

Inside the Secret Facebook War For Mormon Hearts and Minds | The Daily Beast

By Kevin Poulsen

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In November 2017, a provocation appeared in the Facebook feeds of 3,000 Mormon parishioners. It was a sponsored post crafted in the gauzy style of one of the Mormon church's own Facebook ads, but addressing a seldom-discussed truth about the early history of the church and its founding patriarch, Joseph Smith. "Why did Joseph marry a 14 year old girl?" the post asked. "The church has answers. Read them here." Below the text was a photo of a gold wedding band balanced across the inside spine of an open Book of Mormon.

About 1,000 people who saw the Facebook ad clicked on it and were taken to a page deep within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' website that expounded on the "revelation on plural marriage," the order from God that was used to sanction polygamy for decades. During that time some male followers of the Latter Day Saint movement took dozens of wives each, disproportionately favoring girls between 14 and 16 years old. Church leaders finally banned polygamy in 1904.

If anyone reading the text thought to wonder why Facebook served them a slice of the most controversial chapter in their religion's history, they likely chalked it up to the impersonal vagaries of the platform's profiling algorithms. But they'd be wrong. The ad was very personal. Everyone who saw it was secretly hand-picked by a friend or loved one who had walked away from the LDS church, and now turned to Facebook's precision ad system in a desperate attempt to explain their spiritual crisis to those they'd left behind.

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