

The International Abrahamic Network: An Exploration of Social Media

**In association with the
Abrahamic Family Reunion**

**Hosted by the
Esalen Institute's Center for Theory and
Research
and
TRACK TWO: An Institute for Citizen Diplomacy**

**Esalen Institute
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I. Introduction

“This conference is really one big experiment!” –Dulce and Michael Murphy

The conference held at Esalen in March 2011, “The International Abrahamic Network: An Exploration of Social Media”, truly was an exploration. Unlike most Esalen Center for Theory and Research and TRACK TWO conferences, its specific topics were not predetermined; very few of its sessions were anchored by formal presentations; and its desired outcomes were left to its participants to determine. Rather than being structured by established content, this set of meetings was driven by questions regarding a unique historical opportunity: the confluence of radical social evolution in the Middle East, and the rise of new media as effective tools for social change.

In his opening remarks Joe Montville, director of *Towards the Abrahamic Family Reunion*, stated that the Arab world is in the throws of a second “Great Awakening.” This allusion to the title of George Antonius’ influential book (about the rise of the modern Arab world) underscored the radical transformation taking place regarding the geographical, political, and social boundaries of the Middle East. This “awakening,” in large part, has been facilitated by the rise of the information age. New modes of user-generated, web-based media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) have created fresh channels and networks for communication. Likewise, technological advances in digital capabilities (including laptop computers and cell phones) have made the creation and distribution of previously expensive, specialized, and industry-dependant media (such as video) cheap, easy and ubiquitous. This disruption of centralized media networks, coupled with tectonic shifts in social patterns, have created new challenges, and new possibilities for citizen diplomacy.

Throughout the course of this conference its attendees wrestled with the most fundamental questions regarding the nature of media and social media, its application to the efforts of citizen diplomacy, and its specific relevance to

members of the Abrahamic faiths. These discussions were, by design, open-ended and free form; rather than drawing concrete conclusions, participants were asked to mine their own knowledge and experiences to help make sense of this emerging landscape. Working together the group began to sketch a framework for future activity for TRACK TWO, the International Abrahamic Network, Esalen, and others.

This report, like the conference itself, is unconventional. Given the non-linear and informal nature of the sessions, any chronological record of the proceedings would be of little use to the reader. Rather, in the pages that follow, the primary topics, questions and strategies regarding the group's inquiries are encapsulated thematically. The structure of this text is as follows:

- I. Introduction
- II. Establishing a Working Group
 - a. Participant Information
 - b. Participant Perspectives
- III. Creating a Framework for Discussion
 - a. Questions regarding Purpose
 - b. Questions about Media and Social Media
 - c. Questions regarding Citizen Diplomacy and Faith
- IV. Putting Ideas into Practice
 - a. Types of Media Discussed
 - b. Practical Issues regarding Media
 - c. Practical Issues Regarding Citizen Diplomacy
 - d. Resources and Avenues for Success
- V. Projects featured at the Conference

The intention of this structure is to create a readable record of the event, and to allow interested parties to utilize the foundation this conference laid for future work.

II. Establishing a Working Group

A look at the conference participants and the perspectives they brought to Esalen

Conference Facilitator and Participant:

Tamar Miller—Radio producer; political, media leadership and social change consultant; facilitator

Bram Briggance—recorder, note-taker

Conference Participants:

Mindy Affrime—filmmaker

Miriam Abu Sharkh—Visiting Associate Professor at the Stanford Center for International Development; Visiting Scholar at the Center for Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at Stanford University; documentary filmmaker

Corinne Bourdeau—Founder and President of 360 Degree Communications; executive film producer; publisher and writer

Vanessa Gomez Blake—Director of Operations and Outreach at The Chaplaincy Institute; facilitator and peacemaker

Ruth Friend—Co-founder of Citizens Reach Out, Founding Member of the Ruth Group; Founder of Myrung Jin Inc. (textiles); entrepreneur, human activist

Jerome Gary—Chairman of Visionaire Media; Strategic Director of the University of Southern California's Institute for Creative Technologies; filmmaker; television producer

The Rev. Mary E. Haddad—pastor; activist and peace advocate; television executive

Lizbeth Hasse—international lawyer, negotiator and mediator; Board Member of TRACK TWO

Mary Ellen Klee—Arica teacher, acupuncturist; Esalen Board Member

Evelyn Messinger—Founder and President of Internews International; television, internet and cross-platform media producer

Joe Montville—Director of Toward the Abrahamic Family Reunion; Distinguished Diplomat in Residence at American University; Chair of the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University

Dulce Murphy—President and Executive Director of TRACK TWO: An Institute for Citizen Diplomacy

Michael Murphy—Co-founder and Chairman Emeritus of the Esalen Institute, Founder of Esalen’s Center for Theory and Research; Esalen Board Member; author

Lillie Paquette—documentary filmmaker; international affairs specialist and reporter

Scott Ross—Founder of Digital Domain, Inc.; digital media pioneer; film producer

Justine Shapiro—Co-founder of Promises Films; documentary filmmaker; television host and actress; teacher

Ruth Shapiro—documentary filmmaker; television producer, writer and director; writer and visual artist

Kim Spencer—Founder and Chief Content Officer of Link TV; documentary and news producer; television executive producer

Examining Our Own Stories First

In a 2009 conversation about news media two Esalen regulars, David Judson and Betty Sue Flowers, emphasized the importance of understanding how information is understood and “framed,” sometimes unconsciously, by one’s cultural and personal perspectives. “More important than understanding the stories we are writing, we need to understand the stories we are writing *from*.” In other words, until one understands one’s unavoidable biases, any meaningful conversation is compromised.

A good portion of the first day of the AFR conference was dedicated to understanding the personal and professional perspectives the participants brought to the conference; these exchanges helped promote a better understanding of “who was in the room,” and the desires and beliefs that would shape our subsequent explorations.

Below are some of the elements of the “stories” from which the conference was written...

Geographical Homes and Reference Points for the Group:

- New York City
- Israel

- Iran
- Upper Midwest
- Boston
- Tunisia
- Gaza Strip
- San Francisco Bay Area
- Los Angeles
- “Hollywood”
- Saudi Arabia
- Washington, D.C.
- Esalen
- Gaza Strip

Group Faith Traditions and Religious Experiences:

- Judaism
- Catholicism
- Zionism
- Protestantism
- Islam
- Wisdom traditions
- The Esalen tradition
- Parent of a Muslim convert
- Marxism
- Distrust of all religious traditions
- Interfaith marriages

Professional and Life Experience informing the Groups Opinions:

- Law
- Mediation
- Radio
- Social media
- Non-profit organizations
- Documentary filmmaking
- Television
- Academia
- Ministry
- Health care
- Mobile applications and technology
- Science
- Big budget filmmaking
- International relations

- Visual arts
- Music
- Philosophy
- Publishing

Group Age Range: from early 20s to early 80s

III. Creating a Framework for Discussion

The fundamental questions and topics the group explored regarding its purpose, the nature of media, and the role of media in citizen diplomacy and communities of faith

Questions regarding Purpose

Given the “experimental” nature of the conference, the group itself was charged with determining its own purpose, strategic goals, and agenda. Participants took this responsibility very seriously. Almost every discussion, even on the most specific topics, was framed by fundamental questions about the relation of social media to the work of TRACK TWO, and citizen diplomacy in general. Below are some questions raised about this topic:

What is Social Media? What are its distinguishing characteristics? How are these media evolving? What is social media’s importance to the work of the International Abrahamic Network and the Abrahamic Family Reunion? What don’t we currently understand?

How do we build and strengthen the efforts of the International Abrahamic Network and the Abrahamic Family Reunion? What role can this media group play in advancing the cause of the AFR? Where are the most promising opportunities to have an impact?

How do we match the mission of our projects with effective social media tools? What is the specific role social media has played in political and cultural revolution? What are the media needs of the IAN/AFR’s “partners?” What is the role of the IAN/AFR in such media issues?

Where can this group effectively practice citizen diplomacy? How can we promote civic engagement? Engender meaningful debate? Foster civil societies and a peaceful world? Aid democratic reform? Advance the interests of human kind?

What are our responsibilities to truth? If we are in the business of revealing truths, how do we assure accuracy? How does one account for personal biases? Where are we willing to editorialize and compromise?

How can we document and heal history? i.e., Determine “where does it hurt? Allow for the expression of pain and remorse? Investigate what has been done?”

Questions about Media and Social Media

The questions that lay at the heart of the group’s conversations about the relation of social media to citizen diplomacy naturally raised issues regarding the nature of social media itself.

Below are some of the topics that the group explored:

What are the types of messages we should we consider? What are their various purposes? How do we distinguish “creating a narrative” from “conveying information” from “undertaking an investigation?”

What is the difference between “propaganda” and “discovery?” What distinguishes journalistic investigation from politically-motivated stories? Is objective reporting possible?

What is the role of the artist in citizen diplomacy? What is the relation of art to political change? What distinguishes art from other forms of expression, or from other forms of diplomacy?

Is there a clear distinction between “passive” and “active” forms of media? Is this a useful differentiation for the purposes of citizen diplomacy? When is it appropriate to “push” and when is it appropriate to “pull?” Is our objective to let others tell their own stories? To tell our stories? Both?

What is the source and power of the media we are using? Is it useful to think of citizen diplomacy media efforts as seeds (*spota*)? What is “convergence media?” When and how does this “convergence” happen? “Every once in a while” some media effort leads to something extraordinary; what can we learn from these “once-in-a-whiles?” If, as C. S. Lewis says, effective writers create worlds people want to inhabit, what can we do to help audiences envision better worlds?

How does one operate effectively in the “attention economy?” How does one get noticed in the sea of information? What are the ways one can game the search ranking and editing processes of the web? How can one circumvent information filters and funnels? What role should media literacy play developing a self-directed citizenry?

Questions regarding Citizen Diplomacy and Faith

In addition to wrestling with the complicated relationship between media and citizen diplomacy, the group also explored their possible role in advancing the work of the Abrahamic Family Reunion, and the specific opportunities and limitations of targeting audiences of faith. Some of these inquiries included:

What is the relation of our citizen diplomacy agenda to the Abrahamic family? Is our goal with Abrahamic family to highlight a set of common religious values? Is it an effort to identify core human values?

What is the importance of the Abrahamic family as a target audience? Are we interested in the productive power of these specific faith traditions? Is it the collective size of the Abrahamic population that makes them an attractive focus? Is it the collective destructive power they possess? Do they have inherent destructive tendencies?

What roles might our group play in promoting the goals of the IAN/AFR? Can we help create a common vocabulary for mutual understanding? Are we simply enabling the opportunity for communication and understanding?

How can our group reach the Abrahamic family in a way that is non-threatening? How do we navigate the need for many to “save face” within their religious communities? How do we balance the need to educate with the need to listen?

How much promise does Wisdom Tradition hold for our group? In wrestling with issues of religious practice, faith, and identity, could a non-ecclesiastical approach promote mutual understanding within the Abrahamic family? What are the ways media and social media could foster common spiritual community?

How can we take advantage of the fact that the world is getting smaller? Americans increasingly have Islamic neighbors; where are the opportunities for

us to leverage this circumstance? Communication and media have “shrunk” the world; where can transactional diplomacy promote religious peace?

IV. Putting Ideas into Practice

An exploration of opportunities, barriers, and tactics and strategies regarding the work of media production and citizen diplomacy

Types of Media Discussed

Despite the wide range of topics explored during the conference, some specific types of media were discussed in relative detail. Issues about the following media were raised regarding their impact, limitations, and promise as tools for citizen diplomacy:

- Documentary films
- Big-budget films
- T.V.
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Radio
- Video games

Practical Issues re Media

In stark contrast to many of the conference's theoretical themes, many of the group's discussions were practical in nature. Below are some of the topics that arose about concrete ways to achieve success in media production and distribution.

Creating a Media Tool Box for Citizen Diplomacy—There was great interest in the idea of identifying a set of useful techniques, best practices, models, and templates for citizen diplomats. Such a media kit could aid in creating quality content, effective distribution, and robust social organizing.

Forming a “Media Support Group”—The group at Esalen deeply valued the opportunity to discuss their own media work with like-minded persons, and

within the express context of engendering social change. Continuing such interaction was of great interest to the participants. [Note: Shortly after the conference the participants formed a Facebook group to continue mutual support.] Some of the benefit of maintaining a “support group” included: inspiration, networking, help with marketing, securing resources, managing “gatekeepers,” and finding production partners.

Moving Social Media “from Margin to Center”— Given the incredible role that social media is already playing in shaping geopolitical politics, and its untapped potential, a perennial theme of the conference was using the group’s collective power to ensure that social media concerns play a more prominent role in our thinking, our planning and our work.

Connecting Media Projects to Current Events— Many attendees shared success stories about linking media projects to topics receiving news coverage. By linking project content to news items one can use the natural engine of news cycles to raise interest in one’s work.

Showing Multiple Perspectives on One Topic— One theme that received attention from the group was exploring methods to foster mutual understanding among various groups through the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives on a particular topic or event. Link TV and the television program *Mosaic* were raised as promising models.

Using the World’s Generation Gap to Our Advantage— Given the incredible proportion of young people in the Middle East and in other volatile regions, and given young people’s natural affinity for interactive media, how can citizen diplomats leverage this opportunity? What are the generational fault lines that must be navigated?

Practical Issues re Diplomacy

Just as with media issues, the group’s discussion of diplomacy often shifted from the theoretical to realpolitik. Here are some of the themes that were discussed:

Transactional Diplomacy— The basic idea that transactional diplomacy (the theory that increased interaction between two states fosters better relations)

was widely accepted among conference participants, and many successes were offered as evidence. However, recent international polling data (from Gallop) showed an inverse relation between familiarity with the U.S. and mistrust. What are we to make of these data? Should it cause us to re-examine our approach to citizen diplomacy?

Islamaphobia—Difficulties in ameliorating inherent distrust and/or disconnection with Muslims was a cause of great concern to the group. Some of the specific topics examined regarding this theme included hegemonic frames in news reporting, American detachment from Muslim suffering, and the lack of full identification of many Westerners with Muslims (i.e., seeing them as “other,” or merely as victims rather than agents). The tremendous influx of Muslims to the U.S. was seen as a promising opportunity to combat these prejudices.

Giving People Space—Using President Obama’s handling of the Egyptian revolution as an example, the group considered the advantages of having a “light diplomatic touch.” Sometimes, many thought, allowing folks to take the lead themselves in their own affairs may be preferable to full engagement. Discussion of this issue resembled many of the “active vs. passive media” conversations.

Rethinking Track One versus Track Two Diplomacy?—At several points during the conference issues were raised that forced a reconsideration of the relative value of government-sponsored diplomacy versus citizen diplomacy. Creative government partnerships, attractive funding opportunities, widespread mistrust of NGOs, and social uncertainties were among those factors that cast state diplomacy in a favorable light.

Resources and Avenues for Success

“A Tool Kit for the Passionate Filmmaker”—In one of the few semi-structured presentations Corinne Bourdeau shared her perspectives on media distribution and marketing issues. Some of the highlights of her talk included: pointing out that it is common to budget 50% of a film’s production cost for marketing; a discussion of emerging distribution models; and the importance of having a marketing plan in place very early. Bourdeau also presented a “tool kit for the passionate filmmaker” which included the following elements:

- Website
- Action kits
- Resource guides
- Press kits
- Curricula for schools, churches, etc.
- House parties
- Panel discussions
- Creative partnerships
- Alternative distribution channels

V. Projects Featured at the Conference

The final sessions on the second and third days of the conference were “movie nights.” These evenings featured relevant television and film projects with which conference participants were involved. The line-ups for these movie nights were a mixture of snippets, trailers, and feature length presentations. In addition to being inherently rewarding and enjoyable, these films also became reference points and inspiration for many of the conference discussions. These sessions also served as the inspiration for an international Abrahamic film festival that will be hosted by Esalen and TRACK TWO in 2012.

Title: *On the Road in America*

Medium: Documentary-reality TV series

Subject: four young Arabs from the Middle East take a cross-country road trip in the U.S.A. with an American film crew

Participant Connection: Jerome Gary, producer, writer, director—“We showed the kids what they wanted to see.”

Issues Raised: transactional diplomacy; the nature of “reality” in reality shows and documentaries; advantages and disadvantages of government funding and partnerships

Working Title: *Yeshua*

Medium: Big budget studio film

Subject: Biopic about Jesus’ journey from boyhood to manhood

Participant Connection: Scott Ross, producer—“ ‘And Jesus grew in stature and wisdom, and in favor with God and men.’ What could that mean?”

Issues Raised: disentangling “Jesus” from “Christ”; wisdom traditions; the potential impact of reaching large audiences

Name: Link TV

Medium: Broadcast television channel and website

Subject: Link is the first nationwide television channel and website dedicated to providing global perspectives on news, events, and culture

Participant Connection: Kim Spencer, founder and chief content officer—“We are working to un-couch your potato.”

Issues Raised: new methods for online content searches (Link’s unique “search & discover” tool); audience demographics; linking information and action

Name: The Ruth Group’s *What Happened Project*

Medium: Audio recordings; other media is under consideration

Subject: First-person accounts of the second U.S. invasion of Iraq

Participant Connection: Ruth Friend and Ruth Shapiro—“We started by trying to help one Iraqi boy?”

Issues Raised: the underappreciated destruction of war; the opportunity costs of choosing one medium over another; the nature of victimhood; the growing U.S. Muslim population

Working Title: *Tunnels to Nowhere*

Medium: Documentary film

Subject: the filmmaker's family/the inherent displacement of life in Palestine

Participant Connection: Miriam Abu Sharkh, writer, director—“In a sense, you could say Palestine is nowhere.”

Issues Raised: The importance of statehood; the future of Israel and Palestine; personal, economic and political dislocation

Title: *Promises*

Medium: Documentary film

Subject: the interaction and experiences of Israeli and Palestinian children connected for the first time

Participant Connection: Justine Shapiro, director—“Curiosity is a powerful force.”

Issues Raised: examining the notion of the “other”; redefining social and political boundaries

Title: *Our Summer in Tehran*

Medium: Documentary film

Subject: the filmmaker's experiences living in Tehran with her young son

Participant Connection: Justine Shapiro, director—“I'm in it, but Mateo is clearly the star.”

Issues Raised: unique aspects of Iranian culture; the logistical hurdles of international filmmaking; issues regarding being one's own subject

Working Title: *We are Egypt—Voices of Egypt's Youth
Opposition Movement*

Medium: Documentary film

Subject: the efforts of young Egyptian activists to foster political reform (film before the 2011 uprising)

Participant Connection: Lillie Paquette, director—“I’m still trying to figure out what it all means.”

Issues Raised: the future of Egypt and the Middle East; how to best edit and market a film; the role of the U.S. in political change

Title: *Out of Cordoba—Averroes and Maimonides in Their Time and Ours*

Medium: Documentary film

Subject: the legacy of Averroes and Maimonides and their importance in rethinking interfaith relations

Participant Connection: Joe Montville, executive producer—“History can give us reasons to hope.”

Issues Raised: the nature of the Abrahamic family; learning from our historical successes; the relation of religious faith and conflict

Title: *Budrus*

Medium: Documentary film

Subject: a peaceful movement to save the village of Budrus from destruction by Israel’s Separation Barrier

Participant Connection: Tamar Miller

Issues Raised: Israel/Palestinian relations; organizing for peaceful change

Title: *PeaceBeat...some good news, some of the time*

Medium: Radio program

Subject: chronicling international stories about peaceful social change

Participant Connection: Tamar Miller

Issues Raised: moving issues of peace from “margin to center”; the unique power of radio