

The International Abrahamic Network's

Second Annual

Social Media Conference

**In association with the
Abrahamic Family Reunion**

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

**Esalen Institute
Big Sur, California**

March 28-30, 2012

I. Introduction

“What a pleasure it is to have you back!” –Dulce Murphy

In March 2011 Esalen Institute's Center for Theory and Research and TRACK TWO: An Institute for Citizen Diplomacy took a risk--breaking with tradition, they hosted a conference to take advantage of a unique historical opportunity: the confluence of radical social evolution in the Middle East, and the rise of new media as effective tools for social change. “The International Abrahamic Network: An Exploration of Social Media” was a participant-driven conference. The gathering served as an invitation for media experts and thinkers to reassess the potential for social media to engender positive change in interfaith dialogue, and in citizen diplomacy generally.

The conference was a success. Building on this momentum, Esalen’s CTR and TRACK TWO doubled down on their initial bet and hosted a second IAN Social Media Conference in March 2012. Like the first one, the second conference was held in conjunction with the annual Ambrahamic Family Reunion [AFR] Conference. A handful of [AFR] participants joined the social media conference as well. As a way of framing the work of the IAN social media group, Joe Montville, director of *Toward the Abrahamic Family Reunion*, offered two themes from the AFR discussions: 1) What are the means by which social media--in the broadest sense--can heal historical wounds? 2) How can citizen diplomats use social media to teach, organize, and prevent problems before they occur?

With an eye toward leveraging social media for social change, and toward amplifying future activity for TRACK TWO, Esalen, and the International Abrahamic Network, participants of second annual Social Media Conference explored a wide range of topics and challenges during their time together. This report is a summary of those discussions.

Like the conference itself, this report is non-linear. Rather, in the pages that follow the primary topics, questions, and strategies regarding the group's inquiries are encapsulated thematically. The intention of this structure is to create an easy-to-use record of the event, and to allow all stakeholders to utilize the work of this conference to propel future endeavors.

Here is the specific structure of this text:

- I. Introduction**
- II. Establishing a Working Group**
 - a. Participant Information
 - b. Participant Perspectives
 - c. Participants Organizations and Affiliations
 - d. Types of Media Explored
- III. Building on the 2011 Foundation, Questions re:**
 - a. Purpose
 - b. Media and Social Media
 - c. Citizen Diplomacy and Faith
 - d. Practical Matters
- IV. New Challenges, Challenges re:**
 - a. Effective Storytelling
 - b. Leveraging the Beautiful and the Divine
 - c. Measuring Success
 - d. Empowering Others
- V. Concrete Action Ideas**
- VI. Projects featured at the Conference**

II. Our Working Group

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

Conference Facilitator and Participant:

Tamar Miller—Leadership and social change consultant, organizer, facilitator

Bram Briggance—recorder, note-taker

Conference Participants:

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

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

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

Jim Burklo—Associate Dean of Religious Life at the University of Southern California; author and blogger

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

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

Benina Gould—former Director of the Social Transformation Program at Saybrook Graduate School; clinical psychologist; scholar, author, and editor

Nadav Greenberg—Outreach Programming Coordinator, Just Vision; social activist

Benjamin Holfeld—founder of Holfeld Apps; consultant

Anisa Mehdi—writer and lecturer; journalist; television producer and filmmaker; musician

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

Carol Miskel—Member of the Board of Directors, TRACK TWO: An Institute for Citizen Diplomacy; business entrepreneur; promoter and marketer

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

Stephen Most—author; playwright; documentary filmmaker; screenwriter and producer

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

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

Stephen Olsson—President of CEM Productions; co-founder of Link-TV; television and film producer and director

Abdallah Omeish—documentary filmmaker and producer

Cynthia Phillips—founder and Director of the Global Social Change Film Festival; writer; producer; economist

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

Claire Schoen—radio, film, and media producer and director

Parisa Sultani—television producer, editor and host

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

Our Points of Reference

Much of the first day of the AFR conference was spent sharing the personal and professional perspectives the participants brought to the conference. These exchanges helped promote a better understanding of “who was in the room,” and the desires and beliefs that would shape our subsequent explorations.

Below are some of the points of reference, frames and experiences that shaped our discussion, and well as the specific types of media explored...

Geographical Homes and Reference Points for the Group:

- New York City
- Libya
- Israel
- Eastern Europe
- the West Bank
- Indonesia
- Iran
- Pakistan
- Jordan
- New Jersey
- Boston

- Sacramento
- Tunisia
- Gaza Strip
- Eastern Germany
- Paris
- San Francisco Bay Area
- Los Angeles
- Caribbean
- Upper Midwest
- “Hollywood”
- Saudi Arabia
- Turkey
- Washington, D.C.
- Esalen
- Gaza Strip

Group Faith Traditions and Religious Experiences:

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

Professional and Life Experience informing the Groups Opinions:

- Psychotherapy
- Business
- Television
- Academia
- Ministry
- Health care
- Law
- Mediation
- Agriculture
- Radio
- Social media

- Writing
- Economics
- Visual arts
- Physics
- Music
- Philosophy
- Publishing Non-profit organizations
- Documentary filmmaking
- Mobile applications and technology
- Science
- Big budget filmmaking
- International relations

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

Participants' Organizations & Direct Affiliations:

- ◆ Esalen
- ◆ TRACK TWO
- ◆ International Abrahamic Network
- ◆ Abrahamic Family Reunion
- ◆ Link TV
- ◆ CEM Productions
- ◆ Visionaire Media
- ◆ Citizens Reach Out
- ◆ Just Vison
- ◆ Chaplaincy Institute for Arts & Interfaith
- ◆ Holdfield Apps
- ◆ Internews Interactive
- ◆ Seton Hall University
- ◆ Stanford University
- ◆ London School of Economics
- ◆ Westfield State University
- ◆ Presidio Graduate School
- ◆ George Mason University
- ◆ University of Southern California
- ◆ Global Social Change Festival
- ◆ Claire Schoen Media

Types of Media Explored

- Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.)
- Radio
- Documentary films
- Web-based platforms and portals
- Big-budget films
- Television
- Video games

III. Building on the Foundation laid in 2011

Recalling last year's discussions and revisiting the group's purpose

The 2011 IAN Social Media Conference was a first. As such, the group spent a good deal of time considering its agenda, purposes and goals. The 2012 conference did not have to begin from scratch; more than half of the 2012 participants attended the 2011 conference. This familiarity and institutional memory helped accelerate the work of the 2012 group.

Below are some broad 2011 questions to which the 2012 group returned:

Regarding the group's purpose...

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

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

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

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

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

Regarding media...

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

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

What is the source and power of the media we are using? Is it useful to think of citizen diplomacy media efforts as seeds (*spota*)? What is “convergence media?” When and how does this “convergence” happen?

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

Regarding Citizen Diplomacy and Faith...

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

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

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

How can we take advantage of the fact that the world is getting smaller? Americans increasingly have Islamic neighbors; where are the opportunities for us to leverage this circumstance? Communication and media have “shrunk” the world; where can transactional diplomacy promote religious peace?

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

Practical Issues...

Connecting Media Projects to Current Events—Many attendees shared success stories about linking media projects to topics receiving news coverage. By tying project content to news items one can use the natural engine of news cycles to raise interest in one's work. Internews' Digital Citizen Project was thought to be a promising model for connecting user-generated ideas to mainstream media.

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

Transactional Diplomacy—The basic idea that transactional diplomacy (the theory that increased interaction between two states fosters better relations) was widely accepted among conference participants, and many successes were offered as evidence.

IV. New Challenges

New explorations of the opportunities, barriers, and strategies regarding the work of media production and citizen diplomacy

Despite having many of the same participants and mining many of the same veins in the first conference, this second social media conference broke a considerable amount of new ground. In particular, there seemed to be a slight shift in emphasis away from questions of *what* the IAN should or could do, and toward *how* to meet the challenges of doing this work. Many of the challenges discussed regarding creating compelling stories and media channels for citizen diplomacy are encapsulated below.

Challenges in Storytelling...

The Subject Alone is Never Enough—There was tremendous focus on the cardinal importance of craft in effective filmmaking and other media production. Experience has taught the group that no matter how compelling the subjects or issues, there is need for a strong narrative structure, solid direction and editing, and competent production. Additionally, even the best products need good marketing and distribution as well.

Replacing Toxic Narratives with Generative Ones Part of “healing history,” many thought, was combatting destructive narratives that perpetually reopen historical wounds. By offering alternative ways of representing history, and by creating different frames for understanding, new and productive narratives can begin. Additionally, such work could help in shifting focus away from vengefulness, and toward the prevention of harm and destruction.

Reconciling Activism and Storytelling—What is the relation between storytelling to activism? Should the IAN be in the business of creating activist storytellers, or telling the stories of activism, or both? Is there a virtuous cycle between the development of these disparate skills?

Challenges in Leveraging the Beautiful and the Divine...

Keeping the Human Spirit Open through Art—If peaceful change requires that its enactors remain open to it, art can be a valuable ally. By providing new perspectives, and by circumventing cerebral processes, the aesthetic power of art can open new channels for understanding, experiences, and connections.

Unity through Love—*ONE THROUGH LOVE*, *Arab Spring Wedding*, and several other participant projects placed the topic of love squarely in the center of their endeavors. By exploring the source of love, and the barriers to its realization, these works offer the possibility of new, and perhaps divine, connections.

Utilizing and Furthering the Human Potential Movement—During the conference, themes regarding ways to broaden our understanding of humanity and finding ways to realize our best selves were explored. Esalen remains at the center of the human potential movement; how might the IAN harness the power of this tradition? How could it further promote uncovering our better natures?

Challenges in Measuring Success...

What are the Metrics of Success?—A good deal of time at the conference was spent considering the myriad ways of determining the “success” of a project, and the merits of these measurements. For example, how does one determine if a film is a “success”? By box office returns? The total number of people who see it? Its mention in main stream media, or by academics? Critical acclaim? Its social impact? Such questions were recurrent themes as the discussants weighed the relative value of some projects against others, or considered their importance to the mission of the IAN.

How can we Best Meet the Urgent Needs of Today?—Creating quality media content usually requires a lot of time, effort, and resources. However, the world’s problems do not wait. The group, concerned about pressing social issues like potential war with Iran or the unrest in Egypt, discussed the difficulties of participating in meaningful conversations and activities in real time. It is much easier to document history than to engender change.

Challenges in Empowering Others...

Peer-to-Peer Learning—Many of the folks at Esalen saw peer-to-peer learning as a fecund approach to citizen diplomacy, and in keeping with the goals of the IAN. Of particular interest to the group was peer-to-peer connections among young people, who are a huge demographic group in the Middle East, and who are naturally attuned to social media and new ideas.

Developing a Shared Context for Change—One conference participant described her work as an attempt to “create a field where cool things can happen.” Several persons pushed for the adoption of a focus was than was wider than just narrative or content production; rather, they advocated for facilitating connections between people, and providing new shared contexts for the purpose of exchanging ideas and generating positive change.

Amplifying Underrepresented Voices—Finding ways to capture the voices of the disenfranchised, and providing channels so that they can be heard was a priority for many. Several discussions touched upon the delicate balance of providing a narrative voice for a production versus enabling others to find their own voices.

Telling Stories No One wants to Hear—“What do you do when the story that needs to be told is one no one wants to hear?” asked one participant. The group discussed the inherent difficulties in presenting stories or information that elicit negative emotions or complicate accepted narratives. Finding ways to confront audiences with troubling or complex information in compelling ways was considered a real challenge.

“Lessons from the Field”—In a fairly structured session, Corinne Bourdeau reprised and updated a presentation she made in 2011 about media distribution and marketing issues. She explored the need for a comprehensive approach to successful film campaigns, and describing the ways distribution channels are “changing daily.” Additionally, she cited the unique successes of the following films as being potentially instructive for the group:

- *18 Days in Egypt*
- *Ai Wei Wei*
- *Bully Project*
- *End of the Line*
- *Waiting for Superman*
- *Farmy*
- *Island President*
- *One World One Ocean*
- *Queen of the Sun*
- *Where do We Go Now?*
- *Race to Nowhere*

V. Concrete Action Ideas for Consideration

A glance at some specific possibilities for IAN initiatives

Continuing and Strengthening the IAN Social Media Group—Participants continued to value the opportunity to discuss their own media projects with like-minded persons, and to discuss new ways to align their work with social change. After the first conference IAN participants formed a Facebook group to continue contact. However, the group desired to strengthen these ties further, and to be more proactive in networking, finding production partners, and in meeting other mutual needs.

USC/IAN Film Festival—One idea that gained a lot of traction during the conference was creating a film festival geared toward a broader audience. Jim Burklo’s USC connections, and many of the participants’ film festival expertise, made the prospect of such a project seem achievable and attractive. The group thought such a festival might advance the concept of the “Abrahamic family reunion.” In addition to the festival itself, many were excited by the idea of pairing the festival with the launch of an online platform to foster community-building and action. (See below.)

Web-based IAN Media Portal—In order to increase the presence and bandwidth of the IAN, and to invite others to join the “movement,” the group was sanguine about establishing an online platform. Such a “portal” could serve as a go-to place for sharing news, videos, art, blogs, etc., and create a dynamic field to spawn action. As mentioned above, a symbiotic relationship between the portal and a USC film festival (and other high-profile events) could be established--the portal could drive people to the event, and the event could send folks to the portal to join the “action network.”

Video/Online Games—Gaming was widely viewed as an underexploited and promising medium for community-building and social change, especially for young people. Could the it be that the “Abrahamic family that plays together stays together?”

VI. Projects Featured at the Conference

Many of the conference discussions were punctuated with clips from the participants' projects. Additionally, the last sessions of the first two days were "movie nights." These films served as reference points and platforms for many of the conference discussions. They also helped set the stage for *Movie Prophets: An International Abrahamic Network Film Festival*--a three-day film festival hosted by Esalen and produced by TRACK TWO, that immediately followed the conclusion of the social media conference.

Television

Title: *On the Road in America*

Medium: Documentary-reality TV series

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

Participant Connection: Jerome Gary, producer, writer, director—"If it's easy it's a piece of shit."

Issues Raised: transactional diplomacy; the nature of "reality" in reality shows and documentaries; the power of excellent editing and storytelling

[Note: Forthcoming is a companion series to *On the Road in America*, *Caravan*--a show in which American kids travel through the Middle East. Also forthcoming is a show about swapping family members between Middle Eastern and U.S. families called *Trading Places*. Both are produced by Gary.]

Name: Link TV's *Mosaic World News from the Middle East*

Medium: Broadcast television news show

Subject: dedicated to providing multiple perspectives on current events in the Middle East by showing news clips from various nations

Participant Connection: Stephen Olsson creator and producer—“It’s critical to show both common reactions and different political reactions.” Also, Kim Spencer, Link TV chief content officer

Issues Raised: Importance of multiple perspectives and ideas; viewer empowerment

Name: Link TV's *Bridge to Iran*

Medium: Broadcast television news and interview show

Subject: allowing viewers access to conversations about Iranian politics, culture, and daily life

Participant Connection: Stephen Olsson, creator and producer—“It’s critical that we understand Iran.” Also, Parisa Soltani, host and editor

Issues Raised: Inter-cultural learning; stealth political messages; the importance on non-monolithic thinking

Films

Title: *Gaza:Tunnels to Nowhere*

Medium: Documentary film

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

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

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

Title: *Arab Spring Wedding*

Medium: Documentary film

Subject: the filmmaker's wedding and the political and logistical difficulties of everyday life in Gaza, and the Middle East generally

Participant Connection: Miriam Abu Sharkh, writer and director—"It's a story about love."

Issues Raised: "personal is political"; finding common ground; celebrating love between people

Title: *Home Front: Portraits from Sheikh Jarrah*

Medium: Documentary film

Subject: a story of Palestinians being evicted from their homes in an East Jerusalem neighborhood, and the responses it fostered

Participant Connection: Nadav Greenberg of Just Vision—"Personal connections matter."

Issues Raised: Israel/Palestinian relations; organizing for peaceful change; the power of individual relationships in political change

Title: *Budrus*

Medium: Documentary film

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

Participant Connection: Nadav Greenberg of Just Vision—"Even walls can connect us."

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

Title: *Libya: Through the Fire*

Medium: Documentary film

Subject: an on-the-ground chronicle of the 2011 Libyan civil war

Participant Connection: Abdullah Omeish, writer and director—"It is still hard to talk about it."

Issues Raised: Libyan politics; citizen revolution; international politics

Title: *Promises*

Medium: Documentary film

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

Participant Connection: Steve Most, writer and researcher—“*Promises* is another example that films matter.”

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

Title: *Our Summer in Tehran*

Medium: Documentary film

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

Participant Connection: Steve Most, writer —“It’s important to get a firsthand understanding of the issues.”

Issues Raised: unique aspects of Iranian culture; the logistical hurdles of international filmmaking

Other Media

Name: The Digital Citizen Project

Medium: cross-platform and converged media connecting mobile applications to television programming

Subject: providing self-organized popular responses to 2012 campaign issues

Participant Connection: Evelyn Messinger, founder— “Many of these movements are not ‘leaderless,’ they are “leader-*ful*.””

Issues Raised: the need to break through entrenched political hegemony; creative social media solutions; linking citizen voices to major media streams

Name: Global Social Change Film Festival and Institute

Medium: annual film festival and organization dedicated to fostering social change

Subject: social change through organizing and film

Participant Connection: Cynthia Phillips, founder and Director— “We need to get out there sooner rather than later!”

Issues Raised: using film to foster change; leveraging storytelling effectively; creating communities of action

Name: ONE THROUGH LOVE

Medium: Web-based interactive video series and events

Subject: a “gathering of lovers” that presents Sufi teachings and poetry, and invites viewers to interact and participate

Participant Connection: Parisa Soultani, Host and Co-producer— “We are trying to create a field in which good things can happen.” Also, Stephen Olsson, President and Senior Producer

Issues Raised: finding our common humanity/divinity; the longing for reconnection and reconciliation; use of creative web-based platforms

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

Medium: Audio recordings; other media is under consideration

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

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

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

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

Medium: Radio program

Subject: chronicling international stories about peaceful social change

Participant Connection: Tamar Miller, host— “We need to move peace from margin to center.”

Issues Raised: giving peace issues much needed attention; the unique power of radio

Name: *The Passionate Filmmaker*

Medium: book

Subject: a how-to guide and lessons from the field about change-oriented filmmaking

Participant Connection: Corrine Bourdeau, author—“Passion isn’t enough.”

Issues Raised: real market considerations in filmmaking; important lessons from others; harnessing your passion