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Bounded Religious Communities' Management of the Challenge of New Media: Baha'í Negotiation with the Internet

The negotiation of new forms of media by religious groups is a dynamic and complex process that involves decision-making engaging the history, tradition and beliefs of the community. This negotiation process is especially complex for bounded religious communities, which establish rigid social and value-laden boundaries allowing them to create and maintain a unique and separate cultural system. Observing how members of bounded religious communities interact with the Internet enables us to consider how some groups resist the fluidity of networked relations and instead use technology to maintain closed social structures and solidify their unique identities. This is clearly seen in the case of the Bahá'í faith, especially in the patterns of use and limits American Bahá'ís have developed to engage with the Internet. By using the Religious Social Shaping of Technology approach, developed by Campbell (2010), as a lens to explore the challenges and choices made by the Bahá'ís, this process of technological negotiation is unpacked.

1 Bounded religious community and new media

Bounded community is a term used to describe groups who live within a fixed geographic region and/or possess strict ideological boundaries limiting their engagement with outside groups. It has also been used to as a way to discuss tensions that arise between groups attempting to maintain tight identity structures in light of the increasingly permeable social boundaries of a networked society. Describing a group as a bounded community can be challenging. In one sense all communities are bounded, in that all communities possess certain boundaries related to their quintessential characteristics, such as membership, identity or locality. In the 1980s, identifying a group as a bounded community within the sociology of community studies became a way to distinguish traditional communities constrained by geography and familial small-scale relations with more contemporary notions of community as a network of social relations where boundaries are permeable (Wellman 1979; 1988). It also draws on the notion that all communities are symbolically constructed, and their identity formation and presentation is based on varying degrees of boundary maintenance in

order to maintain the desired continuity of community (Cohen 1965). Bounded communities thus become a way to talk about certain normative inclinations of groups, such as constraints forming the basis for identity construction, organization and control of people, materials and territories (Linklater 1988: 133).

The notion of a bounded community is important when considering certain forms of religious community. It is useful as it denotes those religious groups which seek to live within a constrained social and cultural system that seeks to resist the forces and patterns of life within modern networked society. In this chapter the concept of the bounded community draws attention to the fact that some religious groups actively seek to mark out and protect their identities in a cultural milieu that encourages fluidity of identity and relations over static and controlled ones.

Researchers have found that the ambiguity and fluidity of postmodern culture encourages the creation of hybrid or blended cultural spaces among many groups that were traditionally tightly-knit groups, such as ethnic minorities (e.g., Waldinger 2007). This ambiguity is accentuated by the social affordances of digital technology that can make it difficult to retain a cohesive identity structure. Increasingly, religious community leaders struggle to monitor the practices and interactions of their members with external sources, as the Internet can make it easier for members to bypass traditional gatekeepers and channels of control (Livio and Teneboim 2007). This struggle raises provocative questions about how new media technologies such as the Internet are impacting community authority and power relations, especially conservative and fundamentalist groups' negotiation with the Internet (Howard 2000; Shandler 2009). In order to carefully consider how bounded communities negotiate new media usage we turn to the social shaping of technology, which we argue provides a clear frame for studying this phenomenon.

2 The social shaping of technology as a frame for understanding media appropriation

One way to approach how bounded communities negotiate their use of new media technologies is through the lens of the social shaping of technology. This approach frames technology as a product of the interplay between different technical and social factors in both design and use (MacKenzie and Wajcman 2001). Technology use and creation is seen as a social process. Social groups shape technologies towards their own ends rather than the character of a technology determining its use and outcomes. Scholars taking this approach exam-

ine how social processes within a particular group influence user negotiations with different technologies. It acknowledges that groups employ a given technology in distinctive ways, so a group's technology use is unique, and their appropriation reinforces valued patterns of community life or practice.

In order to understand how religious communities and individuals negotiate their choices related to new forms of media technology, it is necessary to study these groups' choices in relation to religious norms and social factors which guide their technological decision-making. This is referred to as the religious-social shaping of technology approach, which attempts to give an account of the specific conditions influencing a community of users' negotiations with a technology that can lead to changes in use or belief within a given social context. It also attempts to explain responses to new technology in socio-technological terms. In other words, the success, failure or redesign of a given technology by a specific group of users is based not simply on the innate qualities of the technology but on the ability of users to socially construct the technology in line with the moral economy of the user community or context. It recognises that individuals and groups of actors within particular social situations see their choices and options constrained by broader structural elements of their worldview and belief system.

3 The religious-social shaping of technology approach to media

Based on extensive online and offline ethnographic research regarding how various religious user communities engage media technology, it has been observed that religious communities typically do not reject new forms of technology outright, even if the communities they come from are highly bounded or controlled groupings. Rather, they undergo a sophisticated negotiation process to determine what effect technology may have on their community. If a religious community sees a new technology as valuable but notes its use may promote beliefs or behaviours that run counter to their community's values, the group must carefully consider what aspects of that technology must be resisted. This resistance often leads to the reconstruction of the technology regarding either how it is used or discussed within the community. It may even lead to innovation, where technical aspects or structures are modified so that they are more in line with the community's social and religious life. The religious-social shaping of technology approach is offered as a way to investigate and analyse the practical and ideological negotiation process these communities undergo. This ap-

proach is outlined in detail in the text *When Religion Meets New Media* (Campbell 2010) and involves scholars employing four levels of examination in relation to the specific group being studied: (1) the history and tradition of the community, (2) its core beliefs and patterns related to media, (3) the specific negotiation processes it undergoes with a new technology, and finally (4) the communal framing and discourses created by them, which are used to define and justify the extent of their technology use and the way they will or will not engage certain media. Together, these form the basis of the religious-social shaping of technology theoretical approach to the study of religious communities' use of media, which is described below.

As suggested, taking a religious-social shaping of technology approach begins with studying the *history and tradition* of a given religious community in relation to their media use. Here, researchers start by carefully considering the historical context of the specific religious community under study to see how a religious community's positions toward and use of different media have emerged over time and what decisions or events in the community history might have shaped these decisions. It is important to note that decisions made regarding texts, one of the earliest forms of media, often serve as a template for future negotiation with other media. In this phase of study, researchers should pay attention to how history and tradition form standards and a trajectory for future media negotiations.

This leads to investigating religious communities' *core beliefs and patterns*, where attention is paid to how these specific communities live out their core social values. It is important to note that while beliefs are often derived from a historically grounded tradition, they must always be contextualised and applied anew to the social, cultural and historic context in which a given community finds itself. Researchers should identify how a community's dominant social and religious values are integrated into patterns of contemporary life and how these might influence their interactions with contemporary technologies. In an age of digital technologies, close attention must be paid to how core beliefs guide communal decision-making processes related to media use and what patterns of use this encourages and discourages.

These two areas set the stage for the study of the *negotiation process* that religious communities undergo when faced with a new form of media. Religious communities must consider in what respect the new form of media mirrors past technologies so that old rules can be applied. If qualities, outcomes or social conditions created by the technology are problematic in any way for the group, the community must enter into a rigorous negotiation process to see what aspects of the technology can be accepted and which ones might need to be rejected or reconstructed.

Innovation takes place if a technology is viewed as valuable but possesses problematic qualities requiring it to be altered in order to be more in line with community beliefs and practices. Researchers consider how the previous phases inform a community's choices and responses to the new technology when considering the ways in which a new technology is accepted, rejected and/or reconstructed. Key to this stage is the community's positions towards authority roles and structures, which can indicate who has the right to govern media decision-making processes and involvement in innovation.

Finally, attention must be paid to *communal framing and discourse* resulting from the adoption of the new media form. This is a stage often overlooked in studies of the social-shaping of technology, yet it plays an important role for religious communities in their internal justification for their approach to new media. Researchers should consider how new technologies may require amendments to previous language about media or how official policies regarding technology are constructed and publicized. The negotiation and adoption of new technologies requires the religious group to create public and private discourses that validate their technology choices in light of established community boundaries, values and identities. The communal discourse can also serve as tool for reaffirming traditions and past standards as well as for setting a new trajectory for the future use or negotiation of technology. Thus, it is important for researchers to pay attention to the language used by a religious community to frame technology and prescribe communal use. Together, these four levels of inquiry make up the religious-social shaping of technology approach to show how multiple social and structural processes influence religious groups' responses to new media.

4 Negotiation between the Baha'i faith and the Internet

Investigating the American Bahá'í community shows the complex process religious groups undergo in their negotiations with new forms of media. This examination of their history, tradition, core beliefs and reactions to older forms of media provides a clear basis for understanding this religious group's current response to the Internet.

4.1 History and tradition

The negotiation of new forms of media by religious groups is a dynamic and complex process that begins with reflection on the religious history, tradition and beliefs of the group. In the case of the Bahá'í faith, it is important to consider how this history has directly affected the negotiation process that practicing Bahá'ís in America have with the Internet. The Bábí movement began in 1844 in the city of Shiraz, located in south-western Iran. In this year, Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad declared having had 'some sort of extraordinary relationship with the Hidden Imam' (Cole 1990: 3). The Hidden Imam, or Mahdi, is believed to be the redeemer or messiah by Shi'a Muslims and is believed to help restore order and peace to the world. Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad, also known as the Báb, was seen as a divine messenger (similar to Moses, Muhammad, Jesus, etc.) by his followers and remains the central figure of the Bahá'í faith. According to Cole, members of the Bábí movement believed the Báb was 'the return of the Imam Mahdi himself, and he asserted that divine inspiration led him to reveal a new holy book abrogating the Quran' (1990: 3). The belief that the Báb was the manifestation of the Hidden Imam to return and their 'abrogation' of the Qur'an were problematic to many practising Muslims and led to the persecution of the individuals associated with the Bábí movement in the nineteenth century. According to Adam Berry (2004: 1), the Bábí movement was met with much resistance, as shown by the execution of the Báb in 1850. Further proof of persecution can be seen by the number of followers killed between 1849 and the mid-1850s. Around 5,000 followers were killed during that period, in which the adherents to the movement numbered 100,000 (Cole 1990: 3). After the death of the Báb, Mirza Husayn 'Ali, the successor of the Báb, adopted the Bahá'í name in an attempt to unify the members and survive persecution in Iran. Not only would this history of persecution affect the way Bahá'ís view media, it would also help shape the faith's core beliefs and where these beliefs would be practised.

In an attempt to escape the persecution prevalent in Iran, many Bahá'ís moved to new areas in an attempt to practise their religion peacefully. With the idea of the Bahá'í faith symbolising 'threatening aspects of modernity' in Iran, Bahá'ís looked to the western world for new opportunities (Cole 1990: 7). From the 1970s to the mid-1980s, around 12,000 Iranian Bahá'ís emigrated to the US to escape persecution, taking advantage of the religious freedom in America. With this migration of Iranian Bahá'ís, the US Bahá'í community grew from 10,000 to about 48,000 individuals with confirmed addresses, or 'sure members' (Cole 1998: 238). According to Juan Cole, this growth can be explained by 'the impact of the civil rights movements, the Vietnam War, the youth counterculture'

(Cole 1998: 236). Currently, there are around 60,000 practising Bahá'ís in the US,¹ and many rely on the Internet to stay connected to the faith. This idea will be explored in depth in the media use negotiation section.

It is also important to note that, as the Baha'i faith emerged out of Shi'a Islam in Iran, these roots and connections in some respects have informed the faith. Scholars have noted a connection between the Baha'i and the Shiite movements, in that both draw from esoteric and charismatic roots, have a defined hierarchical structure of gatekeepers and represent conservative traditions with a certain degree of secrecy in relation to religious knowledge (Warburg 1999). These tendencies can also be seen in their dealings with the spread of information, both inside and outside the community, and their position toward media, as discussed in the following sections. Before moving on to how members of the Bahá'í faith currently negotiate their relationship with the media, it is vital to address the core beliefs and the religion's relationship to authority. According to the official Bahá'í Website of the United States, the purpose of life is to 'worship God, to acquire virtues, and to promote the oneness of humankind' (2010). These beliefs directly influence the Bahá'ís' relationship with other religions which strive for religious universalism. Furthermore, Bahá'ís advocate for service to humanity while maintaining a peaceful and pacifist nature. In relation to social principles, Bahá'ís desire the equality of men and women, universal education and the abandonment of all forms of prejudice. The final factor that directs how the media is treated by practising Bahá'ís is seen in the administrative order of the Bahá'ís community. The formation of an individual order of adherence to a hierarchy occurred in 1921 after the death of Abbás Effendi, who was the son of the first successor to the Báb (Cole 1990: 3). Examples of how these structure the hierarchy of the Bahá'ís community and inform their view of media are explored in greater detail in the next section.

4.2 Media values and policies

Along with the history and tradition of the Bahá'í faith, the core values directly lead to more unified policies towards the uses of media. In order to achieve such beliefs as religious universalism and universal education, Bahá'ís thought it would be important to make the transition from an individual order to an admin-

¹ According to the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2004), there were an estimated 84,000 adult Bahá'í members. The difference between these figures may be accounted for in the word 'practising' as opposed to membership.

istrative order. An example of an administrative body in the Bahá'í faith is the Universal House of Justice. Established in 1963, the Universal House of Justice has guided and directed the activities of the global Bahá'í community for over 40 years. By educating followers on how to practise and live their faith, the Universal House of Justice determines which activities are permitted based on the laws of Mirza Husayn 'Alí (the first successor of the Báb and founder of the Bahá'í faith).

Even though the core values, beliefs and admiration of the Bahá'í faith are related to the creation of the Universal House of Justice, the preceding history and tradition of the Bahá'í faith have contributed to a strict media trajectory. As mentioned above, many practicing Bahá'ís in Iran experienced heavy persecution for their beliefs. Many viewed the western world as an opportunity to practice their religion in peace and to educate others about the Bahá'í faith. However, along with more rights and freedoms has come criticism of Bahá'í policies by Bahá'í followers in the western world. To counter these criticisms, the Universal House of Justice has increased restrictions of certain types of media usage. For example, through the use of National Spiritual Assemblies, which are located throughout the Bahá'í world, the Universal House of Justice has censored or restricted material published by Bahá'ís. Cole states that the 'National Spiritual Assembly claims the prerogative of telling private Bahá'í publishers what Bahá'í-related books they may or may not publish'. This shows the importance of the core Bahá'í belief of having 'conformity of views and behavior' and how it has been directly challenged by the freedoms shared in the western world (Cole 1998: 244).

In relation to this, the Universal House of Justice has not only produced strict policies on media content but also on individuals who produce media content that challenges existing Bahá'í policies. One of the mechanisms used by the Universal House of Justice to achieve unification and conformity is the threat of labelling someone a 'covenant-breaker'. Basically, a person accused of covenant-breaking has committed a form of heresy and is shunned by the practising community. One who even associates with a covenant-breaker can possibly be shunned and not recognised by the community. This has led to Bahá'ís 'informing' the House of Justice of individuals who undermine its policies. 'The House of Justice encourages Bahá'ís who hear something they think out of the ordinary to challenge the speaker to justify his or her statement with regard to the covenant' (cited in Cole 1998: 244). This directly affects what kind of content can be produced and expressed through the media because of the fear of being labelled a covenant-breaker.

The actions and policies created by the House of Justice reveal how the Bahá'í faith negotiates and teaches the Bahá'í how to use media. Due to the

availability of freedoms in the western world, the House of Justice took strong stances against criticizing opinions expressed in the media. One mechanism addressed above was the use of labelling someone a covenant-breaker and how this has led to an 'informing' culture by practicing Bahá'ís. 'Although Baha'u'llah (or Mirza Husayn 'Ali) himself attempted to abolish the practices of shunning', the House of Justice enforces these policies to achieve the core belief of unification (Cole 1998: 243). The work of the House of Justice also sets standards for media engagement, which guide Bahá'ís' views about and uses of the Internet. This media negotiation is explored in more detail in the third area of investigation.

4.3 Media use negotiation

In order to understand how the history, tradition and core beliefs affect the media use negotiation by the Bahá'í faith, it is important to focus in on a specific community and media. Examining the Bahá'í faith community in America reveals how this specific branch of the Baha'i community negotiates its Internet usage and how this has been informed by the Universal House of Justice. In order to fully understand how the American Community of Bahá'ís use the Internet, it is imperative to examine the Bahá'í Internet Agency. This agency was established in 2004 by the Universal House of Justice, the legislative institution and the highest governing body of the Bahá'í faith, and is under the auspices of its International Teaching Centre. The Bahá'í Internet Agency (BIA) seeks to advise and direct members of the Bahá'í faith on how to properly use the Internet as well as offer assistance to the global community through technical support for Bahá'í institutions and to support community-related online initiatives. The BIA has also written a number of documents that provide members with specific guidance about appropriate Internet use, such as blogging, podcasting and social networking (see BIA n.d.).

Bahá'ís in the United States currently have 'official' pages on Facebook, Twitter, Beliefnet and PeaceNext where they post Bahá'í news as well as links to blogs from various bloggers who discuss Bahá'í themes. The US Bahá'í Office of Communications advocates the use of the Internet, yet this use is encouraged or framed within certain constraints. One key emphasis of this office is to encourage community members to engage with the Internet in ways that affirm the beliefs and structures of the movement. They strongly advocate that members seek information from web sites which are published and maintained by the official organization and engage in dialogue in these contexts:

Baha'is are encouraged to participate in a wide range of Internet initiatives carried out in light of Bahá'í principles such as moderation, courtesy, probity, fairness, dignity, accuracy and wisdom. Promoting mutual understanding, fellowship and a spirit of cooperation among diverse individuals and groups is an essential characteristic of all Bahá'í activity. (US Bahá'í Office of Communications 2010)

A further examination of this agency reveals the restrictions Bahá'í faith members in the US face while using the Internet. The Internet is an essential part of any organisation in America due to the high number of users in this country. As of December 2011, according to the Internet World Statistics (2011), the United States has over 245,000,000 users (with a population penetration of 78.6 %), numerically second only to China (penetration of 38.4 %), with over half-a-billion users.

In order to understand how the Bahá'í Internet Agency has reconfigured the usage of the Internet, it is important to examine which aspects of the Internet are beneficial and which are problematic. One activity that seems to be deemed both beneficial and problematic by the Bahá'í community in the US is the use of blogging. According to the Bahá'í Internet Agency's white paper on 'Blogging and the Bahá'í faith: suggestions and possible approaches' (2006), blogging 'offers opportunities to explore Bahá'í teachings' and 'opens new avenues for sharing the message' of the Bahá'í faith. Furthermore, the Agency advocates that 'individual blogging' allows for a 'community of interest to the Revelation and to Bahá'í community activity'.

However, there are some aspects that the American Bahá'is must reject with regard to blogging, as outlined by the Bahá'í Internet Agency. One of the aspects discouraged for practising Bahá'is is the use of confrontational and negative discussion threads on the Internet. This includes any blog post that is seen to undermine or challenge Bahá'í policies or beliefs, which is to be ignored/deleted. If the blogger who makes negative claims happens to be a practising Bahá'í, he/she can be labelled as a covenant-breaker and shunned by the community. Cole explains that 'threats to use shunning' have increased with 'the rise of cyberspace' (1998: 243). The Internet allows some members to post confidentially so other practising Bahá'is will not know who they are. In response to this, the Universal House of Justice has encourage Bahá'is to 'inform' them of members partaking in these restricted actions. Such moves show how the Universal House of Justice has reconfigured the Internet and encouraged certain actions to achieve the core belief of unification and adherence to the given structure.

Another problematic aspect for followers of the Bahá'í faith that has emerged on the Internet is the use of social networking sites in the US. Although many social networking sites, such as Facebook, attempt to connect people from

around the world, there have been many concerns about the association of Bahá'ís with covenant-breakers. One specific example of this problematic activity is outlined on truebahai.com (Weinberg 2008). According to the website, the Bahá'í Internet Agency sent an e-mail out on 28 February 2008 to alert members to the current activities of a specific covenant-breaker who ran an unauthorized 'Orthodox Bahá'í page on Facebook', which was perceived to be threatening to the 'spiritual well-being' of practising Bahá'í youth members (Weinburg 2008). What is interesting is that simply accepting a friend request from this individual is seen as a community violation, as being in association with a covenant-breaker (see BIA n.d.). Through the Bahá'í Internet Agency, the meaning of a (cyber) friendship on Facebook is redefined to be equivalent to a personal, face-to-face friendship. This demonstrates how the Bahá'í must negotiate with online culture and bring online communication in line with traditional religious practice and expectations of behaviour in order for the technology to fit comfortably within accepted community values.

4.4 Communal discourse

Finally, religious communities often develop policies or guidelines that present their official view or perceptions of the Internet and advocate particular uses. The aim of this communal discourse regarding the Internet is not merely instructive for community members; it also serves as an identity narrative – to affirm the values and boundaries of the community. In the case of the Bahá'í community, the Universal House of Justice serves an important role in policing and offering prescriptive guidelines for media activity and has attempted to encourage certain forms of Internet engagement so that members' use will not undermine Bahá'í policies and beliefs. A notable discourse has been produced through the work of the Bahá'í Internet Agency, who provide information on how to use the Internet through issuing a number of white papers on a variety of issues related to online communication, as noted above.

A key role of the Bahá'í Internet Agency is to circulate official statements about Internet communication issued by the Universal House of Justice. These documents advocate a particular relationship between the Bahá'í community and electronic, digital communication technologies, one which supports core communal values, such as unity in diversity and service to humanity. The Internet is framed as offering the community new opportunities and challenges, such that the published and thus accepted wisdom of their religious leaders should be consulted when making decisions regarding the Internet. As stated in the document 'Guidelines for Internet Communication':

The opportunity which electronic communication technology provides is for more speedy and thorough consultation among friends, and is highly significant. Without doubt, it represents another manifestation of a development eagerly anticipated by the Guardian when he foresaw the creation of 'a mechanism of world intercommunication [...] embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity'. (BIA n.d.)

Official white papers also provide guidance to individual community members seeking to use the Internet to represent their beliefs and the community online. 'Members are to be mindful of how their online activities bear witness to the Bahá'í faith', according to the document 'Individual initiative on the Internet' (2007). It continues:

Internet initiatives should of course be carried out in light of Bahá'í principles such as moderation, courtesy, probity, fairness, dignity, accuracy and wisdom [... T]he Internet is yet one more domain in which Bahá'ís should demonstrate etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race – a maturity founded on the oneness and wholeness of human relationships. (BIA 2007)

Thus, members are exhorted to reflect the community in a positive light through mirroring core values. These white papers often emphasise core Bahá'í beliefs and teachings of religious figures as a basis for online decision making. By releasing statements such as the ones above, the Universal House of Justice attempts to define how the Internet should be used by all practicing Bahá'ís (Universal House of Justice 1995). Such statements not only provide Bahá'ís with guidelines for behaviour within specific online contexts but also affirm core values regarding how individuals should present their community identity in public contexts. For example, individual Bahá'ís are not forbidden to be involved in unofficial forums, but these performances should reflect the character of the community.

In general, the House of Justice has no objection to Bahá'ís participating in public, unmoderated discussions about the faith, whether those discussions take place in person or through some form of electronic communication. The wisdom of participating in particular discussions must, of necessity, depend upon circumstances prevailing at the time. When, through such discussions, the faith is attacked or erroneous information about it is disseminated, it may become necessary for individual Bahá'ís to actively defend it (BIA n.d.).

This is affirmed in a 2009 statement issued by the Bahá'í Internet Agency, 'Responding to Criticism and Opposition on the Internet', which states that Bahá'í use of the Internet should reflect the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh:

Internet initiatives by Bahá'ís should therefore aim to broaden vision concerning challenging spiritual and social questions, shape discourse in a unifying way, and emphasize the potentialities and promise of the present moment in human affairs. When harnessed in this way, the Internet can become a vehicle for promoting mutual understanding and learning, serving others, instilling hope about the human condition, and demonstrating rectitude of conduct. (BIA 2009)

The U.S. Bahá'í Office of Communications also plays a role in framing the Internet as an important sphere in which Bahá'ís are welcome to engage and offers suggestions regarding how this should be done:

The increasingly participatory nature of Internet activity is providing novel and creative ways of exploring the compelling message of spiritual and social transformation as taught by Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'ís around the globe are using the Internet to give expression to the many facets of their belief in an open and imaginative manner, including on blogs and social networking sites. (US Bahá'í Office of Communications 2010)

However, this is a contextualised engagement, as evidenced by the documents provided by the Universal House of Justice that give prescriptive instructions on such topics as how Internet discussion related to issues of Bahá'í faith should be maintained and moderated online as well as how Bahá'í members should behave online as representatives of the community in the online world. Thus, official discourse regarding use of and engagement with the Internet serves as a space to reiterate and strengthen the religious identity of the Bahá'í community. Therefore community documents and policy statements such as those highlighted here help reaffirm community distinctiveness and contribute to the construction or maintenance of a desired public image within the age of the Internet.

5 Reflections on a bounded community's management of new media

Undertaking these four levels of inquiry demonstrates that American Bahá'ís have a distinctive negotiation with the Internet, which is guided by their core beliefs and the particular value of unity and which official sources seek to exemplify through their use of the Internet and how they encourage their members to represent themselves online. Their strict adherence to a certain structure and hierarchy within the offline structure of the community is in many respects simply replicated and encouraged online. As has been shown in this brief exploration, the Bahá'í community's Universal House of Justice has attempted to re-

configure the usage and negotiation of the Internet in an effort to achieve ideological unification of motivations and practices in a context which blends the online and offline contexts. Examples of this reconfiguration are evident in the creation of the Bahá'í Internet Agency, which seeks to direct practicing Bahá'ís on how to properly use the Internet in relation to Bahá'í beliefs. Their white papers not only provide guidelines for Internet use but also lead community members back to the teachings of the Báb and therefore reaffirm core community beliefs and frameworks. As the Bahá'í Internet Agency states, 'The principles of our Faith offer valuable guideposts in making use of the Internet. [...] 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' (BIA 2006b).

This chapter also shows how a bounded religious community often seeks to replicate traditional or accepted boundaries and practises of the larger community online in order to solidify their established social patterns and behavioural expectations. It is tradition and established understandings of the identity of a community and authority structures which guide such groups' engagement with technology. The Internet can introduce new challenges for bounded communities, in that it allows community members to interact outside official forums or systems that enhance individual choice over community accountability or control. Therefore negotiation processes and discourse frameworks surrounding new media become important spaces for religious groups to consciously re-establish the boundaries of the community and culture or resist and thence encounter problematic affordances of the technology. Religious groups desiring to maintain a bounded social and moral system must carefully consider the extent to which certain aspects of network culture may run counter to their desired pattern of religious life. Bounded religious communities thus constrain members' use so that it is both in line with community values and enhances desired structures or community identity markers. The religious-social shaping of technology provides a valuable format to study and interrogate these processes of technological negotiation and reveals the distinctiveness of a given religious community that seeks to represent or promote itself in a modern, networked society.

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