illustrate the patriarchal undercurrents emerging from the controversy. As previously discussed, the majority of photographs do not include images of men. However, when included, most often the men are law enforcement officials not polygamist boys (alleged victims) nor polygamist men (alleged perpetrators). These absences are brought to light by coverage critics. Moreover, coverage critics question the legality and morality of newspapers’ inclusion of photographs which show the faces of female children – the alleged victims. Therefore, the notion that the sect, controversy, and images carry patriarchal undertones
is illuminated by the publics – specifically, coverage critics and members of both publics that place blame as they articulate that female sect members were not responsible. The photographs certainly have emotionally appealing qualities – the victims’ small cherubic faces, the strong protective male law enforcement agents, the absence of male FLDS members maintaining the mysterious and inhuman conceptions.

Although male sect members are missing in the photographs, their statuses as powerful figures are illuminated throughout the coverage. Specifically, the power that FLDS men exert over women and children is evidenced in the allegations against the men. Child molestation, one of the greatest societal taboos, is at the center of the allegations against FLDS adult males. This allegation is perhaps more believable through the coverage because the photographs do not show the perpetrators. The males are absent thus reinforcing the mysterious nature of the events. Moreover, the lack of a human face to attribute to the allegations perhaps makes the accusations more gruesome – FLDS males remain monsters without a human face to association with the charges. This enigmatical quality is further reinforced by the distance with which polygamist women are depicted. The sect, in nearly all aspects of coverage, are Other – a position those within the sect do not necessarily dislike considering that even, in some cases, members intentionally perpetuate this Otherness.

In addition to the distancing of female sect members and the absence of male sect members, photographs and newspaper coverage draw upon the actions taken by law enforcement officials and CPS. The images convey that the law enforcement officials in charge of executing the raid were predominantly male. These males are show as authority figures as they help women and children board a bus to be taken away from compound –
the site of alleged nightmarish acts. Male enforcement agents aren’t shown physically removing women and children, but rather are shown guiding the alleged victims, even helping carry belongings, a sympathetic and helpful act. The women and children are depicted as being in need of protection from the patriarchy of the compound. However, they are only being released from one patriarchy (the FLDS) to another (CPS and law enforcement).

Concluding Remarks

Overall, this chapter identifies and explores four emergent publics through letters to the editor and invited editorials across five newspapers since the start of the raid until the initial ruling that the children be given back to their mothers. First, attention shifters turn inward, making claims about the welfare of children in mainstream society, before casting stones at FLDS members. Second, those who blame members of the FLDS assert that the children were in imminent danger. Third, those who blame CPS contend that sect members deserve due process. Finally, coverage critics point to problems in the newspaper coverage of the raid rather than the raid itself.

As mentioned previously, the time frame explored only constitutes a small fragment of the larger controversy – the effects are still being felt by sect members and the first anniversary of the raid produced national coverage. In fact, as will be seen in the next chapter, individual custody battles also bring forth discussion of the raid as a whole. Moreover, *Big Love* changed in light of the raid. The third season of *Big Love*, which premiered in 2009, shows the Henrickson family in fear after officials raid polygamist compounds across the country. Future research should expand the reach (temporally and spatially) of the raid as well as explore how the controversy has changed (and continues
to change) over time. Specifically, future research should examine the impacts of the raid on sect members and/or delve into the ways in which the controversy has shifted since the raid first occurred.
CHAPTER 5: EXPLORING AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO THE JEFFS PHOTOGRAPHS CONTROVERSY

On May 24, 2008, the Texas Appellate Court ruled that children who were removed from a ranch in Eldorado be returned to their parents. While the decision was the result of an ongoing custody battle, this was surely no commonplace trial. This ruling not only affected one or several children, but rather over 400 children who had been removed from the Yearning for Zion (YZR) ranch. The ranch, a polygamist compound affiliated with the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS), had been raided in early April on allegations of child abuse. Once the appellate court ruled that the mass exodus was unconstitutional and illegal, the state of Texas did return some children to their parents, but opted to file for custody of children from several families. One such trial involved the state’s attempt to remove Richard Jessop, a 1-week-old baby who was born in state custody, from his parents, Dan and Louisa Jessop. During the trial, photographs of imprisoned FLDS leader Warren Jeffs kissing underage girls were utilized as evidence by the state. Jeffs, former leader of the FLDS, had been tried and convicted in 2007 of being an accomplice to rape for utilizing his post as the FLDS prophet to marry a 14-year-old girl to her 19-year-old cousin. While the state argued that the photographs were used to show abuse among the FLDS, the lawyers for the Jessop family said that the pictures were irrelevant to the case at hand (Winslow, 2008).

While undeniably a component of the YZR raid, the Jeffs’ photographs provided a distinct platform for publics to emerge surrounding the YZR raid, polygamy, FLDS as a whole, foster care, and constitutional rights. This chapter explores the ways in which publics emerge surrounding the photographs and how the images encourage particular responses through the way the photographs were used, text explaining the photographs,
and specific elements of the photographs themselves. First, a thorough discussion of the photographs is offered as a way to point out components of the photographs that may have served as an invitation for particular publics. Second, two theoretical frameworks for contextualizing and probing the uses of photographs are discussed. In particular, the theoretical frameworks offer two essential understandings of photography including that (1) photographs have an invitational quality leading to audience responses pertaining to the depiction and (2) photography plays a role in constructing meaning for a society as a component of the democratic process. Third, four publics (the repulsed public, raid supporters, anti-FLDS, and a rights protector public) emerging on three online message boards, are explored. In particular, this section identifies and explores the emergent publics in conjunction with claims instigated by the photographs, text surrounding the photographs, and the emergent publics themselves. Fourth, implications concerning the role of photography and the theoretical frames utilized are discussed.

Photographic Evidence

In order to explore publics that emerged during the Jeffs’ photographs controversy, we must first delve into the images that instigated the renewed debate surrounding the infamous polygamist leader. These images appear at the start of each message board regarding the photographs. In particular, three sets of photographs, each supposedly celebrating Jeffs’ wedding anniversary with the girl are pictured. In addition to the images, each message board contains some text contextualizing the photographs. Although each Web site introduces the images differently, the images are nearly identical across the three selected message boards.

The first and second sets of photographs do not identify why the pictures were taken and the girl’s name, Merrianne, is only noted on one set of photographs. The first
set of photographs is only pictured on the Huffington Post and Democratic Underground Web sites (see below).

These images are taken in contrast to a white wall and pieced together – one of the photographs is facing a different way than the other two. Jeffs is wearing a black suit with a white shirt and a white tie. Merrianne is wearing a long, purple dress with a collar. The first photograph, which is turned sideways, shows Merrianne standing with her back pressed against Jeffs. His hands are wrapped around her waist with her hand placed over his. This photograph is nearly an exact replica of the second photograph of Jeffs and Loretta (discussed below). However, Merrianne appears shorter than Loretta because her head only reaches half-way up Jeffs’ chest. The second photograph, left bottom, shows
Jeffs and Merrianne standing side-by-side, his left hand holding her right hand. In this image, Jeffs and Merrianne are looking at each other rather than at the camera. The final picture in the set, right bottom, shows the same position as the second photograph, only the couple are looking at the camera rather than each other. In this set of photographs, the evidence tag is in the bottom right corner and labeled as one. Also, in the top left corner, in someone’s handwriting, “Warren and Merrianne” and “July 27, 2006” is written. This set of pictures will be referenced throughout the remainder of this chapter as photograph set one – in correspondence with the evidence tag. Moreover, the second set of photographs also depicts Jeffs and Merrianne and is a continuation of the photographs mentioned above.

This particular set of images can be found on both the Huffington Post and Democratic Underground Web sites (see below).

Similar to the other sets of images, this second set also consists of three pictures. The first picture, which is turned sideways, shows Jeff's and Merrianne standing side-by-side holding hands and with his right hand on her shoulder appearing to pull them closer together. The second image, bottom left, shows Jeff literally holding Merrianne. In the photograph the pair is kissing, her right hand is thrown over his shoulder, his right hand placed on her back, and his left hand presumably holding her up into the air. The final picture, right bottom, shows Jeff holding Merrianne with her arm on his shoulder and his hand on her back, but in this picture they are not kissing, but rather facing the camera. The evidence tag, placed below, is labeled with a two. The top left corner in an unknown
author’s handwriting reads only “July 27.” Although there appears to be more handwriting, it is unclear what the writing says. This set of pictures will be referenced throughout the remainder of this essay as photograph set two – in correspondence with the evidence tag. However, the photographs of Merrianne were not the only sets of photographs released of Jeffs with underage girls during the Jessop custody trial.

The third set of images consists of three separate photographs on a white matting that reads “Warren and Loretta” in the center, “first anniversary” in the bottom left corner, and “July 26, 2005” in the bottom right corner. This set of photographs is contained on all three of the Web sites selected for this study; Loretta’s face is blurred out on the Sacred Monkeys Web site only (see below).

The images themselves are of Warren Jeffs and a young woman, presumably, Loretta. Jeffs and Loretta are shown in three different poses in contrast to a wooden wall background. In the photographs, Jeffs is wearing a blue, long-sleeved oxford dress shirt and blue jeans. Loretta is wearing a purple dress with a collar. The first image, in the top left corner of the matting, shows Loretta and Jeffs standing side-by-side. In this photograph, Jeffs is holding on to Loretta’s arm with one hand, his other embracing her back. Loretta’s only visible hand is holding the side of Jeffs’ torso. The second photograph, in the top right corner, shows Loretta standing with her back pressed against Jeffs; her head barely reaching his collar bone. Jeffs’ arms are wrapped around the front of Loretta’s waist with her hands placed on top of his. The third photograph, in the bottom center, is the least innocuous of the photographs. The pair is kissing; his left hand pushing her chin upwards, his right hand embracing her back. Her only visible hand is placed on the side of his stomach.

Interestingly, Loretta’s face is blurred out on the Sacred Monkeys Web site, but remains untouched on the Huffington Post and Democratic Underground Web sites. The final element to the collage is a small evidence tag in the top right corner of the matting. The tag reads “Petitioner’s Exhibit” in typed font with a number three written in blue ink. The anniversary photographs are alarming. The girl’s height (not even to Jeffs’ shoulders), her visible adolescence, the evidence tag, the identification of the photographs as anniversary markers, and the intense photograph of the pair kissing, are unsettling to say the least. This set of pictures will be referenced throughout the remainder of this essay as photograph set three – in correspondence with the evidence tag. While the photographs when pictured on the message boards are presented nearly identical, the
ways in which the photographs are incorporated and contextualized differs among the sites.

The Democratic Underground Web site has two separate message boards that discuss the photographs. However, in both instances, the photographs are posted by users of the Web site rather than administrators. The first instance where the photographs appear is within a post titled “Some FLDS kids reunited with parents” by uppityperson on May 24, 2008. The post contains an article about children, who were taken during the YZR raid, being returned to their parents. The post continues by saying, “And to finish up with the pictures of Warren Jeffs and a 12 yr old ‘friend’ because yes, I am uppity and opinionated.” After this statement, set two is displayed. The initial post containing the photographs is followed by 117 message board postings. The second instance where the photographs appear on the Democratic Underground Web site is within a post titled “Smoking Gun releases photos of Warren Jeffs kissing underage brides” by Tinksrival on May 27, 2008. The post contains photograph sets three and one. The initial posting is followed by 228 message board postings. Although the Smoking Gun was the first Web site to release the photographs, the site does not allow for message board responses and therefore, is not included in this analysis.

The Huffington Post Web site displays all three photograph sets after an article about the photographs themselves. The article begins by stating that “shocking new photographs show polygamist leader Warren Jeffs holding and kissing two different young girls in wedding-like photos” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008, para. 1). The article later notes that “The Desert News and Dallas Morning News, both of which have more on the story, report that one of the girls in the in the photos was 12” (“Warren Jeffs
kissing,” 2008, para. 8). However, they also report the viewpoint of Dan Jessop, the father in the custody case in which the photographs were used by the prosecution. The article quotes Jessop as saying that the pictures are “shocking,” but that “you see far worse, immoral, disgusting, gross things than a girl kissing a man in the streets of your own community. And you and I don’t know if the state of Texas fabricated that” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008, para. 7). This quotation is duplicated in the article concerning the photographs on Sacred Monkeys Web site.

The Sacred Monkeys Web site consists of a short article concerning the photographs in which photograph set three is contained. The article argues that “the pictures do not lie. Think there was not abuse going on? … If there was no abuse going on, why is Jeffs in prison?” (“Pics of polygamist leader,” 2008, para. 1). The article continues by saying that the “shots show the jailed, 52-year-old leader of a renegade Mormon sect planting deep kisses on two of his underage ‘wives’ – one of whom is 12 years old” (“Pics of polygamist leader,” 2008, para. 4). The article on the Web site is followed by 20 discussion board postings – although just a small fragment of the total postings discussed in this essay, they tend to contain more depth than those derived from the aforementioned Web sites.

The three Web sites and the photographs are undeniably intertwined with the YZR raid. The contextualizing text on each of the three Web sites makes mention of the raid. The photographs were explicitly utilized as prosecutorial evidence against the return of a child taken during the raid. As such, the YZR controversy and Jeffs’ photographs controversy are linked. However, to think about the raid and photographs as components of the same controversy is problematic and undoubtedly up for interpretation. Here,
unlike the instances that led to the raid and the subsequent trials, the images are not outcomes of the events (i.e., the photographs of polygamous women in the media), but rather serve as an origin for the controversy. Accordingly, rather than position the raid and the photographs as a single controversy, the raid should be considered a component of the Jeffs’ photograph controversy just as Jeffs’ trial served as a component of the YZR raid. As noted in the articles discussed previously, the raid had subsided – only individual cases, rather than the fate of the entire compound, was being decided when the photographs were leaked. Moreover, and perhaps most important to our understanding of controversy, arguing that the two (YZR raid and photographs) are the same controversy denies the uniqueness of responses to the photographs. Identifying the controversy surrounding the photographs as distinct from the YZR controversy should be emergent rather than critic constructed. While many of the responses invoke the raid, these responses are treated below only as a public because many responses do not make mention of the raid. Those who discuss the raid strategically position the photographs as evidence – not a far stretch from what the state actually attempted. However, this public is only one of four that emerge in the Jeffs’ photographs controversy.

Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter’s focus is predominantly on the ways in which audiences emerge and respond to photographs of Warren Jeffs with underage girls. Two different theoretical strands allow us to contextualize and explore the ways in which audiences emerge and construct their arguments. These two strands of theory offer a myriad of concepts and claims for examining the interplay between photographs and audiences. They include Susan Sontag’s evolving discussion of images’ ability to deaden and arouse
consciousness and Hariman and Lucaites’ exploration of the role of iconic photographs in public culture.

First, Sontag in *On Photography* (1973/2001) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) discusses the role of photography in raising awareness, illuminating controversial issues, and (the lack of) serving as a catalyst for consciousness. In her earlier work, Sontag (1973/2001) argues that shocking images may, upon repeated exposure, become less powerful. She writes, “Images anesthetize. An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs … But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real” (p. 20). As an example, Sontag offers forth pornography, “The shock of photographic atrocities wears off with repeated viewings, just as the surprise and bemusement felt the first time one sees a pornographic movie wear off after one sees a few more” (p. 20). Moreover, she notes that “‘concerned’ photography has done as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it” (p. 21). In other words, while pictures meant to illustrate atrocities have the ability to awaken consciousness, repeated exposure to such images ultimately strips them of much of their impact. In this line of thinking, repeat viewings of the Jeffs images would likely reduce the negative feelings experienced upon one’s initial viewing of them.

However, 30 years later, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Sontag questions her earlier line of thinking.

I argued that while an event known through photography certainly becomes more real than it would have been had one never seen the photographs, after repeated exposure it also becomes less real. As much as
they create sympathy, I wrote, photographs shrivel sympathy. Is this true?

I thought it was when I wrote it. I’m not so sure now. (p. 105)

More specifically, Sontag argues that individuals may not be initially impacted by shocking photographs if they do not have a way to respond to the images. “Compassion is an unstable emotion,” Sontag writes, “It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. If one feels that there is nothing ‘we’ can do … and nothing ‘they’ can do either … then one starts to get bored, cynical, and apathetic” (p. 101). This ability to tune out images, she argues, should not necessarily be considered negative.

Parked in front of the little screens – television, computer, and palmtop – we can surf to images and brief reports of disasters throughout the world …. That we are not totally transformed, that we can turn away, turn the page, switch the channel, does not impugn the ethical value of an assault by images. It is not a defect that we are not seared, that we do not suffer enough, when we see these images. Neither is photography supposed to repair our ignorance about the history and causes of suffering it picks out and frames. Such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers. (pp. 116-117)

Sontag’s more recent thinking, then, suggests that we may have the ability to filter not just our exposure to shocking images, but also our emotional response to them. In this respect, photographs should be seen an invitation to understand, question, explore, and respond to tragedies and atrocities; one may or may not accept the invitation. Sontag’s arguments are not necessarily mutually exclusive – someone could perhaps embrace the invitation to respond to the photographs, but repeated viewings could generate
diminishing emotional returns. However, this may not occur in all cases – an individual may, as was my experience with the photographs of Jeffs, have heightened arousal after many viewings. Therefore, rather than understanding photography as an all-encompassing cultural artifact that has the ability to explore, explain, arouse, or deaden consciousness, we must understand photographs, including the photographs of Jeffs, as an invitation to the audiences/publics viewing the images.

If viewers accept an image’s invitation to respond, how does that response relate to the idea of publics? The work of Hariman and Lucaites (2007) suggests that what they call the iconic photograph “functions as a mode of civic discourse” (p. 30). In particular, they note that “by its location in the public media and its focus on public events, photojournalism is a premier visual practice for articulating democratic life” (p. 18). Expanding their argument, they assert that photojournalism is “an important technology of liberal-democratic citizenship. From this perspective, one can consider how any particular photo equips the viewer to act as a citizen, or expand one’s conception of citizen, or otherwise define one’s relationship to the political community” (p. 18). Furthermore, Hariman and Lucaites establish a set of criteria by which photographs should be determined as iconic.

Photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics. (p. 27) Specifically, they identify photographs which were a “visual legacy” of events including Times Square Kiss, Flag Raisings at Iwo Jima, Kent State, and Accidental Napalm. Each
of these images contributes to civic discourse by serving as a reference and/or catalyst for citizens to understand and negotiate their role within the political community.

The photographs of Warren Jeffs with young girls are not, of course, iconic images as defined by Hariman and Lucaites; they do not “represent historically significant events” in a traditional sense. However, those who are immediately impacted by the photographs, including FLDS members, may see them as historically significant both in their initial purpose as anniversary photographs and as evidence in a legal battle that may set precedents thus impacting sect members. To individuals not associated with the photographs they certainly do not represent historic events. Yet, the photographs do meet several other conditions of iconic photographs. The photographs were reproduced and repurposed across media and were widely recognized due to the prevalence of the photographs across news media outlets. Moreover, the images are undoubtedly powerful and – as the message boards illustrate – serve as a vital exigency for civic discourse.

Specifically, they invite the overarching question of “How do we deal with this situation?” Perhaps, then, while the photographs do not meet the traditional understanding of iconicity, they do serve as temporarily iconic images because they are “at once easily recognizable and resonant with comprehensive patterns of meaning” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 290), yet fade from public consciousness as the controversy subsides. The notion that an image is temporarily iconic is inherently oxymoronic – how can an image be simultaneously iconic, which insinuates longevity, but only temporarily? As Edwards and Winkler (1997) note, the appropriation of an image changes the rhetorical function. Moreover, images which serve ideographic functions, when (mis)appropriated take on new meaning for the image and for the
audience. For example, the Jeffs photographs are immediately recognizable as anniversary photographs but their resonance is disturbing because they feature an older man with a child. Moreover, they appear within the public domain as part of the discourse surrounding the familiar YZR controversy. The images thus reference the enduring motif of anniversary photographs while gaining public attention only during the course of the YZR controversy.

In addition, as indicated by discussions of polygamy as a whole, the FLDS, constitutional rights, and foster care situations, publics expand the meanings of the photographs past the individual custody trial and even the YZR raid as a whole. In speaking to so many issues, the images reflect Hariman and Lucaites’ (2007) assertion that “the iconic image is a representative case in the relationship between visual media and the democratic project … no interpretation can speak for all viewers” (p. 305). In other words, compelling images may speak to different audiences in different ways.

In this respect, Hariman and Lucaites’ work may be adapted to mediate Sontag’s arguments; temporarily iconic images may be interpreted in ways that reflect different means of responding to the invitations offered by the images. The clash of interpretations over the photographs is both a construction and illustration of the democratic process evoked through photography. Therefore, rather than attempt to define the photographs as pure iconic images, adopting Hariman and Lucaites’ line of thinking, we should explore the photographs as invitations to participate in civic discourses regarding polygamy, FLDS, and the YZR raid and analyze the responses to those photographs as different means of responding to the invitations interpreted from the images.
The photographs are invitations for contemplation, argument, and discourse not just about the actions of Warren Jeffs, but about larger issues such as the YZR raid, constitutional rights, polygamy, foster care, and the FLDS as a whole. Through the debates on the message boards, the meanings of the photographs become disputed (Are these photographs relevant to the YZR raid?, Do these photographs illustrate an evil across the FLDS?, etc.). Moreover, some of the negotiated meanings center on the question: “What do the photographs mean about us as a society?” As Hariman and Lucaites note, there can be multiple interpretations of a photograph as different audiences (publics) seek to make the images a compatible reflection with their desired state of society. The message boards provide a place for action and negotiation of meanings – not just contemplation.

Emerging Publics

The photographs and the context in which the photographs are introduced on the Web sites invite a number of responses and publics to emerge. Overall, a total of 774 message board postings across the three Web sites have been subjected to a close reading for content, tone, and form. Through the exploration of these Web sites, four publics emerge. The photographs, the text offered with the images, and message board postings provide an invitation for civic discourse.

The first emergent public is the repulsed public. This particular public responds to the images with utter distaste and often conflates polygamy with pedophilia. Since pedophilia is, undoubtedly, one of the greatest societal taboos, these responses are perhaps deemed the most in line with social norms. This public renounces the photographs because the images do not reflect their perception or desired state of society.
In other words, they argue that “We do not condone this behavior.” Often the responses constituting this public are simply referencing the photographs, but at other times the disgust transcends the images to apply to polygamists or FLDS as a whole.

The second public, raid supporters, argues against the court’s decision to return YZR children to their parents. In particular, this public utilizes the photographs as evidence of the danger polygamist men pose to young girls. In other words, this public is responding to the claim made by the courts and members of YZR that the children were not in imminent danger. This public seeks to use the pictures of Jeffs to represent what was occurring to all children of the FLDS and justification for the raid.

While raid supporters argue that the photographs support the raid, the anti-FLDS public stops short of that claim by only arguing that the photographs are evidence of illegal and immoral behavior committed by FLDS members. A third public that emerges eludes the context for the photographs’ release to the general public because this public engages with the photographs outside the context of the YZR raid. Rather than denounce the photographs in light of YZR, this public utilizes the photographs to argue that FLDS, as a whole, is a dangerous cult. In this particular instance, the anti-FLDS public generalizes the photographs to actions of the FLDS as a whole.

The final public, rights protectors, attempts to negate the state’s use of the photographs. In particular, members of this public offer legal reasons why the photographs should not be taken into consideration during the custody hearing. This public is responding to message board postings and the photographs. Primarily, this public seeks to refute claims being made by the other publics. Members of this public establish strict boundaries for the interpretation of the photographs based on legal
arguments. For example, they argue that the photographs should not be used to support
the raid or used in the custody hearing because the photographs are of Warren Jeffs, who
is already in prison, and should not be extended to the FLDS as a whole.

The Repulsed Public

One public that emerges through a close textual analysis of the message board
responses is the repulsed public. The photographs are clearly not of the man whose
child’s custody is in dispute. However, the photographs establish a relationship between
Warren Jeffs (FLDS leader prior to being arrested) and child-brides. The justification for
the state using the photographs as evidence is unknown; the state never explicitly
indicates their rationale for using the photographs as evidence. If, indeed, the state’s goal
was to create general outrage at the photographs, then they surely succeeded; 84 of the
message board responses articulate a clear disgust for the photographs. In other words, if
the state was attempting to make the claim that these photographs are disgusting, then the
repulsed public is clearly stating, “Yes, this is repulsive.” This particular public expresses
disgust of the photographs, reports feeling physically ill over the images, and resorts to ad
hominem attacks against Warren Jeffs. These responses, rather than those that articulate a
discontent for the YZR as a whole or protest the raid, report their affect by disclosing
their opinions about Jeffs and the photographs.

Uppityperson argues “that kiss goes way beyond my comfort zone as to how
adults should act with minors” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). Additionally, tinksrival
writes, “Oh, PUKE! She’s so little he has to pick her up to molest her” (“Smoking Gun,”
2008). Snotcicles demonstrates his disgust when he says that the photographs are “way
to[o] creepy” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Grytpype argues that the images are “effing
Likewise, Frank Cannon asserts that “those pics are so disgusting, not even the trolls can handle them” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). MrSlayer simply refers to the photographs as “sickening,” while Kitty Herder reports that the photographs, “make me ill” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Moreover, Vinca writes that “this is sick and makes me very sad,” while Javaman prefers vulgarity when he writes that the photographs are “just fucking revolting” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Lumberjack_jeff’s writes “OMG! If you’re going to have a harem of prepubescent teens as brides, at least get a photographer who doesn’t take photos of the same pose for every one [sic]” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Undeterred simply writes, “Ick” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008).


A number of respondents directly report physical discomfort after viewing the photographs including: “I just want to puke,” “this makes me want to vomit,” “I’m feeling so sick,” “I’m going to need a shower after that one,” “after looking at those photos I had to go brush my teeth,” “now it’s my turn to puke,” “I think I’m going to puke my lunch,” “[the photographs] make my blood boil,” and “this makes me physically ill” (“Pics of polygamist leader,” 2008; “Smoking Gun,” 2008; “Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008).

Others comment on Jeffs. Some want to seek revenge on Jeffs for his actions. BlackLeatherRain contends that he “want[s] to deliver multiple swift kicks to Warren Jeffs’ naughty bits” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008). Similarly, MrSlayer writes, “Hang this man, right now!” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Other members of the repulsed public
simply revert to calling Jeffs names to show their outrage. Jeffs is referred to as a “sick
fuck” by EmperorHadNoClothes, MidloDemocrat, ophimoimoi, and Marrah_G. He is
also called a “fucker” by Catch22Dem, a “dirt bag” by mitchum, a “sick motherfucker”
by LostinVA, a “baby raper” by pfitz59, and a “scumsucking babyraping creep” by
blondeatlast. Moreover, Jeffs is named a “fucking pedophile bastard” by Kitty Herder, a
“fucking pervert” by Mad_Dem_X, a “sick predator” by Ray, and a “sexual pervert” and
“revolting man” by chronic5. Yet, the names still don’t stop; he is also called a “sick
piece of shit” by BetterAmerica, a “sick man” and “pedophile” by ArmchairPatriot, and
a “nasty bastard” by wbateman (“Pics of polygamist leader,” 2008; “Smoking Gun,”

In addition to exploring their own distaste for the photographs and reverting to
name-calling tactics, this particular public places the photographs in the realm of child
pornography. Dzho writes, “Kiddie porn = images of a child in the act of being molested,
which is what this is” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008). Likewise, Bojett argues that “these
pictures are child pornography and should be taken off the HuffPost” (“Smoking Gun,”
2008). Furthermore, kellygrrrl asks, “Is it actually legal to post these photos here?
Shouldn’t the minor’s faces be blurred out?” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008).

Many members of this public stop at expressing their disgust – they do not make
further claims about the illegality or immorality of the raid, FLDS, or polygamy as a
whole. However, responses here illustrate membership in the repulsed public. Some
members of this public are also members of other publics including raid supporters and
anti-FLDS. Specifically, some members of the repulsed public move beyond articulating
their affect to utilizing the photographs as justification for their support of the YZR raid.
Raid Supporters

One public that emerges during the Jeffs’ photographs controversy is concerned with the YZR raid. Overall, 52 different responses constitute this particular public. While the photographs were released during a trial concerning an individual child, this public argues that the photographs demonstrate an imminent danger to all children living on the YZR ranch because Jeffs was the leader of the FLDS. This particular public demonstrates support for the actions taken by CPS during the raid by utilizing the photographs as evidence as to why the children should not have been given back to their parents. This public transcends the immediate boundaries of the photographs; after all Jeffs is imprisoned and the custody hearing does not concern either of the girls in the photographs. This particular public is invited by the photographs and is able to make the leap from Jeffs to FLDS via, in part by, the evidence tag in the corners of the photographs as well as the state’s use of the photographs in an individual custody trial resultant from the YZR raid. The photographs are evidence and were used during the custody trial of one child taken during the raid. The use of the photographs invites and, perhaps, supports the conclusion that the photographs mean that these children were rightly taken; an argument being crafted and perpetuated by the state.

A primary tenet of this public is the questioning of the court’s decision to return children who were taken during the raid. This public is asserting that a danger is present at the ranch, a danger articulated by those in the repulsed public and, perhaps, conveyed through the drastic height difference between Jeffs and the girls in the photographs. As PuffAndStuff on the Huffington Post Web site asks, “Can someone please explain ‘why’ it is that the Texas legal system has given children back to this damned cult?” (“Warren
Jeffs kissing,” 2008). Moreover, laborgrunt argues that “those children taken away from that ranch should be kept away from it” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008).

Stargazer51 repeats this sentiment when he notes that the children “are obviously at risk to the ‘men’ who claim to be their husbands and fathers.” In the same public, JusticeforNatalee argues, “No immediate danger? A child being kissed on the mouth by an adult male is an IMMEDIATE DANGER” (“Pics of polygamist leader,” 2008). Kitty, after an argument about why the state should not have returned the children asks, “Who’s going to save them [the children]?” (“Pics of polygamist leader,” 2008). Xchron appears convinced that the state was wrong when he contends that “all I know is that the judge said that texas had to return the children to the parents who endangered and enabled what we see in these pics [sic]” (“Pics of polygamist leader,” 2008). “I don’t know what the answers are. Texas may have overstepped and made mistakes that will only make things worse,” writes pnwmom, “But that doesn’t make what the sect does to children and women okay. That doesn’t make child abuse or mind control okay, no matter how many nice lodge buildings” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). Given these reactions, PAposter asks, “who would send children back to these people?” The answer to this question is clear – the Texas Supreme Court. Some members of the raid supporter public place blame directly on the judicial system.

PAposter continues, “I just want to research the Judge that sent some kids back last week” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008). PAposter’s suspicions about the Judge are not unique. Mamack confirms his own suspicions when he argues, “I swear the judge who sent those kids back, is somehow connected to these Child Abusers” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). Moreover, laborgrunt argues that “those children taken away from that ranch
should be kept away from it” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008). Additionally, Faux pas writes, “Now maybe the panel of 3 judges in texas will rethink their decision to send all those kids back home [sic]” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008).

As mentioned previously, some of the Web sites incorporate a quotation from Dan Jessop, the father of the child involved in the custody dispute, in which he argues “you see far worse, immoral, disgusting, gross things than a girl kissing a man in the streets of your own community” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008, para. 7). This quotation is invoked by members of the raid supporter public as they demonize the photographs, Jeffs, and the FLDS. As surfcitysteven notes on the Huffington Post Web site, “No, Jessop, we don’t see more disgusting things than that on the streets of my community and if we did, the perps [perpetrators] would hope that the cops got there real fast” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008). Moreover, richard responds to Jessop’s claim when he postulates, “Point is, Jessop, a ‘decent’ man doesn’t usually go around kissing a 12-year-old girl. His daughter, maybe; but otherwise, no” (“Pics of polygamist leader,” 2008). Similarly, isis writes, “I don’t see things more disgusting than that on my streets. That is super creepy” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008).

In addition to responding to the photographs and the quotation from Dan Jessop, raid supporters are also defending their claims against those who feel the mass removal of the children was unconstitutional. FincenMIB argues that “there are constitutionalists on every new blog who think the crime is at the hands of Texas. Lets all pass the hat, and get one way tickets to Iran or Iraq for these [people]” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008). He adds to this stance in a later posting:
Stay angry because the constitutionalists will descend [sic] upon this site soon, to convince us 2 wrongs make a right and that if they go after FLDS today, that it will be you or them tomorrow! Forget about the laws being violated, because other children are sexually active in America and decadent that the FLDS with their wholesome values of reassigning women and children should be tolerated or ignored, as well [sic].

(“Warren Jeff’s kissing,” 2008)

Overall, FincenMIB’s believes that counterarguments to his assertions are unfounded and slippery slope in nature. He does not stand alone in his claims.

Midlodemocrat takes a legal stance against the rights protector public that believes the burden of proof rested on the state to justify taking the children.

You [the sympathizers] have no idea how CPS and DCYS works … the burden of proof is on the parents that they DIDN’T abuse the child in order to get their children back. If there is a complaint against someone lodged with CPS, you can damn well bet that there was abuse or neglect of some type occurring … And, don’t give me that crap about ‘someone who doesn’t like you can report you and you can lose your kids’. That’s utter horseshit. (“Smoking Gun,” 2008)

Additionally, in a later post, Midlodemocrat contends that “those children can’t speak for themselves and needed protection. If several who weren’t being harmed (yet) got caught up, well, that’s unfortunate, but I’d rather that CPS err on the side of protecting the children in all cases” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008).
Similarly, Aloha Spirit reflects Midlodemocrats beliefs: “when one child is endangered, all children in the family must be removed” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Likewise, StarryNite defends the state’s decision to remove all of the children rather than just those who were thought to have been abused. “Actually, the prudent thing is for adults to keep their damn hands off of kids when it comes to sex,” she writes, adding that “I don’t think the crimes were against all children but I do think there was enough of that going on that an investigation would be necessary” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Frank Cannon repeats this sentiment when he asserts that “Jeffs and his buddies spent years developing the PERFECT pedophile booty farm … THAT is what you [sympathizers] are defending” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Additionally, “The government can take your children from you,” magellan argues, “if it has reason to suspect you’re doing something unlawful with one or more of them” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). In response to madmusic, a rights protector, AngryOldDem writes, “Take a long look at those pictures. This is not dad giving daughter a peck on the cheek. Your justification of this is amazing” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008).

Overall, this particular public consists of individuals who support the raid because they see the images as evidence of children being in imminent danger. This public is responding to both the photographs and the content of the Web sites. The photographs, in their opinion, are proof that child abuse was occurring among FLDS members. In this way, raid supporters are expanding the boundaries of the photographs – moving from photographs of Warren Jeffs to generalizations about the behavior of FLDS members at YZR. Moreover, some raid supporters are responding to the context in which the photographs are introduced on the Web sites when they demonstrate disagreement with
Dan Jessop. While members of this public demonstrate support for the raid, another public goes one step further, making claims about polygamy and the FLDS as a whole.

*Anti-FLDS*

Raid supporters build on responses from the repulsed public by alluding to the photographs as justification for the raid. In a similar fashion, the anti-FLDS public expands the meaning of the photographs to serve not just as justification of the raid, but to also demonize the FLDS as a whole. In a number of cases, members of the anti-FLDS public articulate support for the raid. However, unlike raid supporters, the anti-FLDS public expands the meaning of the photographs to allude to illegal and immoral acts on behalf of the FLDS extraneous to issues in the raid. A total of 38 responses constitute this particular public.

Unlike the raid supporters, this public does not make clear reference to the ranch. Rather, the anti-FLDS public concentrates on the photographs as evidence of the atrocities committed by members of the FLDS and polygamists as a whole. Jeffs’ role in the FLDS is certainly a factor in the expansion of meaning of the photographs. This public infers an illegal act by Jeffs to represent illegal and immoral actions on behalf of the entire FLDS; as the prophet, Jeffs’ role was to establish doctrine for the group.

A central tenet of this public is the naming of the FLDS as a cult that allows for religiously justified pedophilia. As Ilylabrat argues, “Religious sanctioned pedophilia is what this sect represents. Major brain-washing has to have gone on for people to stand by and allow this as if it were morally respectable” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008). Similarly, rzan contends, “A 12-year-old cannot give consent, and in a community like this, there is no choice for a 12-year-old or a 16-year-old” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008).
ColbertWatcher writes only, “Damn cults” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). Brenda calls the FLDS a “religion of pedophile men” (“Pics of polygamist leader,” 2008). “This girl is still a child,” Vinca continues, “If this is the norm, it’s a cult of pedophiles and nothing more” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). Moreover, pfitz59 argues that “the whole FLDS is geared toward pedophilia. The entire doctrine brain-washes girls into seeing only one conclusion in their life, getting hitched to the big kahuna or one of his associates” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). An extended posting by Cilantro on the Huffington Post Web site repeats this sentiment.

FLDS and all versions of this are nothing more than very well thought out, sophisticated pedophile sex villages and so called families that allow a handful of men to realize their ultimate sex dreams – screw as many women as ya want, call them a wife, even if she is underage and screw her too. Then, ya add a bunch of hokus-pokus terminology to justify it, throw in the name of God, Jesus, the Lord here and there … next make the women wear prairie dresses … making it difficult for them to escape … kind of like an orange prison jump suit. Then by having underage girls give birth to new babies who can also be completely brainwashed via isolation from the outside world, you’ve created a 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} generation of new victims to abuse and control [sic]. (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008)

The religious justification for the practice of polygamy is attacked repeatedly on the message board postings.

Just as Cilantro argues that placing polygamy as a practice under God’s law masks the practice, uppityperson takes up the notion of a spiritual relationship. She
asserts that in polygamy “you have one legal wife and another/other ‘spiritual’ ones … ‘spiritual’ means something very different to me, and I expect, to you also” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). Vanboggie also refutes the religious justification for polygamy: “Old guys chasing off the young stallions so they can pick and choose what little girls to boink has nothing to do with religion” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008).

Also in concern for FLDS boys, Midlodemocrat reflects on her own experiences of taking in two homeless FLDS boys. She indicates that “I think about these FLDS boys and wonder how in the holy Hell their mothers could allow it to happen? I know all about subjugation, etc., but BY GOD, I would murder my husband first. And, I love the man dearly” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). Reflecting back to Cilantro’s argument, the style of dress among the FLDS women also becomes a point of contention on the message boards.

The photographs are rather plain – only featuring Jeffs with one of the two girls against a somewhat neutral background. In these photographs, the girls’ dresses stand out in stark contrast to the background and Jeffs’ more modern clothing. The dress and hairstyles are discussed among those who are arguing against polygamy as a whole. For instance, JeanGray asserts that “the ways they dress all these girls the same with the same hairdo, trying to make them look older reminds me in a sick way of some of those baby ‘beauty pageant’ kids” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). In contrast, hokies4ever contends that “I don’t think they dress this way to try to look older. I honestly believe that the pedophiles believe that what they are doing is okay” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). Not counted among this public, nor any of the publics discussed in this chapter, is a small group of individuals on the Democratic Underground Web site who claim that the girls
are dressed this way to disguise pregnancy. However, they are quickly silenced by members of the rights protector public who note that, once taken into state custody, the girls were all given medical examinations to determine if they had ever given birth – pregnancies by FLDS minors certainly made headlines.

Overall, this public argues that polygamy within the FLDS is immoral and/or illegal. In particular, they reference the FLDS as a group embracing religiously justified pedophilia. This public responds to particular components of the photographs including the girls’ clothing and hairstyle. Moreover, in response to the contextualizing information they assert that the religious aspect of the FLDS and polygamy is a false rationale for bigamy and pedophilia. While this public expands the boundaries of the photographs to make assumptions about FLDS members as a whole, unless they are also members of the raid supporter public, they stop short of using the photographs as justification for the YZR raid. Moreover, this public, like the raid supporters, are also responding to claims made by the rights protector public.

Rights Protectors

The final public, rights protectors, both argue against other postings and assert that the raid and subsequent events violated FLDS members’ rights. In total, 73 responses constitute this public. This public, to one extent or another, argues against the meaning other publics derive from the photographs. Moreover, this public seeks to restrict the meanings of the photographs constructed by other posters and the state of Texas. In fact, this public is labeled “FLDS Sympathizers” by those who favor the raid, are repulsed by the images, and/or are members of the anti-FLDS public, but is referred to here as the rights protector public. This label is more appropriate and less derogatory because their
arguments refute claims made by others on the message boards, the actions taken by the state concerning the raid, and the Jeffs photographs rather than demonstrate support for FLDS members. This direct site of conflict is best understood by looking at a post from procrustes on the Huffington Post Web site:

My, my we’re really entertained, here. We used to go to horror shows for our shock, but that’s so passé. Everybody having a gooooood time being just sooooo outraged and having all your electronic buddies with whom to be outraged together … Don’t you see what this is about? We are being shown a human fetish that happens in 0.0000000000001 percent of the population as justification to curtail the liberty of 0.9999999999999 percent of the rest of us … Your [raid supporters] response is an excellent case study why the irrational trumps the rational. (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008)

While procrustes points to the conflict between different publics on the message boards, some members of this public insist that the U.S. Constitution was not upheld during the raid – an additional focus of this public. High Plains, arguing in opposition to raid supporter Midlodemocrat, writes that “it seems to me that in their loathing for the FLDS folks, lots of people are willing to run roughshod over the Constitution or willing to excuse just about anything the state does. I think the state really overreached here” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Wizard 777 notes that “you cannot keep due process out of any court” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). Similarly, Cali writes, “I have never and would never defend that vile man. But the raid was still unconstitutional” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Dadof2Angels agrees when he notes that “CPS took kids who were in no immediate
danger in bulk from a community … they should not work that way and that’s what the appeals court found” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Moreover, hokies4ever argues that “briefly put this case is about legal corner cutting. Is it expensive to individually prosecute each child abuse case? Of course it is. But you can’t just lump EVERY child together” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008).

In addition to those who argue that the raid was unconstitutional, another contingency of the rights protector public argues that the facts in the case are not being discussed accurately (note that many contingencies within the rights protector public overlap). High Plains who argues that the raid was unconstitutional also discusses the misrepresented facts concerning the raid. He asserts that “the state alleged that 31 women ages 14 to 17 were pregnant, mothers or both, a count that included 26 mothers whose ages were disputed. As of noon Thursday, just eight mothers remained in the disputed category” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Furthermore, LisaL contends that “The disputed minors who turned out to be adults might have a civil rights case against the state” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008).

Moreover, in response to the abuse allegations, madmusic argues that the real abuse was not at the hands of members of the FLDS, but rather the state. In other words, raid supporters argue that the wholesale removal was to protect children from abuse, but madmusic and others claim that foster care constitutes abuse. He asks, “And a picture of a kiss is enough to abuse [put in foster care] these kids like that?” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). Likewise, LisaL asks, “What do you say to a little child, under 2 years old, who has been crying and crying because she has been separated from her parents? That it’s for her own good? Even though studies show the effects from separation on children can be
long-lasting?” ("Smoking Gun," 2008). Karate Kid calls on raid supporters to “do a little research on foster homes; the picture is not a rosy one” ("Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008). He further adds, “Let me remind you that Warren Jeffs has been in jail for almost two years; this latest raid had nothing to do with his case except for the church affiliation” ("Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008).

In conjunction with rights protectors discussing the abusive nature of foster care, others argue that the photographs are irrelevant to the custody hearing. In particular, some members of the rights protector public argue that the photographs themselves should not be taken into consideration. Kiddub directly argues that the photographs are irrelevant to the current trial.

I fail to see the connection here. IS one of these girls one of the girls at the centre of the abuse claims? Or are these just pictures of Warren Jeffs kissing underage girls? Obviously the latter is disgusting and he has been tried and convicted for these acts. But the latter has no bearing on the former, especially if the prosecution has failed to demonstrate any actual connection between the women in the photographs and the baby in question. ("Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008)

Wizard 777 asserts that the photographs are “irrelevant … all they prove is Jeffs kissed a girl” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). Likewise, Madmusic writes, “So you want to throw Rulon and Lorene [parents of six FLDS children who were taken during the raid] under the bus because of an old picture though the man in it is in prison? They weren’t even on the ranch then … That’s what makes raid supporters so dangerous” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008). “If CPS has any concern about waterboarding” asserts LisaL, “why aren’t [there
questions about that] instead of showing photos of Jeffs?” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008).
Pleah asks, “What I want to know is how does this picture of Jeffs, have anything to do with all the children that were ILLEGALLY taken from their homes?” (“Some FLDS kids,” 2008).

Also in opposition to the use of the photographs in the custody hearing, BlackLeatherRain asserts that “these pics only prove tht he’s [Jeffs] a pedophile … not that the compound in Texas was participating in this BS, too [sic]” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008). Furthermore, JJK writes, “I doubt that these photos, as stomach-turning as they may be to most of us” meet the standard of proof for the appellate court (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008). Although upset by the photographs, just like JJK, cylinder urges raid supporters to “wait for the real facts to come in before getting the rope over the tree” (“Warren Jeffs kissing,” 2008).

While this public seeks to oppose the meaning of the photographs made by other publics, this is done in a variety of ways. Some contend that the raid was unconstitutional and that foster care, the resulting condition for children taken during the raid, is a worse situation. Still, other members of this constituency assert that the photographs are irrelevant to the individual custody hearings. Overall, they seek to mitigate and restrict the meanings of the photographs crafted by other publics.

Implications

Through an analysis of message board postings and emergent publics concerning the controversy, three implications emerge. First, the multiple publics approach the photographs through various paradigmatic orientations leading to varying conclusions regarding the photographs’ meanings. Second, images, by their very nature, invite, but do
not allow cause-effect relationships to be drawn. Third, while not understood as traditional iconic images, the photographs are (were) temporarily iconic.

**Repurposing**

According to Hariman and Lucaites (2007), one criterion for an iconic photograph is that it must be “widely recognized and remembered” (p. 27). Additionally, a photograph must be “reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics” to be considered iconic (p. 27). Although the photographs are not as recognizable as those studied by Hariman and Lucaites, the images, in part because of Jeffs, were widely recognized. Additionally, the photographs were not only reproduced, but among the multiple iterations, repurposed.

The initial purpose of the photographs is clear in terms of Set 1; that particular set is marked as anniversary photographs. The initial purposes of Sets 2 and 3 may be the same – they certainly might be anniversary photographs – but they might also commemorate another event (wedding, birth, etc.). The use of the photographs in the custody battle over a one-week-old child adds an additional layer to the photographs. Neither the child nor the parents of the baby in dispute are pictured in the photographs. However, an evidence tag and text situating the photographs persuade the viewers of the photographs that the images should be understood in relation to the case. In other words, the images take on new meaning and invite alternative discussion in their multiple iterations.

Moreover, the photographs become photojournalistic only because they were released to the media – and by The Smoking Gun, a controversial source at that. Additionally, the photographs were primarily seen on the Internet (although some news
programs did show the photographs). Should this be seen as an additional repurposing? The use of the photographs and the contexts in which they emerge, limits and changes the possible invitations for meaning-making afforded by the images. The images allow for a discussion of the YZR raid because of their use in a custody hearing resulting from the raid. Additionally, the audience knows, through the text introducing the photographs and because of the news coverage surrounding his arrest, that the man in the photographs is Jeffs who is not just a member of the FLDS, but the “former” leader. Please note that some individuals who posted on the message boards believe that Jeffs is still leading the FLDS from within his prison cell (e.g., “Some FLDS kids,” 2008).

The intersubjectivity between the images and the responses results in enthymematic claims. The images, the contextualizing information, and previous events such as the raid and Jeffs’ previous arrest and trial form minor premises. Audience members understand what the photographs are and how they have been used. However, each public, perhaps even each person, approaches the photographs from a different perspective and paradigm thus bringing a myriad of major premises to bear on the photographic evidence. The variation in major premises leads to varied conclusions about the photographs. Those who perceived the raid as necessary approach the photographs as evidence of their claim. Those who oppose the FLDS view the photographs as justification and rationale for their dislike of the sect. However, those who perceived the raid as unconstitutional argue that the photographs’ usage in the custody trial is just another instance of the bastardization of the legal system by the state. Overall, the differing major premises lead to different conclusions regarding the meaning of the photographs.
Meaning and Images

The various meanings of the photographs, derived from varied major premises, illustrate a concept known as syntactic indeterminacy. Messaris (1997) asserts that visual syntax lacks “explicit devices for indicating causality, analogy, or any other relationships other than those of space and time” (pp. xvii-xviii). This concept, known as syntactic indeterminacy, is evidenced by those arguing that the photographs show a relationship among all members of the FLDS. Raid supporters see the photographs of Jeffs, the leader of the FLDS, having inappropriate relationships with minors as evidenced by the photographs. This public further believes that members of the FLDS follow the prophet, Warren Jeffs. Therefore, they contend, members of the FLDS had inappropriate relationships with minors. Moreover, they argue that the state has the duty to protect minors from inappropriate relationships. Since members of the FLDS had inappropriate relationships with minors, they conclude, the state had the duty to remove the children from their parents. In contrast, some members of the rights protector public argue that girl children in the FLDS are brainwashed into believing that underage marriage is the morally correct action. Since brainwashing alleviates guilt and girl children grow up to be women, members of this public use the images to argue that FLDS women should not be punished for failing to act on their children’s behalf.

These syllogisms may appear logically sound and, in fact, might be accurate. This logic allows the emergent publics to expand the boundaries of the photographs to talk about larger issues. In addition to syllogisms, enthymemes are also evidenced among publics’ responses. As previously mentioned, the photographs serve as minor premises for audience responses. While the photographs are the same, the approach toward the
photographs (the major premise) varies across publics. Therefore, while Messaris claims
the images themselves lack a syntax that allows causal connections, the images serve as
minor premises in arguments that use causal logic. Moreover, the photographs, because
they are so controversial, have apparently produced extreme lines of thinking. Even if the
logic holds and it is true that women are brainwashed and FLDS members act as the
prophet acts, exceptions to the rule undoubtedly exist. The role of images and
photography in constructing extremes is exceptionally interesting. There appears to be
little to no middle ground on the subject that takes into account individual choice. Rather,
groups of people are treated and understood more as commodities – FLDS members will
do as they are told, FLDS women don’t know wrong from right. These extreme lines of
thought indicate that syntactic indeterminacy is in effect – the publics do make leaps in
logic based on the images. However, as Sontag (2003) notes, photographs invite these
interpretations. Therefore, while one cannot prove causation through a photograph, the
lack of syntax invites multiple interpretations. In other words, this lack of determinacy
gives publics latitude to infer cause-effect relationships.

*Expansion of Iconic Images*

While not iconic in terms of the photographs explored by Hariman and Lucaites,
the photographs were temporally iconic – the images became icons of both the FLDS and
the YZR raid. The ability to arrive at inferences concerning the FLDS and the raid is
troublesome in that the enthymematic structure allows and, in fact, encourages multiple
interpretations of the images. While the photographs cannot show cause-effect
relationships with any degree of certainty, the photographs are immediately recognizable
of instances as abuse. However, they do not hold up as images that will be recognized
throughout generations as illustrations of historical events – a criterion of iconic photographs as established by Hariman and Lucaites. This provides an area of expansion of iconic photography as posed by Hariman and Lucaites. Rather than discussing photographs as either iconic or not, temporality must be taken into consideration. The longevity of a photograph within the collective memory certainly makes it iconic in a traditional sense. However, in our fast-paced changing world of YouTube and Twitter, could a photograph be momentarily iconic? The images were recognizable in terms of what was occurring, sparked discussion over the level and type of meaning allowed, provoked discussion of multiple meanings, and was recognizable over a brief frame of time.

Concluding Remarks

The close textual analysis of message board postings revealed four publics including raid supporters, the repulsed public, an anti-FLDS public, and rights protector public. Moreover, the use of the photographs as evidence, and the negotiation of the photographs’ meanings, discloses three implications. First, the repurposing of the images – once used to commemorate anniversaries and subsequently used in two trials – illustrates the use of images as minor premises in conflicting syllogisms and enthymemes. Second, the ability of multiple publics to draw different causal relationships based on the photographs is explained by the concept of syntactic indeterminacy. Third, a call for an expansion of the definition of iconic photographs is articulated. Specifically, in light of the persuasiveness and prevalence of the photographs, the photographs are deemed to be temporarily iconic.
Taking these implications into consideration, scholars must work to continually question and expand theory concerning public controversy and the interplay between photographs and audiences. Additionally, we must seek to uncover possible dangers in the interpretation of photographs by audience members and engagement in message boards. The reflection of enthymemes across publics’ responses is of substantial consideration; the major premises used to approach the photographs vary and could be based on any number of predispositions or exposures to the controversy.

Future research should examine the ways in which the images were discussed in alternative formats in consideration of the following questions. If viewed on television or in the newspapers, would the images have been perceived in the same ways? If the photographs had been blurred would the lack of face have created more or less distance and emotionality between publics and their responses to the images? Moreover, additional research is needed to help explain the ways in which those unfamiliar with the controversy were able to situate and identify the photographs.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND OVERARCHING IMPLICATIONS

In this final chapter, I focus on the connections between the three analysis chapters and, more explicitly than in the chapters, articulate the ways in which I see each of the analyses fitting together. I approach this in two ways. First, I discuss some of the implications that span the three chapters. Second, I offer a writing story to discuss some of the additional considerations regarding choices made for the dissertation. This second component will primarily illustrate some paradigmatic and methodological concerns from the writing of the dissertation.

Overarching Implications

With little exception, each of the analysis chapters is written nearly exclusively from one another – the goal was to allow each chapter to stand independently, for each set of publics to emerge in isolation from the other controversies. My goal in this chapter is to weave threads among the analysis chapters and to return to the theoretical and methodological considerations laid out in the second chapter. Threads exist in two broad areas. First, the abductive, rhetorically-oriented interpretivist approach reveals methodological and topic centered implications surrounding the polygamist controversies and the overarching notion of public controversy. Second, while each chapter has different theoretical underpinnings, the limitations of existing theory appear throughout the analysis chapters in reference to the interplay between publics, their responses, and coverage.

Methodological & Topic Centered Implications

Several implications concerning the polygamist controversies emerged through the analysis of audience responses. The subject of polygamy was initially considered as
just a platform to garner methodological and theoretical insights into emergent publics during social controversies. However, after careful consideration of the controversies and publics, overarching themes exist across the analysis chapters in regards to polygamist controversies and the notion of public controversy. First, multiple overlaps between publics exist within and across each of the three analysis chapters revealing a web of embedded controversies. Moreover, audiences make sense of the controversies based on both textual fragments and their own beliefs. Through these sensemaking devices members of the FLDS are Othered, while sect members simultaneously perpetuate their own Otherness.

Overlaps Between Publics

As indicated in chapter two, the analysis chapters were written nearly without reference to one another due to two factors. First, each chapter was written separately with the ultimate goal of parceling out each chapter for publication. Although some allusions to earlier controversies were noted in latter responses and newspaper coverage in the analysis chapters, each of the three controversies was initially perceived to be somewhat independent of one another. However, a review of all of the emergent publics revealed overlaps between the publics both within and across controversies.

Audience responses to the *Big Love* controversy revealed six publics. First, LDS members seek to distinguish themselves from polygamists and members of the FLDS. Second, those engaged in polyamorous relationships seek to position themselves under the umbrella of polygamy and to defend the practice. Third, gay marriage opponents argue that the legalization of gay marriage will ultimately lead to the legalization of polygamy (the alleged greatest evil of alternative marriage structures). Fourth, practicing
polygamists contend that with the exception of the gratuitous sex scenes, the television program, at least the depiction of the Henrickson family, paints a positive image of their lifestyle. Fifth, those who believe that polygamy leads to inherently negative consequences assert that child-brides and child molestation are endemic to polygamy. The final public argues that polygamy should not be understood as being inextricably linked with negative outcomes.

Although at first glance these publics may seem entirely independent from one another, overlaps exist across the six publics. Some of these overlaps are clear within the responses. However, others are identified based on evidence external to the controversies. First, LDS members, undoubtedly, overlap with gay marriage opponents. While no respondent on the message board indicates that he or she is simultaneously a member of the LDS and against gay marriage, the LDS, as a religion institution, does not support gay marriage. In fact, the Mormon Church gave nearly $200,000 worth of in-kind donations to help pass Proposition 8 in California (“Church Clarifies,” 2009). Therefore, while not all members of the LDS are against gay marriage, certainly some members of this public would resonate with the gay marriage opponent public. Moreover, practicing polygamists may also find their beliefs articulated by gay marriage opponents. According to the aforementioned press release from pro-polygamy.com, the openly gay status of Big Love’s creators is problematic for polygamists (“Polygamy Rights,” 2008). While polygamists would certainly not use the same rhetoric as the gay marriage opponents who place polygamy as a worst case scenario for gay marriage, the fact remains that both publics share the desire for gay marriage to be illegal. Finally, both polyamory participants and practicing polygamists indicate that polygamy and polyandry can have
positive outcomes. Accordingly, polyamory participants and practicing polygamists share sentiments with the public that argues that polygamy has neutral or positive outcomes.

In addition to the six publics that emerged in the Big Love chapter, the Yearning for Zion (YZR) chapter reveals four publics including attention shifters, those who blame CPS for the raid, those who blame FLDS members for the raid, and coverage critics. First, attention shifters turn inward, pointing to problems plaguing children in mainstream society before casting stones at the FLDS. Second, those who blame CPS indicate that state law enforcement agencies and CPS violated the constitutional rights of sect members. In direct opposition, those who blame sect members believe that the raid was justified because the children were in imminent danger. Fourth, coverage critics take a stance against the newspapers’ reporting of the events rather than the raid itself.

As is the case with the emergent publics from the Big Love controversy, some publics within the YZR controversy share similarities. Specifically, the two publics that appear most opposed to one another, those who blame FLDS and those who blame CPS, share a constituency. Among the responses to the controversy are individuals who blame both CPS and FLDS. In particular, this public-bridging constituency contends that while male FLDS members were to blame for the raid because of their alleged abuse against children, CPS should have found ways to allow mothers to remain with their children. Within this constituency, mothers, like children, are seen as victims both of male sect members and CPS.

In addition to the publics that emerge in the Big Love and YZR controversies, four publics are identified among the responses to coverage in the controversy surrounding the photographs of Warren Jeffs kissing underage girls. The four publics include a repulsed
public, raid supporters, an anti-FLDS public, and rights protectors. The repulsed public uses name calling and many expletives to express their affect. Second, raid supporters indicate that the children were in danger and needed to be removed from the compound. Third, members of the anti-FLDS public, aside from the raid, articulate contempt for the sect as a whole. The final emergent public, rights protectors, utilize legal arguments for expressing discontent at the raid and subsequent events.

Within this final analysis chapter, the lines between publics are seemingly more blurry than in the previous analyses. In particular, three of the publics including the repulsed public, raid supporter public, and the anti-FLDS public share a distaste, at one level or another, for actions taken by the FLDS. Those who support the raid use the photographs as evidence of abuse – abuse they find repulsive. The anti-FLDS public also finds the photographs revolting and uses the photographs as evidence for their dislike of the FLDS. Yet, the anti-FLDS public does not explicitly make comments concerning the raid and the raid supporter public does not make outright statements about the morality/legality of the sect as a whole. That being said, those who are members of either the raid supporter or anti-FLDS publics would find resonance in the other publics’ arguments. Moreover, each of these publics, as evidenced by their use of the photographs to support their claims, find the images problematic to say the least. Furthermore, some members of the rights protector public indicate that they also find the photographs disgusting. As one right protector, Cali, writes, “I have never and would never defend that vile man. But the raid was still unconstitutional” (“Smoking Gun,” 2008). However, while some rights protectors explicitly indicate their revulsion for the photographs, they do not find that the raid was legal or that the photographs should be attributed to the
entire FLDS. Overall, multiple overlaps exist between the publics within each controversy.

In addition to overlaps between publics within each controversy, publics across controversies have similar beliefs. In terms of publics that may share members, a variety of overlaps are possible. For instance, those who see polygamy as neutral or resulting in positive outcomes may also be repulsed by the photographs of Jeffs, but simultaneously view them as an anomaly and not indicative of polygamy as a whole. Yet, overlaps such as this may only be true of a few members and do not reveal any significant implications. However, after a careful review of all 14 publics, three general categories of publics emerge. Please note that although three broad categories emerge, overlaps exist even across these categories particularly in relation to the repulsed public. First, seven publics comprise a broad category of publics that articulate, in some way or another, clear opposition to FLDS members. Second, three publics constitute a category of publics which see polygamy as positive or, at the least, having neutral consequences. Third, four publics, rather than show support or place blame on the FLDS, take a more reflexive stance to the controversies. Specifically, this public reflects directly on elements of the controversy rather than placing blame or showing support for the FLDS and/or state.

The category of publics that display opposition to FLDS and polygamy includes LDS members, gay marriage opponents, those who believe polygamy leads to negative outcomes, those who blame FLDS members for the raid, the repulsed public, raid supporters, and the anti-FLDS public. This general category of publics, in one way or another, demonstrates a clear opposition to the FLDS. For LDS members, conflation of their religion with the FLDS is problematic because the LDS has taken a stance against
polygamy. Gay marriage opponents rely on others also believing that polygamy is an immoral practice in order to create a fear of legalizing gay marriage. They place polygamy, a practice of the FLDS, as the worst case and inevitable consequence of legalizing gay marriage. They assert that if gay marriage is legalized, polygamist marriages will also be legalized. Although not directly stated, this public implicitly asserts that there is something “wrong” with polygamy which demonstrates a clear connection with those who believe that polygamy leads to negative consequences. Those who in the *Big Love* controversy asserted that polygamy leads to negative consequences would certainly resonate with raid supporters and those who blame FLDS members for the raid. While the rhetoric used by the three groups is slightly different and is affected by the controversy during which their responses are crafted, each finds the allegations tenable and places blame on members of the FLDS. While the six publics mentioned are quite explicit in their opposition to the FLDS, the repulsed public only roughly fits within this category.

The repulsed public certainly expresses disgust at the photographs of Jeffs who was once the prophet of the FLDS, but for many members, opposition to the FLDS stops there. Moreover, as previously mentioned, publics not included in this general category, such as rights supporters, also find the images revolting. While I have concerns about placing the repulsed public within the general category of FLDS opposition, those in the repulsed public are, in their own way, expressing opposition to the FLDS albeit less strongly than other publics included in this category.

While overlaps and similarities are evident between those who demonstrate opposition to the FLDS, a second general category emerges which shows support for
polygamy, if not the FLDS necessarily. This category of publics includes practicing polygamists, polyamory participants, and those who believe that polygamy leads to neutral or positive outcomes. Practicing polygamists, logically speaking, do not see polygamy as being immoral. Although surely some polygamists do no view their relationships as positive, as a whole polygamists should, theoretically speaking, see their relationship type as positive. Moreover, polyamory participants, even though they fall outside of the definition of polygamy for the purposes of this dissertation, seek to define themselves as polygamists and to show support for the practice. This group, as discussed in the emergent publics section of the *Big Love* analysis, identify with the label “polygamist” even though there could be negative consequences including legal sanction and/or scrutiny from those who oppose the practice. Additionally, those who believe that polygamy leads to neutral or positive consequences would likely be sympathetic to beliefs held by polygamists and polyamory participants even though members of this particular public do not explicitly identify themselves as polygamists.

Within this broad category, publics, to one extent or another, show support for polygamy, but do not necessarily show support for the FLDS. In that way, these publics are not in direct opposition to publics in the broad anti-FLDS category. This lack of direct clash between the publics further illustrates the need for understanding and discussing controversies outside the parameters of binaries. Furthermore, this need is also evidenced by the emergence of a third broad category of publics.

Attention shifters, coverage critics, rights protectors, and those who blame CPS for the raid belong to the third category of publics, one that is more reflexive in nature. This broad category of publics does not show support or contempt for polygamists for
polygamy. Rather, this public is more temporally bounded; they reflect on the
controversy to which they are responding more so than the other categories of publics.
For coverage critics and attention shifters, the problem that they feel needs to be
addressed falls outside the two parties predominantly associated with the raid. Each of
these two publics points to issues in mainstream society – the (re)victimization of victims
by the media and issues plaguing children in mainstream society – rather than the YZR
raid and subsequent events. Moreover, although rights protectors and those who blame
CPS for the raid are called sympathizers by other publics, members of these publics do
not show support for polygamists or members of the FLDS. Both publics deem the raid to
be problematic – in once instance by placing blame on CPS, in the other by using legal
arguments to justify a stance against the raid.

Members of each of these four reflexive publics could also certainly be members
of publics that fit within the two aforementioned categories. This is most clearly
illustrated by those who argue that the raid while unconstitutional (rights supporters),
abuses were probably occurring at the ranch against women and children. Overall, clear
and tentative overlaps exist between the 14 emergent publics and between the
controversies themselves. These overlaps reveal that controversy is not a binary concept.
Instead, these overlaps suggest that controversy is messy and is unbounded rather than
constrained by time. The multitude of overlapping publics and the three broad categories
of publics suggest that more than two sides exist within a controversy. Moreover, the
three publics are rarely in direct conflict with one another. The ways in which the publics
resonate with arguments across controversies reveals that the arguments do not solely
belong to one public at a given time. The similarities between publics in varying
controversies illustrates that the arguments do not reside within the time frame of any one controversy.

*Web of Controversy*

The overlaps between publics suggest that controversies are not necessarily bounded, but are instead embedded in a web of controversies. The connections between publics and between controversies serve as the thread between different points (controversies) in the web. Publics’ responses are not only constructed through coverage, but also through personal beliefs and opinions. Members of each public use the controversy as both a platform and as evidence for their beliefs. For instance, in the case of *Big Love*, gay marriage opponents use the show as a platform to espouse their beliefs concerning gay marriage in light of the show’s creators’ openly gay status. The depictions of polygamy on *Big Love*, both the horrific conditions on the compound and the more positive Henrickson family, provide support for those both for and against polygamy. Similarly, the role of the government and child protective services comes into play in the publics’ responses to polygamy in light of the YZR raid. Moreover, the photographs of Jeffs serve as evidence for those who believe that polygamy is negative, but are labeled as irrelevant by others.

Condit (1989) argues that “audiences are not free to make meanings at will from mass-mediated texts” (p. 103). Instead, audience members’ abilities to create meaning “is constrained by a variety of factors … [which] include access to oppositional codes, the ratio between work required and pleasure produced in decoding a text, the repertoire of available texts, and the historical occasion” (p. 103). In other words, different interpretations of a text are not necessarily derived from the polysemic nature of texts.
The coverage and photographs, as Sontag (2003) suggests, invite publics to respond. Moreover, returning to McGee (1990), we are informed that the ways in which an individual makes sense of the controversy coverage is dependent on the textual fragments that prompt the sensemaking to occur and the individual’s pre-existing warehouse of fragments. As McGee points out, the constellation of fragments is the source of meaning. Returning to the photographs of Jeffs kissing underage girls, each public appears to derive the same meaning from the photographs – these are pictures of Warren Jeffs, FLDS leader, kissing young girls. However, publics draw different implications from the photographs. For some audience members, the photographs mean that Jeffs is disgusting, while others believe they are evidence that the children were in imminent danger. Yet, for others the photographs are a representation of the FLDS as a whole, and still others believe that the photographs violate constitutional rights of the parents in the custody case.

Each public makes sense of the photographs in different ways and the sensemaking devices used are contingent on the available textual fragments and preconceived beliefs. Moreover, responses, once available on message boards or in print via letters to the editor, also serve as textual fragments for other responses. As McGee (1990) suggests, cultural structures also limit how audience members make sense of textual fragments. In the controversy surrounding the photographs of Jeffs, the taboo nature of child molestation (and child pornography) makes it unpalatable for someone to articulate a liking or provide justification for the photographs. In this way, publics are constrained by societal expectations. Overall, audiences are constrained by and create
arguments based on their own beliefs, culture, other publics’ responses, and coverage of the controversy.

Othering of FLDS

Although publics are crafting the web of controversies, FLDS members, who are at the center of the web, have not had a prominent voice in the controversies. FLDS members often choose to remain hidden in the margins of society, but are also forced into that position because of their illegal lifestyles and religious convictions. FLDS members have chosen Otherness – an Otherness that is simultaneously imposed and chosen.

FLDS members are an Other – they live at the margins of society, practice an illegal marriage structure, and are considered by many to be immoral. Their practices are mysterious, often conducted behind closed doors in gated communities. Often this Otherness is crafted by choice – members of the FLDS rarely are seen outside of the high walls of compounds, dress differently than those in mainstream society, are polygamists, and hold stringent fundamentalist values. FLDS members are Othered not only by choice, but in the media. The plethora of popular press reading on the FLDS is heavily restricted to escape narratives. Consequently, those who are interviewed as “experts” on the subject are generally those who were former members of the sect such as Carolyn Jessop (“Former Polygamist,” 2009). Jessop fled a FLDS sect with her children. However, one daughter, Betty, returned to the compound after four years – the day after she turned 18. Jessop claims that Betty’s return is due to pressure from the sect. These narratives and “experts” as well as coverage of the controversies situate the sect as an Other. As mentioned, the depiction of Bill’s family on the compound in Big Love, the comments and photographs concerning women’s dress during the YZR raid, and the comments...
made by Dan Jessop, the father in the custody battle, during which the photographs of Jeffs were released, all help to reinforce the self-imposed Otherness.

In response to this self-imposed and coverage confirmed Otherness, some publics *magnify* the FLDS’s self-imposed otherness while other publics *ignore* it and in some cases point to *similarities* between sect members and mainstream society. For instance LDS members magnify the differences between the FLDS and mainstream society as they attempt to position themselves as “mainstreamers” and FLDS members as outsiders. Gay marriage opponents pray on the perception of polygamists as Other in an attempt to create fear in regards to the legalization of gay marriage resulting in the legalization of polygamy. Moreover, those who blame FLDS for the raid are at times resonating with the Otherness constructed through the newspaper coverage when calling to light the imminent danger posed to children by sect members. Furthermore, anti-FLDS members, in response to the photographs of Jeffs, reinforce the Otherness by referring to the sect as a cult.

Although some publics magnify the self-imposed Otherness, other publics ignore the differences or point to similarities between FLDS members and mainstream society. For instance, attention shifters seek to reflect inward on societal problems prior to casting stones at FLDS members. They argue that while the problems are different, members of mainstream society and the FLDS both suffer from issues concerning children. Those who blame CPS, coverage critics, and rights protectors argue that while sect members may be different from those in mainstream society, they deserve the same rights as everyone else.
Some publics magnify and others ignore the differences between mainstream society and sect members; sect members, on the other hand, recognize differences, but assert that they are similar to those in mainstream society. This same-but-different approach is perhaps most evident in the ways in which sect members discuss their appearance. For instance, an interview of FLDS members conducted by Oprah Winfrey illustrates this same, but different approach. At one point during the interview, Oprah asks: “Can you explain what the dresses are all about?” To which one teenage girl responds: “Mine looks different from hers... To you they probably do [look alike], but to us we say, ‘where’d you get your dress?’” Oprah’s response to the girls comment is particularly enlightening – she laughs, hysterically and says, “That’s funny!” Moreover, she acts surprised that all of the girls have cellular phones – she would not be shocked if a group of girls in mainstream society of the same age also had phones.

Oprah asks a group of FLDS members another question that seems especially pertinent to the discussion herein. She asks, “Is your life anything like Big Love?” To which an adult female sect member responds, “It’s light years away” (Thompson, 2009b). Oprah, like many individuals, uses Big Love as a frame of reference for polygamists since in many ways Big Love is the primary/only frame of reference for many individuals given the self-imposed silence of FLDS members. However, as the sect members indicate, the fictional program is not an accurate representation. The fact remains that what happens in these compounds and the practices associated with the FLDS are blurred and mysterious. Yet, the members interviewed tend to position themselves as simultaneously different, but similar to members of mainstream society. As one teenager explained in the Oprah interview, regarding women’s hairstyle, “It’s the style, come back in ten years”
(Thompson, 2009a). Another woman explains, “It has changed over time just like in mainstream society, the trends in fashion change” (Thompson, 2009a).

While their trends in fashion are different from members of mainstream society, the fashion is not dictated solely by religious protocol (length of dresses is in fact mandated). As they argue, they may be different in dress from the everyday woman walking down the street, but they care about their appearance and are “in-fashion” with the trends in the compound and across the sect. In this way, sect members are simultaneously the same as those in mainstream society (they care about their appearance), but different (they dress much different than those in mainstream society, in part, because of religious convictions).

The magnification of Otherness by some publics, the dismissal of Otherness by some publics, and same-but-different argument constructed by sect members helps to illustrate the messiness of controversy. The belief by some publics that sect members are different from mainstream society and should be treated as such magnifies Otherness. Other publics contend that while sect members are different, they should be treated just like everyone else. Meanwhile, sect members acknowledge and perpetuate this Otherness by living their daily lives primarily behind closed gates, but when discussing their lifestyles attempt to simultaneously acknowledge that they are different, but similar to those in mainstream society. Although sect members are at the center of the controversies, practicing polygamists, who are not even directly identified as FLDS members, are just one of 14 publics that emerged throughout the three controversies.
Textual Fragments and Audience Conjecture

The fourteen publics are revealed through and constructed by the various textual fragments examined throughout the three analysis chapters. The Big Love chapter is composed of 367 different textual fragments including the premiere episode of the show, 25 newspaper articles discussing the premiere, a press release from a pro-polygamy Web site, and 330 message board postings. Discussion of the Yearning for Zion controversy is comprised of 406 textual fragments including People’s article of the raid’s anniversary, 48 front page newspaper articles, 126 newspaper articles on pages other than the front page, 14 front page blurbs, 18 editorials, 133 photographs, 21 images such as maps, 40 letters to the editor, and five invited editorials. Moreover, the controversy surrounding the photographs of Jeffs kissing underage girls consists of 777 textual fragments including the photographs and text introducing the photographs on three Web sites and 774 message board responses. In total, 1550 textual fragments were explored for this dissertation. This large number of textual fragments begs the question: When does a rhetorically-oriented interpretive scholar have a sufficient number of textual fragments to have sufficiently avoided the pitfall of audience conjecture that plagues rhetorical critics (Schiappa, 2008)?

The short answer is provided by Geertz (1973) in his call for thick description. Keeping thick description in mind, we can recognize all elements of the rhetorical triumvirate in a meaningful way rather than resorting to audience conjecture or focusing on one representation of an event. However, the longer answer relies on scholars’ claims concerning the need for evidence in making arguments and the theoretical grounds for expanding the realm of rhetoric.
Rhetorical scholars like Schiappa (2008) who examine mediated representations, and Hauser (1999) who investigates the discourse of publics, encourage interpretive work so that scholars have the evidence required to make compelling arguments about how rhetoric works in particular contexts. Audience conjecture, Schiappa asserts, is when one “rel[ies] solely on a critic’s interpretation of what a film, song, or television show may ‘mean’ to its various audiences” (p. 6). For Schiappa, audience responses to a text should be privileged over a critic’s interpretation. In terms of identifying publics, Hauser argues that “we must widen the discursive arena to include vernacular exchanges, in addition to those of institutional actors” (p. 89, emphasis in the original). In other words, according to Schiappa, we can not rely on the critic’s interpretation to understand how rhetoric works with audiences, and, in line with Hauser, we can not rely solely on responses from institutional actors to comprehend the discursive nature of publics. Therefore, we must seek to find and make sense of the multitude of voices, both institutional and lay, to understand a given controversy.

Moreover, my approach to analysis was abductive, “a back and forth tacking movement between text and the concept or concepts that are being investigated simultaneously” (Jaskinski, 2001, p. 256). Brummett (1984) argues that rhetorical criticism should strive to have heuristic and moral aims. Specifically, he asserts that “rhetorical theory and criticism are heuristic because they are a set of ‘how to’ instructions, they are guides to symbolic action in the real world” (p. 103). He contends that “rhetorical theory and criticism are also moral” in that scholars and teachers must “make the moral choice of which theories to pass on” (p. 104). In reflection of Brummett’s claims, my interest is also in contributing to the moral and heuristic use of
theory. The heuristic and moral aims are why I tack between concept/theory and controversy in each chapter and offer this concluding chapter as another (larger) tack. My goal through tacking is to illustrate how to garner an understanding of audience’s rhetoric (heuristic) and which theoretical frameworks are most apt at understanding publics and their rhetoric (moral).

Throughout the analysis chapters, thick description and saturation were taken into consideration along the way. For instance, three newspapers were initially selected for the YZR chapter including The New York Times, Dallas Morning News, and The Washington Post. However, after review of those three newspapers, publics were still emerging and coverage continued to be varied. Therefore, two additional newspapers were selected including The Houston Chronicle and USA Today. After delving into the two additional newspapers, coverage became more repetitive and the preexisting publics were more thoroughly supported – this support used to provide thick description of the publics.

The variety and quantity of textual fragments led to concerns regarding which textual fragments to privilege in the analysis chapters. In each chapter, the weighting of text and image in constituting the coverage is treated differently. Specifically, and again by trying to alleviate audience conjecture, the weighting of images and text that constitute the coverage is determined by the responses of audience members. Instead of the critic determining the importance of the photographs and images, the importance is revealed by the publics’ responses. However, as an important note, those responding to the controversy are self-selected. In other words, the publics addressed throughout are based on responses from individuals who select to become a voice in the controversy. Throughout the analysis, in an attempt to avoid audience conjecture, the publics’ voices
are paramount. In this abductive, rhetorically-oriented interpretivist work, meanings made by audiences are privileged while also recognizing the importance of the prompting texts as prominent pieces of the textual constellation.

In the *Big Love* chapter, newspaper coverage and a thorough description of the premiere episode is favored over images. This, I believe, was an interesting choice given that the chapter concerns television – a highly visual medium. However, responses reveal opposition and support of the show based more on content than on the visual dimensions of the program. The primary area in which appearance and images are most important concerns the depiction of the polygamists living on the compound. In this instance, a description of the women living on the compound is included. However, the responses dictate the reporting of the coverage from the premiere.

In the YZR chapter, audiences appear to be responding to both coverage and photographs. This is specifically illustrated by coverage critics who argue that the victims’ faces should not be pictured. Moreover, responses reveal that polygamists are Othered. This Otherness is supported and might be created through the photographs of polygamist women because the women are photographed from a distance, showing their antiquated dress and are in opposition to contemporary objects and architecture. Again, the reporting of coverage is influenced by audience responses and therefore, images are weighted more equally with text than in the *Big Love* chapter.

Finally, in the chapter concerning the photographs of Jeffs, text is subordinated to images. The photographs are, undoubtedly, at the heart of the controversy. The custody trial is a contextualizing factor to the release of the photographs. Several individual custody battles were waged over children taken during the raid; however, attention to this
particular trail centered on the release of the photographs. Moreover, audiences are responding more to the photographs than to the trial as evidenced by their use of the photographs to state claims regarding the raid and FLDS as a whole rather than just the individual case.

Theoretical Implications

The moral and heuristic aims of this project, achieved through tacking between concepts/theories and controversies reveal two implications. First, theoretical constructs must be refined and expanded in order to adequately address the ways in which publics are invited by controversies. Second, the overarching discussion concerning polygamy should be understood as a debate rather than a controversy.

Refining and Expanding Theory

A number of theoretical frames are invoked throughout the analysis chapters to help situate the analyses and, when feasible, to explore the ways in which the publics’ rhetoric function. In the chapter exploring the Big Love controversy, the rhetorical concepts of stasis and controversy are utilized. These theoretical strands are used to primarily situate the analysis rather than make sense of the six publics’ rhetoric. The theoretical implications for the chapter focus more on how the responses expand theory than on how the responses can be explained by theory. Specifically, we see that contemporary controversies are messy and that multiple sides are engaged in a controversy. Therefore, stasis, which is based on binary opposition, can be expanded and adapted to include multiple resting points within a debate.

In the chapter focused on the Yearning for Zion raid, Weick’s sensemaking, Abelson’s modes of cognitive conflict resolution, and Ware and Linkugel’s apologia are
adopted to explain the ways in which audience members are invited and make meaning from the coverage. Specifically, publics emerge as commonalities exist among individuals engaged in sensemaking. For some publics, blaming serves as a sensemaking device while others reflect on mainstream society to help understand their own role in the controversy. Moreover, the idea of sensemaking, which has theoretical roots in cognitive dissonance theory, illustrates the need for publics to make sense of controversies albeit not necessarily through cognitive dissonance resolution – although resolving cognitive dissonance is certainly one rationale for sensemaking.

In the chapter focused on the photographs of Warren Jeffs with underage girls, Sontag’s discussion of photographs’ invitational quality and Hariman and Lucaites’ scholarship on iconic photography is employed. Sontag (2003) suggests that photographs do not necessarily anesthetize or promote a reaction; rather they offer an invitation for audiences, in this case publics, to respond. Sontag’s claim enables the photographs to be seen as a text that allows responses. Second, Hariman and Lucaites’ writings on iconic photography both restrict and expand the role of the images. According to their criteria, the photographs are not iconic – they have not had the same longevity as those images they deem to be “iconic.” However, like iconic photographs as components and promulgators of the democratic project, the images of Jeffs with the underage girls sparked discussion and diverse opinions. However, neither framework focuses on the ways in which the individual public’s responses function rhetorically.

Review of the theoretical underpinnings utilized throughout the analysis chapters reveals that existing theory must be refined and built upon to account for the ways in which audiences are invited to respond to texts. In accordance with the heuristic aims of
rhetorical scholarship, my goal is to show others how to make sense of the ways in which publics respond to controversies. Moreover, I hope to demonstrate theories and concepts which, when expanded and refined, are most able to account for publics’ rhetoric – the moral aims of rhetorical criticism. The theoretical stands selected help to situate the analyses and are expanded through the analyses. However, the theoretical strands are expanded to account for and explore the ways in which publics’ rhetoric functions. Returning to DeLuca and Peeples’ (2002) notion of the public screen, we can see the ways in which mediated constructions have become the norm and that mediated platforms have become a popular form of engagement. However, the changing and complicated world of public screens further complicates concerns regarding the ways in which audience responses function and the meaning derived from those responses. In what ways does the form of mediated response impact the ways in which audience communicate? Certainly the repulsed public would not (or could not) have used the same language when communicating through more heavily moderated outlets such as letters to the editor in newspapers.

Not only do the form and mediated nature of publics’ responses need more thorough consideration in the literature, theoretical constructs centered on the ways in which audience responses are constructed via mediated texts would help to continue exploration of publics emerging in public controversies. While multiple rhetorical frames and theories exist to help explore texts, audience responses are outside the range of typical rhetorical texts – particularly when multiple voices emerge as a single audience or public.
Controversy & Debate

In addition to the expansion of theory to help explore audience responses in each section, public controversy, an overarching theoretical frame for the dissertation is also refined. Specifically, each of the three analysis chapters concerns an individual controversy – Big Love, the YZR raid, and the photographs of Jeffs. However, the larger discussion of polygamy falls outside the scope of a controversy and should be understood, instead, as a debate. The rationale for the choice in terminology is one of temporality. Although a controversy does not necessarily need a start or end point, it should have a peak – a heightened sense of awareness by the general public (Phillips, 2004). The individual controversies selected for analysis do have peak points in coverage and eventually the coverage and responses subside. However, the polygamy debate has existed for hundreds of years and, while it has times when it is more prominent in the media, serves as more of a platform for other controversies than constituting a controversy on its own.

In conjunction with controversy, Warner’s (2002) understanding of public – one that emerges through discourse – illustrates that the controversies discussed bring forth publics that might otherwise not be included in the polygamy debate. Adding and expanding to controversy, the analysis chapters demonstrate that each controversy within a larger societal debate further complicates the web of controversies. The television show premiere, the raid, and the photographs all enable new publics to emerge in the larger debate. However, without these controversies, there is little space or justification for new publics to emerge in the overarching polygamy debate.
Therefore, while controversy conventionally presumes two sides in a debate, contemporary controversy is messy and multiple perspectives emerge. Moreover, controversies are in part constructed by audience responses. Although audiences and publics respond to coverage of controversies, the responses also fuel and construct the controversy – without responses a controversy simply wouldn’t exist.

Writing Story

The above implications and questions for future research are derived from the analyses. However, those implications are not the only considerations that exist. While the dissertation is largely written from a rhetorically-oriented interpretivist standpoint, my own role as a researcher revealed several important considerations and implications.

Throughout my academic career I have changed. My paradigm has undoubtedly shifted. Initially trained in political science with a quantitative, post-positive perspective, my role as a researcher and as an academic has adapted. Making the leap from a post-positive perspective to a critical paradigm during my first graduate degree seemed natural. Through a critical perspective I was able to privilege my own voice and understanding of the world – a perspective garnered through my own experiences as a woman, a first-generation college student, a devout Catholic, and a former manager for a company that demanded employees live for work 24/7.

A critical rhetorical critic upon entering my Ph.D. work, I already had the idea that I would write about *Big Love*. However, major polygamist controversies broke as I refined my dissertation topic. Moreover, my own paradigm again shifted, taking a more “neutral” ground. The more rhetorical criticism I read, the more my post-positivist training led me to begin to question the evidence for the arguments being made. After
reading Schiappa (2008), learning about audience conjecture, and delving into the audience responses to the controversy, I ultimately decided to approach the topic from a rhetorically-oriented interpretivist framework in which both the prompting texts and the discourses of those attending to the texts mattered.

First, the decision to approach the topic from this framework was, in part, based on my own voice. My writing style traditionally has been more casual and, just as in life, I revert to humor to punctuate points and communicate ideas. However, this style of writing – this voice – did not seem appropriate for the topic. Polygamy and child abuse were much more serious topics than I had initially planned for or had written about in the past. A casual tone and humor would simply be inappropriate.

The cost of adapting my writing style to the topic was a change of voice – the final product is nearly void of my own opinions and beliefs about the controversies. However, my writing style and voice changed in favor of treating the topic in a manner suitable for the severity of the consequences emerging from the controversies. The manner I found most suitable was to engage in several close readings of the audience responses and then offer forth the publics while incorporating significant amounts of the respondents’ words rather than my own.

A second consideration for exploring the publics through a rhetorically-oriented interpretivist paradigm deals with the inability to provide direct links between responses and coverage. Each public emerges in response to the coverage – otherwise, they wouldn’t know of the controversy in the first place. However, as McGee (1990) suggests, their opinions are most likely informed through a variety of textual fragments including coverage, their own belief systems, and their level of familiarity with the controversies.
Throughout the analysis chapters, I find myself placing qualifiers on the arguments – “perhaps” the publics are responding to a specific element of coverage, the publics “might” be responding to a particular component of the controversy. While these qualifiers certainly detract from the argument regarding the links between the publics and coverage, they are absolutely necessary. Without these qualifiers, not only would the argument be weak, but would be unethical. I am able to see the connections between publics’ responses and coverage, but these are only my own perceptions. The qualifiers indicate that there could be alternative explanations for the emergent publics’ claims.

To explicitly link the responses to coverage would be to engage in Schiappa’s (2008) notion of audience conjecture. As he argues, rhetorical critics and film critics often make assumptions about the ways in which audiences make sense of a text. In the analysis chapters, I seek to circumvent engaging in audience conjecture by offering the publics, their voices, and tentative connections to the coverage. I am able to see certain connections, but these are only my interpretations of connections. The qualifiers indicate to the reader that multiple interpretations and multiple links more than likely exist; there is no single interpretation. While in some instances, such as the letters to the editor in the YZR analysis chapter, linkages to coverage are made clear by the respondent; very few responses directly indicate the grounds or the exigency for their argument. I am motivated by my post-positivist background – I am reluctant to make arguments that cannot be proven or that lack statistical evidence as proof. Since these linkages are uncertain, I rely on qualifiers to indicate that other linkages could be possible. But, because I am also partially a rhetorical critic, I can’t help but offer evaluations as well – a task that is taken up in this section – considerations that are influenced by both the moral
and heuristic aims of rhetorical criticism. Hauser (1999) argues that researchers should be “adopting an empirical attitude toward the ways publics, public spheres, and public opinion are manifested” (p. 275). From my perspective, while links between publics and coverage are uncertain, the tacking movement between texts and concepts, is empirical. Primarily, the systematic approach of moving between audience responses, theory, and newspaper coverage incorporates careful observation and in-depth experience with the texts. Furthermore, the primary rationale for the absence of critique is that it simply does not fit with the research questions and mode of inquiry – I seek to understand and illustrate rather than critique.

As the culminating experience of years of education, I have deviated from my previous work. After careful reflection, I recognize the need for a more interpretivist approach to the responses and the coverage. However, in each chapter a few ethical and/or topical considerations emerged. Furthermore, I understand that while I attempted to use thick description to mitigate my own subjectivities and beliefs, every step of the process was influenced by my own paradigm and experiences; even if these experiences were subordinated at the surface. Therefore, I include this writing story to highlight some substantial issues that arose during the research and writing process.

Reflections from the Big Love Chapter

Prior to my doctoral work and the endless readings, proposals, and pressures, I was an avid television watcher. Admittedly, I hope to return to this passion upon the completion of my dissertation. I am inspired by the work of Bonnie Dow when considering being a critic of something that I enjoy. Dow (1996) talks about her own role as a critic and fan of television:
As a television fan, I appreciate television’s capacity to amuse, to entertain, and to give pleasure. As a television critic, I recognize the problems of those pleasures while often admiring, at the same time, the skill and artistry that goes into producing them. As a feminist, I believe that patriarchy is alive and well, that women’s attempt at self-definition and self-determination continue to be marginalized, silenced, and stymied in myriad ways … and that popular culture and television play key roles in that process. (pp. xi-xii)

Like Dow, my own positionality at the intersection of television fan, feminist, and critic was taken into consideration throughout the writing of the Big Love chapter.

As a fan of the program, I was concerned that I wouldn’t paint the show in an accurate light because of the show’s contradictions with my own feminist beliefs. I was afraid that I would bolster certain elements of the show such as Barb’s defiance of Bill’s rules, in order to mitigate the portrayal of authority that Bill has over his three wives. Downplaying the negative elements of the show in favor of the positive – or at least entertaining – components of the show would certainly be feasible, but problematic nonetheless. While I offer a description of the show and the emergent publics through an interpretivist framework by offering forth thick descriptions of the publics, I am certain that my own subjectivities may have influenced the analysis. Although I tried to allow publics to speak for themselves, from the selection of message boards through the identification of the emergent publics, each step was influenced by my own subjectivities. Up until the end of the third season – which became too outlandish for my tastes – I have been a faithful viewer of the program since it first aired after The Sopranos. I was angry when some members of the Right demanded that the show be taken off the air and
production slowed. Although, admittedly, I watched a tremendous amount of television, very few shows were able to captivate my attention the way that Big Love did. However, after watching the series again for this dissertation, I am now totally disenchanted with the program.

I had turned away from the show as a viewer during the third season, but allowing myself to watch the series through a critic’s lens was a different experience. I no longer saw the instances of rebellion by the wives as being sufficient enough reduce Bill’s tyranny over the household. While in the chapter I discuss the two competing views of polygamy on Big Love, these two portrayals (the Henrickson family and the compound) are not as different as I initially thought. Keeping with the coverage of the event, I maintain the position in the chapter that these two illustrations of polygamy are vastly different from one another. While writing from a critical framework may have allowed me to show the similarities between the two portrayals, the juxtaposition of the Hendrickson’s from the compound was a significant component of coverage – one that audiences responded to and made allusions about.

All of the six emergent publics in the controversy transcend the initial issue of the television program to discussion of polygamy as a whole. Big Love is a television show, not even a so-called “reality” television show. This is all fictitious. These are actors playing roles for salaries. So, why are the responses and coverage of Big Love important for looking at the overarching polygamy controversy? Each side takes issue with the show while simultaneously using the show as a platform for their beliefs. Other than perhaps those on the defensive such as the LDS members who fear conflation of polygamy with their religion and practicing polygamists who want to be represented...
fairly, the publics have an agenda aside from the show. Even LDS members’ argument is not unique – as they note in their responses, they have spent decades attempting to distance themselves from the practice of polygamy.

Polyamory participants use the message boards to gain attention and voice their own opinion about their lifestyles – these people are not polygamists and are not engaged in polyamorous relationships for religious purposes. Their lifestyle has little to do with the marriage structures portrayed on Big Love. Both proponents and opponents of polygamy would have the same arguments regardless of the show’s existence. Moreover, those who use the show’s premiere to make claims regarding gay marriage are engaging in post-hoc fallacies. They assume that either the legalization or the mainstreaming of polygamy will lead to the legalization of gay marriage; this is simply not the case. There is neither precedent nor proof for this argument in this public’s responses (nor anywhere else for the matter). The show’s creators’ gay status and the intertwining of gay marriage and polygamy as alternative marriage structures led to the show’s premiere making the time ripe for arguments against gay marriage – however, these arguments would (and do) exist without the show’s premiere (“Polygamy Around,” 2006). In other words, these publics, rather than constructing new arguments in light of the show, have simply used the show as a reason for reiterating their beliefs. These arguments, for the most part, are not new, but rather serve to demonstrate the beliefs about polygamy that existed at the time. In addition to understanding the attitudes towards polygamy prior to the YZR raid, the chapter was conducted to gain insight into practicing polygamists, a public that had not had much of a voice previous to the premiere.
Reflections from the YZR Chapter

While the *Big Love* chapter primarily identifies publics that have existed in the polygamy debate, the Yearning for Zion chapter identifies and discusses publics that have not traditionally been present. The raid, in size and coverage, was tremendous. Nearly 500 individuals were displaced and the raid was covered across all major news media outlets in the United States. The magnitude of such a series of events is worthy of noting. Polygamist compounds exist across the United States and Canada. However, a raid of this size had never occurred – and will likely never happen again.

My feminist inklings and knowledge of polygamy led me to develop certain beliefs about the raid. To some extent or another, I agree and disagree with nearly every public that emerged during the debate. Unlike the other chapters, I utilized letters to the editor as responses to the controversy and coverage. This was not an easy task. While the message board responses and even coverage of the other controversies were available online, letters to the editor and coverage were not readily available through an electronic format. Instead, I spent approximately 100 hours going through microfilm. This was a challenging, yet rewarding experience. Challenging because I spent hours in a dark secluded area of the library alone; rewarding because I was able to see how coverage and responses were contextualized within the newspapers. However, perhaps because of the time spent with the coverage, I became more emotionally involved with the topic than initially planned. I was not personally affected by the raid when it occurred – my life went forward, only a little extra time spent paying attention to the news. The hours spent and the viewing of photographs of the raid made me more personally involved and, unintentionally, I developed strong opinions concerning the raid.
As I rummaged through the responses, I vehemently disagreed with attention shifters and those who blamed members of the FLDS. Ultimately, I sided with all and none of the publics. I consider myself an expert on the coverage of the raid, but not the raid itself. The facts concerning the magnitude and the exigency for the raid were muddled in the coverage. As facts concerning the hoax phone call and the total number of children removed became available, the alarm I felt about the raid increased. Do I believe that these children were in danger? Yes and No. In a traditional sense that child brides are in danger, yes. In the sense that marriage practices such as these occur daily across other parts of the world, no.

Although the rationale for child brides within the FLDS is unknown, a variety of non-sexually oriented explanations for these marriages exist across the globe. For instance, in a bifurcated kinship system a young girl might even be promised to an older man before her birth. In exchange, the “groom” helps to care for the female child throughout her adolescence. The man will not have sexual intercourse with the child, but will provide her parents with the financial resources to make sure that the child has enough food and clothing. Yet I am torn because in a country such as the United States, this type of system should not be a problem– as the one of the wealthiest countries in the world a lack of food and clothing should not be an issue, but after living in Appalachia, I understand that in marginal(ized) cultures this issue could persist. The question remains: Were limited resources a rationale for the allocation of child brides? The issue is perhaps not one of necessity, but of religious obligations. The religious obligations of the members of the FLDS are just as muddled, if not more so, than the coverage of the raid. The practice of child brides and arranged marriages are not explicitly articulated by sect
members. As outsiders, we rush to conclusions about the morality of the perceived practices, but we only know what the media tells us. The illegality of polygamy has forced these practices underground and to the margins of society; leaving mainstream society largely blind to the rituals.

My disagreement with each of the publics was troublesome throughout the writing process. While I attempted to simply identify and explore each public, I am certain that my own beliefs and attitudes may have influenced the ways in which I represent each public. Moreover, I initially saw the coverage as being in favor of CPS. After setting aside my own predilections concerning the sect, I was able to more clearly see that the raid was being treated rather neutrally by the media. In fact, the coverage was simply reporting the “facts” released to them by those in charge of the raid. My predisposition led me to seeing the coverage as being more slanted than perhaps it actually was and seeing dramatic shifts in coverage that did not actually exist. Although I attempted to rectify these initial conclusions, I am certain that remnants of these attitudes exist in the discussion of coverage.

*Reflections from the Jeffs Photographs Chapter*

My own subjectivities are apparent in both the *Big Love* and YZR chapters. However, they become more problematic to suppress in the chapter concerning the Warren Jeffs anniversary photographs. For one reason or another, the photographs did not bother me at first. Sontag (1973/2001) suggests, “Images anesthetize. An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs … But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real” (p. 20). However, the more I looked at the photographs the more disturbed I
became. As a researcher, I approached the images as objects of study. Therefore, while I certainly do not think that Sontag is necessarily wrong about the repeated exposure to images, my experience was different than what she theorized.

The few responses that attempted to say these girls were not underage repulsed me. These responses claimed that the girls were just short due to the type of nutrients consumed on the compound. As a person who is rather short in stature, I disagreed. These girls were just that, girls, and not, by any stretch of the imagination, were they women. I became embarrassed of my possession of the photographs. I worked on the chapter only late at night with my office door closed. The more I wrote about the photographs, the more I wanted to make sure that others would not see them both for their own sake and for mine – I feared people would associate me with the photographs. The images make it, perhaps, too easy to jump to conclusions about the case during which they served as evidence. The photographs and these responses were upsetting, but writing about the images was even more problematic.

While the photographs themselves may cause some discomfort for the reader, the description of the images is also an issue. As the writer of this essay, I attempted multiple writings of the photographs’ descriptions to reduce any sort of eroticism that might be present in the writing. That being said, the photographs themselves have an erotic quality that seems to be exaggerated when detailed by the written word. Sontag (2003) indicates that photographs should be seen as an invitation. In this regard, the photographs’ invitational quality comes with an eroticism that seems to be unavoidable. This is a problem, I fear, that cannot be resolved, but rather pointed out as an issue for those who seek to write about such issues and visual images. While the young girls are being
exploited by the repurposing of the photographs, the girl’s faces allow the images to be instantly recognizable as evidence of abuse – a necessary characteristic of an iconic photograph.

This leads to a concern arising from the writing of this chapter and the exploration of the photographs. First, once these images were repurposed by the state and then again by the Web sites, the tone of the photographs changed. Once taken in honor to commemorate, the photographs were now supposed evidence of assault on children. These girls’ fate was not being decided by the court, but it is clear by the photographs that they were victims. In fact, the girls are victimized twice. First the girls were victimized by Jeffs. Second, this victimization is repeated in each subsequent showing of the photographs. Why were these girls’ faces shown? The state, the news media, and even I in writing this chapter have prefaced the sensational prior to thinking about the girls in the photographs. Unfortunately and unavoidably, this dissertation participates in this victimization. I will not attempt to offer excuses for showing the photographs in attempt to alleviate my own dissonance about showing the photographs, but, rather, will say that the photographs were necessary to fully understand the controversy and the overarching polygamy debate. Specifically, the publics call on the photographs in their discussion of the custody case and the raid – the publics invite and encourage commentary on the photographs.

The ages of the girls could perhaps be disputed if the faces were blurred – one might think that the girls are small women. The faces show that these girls are very young. However, at what cost? I, personally, have gone between blurring the faces using computer software and leaving the pictures alone. When blurred on the Web site, as is the
case with Set 3, I have chosen to use the blurred photographs. However, in order to fully demonstrate the impact of the photographs – the way the audience saw the photographs – I have left Sets 1 and 2 undisturbed. Each repurposing of the photographs has extended the reach of the images, victimizing these women with every subsequent repurposing.

**Concluding Remarks**

We must take caution in discussing and presenting individuals who have been marginalized or are the victims of exploitation. However and perhaps most importantly, we must continually question ourselves, our research, and ways that we might attempt to separate ourselves from the arguments being posed on message boards. As previously discussed, this dissertation was designed to utilize polygamist controversies as a way to delve into methodological considerations regarding audience conjecture, rhetorical criticism, and textual fragments. The use of such a heavily debated topic is beneficial in that multiple publics emerge.

The severity and magnitude of the issues regarding women and children made the topic more difficult to treat without a critical framework. In other words, approaching this topic from a critical stance throughout the analysis chapters instead of just in this writing story would have been much easier and expected, but not consistent with an interpretivist approach. I find the richness of the analyses to be in the ability to allow the reader to draw his or her own conclusions rather than emphasize the power and hegemonic relationships that exist throughout the controversies and the entire polygamy debate. Moreover, the critical lens is not fully removed – the audience responses often take a critical insight into the coverage, the controversy, and responses made by other publics.
that emerge. So while as a researcher, I removed my critical tendencies, the emergent publics led the way to a more critical understanding of the controversies.
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