

Creating a national Bahá'í Web site

This short paper, prepared by the Office of Public Information of the Bahá'í International Community, aims to provide some preliminary thoughts on the development of national Bahá'í Web sites as part of a wider strategy to augment the Bahá'í presence on the Web. No doubt, as more and more experience is gained over the coming months, many of the ideas and suggestions recorded here will need to be refined and extended to cover new areas of learning.

Introduction

Since access to the Internet has become more widespread, national Bahá'í Web sites have become increasingly useful tools for encouraging contact from seekers, and for providing the public with information about the existence and activities of the Bahá'í community.

In a number of countries, sites have also been set up at the local level by enthusiastic individuals. More recently, many believers share insights and thoughts in Web logs ["blogs"] and via online social networks.

Many National Spiritual Assemblies are now considering the online presence of their communities and how such a presence can be organized in a coherent and systematic manner.

Efforts to develop a Web presence are best carried out in the same humble posture of learning which characterizes other areas of work of the Bahá'í community—action, reflection, and consultation is the mode of operation. Opportunities can be systematically explored, understanding refined, processes evaluated, knowledge and experiences shared and activity multiplied.

1. Starting a process

Most commonly, the first stage of establishing a national Web presence would be the creation of a national Bahá'í Web site.

A National Spiritual Assembly might initially approach this task by calling together a group of people to consult about the national site. Such a group may not necessarily include Web experts; people with a range of experiences and talents—particularly those who have been actively involved in the expansion and consolidation work—can usefully contribute to discussions about the content and scope of a site.

Discussions may begin with some key questions that might be helpful in evolving a strategy. These questions could include:

- What are the key characteristics of the country and its Bahá'í community which a national Web site might present?

- How will the beliefs of the community be conveyed directly in the language the site uses and indirectly in its design and use of images?
- How might language used to describe “who we are” and “what we do”—emerging from the systematic expansion and consolidation work of the community—be integrated into the online presentation?
- How can the national Web site support the processes of expansion and consolidation that are underway, accepting that teaching activities are best conducted face-to-face? How can further contact best be facilitated between Web site visitors and those believers who can assist them to continue their investigation of the Faith?
- How can the online offering at the national level contribute to the image of a united and diverse community?

During this consultation, a few individuals might emerge who could be invited to coordinate the creation and development of the site, utilizing the talents of a range of other contributors in the development of content, design and technical aspects.

2. The national site

A national Bahá'í community's Web site can begin with a page, or a few simple pages, that can evolve over time and grow in complexity.

At its most simple, the national site may offer some basic information about the national community and its activities. The experience of a visit to a Bahá'í site—how it looks and functions, and the information it conveys—can have a profound effect on the impression visitors have of the Faith and whether they wish to investigate further.

Some key areas to consider in the development of a national site include:

2.1. Authenticity

Visitors to a national Bahá'í Web site should have the sense that what they are seeing is authentic, conveying accepted Bahá'í views and practices. Without necessarily adopting an official logo, or “stamp of approval”, such authenticity could be identifiable by the consistency of the key messages it presents and the values governing its presentation.

Authenticity may also be added through the use of section headings and terminology that are already employed on www.bahai.org, or by adopting a similar approach to the arrangement of content. Providing clear links to the official international sites and, where appropriate, other national sites can also increase the perception of authenticity.

2.2. Facilitating contact

One strategy might be to provide the means for visitors to make further contact with a Bahá'í, to continue their investigation, or to begin an engagement with the Faith. Contact details for the national office may be an important feature in this connection.

Those involved in developing the national Web site may wish to consider what mechanisms are needed both online and in terms of human resources to facilitate a fast and effective interaction with a visitor seeking more information or assistance.

Contact information for local communities could also be included if human resources exist at that level to respond effectively to enquiries from seekers in those places.

2.3. Audience

It seems clear that, while national Bahá'í sites will generally be outward-looking, they can also be useful for Bahá'í visitors. Having a highly realistic mental image of a typical visitor can assist to enhance the quality of the site.

Among those coming to a Bahá'í site might be: a seeker, someone who has been the recipient of a visit in a neighbourhood campaign, a person who has a Bahá'í relative or has come into close contact with the Faith through family connections or neighbours, a journalist, a civic official or NGO representative, a representative of a like-minded organization, an academic researcher, a business leader, a school teacher preparing a class, a student researching a project, junior youth that participate in a core activity, or an active adherent from another faith community.

2.4. Language

Consideration also needs to be given to what information should be conveyed and what content, tone, style and even specific languages are most appropriate for the site.

Having an outward-looking orientation influences several important characteristics of the content and presentation of a site, moving it beyond a stance of “them and us”.

The vocabulary of the site needs to be consistent for both internal and external audiences. It seems unwise to assume any prior knowledge of Bahá'í terminology, keywords, principles, administration, history or central figures. At the national level, the site need not go into too much detail, for example, about the history, spiritual concepts or social teachings of the Faith. For those, the site can easily be linked to the rich levels of content contained within www.bahai.org.

National Bahá'í Web Sites may be able to offer a few sections particularly designed to meet the needs of specific interest groups—for example, journalists or school teachers. However, in general, the language used in most of the site should be accessible and open enough to be able to speak to every kind of visitor.

2.5. Presentation

The experience Bahá'ís have of the Faith can be reflected in how we present ourselves online through the look and feel of a site. At the aesthetic level, our sites can be attractively designed and visually pleasing, conveying something of the experience of what recognition of the Blessed Beauty—or an encounter with the community of the Most Great Name—entails. Additionally, the design may reflect the cultural flavors and uniqueness of the region, locality or nation that the site seeks to serve.

The choice of photographs and other imagery should be relevant to the population that the site is aimed at. Do the images employed speak to their local interests? Could they envisage

themselves among the groups of people depicted on the site? Does the style in which photographs are taken suggest a degree of involvement and participation? Do they convey a sense of welcome and warmth?

2.6. Linking

Linking sites from the national levels to www.bahai.org gives the visitor access to in-depth, accurate, and authoritative presentations about Bahá'í beliefs, history, and the activities of the Bahá'ís throughout the world. Such content need not be replicated on other sites, unless local translations are being made or a theme is of particular relevance to a certain population.

An important element of the international site is the “Worldwide Community” page that aims to provide the visitor with an opportunity to make contact with the Bahá'í community of their country. Links to existing national sites are found here and pages are steadily being designed for each country that does not yet have a national Web site. Such links could also be a feature of national sites, reinforcing the notion of a global community, linking the enquirer with the worldwide network of Bahá'í communities, and creating more than 100 in-bound links to every national site providing a valuable boost to search engine discovery.

In recent years, many issues that are pertinent to the prevalent discourses of a particular country have been explored and discussed in statements made by the Bahá'í International Community. Linking to such statements at <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/> might also provide useful and relevant content for a national site.

2.7. News

Those involved in the development of national Web sites may decide not only present or translate news stories of international scope and interest from the Bahá'í World News Service but might also consider how to re-purpose such stories with a national angle or, should resources permit, generate their own home-grown news content.

Stories which might be of interest to the site's visitors could be: accounts of individuals or groups of Bahá'ís making their mark on various fields of human endeavour, including processes which advance the development of society; the community's engagement with the issues of society, such as Human Rights Day, interfaith, climate change, Violence Against Women Awareness month, and the like; the national Bahá'í community's engagement with government or prominent people in defence of the Bahá'ís in Iran; a national perspective on developments in Iran, especially if a relative of a victim is living within the country; or a major event that has Bahá'í participation.

Writing about a community committed to long-term processes of learning could include telling stories about the Bahá'í community's activities in a language that is open and appropriate to all audiences. Prominence can be given to the voices and perceptions of ordinary people developing their innate capacities to serve humanity and build a new society. At this early stage in the development of our core activities, it is felt better not to showcase our junior youth groups or children's programmes.

3. Technical aspects

For communities just starting out on their first national Web page or site, the technical aspects of building a site might appear daunting. However, this need not become a barrier to getting started. Often adequate technical resources can now be found amongst youth or young adults in the community who are quite familiar with, and deft at using, the technology. There are also a number of established Web services which offer easy-to-use, pre-built templates for simple sites.

4. Resources

The first stage in the process of launching a national Web site might often be for the dedicated team—under the direction of the National Spiritual Assembly—to develop a strategy and guide the development of content before any design or site construction starts.

In cases where there is currently no national Web site in place, it is possible for a National Page to be created, for any given country, within www.bahai.org. The page can provide some basic factual and historical information, some photographs and contact details. National Spiritual Assemblies may share information and a selection of pictures with the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information, via opi@bwc.org, which can create such a page.