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Legitimation of New Media for Religious Youth: Orthodox Elites' Approach to Adolescent Youngsters' Engagement with Digital Worlds

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Abstract: The promulgation of new media has generated substantial dilemmas for religious communities in terms of its use, implementation, and impact on youth's socialization. Previous research has echoed religious authorities' concern regarding the widespread integration of new media yet has done little to delineate their narratives of legitimation. Ergo, the question is begged, how do religious communities legitimate the use of new media? Utilizing a case study approach, this study focuses on the social construction of new media's legitimacy within the Jewish Religious-Zionist community in Israel, through an analysis of the community's educational elite. To this end, 26 in-depth interviews with the community's prominent educational leaders were conducted. Findings indicate 4 primary narratives that are employed to legitimate new media use: (1) acclaiming modernity; (2) sanctifying the new media; (3) promoting solidarity; and (4) religious study and the public's ability to choose. Understanding these narratives of legitimation towards new media sheds light on the ways that modern ideas are incrementally being integrated into religious communities, and the ways the elite negotiate its integration through what can be seen as their most weighty tool, that of youth socialization.

Keywords: Zionist-Religious; new media domestication; religious authority; religious education; Israel

1. Introduction

The rise in new media devices and services (i.e., the internet, gaming consoles, and mobile phones) has created substantial dilemmas for religious communities. As the new media have become increasingly embedded in everyday activities, what some regard as useful and associated with educational and communicative benefits is viewed by others as detrimental in that it erodes traditional forms of literacy, fosters new types of social deviance (i.e., cyberbullying, hacking) and encourages the transgression of moral norms (online gambling, cyberporn, etc.) (Selwyn 2016). Religious leaders frequently point to the dangers of new media in weekly sermons, pamphlets, books and perhaps ironically, online (e.g., videos, online responsa, online newspapers) (Fader 2020). These challenges are seen as more acute for the education and socialization of religious youngsters (Golan and Martini 2019).

Previous research has echoed religious authorities' overall apprehension as to the widespread acceptance and implementation of new media in their communities (Golan and Campbell 2015; Mishol-Shauli et al. 2019). However there has been scant research detailing their concerns, or the ways in which these apprehensions have been translated into educational praxis in educational setting (schools, extracurricular contexts). Accordingly, the current study examined how religious leaders and educators have attempted to legitimize new media use. Specifically, this case study approach focuses on the Religious Zionist community in Israel through an analysis of the attitudes of its community's elite towards these emergent technologies. The Religious Zionist community is particularly well suited to this type of investigation since it historically espouses the integration of religiosity and modernity as well as an intermingling between the worldly and otherworldly, where

symbolic and mystical significance are closely ascribed to deeds (Fischer-Nielsen 2012). The Religious Zionist community views religious study as a way of life and rabbis often head educational institutions (e.g., religious schools, seminaries, youth movements).

We posit that understanding religious leaders' legitimization of new media use can elucidate processes of routinization in formal and informal religious education. The findings may thus shed more light on the leveraging of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into the learning and daily praxis of believers as part of the larger overall trend toward technology-enhanced lived religion.

2. Conceptual Framework: Religion, New Media & Legitimacy

The impact of new media on people's everyday lives has elicited utopian and dystopian claims as articulated by policymakers and stakeholders. Since the 1990s, some policymakers and parents have lauded the internet for fostering collaborative and social learning and have legitimized its use. They underscore the new media's affordances for developing learning tools that are well attuned to youngsters' cognitive abilities, the creation of knowledge-building communities, and shared databases (e.g., Wikipedia) (Hoadley and Kali 2019). In contrast, these changing technological circumstances have alarmed other parents and educators who have developed a skeptical, or occasionally dystopian, approach towards the new media's impact on the young. For these educators, the new media encroaches on the teacher as the authority, and distracts from schoolwork (Collins and Halverson 2018). The emergence of online social networks has prompted public concerns over exposure to disinformation and post truths (Barzilai and Chinn 2020). Educators, policymakers and parents have raised concerns over the blurring of boundaries between teacher and students, privacy issues, and the overall erosion of teachers' status. This has led to bans and restrictions of teacher–student social media interactions, and in some instances such as in Queensland Australia, New York, Missouri and Israel, limited forms of student teacher online contact via separate professional profiles especially designed for authorized interactions (Asterhan and Rosenberg 2015).

Other stakeholder objections and (de)legitimations have to do with the perennial problems of integrating technology into religious praxis. The Jewish ultra-Orthodox community is well-known for its enclaved culture and wary approach to mass media (including an overall ban on television) (Golan and Campbell 2015). Since the 1990s, ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) leaders have spoken out about the potential "landmines along the information highway" (Herman 1995). They portray the internet as a seductive gateway to sin and profligacy, whose users transgress communal protocols and ways of life. They warn that it can lead to a breach of the religious-secular divide that can ultimately destroy piety. They regard new media as contrary to their basic ideals and even as a *moshav letsim* (a repository of scorners), a social nexus devoid of Torah (El-Or 1994). Therefore, easy or unintentional access to uncontrolled secular and sinful online content is seen as highly problematic (Tsarfaty and Blais 2002) and internet use is restricted to the needs of one's livelihood (Mishol-Shauli et al. 2019). Leading rabbis have stated their firm objections to the internet and mobile phones in public edicts and rallies in the US and Israel.

However, while religious institutions often rely on the continuation of religious praxis and pedagogies, the emergence of popular forms of media has historically driven religious leaders to accept or embrace these technologies as a way to reach out to their flocks and spread the faith to new publics. The Holy See has been integrating film and media since the 1920s and has published papal edicts that legitimate this approach (Golan and Martini 2018; Ortiz 2003). Similarly, charismatic evangelists embraced televangelism as a key medium long before the rise of the internet, drawing in millions of believers and fueling mass conversions, primarily in South and North America (See Thomas and Lee 2012; Lehmann 2013). Although studies have underscored the potential of media tools to bridge the believer–cleric gap, facilitate the efforts of charismatic preachers and develop religious leadership, with the exception of the Catholic Church, less attention has been paid to the legitimation process. This is particularly the case for non-centralistic religions, where clerics

struggle to acquire clout and status, and seek accepted means to reach out to their flocks. In addition, introducing new technologies into formal educational institutions clearly requires high levels of legitimation. Each faith has developed a process of legitimation to embrace new technologies, amid traditional forms of information transmission and the threat of exposing believers to a global religious market facilitated by the internet.

Legitimization makes something acceptable or normative to a given population. Legitimacy can be seen as the perception that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper and appropriate within a social construction of norms, values and beliefs. These concepts also need to correspond to an overall understanding of justice, universal values or the particularistic interests of a public (Kahane 1982, p. 4; Suchman 1995, p. 574). Within the sociological legacy, Weber's (1947) famous definitions of its sources (traditional, charismatic or legal-rational) anchored legitimacy as a way to achieve the right to rule. In a macroscopic framework, legitimacy is viewed as an integral component of authority and power (Ferrero 1942, c1942) and a basic factor in institutionalization that solidifies nations and social integration (Kahane 1982). More recent studies have pivoted the concept of legitimation from this macroscopic discussion of power and institutions in society and resituated it at a mid-range organizational level. In this case, organizations seek to solidify the congruence between the social values associated with, or implied by, their activities and the norms of acceptable behavior in their communities or larger social system of which they are a part (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990; Markowitz et al. 2012; Mathews 1993).

ICTs challenge religious social institutions and organizations. Ideas and information are directly communicated to believers through mobile phones and the internet, without clerical mediation. This firsthand access to information threatens fundamental elements of social control, the gatekeeping of information and socialization that are fostered by religious institutions and communal leadership, particularly in societies that stress piety and socially-oriented conduct as a way of life. Under these circumstances, one might expect outright resistance and de-legitimation of new media. Instead, religious websites are on the rise among believers in organized (Islam, Christianity, cf. Bunt 2009; Campbell 2010) and new religious movements (i.e., Wicca, Neo-Paganism, see Cowan 2005). Studies have shown that for religious movements, the new media have become a tool for fortifying their identity, rather than impeding it. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of research on the patterns of legitimacy that facilitate the use of new media and its implantation in sensitive channels of cultural continuity, such as the formal socialization of the young, particularly among its key agents, namely clerics and educators who guide youngsters and prepare them for religious beliefs in a digital age.

3. Contextualizing Religious Zionism

Stemming from the early 20th century Mizrachi movement (Mizrachi is the Hebrew abbreviation of *Merkaz Ruhani*, 'spiritual center'), and perhaps even earlier, the Religious Zionist variant has continued to flourish as a key segment of Jewish Israeli society. It constitutes a group that is comparable to the modern Orthodox movement in the US but has developed strong nationalistic tendencies in Israel. Its members embrace Israel's symbolism, are well integrated into the country's military, and tend to vote for political parties that represent a hawkish agenda with regard to the Arab–Israeli conflict. Many of its members embrace a nationalistic orientation by choosing to live in religiously-inspired ideological settlements in the West Bank (Feige and Ohana 2021; Aran 2013).

The Religious Zionist community can be characterized by its continuous dialectic between modern and traditional proclivities as well as between the holy and the profane. In a sense, this dialectic has facilitated much of its flavor and appeal. It offers the allure of living within the rich affordances of modernity with its profane underpinnings, yet at the same time benefits from the prolific meanings infused by traditionalism and religious observance. Despite its strengths, this duality also runs the risk of social anomie and has led to tensions within the community, which some believe may be detrimental to its future (Kaniel 2000). Thus, some intellectuals and community leaders have called for

the strengthening of religiosity and a reduction in engagement in contemporary practices (Wurzburger 1994), while others have been willing to embrace more elements of modernity (Engelberg 2015).

In the last few decades, this split in the Religious Zionist community has accelerated. This has led to the formation of two primary sub-groups: one that leans more towards accepting modernity (the mainstream community), and one that takes a more rigid interpretation that inclines towards traditionalism (*Hardalim*) (Sheleg 2020). This split is manifested in the political sphere and is also entrenched in the educational-religious school system that has become increasingly identified within these groups.

4. The Religious Zionist State Educational System

Within the mosaic of the Israeli educational system, a key stream caters to the Religious Zionist public. Its roots can be found in pre-state Israel (the *Yishuv* period), where it served about 22% of all Jewish pupils and employed over a quarter of all Hebrew teachers (Ichilov 2009, p. 56). Nowadays, these schools are complemented by a strong network of informal education, most notably through several popular and highly active youth movements (i.e., Bnei Akiva, Ariel, Ezra).

Since the 1970s, many Religious Zionist adolescents have chosen to attend *yeshiva* (religious seminaries), rather than secular high schools. Furthermore, there has been a strengthening of religious studies and praxis fostered by the community's education system (Fischer-Nielsen 2012). Currently most male students enroll in pre-army programs (*mechinot*), where they study for one or two years before committing to full army service. The curriculum includes theology, the Bible and Halakah, alongside an array of informal activities. While seminaries in general usually prepare men for religious or monastic positions, these programs are explicitly directed towards preparing young men for leadership roles in the military and a full commitment to the State (Levy 2014) and are spearheaded by the *Yeshivot Hesder* which consist of military combat units that also incorporate religious studies.

For students and parents, choosing a school is significant, not only for their academic achievements but also for their identity construction and the fostering of their social networks. The transition to secondary school is hence highly important for Religious Zionist youngsters. It is a key crossroads where students choose between the more stringent religious identity of the *Hardali* subgroup (see Sheleg 2020), or more mainstream schooling. This in turn shapes these youngsters' worldviews, and determines their educational trajectory, their identity, and personal approach to modern society including technology. However, despite these institutions' pivotal influence on young people, its leaders' approach to modernity has been understudied.

5. Methodology

To investigate religious educators' perceptions and ways of legitimating new media use for young people, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted with the community's most prominent educational leaders. It should be noted that in this community, there is a strong identification between educational and religious leadership and prominent educators are almost always rabbinical figures. The interviews were supplemented with conversations with key informants (i.e., educators, high school principals).

Interviewing these religious leaders was difficult since they not only work in different parts of Israel, but are extremely busy. In addition, some interviewees were reluctant to give interviews, resisted academic inquiry (compare to Stadler 2007) and required a trust-building approach. To do so, the primary interviewers (second author and research assistants) were all members of the community with strong connections within both its formal (teacher) and informal (youth movement advisor) educational organizations. Over the course of two years, a snowball approach was implemented to select interviewees and contact them. The interviewees were selected based on recommendations from community members (in schools and synagogues). Thus, community members helped make contact and arrange meetings with these leading figures.

All the interviewees were currently or previously employed as educators that cater to youth and young adults. All held leadership roles in major religious and/or educational institutions (formal and informal) representing the Religious Zionist community. Overall, the sample included a wide array of educators from religious seminaries, schools, city rabbis, and the founders of informal internet sites for Jewish learning. This included 11 rabbis with advanced academic degrees, a range of ages from 35 to 75 (mean, 53) and a minority of women (3 communal leaders and educators (for details, see Appendix A). These rabbis were all educated in prestigious religious schools led by the movement's ideological founders. Many constitute the *avant garde* who are involved in strengthening the movement and whose impact goes beyond their institutional obligations and reach Israeli society at large.

To uncover the ways that religious educators legitimized new media, an extensive interview protocol, which featured 18 key questions, was designed. The interview covered the following topics:

- Youth, education and new media
- Rabbi's educational approach to new media
- Rabbi's personal engagement with new media
- Rabbi's perspective on education in the information age
- Legitimation, taboos and boundaries

These questions served as talking points to invoke a lengthy conversation. At times, the interviewee would cover some of the later questions while explaining others, thus offering a detailed and fluid account that was later coded and analyzed.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using categorization techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1990), based on Marshall and Rossman's (2014) four stages: (a) organizing data, (b) generating categories, themes, and patterns, (c) testing emergent hypotheses, and (d) searching for alternative explanations. This analysis serves to identify categories in the data, identify recurrent experiences, and link different categories to form central themes. The coding process was run on Atlas Ti software and was guided by the principles set forth by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for comparative analysis. Scouring through the transcripts, we implemented several cycles of coding which tightened the conceptual categories (see Saldaña 2021). Starting with 86 codes, our challenge was to whittle them down to outline and construct the primary themes and concepts. This required us to map the emergent codes (such as "shortcomings in student articulation", "religious position to new media", or "benefits of open access to information") to 10 themes of identified strategies, and finally trim this to four primary themes of thickened interviewee accounts which we deemed "narratives". To ensure reliability, three independent researchers analyzed the entire dataset (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The four sets of categories obtained from the separate analyses were compared and discussed (Marshall and Rossman 2014). Differences and disagreements were resolved through dialogue, leading to high inter-rater reliability between the researchers (Olesen et al. 1994). Trustworthiness was acquired by triangulating the interviews with key informants. Finally, the data were compared to the literature on Religious Zionism as well as data on new media and religion.

6. Findings

Four primary narratives employed to legitimate ICT use emerged from the data: acclaiming modernity, sanctifying the new media, promoting solidarity and religious study and the public's ability to choose.

6.1. Acclaiming Modernity

The strong ties between modernity and traditionalism have historically been a hall-mark of the Religious Zionist community. While modern practices and symbols may be seen as contrary to religious groups, this community takes a more accepting, albeit dialectic, view of modernity. This dialectic was reflected in the rabbis' accounts, as expressed by interviewee #15, a secondary school principal:

> The (Zionist) religious public is highly connected to mainstream culture: its members also work in cutting edge sectors that use advanced technology. Its leisure culture is not that different from the secular public. This is because a good part of their worldview involves openness and liberalism, and the religious public authorizes a broad range of activities. Nevertheless, they still have their Halachic boundaries.

This rabbi thus highlights the integration of the Religious Zionist public into the modern world of jobs, leisure and values. He views these integrated traits as positive but mentions the need to adhere to norms of religious conduct. Similarly, rabbi #13, who serves as the chief educational advisor to a major school network commented:

> Religious Zionism has not declared a war on the modern world. Nevertheless, it supports cautious engagement with modernity. It has a more complex view than fundamentalists who view everything as either permitted or forbidden.

This rabbi underscores the community's innate tension. Within the modern–traditional dialectic, integrating new technologies is viewed as a careful step toward involving be-lievers in a changing world. The rabbi underlines an awareness of their acceptance of a society that does not abstain from the affordances embedded in new technologies. In a complementary manner, Rabbi #8, Head of a *Yeshivat Hesder* in the West Bank and a former school principal refuted the conservative claim that the negative impact of the internet on youngsters outweighs its positive affordances and hence should be banned.

> It is appalling to say these things . . . Let's imagine that we were a religious state and the most prominent rabbis would decree that there would be no internet in the country. In 20 years, this state would collapse economically, scientifically and spiritually. This is because the world is moving forward, and you can't be left behind. These objections (to the internet) sound very irresponsible in terms of educating children. (Even) if two or three students transgress online, this should not prevent authorities from introducing households to the internet. (A ban) would condemn the family to cultural-economic-environmental backwardness. This is very upsetting to me.

Rabbi #8 contends that accepting new media is part and parcel of the Religious Zionist community's creed of accepting modernity. He rejects calls for a ban on the internet since he sees the risk as marginal compared to the crippling effect that restricted use would have on believers' future and public welfare large.

Overall, multiple rabbis underscored the positive value of embracing modernity as a key value of the community. Thus, legitimizing the new media stems from their underlying worldview and their contemporary religious existence which is intertwined with modern life.

6.2. Sanctifying the New Media

Another strategy for legitimizing technology emerged in the spiritual values the rabbis ascribed to the ability to access religious knowledge via the internet. Rabbi #14 is an educator in a major *Yeshivat Hesder*. He described his approach by citing a biblical passage: "for the Earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). In other words, disseminating religious information is a virtue since it fills the world with the word of God, increases the numbers of the faithful and those who are well-acquainted with his doctrine. Rabbi #21 (principal of a religious high school in the

West Bank) took a similar stance: "It's not like sitting in front of a rabbi, but hundreds and thousands of people who cannot attend a Torah class can be deeply impacted by the Torah". The rabbi is aware of the limitations of technology to provide an intimate and interpersonal learning experience yet opts to highlight the advantages of the internet in increasing the circles of Torah learners and believers.

In addition to the benefits of Torah outreach, some rabbis viewed the internet as a way to enforce religious norms especially as regards helping the community and the notion of benevolence. Rabbi #24 justified the fact that he owns a smartphone by saying: "An ultra-Orthodox man recognized me and started talking to me. Suddenly he noticed that I have a smartphone. He asked me what I was doing with one. I told him listen, this only has Torah and goodness." Rabbi #24 legitimized his use of a smartphone to do good. He distinguishes between his views and the views of the Haredi who strictly oppose their use. Rabbi #4, the head of a *Yeshivat Hesder* in the center of the country, considered that the internet can encourage others to do good. He believes that databases that offer knowledge for free fulfill one of the laws of charitable giving. Rabbi #4 explained:

> There is plenty of good out there: freedom of information, Wikipedia, you don't need to buy encyclopedias anymore. All the information is accessible. Hardly a day goes by when I don't use Wikipedia. I read some entries. Today I read *Igrot ha-Re'iyah* (by Rabbi Kook) and came across a term I didn't know. I looked it up. There was nothing like this in the past, even when we used encyclopedias. I stop for a moment, look it up and continue studying. Wikipedia is a good example not only of efficiency, but for the good it does Everything is free. This is a great good. (Rabbi #4)

Rabbi #4 presented a transcendental explanation for advantages of technology in the field of human relations and nature:

> In my opinion, technology puts an end to the age-old curse of "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food" (Genesis 3:19). Because Nature is unforgiving, it exhausts and crushes people's resilience. Technology has made Nature friendlier and separated it into components. If this split between (Nature and technology) is relaxed, we will certainly receive (the blessings of) goodwill.

Rabbi #4 views technology as God's gift to people dealing with the vicissitudes of life. Some interviewees considered that technology contributes to the restoration of the world, as expressed in the Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam* (Rabbi #21). Despite different denominational interpretations, this concept is key to the Jewish creed of the individual's responsibility to engage in ameliorating the world through the Jewish faith and its ideals. Some interviewees noted that this "progress in technology is part of the world's collective redemption" (Rabbi #14), a notion that was repeated in multiple interviews, including among the more conservative Chardali variant.

Thus overall, the Rabbis legitimized the new media through its sanctification. They underscored the advantages of new technologies in expanding the world of religious values. Its ability to foster shared learning is strengthened by the conviction that ICTs can leverage key religious ideals, not only for the pious or the community, but for the sake of the world in the overarching Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam* that advances collective redemption (*Geula*).

6.3. Promoting Solidarity

In addition to these narratives of legitimation, other justifications related to the ways in which the new media can counter the anomie of modern life and facilitate interpersonal and communal relations. This included accounts of enhancing sociability and solidarity on the global, communal and domestic scales. For example, from a global perspective, Rabbi #17 stated that ICTs make it possible to communicate with anyone the world over, and emphasized the social potential of the medium:

> The basic concept of the internet mirrors the idea that Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto envisioned. This is the idea that all people are connected, not just all

people, all the galaxies. We are connected. You can write a message to a person on the opposite side of the country, someone whose interests are completely different, in response to an article that has caught your attention. Suddenly you might read a comment from a guy in China. That is the primary innovation, and the incredible thing is that it has become mundane.

Rabbi #17 views the internet as realizing the 18th century Rabbinical notion that underscores the universality of fulfilling the need for human connections. On the communal scale, interviewee #27, a woman who heads a religious seminary for young women in the West Bank talked about the first time she saw the potential of WhatsApp.

I first saw what WhatsApp could do during the first three days after the abduction (referring to the abduction and murder of three seminary students by Palestinian terrorists). Through that Friday and late Shabbat, whoever read the abducted students' group WhatsApp was (emotionally) moved. It changed the rhetoric and the way of coping (with the trauma) in a way that you cannot imagine. You could stay at home and get support from a hundred people. All sorts of support.

For interviewee #27, this traumatic event solidified her perception of the impact of WhatsApp as a platform for connecting the community in an emotionally charged moment and providing a meaningful form of support and care.

On the domestic level, Rabbi #8, the head of a *Yeshivat Hesder* in the Jerusalem vicinity, mentioned how WhatsApp strengthens his family ties and overcomes disconnects that often occur in modern society:

When we have a family WhatsApp group chat it is a real opportunity. We never had the chance to talk to one another 4 or 5 times a day before, because in a contemporary modern household, you do not see the children, and this is our way to stay in touch. Everyone says what they've been doing and what interests them, and the others comment. It becomes a family forum that is always with you on the go in your pocket.

Rabbi #8 highlighted how new technologies can strengthen family ties. While stressing its advantages, he downplays the disadvantages of new media and insists on how they can strengthen familial ties, and foster closeness. Thus, ICT affordances can also be viewed as a way to address the modern crisis of alienation and to foster social ties and reciprocity. All coincide with the overall sense of belonging that characterizes religious communities and their sense of fraternity.

6.4. Religious Study and the Public's Ability to Choose

Another pivotal narrative of legitimation involved the widespread use of ICTs among youngsters. Most Rabbis commented on the unstoppable spread of ICTs and their impact on students' lives and their religious instruction. "Resisting it would be like resisting cars, electricity, telephones and the radio" (Rabbi #2). Despite their misgivings, Rabbis have thus gradually accepted the majority view toward the new media.

For instance, some rabbis discussed the overwhelming appeal of the new media. These rabbis consider that any attempt to block or disregard use of the new media is tantamount to abandoning their responsibilities as educators at best, or generate alienation and antagonism towards the faith, at worst. Thus, when educators also engage with net culture, they can provide guidance with respect to content. The new media also help disseminate the Religious Zionist value system by putting ICTs to "good use". This was apparent in Rabbi #10's approach, who developed a popular internet portal for the community:

There is no choice. We did not adopt (ICTs), humanity as a whole adopted it. The kids embrace it, the parents (as well). We can't fight it.

Q- Would it be best without it?

A- You can't go against the tide. Of course, it would be better to sit in the *Midrash* (study hall) all day and learn Torah. But what can we do, everyone is connected, most people are connected to new media, in every way. It's just a tool, so we have to learn how to use it in a positive manner . . .

Rabbi #10s 'no choice' narrative recurred in almost all interviews. Some rabbis also saw benefits for Torah study. For example, Rabbi #24, who serves as a community rabbi in the Jerusalem vicinity, stated: "I really think these new media offer a lot. When I study, I can get important information, (religious) articles, and databases that I would otherwise be unable to consult. Rabbi #24 expands on the significance of technology for efficient Torah study and its rapid results: "Even in terms of the thought process, (technology) has advantages. It enables fast-track (religious) thinking and the ability to process information and multi-task". Similarly, Rabbi #14 pointed to the contribution of the new media to enhancing religious study:

> I don't think that we are supposed to study the Torah at a lower level than studying other subjects. If (technology) is one of the best means to learn in every other field, why shouldn't we take advantage of it to the same extent for this type of learning? There is no logic in not doing so.

Rabbi #14 draws attention to a meaningful change in the approach to religious study. While traditional engagement with the sacred texts entailed a sanctified pedagogy that included close supervision, face-to-face discussions and haptic involvement with scripture, new forms of religious study can elicit concerns. Nevertheless, rabbi #14 contended that technology elevates the learning process in general, and as such should be employed to raise the standards of religious study. His statement legitimizes the new media by viewing the acquisition of all knowledge as equally benefitting from the new media, and views it as ultimately elevating Torah study via ICTs.

Other rabbis extended this line of thought. For example, Rabbi #15 suggested that broad exposure to information can (positively) challenge learners: "these tools force us to dig deeper and think more during our religious studies". Others viewed the new technologies to be useful for specific aspects of Torah study in that this type of learning is characterized by being discussion-based. It requires critical and precise levels of thinking, the ability to compare and find results, and have a good command of multiple sources. Access to these sources is an asset in Torah study, as Rabbi #8 explained:

> When I know that 8,10,15 students are sitting in front of me with laptops, who have access to information, I need to be precise. I need to say things accurately, because they will check it on their computers, and despite its limitations (its filtering engine), there will always be someone who says "Oh it says something else here". This is wonderful.

Rabbi #8 views his students' fact-checking as an advantage and considers that his students' criticism, which stems from the use of new technologies, enriches Torah study. Overall, the rabbis took a pragmatic approach that acknowledged the futility of objecting to the introduction of ICTs. They went further by pointing to the benefits of effective and advanced study skills for young people.

7. Discussion

The study examined the ways in which new media use is legitimized among religious educational elites with a focus on the Religious Zionist community. While previous research has examined the domestication of new media (Silverstone 1993) and its integration into religious households (Mishol-Shauli et al. 2019), little research has been devoted to the attitudes and approaches of religious and educational leaders toward ICTs. Furthermore, past studies have indicated religious objections to ICTs (Fader 2020; Campbell and Golan 2011) yet offer less attention to its ways of its legitimation (an exception can be found in the analysis of Catholicism, see Ortiz 2003). Analysis of the interviews showed that rabbinical-educational leaders have developed four narratives to legitimate these new technologies, each of which expresses a religious approach to ICTs that is aimed at solidifying students' digital Torah study. This digital identity embodies a pragmatic convergence between the community's values and the more universal adoption of the new media for educational purposes.

The first narrative (*acclaiming modernity*) highlighted the positive value of internalizing modernity as part-and-parcel of religious life, rather than negating it. The community's spiritual existence emerged as dependent on accepting modern life and ICTs. The second narrative (*sanctifying new media*) revealed an effort to venerate technologies. In this narrative, ICTs transcend their mundane role to achieve religious and ultimately eschatological goals for the world's sake and collective redemption. The third narrative (*promoting solidarity*) views ICTs as underscoring an already well-accepted value in Jewish thought of fraternity on the communal, domestic and interpersonal levels. Thus, paradoxically, the open nature of the internet is interpreted as a way to strengthen communal bonds and enhance solidarity, rather that alienating and fragmenting its believers. The fourth narrative (*religious study and the public's choice*) highlights the advantages for Torah study of ICTs which extends its legitimized use in secular subjects. This can be seen as part of a rationalization of the religious learning process, where the universal aspects of ICTs include the instruction of both religious and secular curricula.

Overall, while religious, and particularly fundamentalist, communities may be seen as particularistic, ethnocentric and pivoting towards religious redemption within their boundaries (Ammerman 1987), Religious Zionist rabbinical educators have adopted universal precepts to legitimize students' ICT use, with messianic overtones that coincide with their religious dogma.

In recent years, research has noted the religious social shaping of technologies (Campbell 2010; Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005) as a prism through which technologies are adjusted to fit believers' creeds and pace of life. By contrast, this study suggests that ICT use can be harnessed to shape the world. While the community has developed tools for religious learning (e.g., apps, Talmudic databases), the respondents did not view these technologies as the primary reason for ICT usage, but rather focused on its broad and globally accessible features (e.g., Wikipedia use), as well as its transcendental contribution towards the betterment of humanity. Thus, the religious educators viewed these technologies as promoting pious ideals (learning, advancing redemption) alongside pragmatic concerns for improving instruction.

Overall, for this community, there has thus been a glocalization of religious leaders' approaches to religious education in the sense that the rabbis interacted with the dialectic between their specific public and the universal features of ICTs. Future studies could consider and compare this dialectic in other religious communities. As technologies evolve, questions of the legitimation of other new technologies will continue to arise and will also require scholarly attention.

To conclude, from a macroscopic perspective, the growth of ICTs has intensely impacted the public, with particular emphasis on younger generations since the mid 1990s. In the past decade, their popularity and influence on everyday life have become undeniable and crucial for education, particularly in the pandemic years. Younger generations' inclination towards these technologies has been discerned by mid-range and top clerics (Golan and Martini 2019). This in turn stirs a clash between traditional pedagogy, which focuses on ways of transmitting the religious dogma, and the proclivities of contemporary youth who demand a more technologically laden experience in their everyday lives and in accessing information (Collins 2018). For fundamentalist communities, attempts were made to shun technologies, ban parents and students from public ICT use and control the acceptable channels of communication. However, for more pragmatic movements which accept multiple precepts of modernity (e.g., science, pluralistic workplaces, democratic participation), embracing technologies-of-the-self, including personal computers and smartphones, has become an acceptable way of life.

In the study at hand, the religious community can be seen as bearing a hybrid epistemology that merges a modern proclivity with a religious lifestyle, which are fostered by educational tracts. Much like other contemporary devout groups, religious leaders and educators are unable to deny followers access to new media technologies. With the rise of new media tools, young believers are empowered by these technologies that enable

them to cultivate a cultural habitus of youthfulness. Furthermore, it also grants them direct access to religious sources which are devoid of adult and clerical mediation. This, in turn, has contributed to a recent surge in websites offering popularized access to religious knowledge, most notably religious Q&A (responsa) websites. Direct access to religious knowledge changes the mode of authority, particularly for youngsters, as it allows them to develop a lifestyle that integrates their belief system and practice in a more autonomous manner, with less dependence on adult or clerical figures to spiritually guide them and dictate their rhythm of life.

The grassroots legitimation of online religious sourcing evokes disagreement among clerics. Some have called for a minimization of the utilization of technological advances, whereas for others smart technologies have been embraced and employed for religious education and outreach (Golan and Stadler 2016). Given the growing inclination to engage media tools, particularly by youngsters, clerics often opt to join the bandwagon of ICTs. In doing so, they intentionally, and often unintentionally, accept underlying concepts that are embedded in these tools. This is to say, they acknowledge a concept of youngsters as active learners whose epistemology is based on their autonomous sourcing, rather than relying on the texts and dictums of their elders and clerical educators. At the same time, they are called to reflect on their roles and develop pedagogies and modes of authority that do not solely rely on their information expertise, which is highly accessible for online learners. Alternatively, clerical educators are challenged to develop their authority through an emphasis on value-transmission and faith. Thus, the exploration of the legitimation of new media invites further investigation of the changing conception of children and youth, as well as that of religious educators and their status in the information age.

Appendix A

Rabbi (#)	Age	Educational Background	Position
1	35	Master's degree in education	Former Head of a seminary for girls, Activist in a religious helpline dedicated to youth's social and psychological wellness, lecturer to youngsters on education, relationships and technology
2	55	PhD in Education	Primary Manager in a major religious youth movement, and instructor in leadership and teacher training programs
3	57	Rabbinical Education	Head of a Yeshivat Hesder in a major city
4	51	Rabbinical Education	Head of a Yehivat Hesder in a major city
5	61	Rabbinical Education	Community Rabbi in a West Bank Town, Head of a Leading Kollel and a primary leader in the community's religious council (Tzohar)
6	41	Academic background (MA in Humanities) + Rabbinical education	Community Rabbi in a city, and lecturer in teacher education
7	68	Academic background (PhD)	Founder of a major Yeshivat Hesder in the West Bank. Former head of a major Yeshiva, renowned religious scholar and teacher
8	55	Master's degree in humanities	Head of a Hesder Yeshiva in the West Bank and former School Principal
9	51	Rabbinical Education	Community Rabbi of a settlement in the West Bank, head of a training program for Rabbis and served as head of a Yeshiva
10	75	Rabbinical studies	Head of a major seminary and leader in an internet-based learning program on Judaism
11	44	PhD in humanities	Head of a religious seminary for women in a major city
12	49	Academic studies (BA) and religious studies	Head of a religious seminary for women in the West Bank
13	68	PhD in science	University Rabbi and head of a Hesder Yeshiva
14	63	Rabbinical Education	Founder of a Yeshivat Hesder in a major town and curriculum director at a teacher training program
15	49	Master's Degree and Rabbinical Education	School Principal in a religious technological school
16	56	Bachelor's degree in Education	Curricula Supervisor in a religious school network and former head of a Girls' high school in the West Bank
17	64	Rabbinical Education	Head of the Hesder Yeshiva in the west bank and head of a seminary within a religious college
18	54	Rabbinical Education	City Rabbi of a town in primary leader in Tzohar
19	41	Rabbinical Studies at a Yeshiva in the West Bank	Spiritual Leader (Rabbi-Educator) in a major Yeshivat Hesder
20	50	Rabbinical Education in Jerusalem and the West Bank	Principal of a renowned Seminary for Girls in a key city
21	56	Rabbinical Education	Principal of a religious high school in the West Bank
22	58	Rabbinical Education	City Rabbi in a peripheral town
23	53	Rabbinical Education	Head of the Hesder Yeshiva in the west bank
24	47	Academic Education (Teachers' College)	Spiritual Leader (Rabbi-Educator) in a major Yeshivat Hesder and Town Rabbi in the West Bank
25	35	Rabbinical Education	Community Rabbi and head of a (deeply conservative) Rabbinical Organization
26	58	Rabbinical Education	Head of a Hesder Yeshiva of a town in Israel's periphery

Figure A1. List of sampled Rabbinical interviewees by age, educational background and current position.

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