Blogging and the Bahá'í Faith: Suggestions and Possible Approaches

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Introduction

The phenomenon of Internet blogging has dramatically expanded over the past few years. Approximately fifteen thousand blogs are started every day. The Bahá'í Faith has well-established and high-quality representation on the Internet in the category of web sites, but is only now beginning to develop a substantive presence in the blog domain. The realm of Internet blogging offers opportunities and challenges to the Bahá'í community. This document provides suggestions to individuals and institutions interested in creating and sustaining a blog presence related to the Bahá'í Faith.

Blogging and the Five Year Plan

The remarkable growth of the "blogosphere"—an arena primarily for individual initiative—offers opportunities to explore Bahá'í teachings and Bahá'í community activity through a personal lens that has previously not been available. Because of its unique interactive aspects, blogging opens new avenues for sharing the message of Bahá'u'lláh. The networking phenomenon associated with blogs allows for information to reach potentially large numbers of like-minded people.

In some respects, individual blogging mirrors in the Internet space the "friends, family, neighbors and co-workers" approach of the core activities now at the heart of Bahá'í community expansion and development. It is a grassroots participatory undertaking. Even if only a handful of friends and acquaintances read one's blog, that blog can serve as an instrument to draw that particular "community of interest" to the Revelation and to Bahá'í community activity. Thus, a thousand such small blogs might be just as effective as a few highly visible blogs.

Because the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh provides insight into all areas of human life, the range of possible blog themes is vast—for example, sharing stories and experiences that have spiritual significance; correlation of the Bahá'í teachings with contemporary social challenges; presentation and exploration of the Creative Word; our spiritual purpose and how one's relationship with Bahá'u'lláh allows one to navigate the challenges of life; basic beliefs of the Faith; community and family life; artistic expression and Bahá'í identity; the pursuit of moral excellence; the relationship of the Faith with other religions; the Bahá'í vision of the future; the model of the Bahá'í administrative order; defense of the Faith; social action; experiences with core activities, youth year of service, or pioneering, etc.

It is important to recognize the potential synergies between institutional sources of information and the activities of individual bloggers. With a wide and active Bahá'í

presence in the blogosphere, a larger universe of inquirers and seekers can be brought to official Bahá'í sites through links and RSS feeds on blogs maintained by individual believers. Links from individual blogs to bahai.org, news.bahai.org, reference.bahai.org, and public sites of National Assemblies amplify and strengthen the overall Bahá'í presence on the Internet. For this reason, institutional Web activity and individual initiative are complementary in nature.

Finding an Audience

For those friends who wish to create blogs that reach beyond their circle of acquaintances, a number of approaches are possible. Starting a blog is easy, but sustaining a blog directed to a wider audience is not. Unlike web sites, blogs can often be developed at no expense and with no design work required. But once the blog has been established, continuing work is required.

The key to a successful blog is having something to say that will be of interest to others. For example, if you are interested and knowledgeable about efforts to promote the advancement of women in your country and you believe there are enough people interested in knowing what you know, then a blog will be a viable method of sharing information with your community of interest. A blog is a conversation between the blogger and the audience. If you cannot maintain a fairly regular commitment to the blog, it is perhaps better to look for other avenues of expression, such as posting a few pages of content on your community's web site or teaming up with other individuals wishing to blog.

There are all types of audiences. Sometimes you may want to build a community of participants while at other times you may only want to distribute news about particular events. Some blogs may have a lifespan of years while other blogs may be temporary sites to support a specific event. A blog may stand on its own or can be part of a web site. You may do it by yourself or as part of a team. It is important to determine whether you are communicating as an individual or as a representative of an institution. Regardless of the combination of attributes you select, the key is that you have a fairly clear idea of the intended audience and purpose of the blog.

Determining the existence of an audience is not easy when dealing with a new medium. Just because something is possible does not mean there will be an audience. Perhaps the first question to ask is whether you would be personally interested in the blog. If you cannot see yourself as an eager user of the proposed blog, it is likely that most people will feel equally unmotivated. Have you seen a demand for the service that the blog would represent or the ideas that it would explore? Are people emailing you asking for more information? Often a narrative exploring some experience in one's life can be compelling to readers, but only experimentation will reveal whether a theme area is of general interest. Increasingly, a common approach to blogging is organic in character: inviting your friends and acquaintances to read and react to your posts and then gradually expanding your community of interest.

Possible Blogs/Podcasts

The following is a list of some possible forms of blogs and podcasts. A podcast is the audio version of a blog. There are also video podcasts or vlogs. Video can enhance your content, but addition of video will increase the technical hurdles.

- Community events blog
- Topical blog – a topic with which you have expertise or interest
- Interview blog/podcast – interviewing Bahá'ís having engaging stories or perspectives to share can be particularly effective.
- Public talks/events/performances podcast or video podcast
- Audio books podcast – making available extracts from the Bahá'í Writings or secondary Bahá'í literature
- Selected readings or prayers podcasts
- Online course. A blog might cover a book chapter at a time or a podcast might present a lecture on a topic. This is like the topical blog, but it has an instructional purpose and may be integrated with online materials.
- Music podcast. Interview musicians and play some of their music. Be sure to get permission to use their music.
- Personal blog. A personal blog from a youth on a year of service may be inspiring to other youth or a blog outlining one's efforts to promote moral education among children in your community may be of interest to other parents.

Blog Placement

Blogs tend to be either on their own or part of a web site. If you or your community have a web site, there are many good reasons to create the blog as part of the web site (e.g., taking advantage of a web site's existing readership). A blog's simplicity is also its weakness. A blog is essentially a series of chronological entries that get automatically archived every month or so. This ever-downward scrolling of information off the screen can be inconvenient to the reader if some forms of information are intended to be static. Static information is best presented via a web site.

In a virtual world, physical location means very little. The address of a blog is its name. Most free blogs expect that your blog's name include the service provider's name. For example: XYZ.blogger.com and XYZ.typepad.com. If your blog is going to be part of a currently existing web site, the name will follow the name of the web site. If you don't have an existing domain name and don't want to use a commercial site's name, you can buy your own domain name. In general, individuals probably don't want to spend money for domain names whereas institutions will probably want to maintain a consistent public image by using their own domain name.

Promoting the Blog

Some blogs need no promotion while others are totally dependant on it. A blog intended to list community events can easily be promoted at the next Feast. Reaching a public audience is more difficult.

The first step is to let people know you have a blog. Word-of-mouth from interested people is a very powerful means to promote a blog. Enter terms such as "promote," "advertise," "list," "blog" and your community's name into Google. The results should provide a number of useful links to information for promoting your blog. Listing your blog with Technorati.com, Google.com, and other search tools is an important step, but you may find topical lists or local web sites that could be just as meaningful.

Before you start, explore blogs with similar interests. Searching for relevant terms at Technorati.com or Blogger.com is an excellent way to see what others are doing. First, you will get a feel for what works and what does not. Second, you may want to ask for a cross-link with a related site or a mention in the blog by the author. A referral by a popular blog can put your blog on the map almost instantly. Of course, you need to be ready. Don't ask for a referral while your site has one or two postings. Having one or two postings is like having a web site with "under construction" and "coming soon" messages everywhere. Make sure your site is at its best before asking the public to come in for inspection, especially if you wish to reach out to a large general audience.

Participation in on-line discussion forums, contributing content to popular web sites or posting comments to other relevant blogs can also be an effective means for inviting individuals to your blog. Frequently, a network of blogs on particular topics cross-link to each other. Having other bloggers include you in their network can greatly increase the visibility of your blog. Seeking out promising forums allows one to connect with others who may be receptive to the Faith—for example, sites or lists addressing social issues, parenting, culture, or religious themes.

Getting Feedback

There are a number of systems that can record voluminous amounts of information about the people who visit your blog. One of the best systems is Google Analytics. These systems can generate reports that show how many people visit your site, where they come from, what search words they used to find your site, and how long they stayed. This information can be very useful in identifying your audience and their specific interests.

One of the weaknesses of a blog reporting tool is that it does not measure the true exposure of your site. The reason for this is because a blogs are often accessed via RSS (Really Simple Syndication). Once the user has subscribed to your blog, their RSS reader will download new posting automatically. The user may not visit your blog site directly ever again. So your most dedicated audience may not be represented in your web logs.

Everything a computer does is recordable in one form or another. If you control the server, it should be possible to see who is downloading your postings via RSS. In the future, blogging systems will probably record all forms of access.

One way to know what your readers like is to allow them the ability to leave comments. There can be downsides to allowing comments. Visitors can post negative or offensive comments just as easily as constructive comments. Another issue of concern is blog-spam. Spammers will go on your site and leave messages like "loved your site and keep up the good work LINK". The link is what they want to put on your site because it can help them with their rankings on search engines. There are methods to limiting spam by asking for registration or by moderating the postings before allowing them to be posted. These steps may lessen your reader's willingness to post a comment. As an alternative, you can ask to be notified when a new comment has been posted. If you don't like the posting, you can delete it.

Ask people you know to review your site. While you may be the best judge of what your site is supposed to be about, you are not necessarily a good judge of how well the site is achieving the goal.

So that the general public and other Bahá'ís can find your blog, consider listing your site with Technorati.com or Blogger.com. In addition to the obvious tag of "Baha'i" or "Bahai", you also might consider using one or more of the following tags. Please note that the term "Baha'i" is without diacriticals (accent marks).

- **Baha'i belief** – covers the range of questions relating to basic Bahá'í beliefs
- **Baha'i personal** – personal experiences as a Bahá'í
- **Baha'i community** –covers the activities of a community
- **Baha'i social-economic development** – covers SED projects or discusses the principles underlying SED work
- **Baha'i spirituality** – discusses spiritual topics.
- **Baha'i apologia** – defends the Faith or explains Bahá'í positions
- **Baha'i youth** – personal experiences and/or life as a youth year of service volunteer

You should also list these terms without the term "Baha'i" so that they can be found by the general public, but if you do not use the term Baha'i, it will be difficult to find your site using a highly used term. For example, a Baha'i youth year of service volunteer wishing to cover an SED health project in Costa Rica would use the following tags: Baha'i, Baha'i youth, Baha'i socio-economic development, socio-economic development, health, and Costa Rica. There is no harm in using more tags, if they apply to the content on your blog.

Podcasting

Podcasting and the related video podcasting bring with them significant technical requirements. Video is great if your content requires something to be shown visually. Performances or content that is heavily oriented towards the visual are compelling reasons to use video. Talks, music, and other audio-heavy content probably should not use video. Video greatly increases the file sizes the user has to download. Furthermore,

audio content has the great advantage of being useful while driving a car or engaged in some other routine task. Many people have an abundance of time that could be used for audio.

Multimedia presented over the Internet always involves a trade-off between quality and delivery time. As the quality of a file increases, so does the file size. As the file size increases, so does the length of time it takes for the user to download it. The production and distribution of podcasts may require expert help and some amount of funding. For more on podcasting see "Podcasting: A Technical Primer."

The First Steps

When contemplating the creation of a new blog or podcast, it is perhaps best to start simple and through a gradual process of experimentation and feedback, develop areas of thematic focus that appeal to particular audiences. As with the global plan of the Faith itself, identifying and utilizing the opportunities afforded by the Internet is an ongoing process of learning and adaptation. Such an approach will surely provide a variety of means for proclaiming the truths, defending the interests, and demonstrating the "indispensability," "potency," and "universality" of the Bahá'í Revelation.

For additional information or advice, the Bahá'í Internet Agency can be reached at: info@bia.bahai.org.