The Press as a Consultative Forum: 
A Contribution to Normative Press Theory

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Abstract
The contemporary press has, in many countries, evolved into a discursive battlefield characterized by a war of words and images. Against this backdrop, some normative theorists of the press assert the need for alternative models of journalistic practice in which the press serves as a forum for more thoughtful and constructive processes of democratic deliberation. As a contribution to the field of normative press theory, this paper articulates a model of the press that derives from the teachings of the Baha’i Faith. At the core of this model are the principles and objectives of consultation, which is a collective decision-making process that Baha’is employ. This paper explores elements of this normative model of the press, which are scattered throughout a wide range of primary Baha’i texts, in order to bring the model into clearer focus. The purpose of the paper is to highlight the heuristic value of the model for press theorists and practitioners, inside and outside the Baha’i community.

In its coverage of public policy issues and current events, the contemporary press has, in some countries, evolved into a discursive battlefield.1 Within this battlefield, public discourse is characterized by a war of words and images. Diverse interest groups vie with one another to influence and dominate public perceptions. The most powerful interest groups mount sophisticated communication campaigns while less powerful groups respond with guerilla communication tactics. Commercial news organizations often capitalize by reporting, and arguably encouraging, the drama and spectacle, while citizens grow more divided, alienated and cynical.

These patterns of media content are epitomized in the American media, which tend to represent human society metaphorically as a ‘war of all against all’.2 Yet these patterns, which are in part a result of the hyper-commercialization of media, are increasingly being exported to, and emulated within, other countries that are following the American lead in this regard.3

Against this backdrop, some normative theorists of the press, such as those who advocate models of civic journalism or public journalism, assert the need for alternative models of journalistic practice in which the press serves as a forum for more thoughtful and constructive public dialogue regarding issues that require collective attention.4 According to such theorists, journalists need to become more effective at facilitating modes of democratic deliberation that

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assist the public and elected officials in their efforts to make informed decisions, formulate effective policies and address pressing social problems. As Rosen asserts, the press needs to develop "alternatives to the familiar metaphors of politics-as-sports and public-life-as-battleducation; it needs to assume "a far more constructive role in public life"; and it needs to be guided by an "affirmative vision, something inspiring that journalists can work toward and believe in" that answers the question "what are we doing all this for?"

In this context, the discussion that follows contributes to the field of normative press theory by articulating a model of the press that derives from the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith. As an emerging world religion, the Bahá’í Faith explicitly addresses the operation of the press and offers an affirmative vision of the vital contribution the press can and must make to the advancement of human civilization. Baha’u’llah (1817–92), the founder of the Bahá’í Faith, made normative statements about the operation of the press in his writing, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844–1921), Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957) and the Universal House of Justice (1963–present), who are the successive centres of covenantal authority and guidance within the Bahá’í community after Baha’u’llah’s passing, have made many more normative statements about the operation of the press. Elements of a normative model of the press are therefore scattered throughout these primary Bahá’í texts. The purpose of this paper is to draw these elements together in a coherent manner that brings the model into clearer focus and enables a discussion of its heuristic value.

Early Bahá’í references to the press

The early history of the Bahá’í community was a history of violent persecution, often incited through misrepresentations spread by antagonists of the religion. Some of the earliest references to the press in the Bahá’í writings were thus written in response to misrepresentations in the press. Baha’u’llah occasionally noted these misrepresentations and used them as an opportunity, on the one hand, to praise the emergence of newspapers as powerful sources of knowledge and insight and, on the other hand, to caution against the type of abuses that had been directed against him through the press. He wrote:

"In this Day, the secrets of the earth are laid bare before the eyes of men. The pages of swiftly-appearing newspapers are indeed the mirror of the world. They reflect the deeds and the pursuits of all peoples and kindreds. They both reflect them and make them known. They are a mirror endowed with hearing, sight and speech. This is an amazing and potent phenomenon. However, be it known that were it not for the prompting of evil passions and desires and to be attired with the raiment of justice and equity, they should be put into situations as much as possible and ascertain the facts, then set them down in writing."

After the passing of Baha’u’llah in 1892, and the establishment of early Bahá’í communities in Europe and North America, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá prepared the early western Bahá’ís to anticipate similar misrepresentations in the press. Like Baha’u’llah before him, he also praised the emergence of the press in recent centuries as an invaluable development within ongoing processes of social evolution. Indeed, he linked the operation of the press directly to the central goal of the world, he wrote:

"In cycles gone by, in the absence of means, the Continents remained within the same containment as it is impossible. Consequently, the peoples of the world, means of commerce of the earth, have virtually come to travel to any land, to become familiar, to become familiar, to be familiar, and the thought of this day be achieved."

After the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, his sucession, Effendi emerged as a global, or the press more directly and raise public awareness. During this period, references focused on developing a press in positive and correct and dignified press. Shoghi Effendi also contributed to the idea of internal news organizations and the nation’s newspapers and had a "sacred function" which he explained as safeguarding the integrity of the press and foreign; he explained that the press "should be made as representative as possible."

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directly to the central goal of the Baha’i Faith: the unification of the peoples of the world. He wrote:

In cycles gone by, though harmony was established, yet, owing to the absence of means, the unity of all mankind could not have been achieved. Continents remained widely divided, nay even among the peoples of one and the same continent association and interchange of thought were well nigh impossible. Consequently intercourse, understanding and unity amongst all the peoples and kindreds of the earth were unattainable. In this day, however, means of communication have multiplied, and the five continents of the earth have virtually merged into one. And for everyone it is now easy to travel to any land, to associate and exchange views with its peoples, and to become familiar, through publications, with the conditions, the religious beliefs and the thoughts of all men... Hence the unity of all mankind can in this day be achieved.1

After the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Baha in 1921, and under the subsequent guidance of his successor, Shoghi Effendi, the Baha’i community gradually emerged as a global, organized community with the capacity to engage the press more directly in order to correct lingering misrepresentations and raise public awareness regarding the fundamental tenets of the Faith. During this period, references to the press in Shoghi Effendi’s writings often focused on developing capacities within the Baha’i community to engage the press in positive and productive ways in order to ‘provide for the full, correct and dignified presentation of the Cause to the general public’.2

Shoghi Effendi also provided guidance regarding the development of internal news organs within the Baha’i community, such as local and national newsletters and other periodicals. He stated that such publications fulfil a ‘vital function’ within the community; he urged Baha’i communities to enlarge their scope; he insisted that such publications ‘combine the essential qualities of accuracy, reliability, thoroughness, dignity and wisdom’; he asserted that they ‘should become a great factor in promoting understanding’ and ‘providing information on Baha’i activity, both local and foreign’; he explained that they should play a role in upholding and safeguarding the institutions of the Cause; and he maintained that they ‘should be made as representative as possible’.3

Shoghi Effendi also contrasted the ideals articulated above with the ‘corruption of the press’ that he observed in the world around him.4 In a reference that simultaneously critiques the contemporary press while offering Baha’i a clearer vision of the role of the press within the future world order they are working to establish, he wrote that

... the press will, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be merrily manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples.5

After the passing of Shoghi Effendi in 1957, and under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, the expanding Baha’i community began to develop more specialized capacities in the areas of media relations, news gathering

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and the publication of a growing range of periodicals, books and journals. By the 1980s, the range of Baha'i publishing was sufficiently complex to generate an informed discourse on new and challenging issues associated with the operation of the press. Prominent among these were the way the management of the and the publication of a growing range of periodicals, books and journals. By the 1980s, the range of Baha'i publishing was sufficiently complex to generate an informed discourse on new and challenging issues associated with the operation of the press. Prominent among these issues was the way that the management of the press was structured and the way that decisions were made. The Baha'i Universal House of Justice explicitly addressed this issue and, in the process, clarified further elements of the Baha'i model of the press by relating the operation of the press to the Baha'i model of collective decision-making.

The consultative model

Since the inception of the Baha'i community, Baha'is have been practicing a model of collective inquiry and deliberation that Baha'u'llah referred to as consultation:

Consultation bestows greater awareness and transmutes conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leads the way and guides. For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation."

In brief, consultation is an approach to collective inquiry and deliberation that is unifying rather than divisive. Participants are encouraged to exercise freedom of expression and engage in informed, probing, critical analysis, yet they are called to express themselves with care and moderation and to remain detached from preconceived opinions and positions. Participants are expected to regard diversity of perspective as an asset and therefore to actively solicit the perspectives, concerns, insights and expertise of others. After ideas are expressed they are no longer to be identified with the individuals who express them and, in this way, ideas become collective resources that can be freely adopted, refined or discarded, according to the collective wisdom of the group, without the entanglements of ego and face. Throughout the entire process, participants are shielded from undue external pressures as they strive to identify relevant spiritual principles and apply them to the solution of problems. When consultation comes to a point of decision-making, participants strive for consensus but can settle for majority agreement if a unanimous consensus cannot be reached.

The 1988 letter from the Universal House of Justice alluded to above was written at a time when the Baha'i community was beginning to struggle with issues pertaining to freedom of expression in the press. This letter reiterated Shoghi Effendi's unambiguous declaration that 'at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the unobstructed right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views.' The same time, the Universal House of Justice explained that 'the exercise of freedom of speech must necessarily be disciplined by a profound appreciation of both the positive and negative dimensions of freedom, on the one hand, and of speech, on the other.' It then asserted that 'a careful examination of the principles of Baha'i consultation and the formal and informal arrangements for employing them offer new insights into the dynamics of freedom of expression' and provide the key to 'the beneficial uses of this freedom.'

Referring specifically to the press:

... the code of conduct and procedures of consultation as to be able to make its full and unreserved use for the good of individual people and become a great force for the advancement of society, and hence for the advancement of civilization.

In order to understand the consultative process, it is helpful to first examine some of the principles that pertain to the Baha'i model of the press.

Objectives of consultation

The overarching objectives of consultation and the consultative process are to achieve intellectual and spiritual development and to enhance the capacity of the community to engage in collective decision-making. The objectives of consultation can be summarized as:

1. To achieve intellectual and spiritual development through the process of consultation.
2. To enhance the capacity of the community to engage in collective decision-making.

In the context of these objectives, consultation and the consultative process are characterized by specific objectives. The primary objective of consultation is to achieve intellectual and spiritual development through the process of consultation. The consultative process is characterized by specific objectives, such as the development of a deeper understanding of the principles of consultation and the application of these principles in practice.

Consultation can also be characterized by the objective of gaining insight into a subject. Thus, consultation is characterized by the objective of gaining insight into a subject. This characteristic is evident in the way that consultation is used to explore the implications of a particular principle, such as freedom of expression, in the context of the Baha'i model of the press.

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radical, books and journals. It was sufficiently complex to gener-
ing issues associated with this was learning how rights were defined in ways that are unifying. 15 In 1888, the Universal House of Justice, in the process, clarified its position on the operation of consultation. 16

In order to understand the normative implications of this statement, it will be helpful to first examine the broad objectives of consultation and how they might pertain to the operation of the press, and then examine specific principles of consultation that appear most relevant to the operation of the press.

Objectives of consultation

The overarching objectives of Baha'i consultation, according to 'Abdu'l-
Baha, are 'to arrive at unity and truth' in deliberative processes. 17 In addition, Baha'i believe that consultation is 'the operating expression of justice in human affairs' and 'at the group level, I concern for justice is the indispensable compass in collective decision-making, because it is the only means by which unity of thought and action can be achieved'. 18 In this regard, justice and unity are inseparable concepts within Baha'i discourse, as one is not attainable without the other. 19

In the context of these objectives – the pursuit of unity, truth and justice – consultation takes different forms that serve varying, more specific, objectives. For instance, consultation can be exploratory in nature, with the objective of gaining collective awareness, insight and understanding into a subject. Thus Baha'u'llah wrote that consultation is 'the bestower of understanding and 'it is and will always be a cause of awareness and understanding'. 20 'Abdu'l-Baha explained that consultation bestows 'insight', enables people 'to delve into questions which are unknown', and is a means for 'the investigation of truth'. 21 This type of consultation can occur in many informal contexts, including among friends, within families or among students or scholars engaged in processes of collective inquiry.

Consultation can also be advisory in nature, with the objective of providing guidance, advice and feedback in the form of suggestions, recommendations and constructive criticism to individuals or elected bodies invested with formal decision-making authority. 22 Such bodies include the elected institutions that govern Baha'i communities at the local, national and international levels. One forum within which consultation takes this advisory form is the monthly Baha'i community gathering known as the nineteen-day feast, which is held in every locality with a sufficient number of Baha'is to elect a local assembly. In such gatherings, Baha'is come together for community devotion and fellowship. A portion of the gathering is also set aside for consultation about the activities and progress of the community and, within these consultations, members of the community often make recommendations to, and share their thoughts and concerns with, their elected local assembly. 23 Within these gatherings, consultation serves as a process of democratic deliberation that engages all members of the community.
Consultation also takes this advisory form at Baha'i electoral conventions. These are meetings, held annually at the local and national levels, and every five years at the international level, at which individuals assemble to elect the respective governing body at that level. At these conventions, the electoral process is followed by consultation regarding the progress and activities of the Faith at the local, national or international levels, respectively. During the convention consultations, participants share their perceptions, thoughts, questions and concerns with one another and sometimes make recommendations to the incoming elected body, in an advisory manner that parallels consultation at the monthly feast.

Of course, the line between exploratory and advisory forms of consultation is not clearly demarcated and some of the consultation at the monthly feasts and electoral conventions is relatively exploratory, as participants think through issues together, deepening their insights and arriving at a greater unity of thought which, in turn, may or may not lead to the formulation of advice or recommendations for elected bodies. However, both of these modes of consultation are distinct from a mode that could be called executive consultation, in which the objective is formal decision-making within a body that is invested with the authority to do so. Within the Baha'i administrative order, the authority to make formal decisions governing the community resides within the locally, nationally and internationally elected bodies referred to above. These elected bodies are therefore the sites that would be most clearly identified, within the Baha'i community, with processes of formal executive decision-making. However, such decision-making also occurs within other contexts, such as the boards of Baha'i-run businesses and non-profit organizations, as well as in other settings, such as between spouses within the institution of marriage.

Baha'i consultation therefore appears to embody at least three distinct, specific objectives, under the broad aegis of the pursuit of unity, truth and justice. These can be described as (1) the pursuit of insight and understanding (exploratory consultation), (2) the formulation of advice (advisory consultation), and (3) the process of formal decision-making (executive consultation). Of these three objectives, the first two appear most relevant to the operation of the press. From a Baha'i perspective, the press, as a consultative forum, is more analogous to a tool which should facilitate, in an ongoing manner, exploratory and advisory modes of inquiry and consultation similar to those that occur within Baha'i communities at the monthly feasts and electoral conventions. In other words, within this normative framework, the press becomes - at least in part - an extension of these consultative processes across time and space.

Principles of consultation

A wide range of principles, articulated throughout the Baha'i writings, provide the framework for Baha'i consultation. Some, like the principle of striving for unanimous consensus but accepting a majority vote if necessary, are not immediately relevant to the exploratory and advisory modes of consultation that the press might facilitate within a community, as discussed above. The discussion that follows therefore focuses on those consultative principles that appear relevant to the press. This discussion is intended to provide an overview of these as a starting point for further exploration that derives from the text.

Among the consultative principles of the press is that it should be thoughtful and intellectual, and be well informed regarding the information needed to adequately report a key principle within Baha'i thought, the model of the press exemplifies its appearance to promote, through reporting that we associate with journalistic tradition - through the press regarding a range of issues.

Another consultative principle of the press is the principle of the Universal House of Justice, upheld by the Universal House of Justice as an integral part of the Baha'i faith. As Shoghi Effendi put it, "the responsibility of every U.S. government is to promote, through the press, the fundamental principles of Baha'i philosophy and to express their views with boldness and courage." As Baha'u'llah states:

Human utterance is an expression of the need to determine . . . to be likened unto fire, an element which is manifest in the world of ideas, but primarily speak with words, which must be nurtured and edified by the existence which is the spiritual world."

The Universal House of Justice is also the depository of the Baha'i teachings, and the independence of the press is a key principle in this context. The Baha'i teachings emphasize the importance of the press in the advancement of society, and the independence of the press is a key principle in this context.

Prescriptions regarding the press do not, however, imply that the press should not air differences or debates. The press is supposed to inform the public, not to suppress it.
principles that appear most immediately relevant to the operation of the press. This discussion is not meant to be exhaustive. Its purpose is to provide an overview of some of the most salient and relevant principles, as a starting point for further inquiry into the normative model of the press that derives from the teachings of the Baha’i Faith.

Among the consultative principles that are clearly relevant to the operation of the press is that of ‘commitment to informed discussion’.24 In any thoughtful and intelligent process of deliberation, participants must clearly be well informed regarding the most relevant facts, context and other information needed to adequately understand the issue at hand — and this is a key principle within Baha’i consultation. In this regard, the consultative model of the press explored in this paper is consistent with, and would appear to promote, the best practices of fact-finding and investigative reporting that we associate with the highest achievements of the journalistic tradition — through which many communities have become informed regarding a range of issues.

Another consultative principle that is clearly relevant to the operation of the press is the principle of ‘freedom of expression’, which is emphatically upheld by the Universal House of Justice as ‘a fundamental principle of the Cause’.25 As Shoghi Effendi has stated, ‘it is not only the right, but the vital responsibility of every loyal and intelligent member of the Community to offer fully and frankly ... any suggestion, recommendation or criticism he conscientiously feels he should’.26 However, within the framework of Baha’i consultation, freedom of expression has to be balanced against a number of other relevant principles. Some of these principles pertain to the manner and mode of expression, and these are directly relevant to the operation of the press. For instance, participants in consultation are encouraged to express their views with ‘devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation’.27 As Baha’u’llah states:

Human utterance is an essence which aspires to exert its influence and needeth moderation ... Every word is endowed with a spirit ... One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world. Therefore an enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility.28

The Universal House of Justice further explains that ‘phenomenal characteristics of speech’, such as ‘content, volume, style, tact, wisdom, timeliness are among the critical factors in determining the effects of speech’.29 Baha’is are therefore called to exert great discipline regarding these characteristics of speech. ‘Their efforts at such discipline’, the Universal House of Justice continues, ‘will give birth to an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race. Just as this discipline applies to the spoken word, it applies equally to the written word; and it profoundly affects the operation of the press’.30

Prescriptions regarding etiquette of expression in the Baha’i teachings do not, however, imply glossing over conflicts by demanding that people bury their differences and speak to each other in artificially polite tones.
Rather, they imply finding and facilitating modes of expression that allow conflicting perceptions and interests to be critically examined, but in an atmosphere within which problems become solvable challenges. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Baha affirms that in many cases, "the shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions."\(^{37}\)

Prescriptions regarding etiquette of expression in the Baha'i teachings also do not imply cold, rationalistic modes of expression in which emotion has no place. As the Universal House of Justice explains, "clearly the expression of feelings and the emotional tone of the interaction make an important contribution to the consultative process."\(^{38}\) Emotion is fundamental to human experience and perception, and efforts to foster collective action and mutual understanding cannot ignore it. Emotions can uplift, inspire and motivate people to pursue meaningful social change and the Baha'i writings are, themselves, filled with emotive imagery and metaphors that do this. In this context, "Abdu'l-Baha refers to 'the quickening of spiritual emotions,' and to 'altruistic emotions belonging to the realm of morality which, like unto a brilliant light, brighten and illumine the lamp of the realities of mankind.' Moreover, even painful emotions convey dimensions of human experience that must be acknowledged if mutual understanding and empathy are to prevail, and Baha'i consultation accommodates such expressions. However, within Baha'i consultation, participants strive to convey the emotional dimension of their experience without the offensive and defensive posturing, and the giving and taking of offence that we have grown so accustomed to associating with politicized discourse in the contemporary press.\(^{39}\)

Prescriptions for a more mature etiquette of expression in the Baha'i teachings also do not serve as a licence to dismiss or exclude any person or group as coarse, uneducated or irrational. The etiquette of expression alluded to above is not a prerequisite for participating in consultation. Rather, within the developmental perspective that Baha'i is continually asked to adopt, consultation is understood as an inclusive process through which people collectively learn and refine more constructive modes of expression. Moreover, in large consultative groups that require a chairperson to facilitate, there is much that a skillful chairperson can do to set a positive tone, foster an inclusive atmosphere, draw out diverse and often contrasting views, and reframe sensitive issues in constructive ways - without silencing any voices. Likewise, there is much that the press could potentially do, along the same lines, as a facilitator of public discourse. Accordingly, if one accepts that "the code of conduct of the press must embrace the principles and objectives of consultation"\(^{40}\) then the press might be understand as a forum through which more mature modes of expression can be fostered by authors, journalists, editors and others, even if this norm does not always prevail within the contemporary commercial press.

Another consultative principle that is directly relevant to the operation of the press is the principle of valuing diversity. Rather than view diversity as a source of conflict, Baha'i is encouraged to regard it as an essential resource in processes of collective inquiry and deliberation.\(^{41}\) Valuing diversity and actively soliciting traditionally excluded views not only increases the breadth of insight available, it also engenders a sense of inclusion, trust and mutual commitment among diverse segments of the community, which is a prerequisite for unity of purpose. This norm does not imply that journalists and editors can set aside their critical thinking and representing the truth, but rather that all relevant segments of the press can contribute to the process of discovering and presenting the truth in an atmosphere in which all views are considered. Until all views are considered, there is no "objective" truth.\(^{42}\) This analysis is consistent with the principle that human beings are neither absolutely wise nor sufficiently informed to comprehensively, in its richness and complexity, understand and act within the cultural environment, historical and other contexts in which we find ourselves.

Baha'i is thus viewed diversely rather than inherently oppositional. Rather than a facet of a complex, messy world, ideas and ideas belong not to the individual but to the group and to best serve the goal pressure group's demands, phrased in strident language, is not the only option. In contrast, takes the form of a consultative process, in which all parties are heard and then are asked to best serve the goal. However, if one accepts that the principles and processes that authors, journalists and editors embrace in this regard, then it is hard to deny that these standards are not in the public interest.

Another principle of consultative process is the requirement for balance and fairness of spiritual principle.\(^{43}\) The consultative principles such as the equilibrium of the extremes of wealth and poverty, the unity of humanity as a whole and the unity of humanity as a whole, of advocacy and purely private pleasures. Accordingly, in the consultative process, the need to identify the principles that discourse at the level of principle, which will, in turn, enable the consultative process to address the many challenges of our day. Consultative processes thus operate through a process of deliberation upon criteria that guide operational and decisional decisions. This principle is deeply rooted in the Baha'i dynamic that is very different from the adversarial model.
etres of expression that allow the emotion to be articulated in a more palatable form. Indeed, the ability to express emotions in a way that does not undermine one's dignity or integrity is a prerequisite for unity of thought and collective action. Again, even though this norm does not always prevail in the contemporary commercial press, journalists and editors can in theory strive to apply this principle by soliciting and representing the perspectives, concerns, interests and expertise of all relevant segments of the community in the examination of a given issue.

Closely related to the principle of valuing diversity are the principles of detachment from one's personal views and of suspending one's judgment until all views are considered. Though these principles may sound paradoxical at first, they reflect an underlying epistemology with very practical implications. In this regard, Bahá'ís accept that human comprehension is finite and limited relative to the infinite complexity and subtlety of reality and that human beings therefore cannot perceive or know reality directly, comprehensively, in its raw form or essence. A person's views are thus shaped and circumscribed by their experience, education, social position, cultural environment, historical context and so forth. Given the limited and circumscribed nature of our views, our access to truth is relative rather than absolute.

Bahá'ís thus view diverse perspectives as potentially complementary rather than inherently oppositional — each potentially illuminating a different facet of a complex, multi-faceted reality. Moreover, diverse perspectives and ideas are understood by Bahá'ís as insights that, once offered, become collective resources available to the entire group. In such an atmosphere, ideas belong not to the individual to whom they occur during the discussion but to the group as a whole, to take up, discard, or revise as seems to best serve the goal pursued. Much contemporary public discourse, in contrast, takes on the form of entrenched positional statements and demands, phrased in strident and inflexible terms, which are the antithesis of the principles of detachment and suspended judgment referred to above. However, if one accepts that the code of conduct of the press must embrace the principles and objectives of consultation then it can be argued that authors, journalists and editors are well-positioned to effect change in this regard, by cultivating new standards within public discourse — even if these standards are not the norm within the contemporary press.

Another principle of consultation that pertains to the operation of the press is the requirement that consultation discourse be raised to the level of spiritual principles. This means that reference to spiritual principles — principles such as the equality of men and women, the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, the sustainable stewardship of the natural environment and the subordination of narrow self-interests to the interests of humanity as a whole — must take precedence over constituency-based advocacy and purely pragmatic political calculation in consultative processes. Accordingly, in their decision-making processes, Bahá'ís are encouraged to identify the principles involved and then be guided by them. 'Only discourse at the level of principle has the power to invoke a moral commitment, which will, in turn, make possible the discovery of enduring solutions to the many challenges confronting a rapidly integrating human society.' Consultative processes thus employ spiritual principles as mutually agreed-upon criteria that guide efforts to formulate, compare and evaluate potential decisions. This principled approach to collective deliberation creates a dynamic that is very different from partisan confrontation, negotiation and
Consultation and the political economy of the press

The consultative principles and objectives articulated above may appear naive and idealistic within the political economy of the contemporary commercial media, where profit motives often override the pursuit of truth and justice, and where the promotion of unity is not an explicitly recognized journalistic value. Within the prevailing commercial framework, print and broadcast news organizations are under constant pressure to lower their reporting costs in order to maximize their profit margins. In the case of media that are financed by advertising revenues, this structural pressure often results in the construction of news stories as simplistic adversarial spectacles, through which news organizations attract audiences as cheaply as possible in order to sell their attention to advertisers for maximum profit.¹¹

This news-as-spectacle formula that characterizes much commercial media clearly does not align with the consultative principles and objectives discussed above, for a number of reasons: it tends to amplify the most extreme and confrontational modes of expression; it tends to filter out diverse voices and views as it reduces stories to simple, binary conflicts; it tends to entrench groups in conflict by emphasizing their most dramatic and irreconcilable positions and demands; and it tends to focus on self-interested advocacy, partisan positioning and Machiavellian political strategy, at the expense of substantive and principle-based public discourse.¹²

The normative model of the press that derives from the Baha’i teachings thus provides an evaluative framework for critiquing the operation of the contemporary press and assessing its performance. Critique and assessment, however, are most meaningful when they lead towards constructive change. In this regard, the Baha’i teachings promote a developmental perspective on the evolution of social institutions.¹³ When viewed from this developmental perspective, the long and relatively successful struggles for press liberty, and freedom of expression, in many parts of the world, along with the normative doctrines and philosophies that have been articulated in support of these struggles, are remarkable historical accomplishments. They represent, in the words of three eminent press theorists, ‘the transfer of the press from authoritarian to libertarian principles’.¹⁴ From a Baha’i perspective, this historical accomplishment appears to lay the foundation upon which the consultative model can be constructed, because the consultative model is premised on freedom of expression. The challenge, from a Baha’i perspective, is to promote the further maturation of the press, from the current code of libertarian principles to a more mature code of consultative principles.

This developmental perspective, in turn, raises a series of questions about the political economy of the press that will eventually need to be considered by Baha’is and others who, for instance, is the consultative-advertising-financed media viable? Or does it tend to dominate access to market forces responding to the underlying confluence of media content to reflect a commercially cultivated version of the truth? If this taste for news as advertising-free subscription services is too refined, can more mature tastes be cultivated over time? Or will other factors, such as advertising-financed media, continue to influence the quality of our environments that are too often defined by profit motives? By focusing on self-interested advocacy, the consultative model is likely to perpetuate the status quo, where the economic interests of a narrow sector of society are prioritized over the needs of the wider population. The consultative model, therefore, needs to be complemented by a broader vision of the role of the media in society.

We cannot say that one of the most important and deeply affected by the ongoing social transformation is the media. The dialectical nature of this transformation is that it can be the result of a broader process of change. The consultative model, in turn, raises a series of questions about the political economy of the press that will eventually need to be considered.

by Baha’is and others who seek to advance this developmental process. For instance, is the consultative model ultimately compatible with advertising-financed news media? Stated another way, is the news-as-spectacle formula that tends to dominate advertising-financed media an inevitable outcome of market forces responding to unalterable human preferences for dramatic and conflictual media content? Or does this contemporary news formula merely reflect a commercially cultivated ‘taste’ that is culturally and historically contingent? If this taste for news-as-spectacle is culturally and historically contingent, can more mature tastes be cultivated over time? If more mature tastes can be cultivated over time, can advertising-financed news media ever satisfy them? Or will other financing structures, such as public-service media and advertising-free subscriber-financed media, also be needed, to compensate for intrinsic limitations of advertising-financed media?

In considering these questions, a few fundamental Baha’i teachings that underlie the consultative model appear to be relevant. Among these are the beliefs that human beings are characterized by a lower and a higher nature, or a material and a spiritual nature; that the purpose of our individual lives is to develop our spiritual nature in order to transcend our basest instincts; and that our collective historical advancement can create social environments that have salutary effects on these processes of individual spiritual development. These beliefs suggest cause for some optimism that more mature tastes among news consumers can be cultivated over time, through broad processes of spiritual development and education, combined perhaps with specific programmes of ‘media literacy’ education. Of course, this type of maturation in the preferences of news consumers would probably take generations. But in theory such maturation should, through the operation of the market, exert a positive influence on the type of media content that is produced and distributed – even by advertising-financed media.

At the same time, the Baha’i teachings also suggest that deep and lasting social transformation can only be achieved through the simultaneous or dialectical transformation of individuals and the institutions that constitute our social environment. As Shoghi Effendi explains:

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.

The dialectical nature of social change processes implies that the cultivation of more mature tastes among individual news consumers would be a necessary but insufficient condition for establishing the consultative model of the press on a societal level. One reason for this is that advertising-financed news content does not simply reflect or respond to the aggregate tastes of individual news consumers. Rather, it is also the product of a range of political and economic forces linked to the interests of advertisers, the interests of media organizations and their owners or shareholders, as well as the interests of public relations professionals and other news sources.

These forces, in turn, influence the tastes of news consumers because they determine the content 'menu' that news consumers choose from – and from which consumers develop their content preferences over time. Just as individuals in different cultures grow up with different tastes in food, as a result of the foods that are normalized within their diets, the same is arguably true of tastes in media content. In this regard, advertising-financed media arguably tend to cultivate a taste for 'junk food news'. This includes a taste for news-as-spectacle which, in contrast with the consultative model, is characterized by the amplification of extreme and confrontational modes of expression, the absence of diverse views and voices, the entrenchment of conflicting positions and the neglect of spiritual or ethical principles as criteria for solving social problems.

For these reasons, advertising-financed media may never be fully capable of supporting the normative model of the press that derives from the Baha'i teachings. Indeed, advertising dependence is one factor that clearly renders the media susceptible to being 'mischievously manipulated by vested interests', as Shoghi Effendi observed in a reference cited earlier in this paper. This susceptibility directly undermines the capacity of the press to function according to the principles and objectives of consultation because advertising dependency leads, among other things, to well-documented practices of media self-censorship by which the press tends to systematically filter out views and voices that are incompatible with the consumer culture that advertisers collectively seek to propagate. Among the views and voices that are routinely filtered are those that recognize a spiritual dimension to human existence and question the hegemony of a highly materialistic consumer culture, while eschewing the religious sectarianism and fanaticism that conforms to the news-as-spectacle formula (and thus dominates news stories about 'spiritual' or 'religious' matters). The result, in essence, is a hyper-commercialized media system in which spiritual interpretations of reality that are thoughtful and moderate are generally not welcome and public discourse is, as a result, rarely elevated to the level of spiritual principle – even though the vast majority of the earth's peoples continue to recognize a spiritual dimension to human existence and thoughtful exponents of this view are in no short supply.

For Baha'i, this insight into the functioning of the commercial media should come as no surprise. In a historical account of the twentieth century that was commissioned by the Universal House of Justice and disseminated throughout the worldwide Baha'i community, Baha'is read that:

Early in the twentieth century, a materialistic interpretation of reality had consolidated itself so completely as to become the dominant world faith insofar as the direction of society was concerned... Having penetrated and captured all significant centres of power and information at the global level, dogmatic materialism ensured that no competing voices would retain the ability to challenge projects of world-wide economic exploitation.

In another passage that provides insight into the impacts of advertising and a hyper-commercialized media system, this same document states that:

Consumer culture, today's inheritor by default of materialism's gospel of human betterment, is unembarrassed by the ephemeral nature of the goals that inspire it. For the material benefits it offers are immutable by the breakdown of principles, essentially no more than blind as appetite, release from sanctions. Its most obvious enemies are universally castigated as the origins of progress. Selfishness brilliant in form, it reinvents itself as public; it publicly claim the status of the only good; lust, indulgence, pride – even the lesser social and economic ills – the meaning, so have the very ends, has been casually sacrificed.

If one recognizes that advertising-financed media are 'significant centres of power', one accepts that the 'code of the Baha'i community' and objectives of consultation cannot develop alternatives to advertising-financed media systems in institutional forms that will not operate in which diverse voices are consistently raised to the level of public discourse.

An invitation to further inquiry

The purpose of this paper is to raise questions and issues pertaining to the role of advertising-financed media or consultative forms of media. It has been to bring a normative perspective to the current debate within the Baha'i community – to prompt further inquiry. The previously outlined model of the press is intended as a starting point toward an alternative path of inquiry.

Another important point for further analysis of, on the one hand, the public life of media and democracy, on the other hand, the public life of Baha'i faith, is the relationship between a particular representation of the ideal speech situation that is implied by the significant similarities we have identified in the Baha'i model. A comparative approach may assist in exploring these insights into both.

Finally, a related set of questions that arises from the consultative model of communication is whether a consultative model of the press could be some difference between the two models of contrasting assumption?
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that inspire it. For the small minority of people who can afford them, the
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by the breakdown of traditional morality, the advance of the new creed is
essentially no more than the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and
blind as appetite, released at long last from the restraints of supernatural
sanctions. “It most obvious casualty has been language. Tendencies once
universally castigated as moral failings mutate into necessities of social
progress. Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood
reinvents itself as public information; perorations of various kinds unabash-
edly claim the status of civil rights. Under appropriate euphemisms, greed,
lust, indolence, pride — even violence — acquire not merely broad acceptance
but social and economic value. Ironically, as words have been drained of
meaning, so have the very material comforts and acquisitions for which truth
has been casually sacrificed.”

13. If one recognizes that advertising-financed commercial media have become
’significant centres of power and information at the global level’, and if one
accepts that ‘the code of conduct of the press must embrace the principles
and objectives of consultation’, then it is logical to encourage, support and
develop alternatives to advertising-financed media as a means of promot-
ing institutional forms that are more consistent with a consultative mode
of operation in which diverse views and voices are welcome and discourse is
consistently raised to the level of spiritual principle.

An invitation to further inquiry
The purpose of this paper has not been to articulate a definitive Bahá’í posi-
tion on issues pertaining to the political economy of the press in general
or advertising-financed media more specifically. Rather, the purpose has
been to bring a normative model of the press that derives from the Bahá’í
teachings into clearer focus and invite others — both inside and outside
of the Bahá’í community — to engage with this heuristic model as a means
for further inquiry. The preceding discussion regarding the political economy
of the press is intended as an illustration of, and an initial step down, one
possible path of inquiry.

Another important path of inquiry would undoubtedly be a comparative
analysis of, on the one hand, the consultative model of the press and, on
the other hand, the public sphere model articulated by Jurgen Habermas —
one of the twentieth century’s most influential philosophers in the area of
media and democratic deliberation.19 Habermas’s public sphere, and the
ideal speech situation that he believes should characterize it, have some
significant similarities with, as well as some distinct differences from,
the Bahá’í model. A comparative analysis could provide illuminating new
insights into both.

Finally, a related path of inquiry would be a comparative analysis of
the consultative model of the press and the civic journalism or public jour-
nalism model referred to at the beginning of this paper. The civic/public
journalism model appears to be the closest approximation, to date, of the
consultative model of the press outlined in this paper. Yet there appear
to be some differences between the two models, which derive from the
contrasting assumptions that underlie each regarding the nature of

Michael Karlberg

The Press as a Consultative Forum

41
democratic deliberation and governance. These differences revolve in part around the extent to which the media should be a forum for partisan debate. In short, partisan debate is incompatible with the principles and objectives of Baha’i consultation. Indeed, the Baha’i community is learning the practice of consultation as an alternative to partisan debate — which Baha’i’s view as an unnecessarily divisive mode of communication that is incapable of addressing the problems facing increasingly interdependent communities in this age. Some advocates of civic and public journalism, however, remain committed to partisan debate (although the movement as a whole does not appear to offer a clear consensus on this issue). Such advocates merely want to move away from the superficial horse-race coverage and the uncivil partisan mud-slinging that dominates much political coverage today, in order to move towards coverage of more substantive partisan debate — but they seldom question the premise of partisanship itself. In this context, a comparative analysis of the two models would undoubtedly yield many rich insights. It might also result in a more critical interrogation of the issue of partisanship within the field of normative press theory.

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The Tablet of Ahd: the Spiritual Way to Nature of Physic

Jean-Marc Lepain

Abstract
This paper analyses some of his earliest tablets, the Tablets addressed to a Babi, Haji Mustafa, in Baghdad. In particular the headings of the four texts: Hahut, Ujut, Jabart and

Baha’u’llah revealed the Tablets in 1854, shortly before his arrest and imprisonment in Baghdad, Baha’u’llah professed himself the Bab, a claim that shocked the community but soon received widespread acceptance. At the request of his brother Mírzá Yahya had been sent to Baghdad to support him. Baha’u’llah himself travelled to Baghdad, arriving in January 1854, and met with his older brother in person. Meanwhile, Baha’u’llah’s leader, involved in rearranging the Babi community, turned to him to reinvigorate the community and to rally support for his cause. Yahya, probably sensing a wave of support, was received by the Baha’is with great enthusiasm.

Shoghi Effendji writes:

A clandestine opposition began to develop amongst the Babis. Every design to capture the Babis, however, proved to be unsuccessful, as the Babis turned to him to reinvigorate the community and to rally support for his cause. Yahya, probably sensing a wave of support, was received by the Baha’is with great enthusiasm.