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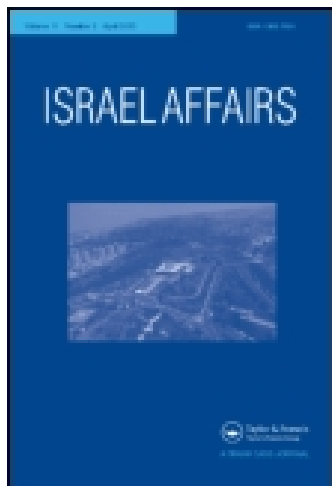
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## Religion and the Internet in the Israeli Orthodox context

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This article provides an overview of research on religion and the Internet within the Israeli context, highlighting how Orthodox Jewish groups have appropriated and responded to the Internet. By surveying Orthodox use of the Internet, and giving special attention to the ultra Orthodox negotiations, a number of key challenges that the Internet poses to the Israeli religious sector are highlighted. Exploring these debates and negotiations demonstrates that while the Internet is readily utilized by many Orthodox groups, it is still viewed by some with suspicion. Fears expressed, primarily by ultra Orthodox groups, shows religious leaders often attempt to constrain Internet use to minimize its potential threat to religious social norms and the structure of authority. This article also highlights the need for research that addresses the concerns and strategies of different Orthodox groups in order to offer a broader understanding of Orthodox engagement with the Internet in Israel.

**Keywords:** authority; community; Internet; Israel; Judaism; religion; Orthodox; ultra Orthodox

In the past decade, there has been a marked increase in religious websites and activities online within the sphere of the Israeli Internet. These innovations are having a growing impact on religious sectors of Israeli society. This article explores the relationship between religion and the Internet within the Israeli context by focusing on how religious Jewish groups have appropriated and responded to the Internet. Specifically, this article focuses on how the Orthodox sector in Israel has responded to the Internet by surveying key research on this area.

This survey is situated within the growing scholarship on religion and the Internet.<sup>1</sup> This research area began in the mid-1990s with a number of notable case studies exploring how the Internet could function as a sacred space for different religious groups and traditions, including Judaism.<sup>2</sup> By the early 2000s, several large scale studies of religious Internet users' patterns of behaviour online had been conducted;<sup>3</sup> most focused on the North American context, and several significant collections of case studies documenting various forms of religious engagement online had been produced.<sup>4</sup> By the end of this decade, scholars have come to recognize religion as an important feature of life online, and research in this area has become comparative and interdisciplinary in order to address

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complex questions related to how religion online both challenges and affirms traditional religious authority, identity, and forms of community.<sup>5</sup> Much research on religion and the Internet has tended to focus on Christianity, Islam, and new religious movements, with significant work on Judaism online beginning to surface only recently.

Scholarly investigation of Jewish engagement and perception of the Internet within Israel has primarily focused on how the Orthodox sector in Israel has responded to the Internet. Of particular interest has been how various Orthodox groups have sought to utilize Internet technologies in light of their religious behaviours and communal boundaries. Many of these appropriations, especially within ultra Orthodox groups, have been viewed with suspicion, leading religious leaders to attempt to constrain community members' Internet use. While numerous religious groups outside Judaism do reside within Israel, such as Islamic and Christian minority populations, almost no substantial research has been conducted to date on non-Jewish religious groups' attitudes toward and uses of the Internet. Most work gathered on non-Jewish ethnic groups' use of the Internet has focused on digital divide issues or how the Internet may serve as an educational tool for cultivating tolerance between different populations.<sup>6</sup> Thus, this article focuses on reviewing work related to Orthodox uses and debates regarding the Internet that has received the most attention. This is done by exploring the possibilities and challenges highlighted in Orthodox discourse about the Internet, especially issues emerging between religious Internet entrepreneurs seeking to embrace the Internet and religious leaders who frame the Internet as a threat to their community.

As ultra Orthodox groups find the Internet most problematic, significant attention is given to these communities' negotiations with the Internet. However this article also seeks to note the response to the Internet of other sectors of Orthodox Judaism within Israel in order to achieve a fuller picture of religious negotiation and point to areas in need of further exploration.

In order to contextualize this exploration, a brief introduction to Jewish engagement with media technology is first offered. This provides a basis for discussing the rise of Jewish Internet use and the different manifestations of religion online, in both the global and Israeli contexts. Importing Judaism online has created a number of challenges, especially for the Israeli Orthodox community. Concerns voiced by rabbinical authorities over the Internet resulted in a series of public debates and bans from 1999 to 2010, as religious leaders sought to take control of this technology increasingly present in their communities by offering prescriptive instructions for community Internet use. Discussions of these controversies highlight core tensions arising over issues of religious authority, community, and identity. Finally, a critical summary of research conducted on Israeli religious Internet use, primarily focused on ultra Orthodox groups' negotiations, demonstrates how these issues have been studied. The article concludes with claims that can be made about the impact the Internet is having on the Israeli Orthodox community and the future of the study of religion and the Internet within the Israeli context.

**Orthodox engagement with media technology**

This article explores Orthodox groups' engagement with the Internet within Israel. This is also the sector of Judaism in which the majority of research on religion and the Internet has been conducted. Orthodox Judaism is used to refer to a distinctive grouping encompassing a range of Israeli religious communities, and is noted as the largest sector of the religious Jewish population within Israel. As Don-Yehiya points out, Orthodox Jewry is perceived by most Israelis as the authentic representative of religious Judaism.<sup>7</sup> The label Orthodox Judaism is often used by Diaspora Jews in the West as a way to distinguish between Reform or Conservative groups. However, within the Israeli context the term may be used to simply connote a high degree of religious devotion; in other words, to be Orthodox is to be 'religious' rather than 'traditional' or 'secular'.<sup>8</sup>

The 'Orthodox' became recognized as a distinctive grouping in the nineteenth century with the rise of the Reform movement in Europe, which sought to modernize Judaism. Today Orthodox Judaism in Israel is not a single or wholly cohesive group. Rather, it is a label used to describe those Jewish communities that seek to closely follow the historic rituals and understandings of Jewish law and directly apply the Torah and Halakah to aspects of the modern world. While Orthodox communities often share common practices and beliefs, they are also distinctive due to their unique histories, Diasporas, and ethnic connections that translate into unique life practices and authority structures for different groups. Israeli Orthodox groups typically fall under one of two distinctions:<sup>9</sup> ultra Orthodox and Religious Zionist.

While a full exploration of the nuances of all Israeli Orthodox groups is beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that there are distinctions between these religious communities resulting in differing responses toward media and the Internet. For instance, Religious Zionist groups see Jewish law as normative and binding, yet they may also attach a positive value to interaction with the modern world and consequently different forms of media. Conversely, ultra Orthodox or Haredim groups (such as Belz, Gur, Satmar, etc.) have been described as enclave cultures,<sup>10</sup> which hold a strict adherence to traditional understandings of religious law, coupled with a rejection of the values of modernity.<sup>11</sup> Many groups also advocate an isolated lifestyle where members often live close to one another in set geographical boundaries and may be organized around a specific spiritual leader or Rebbe, who is considered to be enlightened and thus is consulted for major life decisions and religious counsel.<sup>12</sup> These constraints and a desire to maintain distance from the secular world outside the community mean that these groups often view media with suspicion. Thus, community affiliation within the Orthodox world plays a vital role in guiding members' choices and beliefs regarding modern society and, consequently, their views of media.

So while Israeli Orthodox groups share many common practices and beliefs, as noted above, the distinctive histories, life practices, and authority structures of

their communities have important bearing on their unique media-related strategies and responses.<sup>13</sup> For the ultra Orthodox, Rabbis and religious leaders play a central role in decision-making and policies related to media. For example, the Shas movement and its spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, have set the tone for what is considered acceptable engagement with the media for many Sephardic communities, even when these views collide with state policies.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that each Orthodox group's beliefs about media technology coincide with their views on how and the extent to which one should relate to aspects of modernity and boundaries of participation within the public sphere.<sup>15</sup>

A common issue raised by Orthodox groups is how the use of different media, especially the Internet, may challenge or reframe community practices or structures. While each branch of religious Judaism holds differing views about how traditional texts should be interpreted and about the level of strictness with which they should be applied, all hold a high regard for historic documents that provide guidance for daily life and for faith-based cultural practices that have been standardized over time. The Internet adds a new level of complexity because its decentralized structure means it bypasses traditional channels for vetting texts, information, and interpretations. Some groups, namely the ultra Orthodox, view the flexibility and control it offers individuals as highly problematic, as it privileges individual decision-making over community standards and protocols.

This leads to a second area of concern about who has the responsibility and ability to interpret texts, proctor dissemination, or serve as an official interpreter of information. Orthodox leaders such as rabbis are often regarded as spiritual guides or key advisors, especially within ultra Orthodox communities. In light of this, they often become monitors of media, advising members and in some case seeking to regulate interactions with a various form of media, from text to the Internet. Levels of control over pedagogical practices varies greatly within different Orthodox groups, which can be clearly seen in the variety and unique structures of group-specific Yeshivas.<sup>16</sup> Thus, there is a tendency within ultra Orthodox groups to ascribe or defer the interpretive process to specific authorities in order to regulate or monitor meaning-making.<sup>17</sup> This contrasts to the Internet, which is non-hierarchical and difficult to regulate. The Internet mirrors the more dialogic side of the Jewish faith, in which the process of community interpretation takes place through shared conversation of its members and the act of dialogue becomes itself a central basis for authority. Questioning textual interpretations and meanings when seeking to understand the oral and written traditions within Orthodox Judaism is generally encouraged and seen very clearly in Religious Zionist approaches to learning. The Internet, however, can be seen to encourage or promote non-traditional divergent opinions and interpretations, which can be seen as problematic.<sup>18</sup> It is in these tensions that interesting questions arise about how media technology such as the Internet both disarms and empowers religious groups.

There is growing scholarly literature on Orthodox Judaism's intersection with media technology and the issues these interactions raise for religious groups. Since

the late 1980s, scholars have paid serious attention to how contemporary Jewish media's rhetorical strategies may be informed by traditional religious communication patterns in Israel,<sup>19</sup> especially in relation to textual media.<sup>20</sup> Many of these studies demonstrate how religious Judaism has shaped media discourse within Israel, such as the argument that current political discourse is shaped by historic Jewish religious argumentation found in Talmudic exchanges.<sup>21</sup> The current body of research also focuses on how religious values and distinctive community affiliation may guide the extent to which certain groups may engage with certain types of media.<sup>22</sup> This also highlights a need for more serious study of the role religion plays in relation to the media within the Jewish and Israeli context.

In the past decade, there has been an increase in scholarship on the characteristics and importance of religious media, especially for the ultra Orthodox community.<sup>23</sup> Most of these studies emphasize the value of embracing these tools for enhancing group solidarity and values. Issues under investigation have included how Haredi use audio-taped sermons as a mechanism for building community consensus,<sup>24</sup> and how popular literature can serve as a tool for 'imparting everyday life instructions' for religious practice within the ultra Orthodox community.<sup>25</sup> These studies have addressed various forms of media, from the use of texts for the construction of religious and community authority to religious engagement with electronic media.<sup>26</sup> This is seen in Lehmann and Siebzehner's study of how religious pirate radio has become a vibrant tool for communication within the Israeli Sephardic community or how Lubavitch in New York deploy video media for outreach campaigns.<sup>27</sup> Bagad-Elimelech's study of ultra Orthodox-produced feature films distributed on CD and DVD reveals a reframing of rabbinical authorities and ultra Orthodox men in ways that both challenge and affirm traditional literary troupes of good vs. evil and communal ideals.<sup>28</sup> Cohen, Lemish and Schejter's study of cell phone usage in Israel found that debates within the ultra Orthodox community about the social and moral implications of cell phones led service providers to develop special services to cater specifically to religious Orthodox users.<sup>29</sup> The rise of the 'kosher cell phone' within Israel has also been explored, noting the role and influence Orthodox communities can have as media consumers,<sup>30</sup> as well as intercommunity religious debates about the implication of media appropriation.<sup>31</sup> Much less work has been done on Religious Zionist embrace of media. However the few studies available suggest that while they may more openly and readily use media than the ultra Orthodox, they still encounter similar questions regarding how media aesthetics and technological affordances may pose challenges to community values.<sup>32</sup>

From this discussion, the issues of community and authority are clearly highlighted as central debates within Orthodox Judaism regarding how media are viewed, used, and regulated. The following sections demonstrate that religious engagement and perception of the Internet in Israel is essentially a question of identity management, information control, and community boundary maintenance.

### Judaism and the Internet

Since the mid-1980s, religious Judaism has had a presence on the Internet, and its influence can be seen in the early days of religious practice online.<sup>33</sup> Helland documented discussions of how angst from American USENET users about a primarily religion-focused dialogue in the miscellaneous discussion group section in 1983 eventually led to the creation of net.religion.<sup>34</sup> This became the 'first networked forum for discussions on the religious, ethical, and moral implications of human actions'.<sup>35</sup> Discussions on net.religion were diverse, but tended toward Christian discourse and debate, which led to eventual tension with Jewish members of the group, who felt the need for a space where they would not be immediately criticized for advocating their beliefs and traditions. After a request to the USENET administrators and substantial debates surrounding the implication of creating a religion-specific group, their request was granted, and in 1984 'net.religion.jewish' was created. Since then, a variety of forums and websites have emerged, linking Jewish Internet users to anything from kosher recipes to news from Israel (israelnationalnews.com or kipa.co.il), online Jewish dating services (Jdate.com), online Responsa – sites providing 'ask the rabbi' services (askarabbi.com or moreshet.co.il/web/shut/shut.asp) – Judaica shopping (zionjudaica.com or koogole.co.il), popular online Jewish magazines (jewcy.com and aish.com), and sources for studying Torah (torah.org and biu.ac.il/JH/parasha/eng/). The Internet also offers Jews around the world new possibilities to perform rituals of faith. For instance, websites that provide live viewing of the Western Wall, a point of pilgrimage and prayer for Jews, enable participation in the centuries-old tradition of placing prayers in the Western Wall via an email (i.e. aish.com/wallcam/Place\_a\_Note\_in\_the\_Wall.asp) or even microblogging on Twitter (twitter.com/theKotel). One can also join an online minyan prayer service on Shabbat (i.e. newsiddur.org/listen/index.html or esynagogue.org).

While ultra Orthodox religious leaders voiced concerns in the 1990s about the potential 'landmines along the information highway',<sup>36</sup> Jewish Internet use continued to grow, as marked by a number of guidebooks to Judaism online being produced.<sup>37</sup> These provided an introduction to the diversity of resources found online. By 2000, more books had appeared, reflecting on Jewish Internet use. Rosen argued positively in *The Talmud and the Internet* that interaction with the Internet reflects traditional engagement with the Talmud, as both are timeless, unbounded texts.<sup>38</sup> He argued that Internet hypertext, like the Talmud, provides conceptual linkages that allow online readers to flow from the initial text to related sites and sources representing an interactive argument, linking readers between different verbal universes and traditions. He stressed that the Internet also provides a new virtual home for the global Jewish community, as the Internet possesses the ability to bind the Jewish Diaspora together as a repository of stories and shared beliefs, while also providing a meeting space. Hammerman similarly suggested the Internet could be used for spiritual reflection and development.<sup>39</sup> Computer use, he argued, changes the ways people



of faith, including Jews, think about God and personal faith; he challenged people to think of the web as a potential holy ground, a meeting place between God and humanity.

In the past 20 years, a variety of forms of religious Jewish engagement with the Internet have emerged. Through attempts to map motivations for religious engagement with the Internet, scholars have identified several framing narratives describing common religious uses of the Internet.<sup>40</sup> Common motivations for importing religion online include seeing the Internet as: (a) a spiritual network that should be used to facilitate spiritual experiences or encounters for users, (b) a sacramental space where traditional religious ritual can be performed, (c) a tool for promoting religion and thus encouraging missionary activities online, and (d) a technology that can be used to affirm religious life and identity online.

In the past decade, there has also been a steady rise in the number of Israeli-produced religious websites emerging online. While a systematic analysis of Jewish appropriation of the Internet has not yet been undertaken, when looking at prominent Jewish websites, especially those produced in Israel, in light of these strategies, examples of the latter two forms of engagement are clearly evident. Seeing the Internet as a space for religious identity negotiation is exemplified by sites such as Kipa.co.il, a Jewish portal based in Jerusalem that offers discussion forums, news, and feature articles that highlight the views of Israeli Religious Zionists, and Bhadrei *Haredim* (or Bhol.co.il) is a web portal and discussion forum known in Israel for creating a private space for the Haredi public online. Increasing numbers of websites are emerging, seeking to use the web as a space for presenting and managing religious identities in the public sphere.<sup>41</sup> Using the Internet as a missionary or outreach tool is typified by the work of Aish.com, an online magazine based in Jerusalem that aims to provide articles and information especially targeting secular Jews to learn more about Judaism and hopefully become more religious and committed to modern Jewish life. It can also be seen in the work of Chabad.org, which has pioneered using the Internet for outreach purposes since the 1990s.<sup>42</sup>

The development of the religious Israeli Internet has been largely shaped by young religious entrepreneurs who have embraced the possibilities for the Internet to provide a space for religious dialogue and engagement that is not often available within their offline communities.<sup>43</sup> Yet the religious Israeli Internet is also informed by rhetoric produced by various rabbis regarding Internet technology over the past decade. This has resulted in a number of controversies grounded in community leaders' fears about the Internet's potential to influence beliefs and practices within the Orthodox Jewish world.

### **Religious controversy surrounding the Internet in Israel (1999–2010)**

Over the past 15 years, the Internet has been consistently framed as a controversial technology within Orthodox Judaism, especially by many Israeli ultra Orthodox rabbis who have issued public edicts regarding its use and who

have even banned the Internet from their communities. The first ban came in October 1999 from the Israeli Belz Hasidic sect; a few months later, this ban was endorsed by Israel's Ashkenazi Council of Torah Sages, representing key leaders of notable ultra Orthodox communities.<sup>44</sup> The Internet was described as a communal threat and danger to the Jewish people, especially because the web provided easy access to pornography sites and thus was considered a potential source for transgression or, at the very least, a *moshav letsim* (a seat of scorners), a social gathering where no matters of Torah are discussed.<sup>45</sup> While a full ban on computers had been proposed, this was rejected because computers proved valuable for studying Torah and running businesses. Ultra Orthodox rabbis in Israel urged the Jewish community around the world to recognize and embrace this ban.<sup>46</sup>

The ban was generally ignored by non-Orthodox Jews in Israel; in fact, most Jews outside the ultra Orthodox community were unaware of the ban. It was also met with mixed responses by ultra Orthodox communities outside Israel. American Lubavitch in Brooklyn, while recognizing the wisdom of the spirit of such an edict and the motivation to protect innocent children from secular and pornographic content, made no efforts to scale back their growing web presence. The Lubavitch are known worldwide for their embrace of technology for outreach.<sup>47</sup>

The American Lubavitch also operates a series of virtual Jewish centres online that seek to target secular Jews and draw them towards a religious lifestyle.<sup>48</sup> Other ultra Orthodox groups supported the ban's remit not to casually browse the web or shop online but continued to work as computer programmers, using the Internet only when it was imperative or unavoidable for their work. Still others followed, though they quietly criticized the ban for not fully considering the potential benefits it might afford the Jewish community, labelling the act a mere fearful response to worries that 'that technology will act as a mainstreaming force in the community', thereby threatening its separatist nature.<sup>49</sup>

The American ultra Orthodox community's response to the Internet is relatively understudied in comparison to the Israeli ultra Orthodox community, yet such accounts suggest some diversity of response toward the Internet exists within ultra Orthodox communities in different cultural contexts.<sup>50</sup> Thus, it can be argued that while Orthodox Judaism represents a globalized religious network and that specific Israeli ultra Orthodox communities share close connections with their American and European counterparts, responses to the Internet may be localized. This requires considering the extent to which community decision-making regarding the Internet is more influenced by the stance of regional leadership than it is by the official positions of Israeli rabbinical authorities.

In the mid-2000s, there was a slight softening of the Internet ban within some sectors of the ultra Orthodox world. The Internet continued to be seen as a potential danger and gateway to the secular world and its values.<sup>51</sup> Yet it was also recognized that the Internet offered benefits to the community, such as enabling women to work more easily from home.<sup>52</sup> This use of the Internet also created

new tensions, as debates moved between highlighting both the possible community benefits and the dangers associated with Internet use. In July 2008, the Belz Hassidic court, which initiated the first official ban, issued a statement allowing community members to use the Internet for work-related purposes, although there was a debate surrounding the limits of this permission.<sup>53</sup> This use, however, was contingent upon members using a 'restricted Internet' provided by an Israeli Internet company called Internet Rimon, which developed a number of filtering programmes for the Haredi community that sought to offer a 'kosher Internet' option, thus blocking content not pre-approved by community leaders.<sup>54</sup> This was coupled with the emergence of websites such as *Koogle* or *Jgog* ([www.jgog.net](http://www.jgog.net)), which are Hebrew search engines and directories aimed at Israeli Orthodox users. *Jgog* for instance, looks very similar to the Hebrew version of Google, yet it is a uniquely Jewish-focused search engine that includes filtering mechanisms so that 'unorthodox' words or searches for material related to violence, hate speech, sexually explicit topics, and personal dating (except Kosher sites) are blocked or redefined.

In the late 2000s, a number of commercial filtering software technologies and Internet services surfaced within Israel, including Morshet, E-nativ.com, and Rimon, catering to different segments of the religious community. For instance, Internet Rimon launched 'Torahnineto' in 2007 as a set of special Internet services for 'the observant of the Torah' or, broadly speaking, Orthodox users. According to their website, their filters allow 'only what's good on the Internet' through four different levels of filtering programmes that users can select, ranging from email-only access to 'air tight' filtering that allows access to designated sites such as governmental services and online banking. The rise of such filtering technology became a way for some official authorities to approve of Internet use for certain purposes within the community because use was contingent on the expectation that members were only using a restricted Internet. The Belz endorsement in 2008 seemed directly linked to the fact that filtering technology like Rimon allows leadership to control Internet use in some respects, by offering limited 'kosher Internet' which blocks content that has not been pre-approved by its community's leaders.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, in 2008, Shas announced the launch of the 'Kosher Haredi Internet', developed in conjunction with Internet Rimon (<http://www.neto.net.il>). The implementation of such an ISP provided a way for much of the ultra Orthodox community to repair the boundaries they perceived to be transgressed by allowing the technology into the community.

The perceived softening of official condemnation of the Internet led to the rise of a number of new ultra Orthodox news and service websites, such as [Haredim.co.il](http://Haredim.co.il), [kikarhashabat.co.il](http://kikarhashabat.co.il), and [Haredi.co.il](http://Haredi.co.il), which were also modified and available to mobile phone users. These sites sought to provide ultra Orthodox-oriented information and alternative online spaces for interaction that respected the boundaries and beliefs of these communities. However, this growth in ultra Orthodox Internet use created concerns among some sectors and religious leaders. For instance, in the summer of 2009, pashkevils appeared in several Israeli ultra

Orthodox neighbourhoods such as Mea Shearim and Ramat Beit Shemesh, warning against the dangers of Internet use, some even using images of Rabbi Ovid Yosef to strengthen their condemnation. In late 2009, ultra Orthodox rabbis once again issued another ban on the Internet. Yet what was unique about these public statements of condemnation is that they were focused not on the Internet as a whole, but specifically targeted Haredi news websites and blogs. A main contention in the public statement was over the publication of news unsanctioned by the ultra Orthodox authorities, which was seen to be encouraging the spread of gossip, slander, and impurities within these communities. This condemnation seemed to emerge from the growing influence and popularity experienced by many of these new ultra Orthodox-run websites.<sup>56</sup> Sites like *Bhadrei Haredim*, a site specifically targeted by rabbis, boasted 250,000 unique users on a monthly basis. Rabbis decried these sites, 'which impeach a public tempted to [surf] the vilest of places, which have already caused so many in Israel to breach Torah laws about things best kept private'.<sup>57</sup> The statement also targeted advertisers dealing with these websites, urging them to cease their dealings. This generated a heated public debate and tensions between ultra Orthodox webmasters and their rabbis. The result was the resignation of several noted webmasters, while others issued statements affirming commitment to their work, which they argued offered positive alternatives for religious Jews to secular content online; this second group simultaneously declared their continued devotion to their religious leader's authority.<sup>58</sup>

As this new ban gained international attention, online and offline discussions revealed several layers of complex arguments and issues regarding the ultra Orthodox view of media and engagement with modernity. Highlighted issues included tension between old authority structures and new ones emerging through the Internet; concern over the effects of making public the private inner workings of ultra Orthodox communities, and fears that the presence of Haredi websites suggested a religious legitimization of the Internet, which is viewed as highly problematic for many of these closed groups.<sup>59</sup> Another important dimension to this tension was that these Orthodox websites were perceived as direct competition to the many ultra Orthodox community newspapers. At the time, many sites such as *Bhadrei Haredim* commonly posted newspaper headlines on their sites, as almost no ultra Orthodox paper had an online presence due to the critical views of the Internet within their communities. Many editors also believed these sites were threatening to take away valued advertisers from the papers, and thus used editorial space to support the call for banning religious use of the web. In some cases, editors even lobbied rabbis to shut down offending sites.

The result of this controversy was a renewed community advocacy that the Internet should be banned from Haredi homes. If access is needed for business purposes by parents, this should only be done if appropriate Internet filters are first installed and access is monitored by encryption or password protection. As one Haredi journalist stressed, 'So great is the danger that it outweighs such considerations as convenience or even educational value. Only economic

necessity, coupled with layers of protection, can justify its possession.<sup>60</sup> Though the ban sought to pressure Haredi websites into folding by cutting off their sources of advertising income and discouraging community members from visiting them, the result has been quite the opposite; while some sites have undergone revamps or eliminated the news portions of their sites, many continue to thrive in the post-ban culture.<sup>61</sup>

This summary of press accounts provides an overview of a decade of Internet debates, highlighting that religious leaders' angst towards the Internet has not significantly changed, while their strategy and rhetoric about the Internet has had to adapt due to continued community use and engagement. As community members promoted the social affordances of the Internet, such as supporting desired family structures and helping members stay physically within the community for work, religious leaders were forced to recognize the value of the Internet for the community. However, their desire to regain social control over the technology led them to encourage and advocate clearer boundaries for its use, as seen in both official rhetoric and in community members' discourse to justify their use of the Internet and the rise of filtering software. When it was clear that it would be difficult to ban the Internet fully, due to economic and educational affordance, leaders refocused the strategy to attempt to control non-essential uses of the Internet and especially those sites that sought to represent their community online. Exploring the rhetoric and results of these Internet bans also highlights the core research question explored in scholarship of Israeli Orthodox use of the Internet.

### **Study of religion and the Internet in the Israeli context**

Hojsgaard and Warburg described the development of the academic study of religion and the Internet in terms of three waves of research: descriptive, critical, and theoretical.<sup>62</sup> The study of Judaism online also exemplifies this progression. Initially, researchers approached religion online in an attempt to document the phenomena of various faith traditions that embrace the Internet and consider how individual religious users sought to create new forms of spiritual expression online. This approach is also seen in the earliest studies of Judaism and the Internet, which sought to describe online social and religious activities of religious Jews in the broad sense.<sup>63</sup> More work is still needed in this area of documentation, as currently there are no large-scale quantitative studies of religious Internet usage in Israel, such as those conducted by the Pew American and Internet Life project, which accurately assess to what extent the Internet is used as a tool for religious rituals, conversation, or information-gathering.

Descriptive studies opened the door for more critical analysis of religion online within Israel. These second wave studies sought to identify and compare the different forms of religious activity found online and address the social and cultural impact these uses of the Internet were making for individuals and communities. This approach is exemplified by work investigating how the

Internet is more than just a space for housing Jewish religious activities and texts; rather, the Internet becomes a portal for the initiation and the enculturation of Jews into a larger religious community and thus has interesting implications for the Jewish Diaspora.<sup>64</sup> Recently, there has been a move toward more theoretical work in studies of religion and the Internet. These explore in greater detail the offline implications of online religious activities and how the Internet may serve as a microcosm for studying shifts of behaviour and belief in offline religious culture. Studies demonstrating this theoretical and interpretive turn within Judaism online have employed theories related to the social shaping of technology in order to explore how religious Jewish communities navigate their online use in light of their offline community's structure and meaning-making regarding the Internet.<sup>65</sup>

Studies of religion and the Internet within the Israeli context have primarily focused on ultra Orthodox engagement,<sup>66</sup> with special attention to female users.<sup>67</sup> Many of these works investigate a set of similar themes, such as authority, community, and religious identity in relation to Jewish engagement online. Unlike other studies of religion and the Internet, which often initially focused on questions of what constitutes religious community online or the reinterpretation of religious rituals online, from the beginning studies of the Israeli Jewish Internet were primarily concerned with questions of authority. A key issue related to this is the question of who has authority in an Internet age, whether or not the remit of traditional, recognized religious leaders of various communities still hold the same weight and influence.

Those studying Orthodox reaction to the Internet in Israel highlight user and rabbinical concerns over how exposure to secular media messages might endanger moral codes and boundaries of religious community. Researchers draw attention to issues of social control and the role played by traditional authorities in creating policy or perceptions about the Internet. For instance, Horowitz, in one of the first studies of Israeli ultra Orthodoxy and the Internet, found a strong apprehension among leaders toward the Internet, fearing it would disseminate heretical ideas into the community.<sup>68</sup> Leaders strongly advocated the need for tools such as filters to control surfing into forbidden or problematic/sinful spaces online. Condemnations by rabbis and community leaders about the impact of the Internet led other researchers to explore in detail the strategies employed by ultra Orthodox Internet users to frame their use as acceptable within such community rhetoric.

Barzilai-Nahon's and Barzilai's study of ultra Orthodox Internet users of the Israeli website *Hevre* (<http://www.hevre.co.il>) found rabbis' condemnation of the Internet was challenged by the economic demands of the Haredi community.<sup>69</sup> Computers and the Internet allowed women to work from home and support ultra Orthodox family systems. This forced them to shift their official views about the technology. Yet it also required the Internet to be reshaped and constrained to fit within the boundaries and beliefs of the community's culture. Describing the Internet as a textual communication tool in official and personal rhetoric helps the

Internet be recognized as a traditional form of communication. This creates boundaries of use for work- or education-related information tasks, such as responsa or the study of religious texts. However, access also creates fears among religious authorities that empowerment may lead to a breakdown of traditional hierarchies and patterns of life. While some religious authorities are concerned, other sects praise this innovation.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, the ways that the Internet bypasses or challenges traditional authority structures was addressed in Livio and Tenenboim Weinblatt's study of Israeli ultra Orthodox females who used the Internet for work-related tasks.<sup>71</sup> These users felt the need to legitimize their use in the face of potential communal criticism. This meant they tried to distinguish the technology itself from the content produced, separating personal and societal effects, drawing on acceptable justifications such as statements of religious officials, or depoliticizing use by denying subversive implication of the technology. In general, Livio and Tenenboim Weinblatt found the interviewed women deliberately spoke of Internet technology in ways that framed it as compatible with community values – such as the ability to work at home – and that affirmed discernment of use, meaning active decision-making during use and the forced filtering of content.

From concerns about authority, the question of community emerged within Israeli Jewish Internet studies. Some researchers emphasize that the Internet poses an important sphere for studying the inner workings of the closed, enclave culture of the ultra Orthodox community,<sup>72</sup> especially on issues such as gender and sexuality.<sup>73</sup> The topic of 'community' has been approached almost exclusively in terms of how offline ultra Orthodox groups are challenged by the presence of the Internet in their community, as well as how community members see the Internet as a valuable tool for overcoming traditional communal boundaries of access to information. The Internet creates a unique sphere with which to observe and analyze communal discourse regarding engagement with modernity,<sup>74</sup> and highlights how the pragmatic toleration of the Internet within ultra Orthodox circles also demands that the technology be vilified in order to validate and enhance traditional structures of communication control within these groups.<sup>75</sup> These studies also draw attention to questions of religious identity negotiation online, as many research informants praise the Internet for offering them new experiences of freedom of communication and self-expression, which are often not available in their offline communities.<sup>76</sup> This highlights a tension, which is explored several times in this article, between religious leaders' fear that Internet engagement may impinge on traditional behavioural expectations or religious patterns of life and individuals' embrace of new social affordances and employment possibilities.

Few studies of Israeli religious Internet use have addressed the broad spectrum of Orthodox Internet use, let alone non-Orthodox Jewish groups. This means more research that looks in detail at Orthodox cross-community issues is required, such as studies that investigate the use of Internet technology for engaging with Halakah in traditional practices and debate, or online responsa.<sup>77</sup>

Increased attention is being given within the Israeli Orthodox sector to Religious Zionist use of the Internet and its ability to facilitate discourse on religious issues and to serve as a new platform of rabbinical guidance, as suggested by Rabbi Yuval Sherlow.<sup>78</sup> Further exploration of how the Internet is being seen as a space to tackle and debate different issues of Orthodox life and to mediate practices traditionally guided by a rabbi or yeshiva is needed. This calls for a broader comparative approach, which can be seen in recent work that compares different Orthodox groups' use of Internet technologies to create bounded communities, where technology is used to enforce traditional boundaries and official authority structures while also providing space for the emergence of new patterns of religious and social behaviour.<sup>79</sup>

Overall, studies of Israeli religious Internet use have focused on ultra Orthodox use, spotlighting religious authorities' negotiations and policy-setting regarding Internet use, tensions caused by religious users who embrace the Internet, and the creation of a technological apologetic, a public discourse used to justify Internet use or policy. Internet engagement is framed as enabling the transgression of long-established community boundaries, avenues of social control, and recognized religious authorities. In short, researchers have found Internet use by the Israeli Orthodox community has the potential to create a new social dynamic, establishing new sources of authority or leaders online, while allowing traditional sources to maintain or re-establish their authority through Internet surveillance, peer pressure regarding use, and the declaration of official policies.

### **Considering religion and the Internet in wider Israeli society**

The Internet creates possibilities and perils for religious communities and authorities, yet many of these challenges are not new. With the rise of each form of mass media – from the printing press through the birth of electronic media such as radio and television – Orthodox Jews have had to weigh the affordances offered by new media against the potential conflicts of affiliation with the secular world they create. New media raise age-old questions of how Jewish religious identity is constructed, what constitutes the boundaries of community life, how the sacred should be mitigated and lived out in contemporary society, and what constraints faith should place on engagement outside the Jewish world. These issues underlie the question of what it means to be Jewish in a new media world, or the construction of 'virtual Jewishness', as described by Shandler.<sup>80</sup> This is where individuals create their identity by selecting from Jewish history, memory, and rituals offered to them in a given time and context. The notion of virtual Jewishness has been manifest over time within the Diaspora as Jews have had to navigate their cultural history within their present geography and culture in order to create a contextualized understanding of Jewishness. Shandler suggests the Internet is becoming an important gateway and tool for facilitating this process of identity construction. Virtual Judaism represents a process by which the Internet helps create a new extension and form of Jewish culture. Within some Orthodox



sectors, religious use of the Internet is welcome if it facilitates such exploration. Groups such as Chabad.org and Aish.com have actively cultivated online environments that allow people to explore what it means to be Jewish and religious. Yet within other sectors of the Orthodox Israeli context, engagement with the Internet may be framed in divergent ways. Ultra Orthodox religious leaders and groups often voice a fear of the loss of control brought on by online engagement and respond with attempts to culture or constrain Internet technology so that it is more in line with their strict social and moral codes.<sup>81</sup>

This article has shown how different sectors of the Orthodox tradition within Israel have approached religious engagement with media, specifically the Internet. While some segments of the Orthodox community have embraced the Internet, others still see it as highly problematic. This is because it is a technological medium that easily facilitates the transgression of traditions and authority structures in community. The appropriation of the Internet by the Israeli Orthodox community thus raises important issues of boundary maintenance related to religious authority, community, and identity management. In the past decade there has been increasing interest from scholars within a variety of academic fields regarding the engagement of religious Judaism and new forms of media. As shown above, many of these studies have focused on ultra Orthodox groups' interactions and perceptions of various forms of media. Thus, there is a need for further documentation and interpretative analysis of religious Internet engagement within the Israeli context that gives attention to other forms of Judaism and even other religious groups. While much work has been done on how ultra Orthodox authorities are reacting to rising Internet use, the question remains of how other Orthodox groups will be impacted: for instance, considering how Religious Zionists' websites may impact on patterns of communication and authority structures in relation to their offline counterparts in the long term. Thus, this article highlights the current limitations in this field of knowledge and presents a call for more critical work on religion and the Internet within the Israeli context.

As most work conducted has been on ultra Orthodox Jewish use of websites, discussion forums, and filtering software, many aspects related to religion online have yet to be investigated. The lack of research on non-Jewish religious groups reflects to a certain extent the marginalization of these groups within Israel, and thus there is a need for more serious scholarship on these groups and their Internet usage, along with other issues. Future research on religion online should further consider how Web 2.0 technologies, including blogs and social networking platforms such as Facebook, are being used for religious dialogue and community building within the Israeli context. Also, more work is needed on how religion itself – such as its liturgy, symbols, and religious practices – is or is not being transported online within religious groups' use of the Internet in Israel. Finally, future research should explore in more detail the relationship and effect of online religious activities and groups on offline religious communities and institutions. This will help answer the question of whether the Internet can be used as a public sphere for religion in the Israeli context.

### Notes on contributor

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