

The Mormons Versus the “Armies of Satan”: Competing Frames of Morality in the *Brokeback Mountain* Controversy in Utah Newspapers

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Analyzing Utah op-ed columns and letters to the editor, this essay considers the news media’s role in framing public debate regarding the 2006 cancellation of the film Brokeback Mountain because of its themes of gay love and homophobia. Our study interrogates journalists’ and citizen letter-writers’ discourse on either side of the issue as it played out in the press. The discourse breaks down into two diametrically opposed frames—Defending Zion versus Disrupting Zion—but each argues for the same thing: to protect different perspectives of morality. The values underlying each framing strategy reveal tensions in an LDS Church-dominated culture with a growing “Gentile” population.

Keywords: Brokeback Mountain; Framing; Homophobia; Mormons; Newspapers

For Utah journalists and fans of contentious politics and news of the weird, January 2006 was a good month. As the Utah Legislature opened as usual on the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday—in itself considered an insult to the slain civil rights leader¹ (e.g., Vergakis, 2007)—lawmakers of what is arguably the nation’s most culturally and politically curious state confronted a challenging slate of

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hot-button issues: gay and lesbian rights, hate crimes, divorce laws, and defending “traditional” marriage. One decade-old debate in Utah concerned gay-straight student clubs in public schools: A prominent state senator (who also introduced a bill for “divine design” instruction in public schools) wanted gays nowhere near Utah’s school children. Homosexuals’ “definition of morality is to have no morality,” he said (“Buttars appeals,” 2006, p. A10). A related item, appearing every year since 1999, was a Utah hate-crimes law, this version omitting language protecting gays and lesbians, in hopes of getting the bill past the majority GOP opposition (Sanchez, 2006).

Meanwhile, 300 miles south of Salt Lake City near the Arizona border, the Kanab City Council unanimously adopted a “Natural Family Resolution,” mandating that the Council’s “first responsibility” was the “protection of the natural family” (“Kanab,” 2006, ¶11). The measure defined marriage (i.e., “natural family”) as a union “ordained of God” exclusively between a man (“husbands, home builders and fathers”) and a woman (“wives, homemakers and mothers”) who, the measure said, should be “open to a full quiver of children” (Havnes, 2006, p. B3). Condemning homosexuality as “morally offensive to God,” local Baptist Pastor Doug Hounshell applauded the measure: “I thank God for a community that doesn’t think it has to be ‘gay-friendly’” (2006, p. 6).

But none of these issues generated as much controversy that month as the decision by businessman Larry H. Miller to pull *Brokeback Mountain* (Ossana, Schamus & Lee, 2005) from his suburban Salt Lake City cinemaplex. The high-profile owner of the Utah Jazz, Miller was well known throughout the state. Ranked as the seventh most influential powerbroker in Utah’s arts and entertainment scene (“Utah’s top 25,” 2007), Miller apparently knew nothing about the film until a radio interviewer told him that *Brokeback* was a love story between two cowboys. Initially, Miller said he would not “act as a censor and would let the market decide whether the movie was worthy,” but two hours later he ordered it canceled in his suburban Salt Lake MegaPlex 17 theater (Oberbeck, 2006, p. A10).

Moviegoers complained, and the cancellation was front-page news, spreading to international press reports of Utah as the only place in America to pull the award-winning, Oscar-nominated film (Griggs, 2006b). Late-night TV hosts poked fun at Utah and its conservative Mormon population. *Brokeback* star Heath Ledger said, “Personally, I don’t think the movie is [controversial], but I think maybe the Mormons in Utah do” (Griggs, 2006a, p. A1).² A forum to discuss *Brokeback*’s cancellation and the issues it raised was the Utah press, and letters to the editor began pouring in. In this study, we examine how the *Brokeback* episode, and the deeper societal tensions it reflected, illustrate the press’s role in defining and framing public discussion for citizens seeking to define who they are as a society and what they believe.

Utah is unique among U.S. states because of the predominance of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in all aspects of the state’s public life, politics, and culture (Egan, 2001; “Largest Latter-Day,” 2005), but the press plays the same kind of role in public discourse in Utah as anywhere. Though he’s Mormon, Larry Miller was surely only an accidental icon of LDS morality, which views homosexuality as a

sin that can be “cured” through prayer and church counseling.³ There is no question, however, that the release of *Brokeback Mountain* and Miller’s decision not to screen it tripped many of the hot-buttons that lie so close to the placid surface of Utah daily life. This cultural disconnect was illustrated outside a northern Utah movie house shortly after the Miller story broke. In Providence, Utah, a university-town suburb, a group of self-described good Mormon women picketed a theater where *Brokeback Mountain* was showing, charging that the film promoted “wickedness” and calling on decent people to take a stand against the “Armies of Satan” (Hafen, 2006, p. A1). Thus, the lines in the latest skirmish of Utah’s culture war were drawn.

Ever since Mormons first settled the territory in 1849, Utah has presented a nearly seamless face to the outside world, sculpted by an omnipotent LDS Church. Mormon Church founder and prophet Joseph Smith’s goal was to create a “theocratic kingdom,” and many think his followers succeeded (Egan, 2001, p. SR4). Only in Utah does reference to “the Church” require no explanation—it means LDS (Shelledy, 2001, p. A2). Since before statehood, the LDS Church, headquartered in the center of Salt Lake City just blocks from the state Capitol, has dominated Utah’s social and cultural institutions, and that influence is reflected in conservative values and policies considered among the most conservative in the nation (“U.S. Religious,” 2008). Indeed, observed the chair of the Brigham Young University Department of Church History and Doctrine, “This is the hotbed of Republicanism, the most conservative state in the nation” (LaPlante, 2006, p. A6).

Because Mormons tend to vote at higher rates than non-Mormons in Utah (Canham, 2007), it’s no surprise that “Saints” make up 90% of the state Legislature and hold most other local and state offices up through the governorship and the Utah Supreme Court, prompting the common description of the state as a theocracy (Egan, 2001). In recent years, however, Utah has seen a sharp and accelerating demographic shift, as immigration has cut the LDS proportion of the total population from more than 70% in 1989 to 60.04% in 2008, the lowest since the state was founded (Canham; Loomis & Canham, 2008). During the same period, interestingly, Utah has become increasingly attractive to gays,⁴ as evidenced in a recent study that reported Utah’s gay population has risen from 38th in the nation in 1990 to 14th in 2007 (Bennett, 2007).

These changing demographics have resulted in increased scrutiny and criticism of the dominant culture’s influence on both politics and social norms. The divide is widely acknowledged: A 2001 *Salt Lake Tribune* poll found that more than two-thirds of Utahns perceived a “Mormon/non-Mormon fault line within the state” (Egan, 2001, SR1), “larger than the Grand Canyon” (Sykes, 2001, p. AA2). The cultural, political, and attitudinal gap between the Saints and non-Mormons—generally referred to as “Gentiles”—prompted leaders from various faiths, including the LDS Church, to form the Alliance for Unity in 2001 in an attempt to build bridges and promote tolerance (Egan; “The Great Divide,” 2001). Although LDS leaders, from recently deceased President and Prophet Gordon B. Hinckley⁵ on down, also have publicly urged tolerance for nonmembers, a common response to Gentiles who question LDS positions is, “If you don’t like it here, leave” (Egan, SR2; Sykes).

The Miller–*Brokeback* controversy is one graphic example of growing cultural tension and Mormons’ resentment of “outsiders,” and this is the focus of our study.

Through a framing analysis, we examine how Larry Miller’s decision to ban *Brokeback Mountain*—and the issues the film raises—was framed in editorials, opinion columns, and letters to the editor in the state’s newspapers. Our objective is to interrogate how opinion in newspaper discourse illustrates the intersection of values, religion, and secularism, as opposing sides positioned their perspectives of gays and gay rights in Utah’s newspaper marketplace. While this study may appear unique to an anomalous state and culture, we contend that the way this issue played out in Utah’s press speaks broadly to public debates over values, morality, and social issues. Indeed, nationwide, few issues seem to polarize Americans as much as gay rights. The continuing national debate over gay rights—from “don’t ask, don’t tell” to gay marriage and the nationwide protests after the 2008 passage of California’s Proposition 8, outlawing same-sex marriage—reflects a fundamental cultural schism in which opposing sides’ social and political hostilities are “rooted in different systems of moral understanding” (Hunter, 1991, p. 42). This analysis of *Brokeback* op-ed coverage explicates two conflicting frames in the Utah press about Utah’s culture, which we call *Defending Zion* and *Disrupting Zion*. The first frame echoes the LDS Church opposition to homosexuality, and supports cinema-owner Larry Miller as a righteous man of principle. The second characterizes Miller as a hypocrite and homophobe, and portrays gay intolerance as the true immorality. Thus, analyzing how the *Brokeback Mountain* ban was positioned and reflected in Utah newspapers offers lessons in the ways the press and public frame opinions about controversial issues, and, ultimately, whether such positioning works to broaden or limit public debate in the marketplace of ideas.

The Study

In evaluating press discourse about the *Brokeback*–Miller issue, we examine how the arguments were framed in all editorials, opinion columns, and letters to editors appearing in all Utah newspapers between December 2005—when the film opened in Utah—to the end of February 2006.⁶ Editorials are the newspaper’s own unbylined opinion; columns are bylined opinion pieces; letters are defined as short, signed statements from members of the public, the *vox populi*. Utah has 58 newspapers, including six general-circulation dailies. The two dominant newspapers are *The Salt Lake Tribune* and the LDS Church-owned *Deseret News*.⁷ This study addresses two research questions: 1) How was the *Brokeback*–Miller story framed and debated on Utah’s op-ed pages? and 2) What role do the core values underlying the framing strategies play in positioning the debate?

Frames may be understood as “conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information” (Neuman, Just & Crigler, 1992, p. 60). Framing has been applied as an analytic tool in many media contexts and, as a method of analysis, “consistently offers a way to describe the power of the communicating text” (Entman, 1993, p. 51). Thus, framing provides tools to accomplish

our goal of identifying and interrogating the implications of the conflicting frames in the *Brokeback*–Miller case. The way an issue is framed is important in determining “whether most people notice and how they understand and remember a problem, as well as how they evaluate and chose to act upon it,” Entman says (p. 54; also see Iyengar, 1991). Other research finds that specific news frames “help shape the ways in which the general public understands social problems” (Gandy & Li, 2005, p. 71; also see Bullock, 2007), and how individuals evaluate events and issues (Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007; McCombs & Ghanem, 2003).⁸ In the context of this study, for instance, many scholars conclude that the news media frame stories to privilege heterosexuality, which, in turn, may inadvertently or implicitly encourage prejudice against gays and lesbians (Bennett, 1998). Such framing can work to perpetuate “homophobic myths and stereotypes” (Meyers, 1994, p. 321), reaffirming a “dominant set of discourses that socially stigmatizes gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons” (Ott & Aoki, 2002, p. 483; also see Sloop, 2000).

Framing strategies work simultaneously to direct attention to certain “aspects of reality” while drawing attention away from others (Entman, 1993, p. 54). Thus, journalistic framing can help “determine a news event’s political importance” (Entman, 1991, p. 10). But it’s not only journalists who can strategically frame issues and make persuasive arguments; the lay public—including newspaper letter-writers—also can “organize their thoughts about issues through relevant discourse” (Hoffman & Slater, 2007, p. 59). Further, media frames help “individuals create *personal frames* as they provide pertinent bits of information, or news” (Ryan, 2004, p. 365).

In order to explicate the dominant frames of the Miller–*Brokeback* coverage, we first identified the issues raised in op-ed items about the controversy, and what prominence journalistic and lay commentators gave them. For all 188 items appearing during the study period—editorials, columns, and letters to the editor—we conducted a close textual analysis to identify and interpret the discourse used to direct attention to specific “aspects of reality” (Entman, 1993, p. 54) related to not only the movie and Miller’s decision to ban it, but to the broader issues of same-sex relationships and gay rights.

Although it is not surprising that *Brokeback Mountain*—a film about the tragic consequences of homophobia—and Miller’s last-minute decision not to screen it created controversy in Utah, examining newspaper discourse on the topic sheds light on how such sensitive issues generate strong emotions about core social and personal values that are voiced, defined, framed, and debated in the press. The Miller–*Brokeback* case was such a visceral, hot-button issue that the debate quickly became sharply and starkly defined in black and white, good-versus-evil terms. Significantly, all the *Brokeback* editorials, opinion columns, and letters to the editor were framed in terms of safeguarding morality, while defining morality and how to protect it in oppositional terms.

Utah’s “Great Divide”⁹

If that radio interviewer had not asked Larry Miller about *Brokeback Mountain*, he probably would not have canceled it and the film likely would have gone largely

ignored in Utah. It certainly was not the first gay-themed movie to show in Zion, and none of the others drew the kind of protest and name-calling that *Brokeback Mountain* did. Both the *Tribune* and *DNews* had published positive reviews of *Brokeback* in December 2005 that explicitly explained the movie's gay theme, but *Brokeback* remained off most Utahns' radar screens until Miller's decision to pull it in January.¹⁰

During our study period, 35 editorials and op-ed columns appeared in 15 different Utah newspapers, all falling squarely on either side of the *Defending-Disrupting* divide that characterized public discourse on the Miller–*Brokeback* story. Editorial writers and columnists came down more than 2-to-1 against the LDS party line on same-sex relationships, and only one column was neutral. Letters to editors constituted the largest and, because they theoretically represent the *vox populi*, perhaps the most important part of our sample; nearly half the total letters appeared in the *DNews* (39) and the *Tribune* (34). Of the total 153 letters published statewide, 74 (48%) aligned themselves with Miller and the LDS Church's condemnation of homosexuality—the *Defending Zion* frame—while 79 (52%) criticized intolerance and Miller's hypocrisy. With the exception of the progressive *City Weekly*, in which eight of nine letters excoriated Miller, similar balance was found in all the other Utah newspapers. Whether the items were opinion columns or letters to the editor, the discourse was consistently framed diametrically as either *Defending* or *Disrupting* Utah's cultural status quo. Overall, 55% of the total 188 *Brokeback*–Miller items published during the study period fell into the *Disrupting* category, opposing Miller for canceling *Brokeback*, while 45% fell into the *Defending* frame, supporting Miller and condemning homosexuality.

It would be overly simplistic to assume that all pro-Miller letter-writers were LDS and all opposing letters came from Gentiles, of course, but the division between the camps illustrates neatly the press role in facilitating and framing debate across the “Great Divide.” The *Brokeback* controversy illustrates not only the Us-versus-Them cultural climatology that often governs Utah on social issues and values, but also how newspapers typically frame arguments either defending or questioning Zion's culture.

The Frames

*Defending Zion: “We are Good People”*¹¹

Utah's Us-versus-Them dichotomy was clearly reflected in the arguments surrounding *Brokeback Mountain* in the press's op-ed pages. Editorials, opinion columns, and letters to the editor in support of Miller's decision not to show *Brokeback Mountain* all referenced the decadent morals of both sexual minorities and Hollywood. Their primary argument was that Utah's culture needed protecting from immoral outside influences.

The first thread running through the *Defending Zion* frame focused on the immorality of homosexual relationships and the threat to traditional values. “It isn't fair to call someone a bigot simply because he finds a certain practice, such as homosexuality, immoral,” a *Tribune* reader wrote (Cowley, 2006, p. AA2). *DNews* columnist Doug Robinson (2006) saw *Brokeback* as an insult to cowboys, quoting outraged Wyoming residents. *Tribune* guest columnist Stephen Graham, president of the Standard of

Liberty Foundation, which opposes “radical sexual trends,” argued that homosexuality is immoral but can be cured through God’s help; otherwise, he warned, “our individual relationships and social systems fall apart” (2006, p. AA6). A *Standard Examiner* reader agreed: “The family, the basic unit of our society, is being threatened on all sides by such ominous efforts. . . . God bless Larry Miller and shame on those who would find fault with his conscientious action” (Crimin, 2006, p. A6). Pastor Neal Humphrey praised Utah in the *Standard-Examiner* for its “unique culture with commonly accepted values that may now reflect a minority position in our country,” and predicted Miller’s ban of *Brokeback* “will attract more folks who perceive that Utah is the kind of place they want to live” (2006, p. A7). An editorial in BYU’s student *Daily Universe* applauded Miller and condemned his critics’ “tolerance” for unacceptable lifestyles (“Miller makes,” 2006, p. 4); a BYU student concurred, “Oh, how I despise the word ‘homophobia!’ . . . Sympathizers with the homosexual agenda use that word to silence intelligent discussion and debate” (Smith, 2006, p. 4).

A second thread framing the pro-Miller discourse condemns Hollywood’s decadence and immorality, as writers defended Miller by attacking *Brokeback* and Hollywood culture. Many observers have come to see much at stake in the intersection of films and society, as Robert Johnson, a theology and culture professor, explained in the *New York Times*, “There’s been a recognition within the evangelical community that movies have become a primary means, perhaps *the* primary means, of telling our culture’s stories” (Leland, 2005, p. E1). Thus, for combatants on both sides of the *Brokeback* debate, the stakes were high. As one reader complained, “[T]he agenda of the entertainment industry [is] to degrade the morals in our society” (Brown, 2006, p. A6); and a BYU student wrote, “[D]espite what Hollywood portrays (and the Golden Globes supports) homosexuality is wrong” (Hansen, 2006, p. 4). One reader condemned the *Tribune* for promoting immorality: “The *Tribune* is showing its usual gay bias . . . it’s [*Brokeback*] just another attempt to romanticize the gay lifestyle and make it more palatable” (Beach, 2006, p. A8). *Sun Advocate* columnist Tom McCourt said Hollywood wants to “re-make our culture in the image of Sodom and Gomorrah,” calling *Brokeback* a “frontal attack on American culture and values” (2006, p. A4). McCourt’s column came close to hate-speech in an imagined conversation with an “Uncle Spud,” who advises, “The best thing we can do is to let them have their way. If the Hollywood people are allowed to have all the gay affairs they want, and all the abortions too, there won’t be any left in a generation or two and we can start over” (p. A5).

Those defending Larry Miller and attacking *Brokeback Mountain* were strong and well organized. But those supporting the film and its challenge to a culture that sought to suppress it also were well represented—and equally articulate. These opinions created the oppositional frame we call *Disrupting Zion*.

Disrupting Zion: The “Armies of Satan” Fight Back

Mormons outnumber Gentiles in Utah, of course, but Utah newspapers published more than twice as many opinion columns condemning Miller as supporting him, and anti-Miller letters to the editor slightly outnumbered those supporting him, 79–74.

The primary thread underlying the *Disrupting Zion* discourse is a charge of situational morality and ethics, as many critics complained that Miller's theaters regularly showed R-rated fare of questionable morality¹²—what Chris Hicks of the *DNews* called “indefensible sleaze” (2006, p. W1). A *Standard Examiner* columnist agreed: “Perhaps what's most astonishing is that this movie with two cowboys kissing is causing more of an outrage than the plethora of violent movies and Saturday-morning cartoons that deluge the souls of children” (Karcher, 2006, p. A5). A *Tribune* reader wrote, “I am saddened that Larry was enough of a hypocrite to show, by my count, five other R-rated movies at the Jordan Commons theater complex. I guess since they're rated R for (straight) sex, drugs and violence, the movies are acceptable” (Munk, 2006, p. A10). University of Utah student Chris Bellamy, who identified himself as LDS, pointed out in a column: “Every year, countless movies include, or even endorse, violation of every single one of the Ten Commandments. And yet I can't recall a single one of them in recent years being deliberately pulled from theaters. . . . Gee, that sounds a bit two-faced to me. . . . [I]t's cheap, unethical, motivated by fear, ignorance and, oh yeah, it borders on bigotry” (2006, p. 5, p. 7). And a *Standard Examiner* reader wrote: “[I]f Larry Miller is such a 'good man,' why did he cancel 'Brokeback Mountain' . . . yet continues exhibiting 'Hostel'. . . . Rape is OK, but love is not?” (McShane, 2006, p. A6). *City Weekly* summarized the hypocrisy argument: “It seems to me if the guiding principle means a gay-themed movie is bad, leads to gayness or the acceptance of gayness, then surely, a murder-mayhem movie can yield a worse consequence. I choose the gay theme” (Saltas, 2006, p. 7).

The second major thread underlying the *Disruption* frame is the charge of intolerance, and Miller's action is seen as emblematic of Utah's intolerant culture: “As if homosexuals will somehow cease to exist if no one sees this 'immoral' movie” (Fulton, 2006, p. 10). Zakrey Coon, a self-described gay man, wrote that he and his partner “have become accustomed to the ignorance that many Utahns share regarding homosexuality” and “the hatred and ignorance that many Utah homosexuals feel on a daily basis. Thank you, Larry H. Miller, for showing us and the rest of the country the bigotry that seems to consistently revolve around the LDS Church and its members” (2006, p. A14). A *Spectrum* reader lamented, “In the light of the wonderful movie 'Brokeback Mountain' that I recently saw, I would like to say that I just don't understand homophobia. Christians and a certain Christianity-based religion claim they are against homosexuality and gay marriage because God said it is sin. So, how do you prove that God actually said that?” (Lavanya, 2006, p. A6). One *DNews* reader wrote, “[H]eterosexual homophobia and bigotry in general leave everyone miserable. Apparently Larry H. Miller can't bring himself to show a movie that criticizes the world he helped perpetuate” (Kruse, 2006, p. A10). *Tribune* religion columnist Robert Kirby, who is LDS, encouraged his readers to think outside their comfort zones: “Even though Larry gave it the toss, I'll manage to go see 'Brokeback Mountain' anyway. . . . And I'm doing it for my own good. In seeing 'Brokeback,' I hope to gain an understanding about how two people can feel genuine love for each other in a situation I'm told God does not approve of” (2006, p. E1).

Values Framing & Morality Debates

Despite the opposing positions articulated in the *Defending* versus *Disrupting Zion* frames, we assert that both sides wanted the same fundamental thing—to protect morality as they saw it. On one side, a morality based on conservative LDS Church teachings; on the other, a morality based on universal and individual human rights. As Hunter (1991) says, hot-button issues like gay rights create a cultural schism in American society, and illustrate “different systems of moral understanding” (p. 42). In this case, Miller proponents articulated their understanding of morality within the guiding frame of Utah’s conservative traditions and values, while the anti-Miller discourse positioned morality in terms of equality, individuality, and universalism. These competing perspectives on *Brokeback Mountain* can be understood in terms of differing values and the corresponding oppositional articulations of morality appearing in the columns and letters.

Other researchers have examined similar questions. In their analysis of letters to the editor of *The Australian* after 9/11, Jane Mummery and Debbie Rodan (2003) identified two seemingly oppositional, Us-versus-Them discourses, which they labeled as “protecting our way of life,” and “globalized humanitarianism” (p. 435). The basic imperative in the first was to “protect our way of life from disruption”—specifically, the perceived threats of Muslim refugees in Australia. The second oppositional frame emphasized the “common identity of being human”—human rights, equality, and acceptance (p. 437), which is grounded in an inclusionary logic of extending rights to all people. “[D]espite this apparent irreconcilability,” the authors argue, each discourse is “concerned with the same issue: democracy and the protection of democracy” (p. 440). The letter-writers offered opposing ways to achieve this goal—exclusion versus acceptance—and were equally intolerant of each other: “[B]oth discourses project themselves as the only rational response to these events . . . [and] their interactions are marked by mutual incomprehension, name calling and attempted silencing” (p. 441).

Certainly, a personal moral framework is critical to how individuals see the world and make decisions (Schwartz, 1994). Thus, Lindsay Hoffman and Michael Slater (2007) argue, “[R]esearch on human values provides a viable theoretical framework for characterizing both lay and journalist opinion frames” (p. 58). Paul Brewer (2001) defines a value frame as “an association between a value and an issue that carries an evaluative implication: It presents one position on an issue as being right (and others as wrong) by linking that position to a specific core value” (p. 46). For example, in their study of how health policy issues were framed in newspaper opinion pages, Hoffman and Slater conclude that values play a significant role, and, further, offer “insight into the underlying ideological (i.e., value-based) perspectives of the lay public and journalists regarding important public policy issues” (p. 70). This is problematic, because values framing discourages what Hoffman and Slater refer to as “interpretative complexity,” the ability to evaluate an issue from multiple perspectives (p. 61). Importantly, value frames in media narratives “share a feature that sets them apart from other sorts of messages: They associate an issue with a core value” (Brewer, p. 47). This kind of

association between a core value and an issue is clear in the Miller–*Brokeback* debate, which pitted the view of homosexuality as immoral versus the stance that gay rights is about universal fairness and tolerance—necessary criteria for morality.

In the similarly diametrically distinct sets of opinions identified in our analysis of the Miller–*Brokeback* issue, we see that both sides thought they occupied the moral high ground, which may have made them even less amenable to seeing the other’s point of view and both sides thought they were “protecting” important core values. For Miller supporters who framed their arguments around the necessity of *Defending Zion*, morality is positioned in terms of honoring and adhering to the values inherent in LDS Church doctrine. According to Schwartz (1994), people who align themselves with “traditional values” tend to privilege conformity, preserving and protecting existing social orders (p. 25). Indeed, those supporting Miller’s decision and his implicit rejection of what LDS Church leaders had termed “so-called gays and lesbians” (Hinckley, 1998, p. 70) overwhelmingly focused on values linked to Mormon doctrine, which teaches unequivocally that same-sex relationships are an abomination against God and nature.

This is mirrored in the *Defending Zion* argument: Conveniently, by framing their arguments in terms of LDS doctrine toward homosexuality, *Brokeback* opponents could attack gays and lesbians while denying they were homophobic, but simply adhering to God’s strictures and, in turn, their definition of God’s moral values. Furthermore, for many of these columnists and letter-writers, defending Miller was an opportunity not only to condemn homosexuality but to blame Hollywood for promoting immoral lifestyles that threaten America’s moral foundation. As one anti-*Brokeback* columnist argued, Hollywood is not only out of the American mainstream but out of touch with everyone whose values support “faith, family and fidelity, and who find movies like ‘*Brokeback Mountain*’ offensive” (Patton, 2006, p. 3). Letter-writers similarly linked same-sex relationships with “noble” core values. For example:

[‘E]nough is enough’ of pro-gay movies, videos, magazines and newspaper articles which glorify, condone or excuse behaviors which are considered by the general public to be detrimental to the most noble aspirations of family, religion and progression toward the highest levels of knowledge, understanding and achievement both in this life and in the life hereafter. (Richardson, 2006, p. 6)

Thus, Miller’s decision to cancel the movie was seen by his supporters as a courageous and moral stance to protect Zion’s culture and values.

Within this context of values and morality, it is important to recognize that, for Mormons, ignoring church teachings is considered equivalent of “embracing a sinful lifestyle” (Egan, 2001, SR4). For this reason, the LDS faithful are quick to respond to perceived threats to church doctrine (Quinn, 2000; “Some upset,” 2008). Former LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley explained that Mormons are “not anti-gay”; rather, he said, “We are pro-family” (“Gay marriage ban,” 2000, p. A6). But Hinckley was also firm in opposing the sinfulness of transgressive sexuality: “[W]e cannot stand idle if they indulge in immoral activity, if they try to uphold and defend

and live in a so-called same-sex marriage situation” (1998, pp. 70–71). Other LDS leaders have been less circumspect. James E. Faust, who was the Church’s No. 2 man until his recent death, painted homosexuality in apocalyptic terms: “Alternatives to the legal and loving marriage between a man and a woman are helping to unravel the fabric of human society,” he said in 1995. “I am sure this is pleasing to the devil” (p. 3). Former BYU President Dallin H. Oaks, a former Utah Supreme Court justice and another member of the governing LDS Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, also condemned gay-rights efforts: “Over past years we have seen unrelenting pressure from advocates of that lifestyle to accept as normal what is not normal, and to characterize those who disagree as narrow-minded, bigoted and unreasonable. . . . The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints must take a stand on doctrine and principle” (“Public issues,” n.d., ¶4). In 2000, fellow Apostle Boyd K. Packer, who called the “gay-lesbian movement” one of three major social and political dangers to LDS members (Anderson, 1993, p. B1),¹³ foreshadowed the coming legal battle: “Pressure is put upon legislatures to legalize unnatural conduct, [but] they can never make right that which is forbidden in the laws of God” (Bresnahan, 2000, ¶3, ¶5).¹⁴

On the other hand, Miller critics were equally passionate and self-righteous in promoting their opposing values. The *Disrupting Zion* frame is articulated on Utah op-ed pages predominantly through values that privilege equality, diversity, and social justice. Individuals who profess such values emphasize their openness to change and acceptance of others as equals (Schwartz, 1994, p. 25), defining morality in terms of tolerance and equality, and challenging societal norms, religious doctrine, and laws restricting individual rights. This letter represents this perspective:

People on [the antigay] end of the spectrum never seem to realize that by truly honoring equality and granting different people equal rights, you stand no risk of losing your own rights. The only things that are at risk of being lost are a certain degree of control (for religions or parents) and the social sanction of bigotry. Are these ideals worth holding onto? (Sim, 2006, p. 6)

From this perspective, a moral position must be inclusive. Immorality is defined as any policy, practice, or religious doctrine that discriminates against any group.

We can link the chronic sense of separation between Mormon “Saints” and others in Utah to these warring perceptions at the intersection of values, morality, and state politics. The faithful, Utah lawmakers, and Gentiles alike are well aware of LDS Church positions on same-sex marriage and other rights, as well as on other political and societal issues. “The Church makes no apology for making its views known on issues that it considers essential to the well-being of Utah society,” said LDS public affairs director Bruce Olsen. “It does so as part of our democratic process, through formal lobbying of members of the legislature in the same way that other interest groups seek to explain their views” (2003, ¶3). This is one of the themes embedded in the *Disrupting Zion* discourse—resentment over what many non-LDS citizens perceive as Church efforts to legislate and enforce a rigid, Mormon-based morality in the state,¹⁵ what one reader called the “unchecked power” of the LDS Church within the

Utah Legislature and the “major threat” this represents to the “basic principles of a democracy” (McKnight, 2006, p. A10). This *City Weekly* letter-writer, a gay man who asked that his name be withheld, is representative of this perspective:

I have spent a good portion of my life living in fear. Indeed, I cannot sign this letter because of fear. I might lose my job. . . . I’m tired of LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley saying that gay and lesbian people “have a problem.” . . . How many more lives need to be ended because of bullying, lack of tolerance, good manners and obedience to constitutional law, or simply agreeing to disagree? (“Name withheld,” 2006, p. 5)

So for those engaging in the *Disrupting Zion* discourse, Miller’s decision touched a nerve that brought out other resentments about life in Zion for marginalized groups, both within and outside the LDS Church, including perceived efforts by the faithful to legislate morality in Utah and nationwide.

The most recent and obvious example is LDS involvement in opposing gay marriage legislation. For two decades, LDS officials have encouraged members nationwide to support antigay Defense of Marriage laws, instructing the faithful to write letters to newspapers without identifying themselves as LDS (Quinn, 2000, p. 12). In 2000, even in states where they constituted less than 1% of the population, Mormons wrote approximately 85% of letters opposing same-sex marriage (Quinn, p. 13), and the Church spent millions on successful antigay marriage measures in Alaska, Hawaii, and California (Stack, 2008a). In 2004, the Church supported a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage in Utah (Buckeley, 2004, ¶1). Then in 2008, official LDS support for Proposition 8’s constitutional ban on same-sex marriage in California became much more overt, which religion professor Mark Silk said “raise[d] the specter not just of Mormon weirdness but also Mormon power as far as cash on the barrel” (Stack, 2008d, p. A10). In June 2008, new LDS President and Prophet Thomas S. Monson issued a mandate to Mormons to work to pass Proposition 8 overturning California’s Supreme Court decision giving same-sex couples the right to marry (Dethman & Buckeley, 2008; Monson, Eyring, Uchtdorf, 2008, ¶2, ¶4). LDS college students in California and California residents attending BYU in Utah were urged to “go viral . . . use texting, blogging, videos, podcasts, Twitter and Facebook” to help get out the vote to support Prop 8 (Stack, 2008b, p. B1). Utahns donated an estimated \$2.7 million to the antigay marriage campaign, and in early 2009 LDS officials disclosed some \$230,000 in Church contributions to help pass Prop 8 (Semerad, 2009). LDS contributions from across the nation accounted for an estimated \$22 million to pass Prop 8, or 77% of total contributions (Ravitz, 2008a; Stack, 2008c), and an additional \$3 million to pass a similar antigay marriage legislation in Arizona (“Gay marriage backers,” 2008).¹⁶ Since Prop 8’s passage, several complaints have been filed against the LDS Church, and California’s Fair Political Practices Commission is investigating (Ravitz, 2008b).

Issues of political power-brokering aside, the kinds of ideological differences identified in our study and others make rational debate on social issues problematic,

because both sides see themselves as morally correct (Hoffman & Slater, 2007). Just as Mummery and Rodan (2003) found in their study, the Miller–*Brokeback* debate broke down into “an ongoing process of name-calling,” with each sides’ position remaining “incomprehensible to the other” (p. 440). Miller and his supporters were “mean-spirited” (Larsen, 2006, p. 5), espousing a “malicious brand of hatred, bigotry, ignorance and sanctimony” (Leidolf, 2006, p. A4), and “perpetuating the rampant homophobia that already exists in the state” (McRae, 2006, p. A6). Miller defenders called the other side “morally bankrupt” (Hassell, 2006, p. 4), “intolerant” of those who uphold Biblical values (Talbot, 2006, p. A4), spreading “lies” to force “acceptance of a lifestyle that goes against many’s religious beliefs” (Muholland, 2006, p. A4), and supporting the “trash mongers” in Hollywood (Macomber, 2006, p. A4). This illustration of Utah’s “Great Divide” and the values clash between Utah’s Saints and Gentiles represents a disconnect that makes it difficult to conduct the kind of public debate in Utah that might serve to clarify issues and truly promote civic tolerance.

It was really a fairly minor event—the cancellation of a movie in one Utah theater—yet Utah’s public discussion of *Brokeback*–Miller offers an instructive case study of how such hot-button issues are framed, debated and often reduced to polarizing either-or questions in the public square of the press. On a micro level, the *Brokeback* press debate was another exemplar of the fault lines underlying life in Utah and dividing the Saints from the Gentiles, and the tensions both groups often feel. In banning *Brokeback Mountain*—which had debuted at the Utah’s own Sundance Film Festival the previous year—Larry Miller helped crystallize the Us-versus-Them divide in Utah, and helped draw unwanted negative attention once again to the LDS Church.

The *Deseret News* Versus *The Salt Lake Tribune*

It is a matter of journalistic faith that one of the most essential roles of the press in a democratic society is to serve as a marketplace for competing ideas, to offer a forum for public opinion on issues of the day, and as a means of airing and clarifying what a society stands for, its goals and values. In fact, as some argue, “Editors have a responsibility to seek out the stuff of which democracy is made” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, p. 318). Thus, Utah newspapers played an essential role of societal self-determinism as Utahns struggled with issues that ultimately are much larger than *Brokeback Mountain*. In the *Brokeback*–Miller case, we see all of these mechanisms at work within the larger context of a society whose people already were sharply divided along embedded societal fault lines that might best be described in terms of values and morality battles.

As for the press role in promoting broad debate and many voices, it is worth noting that *The Salt Lake Tribune* offered the widest range of discussion on the Miller–*Brokeback* issue of all Utah newspapers. Not only did the *Tribune* run more opinion pieces on the topic than any other newspaper—10 of the total 35—but its columnists also provided a great diversity of source and perspective. These ranged from its own editorial opposing the movie’s cancellation (“A sad story,” 2006) to a “single, male,

card-carrying, Utah Republican Mormon and born-and-bred Utah County sheepherder” who ridiculed the film (Caras, 2006, p. AA3). In-between were three of the *Tribune's* own staff columnists, who took on a range of issues raised by the film and Miller's opposition, including questions of damage to Utah's reputation. Thus, while individual columnists may have argued strongly on one side or another of the issue, the *Tribune's* op-ed pages taken as a whole offered readers some truly diverse perspectives.

In contrast, the *DNews* did not write its own editorial on the *Brokeback* debate, and, in fact, seemed to take a low profile on the issue compared to the *Tribune*. The *DNews* published only three opinion columns on the subject, one expressing strong support for Miller (Benson, 2006), and another detailing how *Brokeback* was an insult to cowboys (Robinson, 2006). The third supported Miller's right to show whatever movies he wanted, but wondered about his standards, since R-rated films containing graphic violence and heterosexual sex were frequent fare in Miller's cinemas (Hicks, 2006). One explanation for the *DNews's* relatively sparse commentary might relate to the Religious Right's decision not to criticize *Brokeback Mountain* so as not to give the movie any more publicity (Leland, 2005, p. E1). Indeed, when contacted by reporters, LDS Church spokesman Dale Bills declined comment (Buckeley & Warburton, 2006). The relative lack of *DNews* op-ed comment on *Brokeback* might represent a strategic shift in how conservative religious groups respond to films they consider immoral.

For newspapers, letters to the editor represent the most direct possible dialogue with readers, a print marketplace of ideas. Thus, in the interests of the most wide-open and robust possible discussion, editors typically lean toward publishing as many letters as they have space for, and are “extremely cautious about rejecting uncivil letters” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004, p. 102), although studies have found wide variability in newspapers' letters policies and practices (Reader, Stempel, & Daniel, 2004, p. 57). While editors strive to run as many letters as possible, for obvious reasons—legal and otherwise—they do generally reject “personal attack letters” and racist or otherwise bigoted or offensive opinions (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004, p. 89; also see Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002). And this was the case in Utah's *Brokeback* debate. For instance, *Tribune* editorial page editor Vern Anderson says he received a “significant number of letters on the anti-LDS side that were unprintable, mostly because of the virulent bigotry they conveyed” (personal communication, July 7, 2008).

It is unclear, however, whether a count of the published letters on *Brokeback* in the Utah press reflects true public sentiment—either of the general public or of letter-writers. Gatekeepers at Utah's daily newspapers agree with the industry standard that the letters section of any newspaper should reflect the “traffic”—that is, newspapers generally strive to publish opinion letters on controversial topics in the proportion they receive them. “We received many letters that said essentially the same thing—that Miller was a homophobe and way out of line—in numbers we couldn't possibly accommodate,” Anderson said. “We received fewer letters in support of Miller and, as I recall, published most of those” (personal communication, July 7, 2008). *DNews* editorial page editor Jay Evensen also said that, generally, “[O]ur [published] letters

tend to reflect the traffic, rather than some effort on our part for balance” (personal communication, July 10, 2008). Evensen estimated that the *DNews* received as many as 165 letters on *Brokeback*, running 10-to-1 pro-Miller. “I’m guessing the letters we published reflected that ratio to some extent, although we probably published a larger share of the anti-Miller letters than the proportion received” (personal communication, July 10, 2008).¹⁷

Perceptions are not always accurate, of course, either in the newsroom or, perhaps, among the newspaper-reading public. The letters published by the *DNews*, in fact, did not reflect the “traffic,” if Evensen’s estimate is correct that the letters he received ran 10-to-1 in favor of Miller; 59 percent of the *DNews*’ published letters were pro-Miller. So the *DNews* certainly did oversample from the anti-Miller letters it received. Thus, the *vox populi* may not always be reflected accurately in terms of letters to the editor that actually appear in the newspaper, at least not in this case. This is important not only because most readers believe that letters to the editor are “an expression of public opinion” (Mummery & Rodan, 2003, p. 434), but also because other research has found that policy makers view the letters page as a barometer of constituent opinion. These perceptions can have powerful implications for public policy (Hogan, 2006, p. 81), because letters “are often accepted by states as the voice of the people” (Lang & Engle-Lang, cited in Hogan, p. 81). In the case of the *Brokeback*–Miller controversy, the *perception*, based on the letters published on the topic, could have been that public opinion was balanced, if sharply polarized between the adamantly pro and con. But if the actual traffic of letters sent to newspapers was not accurately reflected in what appeared in print, public perception might easily have been wrong.

Implications

Whether editorially engineered or not, the actual published discourse on the *Brokeback*–Miller issue quickly became so absolutist, so polarized and polarizing in Us-versus-Them, Good-versus-Evil terms that robust and wide-open debate on this matter of public interest—which is the press’s role in a democratic society—was undermined. In its 1947 report, the Commission on Freedom of the Press enunciated the public’s legitimate expectations of a socially responsible press, including that a free and responsible press should offer a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism in order to help present and clarify the goals and values of the society (“Commission on Freedom,” 1947, p. 24). Surely, comment and criticism was plentiful in this instance, but far from helping society understand itself better, such absolutist debates serve to drown out nuanced or moderate argument, while painting contentious issues into more hardened and antagonistic corners. While not resolving much about the underlying issues of either sexual minorities or Saints and Gentiles in Utah, the press in this case illustrated how the conflict can swiftly overshadow the original issue itself. As Suzanna Danuta Walters (1995) observed, “As it true of so many ‘explosive’ media moments, we can learn more from the contentious public discourse that surrounded the film than from the film itself” (p. 6).

In a 1996 *60 Minutes* interview with Mike Wallace, then-LDS President and Prophet Gordon B. Hinckley attempted to explain for a lay audience what Mormons were all about. “We’re not a weird people,” Hinckley famously said (Anderson, 1996). In that one statement resides the latent disconnect between Mormons and non-Mormons, both inside and outside of Utah. “[M]ore than a religion,” Wallace said in his *60 Minutes* piece, “Mormonism is a lifestyle, an island of morality, they believe, in a time of moral decay.” Hinckley agreed: “[I]t stands as an anchor in a world of shifting values. It’s the old eternal battle—the forces of evil against the forces of good.”

That is the kind of dichotomy—good against evil, Us-versus-Them—that underlies the *Brokeback* debate as it was framed in Utah’s newspapers in op-ed columns and, especially, in letters to the editor. Like Hinckley’s good–evil dichotomy, the issue was ultimately reduced on the opinion pages to two competing and polarizing frames—*Defending* versus *Disrupting Zion’s* culture—and to underlying values of conformity and obedience versus openness and individual rights. This was one skirmish in an ongoing culture and morality war across the changing societal and demographic landscape that is never far from the surface in Utah. These conflicts also extend nationwide, not only in the same-sex marriage debate, but on broader issues of equality and individual rights for sexual minorities. The role of the mass media in these conversations is central to the health of an informed and participatory democracy. But when the public marketplace of ideas turns from reasoned debate and responsible give-and-take to absolutist, take-no-prisoners conflict, public understanding of social issues falters.¹⁸

Notes

- [1] In 2008, Utah voters approved a constitutional amendment to move the legislative opening day from the third Monday of January—Martin Luther King Jr. Day—to the fourth Monday, beginning in 2009 (“Utah election results,” 2008).
- [2] Medical examiners ruled Ledger’s January 22, 2008, death an accidental overdose of prescription medications (Barron, 2008).
- [3] The LDS Church recommends therapy to overcome dysfunctional same-sex attraction and to heal this dysfunctional behavior (Stack, 1992). (See “Counseling services” at <http://www.providentliving.org/ses/emotionalhealth/0,12283,2129-1,00.html>) Mormons who are homosexual may remain in the Church as long as they are celibate; members who are found to have engaged in sex with a same-sex partner are often excommunicated (Griggs, 2006b).
- [4] In 2008, the Salt Lake City Council approved a domestic-partnership registry for unmarried—including same-sex—couples in order to provide health care benefits for domestic partners of city employees (Page, 2008). The national Human Rights Campaign held its “Camp Equality” in Salt Lake City in 2008 to “help make 2008 the Year to Win for GLBT individuals across the country” (“Camp Equality,” 2008).
- [5] Hinckley died at age 97 on January 27, 2008, and Thomas S. Monson was named the 16th President and Prophet of the LDS Church (“LDS President,” 2008).
- [6] The Utah Press Association’s clipping service provided the sample through searches for keywords in all Utah dailies (6), weeklies (46), and university student newspapers (5). Keywords included: *Brokeback Mountain*, Larry Miller, gays, lesbians, homosexuality, homosexuals, and homophobia.

- [7] The *Salt Lake Tribune*, “Utah’s Independent Voice Since 1871,” was founded to oppose Mormon power, and became the state’s dominant newspaper (Bennion, n.d.). The afternoon *Deseret News* switched to an a.m. cycle in 2003 and briefly changed its name to the *Deseret Morning News* (Arave, 2003); it is generally referred to as the *DNews*. “Deseret” appears in the *Book of Mormon* and is defined as an ancient Egyptian term for the honeybee; Utah is the “Beehive State.”
- [8] Also see: Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1991; Gandy & Li, 2005; Husselbee & Elliot, 2002; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Ryan, 2004; Scheufele, 1999; Stewart, 2005; and, Watkins, 2001.
- [9] “The Great Divide” (2001).
- [10] Nielsen Media Research reports that Salt Lake City residents attend movies more often per capita than anywhere else in the nation (“Utah’s top 25,” 2007). But there is no evidence that other movies focusing on themes of sexual transgression, such as *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Transamerica*, were pulled from cinemas in Utah, nor that other such films generated the level of public controversy as *Brokeback Mountain*.
- [11] Hafen (2006, p. A1).
- [12] LDS doctrine prohibits members from viewing any R-rated films, and church-owned BYU prohibited screenings of *Schindler’s List* and *Amistad* on campus (“Brigham Young,” 1994; Stack, 1996). In 2003, LDS leader M. Russell Ballard warned members about the media’s “devastating attacks” on families: “Immorality and sexual innuendo are everywhere, causing some to believe that, because everyone is doing it, it must be all right. This pernicious evil is not out in the street somewhere. It is coming right into our homes, right into the heart of our families” (2003, ¶4).
- [13] Packer’s other most significant dangers facing the LDS Church were “feminism,” and the “ever-present challenge from the so-called scholars or intellectuals” (Anderson, 1993, p. B1).
- [14] According to LDS principles, Packer’s public statements represent official Church doctrine members are expected to obey (Rosman, 2002). In fact, the “culture of obedience” among Mormons means that members rarely question Church positions (“Some upset,” 2008, ¶15; also see Quinn, 2000).
- [15] As one example, former Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt (Bush Administration Health and Human Services secretary) held regular “Early Morning Seminary” classes with his top advisors and staff that focused on how to infuse “just and holy” Mormon principles into state polices (Gehrke, 2007, ¶1).
- [16] In addition to Arizona and California, Florida voters also adopted an antigay marriage law in 2008, bringing the number of states with such laws to 30 (McKinley & Goodstein, 2008).
- [17] Editors of five of Utah’s six dailies responded to queries regarding their letters policy; letters from these five newspapers represent 77% of the total published on the *Brokeback*–Miller debate.
- [18] Postscript: The saga continued in Utah in early 2009. The 2009 Legislative session opened in January with five gay-rights bills on the table—adoption rights, antidiscrimination in housing and employment, a “Common Ground Initiative” for cohabitating adults (Winters, 2009c). Utah’s Republican Governor Jon Huntsman Jr., a Mormon, endorsed the measures, including civil unions, even though 70% of Utahns opposed them (Winters, 2009a). By the end of February, all those efforts had been spiked. Meanwhile, state Senator Chris Butters exceeded his previous rhetorical flights when he said the gay-rights movement is “probably the greatest threat to America,” and compared gay activists to Muslim radicals (Winters, 2009b, ¶1). The GOP leadership removed Butters from some committee posts, but declined to condemn the statements (Gehrke, 2009). Finally, Larry H. Miller, the reluctant lightning rod for *Brokeback* homophobia in 2006, died in late February 2009 after eight months of poor health. He was 64 (Robinson, 2009).

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