

GUIDELINES FOR INTERNET COMMUNICATION

I. Spiritual Principles

Translating Bahá'í principles for personal conduct into the virtual world of the Internet can be challenging. Below are selected quotations from the Bahá'í Writings that pertain to our quest for a standard of communication that goes well beyond the prevailing Internet ethos of avoiding provocation or giving offense to an individual or group.

1. “O SON OF DUST! Verily I say unto thee: Of all men the most negligent is he that disputeth idly and seeketh to advance himself over his brother. Say, O brethren! Let deeds, not words, be your adorning.”— Bahá'u'lláh (Persian Hidden Words, #5)

Communication requires that one or both sides are in some way learning and benefiting from an exchange. Much of what takes place under the guise of communication is actually a series of pronouncements or unilateral statements.

2. “Beware lest ye harm any soul, or make any heart to sorrow; lest ye wound any man with your words, be he known to you or a stranger, be he friend or foe.” — ‘Abdu'l-Bahá (*Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 73)

The on-line medium is considered a “cool” communication system because it does not have the warmth of face-to-face communications. One needs to be even more careful in choosing one’s words on-line than one would be in person because the warmth of human contact is not being conveyed. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s admonitions refer to everyone, not just to people one likes or agrees with. Similarly, one needs to assume the best intentions on the part of others.

3. “Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.” —Cited by Bahá'u'lláh (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXXIX)

The Internet has many forms of communication involving many cultures. Be aware of the culture, rules and mores of the environment before “speaking.” Humor, irony, and allusions rarely translate well over the Internet and especially often fail to convey the intended meaning when the communication involves different cultures. Be aware that most posted documents are stored for indefinite periods of time on the Internet. Search engines will probably make one’s email of today available to other audiences—perhaps out of context—years later.

4. “Once again We exhort all believers to observe justice and fairness and to show forth love and contentment.” —Baha'u'llah (*Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 134)

The Bahá'í commitment to fairness requires that exceptional effort be made to understand the full context and motivation of a statement. Don't jump to conclusions prematurely. Seek clarification to determine the true intent before commenting on something about which you are unsure.

5. “O SON OF SPIRIT! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created. —Bahá'u'lláh (Arabic Hidden Words, #22)

Recognition of the nobility of each human soul implies a standard of discourse in which dignity, courtesy and mutual respect guide interactions between dialogue participants. Think of yourself as an instrument of unity—a voice which so exemplifies the “spirit of universal love and fellowship as to evoke in the minds of [others]...the vision of that future City of God...”—Shoghi Effendi (*Bahá'í Administration*, p. 131)

II. Bahá'í Netiquette

The following “netiquette” suggestions come from Bahá'ís with years of experience on the Internet. These suggestions are to be taken as common sense advice for protecting oneself and the good name of the Bahá'í Faith.

Email

1. Know with whom you are communicating. Hitting “reply to all” can mean that far more people than you intended will receive your message, including those you do not know.
2. Email messages written in the heat of the moment can have the impact of a formal written communication rather than of spoken communication.
3. Do not write anything you are not willing to see copied to others—it may well be.
4. Email messages tend to be saved for long periods of time. You may find your message forwarded years later.
5. If you send to a group of addresses, place the addresses in the BCC field so that the entire list of addresses is not shared with the recipients. This practice reduces spam, the impact of computer viruses, and clutter in the message's header. It is also a practice of courtesy to those who do not wish to have their email addresses widely disseminated.
6. When emailing people you do not know, use plain text rather than HTML or RTF as a message format. Many people turn off advanced formatting options because of the associated security concerns.
7. Be aware that many people still have low-speed Internet connections and also pay for message traffic. Sending large files can clog the recipient's email box and cost a great deal. If you do not know if the person is able and willing to receive a large file attachment, ask first.
8. Clearly label your subject line. Since the vast majority of all email is spam, it is very important that your message's subject line be specific. Rather than “My photos” it would be better to write “Photos from James Polk.”
9. Email messages are unfortunately easy to falsify. If something looks suspicious, use care before opening it.
10. Refrain from forwarding email messages containing information about the purported conditions facing Bahá'ís in particular countries. It is always preferable to wait for official news from Bahá'í institutions rather than to forward unverified reports.

Web Development

1. Focus on supplying a service to the site's audience.
2. Be respectful in tone when creating a site related to the Faith. Some images require especial respect in their use, such as ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's image or the ring symbol. These images should be clear and sharp; they should not be clickable or used as a functional element in the Web site.

3. If the site collects information from the visitor, some sort of statement of your site's privacy practices and how that information will be used should be present.
4. Information from other sites should be attributed as to its source. You may also need to seek permission from the owner of the information. By default, all text, images, and multimedia content are copyright protected. Make sure you are not infringing on anyone's copyright. It does not hurt to ask for permission to use content. Ask for permission in writing so that you have a record.
5. Remember all Web publishing is international publishing.
6. It is best not to combine a presentation on the Faith with presentations of other topics. The public may not know where objective information about the Faith stops and your personal interests begin.
7. Be careful when linking to other Web sites. While linking to sites belonging to the institutions is a good thing, links to other sites could lead to your implicitly endorsing content of which you may be unaware.
8. Sites that include schedules, calendars, and recent news should be updated frequently. If content cannot be maintained, create a static site until the resources for updating become available.
9. Aim for the highest possible level of compliance with accessibility standards for disabled visitors. A large number of disabled users, such as sight-impaired individuals, heavily use the Internet for information gathering. It is not difficult to make a site friendly to disabled visitors.

Discussion Forums

1. Each forum has a slightly different culture and usually some sort of terms of use. Learn the standards of expected behavior before posting.
2. Do not feed negative discussion threads. Not only is this a waste of time, but also it has the unintended consequence of making the thread appear more interesting to visitors because of all the postings. Let negative postings die on the vine—do not water them.
3. See if your question or topic of interest has already been addressed. Long-term members can become frustrated with numerous postings on topics that have been covered multiple times.
4. Avoid quoting extensively from previous postings when there is no reason to do so.
5. Avoid posting statements such as “me too” or “I agree.” These postings simply clutter the discussion forum.
6. Using ALL CAPS is considered yelling in the on-line medium. You should never find yourself in need of yelling. New people often turn on the caps lock button to add emphasis—don't.
7. Having multiple screen names and identities is allowed in discussion forums. While obscuring one's identity is acceptable, lying about oneself is not.
8. Pick a screen name that gives a good impression of you. On the Internet others cannot see you, so, to some extent, your screen identities represent you and represent the Faith if you identify yourself as a Bahá'í.

9. If you are running and/or moderating a discussion board, make the rules of conduct obvious and clear-cut. Be specific about guidelines rather than simply exhorting everyone to “be nice.” Enforce the rules equitably. Nothing ruins a discussion board faster than perceived bias and favoritism.

Chat and Instant Messaging

1. Chat is perhaps the form of Internet communication most prone to misunderstanding, due to its rapid back-and-forth style. Because chats can be saved and retrieved in some instant message systems, off-the-cuff Internet conversations can take on the same immortality as email. Take special care in choosing your words and topics in this format.
2. Be mindful that people typing in languages other than their first require more time to answer. A fast-flowing discussion could leave some participants out.
3. If one or more of the members of a chat session becomes rude, leave the chat room or use the feature in the chat program—if present—to hide their postings.

Blogs, Podcasts and Wikis

1. Follow the rules of the site you are on. If you have a site that includes the participation of others, have clear rules and enforce them with consistency.
2. Be positive in your postings.
3. Correct errors when you are sure there is an honest mistake but leave the site if it is clear the information is intended as an attack.
4. While supporting your statements related to the Faith via links to authorized Bahá'í Texts is a good general practice, posting multiple pages of text is usually not welcomed.
5. Anyone wanting to post on Wikipedia or similar sites created through public participation should read the history for the pages they are interested in before posting. Wikipedia pages result from a complex interaction among diverse participants and the best results are not always achieved by the most obvious route.¹
6. Remember that your personal views on a publicly available blog or podcast may be taken by the public to reflect the official view of the Faith. The more your content is about the Faith, the more careful you should be in your statements. The newer Internet technologies invite a feeling of informality. Blogs, for example, are often treated as diaries. Problems can sometimes arise because the content of such personal sites may show up in an Internet search just as easily as an official Bahá'í web site. In this regard, it is always desirable to include links to

¹ Each article on Wikipedia, whether on the Bahá'í Faith or existentialism, for example, 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 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 a great dose of wisdom are required when contributing to Wikipedia content.

institutional sites or RSS feeds such as bahai.org, news.bahai.org or public sites sponsored by National Assemblies.

7. Podcasting is a new medium that requires special attention to quality, approach and tone so as to ensure that the dignity of the Faith is safeguarded. Always remember that with the Internet, the audience is not local but global, and thus a podcast can impact the reputation of the Faith across a wide spectrum of social, cultural and political contexts. Again, it is essential to ensure that audiences understand that only individual understandings and views are being expressed, not official views or positions of Bahá'í institutions.
8. 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.” (From a letter dated 2 March 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

Hence, while sharing insights from the Bahá'í teachings concerning the advancement of human society, it is best to focus on relevant spiritual principles and practices that can impact processes of social transformation.

III. Extracts on Internet Communication **Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice**

The ease and relative impersonality of the electronic medium require in some ways an even higher level of self-discipline than is the case in situations where a spirit of unity is reinforced by the opportunity for direct personal contact and social interaction. In the pursuit of such a spirit of unity, Bahá'ís will, without doubt, wish to assist the consultative processes by sharing and discussing relevant Bahá'í texts. This will itself have the further effect of drawing attention back to the framework of Bahá'í belief. *(May 15, 1995 to an individual)*

The opportunity which electronic communication technology provides for more speedy and thorough consultation among the friends 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".

As you well appreciate, the extent to which such technology advances the work of the Faith depends, of course, on the manner in which it is used. As a medium for Bahá'ís to exchange views, it imposes on participants the same requirements of moderation, candour, and courtesy as would be the case in any other discussion. Likewise, those involved should avoid belittling the views of one another. In this regard, the House of Justice has noted your understandable repugnance at an apparent temptation to use misleading and invidious labels like "traditionalists" and "liberals", which divide the Bahá'í community. To the extent that this divisive habit of mind may persist in the Bahá'í community, it is obviously a carry-over from non-Bahá'í society and a manifestation of an immature conception of life. If Bahá'ís were to persist in this mode of thinking, it would bring to naught even the most worthwhile intellectual endeavour, as has so conspicuously been the case with societies of the past.

Most important of all, as with any exploration by Bahá'ís of the beliefs and practices of their Faith, electronic discussion will serve the interests of the Cause and its members only as it is conducted within the framework of the Bahá'í Teachings and the truths they enshrine. To attempt to discuss the Cause of God apart from or with disdain for the authoritative guidance inherent in these Teachings would clearly be a logical contradiction. *(Dec 10, 1992 to an individual)*

We have been asked to advise that there is no objection to the conduct of a chat room...which appears to be similar to a fireside meeting except that it takes place over the Internet. In general, Bahá'í institutions should not interfere with it. However, you may emphasize that, in their efforts to teach the Faith, the friends should refrain from

engaging in argumentation and disputes, concentrating more on introducing the Faith to participants.

(January 26, 2003 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

The House of Justice feels that, when Bahá'ís are teaching in an online “chat room” and Covenant-breakers intrude upon the discussion, the friends should not feel obliged to sign off simply because Covenant-breakers are present in this virtual space. They should, however, refrain from knowingly engaging the Covenant-breakers in discussions and, in any case, should avoid being drawn into contentious or disputatious situations. (October 27, 1997 to an individual)

The House of Justice is aware of the Web sites established on the Internet by Covenant-breaker groups, and while it is closely following the issue, it sees no cause for undue concern. One important means of protecting the Faith is to ensure that Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís alike have ready access to authentic Bahá'í literature and accurate information about the Faith. Web sites such as “The Bahá'í World” [bahai.org] and “One Country” [www.onecountry.org] now provide individuals interested in learning about the Bahá'í Faith with a large and ever-expanding body of material on the Faith, attractively presented and illustrated. Of course, the greatest protection to the Cause will be through ongoing deepening of the Bahá'í community in the Covenant and the history and teachings of the Faith. *(October 9, 1998 to an individual)*

More generally, while it is disconcerting that Covenant-breaker material is being disseminated on the Internet, there is little that can or should be done to directly oppose such dissemination. Rather, the greatest protection to the Cause will be through ongoing deepening of the Bahá'í community in the Covenant and the history and teachings of the Faith. An important role that the Internet can play in this regard is to make authentic Bahá'í literature, on the Covenant and on Bahá'í teachings generally, easily available. *(December 19, 1997 to an individual)*

While there is no objection to Bahá'ís' posting accurate information about Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant in relevant Internet forums, it is obviously not appropriate or helpful to engage in debate with Covenant-breakers or become involved in exchanges with them. *(January 3, 1999 to an individual)*

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. In some circumstances, however, to avoid participating in argumentative exchanges, attracting attention to enemies of the Faith, or engaging Covenant-breakers, it will be more appropriate to withdraw from the discussion. While the institutions of the Faith may, on occasion, find it necessary to offer the friends guidance related to their

participation in particular discussions, generally this, too, is a matter left to the individual. *(October 27, 1997 to an individual)*

Thus, if any participant in an email discussion feels that a view put forward appears to contradict or undermine the provisions of the Covenant, he should be free to say so, explaining candidly and courteously why he feels as he does. The person who made the initial statement will then be able to re-evaluate his opinion and, if he still believes it to be valid, he should be able to explain why it is not contrary to either the letter or the spirit of the Covenant. The participants in such a discussion should avoid disputation and, if they are unable to resolve an issue, they should refer the point to the Universal House of Justice since, in accordance with the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “By this body all the difficult problems are to be resolved...” and it has the authority to decide upon “all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure, and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book.” In this way the Covenant can illuminate and temper the discourse and make it fruitful. *(February 16, 1996 to an individual)*

From a Letter Written by the International Teaching Centre

There is an ever increasing use by believers of the Internet and other available computer based means of communication. These open unlimited possibilities for continuous proclamation and teaching, bringing the Creative Word and the Sacred Writings as well as the ideas of the individual believers to the hearts and minds everywhere. *(May 11, 1995 to a Continental Counsellor)*