

JEWCY

Religion & Beliefs

Mapping The Network Of Jewish Websites

By [Ari Y Kelman](#) / October 29, 2010

The following piece by Ari Y. Kelman, Professor of American Studies and Director of the Graduate Group in the Study of Religion at UC Davis, is an excerpt from a soon to be published study entitled “Reality of the Virtual: Looking for Jewish Leadership Online” that Jack Wertheimer introduced [here](#).

While this particular segment is focused on our friends at [MyJewishLearning](#), we asked to post it because not only do we get name-dropped in section 4, but we just read the whopping 74 page study and it says some nice things about us. Things like: “Jewcy is among the most significant websites in the online Jewish world, outpacing traditional news sources and the establishment of Jewish organizations.” We also think about this shtuff all day long. Mapping (and measurement in general) is a necessary, but tough task. We surely want to have an impact on others, but no matter what anyone says, the dashboard of analytics, survey results, and studies is tough to read. Moreover, who cares about measurement? Do you as a reader? Does your mother?

Jacob Harris, Jewcy’s Publisher, discusses this a bit more in his [response to this excerpt](#). But don’t skip ahead – check this out and let us know what you think.

If you want to understand the Jewish internet, don’t look at the Facebook Hagaddah or the YouTube video of a youthful Paul Rudd as a Bar Mitzvah DJ, or even the successes of JDate. You’ll have to look past the MASA advertising flare-up from September 2009, and beyond the hype that surrounds the blog-two-point-oh-Facebook-Tweet-YouTube-podcast-live-stream-flash-animation-social-media-wikification of virtually every part of Jewish life. Really, if you want to understand the Jewish internet, look at [MyJewishLearning.com](#).

MyJewishLearning is a project of the Samuel Bronfman Philanthropies and several other foundations, and it serves as an outlet for information, commentary and opinions by authors from across the Jewish world, covering topics from the silly to the holy. It is a robust multi-media site that is basically a broadly constructed resource for information about things Jewish.

Although its content tells us something, the site is important for reasons other than its content. It is the most valuable site in the network of Jewish websites, and if we are going to understand the

generational and cultural shifts in our Jewish communities, we had best take a good, close look at what is happening online because that is where those changes are most pronounced.

Within the network of Jewish websites (which, for this study included the 150 most popular sites, along with 279 blogs (the sites and blogs had to promote themselves as Jewish)), MyJewishLearning plays a powerful role. Highlighting its place in the network allows us to measure four ways in which the network online reveals patterns that are shaping Jewish life offline.

1. Links are the Currency of a Network.

For all the talk about The Jewish Community and membership or peoplehood or klal Yisrael, a community is still built out of relationships. Online, those relationships are built out of links. At the time of this study, MyJewishLearning had 752 links to its site; the [UJC](#) had 714. It's not much of a difference, especially when we consider that [Jewschool](#) had just over 4,000 and [FrumSatire](#) had over 1700. Nevertheless, comparing links in reveals a leveling of the playing field when it comes to evaluating the role of an organization, or website, in the larger community.

Looking online reveals that one of the most powerful institutions in Jewish communal life offline — the Federation system — does not exert a similar force online. In terms of links, in fact, it is dwarfed by websites that hardly have an offline presence. As increasing numbers of people turn to the internet as the first source of information about Jewish life, the relative popularity of a site as measured by links suggests that power online may translate into power offline, but not necessarily vice versa.

2. Powerful websites broker relationships between other websites.

To be sure, measuring importance is not just about the gross number of links, but it can be measured in the quality of links, as well; it really is about who you know, not just how many people you know. When accounting for what social network analysis call the “prestige” of one’s neighbors (and calculating what is known as the Bonacich Power Measure), we find that MyJewishLearning is nearly four times as “powerful” as the UJC’s website. Despite the relative parity in links between the two sites, MyJewishLearning is linked to sites with greater “prestige,” and thus it plays a role not only in brokering relationships between sites in the network, but in brokering significant relationships, as well.

MyJewishLearning looks even better when we account for links to it from less “prestigious” websites, retaining connections to less powerful sites who would otherwise find themselves further on the margin of the network. Accounting for this finds the UJC further marginalized and MyJewishLearning increasingly important. In other words, MyJewishLearning is more valuable to a greater diversity of sites than is the UJC website, and thus comes to occupy a far more important role in the network.

3. Transgression Creates Community.

MyJewishLearning is powerful because it has succeeded in attracting links from across the Jewish world, crossing social barriers online where doing so offline would have proven too difficult. Transgressing geographic, political, religious and social barriers has resulted in MyJewishLearning becoming as central as it has. Building links online is, of course, easier than building coalitions offline, but symbolically, the ability to navigate through religious and secular, Israeli and American, Ashkenazi and Sepharadi and Mizrahi websites suggests both a greater fluidity and a stronger unity to “the Jewish Community” than has been evidenced elsewhere.

4. Players are changing the game.

One of the most obvious and well-documented facts about the internet is that it provides massive broadcast outlets for people who would otherwise not have access to them. In the network online, those examples include FrumSatire, Jewcy, [Tablet](#), and MyJewishLearning, all of which vie with the traditional Jewish news outlets for traffic, stories and attention. And the presence of these alternative outlets is changing the shape of the community.

There’s no longer a newspaper of Jewish record. Instead we have a host of bloggers, journalists, editors, writers, curators who are all helping shape the broader Jewish communal conversation. It’s not that traditional news outlets have given way to alternatives; they have not. But the chorus of voices speaking to and speaking for the larger community has expanded as a result of these changes in communication.

Mapping the Jewish internet provides a greater depth to our understanding of just how communications are changing the community. Alternative sites like MyJewishLearning and FrumSatire have emerged as credible forces in the network of Jewish websites and they are challenging the inherited claims of established organizations to leadership. The questions we ought to be asking at this point should no longer focus on how the internet is changing our community, but what we ought to do now that the changes are already well underway.

Research for this article was conducted under the auspices of the Avi Chai Foundation’s project on young Jewish leaders directed by Jack Wertheimer.