

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

9 October 2015

[To a National Spiritual Assembly]

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

... As you know, technological advancement is integral to the emergence of a global civilization. Indeed, the Internet is a manifestation of a development anticipated by the Guardian when, in describing the characteristics of a unified humanity, he foresaw that a “mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity.” Yet, learning to utilize the Internet in a manner conducive to material and spiritual progress is an immense challenge.

The Internet makes it possible for Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired content to become accessible to a wide audience. In this connection, the House of Justice has encouraged the strengthening of the official Bahá'í presence on the World Wide Web, and it has been pleased to see the many advances made, especially in recent years, and looks forward to the further unfoldment of this process. Beyond that, many believers around the world, each according to his or her circumstances and in coherence with other endeavours of the community, use the Internet as a medium for promoting Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order, and it is natural for the friends to explore different ways to do so. However, given that the Internet allows for the instantaneous dissemination of content among growing multitudes, wisdom and self-discipline are required lest the significance or dignity of the Teachings become compromised by an unbecoming, inaccurate, or trivialized presentation.

A related consideration is that the institutions of the Faith are charged with the responsibility for creating and maintaining official sources of information about the Faith, such as national and international websites, regularly assessing the presentation of the Faith on the World Wide Web and providing the necessary guidance to individuals. The friends are generally free to determine what aspects of the Teachings they wish to touch upon in their contributions but in doing so should clearly distinguish their sites from those created by the institutions. This can be accomplished through a variety of means, including the name, description, or design of a site. While in the past the friends have at times been encouraged to refrain from using the word “Bahá'í”, or forms of it, in the name of their websites, experience has demonstrated that this may not always be necessary if other aspects of the site unmistakably identify it as an individual initiative. In addition, individuals will no doubt wish to avoid a tone that could be perceived as authoritative or instructional. They will also want to steer away from areas that lie exclusively within the sphere of institutional responsibility, such as offering a comprehensive collection of the writings and of the messages of the House of Justice or an exhaustive calendar of Bahá'í events across many countries. This becomes particularly significant when the visibility of a website increases and it gains prominence. As the institutions guide the friends in adopting the proper posture, the aim is not to unduly restrict their efforts but to avoid confusion and misinformation.

Notwithstanding that a site may, of course, be accessed from any part of the world, a Bahá'í who seeks to establish a personal site should determine what would be an appropriate audience to address and the scope of subjects to be covered. For example, while it may be beneficial to reflect on the nature and form of the core activities, especially in the context of the experience of a cluster or region, certain problems arise in attempting to create a site that aims to speak to Bahá'ís worldwide about the subject. Such an approach could lead to the cultural norms and values of a particular population being promoted to a universal audience—a pattern all too prevalent in

the world today. There is also the danger of exerting an unintended influence on the process of learning unfolding at the grassroots, where individuals, communities, and institutions are acting as protagonists of their own growth and development. The perspectives offered in the following extract from the message dated 12 December 2011 from the House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies—although in the specific context of artistic endeavours and supplementary educational materials—are especially relevant to aspects of culture mentioned above:

Propelled by forces generated both within and outside the Bahá'í community, the peoples of the earth can be seen to be moving from divergent directions, closer and closer to one another, towards what will be a world civilization so stupendous in character that it would be futile for us to attempt to imagine it today. As this centripetal movement of populations accelerates across the globe, some elements in every culture, not in accord with the teachings of the Faith, will gradually fall away, while others will be reinforced. By the same token, new elements of culture will evolve over time as people hailing from every human group, inspired by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, give expression to patterns of thought and action engendered by His teachings, in part through artistic and literary works.... We long to see, for instance, the emergence of captivating songs from every part of the world, in every language, that will impress upon the consciousness of the young the profound concepts enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings. Yet such an efflorescence of creative thought will fail to materialize, should the friends fall, however inadvertently, into patterns prevalent in the world that give licence to those with financial resources to impose their cultural perspective on others, inundating them with materials and products aggressively promoted.

An overarching principle which should guide the efforts of the friends in their communications on the Internet pertains to the use of language. Bahá'u'lláh refers to human utterance as “an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation”, and He enjoins His followers to “speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility.” The House of Justice in its letter dated 29 December 1988 to the Bahá'ís in the United States observed: “Speech is a powerful phenomenon. Its freedom is both to be extolled and feared. It calls for an acute exercise of judgement, since both the limitation of speech and the excess of it can lead to dire consequences.” With this in mind, Bahá'ís should embody moderation, courtesy, and humility in any discussion in which they take part—whether in person or online. They should recognize and transcend negative habits of thought and expression absorbed from society, often unconsciously, and be on their guard lest they acquire the tendency to reduce the Faith or the processes of the Divine Plan into a simplistic or prescriptive set of points or steps, often conveyed in an unjustifiably authoritative or irreverent tone, or presume to speak with a voice that appears more representative than it can ever be. In this regard, those managing various sites will need to give thought to their own underlying attitudes that may be conveyed through content and manner of expression. In striving for such heightened consciousness, questions to be reflected upon may, for instance, include: How will they avoid the unthinking adoption of fads prevalent online that may undermine their purpose? Is the type of humour employed appropriate? How will the content be perceived by someone who is not familiar with the Faith? As they aspire to achieve the Bahá'í standard, the friends should endeavour to rise above, rather than emulate, widely employed techniques of persuasion and sensationalism, which are often reductive or crass, and must always remain conscious that they are striving for “an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race”.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat