

Bahá'í Participation on the Internet: Some Reflections

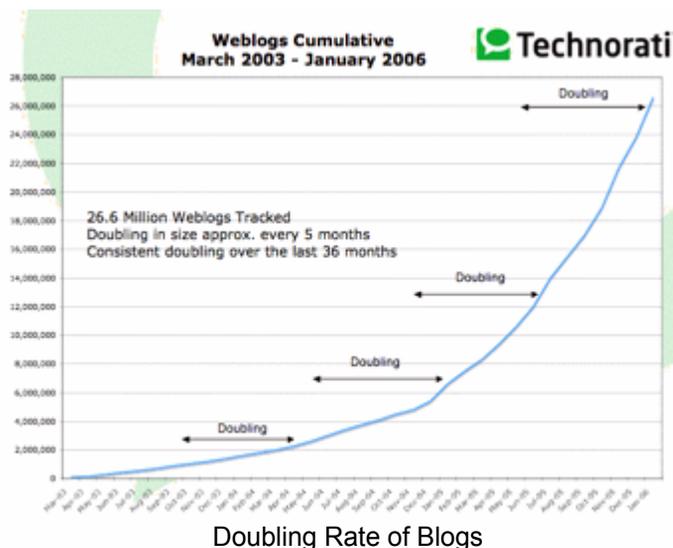
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Introduction

“The powers released by Bahá'u'lláh match the needs of the times. We may therefore be utterly confident that the new throb of energy now vibrating throughout the Cause will empower it to meet the oncoming challenges of assisting, as maturity and resources allow, the development of the social and economic life of peoples, of collaborating with the forces leading towards the establishment of order in the world, of influencing the exploitation and constructive uses of modern technology, and in all these ways enhancing the prestige and progress of the Faith and uplifting the conditions of the generality of mankind.”¹

The Internet is one of this age's most revolutionary and transformative technological developments. New terms, such as wikis, RSS, podcasting, blogs, FOAF, VoIP, and folksonomies,² while virtually unknown a few years ago, are rapidly becoming common currency among millions of Internet users. These new forms of communication technology represent major social trends that offer new ways of sharing Bahá'í perspectives, precepts, and experiences.

As existing institutions and social practices disintegrate around us, the Bahá'í teachings indicate that there is a parallel process at work of creating new structures and tools that enable unifying patterns of collective life to emerge. The Internet appears to be playing a catalytic role in breaking down longstanding geographic, cultural and institutional barriers while facilitating the formation of new communities of interaction that are increasingly global in nature.



¹ From the message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 1983

² Wikis are a form of publicly editable web site; RSS (Really Simply Syndication) is a communications protocol being used by blogs and podcasts; blogs are online journals; FOAF (Friend of a Friend) describes social networks such as Facebook and Friendster; VoIP (Voice over IP) is the use of the Internet for telephone service; and, folksonomies (or social tags) are systems by which the author and/or users classify content based on keywords.

Many Bahá'ís have been active on the Internet from its earliest days. The richness and variety of the content produced through individual and institutional initiatives have served to raise awareness of the Bahá'í Faith and its basic beliefs, aims and activities. As it is evident that new developments on the Internet are giving expressing to key Bahá'í principles, the possibility of having far greater impact in promoting Bahá'í ideals and concepts for human well-being lies within reach.

The “Participation Age”

The Internet has gone through a number of significant transformations since its creation in 1969. One major step was the expansion of communication forms such as electronic mail beyond defined or national communities to a global scale. The development of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s allowed for richer content to be added. This dramatically increased the public's interest in and use of the Internet. We are now witnessing another transformation from the previous model of persons or organized entities being independent producers of content to what is now being called the “participation age.”³

The “participation age” is principally distinguished by its ethos of collaboration and sharing. One of the basic aspects of this new ethos is that the collaborative efforts of a group of ordinary individuals can lead to perspectives and outcomes not possible for an individual, even a recognized expert. Cooperative content generation and knowledge generation are among the most noteworthy manifestations of the participatory trend.⁴ With the emergence of interactive media, readers of news are no longer passive recipients of information, but participate in how that information is distributed and ultimately interpreted. Although the concept and feasibility of new modes of global participation and collaboration may represent a startling change for many, the Bahá'í teachings have anticipated this collective awakening and empowerment of peoples around the world, and provide a context for successfully operating in these new paradigms.

Forms of Participation

Participation can entail many different forms and levels of activity and engagement. The expression of this new “participation age” often depends on the cultural context from which it comes. For example, blogs are the most common form of expression in some countries, whilst in others, chat rooms, message boards or cell phone SMS messaging may be more prevalent.⁵ The Internet's culture is a fluid mix of international and local requirements and thus requires a considered and sensitive approach by each community.

³Scott McNealy cited at www.sun.com/aboutsun/media/features/participate.html;
www.ciol.com/content/news/2006/106080703.asp

⁴Wikipedia.org is a prime example of collaborative content generation and open source software development illustrates the impact of focused innovation driven by a global community of participants.

⁵More sophisticated forms of Internet interaction such as mediums utilizing virtual reality are on the horizon. An example of a dynamic interactive environment where information and individuals interact can be found on secondlife.com, a virtual space drawing more than a million participants. Such interactive spaces offer the possibility of new learning environments.

Bahá'ís around the globe have made promising strides toward utilizing the Internet as a new means for proclamation and teaching. There are excellent introductory materials available on the Internet in English and many other languages including sites such as bahai.org, sites sponsored by National Assemblies or specialized sites created by individuals. There is an increasing demand for multilingual materials as the Internet penetrates a broader cross-section of countries and cultures. New opportunities for the systematic teaching of the Bahá'í Faith on the Internet are also emerging in both text based and non-text based media.

By creating an online presence, a local community or cluster can reinforce its existing teaching and consolidation efforts, particularly those engaged in intensive programs of growth. An online service could include a calendar of community activities, interactive mechanisms for responding to questions from interested inquirers who find out about the Faith from outreach or advertising campaigns, and materials tailored to the interests of receptive populations. An internal community blog could facilitate the sharing of experiences and information related to the core activities as well as the tracking of cluster goals, thereby improving how the community's human resources are utilized and deployed. Each community can best determine the combination of Internet and in-person activities that will best serve its objectives.

The Culture of Participation

Bahá'í pioneers understand the need to observe and listen when they first arrive in a new culture. The Internet has its own culture that encompasses a complex and dynamic mix of cultures and sensibilities from across the planet. Bahá'ís can participate on the Internet within the context of their own sites and services or join public sites and services. Both have their place.

Bahá'ís usually understand that content placed on the Internet presenting some aspect of the Faith needs to be given the same level of care as any other form of public representation of the Faith. This objective is sometimes complicated by the fact that these new means of communication have unusual constraints when compared to the traditional conversational exchanges between individuals. Bahá'ís need to learn as much as possible about these new modes of interaction and determine how the principles of the Faith apply to their use.

Each Internet space has its own norms and context of participation. Learning the culture of each medium requires observing how people behave. It usually does not take long to determine the characteristics and assumptions associated with a particular Internet space. One need not endorse all the tenets of a particular culture, but it is essential to understand the environment in which one operates, just as one does not need to approve of all the characteristics of a society in order to function within it.⁶ As with other modes of sharing

⁶ For instance, each article on Wikipedia, whether on the Bahá'í Faith or some other topic, has a community of participants that determines the content of the article. Each article essentially reflects a community of interaction--a community that may consist of both sympathetic and antagonistic voices. If

the Bahá'í teachings, building relationships in online fora is perhaps one of the most constructive strategies in introducing the insights and claims of the Bahá'í Revelation.

One of the main difficulties with presenting the Faith to the Internet public is that certain types of information, or a specific example of Bahá'í community life, may be appropriate within one context, but may be unsuitable for someone who reads the information at another time or out of context. The Internet audience is always potentially global in extent. Being aware that information may be read by many other people outside of your intended audience is vital, but it is also important not to be so cautious that your meaning is lost in vague or specialized language. Sincerity of motive will be apparent to most open-minded readers even when they are in disagreement with what is being said. Reliance on and use of the Writings in Internet fora provide yet another safeguard.

Building on Spiritual Principles

The principles of our Faith offer valuable guideposts in making use of the Internet. While it is easy to understand how the principles of the independent investigation of the truth or the harmony between science and religion could translate into the public statements we might make on the Internet, it is less obvious how they can be applied to the design of Internet services. “Form follows function” is a frequently repeated design principle. But function represents our implicit attitudes about our relationship with the visitor. So it is important to consider how the form – graphical elements, structure, and language – of the site bespeaks our attitude towards the visitor. The list below represents some of the principles that may be considered when creating a Bahá'í presence on the Internet:

- Trustworthiness
- Unity in Diversity
- Oneness of Humanity
- Equality of Women and Men
- Consultation
- Service to Humanity
- Independent Search for Truth
- Harmony of Science and Religion
- Non-involvement in Partisan Politics

Trustworthiness

the content of any particular Wikipedia article causes enough controversy, higher level editorial intervention can occur, but this usually involves trying to ensure that all perspectives on a question are being fairly represented. Wikipedia "administrators" adhere to the idea of “rough consensus” in deciding whether material should be removed. In short, while Wikipedia may utilize some of the consultative mechanisms familiar to Bahá'ís, its overarching principles guiding such decision-making are quite different. Thus, patience, perseverance, a commitment to fairness and Wikipedia policies, and a great dose of wisdom are required when contributing to Wikipedia content.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes that “trustworthiness is the bedrock” of the Faith and “the foundation of all virtues and perfections.”⁷ What is true for individuals is also true for Internet sites, online video presentations, blogs and podcasts. If people don’t trust a site, its utility as a vehicle for drawing individuals to the Revelation is compromised. There are several ways to demonstrate trustworthiness in the Internet context. The first is to make sure that information is accurate. Users are often sensitive to the feeling that they are being manipulated. Second, any factual information that is presented should be supported by authoritative sources wherever possible. Third, if any user information is collected, the site needs to have a clear statement of how such information will be used. Finally, tone and approach serve to transmit something of the spirit of the Cause.

Unity in Diversity

At a time when the world is suffering from polarized patterns of thought and behavior, the Faith’s ability to demonstrate that diversity can exist in a harmonious framework can serve as a major source of attraction. There are multiple ways to reflect this principle. The most obvious is to highlight the Bahá’í community’s concrete commitment to diversity of culture, perspective and action. It should also be kept in mind that disabled individuals heavily use the Internet, that large portions of Internet users do not have fast, broadband access, and that some seekers may be illiterate.

Educators have known for a long time that within a group, individuals will respond differently to each learning methodology. Some individuals learn best through reading, others through audio formats, and yet others by doing. There is no single right answer on how to best present a subject. At present, we primarily serve the traditional text-based learner. Audio, video and other multimedia elements are some ways to add diversity to our offerings. The arts allow us to introduce another form of diversity that can contain more tangible devotional or inspirational elements. The Universal House of Justice has pointed out that “the graphic and performing arts and literature have played, and can play, a major role in extending the influence of the Cause.”⁸ The Internet is well suited to distribute many of these art forms that have up to now been restricted to in-person presentations.

Unity in diversity can also relate to the transmission of information. While the web is clearly a very powerful tool in many parts of the world, it still does not reach the majority of the world’s population. Opportunities to repurpose Bahá’í-related Internet content to CD-ROM, MP3 audio files, printed materials and other offline methods should be explored. Creating good content is difficult; for this reason, Bahá’í materials should be distributed in as many forms as possible.

Oneness of Humanity

⁷ *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. II, p. 339.

⁸ Letter from the Universal House of Justice, Ridván 1996, to the Bahá’is of the World.

The oneness of humanity is a principle that the world is seeking without knowing it—the “monarch of all aspirations.”⁹ Authoritative Bahá’í texts and statements of Bahá’í institutions address many contemporary issues and how they require global solutions. Supplementing the presentation of Bahá’í concepts of unity with models and examples of unity can also greatly enhance an Internet outreach effort. For instance, spotlighting social and economic development initiatives or the activities of youth engaged in service can be a compelling way to share information, stories and experiences to inquirers around the world. We live in an age when many Bahá’í ideals or perspectives are viewed as naïve or utopian. Concrete examples can infuse these ideals with meaning and demonstrate the practicality of the Bahá’í approach to social betterment.

Equality of Women and Men

The concept of the equality between the sexes is so well accepted in popular discourse that, in the main, it has become a basic axiom of social existence. Of course, that does not mean that equality has been achieved. Visitors to a Bahá’í-inspired site or blog will observe the subtle clues that demonstrate the Bahá’í commitment to this principle. We should make sure that not only do our photos of the Bahá’í community have a balance of genders, but men and women are shown in comparable roles. In addition, interactive mediums should, wherever possible, adequately give voice to the perspectives of both sexes.

Consultation

One of the hallmarks of the Internet is that user participation is welcomed and is even a source of value. In fact, the Internet standards that make the Internet technically possible are the result of consultation.

There are many forms of consultation that can be applied to Bahá’í Internet initiatives. Some web sites and blogs will be more amenable to consultative exchange than others. Providing mechanisms of interaction with visitors will add a dynamic element to a site or blog, and can more effectively remove obstacles in recognizing the station of Bahá’u’lláh. It is also desirable to look for ways to incorporate consultation into the design and content creation processes for new web sites.

Service to Humanity

Given that service to others is the primary goal of any Bahá’í activity, the question of how Internet sites can maximize their service to society is very relevant to design and content creation. The essential question to ask is what are the needs or interests of the audience we wish to serve?

Service can take many forms. Having the information that people want and making it clear how to find it are perhaps the most important things that sites can provide. In addition to the existence of information we must consider how people can access it. Are

⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 288.

we putting unnecessary barriers between the user and the content they want to have? Is the content in the form that the user would prefer?

While Bahá'í sites should not be solely defined by what our visitors want, we should take into consideration why they are coming. Certainly not all visitors are the same. Some visitors will represent the media. They may have no personal interest in the Faith other than to write a story on it as part of their work. Others may come out of a profound inclination to find meaning. We want to serve as many audiences as possible, and when a trade-off is required, we should prioritize the potential benefits.

Independent Search for Truth

The precept of the independent search for truth offers a distinctive point of departure for our Internet efforts. Most religiously oriented web sites and blogs inform the visitor what the truth is according to their doctrines. Exposing inquirers to concepts such as progressive revelation and unity in diversity and that we are there to help them find truth could lead to a transformative experience. While talking about this principle is important, helping the user to carry out their search is equally important. If you are able, provide supporting information in addition to a summary. The Internet has the advantageous characteristic of being able to provide both breadth and depth. Users can choose to read summarized information or can decide to dig deeper into primary sources. One way to do this is to provide links to sources of information on which your site's content may be based. Perhaps most important of all is to give easy and ready access to the Word of God. Any type of presentation whether in the format of text, audio or video should strive to incorporate verses from the Bahá'í Writings.

Harmony of Science and Religion

The principle of the unity of science and religion is a thematic area where the Faith can contribute much to contemporary dialogues. Showing how rational methods and spiritual values can work in concert to address social challenges can potentially highlight a range of distinct Bahá'í approaches to problem solving. The Bahá'í teachings offer perspectives and insights that undoubtedly will be regarded as novel by many and that can be used as a means of attraction. The design of Bahá'í sites and blogs should also endeavor to highlight the intimate connection between the powers of the human spirit and the application of knowledge.

Non-involvement in Political Matters

It is important to recognize that virtually all social issues can be viewed through a political lens or perspective. Comments relating to contemporary social questions can be easily misconstrued by readers as being either supportive or critical of particular political ideologies or interests. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi underscores this point:

“By the principle of non-interference in political matters we should not mean that only corrupt politics and partial and sectarian politics are to be avoided. But that any pronouncement on any current system of politics connected with any government must be shunned. We should not only take side with no political party, group or system actually in use, but we should also refuse to commit ourselves to any statement which may be interpreted as being sympathetic or antagonistic to any existing political organization or philosophy.”¹⁰

Hence, while sharing insights from the Bahá'í teachings concerning the advancement of society, it is best to focus on relevant spiritual principles and practices that can impact processes of social transformation. Even then, we may still have to make it clear that our views represent a multifaceted understanding of social change and not an endorsement of any external group's position. As always, reliance on quotations from the Writings will serve to underscore the essential spiritual perspective being offered by the Faith.

Taking Action

One of the key features of the new participation paradigm is a focus on process as well as outcomes. Adhering to key Bahá'í principles will ensure that our Internet initiatives will combine the necessary features of flexibility, creativity and respect for the Internet user.

This document is intended to provide concepts for constructing a viable process of Internet participation. The Bahá'í Internet Agency also has developed materials addressing the use of various technologies. These documents will be augmented and revised as the need arises. They may be found at: www.bcca.org/bia.

¹⁰ From a letter dated 2 March 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer.