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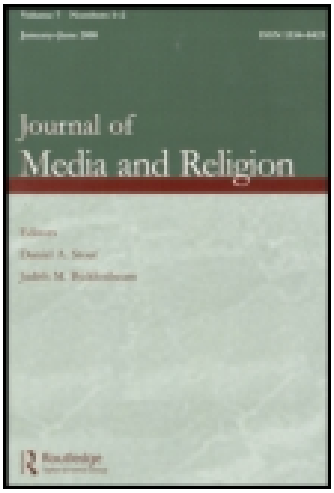

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Sharrona Pearl[a]
[a] University of Pennsylvania
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Exceptions to the Rule: Chabad-Lubavitch and the Digital Sphere

Sharrona Pearl
University of Pennsylvania

This article explores the tension between the inside and the outside in Chabad practice as represented by the digital sphere. Drawing on a close reading of Chabad Web sites, as well as archival and theoretical sources and biblical and rabbinic analysis, Chabad's relationship to media generally and the Internet specifically is explored. I find that Chabad's institutional use of the Internet is as a space to disseminate information rather than create community. The Internet is, for Chabad, a temporary space designed to bring people together in the real world rather than to create a virtual community. The Web site is designed to encourage people to seek out in-person encounters with Chabad Rabbis, whose recruitment techniques rest largely on personal charisma and interactions.

Some 34 years after Internet visionary and Chabad Hasid Rabbi Yosef Kazen started experimenting with fidonet as a means of Jewish outreach, the leading Chabad girls high school, Beis Rivkah, ordered its students to delete their Facebook accounts (Chapman et al., 2012). This move does not represent a sea change in Chabad's attitude toward media; their Web sites, video broadcasts, and publishing empire make up the single most impressive Jewish media organization in the world. Rather, the seeming contradiction between Chabad's internal approach to media and its extensive media network is entirely consistent with the careful (and at times precarious) balance Chabad has struck between openness and outreach, tradition and transformation. Chabad Hasidim are in the business of teaching other Jews about the Hasidic lifestyle in order to recruit their practice. Practice here is important; intention, while valuable, is not the point. According to Chabad theology, every fulfillment of a *mitzvah*, a commandment, benefits the Jewish body as a whole. It might also, in the best case scenario, awaken the intention that is, according to Chabad theology, always already there.

This might seem like a series of double standards. Chabad has (rightly) earned a reputation as the most open of the ultra-Orthodox sects. (Modest) Western dress is allowed and, for *shluchim* (professional outreach emissaries), promoted as a value. Women in particular are urged to dress fashionably, both to connect with non-Orthodox women and to model the possibility of *tznius* (modest) attractiveness. Men wear suits and interesting ties, and often roll

Correspondence should be sent to Sharrona Pearl, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 3620 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6220. E-mail: spearl@asc.upenn.edu

their beards and tuck their subtle *peyot* (sidecurls) behind their ears. They are not hiding—they are relating and being related to. (Though sometimes, in service of authenticity and old-world charm, these marks of Jewish observance are emphasized and highlighted.) Women drive. Although the men, particularly Rabbis engaged in *shluchis* (outreach), often have little secular higher education (excluding the *ba'alei teshuva*, or returners to observance, formerly nonobservant Jews who have joined the community later in life) many women boast higher degrees in fields such as teaching and computer programming (Fishkoff, 2005, p. 252). Not only is the Internet not shunned (unlike, according to recent headline-grabbing news, in other ultra-Orthodox communities; Otterman, 2012) it is carefully cultivated, strategically deployed, and in heavy use as a recruitment tool, a means of engagement, a method of (knowingly or otherwise) causing viewers to do *mitzvos*, and as the fulfillment of the divine commandment *ufaratztah*—"you will disseminate" (Chabad-Lubavitch in Cyberspace, 2009). The "present information revolution," in the words of the late Chabad *Rebbe* (dynastic leader) Menachem Mendel Schneerson, has a "divine purpose":

> ... which gives an individual unprecedented power and opportunity ... to allow us to share knowledge—spiritual knowledge with each other, empowering and unifying individuals everywhere. We need to utilize today's interactive technology not just for business or leisure but to interlink as people—to create a welcome environment for the interaction of our souls, our hearts, our visions. (Chabad.org, 2012)

Far from being a source of fear and a temptation to be avoided, the internet is an important and powerful tool in reaching the ultimate goal. The Internet is to be used. By *shluchim*. For outsiders.

In this article, I explore the tension between the inside and the outside in Chabad practice as represented by the digital sphere. I focus my analysis around the practice-oriented approach of the Chabad community, delving into the theological roots of this mindset and thinking through its applications. Drawing on a close reading of Chabad Web sites, as well as archival sources dealing with Chabad's history with and relationship to media, and biblical and rabbinic analysis, I engage in an exploration of Chabad's relationship to media generally and the Internet specifically. I use discourse analysis and historical evidence to consider the factors that have contributed to the ways that Chabad balances internal restrictions with outreach-motivated openness in their use of the Internet. A note about language: many of the frameworks within which this community operates are defined by Yiddish terms. I am attentive to these actors' categories and try to preserve the original language while offering a translation alongside. The concepts encapsulated by these terms are often quite specific, and presenting them just in translation would not do justice to the ideas therein.

A community deeply committed to the idea of *shluchis*, or emissarism, Chabad is unique among Hasidic sects for its relationship to non-Orthodox Jews. Chabad *shluchim* (emissaries or outreach workers, those engaged in *shluchis*) establish Chabad Houses in communities across the world with even very small Jewish populations. Once they arrive in their postings, which are life-long, they reach out to unaffiliated and non-Orthodox Jews, either independently or occasionally in collaboration with the established Jewish community. Unlike missionary work in other religions, Chabad focuses only on Jews, and, in accordance with Jewish tradition, has no interest in converting non-Jews to the faith views.

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What role does the digital play in Chabad's outreach activities? What is the status of the internet as a *shaliach*? How does Chabad use media to enroll practice amongst unaffiliated and marginally affiliated Jews? More specifically, I hope to begin to understand exactly what sort of opportunity the Internet represents to the Hassidic sect of Chabad-Lubavitch. Both an archive of immodesty and a powerful tool of outreach, the Internet stands at the crossroads of Chabad's negotiation between openness and entrenchment, enrollment and exclusion.

Ultimately, I argue, Chabad's institutional use of the Internet is as a space to disseminate information rather than create community. Personal use beyond recruitment purposes is largely frowned upon, with exceptions that I discuss below. The Internet excels at practice-oriented outreach for specific and momentary behaviors (O'Leary, 1996), which is an important but ultimately subordinate part of the Chabad outreach strategy. Despite its rhetoric and seeming framework of orthopraxy, Chabad philosophy is deeply entrenched in an orthodox framework. The Internet is, for Chabad, a temporary space designed to bring people together in the real world rather than to create a virtual community. Chabad.org is a way-station, a place to gather information to inspire visitors to do, to learn, and, importantly, to experience. While it is a font of valuable information for the merely interested or the aspiring observant Jew, as well as an archive of useful outreach materials, it is not a place to gather. There is no access to communal conversation beyond a simple "ask the rabbi" framework that connects visitors to one specific person to answer specific questions. The point of Chabad.org is to get people to browse, to gather information, to perform specific individual *mitzvos* like candle lighting, and then to leave. To leave to go out in the world to meet a Chabad rabbi, to participate in a prayer service, to experience *Shabbos*, to come back to real physical space again. And again and again.

While the Internet can connect people, there can never, theologically, be a virtual *minyan*, a prayer quorum. Certain prayers can only be performed in the actual company of nine other qualified (read: male in traditional Jewish communities) Jews of the age of majority. Everyone has to be in the same physical space. This has always been so: the synagogue, the central focus of a Jewish community, is called in Hebrew a "*Beit Knesset*," a "house of gathering" rather than a "house of prayer." It is designed to bring people together. While the digital can access people's concerns in a protected fashion, it cannot reassure through care and touch. While web pages can offer menus for *Shabbos* meals, they cannot replicate the scent of fresh *challah* (traditional Jewish braided loaves) and chicken soup. Chabad emissaries are entirely aware of these shortcomings, and have constructed their outreach edifice to balance the personal with the virtual. You can find *Shabbos* candle lighting times on Chabad.org, but you cannot buy candles. More centrally in terms of visual layout, you can find the location of the nearest Chabad House so that you will go to one. There, you will be enveloped in personal warmth and connection, which, Chabad believes, both cannot and should not be replicated online. The digital directs you to the actual, and that is where the real work begins.

With only one major exception, and that is the late Rebbe himself. The dynastic leader Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994) had early realized the potential of media as a tool not only for outreach but for internal cohesion. Beginning in the 1970s, he used print, radio, and video to establish a virtual version of himself to inspire followers, create community, and establish a legacy that successfully carried the movement through the trauma of his demise and lack of successor. Geared specifically toward members of the community rather than to potential recruits, the archive and persona of the virtual Rebbe is now largely situated within

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and deployed through Chabad.org, bringing together *shluchim* from around the world to connect not with one another but to his charisma and mission.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The unprecedented breadth of outreach and degree of penetration of Chabad has attracted much scholarly and journalistic attention. Under the auspices of the most recent and highly charismatic dynastic leader or *Rebbe*, the late Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Chabad began a program of travelling emissary outreach, *shluchis*, in the 1950s (Fishkoff, 2005). Schneerson assembled the leadership of Chabad in 1950, from which point he laid out a plan to extend Jewish outreach to every part of the globe. To date, there are more than 4,500 Chabad *shluchim* (a number which represents a consistent rise over time) whose target populations range from traditional synagogue members to college students to prison inmates to those battling drug and alcohol addiction (Fishkoff, 2005). During the Rebbe's lifetime, each placement was personally cleared by him; the aspiring couple received his approval and set out to establish their Chabad center on a shoestring budget. All fundraising and programming was done on an individual and local basis by the new agents, whose placement was theirs for life. (While the option to move is available, very few avail themselves of it, taking seriously the challenges inherent in the work from the outset.) For some, this means a lifetime of outreach work in places such as South Florida and Cleveland, Ohio. For others, their community building and financing operations take place in Uzbekistan, Shanghai, Alaska, and other locations even more remote and devoid of Jewish life. And still, for the sake of even a handful of Jewish residents, they go.

Chabad is somewhat uniquely situated for ethnographic and historical study as a Hasidic (traditional ultra-Orthodox Jewish) movement that is not only willing but eager to talk to outsiders. Journalistic accounts such as Fishkoff (2005) have captured the fascination that Chabad holds as this blend of old-world adherence, strong commitment to religious ideals, and cutting-edge media and outreach machine.

W. Shaffir's (1974, 1995) ethnographic work reinforces the importance of outreach as a means of guarding against assimilation. Shaffir shows that for Chabad, outreach is so central to group identity and ideology that it helps secure the status of *shluchim* within the larger Chabad community. Outreach work necessarily requires contact with non-Hassidic ways of life and activities, but these deviations from a traditional lifestyle only serve to reinforce it. In this way, Shaffir argues that outsider exceptions actually strengthen the position of the emissary within the group.

Psychologists, ritual theorists, and anthropologists have expressed interest in Chabad's messianism and dynastic culture, focusing in particular in communal reactions to the death of the Rebbe without an heir. Dein (2010) has explored the coping mechanisms used by those segments of the community who believed the Rebbe to be the messiah and the ways they have responded to the apparent failure of the messianic age to manifest to date. In a particularly interesting take on this issue, art historian Maya Balakirsky Katz (2010) has thought critically about the role that portraits of the rabbinic dynasty have played in strengthening community ties, and how these aspects of visual culture have sustained the community in the wake of the Rebbe's death. While she does not engage explicitly in media theory, her work resonates with

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this exploration of Chabad's use of the digital as a way of sustaining its outreach mission while emphasizing the importance of personal connection.

Numerous scholars have explored the relationship between religion and technology, focusing in particular on fundamentalist and highly traditional groups. Campbell (2007) investigates the sophisticated negotiation between religious groups and new technologies, focusing in particular on the kosher cell phone and the Amish engagement with the phone. She demonstrates that the response of religious communities to new technologies reflect their prevailing cultural attitudes and commitments; Chabad's approach to the internet as a carefully controlled means of outreach reflects and supports Campbell's claims. Livio and Tenenboim Weinblatt (2007) pursue a similar set of claims in their exploration of Internet use by Ultra-Orthodox Israeli women. They examine the disparities between the framing of the Internet as a highly dangerous secular technology and its actual subversive use for financial purposes. Livio and Tenenboim Weinblatt focus in particular on the rhetorical framing women use to justify their practice, a negotiation again in keeping with Chabad's careful framing of Internet use for specific and highly controlled purposes. Barzilai-Nahon and Barzailai (2005) reorient these claims by arguing that religious communities adapt their frameworks to adjust to the technology while simultaneously reshaping the technology to adhere to their cultural norms. Their nuanced study introduces the notion of cultured technology, an idea very much in keeping with Chabad's long-term media vision and its adaptation to newer digital technologies.

Chabad's highly sophisticated use of media reinforces Hoover and Venturelli's 1996 argument that social theory of religion as developed by Durkheim, Weber, and Marx fails to take into account the interpenetration of religion and secular media. Hoover and Venturelli call for a more nuanced understanding of the overlaps between religion, spirituality, and secular rationalism; Chabad's deep engagement with publishing, television, radio, and the Internet show the extent to which these realms cannot be separated. While using the digital space to encourage people to meet in the life-world may seem like an unlikely paradox, Hampton (2011) has shown that participation in online communities increases affiliation in life-world social organizations. Chabad.org takes the logic of affiliation one step further, using the digital space as a means to direct people to real space by (obliquely) making impossible an online community.

This approach to digital space exemplifies Helland's (2000, 2002) distinction between religion-online and online-religion. Religion-online, according to Helland, is represented by digital spaces that primarily dispense information rather than invite browsers to participate in ceremonial or ritual experiences. Laughlin (2011) has shown, many American evangelical sites in particular use their space for communal online-religion, Chabad explicitly engages in the former approach, a function both of the theological impossibility of online Jewish ceremony and its own commitments to personal interaction. Chabad's use of the Internet stands in sharp contrast to the predictions of Brasher (2001), who argued that the digital sphere will shape religion practice in the upcoming decades. Not only does Chabad not engage in, for example, virtual Passover *Seders*, it is theologically, ideologically, and practically opposed to the use of the digital sphere for communal organization and affiliation.

Berman's (2009) work on Chabad outreach explicitly explores the insider-outsider dialogic of Chabad communal organization, analyzing the ritual of the communal *Shabbos* dinner. Drawing on Bahktin, Berman argues that Chabad *shluchim* use one voice to outsiders invited to *Shabbos* dinner that maximizes a sense of comfort and welcome, making invisible the outreach project

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of the dinner. That very same object, the hosting of *Shabbos* dinner, is presented in an entirely different voice to insiders, underscoring the adherence of the hosts to Chabad community norms and goals. This framework is useful in making sense of the dual valence of Internet and media consumption within Chabad; internet use for personal purposes is highly problematic, but in service of outreach it marks the user as a devout adherent to community goals. While the richness of the Chabad-sponsored online archive of Rebbe representations might seem to complicate this distinction, I argue that the virtual Rebbe is designed to energize and inspire followers in their religious activities, paramount to which is outreach. While media consumption of the Rebbe may seem to be for personal rather than outreach use, the culture of the virtual Rebbe offers users an outreach rationale for this particular aspect of communication technology.

There have been numerous general studies on religion and communication, including Jeffrey Shandler's (2009) work on Jews and media and Jeff Zaleski's early exploration of religion on the web (1997). These sources think critically about both the tremendous power and the significant limitations of digital technology in creating and sustaining religious communities. Shandler raises the problem of the virtual religious space, arguing that the digital sphere serves as a point of entry and a resource. He ultimately shows that Chabad is a physical and bodily set of practices, limiting the utility of the Internet for the ultimate goals of communal practice and observance. My research takes these questions one step further by exploring the practical use of digital media in Chabad and analyzing its differential application within and outside the community. I think not only about how Chabad uses media for outreach but also about the costs of that use, how they are negotiated by *shluchim* for their own use and for wider communal uses, and what might be the gaps between these two spaces.

Other important literature includes the general research on religion and communication, including works by Campell (2010), Peters (1999, 2006), Dayan and Katz (1994), Stout (2004), Stolow (2010), and Blondheim and Blum-Kulka (2001). I am particularly interested in material that explores notions of the digital emissary and the advantages and disadvantages of employing media to enroll practice. This concept has been explored in the context of media messaging (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1960; Katz & Dayan, 1992) rather than in religious practice. I take these notions and extend them to the realm of religion, focusing specifically on the ways that the digital works with in tandem with corporeal missionaries. While I do discuss the shortcomings or challenges of using digital media for outreach and connection, I do not seek to evaluate the various strengths and weaknesses of these approaches. Rather, I show how Chabad combines strategies for different situations to achieve their ultimate goals of increasing Jewish practice and relationships.

Jewish professionals from across the spectrum have been interested in analyzing the success of Chabad in establishing and maintaining centers and building Jewish communities, often in places where only a handful of affiliated Jews exist. Works by Ronn Torossian (2011) and Dennis Prager (2010) have looked at the strategies Chabad uses to create these personal connections that inspire monetary contributions and strong relationships. These essays explore the importance of the personal connection and the fact that Chabad emissaries see their role as their lives rather than their jobs. As Chabad centers are often the site of the *shluchim*'s housing, they simply never go home and never stop working. President and International Director of Hillel (the umbrella organization for campus Jewish life) Richard Joel notes, he simply cannot offer the kind of commitment that comes with the deep ideological drive of the *shluchim*: "They are all mission-driven, and prepared to devote their lives to it. [My people] want to go home at

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the end of the day. It's a different cultural gestalt (quoted in Fishkoff, 2005, p. 100). Many have tried to duplicate Chabad's fundraising and outreach success, as well as their impressive media infrastructure. These analytic sources and the attempts based upon their findings often fail to take seriously their own contents, namely, that for *shluchim*, life is outreach and outreach is life. Their only formal training is in Jewish law and liturgy, and their only mission is to connect with other Jews and increase their Jewish practice. Any analysis of their strategy and rhetorical approach must take into account their ideological motivations and reliance on unarticulated tacit knowledge. Which is to say that everything they do is on purpose but often uncalculated.

My approach understands the fact that *shluchim* are operating without a centralized set of instructions. Their training is in arcane matters of Jewish law and observance rather than sophisticated recruitment techniques. They use the complete integration of job and life to great advantage, exuding an authenticity that works because of rather than in spite of their lack of formal training. This does not make it any easier—these young, newly married couples are sent far from family and often, from organized Jewish communities with a very small start-up fund and the names of a few local Jews. Aside from the many structural challenges they may encounter, they also face a possibly overwhelming feeling of isolation. Many of these issues are discussed at the annual *kinnus*, a yearly single-sex convention for men and women *shluchim* respectively. There are sessions on fundraising and accounting, as well as formal and informal programming exchanges. However, the heart of the *kinnus* (like the heart of the *shluchis* movement) remains the inspirational sessions that remind the *shluchim* why they are doing what they do.

Isolation remains an ongoing challenge for *shluchim*, as does the practical skills required to run what is essentially a nonprofit small business. Historically, couples muddled through as best they could, drawing on the expertise of their adherents as well as their confidence in their mission. While things often worked out, they were also often on a relatively small scale. In the past 15 years, however, the movement has exploded, with more than 4,500 *shluchim* across the globe. The infrastructure has exploded as well; while *shluchim* still receive no formal training in business methods, programming techniques, or recruitment psychology before heading out, they now have access to a wide variety of online classes and guides through the *shluchim* intranet. There is an active listserv for *shluchim* that offers advice, guidance, matchmaking services (for congregants; *shluchim* are married when they head out), as well as programming exchanges, internet assistance, and general support. While Chabad *shluchim* always racked up the frequent flier miles visiting far-flung family members as a way to maintain contact, now they have other and more sustainable options to combat feelings of loneliness.

These services and options are all part of an intranet that is not available to the general public. While many Chabad Rabbis will readily and happily reveal the frameworks for these Web sites and listservs, they are designed for internal use and are not part of the Chabad.org platform, itself an impressive and fairly dazzling empire that links to every individual Chabad House in the world.

THE VIRTUAL REBBE

Scattered across the four corners of the globe, Chabad *shluchim* turn to the Rebbe to remind themselves that they are not alone. Basking in the considerable charisma of their leader, they

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are reinspired and reconnected—to him, to their fellow shluchim, and to the mission at large. Even after his death, the virtual Rebbe remains a powerful way to keep Chabad together and moving forward. The virtual Rebbe helps keep Chabad ideology alive in the absence of a clear heir to his dynasty.

In his lifetime, Schneerson recognized the importance of his charisma and sought ways to provide his followers with a greater sense of his personal engagement and connection to their lives (Katz, 2010, p. 101). In addition to his sophisticated use of communication technology for outreach and education purposes, Schneerson used media to essentially expand and replicate himself in order to offer his participation and validation in the lives of his followers. Early endeavors included photography and recording of his lectures and events, which were later sent to various communities across the globe. Pictures of the Rebbe adorn the walls in every Chabad home and in every official Chabad House, extending the Rebbe's reach across the globe and creating the sense that he is present and presiding over each location (Katz, 2010, p. 101).

Starting in 1970 (in honor of the 20th anniversary of the Rebbe's succession) Chabad shluchim from London, Israeli, and Melbourne engaged in a telephone hook-up for the first ever live broadcast of one of the Rebbe's *farbrengens* ("joyous gatherings"). These were celebratory learning sessions that attracted overflowing crowds over which the Rebbe presided, offering lectures and teachings. Following the early success of the hookup, the practice grew, adding additional locations and linking thousands of listeners. From 1980 onward, the *farbrengens* were broadcast live to Chabad centers and homes around the world, and began to be regularly videotaped for additional screenings and replays (Chabad.org, 2012c).

The *farbrengen* video footage is now the centerpiece of the "Rebbe" section on the Chabad.org platform, providing followers with much-needed spiritual and inspirational reinforcement. The virtual Chabad community coalesces around the Rebbe, which comprises largely long-standing followers rather than those newly introduced to the sect. Chabad.org is used mostly as an outreach tool and resource database for *shluchim* to use in their education, recruitment, and community building work. I will explore the workings of the site below, but first I want to note that although most insiders use the Web site in very different ways than outsiders and new recruits, it does serve one enormously powerful function unique to the native Chabad and especially *shluchus* community: maintaining a strong and personal connection to the late Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

This one space, which broadcasts recordings of the Rebbe's speeches and *farbrengens* acts as a parasocial community that reminds the *shluchim* why they are engaged in challenging and often thankless outreach work. When the Rebbe was alive, each *Shaliach* was personally sent under his auspices and felt a direct connection to his vision, easing the considerable obstructions to success as outreach pioneers. The Rebbe kept that connection strong, using communication technology as a way to expand his reach and supply his followers with regular access to his considerable charisma, thereby renewing their own commitment and sense of purpose. Schneerson was an early adopter of mass communication, starting with a radio broadcast that featured his teachings even as other Orthodox sects were condemning the use of media in this way. While Schneerson always acknowledged the possible dangers of the misuse of technology, he emphasized its advantages for those who use it carefully, wisely, and in aid of the higher purpose of:

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> . . . understanding science and technology as divine tools for our personal and spiritual growth is critical for our well-being. It is well and good to learn to program a computer, but unless a student also acquires a sense of discipline and integrity, he or she might just as easily use that skill to wreak technological havoc as to obtain a job. (Chabad.org, 2012)

In the wake of his death, many observers predicted a precipitous decline in the solidarity of the Chabad community, partly due to internal splits around the question of the Rebbe's messianic status and possible (unnamed and to date nonexistent) successor. This decline failed to materialize as the movement has continued stronger, better resourced, larger, more effective in enrolling practice, and more vibrant than any point in its history to date.

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DIVINE DATABASE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE

In the Chabad system, the importance of performing Jewish commandments is underscored by a very real sense of connection and commitment binding all Jews together. Chabad believes that the collective Jewish body reaps divine benefit from every mitzvah performed; the numerical reckoning is counted not just for the individual, but for the people as a whole. And so, the thinking goes, any good deed done by any one Jew benefits them all. Chabad sets out to cause those deeds to happen, with or without thoughtful intention on the part of the deed doer. Because, in their orthopraxy approach, it is the practice, not the thought, that matters.

And matter it does. Not just for life and death (important as that may be), and not just for the collective benefit as such, and not just for life lived in this world, but for the longed-for future. For the coming of the Messiah, whose arrival, Chabad Hasidim believe, is hastened with the performance of every *mitzvah*.

It is not very complicated: The goal of Chabad is to improve the collective lot of the Jewish people. It is to make Jews do good deeds. By almost any means necessary. To achieve these goals, Chabad has set up a far-reaching system of *shluchim*, whose goal is to reach out to other Jews and help them perform *mitzvos*. Ideally, of course, these Jews would become increasingly observant and continue to perform *mitzvos* independent of their *shluchim*; based on the growing community of Chabad supporters, such an outcome is far from rare. But even when the ideal goal of bringing the world closer to the coming of the *Mashiach* (messiah) is not reached, the numbers rack up. Every *mitzvah* is an important piece of the puzzle, and important in and of itself.

In the end, according to Chabad, the future of the worldwide Jewish community may come down to a numbers game. According to a literal understanding of the theology of the high holiday days in Judaism, life and death are decided by a simple arithmetic sum: if the number of *mitzvos* fulfilled is greater than the number of sins committed, the Jew in question lives (to sin) another year. A variety of metaphors have come to describe and even epitomize this time of year, including a scale that balances the *mitzvos* against the sins. While the definition of "*mitzvah* fulfilled" and "sin committed" may well be up for interpretation, the calculations, according to the mythology, are not. A "divine database" (Ben Peters, 2012, ICA conference) keeps a running total finally tallied during *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*. The supplicant in question can take advantage of the wiggle room afforded by performing a *cheshbon nefesh*

(self-audit) and *teshuva* (repentance) which might well swing the balance. But a balance it is. Numbers, they are. In this version of the Jewish lifecycle, the very life of the cyclers themselves come down to arithmetic and the deeds associated with the calculations. The divine database rests on a highly orthoprax notion of religion life, in which the most poignant questions of life and death come down to the fulfilling of accountable practices. According to Chabad, it does not stop there. An even greater imperative than the tabulation of life and death is that of the transformation of our world during the coming of the Messiah. Which also comes down to numbers, practice, and the divine database. To Chabad, every Jew can bring about the messiah. One deed at a time, by the numbers. Whether they mean to do the deed or not. The classic example (and by classic I mean the one I was taught at school) is of someone whose change falls into a beggar's hand. Despite the complete lack of intention to be charitable, the hapless owner of pants with holes in the pockets receives full credit for the deed. By contrast, the well-intentioned one with no follow-through who fails, despite all good intentions to donate, gets exactly what she gave: nothing.

Except, like all descriptions of ideology, this one is not strictly accurate. While the structure of Chabad seems to emphasize practice (even at the expense of understanding), such an approach is only the very first layer of a multi-layered social, religious, and media empire. The prevalence of the *shluchim* whose focus is only on *mivtzoim*, often young men on vacation from school who attempt to enroll Jews in singular and specific commandments such as putting on phylacteries ("laying tefillin"), shaking and blessing the *lulav* and *etrog* over the holiday of *succot*, and accepting Shabbos candles with the possibility of lighting them, indicates a strong commitment to one-off acts of practice. The movement regularly sends high schoolers to various cities during vacations to pound the pavements to get (Jewish) strangers to perform these deeds. In some cases, the young Chabadniks develop a rapport with passers-by over time, building relationships that may translate into greater adherence and observance. More often than not, these singular acts remain singular, if they are achieved at all. In the words of Chabad Rabbi Gershon Avtzon, "the whole point of Mivtzoim ... is to bring the world to its ultimate perfection that will be achieved in the era of Moshiach." Avtzon recognizes that this goal requires a (piecemeal) process, one which focuses both on the individual *mitzvos* and their cumulative effect, which will "build the palace, one brick—one Mitzvah—at a time." (Avtzon, 2011).

These solicitations (and the frequent rejections they engender) provide valuable training for future *shluchim*. While they are not designed as workshops per se, standing on their own merit and value as ways to increase practice and expose Jews to various aspects of Judaism, they have the added benefit of preparing young idealists for their life's work, a far more intensive and all-encompassing form of outreach and education. While the *mivtzoim* are an important part of the Chabad vision and one that provides them with a recognizable public face, their limitations are clear, if not always recognized. In his pamphlet on the *mivtzoim*, Rabbi Gershon Avtzom argues that the limitations were obscured to both the shaliach and his or her target, writing that "for many years, it was not important that the one doing the Mitavah—or even the Shliach!—knew the true intention of the Mivtzoim. "The deed is the main thing!" was the motto." (Avtzon, 2011). The motto it may have been, but the Chabad vision is far bigger than singular acts of practice, and not only because such acts are often merely singular. Chabad wants more—for themselves and from their targets. They do not simply want action. They want experience. Extended experience. In real time and in the real world.

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CHABAD DIGITAL CULTURE

The area of digital media is only the latest manifestation of a media-savvy and historically rich vision of the possibilities of communication technology. While Chabad's modern Internet presence is impressive, with more than 7.6 million self-reported visitors monthly to Chabad.org and a digital presence dating back to fidonet in 1988, Chabad's older applications of media are equally powerful and have tremendous reach. The Rebbe himself produced and supported a radio show starting in 1960, despite heated opposition from other ultra-Orthodox groups. This program on New York station WEVD featured Schneerson's students teaching and engaging with the traditional Chabad text the *Tanya* and found a wide audience among Chabad Jews in Brooklyn. Today, this show stands as the historical forbearer of numerous Chabad public media endeavors, including radio shows, newspaper columns, and the well-known LA-based Chabad television telethon (Margolin, 2010).

Radio was only the beginning for the modern Chabad empire. (Actually, not even the beginning: Chabad's engagement with media dates back to their obsessive preservation of portraits and photographs of their dynastic leaders first released in the mid-1880s.) However, these portraits were singular and had far narrower audiences and reach (Katz, 2010, p. 19). Close advisors in the Rebbe's Brooklyn court began carefully compiling notes of his lectures and teachings. They launched a publication line that enriched the already prolific Chabad sources available through Kehot Publication Society, established in 1942 by Schneerson's predecessor (and father-in-law), Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn. Unlike the historical texts of great Rabbinic teachings, the Rebbe's material had a far more personal touch, allowing adherents to access the Rebbe's conversations, letters, and blessings, creating an intimate feel and further developing the virtual Rebbe persona. Through their use of these publications, adherents felt as though the Rebbe was playing a personal role in guiding their own lives and decisions. (Katz, 2010).

Schneerson's presence from beyond the grave continues to mark all aspects of the Chabad media empire from video footage of his talks to photo montages and major billboards of his image. In addition to the Rebbe-specific interventions designed to bring the Rebbe's charisma into people's lives, the major thrust of Chabad media is enroll audiences into momentary practice and further exploration and experience. To this end, Chabad deploys visual and textual materials, television, radio, video, snail mail, public displays and exhibitions, and, importantly, the digital sphere.

While Chabad's embrace of modern media seems wholehearted and ubiquitous, it is also complicated and carefully negotiated. Acceptable and even holy in the service of outreach, media are also quickly rendered profane, as illustrated by the Rebbe's fierce opposition to televisions inside the homes of his disciples. According to Simon Jacobson's rendering of his teachings, the Rebbe wrote that "a beautiful home must also be free from influences that can pollute its wholesomeness and spiritual grace—television, for instance. People today recognize the damaging effects that television has on impressionable children, and, for that matter, on teenagers and adults. A television must not be allowed to rule the home" (Chabad.org, 2012a). Schneerson acknowledged the possible benefits of technology, noting that "technology, as with all forces in our lives, can be used either constructively or destructively. Developments such as television, computers, and lasers, and discoveries in nuclear energy, medicine, and biology—these are all instances of G-dly forces that are manifested in nature." These forces contain great

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positive potential for humanity, should it use them appropriately: "Man has been charged with tapping those resources to refine and civilize the world, to transform our material surroundings into a proper home for spirituality and G-dliness" (Chabad.org, 2012b).

This is what Schneerson wrote, yet he opposed the presence of television in the homes of his followers as a corrupting and time-wasting influence. He supported the use of media for outreach purposes, which he saw as an example of refining and civilizing the world; private television sets served no such purpose. Schneerson's version of manifest destiny allowed media for the purposes of reaching the unenlightened who were themselves accessing the multivalent devices. For his own followers, for whom outreach was unnecessary, personal use of television had no real advantages and only drawbacks. Television was a useful tool to reach outsiders; insiders had a different set of standards.

Except when it came to the Rebbe's own videos, which is the one part of Chabad.org designed explicitly for Yiddish-speaking adherents and insiders. Most of the Rebbe.org portion of the site provides easily parsed and digested English-language summaries of the Rebbe's teachings, as well as stories, biographies, and memories of those who met him. But the Yiddish-language *farbrengen* videos of the Rebbe himself have a far more select audience. English subtitles have recently been added to many of the videos, in deference to the declining use of Yiddish among Chabad families, but even with these aids, the videos themselves remain difficult to find and hard to follow. They are not for the casually interested or the nonchalant browser. The *farbrengens* and other video recordings of the Rebbe are there for the true believers. They are there not to recruit, but to inspire. This contact with the Rebbe and his vision urge insiders to keep on going with their mission, to continue reaching out and bringing outsiders in. While inspiration is a cornerstone of the Chabad outreach model, for outsiders, it is best done in person. For those already and always following the late Rebbe, the in person model is impossible. But the virtual Rebbe stands strongly in its stead.

The Web site itself is an impressive index of Hassidic teaching, basic practical guidelines, informational material, moral and ethical precepts, and roadmaps to physical spaces and actual times. The emphasis on practice is central, with the first tab on the left hand side entitled "Jewish Practice," and the central banners featuring articles about observance, study, and advice. The right hand site features an input that customizes *shabbos* candle lighting times based on sundown in every zip code, underneath which is a listing of the weekly Torah portion, upcoming holidays and significant Jewish events. The other major focus in the center of the page the "Chabad Locator," the finding tool for Chabad Centers across the world. The "Ask the Rabbi" feature is a small-text tab on the top right, next to yet another Chabad Locator and far from the center of the page. The message is clear: practice comes first. And to do the practices correctly, you will probably need some in person help and guidance for the rituals.

The "Rebbe" section is immediately below the main "Chabad Locator," next to the classic Schneerson portrait. Though central, even the collection of the Rebbe's teachings is subordinate to the Chabad Locator. The Web site can introduce you to the Rebbe. A Chabad *shluach* can do it better.

If intentionality is secondary, can the mere act of browsing a Web site constitute the performance of a *mitzvah*? Is there some way that the Web site itself makes practice happen while (rather than after) reading the site? Chabad.org gives the proposition its best shot. Rather than simply offering directions about what to do once leaving the site, the material strives to make *mitzvos* happen during the very process of reading, deliberately or otherwise. The

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central (and rotating) banners offer unavoidable headings that themselves constitute the study of Torah and invite the reader to delve further, both within, and, centrally, outside the confines of the Web site. The knowledge communicated in these texts is either highly practical, offering guidelines about how to perform *mitvos*, or is constitutive thereof, fulfilling commandments to learn Jewish texts on a regular basis. All the necessary information is contained, but that isn't what the Web site features. Rather, it directs readers away from the computer and to the life world, both to do further *mitzvos*, and, more importantly, to acquire the means and knowledge to do so. From other people. In person.

The "Ask the Rabbi" portal is the only model of virtual meeting on the site, which is situated directly next to the "Chabad Locator" search mechanism at the top of the site. This anonymous Rabbi is the only real person with whom one can communicate on the site; all other presences are virtual or textual. Ask the Rabbi can answer focused and specific questions, the site indicates. However, for nuance and holistic experience, go to Find a Center.

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CONCLUSION

Chabad has embraced media technology in all its incarnations, for specific goals, and in highly focused ways. From its pioneering forays into religion on radio and television to its foresight in recognizing the power of the Internet as a means of information dissemination and an outreach tool, Chabad has been consistent in its application of technology to reach unaffiliated Jews. Personal use of media has always been more fraught, particularly for those adherents not explicitly engaged in *shaliach* work. With one major exception, namely the virtual representations of the Rebbe and all its incarnations, used to connect followers and inspire them in their work. The Chabad outreach mission has driven a highly innovative, deeply tensioned, and ultimately carefully negotiated relationship to technology and media. While universal in its vision to reach all Jews, the *shluchim* movement is highly individualized and piecemeal in its application. The community promotes and develops public media yet remains closed to personal consumption of said media for its committed adherents. The techniques of the movement are deeply personal yet conspicuously devoid of social networking capacity, with the important exception of the figure of the virtual Rebbe. This, like all exceptions, is resolved under the framework of strengthening communal ties for the purposes of inspiration for outreach activities.

While the Internet is largely a continuation of Chabad's ideological position on media technology, there have been recent debates about the use of smart phone and tablet apps designed specifically for observant Jews to aid them in their practice. Further research should investigate the ways in which these apps are seen as outside the restrictions on technology, which sheds light on the unique status of this new media environment, even for the media-savvy Chabad community. In addition, the centrality of social media for Chabad's outreach work has created a new level of engagement and education among, in particular, campus *shluchim*, who have expanded their intranet beyond strictly outreach-oriented discussions. A deeper examination of both the *shluchim* intranet and other personal uses of the digital sphere would complicate this discussion and help frame the questions facing Chabad's use of the media going forward.

What remains clear is Chabad's insistence on the importance of interpersonal interactions. The digital sphere remains largely a text rather than a space, designed to disseminate information rather than create virtual points of contact. The Chabad.org space is not a virtual *shluach* and is not designed to stand in any human's stead. Precisely the opposite; Chabad uses the Internet to urge people to meet in the life world.

This is where the real work of the *shluchim* begins. While the Web site may pique the curiosity of the Web surfer, or provide resources and answers for the somewhat engaged outsider, it is designed to be a limited resource. Ultimately, candidates for outreach will find that what they need is a real person in real space. More than that, they will find that what they want is the real experience. For that they must leave the screen behind. In fact, the most powerful recruitment tool available to *shluchim*, the *Shabbos* dinner experience, explicitly prohibits the use of electricity and all associated technology for the 25-hour period of the weekly *Shabbos*. While the Internet may help to bring people into the room, once they enter, the Internet is entirely absent. And its absence—and the absence of all electric technology—it celebrated as a virtue, an opportunity to connect with other people without distractions or disruption. The *Shabbos* dinner experience—communal, corporeal, visceral, physical, involving ingestion and digestion and singing and dancing—demonstrates the limits of digital religious space. You cannot eat a Web page.

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