A forum of their own. Views about the Internet among ultra-Orthodox Jewish women who browse designated closed fora
by Azi Lev-On and Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar

Abstract
The paper studies attitudes towards and perceptions of the Internet by ultra-Orthodox women who are members of closed online forums. The forums constitute a unique environment for ultra-Orthodox women, where they can talk amongst themselves anonymously on issues that may be illegitimate in their community.

Findings show that the ultra-Orthodox women who browse closed designated forums view the Internet as constructive and empowering, but also as a challenge to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle. They acknowledge that the rabbis allow using the Internet only for work-related purposes from the workplace and not from home, and yet they formed online relationships, especially with other ultra-Orthodox women.

The findings demonstrate a sense of ambivalence among the ultra-Orthodox women about the Internet. As independent women living in communities with strict supervision and enforcement patterns, they want to continue and be a part of the ultra-Orthodox community, and yet maintain a site, i.e., a forum, of their own.

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Introduction
The article presents the views of and attitudes towards the Internet of ultra-Orthodox women who browse close designated forums online. This article portrays a unique phenomenon, where ultra-Orthodox women use a modern technology in a space whose legitimacy is questionable
within their community, in which they can communicate anonymously with similarly situated other women about common themes and concerns.

This study is derived from a theoretical framework that deals with the struggle of contemporary conservative communities with the gap between ideology -- the social patterns dictated by values and social norms and are emphasized by institutionalized religion and articulated by community leaders -- and the actual behavior of community members that sometimes only moderately approximate the dictates of ideology (Campbell, 2010). This discrepancy is an especially interesting subject of study in religious communities, in which the tension between "the desirable or the ideal and the requirements and challenges of life" is particularly viable and visible [1].

This study examines the discrepancy between ideology and practice from the unique angle of gender and technology. Studies show that women in fundamentalist societies occupy a significant place in the social dialectic between ideology and practice, despite their marginality, or perhaps because of it (Gross, 1966; Hardacre, 1993). Working women are often perceived as a unique danger and possible agents of change in their communities (Friedl, 1997; Moghadam, 1988).

The disparity between ideology and practice is especially evident in the case of Haredi women employed in computerized environments, including environments with Internet access. On the ideological level, the Haredim are suspicious of new technologies, women are channeled into the private domain and it is thought they should be barred from access to new technologies; their work should help support their families and keep their scholar-husbands within the boundaries of Haredi society. On the practical level, however, the Haredim adopt (although partially and with reservations) new technologies, and women appear in public spheres outside the boundaries of Haredi society, where new technologies are accessible.

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Ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel

The ultra-Orthodox community constitutes about 6.7 percent of the adult (age 20 and up) Jewish population in Israel (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The Jewish religion and all its principles, instructions and limitations strictly dictates the private and public life of community members. The all-encompassing religiosity and relentless study of the Torah differentiate ultra-Orthodox, and ultra-Orthodox people, from other religious sectors in the Israeli society (Friedman, 1991; Liebman, 1992).

The ultra-Orthodox community is not a unified whole, and is rather complex and multifaceted. The various ultra-Orthodox groups are distinguished from one another as a result of paring developments which occurred in Eastern Europe over the past two centuries (Heilman and Friedman, 1991). The split within the ultra-Orthodox community began in eighteenth century Poland with the rise of the Hasidic movement, and the contra-movement of those who opposed it (Mitnagdim), whose members are also called Lithuanians. Nowadays the differences between the Hasidim and the Lithuanians are manifest, among other things, in the emphasis (or lack thereof) on spirituality, perceptions of leadership, dress code and even spoken language. In comparison with Hasidic communities, Lithuanian communities are considered more open and liberal (Friedman, 1991).

The ultra-Orthodox are a minority in Israeli society, which maintains a delicate and tense relationship with the majority. Scholars point at three central models that characterize minority-majority relationships: assimilation, integration, and segregation (Lee and Tse, 1994; Wilson and Gutiérrez, 1995). Most ultra-Orthodox choose the segregation model, zealously preserving their traditional ways of life and distancing themselves from the surrounding society (Orbe, 1998). The segregation from the majority society turns the ultra-Orthodox community into an "enclave culture" (Sivan, 1991), a minority that is disinterested in nurturing relationships with the majority and instead concerns itself with preserving its unique characteristics while avoiding external influences.
As members of a marginalized group (women) within a minority group (the ultra-Orthodox community), ultra-Orthodox women experience a double exclusion. The ultra-Orthodox reserve the key positions in the community for males, leaving women in the periphery, while idealizing women’s place in the private sphere (El-Or, 1995; 1997). The place of a woman, as described in the emblematic passage “all the glory of the daughter of the king is within” (Psalms, 45:14), is emphasized repeatedly in various forms such as modesty classes in schools and texts published in the ultra-Orthodox newspapers. Household functions are considered, primarily, the obligation of women. One of the outstanding characteristics of the ultra-Orthodox domestic sphere is the abundance of children: Ultra-Orthodox women in Israel have 7.7 children on average, compared to 2.6 children among non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish women (Gurovich and Cohen-Kastro, 2004).

The ultra-Orthodox maintain strict gender separation, across all age groups and in nearly all sites: in bedrooms that are either for boys or for girls, but not for both; in schools and academic institutions; in work environments; in family and social events; and, of course in synagogues, that are separated — men are in the front, women are in the back (Yafeh, 2007; Zalcberg, 2007).

The Internet and the ultra-Orthodox in Israel

The self-isolation of the ultra-Orthodox community is manifest, among other things, in the media. The ultra-Orthodox media in Israel includes over 30 newspaper titles, an official radio station and a number of pirate radio stations as well as “small media” such as audio tapes and wall posters (pasquinades) (Neriyah–Ben Shahar, 2008). The “secular” media are generally banned; it is forbidden to own a television, a device which is called “the device of impurity” or “that device.” Similarly, the radio is nicknamed “the device”. These media are considered illegitimate for a number of reasons: they use modern technologies, that are in and of themselves in tension with the values of conservative communities; they may cause ‘bitul Torah’, wasting time at the expense of Torah study; and they may serve as tools for exposure to dangerous content.

The ultra-Orthodox newspapers have a special endorsement because almost all of them operate under rabbinic supervision (Neriyah–Ben Shahar, 2008). In most ultra-Orthodox newspapers there is a “spiritual committee” or an “inspection committee” whose central function is to examine and critique the content of the paper, both the editorial and advertising, and to censor improper subjects, phrases and pictures. The committees are comprised of Rabbis or their representatives (men only) that perform their duty by roster (Levi, 1988; Baumer, 2006).

Ultra-Orthodox women are exposed to various media. They read at least one ultra-Orthodox newspaper, at least once a week; 76 percent of them listen to recorded Torah lessons on audio tapes and/or CDs and 24 percent listen to the religious -Orthodox radio station Kol Chai. Thirty-two percent are exposed to secular media, in varying intensities. When asked if they share their media exposure patterns with their spouses and women friends, ultra-Orthodox women report that they share significantly more with their partner than with their friends, especially when it comes to media which are considered less legitimate, such as radio (Neriyah–Ben Shahar, 2008).

The admission of modern technologies into traditional communities is oftentimes accompanied by wariness and suspicion, all the more so in regards to the Internet. In some religious communities the Internet is perceived as a tool that allows novel religious and spiritual experiences, and provides for believers’ religious and social needs (Campbell, 2005a, 2005b; Cobb, 1998; Ess, et al., 2007). According to Bunt (2000), the Internet creates a public space for members of Muslim communities in which they connect to each other and learn about religious practice. Larson (2001) shows that in many Christian communities, the Internet enhances the sense of belonging to the church and strengthens believers’ faith and spiritual growth. On the other hand, a few studies report opposition from religious and conservative communities to Internet usage (Campbell, 2004; Dawson 2001, 2005). Among other things,
the leaders of those communities are concerned about novel challenges to their authority, and from changes in the hierarchical communal structure.

In ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, the Internet arouses much debate. Attitudes about the Internet range from hesitant acceptance to principled rejection. The view that sides with acceptance perceives the Internet as a tool for finding employment, information, and services. It is also seen as a facilitator of horizontal and vertical communication within the community in Israel, between ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel and abroad and even between members of the community and the great sages of the generations by means of joint learning, watching rabbinical events online, and listening to Torah classes (Zarfaty and Blais, 2002).

The outlook that totally rejects the Internet perceives it as a hazardous medium that may expose community members to dangerous content, even unwillingly. The Internet, which includes infinite worlds of content and enables anonymous communication, can expose the ultra-Orthodox individual to works of heresy, sexual or violent materials, and other content that desecrates the name of God and threatens traditional values (Livio and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2007).

The dominance of this outlook led to the establishment of a special rabbinical committee regarding "the issue of breaches [2] in computers" that on 7 January 2000 publicized a Torah opinion that "every man of Israel should know, that the connection to Internet or to television places, God forbid, the continuation of the generations of Israel in grave danger, and it is a terrible breach in the holiness of Israel." The Internet's danger is "a thousand times more severe [than television], and is liable to bring destruction, God forbid, to the nation of Israel" [3]. Consequently, Internet usage was forbidden, even for assistance in providing a livelihood.

However, the prohibition was one that the public could not uphold. A number of groups in the ultra-Orthodox community ignored the Torah opinion and continued to use the Internet, including the Chasidic sects of Breslov, Rachlin, and others (Zarfaty and Blais, 2002). Although the voice of the rejecting approach is heard loudly, one must check the measure to which it is actually applied. For example, a survey by the Shiluv Research Center (2007) shows that 60 percent of ultra-Orthodox use computers, and among them 57 percent (approximately one-third of the ultra-Orthodox public) use the Internet.

Faced with this, and considering the growth of the ultra-Orthodox business sector and with it the pressure for computerized communications, another "Rabbinic Committee for Matters of Communications" was established in 2006. In December 2007, the Committee permitted Internet use for the first time, but the permission was only granted for supervised access. At the time of writing, a "Kosher Internet" project is in its infancy. The most significant barrier standing before it is, "how to get those who are currently connected to unrestricted Internet to abandon their current connection in favor of the religious filtering solution offered by the Committee" (Pereg, 2007).

A popular activity among ultra-Orthodox Internet users is browsing in dedicated forums (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005; Rose, 2007; Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, 2009). The leading ultra-Orthodox Israeli portal for forums is BeChadrel Charedim [4], which gets 250,000 unique users every month. Rose (2007) claims that the ultra-Orthodox forums are the only means of communication that succeeds in "peaking, without being harmed, into the cloud of hidden secrets that surrounds the controversies within the ultra-Orthodox circles." In addition to the "mixed" forums, special forums were designated for women only, and are only open to women.

A forum exclusively for ultra-Orthodox women is not a simple matter. In the ultra-Orthodox sector there is no daily newspaper that exclusively targets women, and for good reasons. The ultra-Orthodox woman is expected to deal with the household, and if she has free time, she could dedicate it to helping others or learning the weekly Torah portion but not to reading a newspaper. Dealing with beauty, gossip, or sex is taboo for the ultra-Orthodox.

Thus, women's online forums enable them to have a "forum of their own". Such sites have a double significance. First, they guard and protect the women from infiltration of secular culture, for as long as they have "their own site," they do not need to surf on a secular women's forum. Second, they constitute a respectable separated place for themselves to discuss private and public matters.

Closed forums introduce unique advantages to ultra-Orthodox women. Studies show that communities and forums online are important sources for information, support and sense of belonging (Wellman, 2001). In these forums, members can establish new social ties and maintain existing ones, keeping in touch with friends and family living close by or further away (Rainie, et al., 2006; Wellman, et al., 2008). The possibility of interacting anonymously, hiding one’s physical appearance, controlling the interaction to a great level and easily finding like-minded or similarly situated others, are especially valuable to members of stigmatized or marginalized groups (Amichai-Hamburger, et al., 2008). Indeed, the forums that this study focuses on, may generate “protected environments” that enable purely feminine interaction behind the veil of anonymity.

There exist few studies of Internet usage in the ultra-Orthodox world. Livio and Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2007) held in-depth interviews with five ultra-Orthodox women who use the Internet on a regular basis for employment and leisure; the authors focused on their justification of using the Internet despite rabbinic prohibitions. Tyrador Baumel-Schwartz (2009) analyzed the content of five ultra-Orthodox women’s fora written in English and surveyed some events as signs of larger changes in ultra-Orthodox communities (forum members were not exclusively Israeli). Katz (2007) held interviews with members of five ultra-Orthodox families from the northern part of Israel and compared them with the members of five Baptist families. Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) studied usage patterns of 14,000 users of the nostalgic site Chevre who self-categorized as "ultra-Orthodox.

The current study addresses an interesting social phenomenon, created by the theoretical and practical triangle connecting between gender, conservative communities, and the acceptance/rejection patterns of new technologies. Unlike previous studies, the current study targets ultra-Orthodox Israeli women who are members of closed online fora. These fora have a double protection, i.e., entrance is for women only and only to those belonging to the ultra-Orthodox community. This study allows a unique observation of a new and fascinating societal phenomenon with three key goals: Analyzing the views of ultra-Orthodox women regarding the place of the Internet in the ultra-Orthodox community in general, and in their lives in particular; and, Examining the Internet as a tool that enables social connectivity.

Methodology

The research questions examined in this paper are derived from the above mentioned research goals:

1. How do ultra-Orthodox women, who browse close and designated forums online, perceive the place of the Internet in the ultra-Orthodox community?

2. Do they create online connections with ultra-Orthodox and non-ultra-Orthodox women and men?

3. How do these women perceive the place of the Internet in their personal lives?

The first question is an ideological one. In the review we described the orthodox community’s grave concerns of its boundaries being breached. The Internet is perceived as a potentially dangerous trespasser. If so, how is it perceived by the women themselves?

The second question is a practical one, related to fears of the Internet as a tool that makes gender mixing easier, and the creation of connections with men and women from other groups possible. As described in the literature review, fora and social networks may have a central role in the creation and maintenance of social connections among marginalized groups, and women in conservative groups in particular (Rainie, et al., 2006; Wellman, et al., 2008; Shade, 2004). It was therefore hypothesized that, in general, ultra-Orthodox women would also use such fora for social connectivity. The strict gender separation in the ultra-Orthodox community was also noted earlier. The Internet, as a borderless tool, might impinge upon this separation. Women can make contact with men, ultra-Orthodox and non-ultra-Orthodox;
creating contacts with non-ultra-Orthodox women is also a threat, since it breaches the boundaries of the community. Non-ultra-Orthodox women can influence, ideologically and practically, the perceptions and behaviors of ultra-Orthodox women. Therefore, it is hypothesized that the women would allow themselves to make online connections mainly with other ultra-Orthodox women, and only a minority would make online connections with men.

The third question deals with the gap between ideology and practicality. From an ideological aspect, the Internet is a “dangerous” tool. From a practical aspect, it was hypothesized that it holds an important place in the lives of the women. This hypothesis is based on a variety of studies, such as by Orgad (2005), illuminating the major role of the Internet in closed groups of women, and by Nerya-Ben Shahar (2008), which describes, inter alia, the experience of reading and the consumption of media among ultra-Orthodox women.

Thus, the hypotheses are:

1. Most ultra-Orthodox women would perceive the place of the Internet in ultra-Orthodox society as harmful and dangerous.
2. Most ultra-Orthodox women would create online connections with other ultra-Orthodox women and a few of them with non-ultra-Orthodox women. Most would not create online connections with men, ultra-Orthodox or other.
3. Most ultra-Orthodox women would perceive the place of the Internet in their personal lives as empowering.

This is the first intervening and quantitative study of Internet usage in the ultra-Orthodox community. The research tool used in this study was an author-generated questionnaire, composed of two main parts: first, a list of statements that subjects were asked to rate on a scale including five options ranging between “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree”; and second, a few socio-economic and socio-demographic measures. The first section of the questionnaire was broken into three subsections addressing conceptions of the place of the Internet in the ultra-Orthodox society; conceptions of the place of the Internet in the lives of ultra-Orthodox women; and, connections formed online, with ultra-Orthodox and non-ultra-Orthodox women and men.

The second part of the questionnaire addressed the following variables: work outside home (of both the women and spouses); occupation; availability of a computer at home; availability of Internet connection at home; level of education (number of formal years of study, and academic degree); personal status; number of children; age; birth country of the woman and of her father; level of religious observance; political stance; and, income level.

We used a script with seven open-ended questions as a guideline for the conversational interviews with participants. To ensure consistency, the same person conducted all of the interviews.

**Questionnaire validity and credibility**

The questionnaire was worded on the basis of an in-depth familiarity with the ultra-Orthodox community in general and ultra-Orthodox women in particular. Special attention was given to fine-tune the text so it corresponds to the unique parlance used in the ultra-Orthodox sector. Before distributing the questionnaires they were pre-tested with a number of ultra-Orthodox women who completed them and commented on them. The questionnaire was also sent to key researchers who study perceptions of media exposure and to others who study the ultra-Orthodox community. The questionnaire was revised in accordance with the comments received.

**Research procedure**

The research procedure was composed of three main stages: forum choice, obtaining permission from forum managers to post links to the online questionnaire, and gathering the data from the survey Web site.

**A. Forum choice.** Mapping and choosing the relevant fora for this study took place during 2007 by one of the writers and a teaching assistant, both religious women well qualified to recognize nuances and difference between ultra-Orthodox and other religious Web sites. Fora
were chosen from popular ultra-Orthodox sites, such as "Bechadrey Charedim" and "Ladaat," and from popular non-ultra-Orthodox sites like "Tapuz" that maintain forums for ultra-Orthodox women. After filtering out fora for religious but non-ultra-Orthodox women, as well as open fora for the ultra-Orthodox population, we were left with four closed fora for ultra-Orthodox women, which were the subject of this study. The following is a short description of the four fora.

Locked Garden [5]: A forum for ultra-Orthodox women at Hyde Park, which defines itself as the "Israeli center of forums." The manager of the forum commented that members mainly access the site from work. The typical issues discussed in the forum are cooking, clothing and child education, as well as ultra-Orthodox themes involving religious questions and sectarian politics. In a phone conversation the manager stated that "there are no forbidden topics for discussion, except issues that silence suits them." It seems like the "forbidden" topics especially regard intimate relationships and sex. The women that browse the forum belong to a variety of groups that make up the ultra-Orthodox community. To become a member one must send a request to the manager with a recommendation from an existing member. The acceptance process is finalized after prospective members agree to adhere to the conditions of the forum.

Harbayot [6]: Another forum for ultra-Orthodox women at Hyde Park. According to the manager, all issues are open for discussion. If members want to discuss a certain topic without revealing their identity they can use the nickname "anonymous," whose password is known to all of them. Members’ ages range from 19 to 60. Acceptance to the forum is conditional upon personal acquaintance with the manager.

The Bachelorettes among us [7]: A forum for ultra-Orthodox women at BeChadrei Charedim (owned by Hyde Park). According to the manager, the issues discussed are oftentimes related to matchmaking. The subjects that are forbidden are "subjects that require modesty". The forum's members are ultra-Orthodox single women that finished their schooling. The acceptance process is done through a request to the manager.

Browsing to Know [8]: A forum for ultra-Orthodox women at Ladaat (literally, To Know), which defines itself as a news site for the ultra-Orthodox community. The subjects of discussion are shopping (shoes, clothes, etc.), tips for child rearing, and religious issues. When one of the forum members was asked if there were any taboo subjects, she replied: "You know the subjects that aren't spoken about anywhere. Certainly not in a forum like this." Members come from all sectors of the ultra-Orthodox community. The application process begins with sending a request to the site Ladaat which is then forwarded to the forum manager, who then phones the applicant to ensure that she is really a woman. The applicant answers a few questions and afterwards she receives a nickname in the forum.

B. Receiving permission. Forum managers were contacted by e-mail and/or phone, we explained the goals and process of the study and asked for their assistance in posting a link to the questionnaire. The survey itself was posted in the survey generator Web site Survey Monkey (http://www.surveymonkey.com/). The managers were asked a few questions about the number of members in the forum, subjects discussed, subjects that are never brought up, member population, and terms of acceptance.

C. Filling the survey. The managers advertised a link to the questionnaires on the forum and the women who chose to participate clicked on the link and filled out the questionnaire. The questionnaire text assured subjects that they remain anonymous.

Sampling and study population

The study population involves ultra-Orthodox women who browse closed fora online, that are designated exclusively for ultra-Orthodox women. We cannot know how many women belong to this population or what their characteristics are; hence a probabilistic sample is irrelevant. Instead, it was decided to perform a non-probabilistic volunteer sampling, along the lines described above. The questionnaire was filled by 53 women.

Let us recall that ultra-Orthodox communities are conservative and deeply embedded in codes of modesty and chastity. Hence it is excessively difficult to recruit this population to participate in academic studies (Nariya-Ben Shahar, 2008; Rier, et al., 2008). Furthermore, the number
of ultra-Orthodox women surfing online fora, open or closed, is unknown. Reports provided by the forum manager show that 166 women were subscribed to the four fora, 90 of which were active (some on a daily basis). Hence, the 53 responses represent response rates ranging between 32–59 percent.

Half of the participants have an academic degree (or an equivalent) [9], and the average number of years of formal schooling is 14.71. Participants come from a variety of sects within the ultra-Orthodox community, 53 percent are Lithuanian, 35 percent Hasidic, six percent Sephardic and the remainder belonging to other smaller sects. The majority is Israeli born (91 percent) while the rest were born in the U.S., Canada and France. Eighty percent of participants were married, while the rest were single. The average age of participants was 26.31 (age range was 21–40).

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Findings and discussion

In the following, “agreement” to a certain statement is calculated by the percentage of the answers “very much agree,” “agree” and “somewhat agree” (answers 3–5); and, “agreement level” is the average of answers (between 1 and 5). We decided not to label one of the choices as “undetermined,” in order to place subjects in a position of agreement or disagreement.

Hypothesis 1 (“Ideology”): Most ultra-Orthodox women would perceive the place of the Internet in the ultra-Orthodox society as harmful and dangerous.

The term danger was chosen as it is a part of the ultra-Orthodox view towards modern technology, and often appears in texts publicized in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods. We hypothesized that the majority of women would view the Internet as dangerous for the ultra-Orthodox community. Indeed, 74 percent (39) of the women agreed with the statement, “I think the Internet is a danger to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle” (mean= 3.5). 64 percent (34) agreed with the statement, “I think the Internet is as dangerous as the television since it enables hearing and seeing forbidden content” (mean= 3.91) and 62 percent (33) agreed with the statement, “In my opinion, the Internet is dangerous like the cell phone since it enables contacting other people” (mean= 3.12).

A possible means of coping with the dangers is to use a “Kosher” Internet which allows access only to certain sites, based on screening made by the Internet service provider. One of the statements addressed this possibility: “In my opinion, Kosher Internet with certified filtering is not a danger.” Eighty-one percent (42) agreed to this statement (mean= 3.4). This result seems to capture the complexity of technology perception by the ultra-Orthodox: If the technology can become Kosher, its use should be permitted. Thus, the danger lies not in the technology per se, but rather in its applications in specific environments.

1a. In an ultra-Orthodox household, there is no place for the Internet

Let us further explore the perception of the Internet as a dangerous tool. Using Pearson correlation tests we found significant correlations between the level of agreement with the statement: “I think that the ultra-Orthodox household has no place for the Internet” and the levels of agreement with these statements:

- “I think the Internet can weaken people in terms of religion” (r=.41, p<.01)
- “I feel that the Internet weakens me in terms of religion” (r=.51, p<.01)
- “I think the Internet is a danger to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle” (r=.71, p<.01)
- “I think that the Internet is dangerous like the television since it enables seeing and hearing forbidden content” (r=.5, p<.01)

A possible explanation to the high level of agreement with the statements expressing danger has to do with the religious stringency and strictness of the ultra-Orthodox community (Hellman and Friedman, 1991). Also, as an “enclave culture” (Silvan, 1991), the ultra-Orthodox household guards and defends its boarders from the penetration of threatening
content and technologies. The correlations between the statements demonstrate that the concerns are accompanied by establishing fences around the ultra-Orthodox household.

1b. The Internet is dangerous: It is similar to the television and the cellular phone

Significant correlations were found between the statements "I think the Internet is dangerous like the television since it enables hearing and seeing forbidden content", and the following statements:

- "In my opinion, the Internet is dangerous like the cellular phone since it enables contacting other people" (r=.54, p<.01).
- "I think I am able to control what content I am exposed to online" (r=-.31, p<.01)

To account for the positive correlation between the view of the Internet as "dangerous like the television" and the view that the Internet is "dangerous like the cellular phone", one should recall that the ultra-Orthodox community is very wary of these two devices. The perception that the television is an "impure device" and a dangerous tool is deeply rooted (Nerina–Ben Shahar, 2008). The cellular phone is dangerous since it enables unsupervised contact with others. The Internet is doubly dangerous since it combines the two dangers, exposure to threatening content and relationship formation.

Furthermore, the more dangerous the participants perceive the television to be, the less they perceive themselves as capable of controlling the content they are exposed to online.

1c. The Internet is dangerous: the fear of being exposed to inappropriate content

Fully 91 percent (48) of participants agreed to the statement: "I think I am able to control what content I am exposed to online" (mean=3.83). Seventy-one percent (38) of the women admitted that "sometimes I am exposed to inappropriate content online (unintentionally)" (mean=3.66).

The ultra-Orthodox education system teaches how to control "evil inclinations" (Goodman, 2003). Ultra-Orthodox women, who observe Jewish law and stay away from foods that are not exceptionally Kosher, also stay away from spiritual food that is not "Kosher", and make efforts not to browse to Web sites that may include inappropriate content. They do, however, admit that they are sometimes exposed to this kind of content (unintentionally). Perhaps the expression "unintentionally" assisted participants to admitting to this "sin."

1d. The Internet is dangerous, but "I am not like everyone"

When participants were asked if they had Internet at home, 75 percent (40) responded affirmatively. Still, only 25 percent (10) of the women that have Internet at home agree with the statement, "In my opinion, most ultra-Orthodox households have Internet."

Interestingly, 88 percent (46) of the women agreed with the statement, "I think that the Internet can weaken people in terms of religion" (an average agreement level of 4.15), but only 48 percent (26) of the women agreed with the statement, "I feel that the Internet weakens me in terms of religion" (an average agreement level of 2.6).

These findings demonstrate the existence of a third-person effect (Davison, 1983), whereby individuals perceive media messages to be significantly more influential on others than on themselves. Third-person studies examined, for instance, the perception of influence of mass media messages regarding pornography and violence. Studies show that individuals perceive themselves as more resilient to such "negative" influences of the media, relative to the general population (for a meta-analysis of third person studies, see Paul, et al., 2000).

The third-person effect is relevant to the Internet, for example regarding the perception of the influence of pornographic and violent content on the Internet (Lee and Tamborini, 2005; Lo and Wei, 2002). Arguably, the findings accord with the above mentioned studies and the Internet is perceived as dangerous in general, but more so for others than for the subjects in this study.

Women declared that the Internet is dangerous to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle. Still, and in notable tension with the ideological declarations, 75 percent (40) of the respondents had Internet at home. To further explore this tension, a comparison was made between women
who have Internet at home and those who do not in the levels of agreement with the statements that express concerns from the Internet. The findings are displayed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think that the Internet can weaken people in terms of religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t=2.7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df=49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the Internet is a danger to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t=2.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df=50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the Internet is dangerous like television since it enables seeing and hearing prohibited content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t=3.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df=50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In my opinion, the Internet is dangerous like the cellular phone since it enables contacting other people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t=2.36*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df=49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings demonstrate that women who do not have Internet access at home, perceive it as more dangerous than women who do have it. It seems that the more the women perceive the Internet as dangerous, the less they incline to enter it into their homes. An additional possibility is that the participants who do not allow the Internet in their homes, rationalize their decision by arguing that it as extremely dangerous.

Hypothesis 2 (Ideology-oriented practices): Most ultra-Orthodox women would create online connections with other ultra-Orthodox women and a few of them with non-ultra-Orthodox women. Most of them would not create online connections with men, ultra-Orthodox or other.

We hypothesized that most ultra-Orthodox women would form online relationships with other ultra-Orthodox women, and a few with other women. In contrast, the majority of the ultra-Orthodox women would not form online relationships with men, ultra-Orthodox or otherwise. The following are the levels of agreement to the relevant statements:

92% (49): I am in contact with different women online (mean=4.15).

89% (47): I use the Internet to meet new [female] friends (mean=4).

70% (37): I am in contact only with other ultra-Orthodox women online (mean=3.57).

49% (26): I am in contact with different people online (mean=2.6).

Women form online relationships with other women, but most of them maintain relationships only with other ultra-Orthodox women. The expression "different women" was chosen to relate to non-ultra-Orthodox women as well, without explicitly pointing to "secular and religious women."

Half of the women are in contact with "different people" online. This expression was chosen to include (with appropriate caution) the option of a relationship with men, ultra-Orthodox and otherwise. Here our hypothesis was nearly rejected, as the percentage of women who form online contacts with other people seems high. It is possible that the women are in contact with men only for work-related issues; further study is necessary to address this point.

We also hypothesized a correlation between viewing the Internet as a legitimate work tool and the level of online relationships formed. Indeed, a positive correlation was found between the level of agreement with the statement: "From what I understand, the rabbis in my circle allow the use of the Internet only for work related purposes" and the level of agreement with the statement "I am in contact with different women online" ($r=.33$, $p<.05$).

The legitimate existence of the Internet at the workplace enables the ultra-Orthodox women to be in contact with different women. Still, they prefer that their friends not know that they use the Internet, even when they think that rabbis allow its use for work purposes. Perhaps they fear that their friends would assume that they use the Internet for other purposes. "Different" women, with whom participants work, know that they use the Internet but they may not share this information with her friends.

**Hypothesis 3 (Gap between ideology and practice): Most ultra-Orthodox women would perceive the place of the Internet in their personal lives as empowering.**

We hypothesized that most of the women would view the Internet in their personal lives as empowering. Indeed, 96 percent (51) of the women agreed with the statement: "I feel that the Internet enables me to achieve things that I wasn't able to before" (mean=4.49) and 56 percent (30) agreed to the statement: "I feel that the Internet enables me rest and relaxation" (mean=3.56).

Apparently, subjects appreciate the contribution of the Internet to their ability to achieve things, and understand that the Internet assists them in their lives. However, only half let themselves find in it rest and relaxation. Still, these findings, alongside the findings that point to the perceived dangers of the Internet, point to a dissonance. If the Internet harms the ultra-Orthodox community and the subjects are ultra-Orthodox women, why isn't the Internet perceived as personally harmful as well? This dissonance points, again, at the gap between ideology and practice, between declaring that the Internet is dangerous, to using it frequently and recognizing its many advantages.

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**Conclusion**

The paper addresses the encounter between traditional communities, modern technologies and gender through the study of ultra-Orthodox women who are members of closed and designated Internet fora.

Most ultra-Orthodox object to technological innovations in general, and perceive the Internet as especially dangerous: a modern information and communication technology which can introduce heresy and dangerous content right into one's living room. But in practice, the penetration rates of the Internet to the ultra-Orthodox sector are steadily growing, and Internet fora are dazzling with action.

Ultra-Orthodox women are socialized that their ideal place is inside the home, and are supervised by the community when they leave it. Yet, since they often are the main providers of their families, they move between the household and the public domain. Thus, it is especially interesting to learn how they perceive the consequences of the Internet for their communities and for themselves personally, which online connections they form and with
whom. These questions were studied using an online questionnaires filled by ultra-Orthodox women who browse closed and designated online fora.

Findings show that participants perceive the Internet as harmful and dangerous to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle. They agreed with the statements that compared the dangers of the Internet with those of the television and cellular phones, both of which bring home dangerous content and enable contact with different people. The women pointed out that the Internet can weaken the ultra-Orthodox community and themselves in terms of their religiosity, among other things, through exposure to dangerous content. At least in the declarative level, the ultra-Orthodox ideology certainly has in impact on subjects’ perceptions of the Internet — as a dangerous tool. At the same time, findings also demonstrate a gap between ideology and actual practice; participants view the place of the Internet in their lives as vital and empowering. Most of them have Internet at home, which points at the gap between ideology and practice. Subjects feel that the Internet enables them to achieve things they were unable to before, and some of them even acquire rest and relaxation through some of their online pursuits. How do these women cope with this disparity? A comprehensive answer to this question requires in-depth interviews in a separate study, designed to further explore the unique meanings of Internet usage for women whose access to information was severely restricted throughout their entire life.

Ultra-Orthodox women form online relationships, but most of them are only with other ultra-Orthodox women. Still, the Internet enables them to form relationships that they wouldn’t have made otherwise. Even if many of these relationships are work-oriented and legitimate unto themselves, the participants still have here a novel opening to acquainting the non-ultra-Orthodox world, with its abundance of temptations.

The ultra-Orthodox women who browse closed Internet forums are thus absorbed into two worlds at once. They are members of a traditional community that is wary of its borders, and agree with the statements that express this wariness. At the same time, they are modern and educated women who recognize the vital place of the Internet in their lives. Will the encounter between traditional community and modern technology cause and/or accelerate the changes happening in the ultra-Orthodox Israeli community? This question remains, for now, open.

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Notes


2. Breach, pirtza, is the common term in ultra-Orthodox rabbinic speech for breach in traditional values, rabbinic decrees, or exposure to improper content.


4. The phrase BeChadrei Chadarim literally means "in the rooms of rooms," which means in the inner chambers, deep inside. The portal's name, BeChadrei Cahredim, is a play-of-words, literally meaning "in the rooms of the ultra-Orthodox," but also hinting that some of the activities that take place on the site should be well hidden and kept secretive, according to many members of the ultra-Orthodox community who use the site.

5. [web link] The forum was established in February 2007. Up until November 2008, 19,500 messages were posted to the forum. In the month of November 2008 14,000 pages were viewed, and the forum had 46 members. About 20 members visit the forum on a daily basis.

6. [web link] The forum was established in November 2004. Until November 2008, 47,000 messages were posted. In November 2008, 38,000 pages were viewed; there were 58 registered members, of which 35 were active according to the manager.

7. [web link] The forum was established in August 2006. Until November 2008, 19,000 messages were posted. In November 2008, 6,600 pages were viewed, and there were 29 registered members, ten of whom were active according to the manager.

8. For more background about our ongoing research project, see the Project Information Literacy Web site at [web link], accessed on 22 December 2010.

9. Ultra-Orthodox rabbis overwhelmingly instruct their following not to learn in universities or colleges. There is an agreement between Ministry of Education and the ultra-Orthodox sector, by which women can take education classes in ultra-Orthodox institutions and in groups of women only. Many women participate in such "degree equivalents" programs, and those who graduate receive a 'degree equivalent' and a certificate that enables them salaries parallel to those of academic teachers in Israel. Consequently, the variable "Has an academic degree" refers also to women who possess a 'degree equivalent.'

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