

# The Art of Curating Conversations: Live Podcast of a Conversation with LDSPMA President-Elect Devan Jensen

**Presenters: Christine Baird and Devan Jensen**

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**Christine Baird:** Welcome. We are so excited to be here. I'm Christine Baird just introduced this is Devin Jensen, and this session is about the art of curating conversations And the reason we're doing a podcast format, a Live podcast that you get to watch, is because podcasting is just one of many mediums that we were talking about today.

We're covering writing and publishing, editing, and podcasting is a new and emerging format that fits into the same lane. And so using this format, we want to share today how to think about podcasting and the way you've maybe thought about writing, you've thought about interviewing, and you've thought about editing. So this is a fun experiment, a little hybrid. My background is podcast production for influencers and, as you've heard, Devon's background is an incredible array of editorial work over decades in many of the church branches, and so we're thrilled. Thank you, Devin, for being here.

**Devan Jensen:** Happy to be here. Thank you, Christine.

**Christine Baird:** Of course, so we've had a little bit of time just now to chat before we started, and we're both excited because There's a lot of commonalities, even though I'm coming from podcasting and you're coming from the more traditional world of editing. So I want to start off with this question.

You're an editor by profession, and I want to know what you've noticed about written conversation that's different from the live conversation format. Are there pros, are there cons, and what have you noticed through the years? Fantastic.

**Devan Jensen:** Well, I've noticed that in the live setting, things are punchy and short and context specific. And so there's a lot of engagement, just like this conversation right now. We're talking, and we're sort of expressing ideas. We may not worry about how or where the sentence is going to go, or where it's going to end. But we are expressing things.

With a written format, you're a little more able to be thoughtful and expressive and maybe a little more measured where you're going, and so it's a little more planned out. So I think that there are advantages to both. For example, I would say that the live ones really can be fun. It's like catching the person on the street. I mean, you're ideally catching somebody who's knowledgeable, but it's going to be a short clip, maybe like a Twitter or a Tweet, you know. Here's a little thought—and then it doesn't necessarily have to go somewhere, or it might have little connected threads. But with a written conversation, or another venue, you might have a little bit longer to develop. It might be more like a Facebook post, and you're kind of going somewhere, or a blog and you're expressing an idea and allows you to edit and refine things. And so I find there's advantages to both.

One thing I do like about both is if you can send your questions in ahead of time to the interviewee—as you did, Christine—because then it sort of primes the pump and allows the person to be thinking along a certain direction. I'm thinking of a Mark Twain quote; he said “I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one.” Right? And so, when you're able to get your ideas ahead of time and formulated, you know where you're going; and when you don't, it just kind of rambles. And so one thing I'll add there is from an editor's perspective: Always it's preferred to have the written conversation because you can tweak things. When you have somebody saying things, it makes perfect sense at the time, but later you have to sort of fill in the gap—“Let's see now, they were going somewhere with this and they never finished it.” And so I've had a couple of professors over the years who will say, “Oh, this will be easy. We'll just interview this person, and then the editors will fix it!” which is very funny. That's the way to say “We don't want to do the work, let's let the editors do that!”—and it is a lot of work, but that gives you some of the pros and cons to both formats, written and spoken.

**Christine Baird:** I love that perspective. Having spent many hours editing audio, there are many tangents and rambles that come through in conversation and it's very much made me appreciate quality editing, both written and audio. I love that perspective. Okay, so with that in mind, I love the decades of perspective you have in the editorial world. I think that's a treasure trove. So how has the editing style of the publications you've worked on changed over the past few decades? Like, what are the trends, you're noticing in editing?

**Devan Jensen:** Fantastic. Thanks for asking that. So I have to give a little context to say that I graduated in early '90, and so the internet was kind of a new thing. And we were still using these great big 5-1/4" floppy disks that you didn't want to hold it wrong or the wind would blow and destroy all your data, Or get too close to a magnet, right? And so a tremendous amount of technology has happened in these years. And one thing we used to do that has changed dramatically is we used to have paper copy edits where we write everything down with a red pencil. You had to know all the marks and everything.

And that is still a valuable skill because we're still proofreading on paper. But one thing we have done is gone entirely to electronic communications, and so we are editing on the server, and we have to know how to navigate box and you have to be able to send emails that are concise and explain what you mean, and praise the author and say, "Now could you pull out a little more meaning here?" And so you're writing a lot of notes to the author.

So those are just the technological things that have changed. Also, related to technology, is adding lots of URLs and your editing style.

We have to know Chicago Manual of Style and being able to keep up to speed with how they handle URLs and so forth.

So these are things that have changed. Now I will say very specifically, in relation to editing styles, that when I started at Deseret Book, they were using kind of an MLA-Chicago hybrid and they loved periods. And this does not mean to be critical of Deseret Book, but they were just kind of in an 80's style, or maybe even late 70's style that had kind of lasted, and so I began taking all the periods out of the citation. What I mean by that is, let's say, "I Nephi, having been born of goodly parents" and then they put a period, and then they'd say paren ( ). And then they have a period after the citation, so I'm going, "Wow, this is cluttered with punctuation!" So I started taking out that extra punctuation, and one of the top editors there said, "I like this style. I think this works." And so I said, "Yeah, I think so, too" because it was what I had grown up with. So that's an example of how language changes specifically as far as citations. They've also cleaned up a lot of the clutter, as far as some of the punctuation—maybe an open style for commas, fewer commas. We still uphold the Oxford comma, and of course there have been gang wars over the AP style versus the Oxford comma but, in a word, for those who are not familiar with that, it's the bread, butter, and potato, something like that.

So we do uphold those, but a lot has changed in style, but for the most part, it's very small changes. Now this is a very important part about language change. Language is always changing, and so words are always been added to the dictionary.

For example, I just was curious and so I looked up this morning. I said, “Well, I wonder what’s happened with the dictionary.” And so in 2017, for example, Merriam Webster’s Dictionary added 1000 words! So just words like “binge-watch”—you know, things that we now know, they’re a thing! But you have to, as an editor, be watching for those and thinking, “Now okay, how is language changing, and what words are being added?” Is this unacceptable? I’ll give you another example that’s being discussed right now: Black, as relating to African-Americans. Is that capital or lowercase? That is changing as we are speaking. And there are discussions in that “Well, do you handle white the same way?” And so it actually is very complicated when you’re an editor and you’re saying, “Let’s see. I think I’m going to treat this this way,” and so I would just add this as an editor. I kind of viewed my initial view as the Grammar Police, to serve and protect the English language.

And there is a role for that, where you’re trying to make sure that rules are being followed.

Over the decades, I’ve become to see myself as more, maybe, a midwife of meaning.

Right, to say I’m going to help the author, who is the parent, to deliver the message to the audience, and both those partners are very important.

And I’m not really the creator, but I’m a very helpful part of that process. And I want to make sure the baby is delivered and that the author is happy.

**Christine Baird:** I love that metaphor, and it made perfect sense. And I’m so glad you kind of got into what’s been added to the dictionary; that was actually a follow-up question I had.

What have you noticed, as our language and as our society has become much more casual, a lot more slang? And my generation is considered millennials, and all their woes. I’m curious, just as a follow-up, have you noticed any positives coming from these newer decades and generations of a much more sort of inclusive? What have you noticed about that in language?

**Devan Jensen:** Oh, yes. And I’m going to say Oh yes, I love millennials because your generation is very open to change, much more so, I would say, than my generation or other generations. And because you’re saying “Let’s be inclusive,” we’re talking about an absence of gender bias.

Let’s see, what are some other things that are trends?... I think adoption of lots of technology, right? And So I think because of that, because of your generation, we are finding ourselves in a

period of tremendous language change. And there are old-school folks who would say, “This is wrong, we should need to guard the past.” But I say, language always changes, so go with it. And so I guess I’m kind of young at heart as far as language, because I want to be current with what’s going on. I want to know the latest trends. I want to pick up a new word. And if something is relevant, let’s add it to our dictionary and let’s share. Because basically you’re trying to share meaning. And so, however you do that.

Back to my earlier stage where I felt like I was the grammar police. There actually is another way to look at what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to make sure that people understand a message, and so a role of an editor is to make sensible exceptions to rules. You don’t have to be ruled out. If you say, “Normally we would put a hyphen here in this, but there are two other words that don’t have hyphens. I’m going to bend the rule a bit and treat all that as the same category.” That’s a very specific example when we’re talking about punctuation, but you also have the same option with sentences. If a punchy fragment style communicates to the author, go with it—especially if the author appears that they know what they’re doing. You want to say, “I’m going to make sure that their meaning is communicated. I’m not necessarily bound to the rules, and I want to make sure that the audience understands the message.” It’s that rhetorical triangle.

**Christine Baird:** Well, and then back to your midwife example: Every baby is so different, I mean to state the obvious, no two humans are the same.

So, to just think of every piece you are supporting and birthing as a unique entity, there’s exceptions for every piece.

And I’ve absolutely seen that in the audio world as well.

Okay, so this is one of actually my favorite questions, and this is a geek out moment for me. I’ve often noticed there’s a difference between curating content and creating content, especially in today’s vast amount of options. So I’m curious about your perspective, what’s the value of curating content versus creating content in such an information-saturated day? **Devan Jensen:** Fantastic. So I’m going to just throw out a definition here. When we’re talking about curating content, we’re talking about picking maybe the social media world from among the options, and then sort of repackaging it, saying “I want to put my spin on it, and here’s something valuable that I have found.” Okay, so with that in mind, creating content is very difficult. It takes a lot of time, just like this interview. We’ve planned this out and it’s a bit of behind-the-scenes work. And also, if we were to present only our material—LDSPMA material—it would look like we’re very selfish.

When we're curating material, we're saying, "I'm looking out at conversations that are going out all across the web" and saying, "I think you, my reader, would be very interested in this conversation and I think you'd also love to have this source." And that allows you to make partnerships and to build bridges among communities, and you're part of a bigger world instead of just your isolated website or organization. So I am a big fan of networking and connecting.

My colleagues have said that's one of my strengths, is I'm a connector. I love people, and I'm loving meeting you today and I feel like we'll have a bond.

And this sort of thing now spreads out for LDSPMA Religious Studies Center, and now we're kind of making new bridges. So that's the same thing we're doing with curating material.

So, for example, I'm going to say one thing in a very religious context, which we do. We do a lot of "Come Follow Me" material. We say, "Okay, what's the lesson coming out this week?" and we'll see we've got some content on our website that relates to that. So we'll put together an RSC.edu.byu, or a list of "Come Follow Me" resources. So then people are saying "Oh, now this is not official church stuff, but it is really good supplementary reading that might enrich my lesson or my personal reading." And so that's an example of how we're sort of curating what's coming from the church and then repackaging in a way that's that blends with our material. So, I'm a big fan of connecting and building bridges when we can.

**Christine Baird:** That's one of the best answers I've heard to that question. All right, this is a bit of a follow up. What do you want current authors, artists, creatives, or anyone listening to know about the value of the editorial process in the age of consumption and fast-churn content? We kind of started the conversation talking about how rapid-fire and quick social media is, but also you could say podcasting. You could even say written content is becoming that way. So what is the value of the editorial process in this current age? **Devan Jensen:** Fantastic. I think that in this age of quick turnaround, I see something I'm tweeting, that it's really important to have an editorial process.

It's important to have somebody checking you, balancing your perspectives to make sure that the content you send out to the world reflects your values, your standards, your worldview, if you will, and I'll give you a very specific example of that. At the Religious Studies Center, we have, we have a student who is awesome. Her name is Emily cannon. Shout out to Emily and she post content.

We have established a very short review process where she'll email me the content first, and I'll look at it, and my boss Scott Esplin, who is awesome as well, our publications director, will also take a quick look at it. It sounds like a lot of layers, but it's only two, and we're usually pretty fast, within 15 minutes. And we will look at that and it might seem like What I'm looking at, from an editorial standpoint, is to make sure it's punctuated correctly, it has the correct Link, and it's working properly, but what he's looking for, as well, is Are there other things, other products, other concerns that we want to be sensitive to? And so we will look at that really quickly and we'll send that back to her. So I would say, in relation to that: Creatives, Artists, Have some sort of system in place so that when you send something out, you can feel comfortable that this reflects your worldview and your values and your editorial standards.

I love what I do, and sometimes it feels a little restrictive to do that, but I always am grateful. There's been several times where I've been ready to send something out, and my director will say, "Well, are you aware that this other product relates to this, or another article does, and so if you'll add that link to it, it'll enrich this whole thing." And then I'll say, "That's good." That's why he makes the big bucks, and that's why we have this process.

**Christine Baird:** Hmm. I love that, especially because I've worked heavily in social media, kind of in the flashier side, and the amount of typos that show up in little social media videos—it's almost become acceptable now, in a weird turn of events.

To have typos on your subtitles because they get done so quickly, it's such fast churn, and it's so much about "hop on the trend of the moment." And it's been interesting for me to notice that if you have an editorial process that doesn't take that long, like you said, it is such an elevation and it holds a standard.

In the world of social media, which is an interesting dynamic and I actually just because we were talking about this before.

You've recently started managing a lot of the social media for some of the work you're doing. So I'm just going to kind of slip in a follow up. What have you noticed about editing for social media versus editing for long form articles? **Devan Jensen:** Oh yes, that's great. It's editing a bite at a time, right? You're getting a little snippet, you know, two sentences, three sentences, and It's very important to give those your full attention and not to say, "Oh, looks good to me. Okay." There've been a couple of times when I've said, "No. What did that say?" and I'll think, "Oh, I've got to check that" and I'll go double-check my facts and so forth. So yeah, I think that's a really important thing that it is a bite-size edit and you're right, it is somewhat ephemeral, you're going to put it out there and it's going to be gone fairly soon.

So you want to make sure it has some pretty good impact. For example, along those lines—which this might sound very obvious, but a lot of images help.

If you have a post, and it has an enticing image or a good catchy lead that pulls people in, those are important ways to grab the reader’s attention. And that’s something a content creator may not be thinking about. They may just be going “Okay, I found something.” And so your second round, your editing round, may be the time to say, “Can we amplify your message by creating something that pulls people in?”

**Christine Baird:** Absolutely, I’m thinking of even in the world of podcasting, the title of an episode is oftentimes the thing that’s labored over the most, because even a one-word change, because it’s such short form and people are so rapidly scrolling through who-knows-how-many episode options, it’s just like a one-word difference could actually powerfully change and pull someone into listening to an hour of content.

So I have deep respect for that process.

**Devan Jensen:** And I’m glad you said that because it is a team effort. One thing that Pixar does so well is they create their storyboard and they hash it out at that level.

And sometime we had one of the Presidents of Pixar come to BYU, and he explained the early version of “Up” And it was completely different from the way the final thing. And so sometimes that storyboard stage, or the draft stage, is the important time to redirect content and say, “We can do better. We can make this even better.” And so even though it’s not typical in the social media world to take a lot of deliberation, that’s a really powerful time. I actually think the professionals really do take the time, like the Pixars of the world and the other powerful organizations. They do take the time, and that shows up in the impact they have on the industry because when they roll it out, you think, “Wow, it’s magic. They had another hit.” And the reason they did that is because the gears were churning and meshing and clashing and grinding before that process for years until they finally created the final content that is so magical, it’s so effortless. It’s the man behind the curtain—it’s the Wizard of Oz, saying, “I’m the great and powerful Oz” and there are actually gears behind it that are creating that illusion of simplicity.

**Christine Baird:** I love that. Pixar stories are the best! Okay, I’m going to select a couple of final questions because we could both probably geek out for a while about this. Okay, this is just a personal interest question. What’s the best piece of writing you’ve read this year and why?



**Devan Jensen:** Fantastic. My favorite piece of writing that I came across this year was a book by George Handley called “The Hope of Nature” and it is a beautiful work. He’s a humanities Professor at BYU and this is published by the Maxwell Institute. I was fortunate to be the editor of that.

For those who don’t know, the Religious Studies Center and Maxwell Institute are sister organizations, and we pretty much edit the other organization’s work. So what I loved about his writing is that he used so many analogies and he’s so artful about it, to talk about the world we live in and say, “This is not a political issue, this is an issue of stewardship.” All we’re Able to take care of the earth in a way that we will pass it down to our children and grandchildren. Anyway, he uses analogies. For example, he’ll say, “Well, some people—some Latter-day Saints, I’m going to be very specific—say, “Well, the earth will be renewed eventually, and receive its paradisiacal glory” so therefore, it doesn’t really matter what we do.” And he says, “To use that analogy, it would be like saying, “Well, my body is going to be resurrected eventually—what does it matter what I eat and how I treat it today? It doesn’t matter.” Well, there’s a quality of life and there’s a quality of existence that that go closely, along with how we treat our bodies and our environment. And so, what I love about his book, and—shouting out to George Handley—is he is a very articulate thinker and, like me, he’s had decades to think about his craft and he has done it so well. One of my favorite books that I’ve read, perhaps, in my life.

**Christine Baird:** Wow, I am so thrilled to hear that. George Handley was my professor when I was at BYU. I had studied abroad in London with him so, fond memories! I was his TA (teacher’s assistant). I love that so much.

**Devan Jensen:** Shout out to you, Dr. Handley!

**Christine Baird:** Shadow to talk to him, like, Okay, perfect. Last question here before we wrap up for this section of the interview. You are the President-elect of LDSPMA, which is so awesome, and I want to know about the future, what’s coming. What’s in the future of LDSPMA?

**Devan Jensen:** Fantastic. So this year, because of this Corona-pocalypse, we are gathering for a virtual conference. You’re a part of this, we are part of this, and this organization has had to pivot toward a virtual conference. There are a lot of things we like about it: we like the fact that we can reach out to people across the world, really, and can tune into events like this. So, I would say, one of our strong desires is that we can continue at least part of our conference to be a virtual or perhaps a hybrid of, and a virtual conference so that we can reach out to a bigger group than we have. So I would say that is one of our major areas of growth in the future. We

also look forward dramatically to gathering together. I miss people, we miss people, and we want to be together. And so we're going to try to do that when we can. So we are in the process of talking about how we can continue our networking groups through zoom, and so forth. That is something we are in the process of discussing. We'll see how that all unrolls as the months progress, but we're hopeful that we can still connect virtually even if we can't be together in person.

**Christine Baird:** Well, I'm thrilled that we're getting to do this, and just final thoughts. I think there's something so powerful about sharing the wisdom, despite the circumstances. I've been definitely very energized and it really opened my mind back up to the value of slowing down and taking time to edit, and taking time to prepare for a conversation.

I'm excited for everyone watching to kind of take away some of that wisdom and realize there're immense opportunities, even in the time where everything's digital.

Any final thoughts you want to share about anything? Art of curating conversation, editorial process? What's next in the world as we adapt? Any final thoughts? **Devan Jensen:** Well, I just share this: Publishing is a world where we can somewhat work disconnected. We can be connected via electronics. And so I would just encourage you all to have fun doing what you're doing, but also to connect with your people, your loved ones, your friends.

One term that I would replace: Social distancing is physical distancing because you can still be connected. You can be a social connector and a physical distancer. So keep connected and and make those make those connections happen in a meaningful way.

I just would share with my audience. I realize that this is a very difficult emotional time, especially for people who are solo, who are individuals, I ate yesterday with a good friend of mine, Jesse Embry, who said she needs to connect with somebody every day, so we make sure to take time and connect in a fun way, and I would encourage everybody to try to do that and stay safe and stay healthy.

**Christine Baird:** Well, amen. And thank you so much. We hope everyone got something out of this. I certainly did. And we'll talk then.

**Devan Jensen:** Thank you, Christine, I appreciate you.