Interfaith:
Engaging Religious Diversity Online

Curriculum Guide & Course Content

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Educator's Curriculum Guide

Welcome: Start Here

Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) is delighted to share this curriculum guide for *#Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online*. This complete curriculum is available for educators to use free of charge, though we may contact you to learn more about how you are using the curricular materials and to measure their strengths and weaknesses. Educators have two options for accessing *#Interfaith*:

1. The full curricular content – all eleven lessons – is contained in the following pages of this document. With appropriate attribution (see the FAQ for more information about appropriate citation), educators may feel free to reproduce, adopt, or adapt this content as meets their educational needs.

2. Educators also may have their students access the curriculum directly online via our partners at ReligionAndPublicLife.org. ReligionAndPublicLife.org makes it possible for students to experience a state-of-the-art learning platform, custom-designed for learners focused on religion in civic spaces. To access the curriculum via this online platform, students will need to register with a bio and a photo on ReligionAndPublicLife.org (This is to ensure that all learners are actual people who are interested in learning together). All learners who complete the full online course on ReligionAndPublicLife.org will receive a shareable, verifiable, digital certificate of completion (granted by IFYC) that can be linked directly to their LinkedIn profile. Educators can set up a "faculty" account on the platform to manage their students' participation. *Please note that while there is a $224 enrollment fee for #Interfaith at ReligionAndPublicLife.org, IFYC is offering full scholarships that can be accessed via the code "#Interfaith100." This code entitles learners to register for the course for free.*

The *#Interfaith* curriculum was designed to be adaptable to meet the needs of educators in diverse sectors, disciplines, and settings. You are invited to use this curriculum even if you are only using select components, rather than the curriculum in its entirety.

Please read through the following Frequent Asked Questions (FAQs) as you think about how best to integrate this curriculum into your educational plans. If you have any questions about how to access or use *#Interfaith* with your learners, please contact Connie Meyer at connie@ifyc.org.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What is *#Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online*?

#Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online is a self-paced (fully asynchronous), online curriculum developed by IFYC to help develop civic interfaith leadership skills for digital media. IFYC believes that online interfaith leadership is critical for the future of respect, relationships, and cooperation between and among people of diverse religious and non-religious traditions. *#Interfaith* learners explore the particular opportunities and challenges of leading online and build awareness and skills to use the Internet as a powerful space for bridgebuilding.

Why Is Learning About Digital Interfaith Leadership Important?

The Internet has transformed every area of human interaction – including religion – more than any other invention in history. The technology is disrupting and transforming traditional definitions of community, authority, beliefs, and even what it means to be human and present to one another. The Internet can be used to further divide people of different faiths and worldviews, or it can foster greater understanding – the choice is up to us.

#Interfaith presents an opportunity for leaders to take their bridgebuilding to the next level by learning to fully harness the power of the Internet to cultivate community and positive connections. With the awareness and skills they will gain via *#Interfaith*, learners will be better equipped to lead online, creating spaces, conversations, and relationships that are hopeful, fulfilling, and safe. What is more, the curriculum can bolster learners' credentials as an interfaith leader, as all learners who complete the full online course on ReligionAndPublicLife.org will receive a shareable, verifiable, digital certificate of completion (granted by IFYC) that can be linked directly to a LinkedIn profile.

IFYC invites learners of all ages to be part of a new generation of interfaith leaders who understand the power of the Internet, appreciate how it can be used to promote understanding across lines of difference, and are fully trained to maximize the impact of technology for the common good.

What Topics and Material Does the Curriculum Cover?

Learners engaging with *#Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online* will build their expertise across multiple topics, including: how to build bridges, create community, and disrupt hate online; who owns content posted online and how to identify reputable

sources; and how to reflect on and strategize one's own activity and leadership online. Please see the *List of #Interfaith Lessons* for descriptions of all eleven lessons.

Who Is the Target Audience for *#Interfaith*?

The curriculum was designed with undergraduate students in mind, as a resource for extending their interfaith leadership to online spaces. At the same time, we hope that many other types of learners and interfaith leaders will find this content useful – from graduate and seminary students to community organizers and religious leaders. Everyone has the capacity to act as an interfaith leader, and increasingly we all need to get better at doing that online!

Who Can Use *#Interfaith*?

Anyone! Individual learners can access the online curriculum via ReligionAndPublicLife.org and can complete the course at their own pace. *Please note that while there is a $224 enrollment fee for #Interfaith at ReligionAndPublicLife.org, IFYC is offering full scholarships that can be accessed via the code "#Interfaith100."* This code entitles learners to register for the course for free.

Educators who would like to offer the curriculum (or select content from the curriculum) to their students may do so via this packet or online, as described above. We hope that the curricular content will be useful across a broad set of civic and educational leaders who want to improve their (or their students') digital interfaith leadership skills. If you have questions about how to access or use *#Interfaith*, please contact Connie Meyer at connie@ifyc.org.

How Is the Curriculum Organized?

Part of the joy – and challenge! – of the Internet is the diversity of modes of engagement it offers. We designed the curriculum to be adaptable to meet the needs of learners in diverse settings. The curriculum (currently) consists of eleven lessons that each cover one topic and can be completed independently. By and large, each lesson is structured similarly, with the following components:

- An overall learning outcome;
- An introduction to the topic and more specific learning objectives;
- Lesson content, including reading, links, videos, and activities (formative assessments);
- A "Going Deeper" section that links to additional resources related to the topic; &
- A suggested summative assessment.

How Should My Students Work Through this Curriculum, and Do They Have to Complete All Eleven Lessons?

You are welcome to engage with as much or as little of the curricular content as you would like, in any sequence; each lesson stands on its own. A learner who completes the entire curriculum is eligible to receive a shareable, verifiable, digital certificate of completion (granted by IFYC) that can be linked directly to a LinkedIn profile.

How Long Will It Take to Complete the Entire Curriculum?

Each lesson is designed to take around 30 minutes to complete (not including the summative assessment), so to complete the entire curriculum would take approximately five and a half hours. The content is self-paced, however, so students who access it directly online via ReligionAndPublicLife.org have the freedom to engage whenever and for as long as they would like. They may save their progress and come back to continue at any time.

What Is ReligionAndPublicLife.org, and Why Do Learners Have to Register to Access the Curriculum There?

Our partners at ReligionAndPublicLife.org have made it possible for us to offer a state-of-the-art online learning experience. Their learning platform is custom designed for learners focused on religion in civic spaces. To access the curriculum, learners will need to register with a bio and a photo (similar to that of social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter). This is to ensure that all learners are actual people who are interested in learning together. We hope participants will enjoy learning with others who are genuinely committed to growing their interfaith leadership.

Please note that while there is a $224 enrollment fee for #Interfaith at ReligionAndPublicLife.org, IFYC is offering full scholarships that can be accessed via the code "#Interfaith100." This code entitles learners to register for the course for free.

All that said, if you would rather not have your learners register at ReligionAndPublicLife.org, with appropriate attribution (see below) you may feel free to reproduce, adopt, or adapt the content in this document as meets your educational needs.

Who Developed *#Interfaith*?

While IFYC has been thinking about the animating questions behind *#Interfaith* for a long time, we knew that there was much that we didn't know. To learn more, we assembled an Expert Advisory Committee of seven professionals in relevant fields and a Student

Advisory Council of six students. These experts and students helped us develop the goals, structure, and content of the curriculum. The Expert Advisory Council consisted of: Josie Alquist, danah boyd, Heidi Campbell, Cheryl Contee, Jeremy Nickel, Amanda Quraishi, and Chris Stedman. Members of the Student Advisory Council included: Angie Benitez-Garcia, Farham Islam, Aliia Matthew, Maya Reinfeldt, Hannah Silver, and Nijha Young.

Can I Reproduce the Materials in this Packet?

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- Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material

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- Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the original source (ifyc.org/interfaith-digital), and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- Non-Commercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

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How Do I Cite This Project?

To cite the entire project, we recommend:

- Raushenbush, Paul, Noah J. Silverman, Janett I. Cordovés, and Jack Spector-Bishop (2022). *#Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online* [online curriculum]. Accessed {date of retrieval}. https://ifyc.org/interfaith-digital.

To cite an individual lesson, you can use the following:

- Raushenbush, Paul, Noah J. Silverman, Janett I. Cordovés, and Jack Spector-Bishop (2022). {Lesson title}. In Raushenbush, Paul, Noah J. Silverman, Janett Cordoves, and Jack Spector-Bishop (Eds.), *#Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online* [online curriculum]. Accessed {date of retrieval}. https://ifyc.org/interfaith-digital.

What Other Interfaith Curriculum / Training Material Does IFYC Have Available?

So much! Coming soon on ReligionAndPublicLife.org you can find two other curricula: *Interfaith Leadership 101* and *Interfaith Cooperation & Civil Rights*. Also be sure to visit our

eight-part Interfaith Leadership video series if you are interested in content designed more for academic coursework, and our BRIDGE training curriculum if you are interested in leading a training for students, staff, or faculty on your campus.

List of #*Interfaith* Lessons & Learning Outcomes/Objectives

Bridgebuilding Online
Explore case studies of powerful online interfaith bridgebuilding. Learn helpful tools for your own bridgebuilding.

- Learning Outcome: Learn from three online bridgebuilding case studies and explore tools and resources for your own bridgebuilding work.
- Learning Objectives:
    - Learn from the experiences of three interfaith leaders who are building bridges across difference online
    - Explore helpful approaches, tools, and resources for online bridgebuilding
    - Reflect on your own experiences with bridging difference online

From IRL to URL
Why should we engage in interfaith leadership online? What changes and what stays the same when interfaith work is brought into digital spaces?

- Learning Outcome: Consider the importance of online interfaith engagement and explore how interfaith leadership translates digitally.
- Learning Objectives:
    - Consider five reasons why it is important to engage religious diversity online
    - Explore how interfaith leadership translates from in-person to online contexts

How Will YOU Lead Online?
There is a great need for online leadership, but there is no one way to lead. Reflect on your values, priorities, and goals to craft your own distinct leadership style.

- Learning Outcome: Explore the importance of leadership online and reflect on your own leadership style.
- Learning Objectives:
    - Consider the need for leadership in online spaces
    - Learn that there are many ways to approach leadership
    - Reflect on your own leadership values and style

Religion and the Internet 101

Learn about the Internet's genesis and evolution, how it is has impacted religious communities, and some intrinsic challenges to online interfaith leadership.

- Learning Outcome: Reflect on the history and control of the Internet, with particular attention to how religion functions online.
- Learning Objectives:
    - Reflect on the Internet's genesis and evolution
    - Consider the ongoing fight over who controls it
    - Consider how religion has and will continue to function online
    - Develop a personal history of your online presence and how religion and interfaith leadership might have played into your history so far

Faith, Facts, and Truth Online

Learn about the ubiquity and danger of misinformation online and develop skills for identifying it. Identify trusted sources for religious information online.

- Learning Outcome: Consider the dangers of misinformation online and learn best practices for finding and sharing reliable information.
- Learning Objectives:
    - Learn the distinction between "misinformation" and "disinformation"
    - Reflect on the dangers of misinformation, disinformation, and hateful disinformation
    - Become aware of the challenges associated with finding reliable information online
    - Learn best practices for finding and sharing reliable information online

Disrupting Hate Online

Learn best practices for disrupting hate online. Better understand how hate, disinformation, and discrimination manifest online.

- Learning Outcome: Learn what online harassment is, how it has flourished online, and some best practices and tools for disrupting it.
- Learning Objectives:
    - Learn more about definitions and manifestations of hate online
    - Become familiar with best practices for disrupting hate

Building Online Community

Examine two case studies and reflect on necessary elements for building community online.

- Learning Outcome: Reflect on the unique nature and potential of online interfaith communities and learn about the tools for building them.
- Learning Objectives:
  - Reflect on the unique nature and potential of online interfaith community
  - Learn the tools necessary for creating an online interfaith community
  - Consider the interfaith community you would like to create or in which you would like to participate

Being Safe Online

Assess and learn to mitigate personal risk online.

- Learning Outcome: Learn how to protect yourself online through assessing risk and identifying the proper digital tools.
- Learning Objectives:
  - Learn how to assess the risk levels of various online engagement
  - Become familiar with the questions you should always be asking yourself to stay safe online
  - Increase understanding about foundational online safety tips and tools

Achieving Impact Online

Articulate a vision for your online interfaith leadership. Who is your audience? What do you want to achieve?

- Learning Outcome: Reflect upon and begin to articulate the vision, goals, and audience for your interfaith leadership online.
- Learning Objectives:
  - Reflect on your *vision* for online interfaith leadership
  - Consider what *goals* you might choose for your online interfaith leadership
  - Begin to imagine what *audiences* you hope to reach through your leadership

Choose Your Platforms
Explore how other online interfaith leaders have utilized different digital platforms for diverse goals. Reflect on which platforms might be best suited to your particular goals and style.

- Learning Outcome: Draw inspiration from online interfaith leaders and reflect on where and how you want to begin leading yourself.
- Learning Objectives:
  - Draw inspiration from various online interfaith leaders, leadership styles, and platforms
  - Consider what online spaces might be best for your leadership style and goals

Self-Care Online
Online engagement can produce spiritual and emotional stress. Learn tools for recognizing harm online, taking care of yourself, and accessing support.

- Learning Outcome: Learn how the Internet can produce both stress and joy, and learn some techniques for caring for yourself while online.
- Learning Objectives:
  - Learn about how the Internet can produce stress, as well as bring happiness
  - Develop your own, unique self-care plan to help you maintain spiritual, mental, and physical health while you engage in interfaith leadership online

Bridgebuilding Online

Mohammed AL Samawi

<u>Learning Outcome</u>: Learn from three online bridgebuilding case studies and explore tools and resources for your own bridgebuilding work.

"Immense Possibilities for Encounter and Solidarity"

We have become accustomed – and even resigned – to the idea that the Internet is a place where people become polarized and misinformed. However, <u>at its beginning, the Internet</u> was widely viewed as offering an extraordinary opportunity to learn about and interact with diverse people from around the world. In 2014, <u>Pope Francis wrote</u>: "The Internet offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God."

The Internet is, of course, what we make of it. For interfaith leaders, the Internet must be understood and leveraged for the critical work of building bridges between people of different religions and worldviews. This involves <u>learning about the technology</u>, but even more importantly, it is about <u>understanding yourself</u>, and how to approach others online in a way that leads to building bridges, rather than burning them.

As data expert danah boyd puts it, "The key for the Internet is not about what you can functionally do, but what your mindset and what your choices are. You have the choice to double down on the things you believe and the people you know, or you have the choice to go out of your way to learn and see a different world. And that is not unlike the choice you have when you go into a party; you can just hang out with your friends and stare at the new person from across the room and judge them. Or you can try to meet that new person and learn about somebody new."

In this lesson we will:
- Learn from the experiences of three interfaith leaders who are building bridges across difference online
- Explore helpful approaches, tools, and resources for online bridgebuilding
- Reflect on your own experiences with bridging difference online

Bridgebuilding Online – Three Case Studies

There are infinite ways to build bridges online. Let's look at three examples of interfaith leaders using online spaces to build connection across difference. As you explore these case studies, consider: What's unique about the bridgebuilding that's possible online? What choices made by these leaders were important in making impactful online bridgebuilding possible?

Case Study – Mohammed AL Samawi

In 2010, a Yemini Muslim man wrote a message on Facebook: "Greetings from Yemen! My name is Mohammed AL Samawi and I am a Muslim living in Yemen. What do you think of Islam? What do you think of Muslims? What do you think of Yemenis?" Mohammed had been taught to be suspicious of people of other religious traditions, but after a positive interaction with a Christian teacher, he turned to the Internet to encounter people of other religions, especially Jews. An Israeli Jew answered Mohammed's Facebook post, and they began a dialogue. This encounter led Mohammed to start an interfaith dialogue group online, which in turn led to him becoming a self-described "interfaith activist."

When he became targeted with violence in his home country for his interfaith work, his interfaith friends from around the world helped him to escape Yemen and immigrate to America, where he founded the Abrahamic House, an interfaith organization "committed to the exchange and education of core values that define our religious traditions."

Activity: Please watch this 5-minute video of Mohammed telling his story.

Mohammed's story shows the power of the Internet to transcend geographic location and cultural bias to form connections between people who might never have met otherwise. However, technology is not the only tool that Mohammed employed in his efforts to build bridges. His open mind and open heart, and the open questions in his initial post were equally responsible for the success of his interfaith work and the bonds that saved his life.

Case Study – Chris Stedman

Another, very different example of bridging divides online comes from Chris Stedman. Chris is a secular humanist who believes in the importance of atheists and humanists engaging in interfaith conversations. A few years ago, Chris spoke at a Center for Inquiry conference about this perspective, and a student in the audience came up afterward to voice his strong disagreement. After the conference, they started following one another online. Chris would post things about atheists and interfaith, and the student would engage and debate it. While they didn't see one another in person again for a long time, they kept in contact through the Internet and had productive conversation that led to increased understanding on both sides and eventually a formal working partnership.

According to Chris, the relationship with the student is an example of "weak ties," which Chris believes carry underappreciated potential for bridgebuilding online: "Sociologists talk about close ties and weak ties. Close ties are our family members and best friends; people who – no matter what circumstances occur in life – we're going to keep up with, one way or another. Whereas weak ties are people whom we meet once in passing, and without the Internet, we would go our separate ways. Without the Internet, I probably would never have seen that student again. Sociologists suggest that weak ties tend to bring different perspectives into our lives more than our close ties do."

Case Study – Rev. Jeremy Nickel

Virtual reality is opening up new bridgebuilding pathways. Rev. Jeremy Nickel founded EvolVR, a virtual-reality based spiritual community space. He and his team have used their platform to feature 360-degree experiences of churches, temples and mosques. The goal is to use virtual reality to make these sacred sites more familiar and to humanize the people inside. As Nickel explains, "You can go into a mosque, and experience Jumma prayers as one of the worshipers. The prayers are unfolding around you. Then you're in the Hindu temple, and the priest is walking around and telling you about the different deities." Jeremy believes these sorts of encounters are a powerful

tool for bridging difference. "I was invited in my teens into a mosque, and it immediately changed the way that I thought about Muslims and how they worship for the rest of my life…These videos provide a safe first step into another's world."

Rev. Nickel has harnessed virtual reality technology to build bridges in a whole new way. He has not just replicated an offline activity online but is instead facilitating connection in ways that are only possible in this particular, digital space. His efforts expand how we might think about creating opportunities for people to step into each other's shoes. Virtual reality presents another avenue for generating the mutual empathy that is so fundamental to bridgebuilding.

Aden Van Noppen, Founder and Executive Director, Mobius

"Aden Van Noppen, an expert on the intersection of technology and spirituality, shares: "There's been some really interesting research on the embodied experience of having something happen to you [via a virtual reality experience]. The embodied experience of walking in someone else's shoes. Virtual reality can be a very powerful empathy building tool."

Activity: After exploring these case studies, consider:
- How are these three examples of bridgebuilding similar? How are they different?
- What dimensions of difference are being bridged in each example?
- What kinds of opportunities for connection and learning are made possible by the Internet?
- What did each of these leaders need to do in order to realize the potential for bridgebuilding presented by the Internet?

Skills and Tools for Leading Online Bridgebuilding

The Internet presents opportunities for bridgebuilding, but that doesn't mean that bridges get built automatically. As we saw above, effective online interfaith leaders make intentional choices to bring people together. They also leverage tools and skills to help them in their work.

Many of the skills interfaith leaders need for successful online bridgebuilding mirror offline interfaith skills. You may find, however, that these skills become even more important online. The Internet has given rise to "the online disinhibition effect," which describes the tendency of some people to self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely in online spaces than they would face-to-face. Online disinhibition can be useful for interfaith engagement, as people might be more open in online discussions than they would be in person. But it can also lead some people to be more willing to say and do things that could be insulting or hurtful. The following skills and tools will support your efforts to bridge divides online:

Know Thyself

For professor and scholar of digital leadership, Dr. Josie Ahlquist, the most important part of online leadership is to "ground your work in self-awareness." "What impact do you want to make…and how do you want to live your life?" This type of self-awareness will help you in your work to bridges divides online. Chris Stedman likewise believes that going online with clear intent is the key to successful online interfaith leadership: "It's very easy to use the internet mindlessly and to anxiously keep following the current of the Internet. Most often, that current moves us in polarizing and divisive directions. But I can change the way that I use the Internet, and that can have a positive impact on my life. There was this eight-year, longitudinal study out of BYU that found that two people could spend the same exact amount of time online and have radically different experiences of the Internet. So much of it had to do with whether or not they were thinking about what needs they were trying to meet as they used the Internet."

Consider how you would like to cultivate self-awareness when you're online. Will you pause before starting in online, to ask yourself about your purpose? Will you make a note when something that happens causes you to react emotionally (either positively or negatively)? Will you set a timer so that you can take five-minute reflection breaks here and there? Be intentional about growing your self-awareness and grounding your work.

Sacred Pause: Take Your Time

The Internet is fast. Information, both good and bad, can go around the world in a single click. You can control your own pace, however. You can respond quickly, but that doesn't mean you have to do so. Rabbi Josh Stanton suggests that taking a moment before replying online is one of the most important tools we can use for bridgebuilding: "In many traditions, the notion of the pause – the *bechira* in Hebrew – offers a point in which we have to choose. Pausing just long enough online to formulate a [better] response to something or generate a [better] initial line of conversation…The sacred mindfulness practice of giving myself just one more breath between receiving a signal and responding to it [can] create a spark of the sacred between myself and someone else online."

Practicing Curiosity: Asking Questions

Mohammed's first post on Facebook consisted of a brief introduction and then three questions. Mohammed led with his curiosity about the beliefs of people very different than himself, and he did not have a pre-conceived idea of the correct answers. Honest questions (that is, questions that are genuinely curious and *not* intended to teach or make a point) indicate to others that we value them and their ideas. The Internet provides the technology to ask questions of people who are far away – both physically, and in terms of their beliefs – and it can bring them closer as we gain understanding in both directions.

"Holy Listening" Online

For interfaith bridgebuilders, the Internet is a place where we have the opportunity to listen: hear new voices, engage new ideas, and forge new bonds. What does it mean to "listen" to a tweet or a Facebook post? Professor Heidi Campbell at Texas A&M has spent her career researching religion online, and she also is trained as a spiritual director in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. Heidi believes that listening online is one of the most important and underappreciated online skills: "Digital culture is about filling in with noise and image. The contemplative tradition can help create a space for acknowledging and understanding difference. The practice of holy listening – not just the words and not just the meaning, but the intent and process that went into developing that other perspective; trying to step into the other person's frame."

Some of this listening is facilitated by the "sacred pause" mentioned above. Pausing to consider what someone just said or what you just read increases the chance that you're actually deeply listening to the other perspective. It also often requires genuine questions like the ones we just explored. Finally, listening is not passive, but requires

active acknowledgement of what's been said, via summary, paraphrasing, questions to check for understanding, or other thoughtful feedback. All of these skills, which are grounded in sincere desire to listen and learn, are foundational for online leaders.

Resources for Navigating Tough Conversations

As an online bridgebuilder, you'll want to continue to develop skills and gather tools to facilitate more challenging conversations. There are a wide variety of resources available for handing these tougher moments. This Open Mind exercise, for example, helps you practice handling difficult conversations via a simple, 10-minute activity. Another example of helpful resources can be found at Living Room Conversations. They offer conversation guides for a wide variety of topics, including a long list of topics related to faith.

Going Deeper: Additional Resources
- *Read:* Mohammed AL Samawi's memoir, *The Fox Hunt*
- *Read: "How to Argue on the Internet without Losing Your Mind"*
- *Listen:* Mohammed AL Samawi interviewed on WNYC
- *Watch: "How virtual reality can create the ultimate empathy machine"*

Summative Assessment: Your Experience with Online Bridgebuilding
- What experiences have you had online that felt like bridge building?
- What were some of the things that you (or others involved) did that helped build bridges?
- What was challenging or didn't work well?
- Have you had the experience of getting to know someone well, who was from a different background and with whom you only (or mostly) interacted online? What made that work?

Header: Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online

From IRL to URL

Learning Outcome: Consider the importance of online interfaith engagement and explore how interfaith leadership translates digitally.

"A Priest, A Rabbi, and an Imam Login to a Chatroom…"

At first blush, emphasizing the importance of interfaith leadership online might be surprising. There's a lot about interfaith work that doesn't seem to lend itself to digital engagement:

- Interfaith work entails learning about and *respecting* diverse identities, and we keep hearing about how the Internet creates echo-chambers and increases polarization.
- Interfaith work is about building *relationships* that bridge difference, and the Internet infamous for anonymous, superficial and malicious interactions.
- Interfaith work is about mobilizing people toward *common action for the common good*, and the Internet fosters isolation and disenchantment.

But these dichotomies fail to grasp the dynamism and adaptability of both interfaith engagement and the Internet. We are still at the dawn of the greatest transformations in human communication and interaction, and there is a great need for leaders who both

recognize this momentous opportunity and are prepared to meet its attendant challenges. The Internet has made it possible to connect people from every corner of the earth, but there is no guarantee that our new digital village will be a peaceful one – indeed the history of sudden and massive intercultural exchange tells a different story. For the promise of interfaith cooperation to succeed in the digital age, it will take interfaith leaders who understand and are adept at using the very technologies that have brought us to this crossroads.

"I see technology as just another way that humans connect and communicate. First, we invented smoke signals and drumlines, and, throughout history, we've invented successive ways of saying, "We need to talk to that village over there. We need to have a conversation." That's a basic human need, and digital technology has provided this amazing way for us to do that so much more rapidly, so much more cheaply, at scales that were never before humanly possible."

Cheryl Contee, CEO of Do Big Things

![Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online]

In this lesson we will:
- Consider five reasons why it is important to engage religious diversity online
- Explore how interfaith leadership translates from in-person to online contexts

The Importance of Engaging Religious Diversity Online: A Digital Apologetic

There is a widespread notion that the Internet is, at best, a place where people waste tremendous amounts of time, only to feel worse about themselves, and, at worst, a cesspool of echo chambers, misinformation, and hate. Why, then, are we advocating that interfaith leaders think about engaging religious diversity online? Let's look at a few reasons.

Because That's Where the People Are

While there is truth to the aforementioned assessments of digital culture, there is equal truth that the Internet has created unparalleled opportunities to learn about and interact with diverse people from every corner of the globe. There are over 4.66 billion active internet users worldwide, which represents nearly 60% of global population. Indeed, if in its basest form, interfaith leadership is about improving people's attitudes and actions with respect to religious diversity, it only makes sense to – in the (misattributed) words of Willie Sutton – go "where the people are," and the people are online.

Because, Despite What You've Been Told, Online Interactions are Still Real

While a shockingly high percentage of the Internet might be cat videos, we must disabuse ourselves of the notion that digital experiences are somehow inherently inferior to experiences "in real life" (IRL). As Chris Stedman, author of the book *IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in Our Digital Lives*, observes, "We tend to consider life online to be fake or less real. We are wont to think that the things that we do online don't really count in the same way as things that we do offline, which means that we don't always aspire to bring the same practices to the Internet that we do in other parts of our life. Essentially, we don't take it seriously as a space where we can actually learn from other people and where we can forge really meaningful connections, even though we're all doing it all the time. There is also a danger in overcorrecting and saying, 'Well, life online and life offline are exactly the same,' which is also not true. The ways that we can connect are very different online. But that they are different doesn't mean that they're not both real or that they don't count in the same way. IRL and URL are different, but one isn't any more real than the other."

> "We tend to consider life online to be fake or less real. We are wont to think that the things that we do online don't really count in the same way as things that we do offline, which means that we don't always aspire to bring the same practices to the Internet that we do in other parts of our life."

Chris Stedman, Executive Director
of the Yale Humanist Community

Because the Internet Makes Many Forms of Human Engagement Much Easier

The Internet offers new possibilities for how we imagine community – not bound by time or geography, but by intention and interest. For online interfaith leaders, the Internet offers incomparable opportunities to create communities among people from all different religious and spiritual backgrounds, aimed at creating more understanding and sustaining relationships. As Amanda Quraishi, a contributing fellow at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture, put it: "A lot of people feel that the value of the Internet is as a broadcasting platform, or that the only metric for success is how many, e.g., can we get millions of people to sign this thing or to be on board with this position? I think that is not the value of the Internet, and I say that as somebody who does digital marketing. Anyone with a few books can spread a message. The value of the Internet is its potential for depth. You can create greater depth online because you can bring very specific interests together in ways that you couldn't afford to, or you just didn't know about before the digital age."

Because of the Very Fact that the Internet is Rife with Prejudice

There is an apocryphal story of two American businesspeople who worked for two competing and rapidly expanding shoe companies. Each of their companies sent them to the same overseas market to consider expansion. The first sent a message back: "There are millions of people here. *None* of them wear shoes. Possibilities for expansion nil." The second sent a message back: "There are millions of people here. *None* of them

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wear shoes. Possibilities for expansion endless." Often, what makes the difference in how we approach a situation is not the "facts on the ground," but the attitude that we bring to it. And this is a crucial piece of leadership. As Eboo Patel, Founder and President of IFYC, writes, "Interfaith leaders ought to look at [difficult] situations the way a mountain climber looks at a mountain. The first reaction is not, 'Hey, how did *that* get there?' It is, 'I *came* to climb this mountain.'" The mountain of prejudice, misinformation, and fear online is high; but that is exactly why it calls for interfaith leaders who are equipped with *both* the skillset of interfaith leadership *and* digital acumen.

Because There Really Isn't a Choice Anyway

The irreversible ubiquity of digital communication means that in many ways, debating whether or not to engage online is a little bit like debating taking swimming lessons after you've already fallen off the boat. The Internet is here, and it sure isn't going anywhere. As data expert danah boyd observed, "It's not that there's an Internet versus not Internet; there are just different degrees of mediation in human communication, from physical interaction to handwritten notes to phones to email to Zoom to TikTok. The point is not to argue their relative merits, but rather to say: 'What do they afford us? What are the things that we can do? What are the social norms and social expectations that we can have? How do they look different in each?'"

The Internet is, and will be, what we make of it and how we use it for good. For interfaith leaders, the Internet must be understood and leveraged for the critical work of building bridges between people of different religions and worldviews.

From Interfaith Leadership to Interfaith Leadership Online

If the question is not *whether* or not to engage religious diversity online, but rather *how* to do that effectively, let's look at some ways in which digital interfaith leadership is similar and different from in-person contexts.

The Principles Are the Same

Just as in IRL spaces, there are important ideas for how to engage difference that can be replicated in online spaces. In fact, some online spaces make it easier to do interfaith work.

IFYC has developed an online [Interfaith Leadership](#) curriculum. The frameworks articulated there – the vision, knowledgebase, and skillset of interfaith leadership – as well as the concrete skills of authentically sharing your own story, asking good questions and listening attentively, and navigating deep differences – all can be done online. Indeed, the Internet provides an excellent medium by which to discover and organize opportunities to take common action for the common good.

Don't feel as though you need to reinvent the wheel! The instincts and skills you've developed in your interfaith work thus far are all at your disposal as you take them into a digital setting. As [Aden Van Noppen](#), an expert on the intersection of technology and spirituality, told us: "So many of the tactics that work offline – like personal storytelling – are exactly what we need online. We know how to reveal humanity offline, and we can lean into those same tactics in digital spaces."

The Devil is in the Details

While the principles might be the same, there are special factors and circumstances that you should be aware of as you embark on interfaith leadership online. Let's look at a few of those:

- **It's All Way More Public –** While many of the principles of interfaith interaction translate online, it's important to keep in mind that the Internet is a far more public space than in-person contexts. As [Amanda Quraishi](#) shared, "There's far less control over who comes in and out…At any given moment, you don't necessarily know who is watching. Everything is public…The Internet is

exponentially more public than a public, physical space." Given the sensitivity –
and, frequently, vulnerability – that can be part of effective interfaith dialogues,
this is an important factor to keep in mind when moving online. The frequent
invocation of the "Vegas Rule" (what happens in this space, stays in this space) in
interfaith contexts cannot be an expectation online.

- **Authenticity Matters Even More** – [Authenticity is an essential element of
leadership](#) in all contexts but can matter even more online. As [Kristina Viera](#),
Director of Marketing and Communications at [IFYC](#), [says](#), "Social media
authenticity has become a form of currency. The reason people become
influencers is because their real life is being shown on social media. They are
vulnerable, they share their experiences." The good news is that this can be the
easiest part of leading online: just be yourself. As Cheryl Contee, [Founder of Do
Big Things](#), puts it, "It's real simple. The person you see online is the person you
will see in my living room. There is not a difference. And that's all it is. It's really not
that hard."

- **Resist the Pull Toward Performance** – Because the Internet is so public, one of the
dangers for interfaith leaders is the temptation to think of everything you do as a
performance. Interfaith leadership, online or off, requires actively listening to and
building relationships with the people you are engaging. If one part of your brain
is constantly thinking about how your statements or profile appear to the Internet
at large, it will be harder for you to be present to the people with whom you are
actually trying to work. Being aware that everything you do online is public is
important for [security](#) and [self-care](#), but that is quite different from taking actions
precisely because you are striving for fame. Even for interfaith leaders for whom
building a "personal brand" and garnering a following is part of how they are
making impact, there is a fine but crucial line between fame for fame's sake and
attention for good work. As [danah boyd](#) emphasized, "When we take our faith or
good intentions to the Internet, we have to make certain that we're also taking
humility to the Internet and not taking the idea of celebrity or the idea of fame or
the idea of amplification, because that is false faith."

- **Work Harder to Create Shared Space** – One of the crucial elements to interfaith
engagement is building spaces where it is easier for people to appreciate religious
diversity and work collaboratively with others. This often involves fashioning a
shared space where diverse people can meet and engage on relatively equal
footing and with shared goals. The ability of [the Internet to create ever more self-](#)

reinforcing worldviews can make this difficult. The world that you encounter online might be vastly different than the one someone else experiences. As a result, it's important to both be self-aware of your own digital world and be conscious of how others' might be different. Professor Heidi Campbell at Texas A&M emphasized this point: "It's important to cultivate digital self-awareness and to reflect on your digital footprint. Our digital worlds are so embedded in our everyday lives that we just don't think about it, and don't realize how different they will be for someone who is Muslim, or a Rabbi versus a Baptist minister. Their digital environments, like everyone's, have been crafted by themselves, often unintentionally in a lot of ways. But how is that shaping how they see the world? And then when they come into an interfaith space, what are they bringing into that? We all come with our own baggage, but we don't always think about our *digital* baggage."

Summative Assessment: The Future of Interfaith Work

While there is continuity between interfaith work IRL and URL, it seems clear that the digital age will impact interfaith work in profound ways. What that will look like is still unclear. To a large extent, it will depend on you and people like you and the choices that you make.

Imagine yourself well in the future. It is the year 2075. Having spent good portions of your life engaging in interfaith leadership online, you are asked to write a short piece reflecting on how the digital age influenced the evolution of interfaith work:

- What would you say?
- What will interfaith work online look like over the next half century?
- What will it have achieved?
- What do we need to do today, in 2021, to get there? Or what do we need to avoid?

How Will YOU Lead Online?
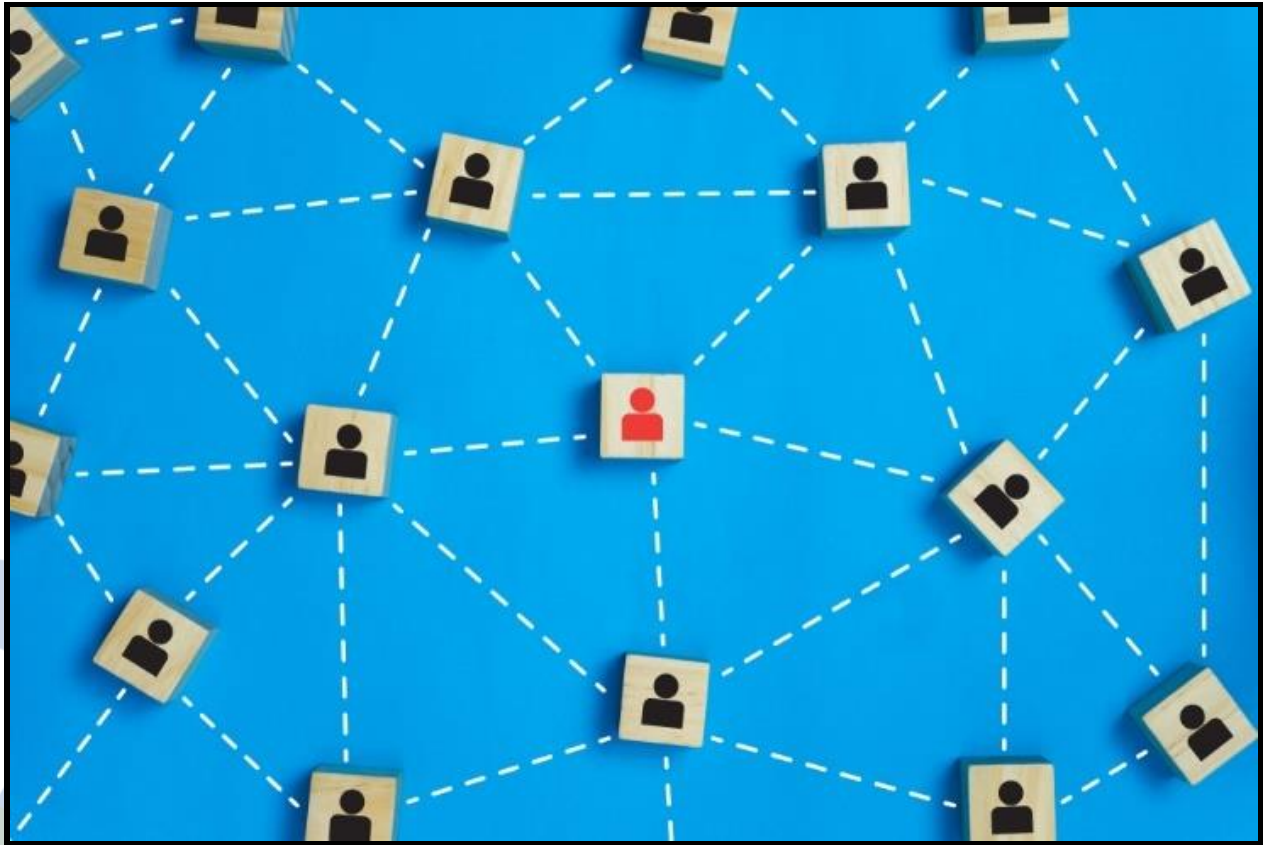
<u>Learning Outcome:</u> Explore the importance of leadership online and reflect on your own leadership style.

"Change is the Function of Leadership"

In the digital age, it's tempting to be charmed by the idea that we no longer need leaders to effect social change. As the public health researcher and writer <u>Atul Gawande</u> put it in a <u>piece in the *New Yorker*</u>: "In the era of the iPhone, Facebook, and Twitter, we've become enamored of ideas that spread as effortlessly as ether. We want frictionless, 'turnkey' solutions to the major difficulties of the world – hunger, disease, poverty. We prefer instructional videos to teachers, drones to troops, incentives to institutions. People and institutions can feel messy and anachronistic. They introduce, as the engineers put it, uncontrolled variability."

Social change is what we call the process by which people begin to do things differently and create new norms – think recycling, online banking, or identifying our preferred

pronouns when we introduce ourselves, all practices that were unheard of to our grandparents but are commonplace now. As Eboo Patel, Founder and President of IFYC, writes, "There's frequently an old-school dynamic to social change. It's not a cool website or a sexy public relations campaign that ultimately bends the arc; it's a person." In his analysis of what makes for successful public health campaigns, Gawande concluded, "People follow the lead of other people they know and trust when they decide whether to take up [something new]. Every change requires effort, and the decision to make that effort is a social process."

Essentially, people change when they are influenced by other people – people we call leaders – whom they find relatable and inspiring. Or, as John Kotter stated in his seminal article on leadership, "Change is the function of leadership."

In this lesson we will:
- Consider the need for leadership in online spaces
- Learn that there are many ways to approach leadership
- Reflect on your own leadership values and style

Leading Online?

Just as we still need leaders in our digitally advanced world, we need leaders in online spaces. Positive online engagement and community building doesn't just happen. We need leaders to cultivate and create the space for enriching interaction. For interfaith leaders in particular, leading online is critical. The internet is full of opportunities for interfaith exchange and relationship building, but leaders are the ones who make those opportunities happen, build bridges, and interrupt division.

Leading can be difficult, and it can be especially challenging when it feels like everyone is watching and everything is recorded, tracked, and stored. It might be stressful enough to make you reconsider online leadership...but please don't! Your interfaith leadership skills are needed in the digital spaces you occupy, and in those that you have not yet discovered. We are in a digital revolution. The Internet is expansive and still uncharted, with lots of opportunities to create something beautiful and better, alone or in community.

Interfaith leader Amanda Quraishi talks about an important role of online leaders: "Part of it is: you seed a culture, you provide rules, you demonstrate what it looks like to do certain things, and you have a concept for how to moderate. That's where leadership comes in. And then you allow the community to also start to contribute to the culture, right. And I say allow, not because I'm a dictator. But because you do have to keep a rein on it, it will run off course, it will go off track. We need somebody in there to be in charge."

Amanda Quraishi, Contributing Fellow at USC's Center for Religion and Civic Culture

So Many Ways to Lead

Leadership looks different depending on the context, and on individual preference and styles. If you research leadership, you will find over 1,000 different definitions and over 100 theories about leadership – and this is just in the United States.

Leadership is influenced by societal and cultural norms. For instance, while a soccer team captain in Ghana, a non-profit board member in Kuala Lumpur, and a rabbi in Argentina are all "leaders," it is possible that they use different models of leadership. Why? Because culture, context, and norms matter and will impact how anyone connects to their constituents. This is also true for the digital spaces you are in -- each has its own culture, context, and norms.

Activity: Take a few minutes and reflect:
- On what three digital spaces (e.g, TikTok, Instagram) do you spend the most time?
- What does leadership look like in each space? Can you tell who is leading?
- How does leadership look similar across these spaces? What looks different?
- Do you change how you lead online, depending on the platform?

This vast field of "leadership studies" has evolved to consider what makes for effective leadership in different contexts, including digital spaces. Some leadership models focus on the individual, others look at power, and others center the community. Some models

prioritize results, while others emphasize process. Let's look now at a few prominent leadership models, to get a sense for the diversity of approaches:

Culturally Relevant Leadership

Increasing cultural diversity is a reality in many of our communities. Certainly, online spaces have the potential to be very diverse. Culturally relevant leadership, informed by the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings, prioritizes approaches that are culturally competent. The culturally relevant leader aims to work skillfully across cultures, seeking to understand, respond to, and integrate diverse needs and perspectives. Practitioners of culturally relevant leadership ask questions about power and privilege, influence and impact, and center diverse individuals' identities and stories. This leadership model seeks to equip all individuals with the skillsets to lead in religiously, ethnically, and socially diverse communities.

Emotionally Intelligent Leadership

First coined in 1990, the term "emotional intelligence" was popularized shortly thereafter in Daniel Goleman's book, *Emotional Intelligence*. Goleman defined "EI" as "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well." Goleman added five areas of competency within EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social ability to cultivate and deepen relationships. Emotionally intelligent leaders are able to perceive their own and others' emotions, take information about emotions into account when working with others, understand how emotions affect human behavior, and manage strong emotions when they arise.

Authentic Leadership

Developed in the early 2000s by Bill George, the authentic leadership model centers on the idea of bringing your whole self to your leadership. Leaders in this model are open about their passion and purpose. They seek to build genuine relationships, demonstrating compassion and empathy as they attune themselves to others' needs. They know their values, build clear goals on top of those values, and then are self-disciplined in pursuit of those goals. There is a "seamless link between their espoused values, actions, and behaviors." Cheryl Contee, founder of Do Big Things, models authentic leadership: "The person you see online, is the person you will see in my living room, okay, there is not a difference. And that's all it is. It's really not that hard. It's real simple."

How will YOU lead?

As you can see, there are many different ways to think about leadership. And, there's no one right way! Each of us has the opportunity to decide on our own leadership values and approach.

> "No one taught me how to [be an interfaith leader online]. A lot of it was just figuring it out on my own…No one is teaching or talking to us about values. Why are you doing what you are doing?…If you have some clarity around who you are and what type of person you want to be, it's much easier to not get lost in the way that we easily can in this ocean."
>
> Dr. Simran Jeet Singh, Senior Adviser for Equity and Inclusion at YSC Consulting

We've been thinking about leadership relatively abstractly. As we pivot to reflecting on your personal online leadership, let's take a few minutes to be inspired by other online interfaith leaders.

Activity: Please watch the following three videos:
- Interfaith Leader - Balpreet Kaur (3.5 mins)
- Civil Discourse Online: A Conversation With Cameron Kasky (6 mins)
- Empathy is not Endorsement | TED Talk by Dylan Marron (11 mins)

Activity: After watching the videos, reflect on the following questions:
- How would you describe these folks' leadership styles?
- What resonates or inspires you about their online leadership?
- What about their approaches, if anything, feels discordant with your own leadership inclinations?

Going Deeper: Additional Resources

Listen:
- [Juana Bordas on Leadership for a Multicultural Age](#)

Watch:
- [Charlene Li: Efficient leadership in the digital era](#)
- [Great Tribal Leaders of Modern Times: LaDonna Harris](#)
- [Recognizing the Sound of the Genuine](#)
- [Learning Leadership: Lessons from a Pop-Up Choir](#)

Read:
- Guthrie, K. L., Jones, T. B., & Osteen, L. (Eds.). (2016). Developing Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning: New Directions for Student Leadership, Number 152. John Wiley & Sons.
- Shankman, M. L., & Allen, S. J. (2009). Emotionally intelligent leadership: A guide for college students. John Wiley & Sons.
- Luthans, F., & Avolio, B. J. (2003). Authentic leadership development. Positive organizational scholarship, 241, 258.

Summative Assessment: Who Are You as a Leader?

With the examples from this lesson as inspiration, let's reflect on your own leadership. Using the template below, fill in the blanks to talk or write about yourself, your values, and some of your experiences online. We hope this exercise will help you feel out the core of your own leadership approach, and also bring to your attention leadership considerations upon which you'd like to reflect further.

My name is _____, and I'm from _____ (home, region, country you feel most connected to, land, family, lineage). I am currently located _____, and I am _____ (what are you doing, working on, pursuing). I grew up _____ (religious, spiritual, secular, worldview) and believed _____. I now believe (same, different, mixture) _____ (religious, spiritual, secular, worldview) and believe _____ (what you believe).

People who know me would describe me as _____. This is pretty accurate except for _____. I'm passionate about _____, and it's the reason I (am involved, write about, participate, serve) in _____ (x project, x work, my religious community, etc.). Others whom I care about might not always care about the things I care about, but I know it's important work because _____. I care about this work because _____, and I hope one day to _____.

My philosophical, religious, or spiritual tradition does/does not (choose one) influence the way I lead and think about leadership. I am influenced by _____. One of my role models for leadership is _____. They value _____, just like I do. I aspire to _____ as well as they do.

These are some of the digital platforms that I frequently browse: _____ (platforms), and I usually engage in the space by _____ (using emojis, just scrolling, adding comments, etc.) On social media, I follow and/or get inspiration from _____ (people you admire) because they exhibit values that are important to me. I mostly resonate with the way they _____.

Usually, I _____ (dismiss, ignore, engage, address) statements about _____ (topic or subject area) online. I do or do not (choose one) take a stand when discrimination, persecution, bias, bigotry, or prejudice about religion, traditions or rituals occur online. I am inclined to _____ if I come across this behavior online and usually _____.

The best experience I had online was when _____. The worst experience I had online was when _____. {We are sorry this happened to you}. These experiences taught me _____. If I were to experience something similar again, I would _____.

I'd like to be more _____ on the Internet, but I need to develop my _____ to do so.

If I could redesign the Internet I would _____ because I believe _____. I dream of a world that _____ and hope soon to be able to help make that world become a reality.

Religion and the Internet 101

<u>Learning Outcome</u>: Reflect on the history and control of the Internet, with particular attention to how religion functions online.

Humanity's Most Consequential Invention

In the middle of the 20th century, the Catholic priest Telliard de Chardin suggested that one day a connective "thinking layer" would envelope the entire world. Just a few years later, the technology that would become known as the Internet was created. Our online world may not be precisely what the priest had in mind, but it is the realization of an interconnected world that is proving to be humanity's most consequential invention.

Despite the enormity of what has transpired, most of us don't think enough about where we are going when we go online or the specific way religion has been part of the Internet. For online interfaith leaders, understanding the history, and the present context, of online spaces is important for a better future on *and* off-line.

In this lesson we will:
- Reflect on the Internet's genesis and evolution
- Consider the ongoing fight over who controls it
- Consider how religion has and will continue to function online
- Develop a personal history of your online presence and how religion and interfaith leadership might have played into your history so far

Activity: Take a few minutes to reflect on how the Internet shapes your daily life:
- In what ways do you NEED the internet to go to school/do your job/manage your life (e.g., sending email, attending Zoom classes/meetings, online shopping/banking, etc.)?
- How frequently do you rely on the Internet for your recreational and/or social life (e.g., social media, video/audio streaming, social activism, etc.)?
- How different would your day look/feel if you didn't have internet access?

You May Ask Yourself: "How Did We Get Here?"

Every time you grab your phone or open your laptop, you are entering a space that has a specific and complex history that starts in the 1960s and is still dynamic today. The disruptive phenomenon called the Internet began as a system created to connect diffuse universities and government agencies. It grew through the 1970s and 1980s to a wider network called Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), leading to technological advances we take for granted today, like email, the URL, and the World Wide Web.

In the 1990s, the technology became widely available to the public, and since that time the number of people online has exploded to over four billion worldwide and 300 million in the United States.

There have already been four important advances in the Internet since its public adoption in the '90s:

1. **Broadband** – The advent of broadband allowed for larger files to be shared, including video and images, and sped up communication to be in real time.
2. **Mobile** – Today, an ever-increasing number of people around the world has access to the Internet in their pockets. This innovation has made the Internet a near constant presence in many people's lives.
3. **Social** – While the early Internet relied on tools that allowed a few people to communicate with many – e.g., email and websites – the advent of social

networking shifted the power of producing content directly into the hands of users, changing the flow of information and disrupting media, politics, and broader civic life.

4. **Internet of Things, or AI (artificial intelligence)** – Through the Internet, we now have machines with the ability to think and speak to one another, sometimes with human mediation, but most of the time directly – think of self-driving cars.

The former head of Google, Eric Schmidt, famously stated: "The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand." How the Internet is affecting our world, and your personal life, is worth reflecting upon as you consider interfaith leadership in the online world.

Kevin Kelly, the founder of Wired said: "As far as the Internet goes, nothing has happened yet," meaning the future of the Internet is being written now. It is up to people like you, who are proactively engaging this awesome tool, to use this technology for good.

Activity: Take 5 minutes to look through this History of the Internet to see the stages of how we got to where we are today

Whose Internet? Their Internet!

Every time we log onto the Internet, there should be a giant warning sign that pops up to remind us that we are entering territory that was constructed for a specific purpose (and often not the one for which we are using it), is carefully monitored, and is hotly contested.

"You are The Product"

While the Internet is optimized for communication and engagement, it is built with objectives by the builders, which include financial incentives. Since 1995, when Amazon and eBay were founded, every commercial product has looked to the Internet to find their customers. Thus, while social media sites like Instagram and Twitter are nominally about human connection and communication, the objective of its designers and owners is actually to keep you logged on as long as possible, so that you interreact with more advertisers.

Professor Heidi Campbell at Texas A&M has studied religion and the Internet for as long as anyone. She offered this piece of wisdom: "Users create the digital worlds they live in. But we also live in spaces online that have been created for us, and people don't realize how much the choices of the designers of these spaces can begin to shape their worldview. It is called, 'the myth of interactivity.' We see the Internet as this open space of complete freedom, when actually most of the options open to us have already been determined by media designers, and the previous choices we've made."

Dr. Heidi A. Campbell, Professor at Texas A&M University

Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online

In the Netflix documentary _The Social Dilemma_, there is an important exchange of ideas starting with the old axiom, "If you're not paying for the product, then you are the product." Computer scientist Jaron Lanier, a founding father of virtual reality, offers an important rejoinder that when we are using the Internet, the real product is "the ability of companies who advertise on these platforms to influence us and change our behavior… changing what you do, how you think, who you are."

Net Neutrality

Not only are commercial interests influencing platforms, but the Internet itself has become a commodity. How the Internet is provided and who gets priority is the subject of intense debate under the broad mantle of "Net Neutrality." Net Neutrality is "the idea, principle, or requirement that Internet service providers should or must treat all Internet data as the same regardless of its kind, source, or destination." Sarah Rabil adds: "Broadly, it means everything on the Internet should be equally accessible—that the Internet should be a place where great ideas compete on equal terms with big money." The question of Net Neutrality has come before Congress, and it is still unclear what the future of public access to the Internet will look like.

Data expert danah boyd wishes every person who goes online would understand that the Internet is very much about commerce. "It was intended to connect people, and that's been perverted and turned into a tool of financial gain on every level."

danah boyd, Founder of Data & Society

Interfaith:
Engaging Religious Diversity Online

The most valuable asset that any interfaith leader can bring to the online space is awareness of the oft-overlooked forces controlling it and recognition of the resulting possibilities and limits of how we can work with this technology.

Rev. Jeremy Nickel, who founded "SacredVR," insists that: "The internet should be a human right that everyone has access to. Technology is neutral: people decide how technology moves. Corporations are trying to privatize it and people need to be aware of this threat."

Rev. Jeremy D. Nickel, Founder and CEO of SacredVR and EvolVR, Ordained Unitarian Universalist Minister

Interfaith:
Engaging Religious Diversity Online

Governmental Control

The other potential impediment to Internet access is governmental control. Over the past 25 years, the Internet has provided people with ways to communicate with one another that can be threatening to the status quo. Many governments routinely censor what information or communication the public can access, slowing down access to information and occasionally shutting down the Internet completely. The rate of this practice is rising rapidly and in 2020 there were 93 major internet shutdowns in 21 countries.

Activity: Check out this *5-minute video* to learn more about how governments censor Internet access.

You Are Being Watched

One final note to this "yikes" section – you are being watched. You know that, but it is worth repeating, especially within the context of religion, that the Internet is hyper equipped to track users' every move. This can be abused as governments monitor the Internet usage of religious individuals. Understanding surveillance and data collection should not paralyze you, but instead invite an awareness that inspires intentional choices about how you show up online, with whom, and for what purpose.

Religion Everywhere Online

Religion and religious ideas always have been a part of what people are seeking and experiencing online. The Internet is the Gutenberg printing press on steroids. The Gutenberg Bible? You want a Bible? How do you want it? The Internet has a thousand apps for that. Since the earliest days, when group chats and message boards were made possible, there have been online discussions about religion. People built religious communities on AOL, Second Life, and in the comment section of religious websites like Beliefnet. Pew surveys from the early 2000s show the rise of religion online: In 2000, 21% of Internet users had gone online to find religious or spiritual information. In 2001, it rose to 25%, and in 2004 it was up to 64%.

However, more than just a conduit for information, the Internet is transforming how individuals and communities receive, parse, digest, and produce religious knowledge and experience. It is changing how we understand religious authority and the way it is wielded. It is shaping how we understand who our community is and how it is formed. Finally, the technology of the Internet is challenging liturgical, theological, and ecclesial assumptions and creating new ones.

The Vatican had been online since 1995, and it launched a Twitter handle in 2012. Pope Benedict tweeted once a day from the widely ridiculed twitter handle – @Pope2YouVatican – until a major Twitter reboot was a success and the Twitter handle @Pontifex under Pope Francis exploded. For a time, the Pope was ranked by Twitter as the most influential world leader, with Tweets coming out in several languages, including Latin. Many religious groups had already established religious services online, expanding their reach beyond traditional geographic limitations, when the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend. The threat of infection forced many faith traditions to gather in virtual settings, affecting the way religious leaders performed rituals and observed holy days.

Many religious groups are beginning to grapple with the theological and/or deeper transcendent questions that the Internet poses, such as what it means to be *present* to one another. For instance, for Jews, a *minyan* is when 10 Jews are together and it is required for the recitation of certain prayers, but if 10 Jews are online together, does that constitute a *minyan*? (Turns out, some rabbis say yes, and some say no.) Virtual realities might be built so that people can "experience" Jesus on the Cross or sit with the Buddha during a teaching. But what will Jesus look like, and how will the Buddha's wisdom be translated?

Online religion can create experiences and offer "Truth" in such a way that it may be easy to forget that there are people behind the experiences, designing them using their own viewpoints toward their own objectives. For example, now when you ask Siri about God, you get a coy response suggesting you ask a human. However, soon someone will build an AI Pastor, Rabbi, Imam, or Guru who will be able to call upon an almost infinite amount of data to give answers. It will originally be programmed by humans, but it will eventually self-teach from the questions asked and refine its answers accordingly. But is that "Truth"?

The relationship between religion and the Internet has only just begun. As an interfaith leader online, you can be part of the story that is told.

Going Deeper: Additional Resources
- *Enroll:* Consider enrolling in the Internet Governance course to learn more about the history and governance of the Internet
- *Explore:* The Internet Hall of Fame Timeline
- *Watch: The Social Dilemma*

Summative Assessment: The Story of My Digital Self

Create a timeline on a sheet of paper or on your computer:

- Chart your own history of use of the internet. How has your use of the Internet changed over the years?
- What are the big milestones on your timeline?
- When did you first encounter religion as part of your Internet experience and how has it come up since then?

Faith, Facts, and Truth Online

Learning Outcome: Consider the dangers of misinformation online and learn best practices for finding and sharing reliable information.

Facts are the Most Precious and Contested Commodity Online

As interfaith leaders, we recognize and even embrace the idea that people from different traditions don't agree on matters of ultimate "Truth." We don't expect Buddhists and Christians to agree on the question of what the Divine might or might not be. We celebrate learning about how others understand "Truth" (with a capital T). Yet, we also believe that it is necessary to have our traditions and communities, and those of others, accurately represented. This is a serious challenge, especially on the Internet. Facts are the most precious and contested commodity online. Learning how to navigate facts vs falsehoods online is one of the most important skills we need to develop.

In this lesson we will:

- Learn the distinction between "misinformation" and "disinformation"
- Reflect on the dangers of misinformation, disinformation, and hateful disinformation
- Become aware of the challenges associated with finding reliable information online
- Learn best practices for finding and sharing reliable information online

We asked Cheryl Contee, Founder of Do Big Things, the question, "What is the one thing that you think the average user doesn't understand about the internet that you wish they would?" She responded: "Know truth from fiction. That is probably one of the biggest issues of our lifetime. How do we ensure that the information that people are sharing is healthy and true and adds to our collective benefit, as opposed to creating division and violence?"

Cheryl Contee, CEO of Do Big Things

Misinformation, Disinformation, Hate, and Consequences

The Internet allows the kind of access into the minds and lives of individuals across the world that was unfathomable just decades ago. It can be liberating, but also dangerous. Minds, hearts, and spirits can be poisoned by false information spread online, and that online misinformation and hate has consequences in both online and offline spaces.

Misinformation vs. Disinformation

Before we go any further, let's clarify two closely related (and similarly spelled!) terms: misinformation and disinformation.

Misinformation is any false information that is spread, *regardless of intent to mislead*. This latter part of the definition is crucially important. All of us spread misinformation, probably on a weekly basis and likely unintentionally. If you have ever misquoted a

statistic to a friend, sent somebody the wrong time for an event, or misremembered details in something you read when describing it to someone else, then you are technically guilty of spreading *misinformation*. But don't stress too much, we all do it all the time!

The danger is that in our digital lives, and *especially* on social media, it is far easier to spread misinformation unwittingly, and for it to spread further, faster.

As Dictionary.com points out in its excellent article on this topic, one relatively innocuous example was the stories and photos of dolphins and swans swimming in the canals of Venice at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those memes spread virally across multiple social media platforms, even though they weren't true. The hundreds of thousands of people who retweeted, posted, or even discussed this story contributed, probably inadvertently, to *misinformation*.

Disinformation is any *deliberately* misleading, biased, or false information. *Disinformation* is actually a specific form of *misinformation*. The crucial distinction is intent. If the information spread was *deliberately* manipulated or falsified, then it is disinformation.

Historically, disinformation was a tool employed by governments in espionage and propaganda. In the digital age, a wide range of nefarious actors spread disinformation. Further, disinformation and misinformation often go hand in hand. We see this around COVID-19 vaccines. Both deliberate disinformation and more general misinformation about the vaccines have contributed to distrust and vaccine hesitancy.

Hateful Disinformation

Disinformation becomes a much more serious threat when it combines with hate. Dylan Roof was a member of a mainline Lutheran congregation before he discovered a website that promoted a violent Christian white supremacist ideology that led to his murder of nine Black members of Mother Emanual Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. Likewise, online white supremacist hate manifestos and disinformation about particular religious groups led to the killing of 11 people at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the shooting of 51 Muslims at the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. Sadly, there are examples of violent ideology across faith traditions and all around the world.

Stopping the Spread of Mis- and Disinformation: Our Role

How do we stop the flow of harmful mis- and disinformation? Some look to the digital platforms that serve as conduits for disinformation. One of the major questions surrounding the Internet today is whether companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Google should be responsible for stopping the spread of misinformation on their platforms.

How does society's interest in preventing hateful, and potentially life-endangering, disinformation intersect with individual users' freedom of speech, as enshrined in the First Amendment?

And how liable are private media companies for disinformation published by users on their platforms? For a particularly compelling reflection on the responsibilities of social media companies, see Sacha Baron Cohen's 2019 address at the ADL.

We might be able to play a role in some of these wider Internet policy conversations, but as interfaith leaders, we can help stem the tide of mis- and disinformation right now by being intentional about our activity online. We need to train ourselves to be critical of what we see, to be aware that social media posts are sometimes disseminated by bots rather than humans, and to share reliable sources about our own and others' traditions.

Finding Reliable Religious Information Online

There is an ever-expanding list of online platforms that include information about religious beliefs and practices. The Internet provides access to a vast theological library that is unparalleled in history. There are thousands of spiritual communities you can join to participate in a worship service, study scriptures, or practice meditations and prayers. You can connect with other people across diverse religious and faith traditions, and they can be some of your best resources for helping you to understand the diversity of spirituality and engage in interfaith dialogue.

Activity: My Online Religion Resource List

- List the top 10 websites, platforms, and social media influencers and organizations that you follow for religious and spiritual content.
- Once you have your list, take some time to remember how you came to follow them, what kind of information they offer, and why they are a reliable source of spiritual and religious information for you.
- How do you decide to start following one, and when, if ever, have you stopped following someone? And why?

However, it is not always easy to distinguish a reliable source from a dishonest actor online. A source that seems reliable might actually be disseminating misinformation, intentionally or unwittingly. Videos of people speaking can be doctored; the origins of a meme or a quote can be suspect; and people with whom we are interacting may not always be who they say they are.

> "We need to be aware that we're in a filter bubble and not always getting the full picture. Also, people should understand the dangers of not being thoughtful about our behavior online and the importance of training in digital citizenship."
>
> Aden Van Noppen, Founder and Executive Director, Mobius
>
> **#Interfaith:**
> Engaging Religious Diversity Online

Identifying Credible Authorities

Part of the challenge stems from the way the web has undermined traditional authority, including religious authority. It is as easy (if not easier) to type a question about religion into a search engine as it is to speak to a religious leader. The Internet will provide answers, but the algorithms at work to determine what answers you receive are not necessarily calibrated to find reliable information. Search engines are guided by complex and opaque systems that can lead unsuspecting people to very bad places. Until recently, if you entered "Jew" into Google, you would get several virulently anti-Jewish websites on the very first page. This was achieved by the sites' authors intentionally "winning" the search to spread hate.

Beware of Your Bubbles

A quick way to see the arbitrary nature of our searches is to open up your usual browser (let's say Google) and search for a religious question you care about. Now open up a different browser (let's say Bing), one you haven't used as much, and search for the

same thing. You will notice that the results you receive are different. Not only are results different across search engines, but they might also be different for the same search engine, depending on if you are physically located in a rural part of the country or a city, or in a traditionally conservative area or a more progressive one. For more on this phenomenon, take a few moments to watch Eli Pariser's TED talk "Beware Online 'Filter Bubbles'".

Question Viral Vacuums

Increasingly, people get their information from social media, where it is easier to pass on disinformation as "news" and "truth." Twitter is overrun with "bots" that pose as humans, specifically to spread disinformation. Algorithms on Facebook often favor more incendiary or salacious news, meaning that fake stories can spread at far greater rates than true ones.

Spot Fake News

While many of us might think that our Internet game is pretty good, a study at Stanford University showed that even the best of us can fall prey to fake news or disinformation. Digital interfaith leaders must develop a highly trained sense of discernment to make sure the information they are learning is reliable and the people with whom they are interacting are who they say they are.

This resource from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions can help identify fake news:

Activity: Can you spot the Troll? *This game* helps us to spot and disrupt the spread of disinformation and helps identify warning signs.

Best Practices for Finding and Sharing Reliable Religious Information Online
Here are five ways to make sure that the religious information you are receiving and sharing online is reliable.

- **Make sure the religion websites you are using are provided by the religion itself** – for instance, for information about Roman Catholics, make sure the site/source is connected with an actual Roman Catholic church or organization. Other good sources of information about religion can come from websites sponsored by reputable universities and libraries. You'll note that while there have been countless news and analysis pieces about the religious hate crimes we mentioned above, we linked to the websites of the communities themselves. This is a small example of this principle: it's important to listen and learn from communities telling their own stories.

- **If you are following a person talking about religion whom you do not know, feel free to do a search on them to see what comes up**. Most people have some footprint online and those who don't might not be the ones you want to follow. It is also good to know the biases that the people you follow hold (we all have them) so you are aware of how to evaluate their posts. Beware of anyone reaching out with agendas so aggressive that you don't have space to think and have your own opinion.

- **Take a moment before passing along a social media post about religion**. Sometimes misinformation is passed through seemingly innocuous memes. Professor Heidi Campbell has done some important research on memes and stereotypes that you can find here.

- **It is fine to share your own beliefs and stories**. Recognize that not everyone, even from your own tradition, will agree with you, but let it be an opening for more opportunities for them to learn about you and your tradition and for you to learn about theirs.

- Most importantly, as you develop your interfaith leadership online, **remember to stop, research, and reflect before posting anything** that you believe might not be accurate, so that you will gain a reputation as a trusted source yourself.

Going Deeper: Additional Resources
- *Read:* The Council of Europe's report, "Starting Points for Combatting Hate Speech Online: Three studies about online hate speech and ways to address it," or the Council on Foreign Relations' article, "Hate Speech on Social Media: Global Comparisons"
- *Explore:* The Center for Information Technology and Society at UC Santa Barbara's guide, "How is Fake News Spread? Bots, People like You, Trolls, and Microtargeting"
- *Listen:* Dr. Adam Bell's podcast. "Why People Become Internet Trolls"

Summative Assessment: My Online Religion Resource List
- From the activity above: what are the top 10 websites, platforms, and social media influencers and organizations that you follow for religious and spiritual content?
- How did you come to follow these sources? What kind of information do they offer? Why are they a reliable source of spiritual and religious information for you?
- How do you decide to start following a person or information source? When, if ever, have you stopped following someone? Why?

Disrupting Hate Online

Learning Outcome: Learn what online harassment is, how it has flourished online, and some best practices and tools for disrupting it.

Disrupting Hate (and Sharing Love) Online

One of the main purposes of going online as an interfaith leader is to engage with and learn from people who are different from you. As interfaith leaders online, we hope to model and facilitate positive ways to be in community with others – sometimes for just a brief interaction, or possibly to develop an ongoing conversation and commitment. Unfortunately, we know that far too many people experience hate online, often because of their religious tradition. A recent report from the Pew Research Center suggests that as many as four-in-ten Americans have experienced some form of online harassment, and one-in-five of those who have been harassed online believe they were targeted for their religious identity.

As individuals who are seeking to create more interfaith understanding, we know that we cannot stop all hate online, but we can do our part to help disrupt it where we see it.

In this lesson we will:
- Learn more about definitions and manifestations of hate online
- Become familiar with best practices for disrupting hate

Identify the Legal Parameters of Hate Speech

What's the best way to deal with hate speech? Should we use the law to ban it and use the full force of the government to suppress offensive speech? Or should we ignore it and not give it any more attention than it deserves? These are questions societies have been struggling with, especially in the United States, where there is an increase of social hostilities and violence against vulnerable groups. In this section, you will identify the legal parameters of hate speech, the distinction between public and private speech, and the best-known remedies for countering hate online. While these more technical, legal dimensions of hate speech are not the main focus of this lesson, they provide helpful context for our work to counter hate online.

What is Hate Speech?

For the purpose of this lesson, we will draw upon the the United Nation's *Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech* to articulate a definition of hate speech:

> Hate speech is understood as any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factor. This is often rooted in, and generates intolerance and hatred and, in certain contexts, can be demeaning and divisive.

Is Offensive Speech Legally Protected?

Yes, in the United States, but not if it is a "true threat." The American Library Association writes:

> Hate speech is protected by the First Amendment. Courts extend this protection on the grounds that the First Amendment requires the government to strictly protect robust debate on matters of public concern even when such debate devolves into distasteful, offensive, or hateful speech that causes others to feel grief, anger, or fear. The Supreme Court's decision in Snyder v. Phelps provides an example of this legal reasoning.

The only legal exemption to this broad protection is if the speech constitutes "fighting words." This category, first established in *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* (1942), was defined as "such words, as ordinary men know, are likely to cause a fight." In *Virginia v. Black* (2003), Justice Sandra Day O'Connor reaffirmed that true threats are not a form of protected expression under the First Amendment.

Is False Speech Legally Protected?

Yes, in the United States, except in some contexts. Basically, people can say almost anything, except if they use lies to deliberately and maliciously damage someone's reputation. Professor John Vile explains:

> Because the First Amendment is designed to further the pursuit of truth, it may not protect individuals who engage in slander or libel, especially those who display actual malice by knowingly publishing false information or publishing information "with reckless disregard for the truth." As a general rule, however, the government does not stand as the definer of truth, which is designed to emerge from the clash of opinions rather than from government fiat. Legally, it is difficult to identify a false opinion, although courts are consistently called upon to weigh factual evidence in both civil and criminal cases. … The more recent buzzword for false speech is fake news. The term, which often mixes criticism not simply of facts but also of their interpretation, further illumines the difficulty of allowing government (which the media seek to guard) to arbitrate rival claims to truth. Those who view the public realm as a marketplace of ideas are ultimately expressing confidence that over time the American people will be able to sort out truth from falsehood.

What's the Difference Between hate Speech and a Hate Crime?

Hate speech is verbal or written attacks against someone (or some group or institution) based on their identity and is only a crime in narrow circumstances. Hate crimes are overt violence or threats against someone (or some group or institution) based on their identity and are always illegal. The American Library Association explains:

> Under current First Amendment jurisprudence, hate speech can only be criminalized when it directly incites imminent criminal activity or consists of specific threats of violence targeted against a person or group. For the purposes of collecting statistics, the FBI has defined a hate crime as a "criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender's bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity," including skin color and national origin. Hate crimes

are overt acts that can include acts of violence against persons or property, violation or deprivation of civil rights, certain 'true threats,' or acts of intimidation, or conspiracy to commit these crimes. The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld laws that either criminalize these acts or impose a harsher punishment when it can be proven that the defendant targeted the victim because of the victim's race, ethnicity, identity, or beliefs. A hate crime is more than offensive speech or conduct; it is specific criminal *behavior* that ranges from property crimes like vandalism and arson to acts of intimidation, assault, and murder. Victims of hate crimes can include institutions, religious organizations and government entities as well as individuals.

Can Private Companies Regulate Speech?

Yes, private online companies have the legal authority to regulate speech in their social networking platforms. Attorney Brett M. Pinkus explains, "The overarching principle of free speech under the First Amendment is that its reach is limited to protections against restrictions on speech made by the government. First Amendment restrictions traditionally do not extend to private parties, such as individuals or private companies. In other words, a private person or private company (such as a social media company) cannot violate your constitutional free speech rights, only the government can do so."

Should private online companies regulate speech?

Yes. Tech companies have a particular role in countering online hate. These companies are balancing the value of freedom of speech with the equally important value of protecting all users from hate. YouTube has announced the ways they are intending to address hate on their platform, and Facebook has done the same.

What is the role of an interfaith leader?

One role for a digital interfaith leader is to speak up and encourage companies like Facebook and YouTube to address the way current algorithms can elevate hate speech, with dire consequences both on- and off-line. Tech companies also have rules for what kinds of speech are acceptable on their platforms, and interfaith leaders can influence those rules and also ensure that they are being enforced in an equitable manner.

A Toxic Mix: Hate Speech and the Internet

Hate speech online affects far too many people – especially those from minority religious traditions. The most recent data from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) indicate that Muslims and Jews, along with LGBTQ+ Americans, Women, Black Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans are all experiencing hate speech online at disturbing

rates. Hate speech online can inspire violence that targets communities offline and cause psychological harm to individuals who experience it online.

> Data expert danah boyd offered this analysis of why hate and harassment are so much more prevalent and pernicious online: "It is a lot easier to amplify a rumor online and get no pushback. So, if I go around a party talking about Paul, it's quite possible that somebody's going to say, 'Dude, keep your mouth shut; you're just being mean.' That's normal pushback in a 'real' social situation. Whereas if I go and post it on Facebook, I may get pushback. But by that point, the amplification has happened."

danah boyd, Founder of Data & Society

Activity: Take 5 minutes to review the ADL's most recent report: _Online Hate and Harassment: The American Experience 2021_.

"A Digital Age is Not an Unbiased Age"
Unfortunately, the problem goes deeper than the ease with which people can spread cruelty online. Professor Heidi Campbell at Texas A&M, who has studied religion and the Internet for as long as anyone, shared how the _very design and construction_ of various online spaces are replete with bigotry:

"Religious and cultural bias are replicated online. We saw this back in the 2000s when there was a lot of the early research on gaming and how different gaming characters [were created with] stereotypes; just replicating the same kind of biases that people have. And that's what I found in my research: the anti-Semitism that you see within meme culture is just replicating things from 100 years ago…There's been a lot of research in the last five years about artificial intelligence [that's revealed that] when people design [AI systems,] negative words and concepts get associated with "Jewish" and "African American" and "Muslim". Because these systems are created by humans, bias is put into the system. There is no neutral technology out there; it really depends on

who the creators were, and if they were aware of their biases when they created the technology…A digital age is not an unbiased age."

Countering Hate Online

Of course, influencing platforms and holding designers accountable is not our only recourse. Each of us as online interfaith leaders have an opportunity – and even an obligation – to develop strategies for identifying and disrupting online hate, when we can do so in a way that does not compromise our own safety. Sometimes this is called "counter speech."

Activity: Please watch the following three videos to further explore the concept of "counter speech" and learn from leaders who are pushing back against hate.

- Video 1: *"5 Types of Online Racism and Why You Should Care,"* a TedX talk by Dr. Lisa Nakumura (21 min)
- Video 2: "5 Ways to Deal With Hate Speech Online" from *Common Sense Media* (I min)
- Video 3 "Countering Online Hate Speech" from *Teaching Tolerance* (6 min)

Cheryl Contee, CEO of Do Big Things

Cheryl Contee, Founder of Do Big Things, shared this advice: "Basically, there are choices. Someone says something hate-filled online, you can ignore them, you can block them or seek to de-platform them, you can engage them directly yourself, or you can encourage the community to shout them down and shut them up."

Showing Solidarity

While many of these strategies are aimed at the people (or the bots that they create) who are the source of hate speech, as digital interfaith leaders it is just as important for us to show solidarity and support for those who are the targets.

Some of the best practices for disrupting hate in both on- and offline settings is to speak directly to the person being targeted and offer support and encouragement. There is a group called Hollaback! that offers training to disrupt harassment and hate happening in-person. One of the important pieces of advice in the training is to "ignore the harasser and engage directly with the person who is being targeted."

Online that can mean interrupting the flow of hate towards a target by posting a kind comment toward the victim or asking a question to open a positive dialogue about their faith tradition. Most people experience various degrees of loneliness online, and those who are the target of hate are more likely to feel even more alone. As a digital interfaith leader, you might be just the person to show solidarity, kindness and compassion – even if you aren't from the same background or share the same religious beliefs.

Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- *Read: "The State of Online Harassment" from the Pew Research Center*
- *Explore: Hollaback!'s bystander intervention resources*
- *Watch: Teens discuss personal experiences with hate speech*

Summative Assessment: How Have You Dealt with Hate?

- Have you ever had to deal with hate speech online?
- What did you do?
- Looking back on that experience, what worked about your response?
- What, if anything, would you do differently if you could go back in time?

If you've never had to deal with hate speech, watch this video of teens discussing their experiences with hate online.

- What struck you about the impact of online hate on the speakers?

Building Online Community

Learning Outcome: Reflect on the unique nature and potential of online interfaith communities and learn about the tools for building them.

A Truly Global Community

The Internet offers new possibilities for how we imagine community – not bound by time or geography, but by intention and interest. Every social media handle, email address, or avatar represents a complex, living human being who is reaching out through the Internet to create, join, influence, and sometimes disrupt, communities of other people. As Amanda Quraishi, Contributing Fellow for the Center for Religion and Civic Culture, put it, "The Internet is not just this giant repository of information. It's spaces where we can go and connect with other people across time and space and build relationships and get support in completely different ways than we can offline. I now have access to people from all over the world whom I otherwise would never be able to meet."

For online interfaith leaders, the Internet offers unparalleled opportunities to create communities among people from all different religious and spiritual backgrounds, aimed at creating more understanding and sustaining relationships. Like offline communities,

however, creating and sustaining online interfaith communities requires skill and attention.

In this lesson we will:
- Reflect on the unique nature and potential of online interfaith community
- Learn the tools necessary for creating an online interfaith community
- Consider the interfaith community you would like to create or in which you would like to participate

The Potential of Online Interfaith Communities: Two Case Studies

Creating community and being "present" to one another is an essential component of essentially all religious and spiritual traditions. One possible derivation of the word "religion" is from the Latin *religare*, which means "to bind" or "to reconnect." In Judaism, for instance, a *minyan* is formed when ten Jews come together, as is required for the recitation of certain prayers. The challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic caused some – although not all – Jewish communities to decide that ten Jews gathered online constitutes a *minyan* – the requirement of community is the same, but different.

In interfaith work, people from different religious backgrounds and worldviews come together to form communities, both in offline and online settings. As more of the world spends more of its time online, it becomes increasingly important that people can find and join interfaith communities there. These do not have to mirror exactly interfaith communities in offline settings. In fact, Chris Stedman, author of the book *IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in Our Digital Lives*, encourages interfaith leaders online to ask the question: "What are the strengths and the limitations of the Internet, and how can we foster an experience of community in this specific context? ...Think about what brings people to the Internet in search of community, and then offer that."

Case Study – Amanda Quraishi

One example of excellent online interfaith community building comes from Amanda Quraishi, who is a Muslim woman living in Texas. Along with other Muslim and Jewish women, Amanda created a local online community in her town affiliated with the national organization The Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom. Let's watch Amanda discussing her work creating online interfaith community. (*Please watch from timestamp 14:30-18:49. If you'd prefer to read a transcript, you can find one here.*)

Activity: After watching the video, reflect on these questions:

- What do you think about Amanda's distinction between using the Internet as a "broadcasting platform" vs. building community online? Can you think of examples of each? Which way do you think you use it more?
- Amanda says, "In order for people to have meaningful engagement online, we need to be able to be vulnerable." Can you think of times when you've been able to be vulnerable online? What enabled that for you? Did it lead to meaningful engagement with others? If you haven't had that experience, why do you think you haven't?
- Amanda describes her online interfaith group as "a place where people can go and share these very important, sometimes tragic, sometimes beautiful things." What are those spaces for you, offline or online? What works about those spaces? If offline, what do you think could translate to a digital context?

Case Study – Hannah Silver

A Platonic Love Letter to Interfaith

Another example of online interfaith community building comes from a Jewish college student at the University of Wisconsin named Hannah Silver. During the pandemic, Hannah started a group called "Interfaith Online." Frustrated by not being able to have the kinds of conversations across religious difference that she had hoped to have at college because of pandemic restrictions, Hannah decided to create an online weekly Zoom group. While it began with 25 other students from different traditions that she already knew, one year later the size of their email list had reached 150, with people joining from across the country and even internationally. Hannah wrote an article about

her experience called "A Platonic Love Letter to Interfaith" that ends with this encouragement: "This is a love letter to communities across the country who look like ours – communities who have helped people survive this pandemic. To communities that include people from different backgrounds and faith traditions and work to build bridges, thank you. As a good friend of mine always says, find your people and win. Thank you Interfaith Online, and so many other communities, for helping me find my people and win. Go find your people and win."

Activity: After reading Hannah's article, reflect on these questions:
- Hannah describes missing a sense of community as one of the hardest aspects of the pandemic, and her impetus for starting Interfaith Online. What have you missed about in-person community during the pandemic? What aspects of that have you managed to refashion online?
- Hannah writes, "transitioning an in-person community into an online community just seemed so much harder for me than joining a community that is completely virtual to begin with." What do you think about that? Which do you think would be harder for you? Why?
- Note that Hannah refers throughout to her "Interfaith Online team." Leadership does not mean going it alone. Can you think of things that you would not have been able to accomplish if you hadn't had partners in the endeavor?

Four Crucial Elements to Your Online Interfaith Community Building
Now that you've been inspired by a couple of examples of interfaith community online, let's turn to some best practices.

Mission Statement: Know Why You Are
Part of what enabled Amanda and Hannah to be successful in building their online interfaith communities was having clearly articulated goals. For Amanda, it was creating a space that called Muslim and Jewish women in to be vulnerable and share personal experiences. For Hannah, it was a weekly virtual discussion group for college students of any or no faith from across the nation to connect and talk about their relationship with faith. A clearly articulated goal enables members of the community to understand why they are there. It also help potential new members to determine whether the community is for them.

As Amanda emphasizes: "When you build a community, online or offline, some of the same principles apply: you need to know the purpose of that community, why it exists.

And that needs to be very clearly defined in your mind: 'Why are we here? And what are the expectations for being here?'"

Not all online interfaith communities need to have the same goal. One community could be aimed at religious literacy and learning more about different traditions, another might be focused on mobilization for the common good, others might be fashioned around deepening relationships among local faith leaders, and another might be for difficult discussions about social issues. There can be many reasons for an online interfaith community. Knowing the purpose of the community you are building helps to keep the community on track.

Covenant Agreement: Rules for the Road Ahead

While explicit rules and norms are helpful in offline communities, they're especially critical online. This is because norms of interaction are very fluid and different from platform to platform. We can't take for granted that our community members will all have the same understanding of how we should interact, especially when we are geographically and culturally diverse. When we as leaders are explicit about our communities' norms, we provide important infrastructure for the group. You may decide on these norms on your own or with others in your group. However you choose to go about it, these guidelines will serve as an important foundation for your community.

You'll want to establish norms that your community members understand and accept as a condition for participation. This is particularly important when it comes to how you'll communicate. Because it can be more difficult to pick up on subtle cues online – such as when people are feeling uncomfortable – online communities need to have rules for the kind of language and conduct that is acceptable to ensure everyone feels equally welcome and able to contribute. Cheryl Contee, _Founder of Do Big Things_, underlines the importance of sharing the rules and the consequences of breaking them: "One thing that's really important that doesn't get done enough, is being really clear with the community: 'These are the ground rules. If you break the rules, we're going to ask you to leave.'"

Establishing clear guidelines doesn't mean that members of the community can't ask questions of one another or even fundamentally disagree. It just means people need to disagree within the parameters of the community's norms. For a good discussion of how to disagree well online, read _How to Argue on the Internet Without Losing Your Mind_ and remember that _the Golden Rule_ can be a baseline norm for any interfaith community.

The Best Platform for Your Community

There are many [platforms that might be right](#) for the community you want to host. While Amanda used Facebook and Hannah decided on Zoom, [Rev. Jeremy Nickel](#), a [Unitarian Universalist](#) Minister, works in virtual reality (VR). Jeremy's [EvolVR](#) hosts several different communities in virtual reality that offer yoga, meditation, and even dance parties. EvolVR also hosts a community discussion group on [Discord](#) to compliment the VR space. Jeremy was intentional about choosing VR: "People feel like they're together in VR; really together...as in shared presence...as in '[wherever more than one are gathered in my name](#)' kind of stuff...We've built an incredible worldwide community."

Jeremy also chose the [AltSpaceVR](#) platform because of the tools it offered for supporting and defining the community. "We've got cool controls. We have the power to put a bubble around our body so people can't get up in our physical space...When you enter one of our spaces, a basic covenant appears in front of you, and you have to click OK."

Facilitating the Community

The Internet has transformed traditional authority structures, including religious ones. While [interfaith work might have once been led by clergy and spiritual leaders](#), the Internet allows pretty much anyone with an Internet connection to help form and lead communities, including interfaith ones. However, every successful community has moderators whose job it is to maintain community guidelines.

Don't underestimate the effort this involves! As Amanda attests, "The amount of work that goes into leading a community online is the same – and sometimes even more – as offline. It [the community] is not something that you just throw up there and expect it to be fruitful, productive, successful, and healthy."

Amanda suggests having a team of people who do the moderating work together. In the case of her group, the team looks at all the postings before they go into the community space and make decisions jointly. There are times when they reject posts or call people out for breaking the covenant. When this happens, they document the incident for other moderators to see with a note. It is important for the entire community to understand and appreciate the role that the moderators play in creating a space that is safe, productive, and encourages the kind of engagement of religious diversity that makes interfaith work so powerful and affirming.

Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- *Read:* How to Argue on the Internet Without Losing Your Mind by Kristin Wong
- *Explore:* 7 Essentials Steps in Any Online Community Moderation Process by Jenny Taylor
- *Watch:* The entire webinar from which Amanda's clip above was taken: What Interfaith Leadership Looks Like Online

Summative Assessment: Looking at Online Community Norms

- Visit the online communities that you are a part of – whether religious, interfaith, or any other kind – and find the mission statement and/or the covenant agreement for the group. Write down what you like about these community guides, along with what you think is missing. If you can't find these sorts of statements, inquire if they exist. If they do not, you might offer to help create them.
- Imagine an online interfaith community that you would like to create. Write five rules or norms that you would suggest for the group.

Being Safe Online

<u>Learning Outcome</u>: Learn how to protect yourself online through assessing risk and identifying the proper digital tools.

With Great Opportunity, Comes Some Risk

As an online interfaith leader, you seek to meet new people, engage them in conversation about their diverse experiences, and build connections. The near limitless opportunity to meet people of diverse religious backgrounds from around the world is one of the chief advantages of being an interfaith leader *online*. Unlike "real life," however, it can be much harder to discern the true identity and intentions of people you meet. Sadly, just like in any other public space, there are people on the Internet who mean you harm and will prey on your good intentions for their own personal or political reasons. Over the past few years, there have been numerous examples in the news of online trolls leading organized campaigns of harassment. People have lost their jobs and had threats made against them.

Therefore, online interfaith leaders need to be aware of the risks attendant to various forms of online engagement and learn how to protect themselves. Just as you wouldn't jump into the ocean without first checking for rocks and knowing how to swim, you

shouldn't venture onto any online platform without first assessing the risks and taking necessary precautions.

In this lesson we will:
- Learn how to assess the risk levels of various online engagement
- Become familiar with the questions you should always be asking yourself to stay safe online
- Increase understanding about foundational online safety tips and tools

Cheryl Contee told us that there are three main kinds of harassment online:

- Doxxing, where people purposefully post your private information online – often including your address, school, workplace, or information about your family members – with the intention of hurting you or putting you in danger

- Active harassment, where people tag you in posts that are degrading, defamatory, and/or abusive

- Hacking, where people break into your computer and/or online accounts and steal personal information

Cheryl Contee, CEO of Do Big Things

Protecting Yourself Online

For most people, most of the time, the Internet is a safe place to meet new people, learn new things, and exchange ideas. But we've all heard horror stories, and a recent report from the Pew Research Center suggests that as many as four-in-ten Americans have experienced some form of online harassment. The good news is that learning a few simple habits and tools can be protective as you engage in interfaith leadership online.

As Cheryl Contee, founder of Do Big Things, said, "When people start to take online safety seriously, that really lowers their risk. It's about understanding the ways that people can get at you and then having some sort of strategy in mind to counter it." One way to think about protecting yourself online is akin to scuba diving. Scuba divers protect themselves by both *assessing the risk* of the water in which they are diving and

having the right equipment to mitigate those risks. Assessing the risks of the water means the diver is familiar with the dive site: What predators swim in these waters? When are they most active? Are there strong currents? Where can you let your guard down and where do you have to be extra careful? Having the right equipment means identifying and knowing how to use and maintain the particular set of tools that will protect the diver from those risks.

Let's take a few minutes to explore both these concepts as they pertain to online safety.

Assessing Risk Online

Here are some things to consider when assessing the risk of different online engagements:

- *Where are you? With whom are you in conversation?* As you know, there are all sorts of online spaces. You can post to your private Instagram and have it seen only by 20 close friends, or you can jump into a Reddit thread and chat with a million strangers. In general, the wider and more unknown your audience, the more careful you should be about what you share. Some spaces on the Internet are like a town square, very public and diverse in opinion. Other spaces are more niche and attached to a subculture with distinct etiquette and beliefs. Just like exploring a new neighborhood, it is good to be cautious when you're in an unfamiliar space.

- *What are you talking about?* Most likely, nobody is going to get mad at you for posting pictures of your dog. However, there are many issues that can spark anger and make you the target of online harassment. You can probably guess what these contentious topics are: religion, politics, social justice, race, sexual and gender identities, etc. These are important issues, and they are central to many people's interfaith leadership. But when discussing contentious issues, it helps to be aware of your audience and anticipate how they might react. Sharing political posts for a circle of friends on your Facebook page is common and not that risky, whereas starting a YouTube channel where you vlog about your faith could call for more caution.

Rev. Jeremy Nickel, who founded "SacredVR," shared: "I run in a fair amount of activist circles. ... They're always looking for spaces to have confidential conversations from a distance. And some people approached me and said, 'Can you create some really safe spaces in VR?' I did a little research, and the answer is 'No way. Not at all.' All these apps are controlled by someone who has total control over what's being recorded at any one time."

Rev. Jeremy D. Nickel, Founder and CEO of SacredVR and EvolVR, Ordained Unitarian Universalist Minister

![Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online]

- *How much can people find out about you from your digital footprint?* Is your full name on your Instagram? Do you tweet about the town you live in or the school you go to? Can people find out where you work or where your parents work with a quick Google search? If the answer to all those questions is yes, don't panic! It is just something to be aware of, especially if you have a large following and are talking about polarizing issues.

"A way to not get doxxed is to make sure you're careful about what kinds of information are available in your online bios and social platforms...If you register a domain name, for example, people can look you up; it's public... It's just thinking through that kind of thing, like, "If someone was going to try to doxx me, where would they find information?" and then being careful about that."

Cheryl Contee, CEO of Do Big Things

![Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online]

None of these questions are black and white, and none of them should be considered alone without the others. They are all part of the healthy risk assessment that an online interfaith leader should always be thinking about on a case-by-case basis. Just because the Internet has some scary people who cause harm does not mean that you need to be afraid to speak up and be open in your leadership. It just means being aware of the risks involved and taking adequate precautions.

Having the Right Equipment

After assessing the risk of your online engagement, here are some tools you can consider to help protect yourself online. In a perfect world, we would all use all these tools, however some of them might be unnecessary depending on what you are doing online. Use what makes sense based on your situation.

- **Block, Restrict, Report:** Sweet and simple! If you are being harassed online, use the blocking features built into the platform. If you feel it is necessary, report the user or content. Chris Stedman, author of *IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in Our Digital Lives*, advised us, "I can put various sorts of measures in place to improve the kind of experience I have online. I use a quality filter on Twitter, so I don't see every single thing that someone says in response to what I'm saying; it filters out some of the more abusive kinds of things." Cheryl added, "You just block those people…Just be like, 'I don't want to hear from you anymore.' … Some of the *haterade*, I mean, honestly, you can just ignore it."

- **Two-Factor Authentication** (or 2FA) is a way to make it more difficult for your account to be hacked. Basically, 2FA adds another step besides username and password to make sure that it is really you who is trying to log into your account. You might have experienced this when you have logged into an account from a new computer and were prompted to input a code that is texted to your phone. This is a fine method of 2FA, but is actually considered the less secure, because hackers can have the authentication texts sent to their phone instead of yours. For even more secure 2FA, you can use a special app like Duo Mobile or Google Authenticator to be your second authentication.

- **Password Managers** are one of the best ways to improve your cybersecurity. Most of us use the same simple passwords for all our accounts, which is incredibly risky. Experts advise using unique, secure (random strings of letters and numbers) passwords for each account. But there are way too many accounts to remember

unique passwords for all of them and having secure passwords can be cumbersome! Password managers store all your passwords in one, heavily encrypted place so you do not have to remember them. All you need to remember is the login information to your password manager. This way, you can set secure, unique passwords on all your other accounts and be less susceptible to hacking. There are many great password managers out there, some free and some not. To start out, try out LastPass, a free and secure password manager.

Final advice from Cheryl: "My hard drive is encrypted. I also use encrypt.me, which is an encryption software, so all of my information is encrypted as it goes back and forth on the Internet. I use DuckDuckGo, instead of Google, for my search, so that I have less of a search engine trace...I have two factor authentication on everything, so that I am not easy to hack."

Cheryl Contee, CEO of Do Big Things

![Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online]

Going Deeper: Additional Resources
- *Read:* "How to Protect Your Digital Privacy," by Thorin Klosowski of the New York Times
- *Explore:* Speak Up & Stay Safe(r): A guide to Protecting Yourself From Online Harassment
- *Watch:* Former NSA Hacker Reveals 5 Ways To Protect Yourself Online

Summative Assessment: Quiz
For each of the following three scenarios, try to determine whether the situation described presents an acceptable level of online risk:

1) I have 500 followers on my public Instagram, and I often re-share infographics about racial injustice. Sometimes I write my own posts about what my Muslim faith says about equality.

a) This seems mostly safe*
b) Woah, I better rethink this!

2) I have around 10,000 followers on Twitter and I want to start a vlog on YouTube about what it's like to be a Hindu American, and the way I feel like my faith is misunderstood.
a) Woah, I better rethink this!*
b) This seems mostly safe.

3) I spend a lot of time in political discussion groups on Reddit and Discord. There are a lot of very extreme politics in these groups, but I often find valuable conversations. I post a lot about my Jewish faith and my nuanced beliefs about Israel.
a) Woah, I better rethink this!*
b) This seems mostly safe

4) In order to keep safe online, I should consider using _____.
a) A password manager*
b) The same password for everything
c) My personal information as my password

5) How can I practice safety online?
a) Check what information is publicly available.
b) Use two-factor authentication.
c) Be mindful of what I am posting.
d) Be mindful of where I am posting.
e) All the above.*

Denotes correct answer

Achieving Impact Online

<u>Learning Outcome</u>: Reflect upon and begin to articulate the vision, goals, and audience for your interfaith leadership online.

Making It Happen

Once you have a sense of your values and who you want to be as a leader, you're in a good place to build out a vision for your leadership. That vision serves as the context for your goals. Then, with your goals in mind, you can get clear about the audience (or audiences) you'd like to reach. This lesson will provide food for thought as you build out this infrastructure for making an impact.

Before we dive in, do note that it's 100% okay if you don't have a clear plan for your online interfaith leadership just yet. You may be in a place where you're mostly working on clarifying your own approach to leadership, you may be starting to imagine some goals, you may already have a clear set of goals and a target audience in mind, or you may be starting from the beginning. Wherever you are, use this learning to support your progress. Remember, too, that all of this is iterative: your approach or goals or target audiences will likely change over time. At any point along the way, you can come back to

these questions – *Who am I as a leader? What's my vision? What are my goals? Whom do I want to reach?* – as guideposts for your leadership development.

In this lesson we will:
- Reflect on your *vision* for online interfaith leadership
- Consider what *goals* you might choose for your online interfaith leadership
- Begin to imagine what *audiences* you hope to reach through your leadership

What Do You See?

"When I use my strength in the service of my vision it makes no difference whether or not I am afraid." –Audre Lorde

Your vision describes the world that you see as possible and worth striving for. When you look into the future, what do you see that is different from how it is today? What do you see that is happening, or that is created, or that is true? At IFYC, our vision is of an America where interfaith cooperation is the norm. A place where religious diversity is universally valued and where people of all different religious and non-religious background work together to advance the common good. A place we are all proud to call Interfaith America. This is our vision. Take a moment now to reflect on your own vision:

Activity: Sit in a quiet, pleasant place, with no distractions. Leave your phone somewhere else. Make sure all screens are out of sight. Bring something with which to write or draw and a notebook or some paper. Close your eyes, and ask yourself:
- What is my vision of an interfaith future?
- If I could make it so today, what would change about the world?
- What do I think is possible?
- What do I want people to do, to say, to think in this future world?

As you reflect, jot down thoughts or sketch pictures as things come to mind. At the end of your reflection time, review your notes or drawings. What did you learn about your vision?

Clarifying your vision is something that may take time. If you're not yet clear on a vision for your online interfaith leadership, keep asking yourself these sorts of reflection questions (as in the activity above). Talking to others who share a passion for interfaith cooperation might be helpful as well. Ask them about their vision for the future, and share your own thoughts. Over time, your leadership vision is likely to take shape.

What Will You Make Happen?

Once you have a sense of your vision, you're ready to set some clear goals for your online interfaith leadership. What are you aiming to make happen? There is no one way to lead, and there is lots of work to be done, so we have lots of choices when it comes to the targets for our work. In the broadest sense, as online interfaith leaders, we are all striving to create conversations that reach across lines of religious difference on the Internet, but that work can take many forms.

Way back at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we looked to three of the most inspiring online interfaith leaders we knew – Amanda Quraishi, Rabbi Joshua Stanton, and Simran Jeet Singh – and asked them to discuss What Interfaith Leadership Looks Like Online. One of the most fascinating aspects of the conversation was that each had chosen to focus on different online interfaith leadership goals.

Activity: Please take 15 minutes to *watch them discussing their work* from timestamp 8:07-23:19. (If you'd prefer to read a transcript, you can find one *here*.) As you watch, ask yourself: What online interfaith leadership goals are each of the speakers pursuing?

Activity: After watching the video, reflect on the following questions:
- If you could summarize in one sentence, how would you describe how Amanda, Josh, and Simran each think about their goals for engaging in interfaith leadership online?
- Which of those goals do you find most compelling as you think about your own online interfaith leadership? Why?

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Setting clear goals will help you gauge your progress by helping you define success. What does success look like for you and your online interfaith leadership? For some leaders, like Amanda, it's about building and maintaining lasting community. For others, like Simran, success can be as quick and impactful as a powerful meme about respecting others' religious identity.

Let's return to Amanda, Josh, and Simran's conversation and watch another clip of them discussing what success looks like.

Activity: Please take another seven minutes to *watch from timestamp 41:57-48:25*. (If you'd prefer to read a transcript, you can find one *here*.)

Activity: After watching the video, take a few minutes and reflect on the following questions:
- Simran talks about how his goals have evolved over time. What's your reaction to the way he has shifted his focus?
- Amanda says that she considers herself successful if her messages come from a place of empathy and an intention to meet folks where they are. When you think about your own actions as an interfaith leader online, what will success look like for you? How will you know if you've achieved it?

Finally, it's worth mentioning that we won't always achieve our goals, and that's okay! A big part of any kind of leadership, online or off-, is failing and learning from those failures. As Rev. Jeremy Nickel said to us, "We have to be willing to be okay making mistakes. To try things and take risks, without being embarrassed. Being a digital spiritual leader, you're doing things with technology that no one's done before, and you really have to be okay with screwing things up and publicly failing often. You can see that as a great part of your adventure, not an embarrassing thing."

"We have to be willing to be okay making mistakes. To try things and take risks, without being embarrassed. Being a digital spiritual leader, you're doing things with technology that no one's done before, and you really have to be okay with screwing things up and publicly failing often. You can see that as a great part of your adventure, not an embarrassing thing."

Rev. Jeremy D. Nickel, Founder and CEO of SacredVR and EvolVR, Ordained Unitarian Universalist Minister

#Interfaith:
Engaging Religious Diversity Online

Whom Are You Trying to Reach?

Deeply related to the question of goals is the question of audience. Your goal will likely influence—or even significantly determine—whom you seek to reach via your online leadership efforts. With whom would you like to be in communication online? From and with whom would you like to learn? For whom are your messages designed? The answers to these questions will, at least in part, come as you consider what's necessary to move in the direction of your goals.

For example, if your goal for online interfaith leadership is to stand up for marginalized communities, then your audience might be people who have varying degrees of ignorance and/or prejudice toward those communities. Or, maybe your goal is to mobilize other interfaith leaders to stand up for marginalized communities. Then your primary audience would be those other interfaith leaders.

Once you have a sense of your target audience or audiences, you'll want to consider which online platform is best suited to help you reach that audience. Each digital platform attracts its own unique set of users. You'll want to get familiar with the platforms favored by your audience and then go there. For more on this issue, check out the "Choosing Your Platforms" lesson.

Activity: Take a few minutes to imagine your intended audience and reflect on the following questions:

- Given my goals, whom do I need to reach? What kinds of interactions I am hoping to have with them?
- What digital spaces do those groups currently occupy?
- What relationships do I or don't I have with these groups in offline spaces? How does the Internet present unique opportunities to reach my audience? What challenges does it bring as well?

Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- *Read:* "What is Goal Setting and How to Do It Well"
- *Watch:* The full webinar: What Interfaith Leadership Looks Like Online
- *Watch:* Simon Sinek on the difference between goals and vision

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Summative Assessment: Your Vision, Your Goals, Your Audience

Imagine you just entered an elevator from the first floor. The person in the elevator asks you about your work. You have the time it takes to get to the fifth floor to make your elevator pitch. In a few simple sentences, articulate your vision, who benefits from that vision, and how you will achieve your goals.

Choose Your Platforms

Learning Outcome: Draw inspiration from online interfaith leaders and reflect on where and how you want to begin leading yourself.

Location, Location, Location

AltSpaceVR, Clubhouse, Facebook, Instagram, Imgur, LinkedIn, Medium, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat, Tik Tok, Tumblr, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube … There are as many spaces for interfaith leadership as there are websites on the Internet. Which ones suit your online interfaith leadership style and goals?

There are all sorts of ways to build interfaith connections and lead online, and all sorts of places to do it! You can go where your audience already is, or you can create a new online space for people to gather. You can lead by facilitating a community where people engage directly with each other, you can seek to educate and address misinformation, you can create new and inspiring content, you can motivate people to action, you can lead by example and engage others in interfaith dialogue, or you can lead in any other way that works for you!

Whatever way you choose, it's important that you choose a platform that best meets your particular goals, skills, and needs.

In this lesson we will:
- Draw inspiration from various online interfaith leaders, leadership styles, and platforms
- Consider what online spaces might be best for your leadership style and goals

#Interfaith: Examples from Around the Web
Religion has been on the Internet for as long as there has been an Internet. This is good news because it means that you don't have to start from scratch in your online interfaith leadership. Before we dive into considering what online spaces are best for your particular leadership goals, let's look at some examples of interfaith leadership from around the web.

Activity: Take a look at how the following individuals lead across a few different platforms, and then reflect on what you saw via the activity questions below.

Instagram
- Valarie Kaur
- The Black Muslim Girl

Twitter
- Pope Francis
- Courtney Weber

TikTok
- Rabbi Sandra Lawson
- Shina Nova

Facebook
- [Father James Martin](#)
- [Harmeet Kamboj](#)

Activity: Take a few minutes and reflect on the following questions:
- Which example was your favorite? Was it the platform or the content that spoke to you, or perhaps both?
- Which seems like a type of leadership you can imagine yourself emulating? Why?
- Which two examples seemed the most different in terms of leadership style? Which two seemed the most similar? Which platforms were these on?

Activity: *[Watch this 7-minute video](#)* for an introduction to using social media to engage religious difference.

Platform Follows Purpose

Now that you've been inspired by examples of interfaith leadership across the web, let's turn to where you're going to start leading online. When choosing a place to start, ask yourself a couple questions first:

What's your goal? Who are you trying to reach?

Depending on [what you are trying to do with your interfaith leadership](#), different platforms and online communities might make more sense. Making TikToks would be a great way to spread viral educational content, but a Facebook group would be a better place for building a sustained community.

What kind of [leader](#) are you?

Are you someone who is comfortable putting yourself out there and being the face of a project? Or do you lead behind the scenes, working to connect people and create space for others? Social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram often allow people to lead by example—take Influencers, who develop a following on their personal accounts and use that platform to educate and lead. But some people might not want to have their leadership so attached to their personal social media presence. You could also lead online by moderating a Reddit community, or by working with others to run a shared Instagram account.

Professor Heidi Campbell at Texas A&M is an expert on the Internet and religion. When we asked her what skill sets she thought were necessary for online interfaith leadership, she replied: "In religious communities, there's a tendency to think that 'If we build it, they will come. Let's build the kind of community that we want to have. And then everyone will migrate there.' Things go best when you learn that certain groups are more drawn toward YouTube, or Facebook, or WhatsApp. It's really about learning who your target population is, and not being dependent on just one platform."

Dr. Heidi A. Campbell, Professor at Texas A&M University

What's your skillset?

Different platforms are better suited to different kinds of content and skillsets. Are you funny? Make amusing TikToks that educate people about your faith. Are you good at graphic design? Make eye-catching Instagram infographics or memes about an issue important to you. Are you articulate and love to talk things through? Get on YouTube and make vlogs! The more engaging the content is, the more likely it will be shared and re-shared. Leaning into your strengths can widen your reach.

What does the technology allow you to do?

Different platforms have different technological possibilities and limitations. For instance, while Facebook allows video, messaging, and posting, it does not have the same ability to "show" community as do virtual reality platforms like AltSpaceVR. An audio platform like Clubhouse has its own advantages, bringing people together on a one-time or repeated basis to converse and commune. Once you know what you want to do, find the platform with the technology that allows you to do it.

Amanda Quraishi, a contributing fellow at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture, offered this advice: "Once you pick your platform, really understand the tool, dig into it and figure out what all you can use to make sure that your job is easier. There's no one way to do it, which is what is so frustrating about the internet. You can pick any platform and you're going to have to adjust everything you do specifically to that platform."

Amanda Quraishi, Contributing Fellow at USC's Center for Religion and Civic Culture

#Interfaith:
Engaging Religious Diversity Online

Consider Privacy Concerns

Make sure you're familiar with the user agreements for whatever site you're using and that you're comfortable with the level of (or lack of) privacy that it affords. You don't want to create a confidential, closed-door interfaith discussion with activists around the world on a platform that shares its data with repressive regimes where your participants might be located.

Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- *Read:* "Tweet the Message? Religious Authority and Social Media Innovation," by Dr. Pauline Hope Cheong in the *Journal of Religion, Media & Digital Culture*
- *Watch:* AOC Plays "Among Us" on Twitch

Summative Assessment: Quiz

1) Which of the following should you consider as you decide which digital platforms to use?
   a) The platforms' tools and functions
   b) Your online interfaith leadership goals
   c) Your skills and talents
   d) All of the above*

2) Privacy terms for digital platforms are:
   a) Always the same across every platform
   b) Always easy to find
   c) Not really important
   d) None of the above*

3) You should consider your target audience when deciding on a digital platform because:
   a) The people whom you want to reach may be more likely to be on one platform over another
   b) A list of group members is required to get started on most digital platforms
   c) It's easier to go where your audience already is, rather than try to recruit them to start on a new platform
   d) Both a) and c)*

Denotes correct answer

Self-Care Online
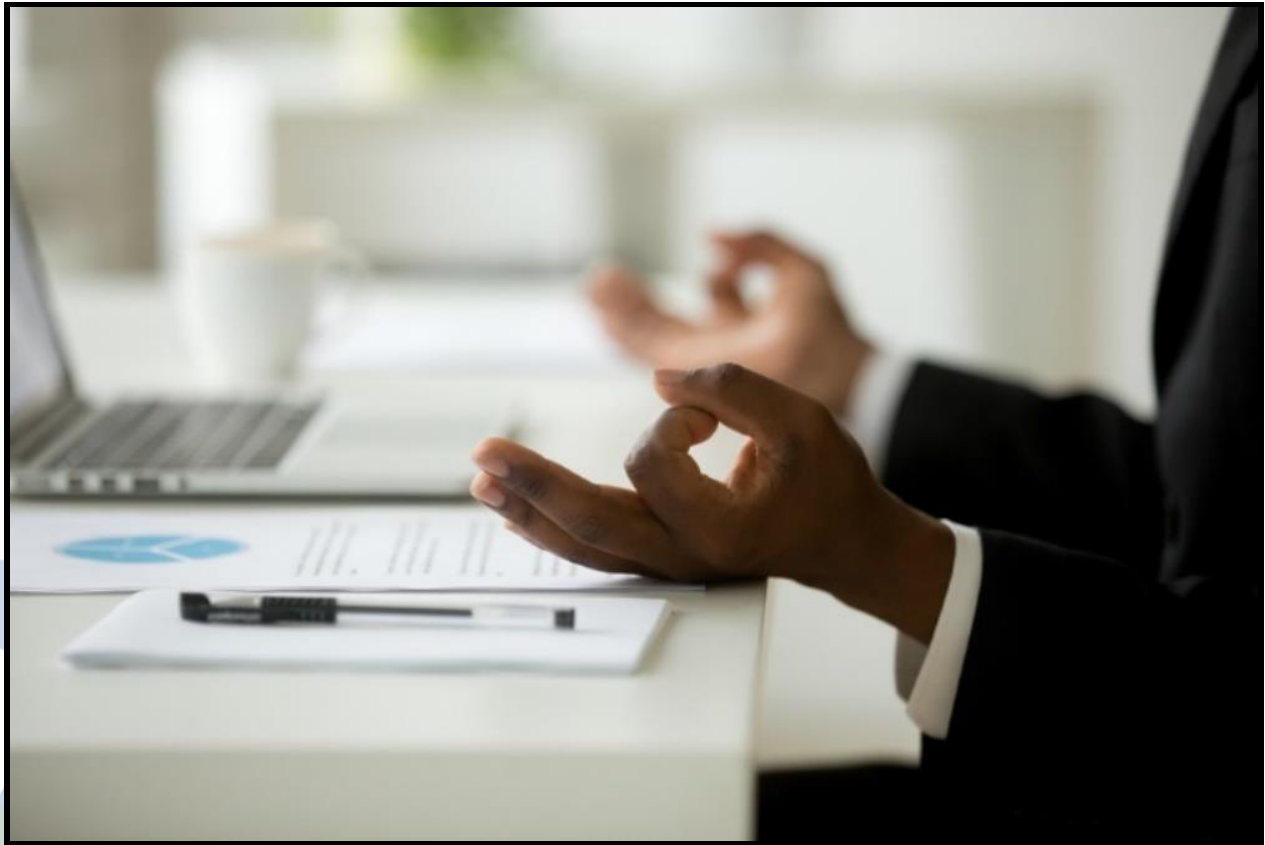
<u>Learning Outcome</u>: Learn how the Internet can produce both stress and joy, and learn some techniques for caring for yourself while online.

How Are You Doing?

When we go online, we bring our heart, head, and spirit with us. As interfaith leaders, we hope our presence on the Internet will lead to <u>productive encounters with new people</u> as well as <u>constructive engagement</u> with those whom we already know. However, being online also <u>opens us up to potential anxiety and to hostility</u> that is all too common to the Internet environment. That is why having a self-care plan is so important to the success of any online interfaith leader.

As Amanda Quraishi, a contributing fellow at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture, put it: "It's bananas out there. You have no clue; you have no idea what's going on out there. If you take a glimpse of what's happening in some places on the Internet, your mind will explode. You cannot worry about that. What you have to do is figure out what you can control. Find a space, make it your own, invite people in, protect it, and use it to the best of your ability for good things. And that's all you can do."

Amanda Quraishi, Contributing Fellow at USC's Center for Religion and Civic Culture

In this lesson we will:

- Learn about how the Internet can produce stress, as well as bring happiness
- Develop your own, unique self-care plan to help you maintain spiritual, mental, and physical health while you engage in interfaith leadership online

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly Online

Let's start by watching this Ted Talk by Adam Alter on "Why Our Screens Make Us Less Happy" (it's only 9 minutes!).

Activity: After watching the Ted Talk, take a few minutes and reflect on the following questions:

- What is your reaction to the story about Steve Jobs – and other tech industry professionals – limiting the amount of screen time their children have?
- How do you fill your "personal space" in your day? How much of it do you think you spend on your screen? What is one of the most fulfilling *non*-screen-based activities you engage in on a regular basis?
- What apps on your phone consistently make you feel content and satisfied? Which ones leave you feeling insecure and anxious? What do you think the balance is between the time you spend on the two groups?

- Have you devised any "stopping cues," or rules for when you don't allow yourself to use your phone? Would you like to create some? What do you feel like you could do? How would your life look different? How would your mood look different?

Now let's read this article from Greater Good Magazine: "Four Ways Technology Can Make You Happier" by Tchiki Davis (It's about a 5-minute read.)

Activity: After reading "*Four Ways Technology Can Make You Happier,*" take a few minutes and reflect on the following questions:
- Was there anything that surprised you? What resonated for you?
- How frequently do you use social media to engage in kind and helpful behavior or to express gratitude? What could you do to increase that percentage?
- What would you say the balance in your life is between using social media passively – and therefore perhaps comparing yourself others – and actively (e.g. liking, commenting, and posting)? Do you notice a difference in your mood when you do one more than the other?
- Do you use or have any wellness apps or use the Internet to access wellness resources? Which techniques have you found the most useful?

Create Your Self-Care Plan

There is no one way to care for yourself online – the important thing is to make it right for you. Given what you have learned from the video, article, and your own experience, begin to think about your own self-care plan. Below are six suggestions as to what might go into your plan.

Listen to Your Body

Although we digitize ourselves online, we still have physical bodies. Our bodies hold information that helps us know if we are staying well. Take a moment every so often to see how your body feels. Is your heart calm? Is your breathing relaxed? How about your neck? Decide whether you need to step away to take a walk or call a friend. Don't worry, the Internet will be there when you come back.
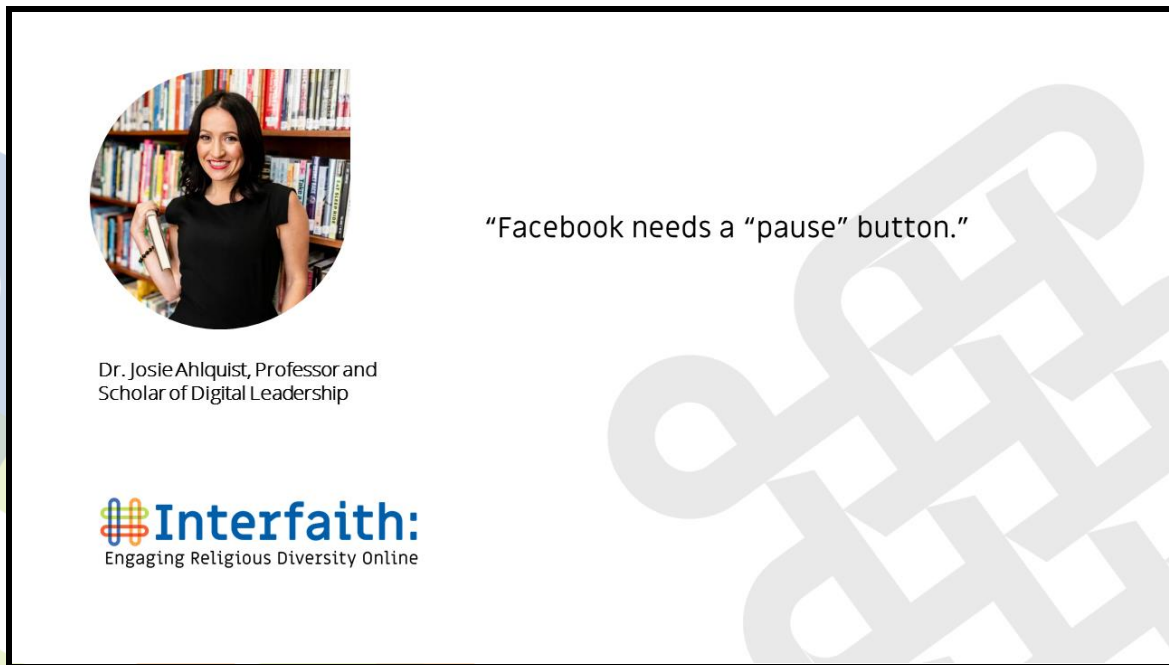
Locate Places of Joy

As the article above points out, there are online spaces that give us happiness, joy, and peace. The Internet is filled with websites, apps, and videos that can be sources of care. Whether it is a meditation, scripture, or beautiful photos, there are almost endless number of places for you to go online that will help your wellbeing. Find those and save

them in your browser so they are just one click away. Visit these spaces routinely throughout your day.

Block the Trolls

As interfaith leaders online, you are likely to have interactions with others on topics on which you disagree, even strongly. Some discomfort in those moments is inevitable. However, when done with respect, those kinds of discussions can help us learn new perspectives and expand our understanding. *BUT* you never have to tolerate any behavior that denigrates you as a person. If that happens – block and report. Not only are you caring for yourself, you are likely helping others who received the same treatment. For more on this, see the "Being Safe Online" lesson.

"Facebook needs a "pause" button."

Dr. Josie Ahlquist, Professor and
Scholar of Digital Leadership

![Interfaith: Engaging Religious Diversity Online]

Press Pause

Our digital life can feel like going down a river that suddenly turns into rapids, leaving us feeling out of control and in danger of falling out of the boat. A great piece of wisdom comes from professor and scholar of digital leadership, Dr. Josie Ahlquist, who jokes that "Facebook needs a pause button" to give people a chance to reflect on what they are really feeling and sit quietly for a minute. Pausing ourselves can help us remember that we can control the pace of a conversation. It's okay to take it slow, feel your emotions, and let that self-awareness guide your next activity. Take your time.

Build a Community of Care

Self-care can sound individualistic, but self-care is connected to the practice of community care. Part of caring for yourself is being in relationship with people to whom you can turn when you are feeling anxious, frustrated, or lonely. Create of list of people whom you would like to be part of your self-care and invite them to be part of your network. These can be people you know offline, or people whom you have grown to trust online. And make the practice mutual! Caring for others often makes us feel better and can offer a reminder to care for ourselves. Determine a schedule for check-ins and keep them in your prayers, good thoughts, or whatever spiritual practice is right for you.

Disengagement and Alone Time

When the work we are doing feels *so* important – especially when we feel as though it's connected to our religious or ethical identity – it's hard to give ourselves permission to take a break. But taking such a break offers us the time, space, and perspective that we need in order to move our work forward. Chris Stedman, author of *IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in Our Digital Lives*, shared: "I think we do have to take time to step back and disconnect. I think that it's really, critically important. Not because life online is fake or less real, but because we need the kind of perspective that we can get from being alone and being disconnected, that then brings us back into digital space…I think that, especially in a year when digital connection is one of the few ways we can connect with others, I would want digital interfaith leaders to recognize that part of what it means to be an online leader is also to make sure that you are taking space in your life for other experiences – especially times to release and check in and connect with yourself. Then you can re-enter the work with the perspective that you get from being disconnected."

Going Deeper: Additional Resources
- *Read: "Empowered to Unplug" by Dr. Josie Ahlquist*
- *Explore: Mindfulness coloring books by Dr. Raja Bhattar*

Summative Assessment: Create Your Self-Care Plan

Take 15 minutes to create your own self-care plan. Once you have completed it, sign it as a sign of contractual commitment to yourself to care for yourself. Post it somewhere where you'll see it every day. Remember, there is no one way to care for yourself online – the important thing is to make it right for you.