

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

Michael Karlberg

## 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.*

## Keywords

journalism  
 public sphere  
 normative press  
 theory  
 consultation

In its coverage of public policy issues and current events, the contemporary press has, in some countries, evolved into a discursive battlefield.<sup>1</sup> 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 guerrilla 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'.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> According to such theorists, journalists need to become more effective at facilitating modes of democratic deliberation that

1. Simon Cottle, *Mediatized Conflict* (Berkshire, UK: Open University Press, 2006); Hemant Shah and Michael Thornton, *Newspaper Coverage of Interethnic Conflict* (London: Sage, 2004); Michael Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2004); Johan Galtung, 'Peace journalism', *Media Asia*, 30, no. 3 (2003) 177–81; Trudie Richards and Brent King, 'An alternative to the fighting frame in news reporting', *Canadian Journal of Communication* 25 (2000) 479–96; Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture*

(New York: Random House, 1998); Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Michael Karlberg, 'News and conflict: How adversarial news frames limit public understanding of environmental issues', *Alternatives: Perspectives on Society, Technology and Environment*, 23, no. 1 (1997) 22–7; Celeste Condit, 'Two sides to every question: The impact of news formulas on abortion policy and options', *Argumentation*, 8, no. 4 (1994) 327–36; Richard Rubenstein, Johannes Botes, Frank Dukes and John Stephens, *Frameworks for Interpreting Conflicts: A Handbook for Journalists* (Fairfax, VA: Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, 1994); Suzanne McCorkle, 'War metaphors in popular magazines', *Journal of the Northwest Communication Association*, 19, no. 1 (1991) 47–58; So Clement, 'The summit as war: How journalists use metaphors', *Journalism Quarterly*, 64 (1987) 623–26.

2. Michael Karlberg and Leslie Buell, 'Deconstructing the "war of all against all": The prevalence and implications of war metaphors and other adversarial news schema in *TIME*, *Newsweek*, and *Maclean's*', *Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 12, no.1 (2005) 22–39.

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-battlefield'; 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 or believe in' that answers the question 'what are we doing all this for?'<sup>5</sup>

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 Baha'i Faith. As an emerging world religion, the Baha'i 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 Baha'i Faith, made normative statements about the operation of the press in his writings. 'Abdu'l-Baha (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 Baha'i community after Baha'u'llah's passing, have made many other normative statements about the operation of the press. Elements of a normative model of the press are therefore scattered throughout these primary Baha'i 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 Baha'i references to the press

The early history of the Baha'i 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 Baha'i writings were thus written in response to misrepresentations in the press.<sup>6</sup> 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 divers 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, it behoveth the writers thereof to be purged from the promptings of evil passions and desires and to be attired with the raiment of justice and equity. They should enquire into situations as much as possible and ascertain the facts, then set them down in writing.<sup>7</sup>

After the passing of Baha'u'llah in 1892, and the establishment of early Baha'i communities in Europe and North America, 'Abdu'l-Baha prepared the early western Baha'is to anticipate similar misrepresentations in the press.<sup>8</sup> 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 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.<sup>9</sup>

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'.<sup>10</sup>

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 Bahā'ī 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'.<sup>11</sup>

Shoghi Effendi also contrasted the ideals articulated above with the 'corruption of the press' that he observed in the world around him.<sup>12</sup> In a reference that simultaneously critiques the contemporary press while offering Baha'is 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 mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples.<sup>13</sup>

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

3. Thomas McPhail, *Global Communication: Theories, Stakeholders, and Trends* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, 2nd edn.); Robert McChesney, *The Problem of the Media* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004); Robin Andersen and Lance Strate (eds), *Critical Studies in Media Commercialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Edward Herman and Robert McChesney, *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism* (London: Continuum, 1997).
4. Refer, for example, to Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgement: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991); Lewis Friedland, *Public Journalism: Past and Future* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2003); David Perry, *Roots of Civic Journalism: Darwin, Dewey, and Mead* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Anthony Eksterowicz and Robert Roberts (eds), *Public Journalism and Political Knowledge* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); *Civic Journalism Is ...* (Washington, DC: The Pew Center for Civic Journalism, 2000); Jay Rosen, *What Are Journalists For?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Jay Rosen, Davis Merritt and Lisa Austin, *Public Journalism Theory and Practice: Lessons from Experience* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1997).

5. Jay Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right: Public Journalism and the Troubles in the Press* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1996) 6, 24.
6. Refer, for example, to Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) 125.
7. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 39–40.
8. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 429.
9. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 31–32.
10. *Messages of Shoghi Effendi to the Indian Sub-Continent, 1923–1957* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust of India, 1995) 2.
11. *Bahá'í Administration* (Wilmette, IL: US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) 82.
12. *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1938) 188.
13. *World Order* 204.
14. *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989).
15. *Compilation of Compilations* (3 vols. [Mona Vale NSW]: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991, 2000) 1:93.
16. *Individual Rights and Freedoms* 14.

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 was learning how rights to free speech and critical inquiry can be expressed in ways that are unifying and constructive rather than divisive or destructive. In 1988, the Universal House of Justice explicitly addressed this issue and, in the process, clarified further elements of a Baha'i model of the press by relating the operation of the press to the Baha'i model of consultative decision-making.<sup>14</sup>

### The consultative model

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

Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth. 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.<sup>15</sup>

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 entangling complications 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 undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views'.<sup>16</sup> At 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'.<sup>17</sup> It then asserted that 'a careful examination of the principles of Bahá'í 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 in the onward development of society.’<sup>18</sup> Referring specifically to the press, the Universal House of Justice wrote that:

... the code of conduct of the press must embrace the *principles* and *objectives* of consultation as revealed by Bahá’u’lláh. Only in this way will the press be able to make its full contribution to the preservation of the rights of the people and become a powerful instrument in the consultative processes of society, and hence for the unity of the human race. (italics added)<sup>19</sup>

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-Bahā, are ‘to arrive at unity and truth’ in deliberative processes.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Baha’is believe that consultation is ‘the operating expression of justice in human affairs’ and ‘at the group level, a 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’.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, justice and unity are inseparable concepts within Baha’i discourse, as one is not attainable without the other.<sup>22</sup>

In the context of these overarching 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 awakening’.<sup>23</sup> ‘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’.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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 devotions 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.<sup>26</sup> Within these gatherings, consultation serves as a process of democratic deliberation that engages all members of the community.

17. *Individual Rights and Freedoms* 12.
18. *Individual Rights and Freedoms* 13.
19. *Individual Rights and Freedoms* 17–18.
20. ‘Abdu’l-Bahā in *Compilation of Compilations* 1:99 (para. 186).
21. *The Prosperity of Humankind* (London: Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1995) 16, 9.
22. Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets*, 66; ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Promulgation*, 202; Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* (Wilmette, IL: US Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1941) 17.
23. *Compilation of Compilations* 1:93 (para. 170).
24. *Compilation of Compilations* 1:97 (para. 180), 99 (para. 186).
25. *Compilation of Compilations* 1:101–3 (paras. 189, 193, 194).
26. *Compilation of Compilations* 1:451–3 (paras. 993–6).

27. *Compilation of Compilations* 2:98–100, 104 (paras. 1453, 1456).
28. *Compilation of Compilations* 1: 319–66; 2:39–60, 83–136.
29. The Universal House of Justice in *Compilation of Compilations* 1:108 (para. 209).

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.<sup>27</sup> 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 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.<sup>28</sup> 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 corporate bodies, 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 the institution of the monthly feast or the electoral convention than it is to an elected body. In this regard, the press can be envisioned as a forum that 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,<sup>29</sup> 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 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'.<sup>30</sup> 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'.<sup>31</sup> 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'.<sup>32</sup> 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'.<sup>33</sup> As Baha'u'llah states:

Human utterance is an essence which aspireth 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.<sup>34</sup>

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'.<sup>35</sup> 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.'<sup>36</sup>

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.

30. Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, in a letter dated 24 October 1990 (italics added).

31. *Individual Rights and Freedoms* 12.

32. *Compilation of Compilations* 1:452 (para. 995).

33. 'Abdu'l-Bahā in *Compilation of Compilations* 1:95 (para. 176).

34. *Tablets* 172–3.

35. *Individual Rights and Freedoms* 16.

36. *Individual Rights and Freedoms* 16–17.

37. 'Abdu'l-Bahā in *Compilation of Compilations* 1:95 (para. 175), 99 (para. 186).
38. *Compilation of Compilations* 1:95 (para. 175).
39. *Compilation of Compilations* 3:53.
40. *Promulgation* 317.
41. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahā* 283.
42. *Compilation of Compilations* 3:51–4.
43. *Individual Rights and Freedoms* 17.
44. 'Abdu'l-Bahā in *Compilation of Compilations* 1:97–8 (para. 182); Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, IL: US Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1939) 35–6.

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 soluble challenges.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Baha affirms that, in many cases, 'the shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions'.<sup>38</sup>

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'.<sup>39</sup> 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',<sup>40</sup> 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'.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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'is are 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 skilful 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'<sup>43</sup> then the press might be understood 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'is are encouraged to regard it as an essential resource in processes of collective inquiry and deliberation.<sup>44</sup> 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 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.<sup>45</sup> Though these principles may sound paradoxical at first, they reflect an underlying epistemology with very practical implications. In this regard, Baha'is 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup>

Baha'is 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 Baha'is 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.'<sup>48</sup> Much contemporary public discourse, in contrast, takes 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 consultative discourse be raised to the level of spiritual principle.<sup>49</sup> 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, Baha'is 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.'<sup>50</sup> 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

45. 'Abdu'l-Bahā in *Compilation of Compilations* 1:95 (para. 176), 99 (para. 186); The Universal House of Justice in Helen Hornby (ed.), *Lights of Guidance* (Delhi: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1994), para. 590.
46. 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Promulgation* 114, 422.
47. 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Foundations of World Unity* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1968) 58; Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 58, 115.
48. *Prosperity* 15.
49. The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* (Haifa: Bahā'ī World Centre, 1985) 15.
50. Bahā'ī International Community, *The Earth Charter/Rio de Janeiro Declaration and the Oneness of Humanity* (New York, 1992) para. 1.

51. Sut Jhally, *The Spectacle of Accumulation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006); James Compton, *The Integrated News Spectacle: A Political Economy of Cultural Performance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Michael Karlberg, 'Partisan branding and media spectacle: Implications for democratic communication', *Democratic Communique*, 18 (2003) 1–18; Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Dallas Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1981).
52. *The Problem of the Media*; Robert Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, *Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1998); Michael Karlberg, 'News and conflict'; S. Dale, *McLuhan's Children: The Greenpeace Message and the Media* (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1996); Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influence on Media Content* (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1996); Jay Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right: Public Journalism and the Troubles in the Press* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996); Richard Rubenstein, Johannes Botes, Frank Dukes, and John

compromise. This dynamic is intended to shift the process of collective deliberation towards a new centre, manoeuvring it out of the quagmire of competing interest claims and into the court of spiritual principle, where the broader goals of social justice are more likely to prevail. Here again, if one accepts that the code of conduct of the press must embrace the principles and objectives of consultation then one can see that the press is in theory well positioned to help raise public discourse to the level of principle, even if this norm does not always prevail within the contemporary press.

### Consultation and the political economy of the press

The consultative principles and objectives articulated above may appear naïve 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.<sup>51</sup>

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 views and voices 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.<sup>52</sup>

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.<sup>53</sup> 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 theories 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'.<sup>54</sup> 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 upon 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 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;<sup>55</sup> that the purpose of our individual lives is to develop our spiritual nature in order to transcend our basest instincts;<sup>56</sup> and that our collective historical advancement can create social environments that have salutary effects on these processes of individual spiritual development.<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup>

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.<sup>59</sup>

Stephens, *Frameworks for Interpreting Conflicts* (Fairfax, VA: Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, 1994); Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980).

53. *Individual Rights and Freedoms* 6.
54. Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1956) 44.
55. 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Paris Talks* (12th edn., London: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1995) 60.
56. 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Paris Talks* 60–1; 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Foundations of World Unity* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1968) 69–70.
57. 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette, IL: US Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1957); Shoghi Effendi, letter to Agnes Alexander, 15 January 1933.
58. Letter to an individual, 17 February 1933, cited in *Conservation of the Earth's Resources* (compilation prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Haifa, Israel: Bahā'ī World Centre, 1990) para. 3.3; refer also to an elaboration of this theme by Farzam Arbab, 'The process of social transformation', *The Bahā'ī Faith and Marxism: Proceedings of a conference held*

January 1986 (Ottawa: Association for Bahā'ī Studies, 1987) 9–20.

59. Andrew Calabrese and Colin Sparks (eds), *Toward a Political Economy of Culture: Capitalism and Communication in the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004); McChesney, *Problem of Media*; Compton, *Integrated News Spectacle*; Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); Vincent Mosco and Janet Wasko (eds), *The Political Economy of Information* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Shoemaker and Reese, *Mediating the Message*.
60. Katherine Albergate, Lesley Amberger, Lindsay San Martin and Kate Sims, 'Junk Food News and News Abuse', in *Censored 2007: Media Democracy in Action* (ed. Peter Phillips, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006) 219–30.
61. *World Order* 204. For discussions regarding the profound influence of advertising on media content, refer to *The Problem of the Media*; David Croteau and William Hoynes, *The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2001); Robin Andersen and Lance Strate (eds), *Critical Studies in Media Commercialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Mike Budd,

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'.<sup>60</sup> 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'ī 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup> 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'is, 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'ī 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.<sup>63</sup>

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 small minority of people who can afford them, the benefits it offers are immediate, and the rationale unapologetic. Emboldened 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. Its 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; perversions of various kinds unabashedly 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.<sup>64</sup>

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 promoting 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 Baha'i position 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 Baha'i teachings into clearer focus and invite others – both inside and outside of the Baha'i 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.<sup>65</sup> 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 Baha'i 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 journalism* 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

Steve Craig and Clay Steinman, *Consuming Environments: Television and Commercial Culture* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Edward Herman and Robert McChesney, *The Global Media*; Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influence on Mass Media Content*, 2nd edn. (New York: Longman, 1996); C. Edwin Baker, *Advertising and a Democratic Press* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (London: Routledge, 1990); Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

62. Refer again to the sources cited in footnote 61 above for discussions of media self-censorship.
63. *One Common Faith* (Haifa: Bahā'ī World Centre, 2005) 3, 5.
64. *One Common Faith* 10.
65. Jurgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* (trans. T. McCarthy, Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Habermas, 'Further reflections on the public sphere', in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) 421–60; Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the*

*Public Sphere* (trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

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'is 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.

#### Suggested citation

Karlberg, M. (2010), 'The Press as a Consultative Forum: A Contribution to Normative Press Theory', *Baha'i Studies Review* 16, pp. 29–42. doi: 10.1386/bsr.16.29/1

#### Contributor details

Michael Karlberg is an Associate Professor of Communication at Western Washington University. His research and writing focus on the relationship between communication, culture and conflict. He authored the book *Beyond the Culture of Contest* and various journal articles on related themes. He teaches classes in 'critical media literacy' and ethics.

E-mail: karlberg@wwu.edu