Understanding Online Social Networks

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The Internet is dramatically reshaping patterns of communication and information sharing at the personal, professional and social level. Innovative services and platforms are giving rise to new forms of collaboration, social outreach and creative expression. These online communities of interaction are typically global in nature, providing unique opportunities to share Bahá'í perspectives and experiences in a manner "freed from national hindrances and restrictions."[1]

Peace and well-being, the Bahá'í Writings indicate, can only be attained through the involvement of all members of the human family in true cooperative action. It is evident that Internet technologies are increasingly serving to empower and engage the peoples of the world in such collective activity. As the Bahá'í International Community has noted:

> …the human race is now endowed with the means needed to realize the visionary goals summoned up by a steadily maturing consciousness. Viewed more deeply, this empowerment is potentially available to all of the earth's inhabitants, without regard to race, culture, or nation.[2]

In this respect, the Internet appears to be effecting profound changes in human relationships—relationships encompassing individuals, families, the workplace, public institutions, and even international affairs. This phenomenon illustrates how "revolutions in science and technology change not only the functioning but the conception of society, indeed of existence itself."[3]

The emergence of online social networks is perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of the Internet. These social networks are also sometimes referred to as "virtual communities," "online groups," or "Internet networks." This document looks at what online social networks are and how Bahá'ís can constructively and safely use them.

An online social network is any form of community created by an Internet-based computer system. The key element is that some sort of community or nominal association is being established. In some cases, such as Facebook, MySpace, Orkut, Hi5, LinkedIn, Twitter and Ning, the creation of communities is a central objective. For cooperative enterprises such as Wikipedia and virtual environments like Second Life, communities of interaction naturally develop as contributors strive toward a common goal. These diverse participatory spaces provide mechanisms of connection and

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[1] Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), p. 203.
[2] Bahá'í International Community, "Who is Writing the Future? Reflections on the Twentieth Century," February 1999.
[3] *One Common Faith*, Bahá'í World Centre, 2005, p. 15.

information exchange among individuals and groups, associations which can enhance the social skills, resources and self-expression of network participants. Affiliations can emerge from shared interests pertaining to almost any area of human endeavor, but in many circumstances simply complement or deepen existing offline relationships.[4] From cooperative multimedia production across time zones to collaborative indexing of information[5] to "massively multiplayer" gaming[6], social networking is becoming a remarkable channel of human ingenuity and collective action.

The complexity, scope and reach of various online social networks are striking. In a period of a few years, hundreds of millions of people around the globe have joined such networks and become regular contributors.[7] This exceptional rate of growth and innovation suggests "that social networking is not a fad but rather an activity that is being woven into the very fabric of the global Internet."[8]

The opportunities for Bahá'ís to use online social networks to strengthen and extend patterns of collaboration within the Bahá'í community, and to reach out to others with the message of Bahá'u'lláh, are virtually limitless.[9] As with all Bahá'í undertakings, though, a spirit of learning by doing and boldness should be balanced with forethought and wisdom when using these online tools. The Internet is something of a proto-global community. It is both familiar and novel at the same time. The types of interactions one may have are similarly traditional and new. Combining common sense with reliance on Bahá'í principles is essential to effective participation.

Online social networks in some ways resemble the social networks formed through face-to-face relationships and voluntary associations, such as business and humanitarian organizations, clubs, and schools. Like their real-world counterparts, online networks are able to engender a sense of community and shared identity, foster new personal bonds,

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[4] A recent study sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation found that online youth activity falls into two principal categories: "friendship-driven and interest-driven." Most youth use new digital media to extend friendships that originate in school, sports or other activities. A smaller percentage use "the online world to explore interests and find information that goes beyond what they have access to at school or in their local community." Each of these types of activity plays a role in social learning, youth identity formation and in reshaping social norms—for example, in transforming the meaning of "friend" and "friendship." See "New Study Shows Time Spent Online Important for Teen Development," November 20, 2008, www.macfound.org.

[5] An example of social indexing of information is found at www.delicious.com.

[6] This form of gaming allows players to cooperate and compete with each other on a large scale, and often involves meaningful social engagement with individuals around the globe. More generally, a US survey found that gaming of all types is "is a ubiquitous part of life for both boys and girls," and is characterized by "significant social interaction." http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/263/report_display.asp

[7] Major growth in use of online social networks is occurring in Asia, Latin America, Europe and North America. As an indication of their widespread popularity, one recent analysis reported that 38% of all Internet users in the United States, or 72 million people, used social networks at least once a month in 2007. Among 18-34 year olds, 25% visit social networks daily and, among 9-17 year olds, 55% spent between 5 and 30 hours per week on social networking sites: adwords.google.com/select/afc/socialnetworks.html

[8] ComScore, 31 July 2007, http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=1555

[9] On popular social networking sites, creative outreach initiatives by individual Bahá'ís can be found by searching for pertinent terms relating to the Faith.

exert social and moral influence, and promote mutual goals and interests. However, online social networks have several distinguishing features:

- Online social networks can be composed of far larger numbers of individuals than possible with face-to-face interactions;
- Communications between individuals are often digitally recorded for an indeterminate amount of time and may be open to others to view; and,
- Online social networks often provide more factual information about an individual than would a casual face-to-face relationship while at the same time generally providing less contextual information (e.g., vocal cues, body language, and facial expressions).

The unfamiliarity of participating in an online setting can be quite challenging. A key point to remember is that regardless of how novel or complex a social network may be, the root of everything is interaction among human beings. It can be easy to forget this fundamental characteristic of online environments, especially when the other person is known only by an imaginative pseudonym or a set of initials followed by a number.

There are two main types of online social networks: those in which members know one another directly or through friends; and those which are comprised of unknown individuals coming from diverse geographic locations and backgrounds. Often participants do not fully internalize this distinction and, due to the informal and immediate quality of the medium, will treat unknown individuals as if they were close acquaintances, unwisely extending trust or exposing more information about themselves than is advisable. Thus, while interacting with all "in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship," prudence and good judgment should be observed.[10]

In particular, youth and junior youth should be encouraged to exercise wisdom with respect to information posted in personal profiles; caution should be exercised in accepting invitations from unfamiliar names[11] or joining groups that one is not certain about; postings and other content should be consistent with standards of dignity and accuracy, as youth are representatives of the Faith;[12] and advice from Bahá'í institutions should be sought concerning protection matters or inquiries from individuals residing in sensitive countries. In the case of children, parents need to exercise special vigilance with regard to social networking spaces.[13]

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[10] *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 289, (section CXXXII).

[11] On major sites such as Facebook, one can quickly become "friends" with hundreds of people and thus discretion is necessary in accepting invitations in this open networking environment.

[12] Personal pages, "wall postings," and profiles created by Bahá'ís should, like other aspects of life, exhibit "moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and artistic and literary avocations." Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), p. 30.

[13] Some practical safety precautions for parents include advising children never to give out personal information such as one's real name, age, location, phone number or school; never to share one's password so that personal data in the account can be accessed or the account misused; immediately to report any interactions that make them uncomfortable or involve requests for personal information; and only to

As we use online social networks to form new friendships, share insights from the Bahá'í teachings or advance the interests of the Faith, our discourse and behavior, the photographs we post, and the profiles we create about ourselves should reflect the distinguishing spiritual qualities that animate all Bahá'í endeavor. 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides a vision for Bahá'ís visiting a new city—guidance that pertains equally well to online social environments:

> Should any one of you enter a city, he should become a center of attraction by reason of his sincerity, his faithfulness and love, his honesty and fidelity, his truthfulness and loving-kindness towards all the peoples of the world, so that the people of that city may cry out and say: "This man is unquestionably a Bahá'í, for his manners, his behavior, his conduct, his morals, his nature, and disposition reflect the attributes of the Bahá'ís."[14]

Online social networks offer fresh avenues for mobilizing "the talents and abilities of the rank and file of the believers" in conveying the spark of faith to a growing number seekers and inquirers.[15] If utilized in a sensible and balanced manner, these online services can provide dynamic new ways of presenting the ideals and compelling verities of the Bahá'í Revelation.

Further resource materials designed to assist Bahá'ís in understanding and using the Internet can be found at: www.bcca.org/bia.

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participate in chat rooms or other spaces for children that are monitored by adult moderators. Parents should discuss on an ongoing basis the types of sites that children may visit.

[14] *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), p. 71.

[15] Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1947), p. 79.