TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND WORLD JEWISH RENEWAL

Keynote Address by
ELI N. EVANS, President
CHARLES H. REVSON FOUNDATION

CONFERENCES ON MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY IN JEWISH EDUCATION
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6. THE NEXT GENERATION, THE NEXT CENTURY
Before addressing the Jewish dimension of the telecommunications revolution, let me say a few words about the telecommunications revolution itself.

Nicholas Negroponte, founder of the MIT Media Lab, in his recent book, *Being Digital*, states that “computing is not about computers anymore. It is about living.” In Negroponte’s words, “the computer represents the merger of home and office, of work and play.” With regard to education, he states, “schools will change to become more like museums and playgrounds for children to assemble ideas and socialize with other children all over the world.”

It’s not easy for even the most informed observers to understand the shifting sands of change. On any given day, you can pick up a newspaper or turn on the news on television, and read or hear a wide variety of different stories about the Internet and the newest technologies. One recent article described understanding the Internet as “trying to pick up a lemon seed from the kitchen table.” It is difficult, it said, because the Internet operates under a governance idea some call “consensual anarchy.”

We may not always understand new technologies completely, but many more of us are beginning to understand what they can do. Unlike broadcasting and print, which are one-to-many entities with a passive audience, the
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The Challenges: Access and Creativity

The two biggest challenges, at this point, are ensuring equitable access and developing creative content.

We’ve all heard a great deal of talk over the past few years about the need to ensure that there is equitable access to the Internet, so that no one will be left behind in this revolution. In this country, President Clinton and Vice President Gore have repeatedly called for the building of a “digital information highway,” and for making the hardware and software necessary to utilize it available in every American school by the year 2000. The Israel Ministry of Education recently made a similar pledge to the schoolchildren of Israel.

As critical as access is, even more critical is creativity, the potential for using these new technologies creatively in the service of education — and, in this case, Jewish education.

A leading scientist from Bell Atlantic briefed foundations some time ago and pointed out that the crisis in the computer revolution was a crisis in creativity. On the walls at headquarters, he said, is a sign reading: “It’s the content, stupid.”

For the Jewish community today, there are a huge number of opportunities across many technologies: on cable television in a world of 500 channels and widespread satellite connections; in film and video cassette libraries and rentals; through educational software, CD-ROMs, the Internet, and the Web. With all of them, I believe, our challenge is the same: developing creative content.
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g of world leaders and along with the touching daughter, whose simple

and moving farewell stirred young people profoundly in Israel and will forever be in our hearts. Television provided a window for worldwide participation and commitment to peace, for which Rabin gave his life, turning the ceremony into a universal resolve. It transformed living rooms around the globe into a vast worldwide amphitheater of shared mourning. Jewish and non-Jewish families — from Jerusalem to New York, Paris and London, from Tel Aviv to Buenos Aires and Moscow — gathered about the electronic hearth during those sad days of aftershock and shared loss.

This outpouring of feelings from world leaders, from non-Jews as well as Jews, was unprecedented in world history. And for us, as American Jews, modern telecommunications provided us with something more: it gave us the opportunity and the means to feel connected to Jews in Israel and all over the world; it united us in sadness and in resolve; it reawakened us to our sense of peoplehood. Jews the world over reaffirmed their connection to Judaism and to the land of their ancestors, brought together by television over the loss of a Jewish son who had changed the course of history.

Yet, at the same time, the limits of our current telecommunications systems meant that much was missed in Israel and elsewhere. Had we been able to continue to share Jewish experience on a worldwide level in November of 1995 — a Jewish C-Span if you will — Israelis as well as Jews from around the world could have been present in a packed Carnegie Hall in New York City for Itzhak Perlman’s violin tribute to Rabin; could have joined the 250,000 people at the second Peace Now rally a week later at the site of the
A number of elements are already in place:

- The Jewish Television Network in Los Angeles will soon be available in seven major American cities, and, with virtually all of Israel now wired for cable, the television industry is growing dramatically in Israel. And, as the telephone, the television set and the computer continue to move toward merging into one multifaceted technology, think of the potential of such a commitment to reach into the Jewish home in every country in the world.

Think about daily news and features bringing detailed reporting about the people and the history of Israel into homes in America and other countries. Think about our families experiencing not just controversies and violent episodes, but the daily life of Israelis. Think about the possibilities for the 50th anniversary of the state of Israel.

And think about Israelis learning about Jewish communities in America and throughout the Diaspora. That this is needed is already clear to the Israeli government: For the past few years, the Ministry of Education has been putting considerable funding into programs with the Hartman Institute and others, to educate Israeli teachers about Jews and Judaism in the Diaspora, particularly Americans, precisely because most Israelis have so little idea about how American Jews live — what we believe, what our religious practices are, how we feel about Israel and how we live as Jews.
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through its Bronfman for programs based on its series of concerts, poetry readings, discussions, debates, and lectures.

• With news programming, the situation is similar: Young and emerging political leaders in Israel and the U.S. and Jewish intellectuals from all countries could participate in frequent electronic international round tables to interact with each other.

When Edgar Bronfman reports to the World Jewish Congress on the status of his talks with the Swiss banks, a worldwide audience could participate. In-depth looks at the Eizenstat report and interviews with Stuart Eizenstat himself could broaden the conversation and the understanding.

The Jewish people all over the world could come to know Jewish personalities from every country — Israeli Cabinet officials, university presidents, playwrights, poets, scholars, religious thinkers, scientists, and corporate and financial leaders. There are so many opportunities for exciting discussions, interviews, and profiles and television biographies.

Film is a critical component, of course — for any kind of broadcast effort and for a variety of educational initiatives as well. Most of you have heard me talk before of the Jewish Heritage Video Collection — the collection of 200 feature films, documentaries, independent films, television shows, and PBS series; and 12 courses on such subjects as coming of age, values and acculturation, romance, Yiddish culture, Israel, and the Holocaust. Collections and accompanying teaching materials have already been placed by local donors
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earth at one thousand miles in space, to facilitate easy interactivity all over the globe, even in underdeveloped countries.

A Flowering of Jewish Web Sites

It's hard to believe, but according to an excellent new book by Irving Green entitled Judaism on the Web, there are already more than five thousand different Jewish sites on the World Wide Web, covering everything from discussions of the Bible portion of the week, to courses in Basic Judaism, to an exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls. There are dozens of Jewish bulletin boards and "chat rooms" for conversations and study and research. There is access to music, museums, libraries, The Jerusalem Post and other publications, holiday information, singles meeting places, and kosher restaurants. This spontaneous outburst of activity can and should be dramatically enlarged and energized with coordination, funding, and support.

What is newest, and perhaps most exciting, for the future of the Jewish community is that the computer-based technologies of the Internet and the Web are already being used to build communities of common interest and friendship that transcend geography and age and time. It is interesting to note that the first Jewish groups to have a major presence in cyberspace were not the ones we might have expected, but the Lubavitch movement, which early saw the new technology's potential for reaching the world to deliver its messages. In fact, it is only recently that almost
institution has begun to s and faculty at Hebrew te are beginning to be in the Jewish Theological College — as well as , Oxford University, and wide ORT in England is Bar and Bat Mitzvah it available online to echers are available — and South America, as ska, and Mississippi.

rst truly comprehensive ng it a built-in audience time. It has a newstand ard, The Jerusalem Post, Jewish papers from d, and other cities); a ational bulletin boards; icles from around the special discussions with nroduction to Judaism e holidays, a guide to ind, most recently, a night service; a forum rovided by Orthodox, Reconstrictionist, and to hundreds of Jewish

Speaking of AOL’s Jewish Community Online, which was originally created in San Francisco and then picked up by AOL, as an experiment, I recently went into a chat room and asked “Who here has ever attended Brandeis camp at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute in California?” Within minutes, I had responses from 15 people, and we broke off from the larger group into a private chat area, creating an instant “virtual community” for a wonderful hour of reminiscing about our experiences.

Our goal must be to conceive new, innovative programs that link young Israelis to young people in America, families in Paris to families in Tel Aviv and Los Angeles, students in London to students in Moscow, Jerusalem, and New York, and congregations in Latin America to congregations in North America, the Middle East, and Asia.

The Creative Potential of CD-ROMs

The growth in home computer sales offers a rare opportunity to launch a Jewish educational and cultural renaissance in the Jewish home. It turns out the Jewish people have been in training for the computer revolution for 2,500 years. It is uncanny, but the Talmud is organized in virtually the same manner as an interactive CD-ROM, grouping commentaries around a single word or phrase or concept in the text. CD-ROMs enable us to go another step — to add video art and additional text. Israel is already a center of software creativity and a leading creative force in the
here, as here, it is the leading CD-ROM 25 years old.

already under way. For instance, Judaeica has just been introducing an animated CD-ROM.

able to experience the past and Yad Vashem in person than the computer in T/Channel 13 in New York will enable you to tour in San Francisco, a city stages that has an integral part of its history increases with digital age. To put an enormous amount of data on a VHS tape or an enormous amount of video to Abba Eban's Heritage: will let users experience Jewish history. In fact, the TV series itself is able to view more than the British Museum, the Vatican Collection, the Israel Museum, Luxor and other leading museums in the world. The DVD technology will allow a user to move with a click from the video to art objects, to archeological sites, to biblical texts, to scholarly articles, to biographies, to photographs. Hopefully, since the series has been broadcast in 17 countries, including the former Soviet Union, the disc, too, will be a global project in many languages, from Arabic, French, and Russian to Japanese. Hopefully, too, it will eventually be an Internet site, with a full range of discussion groups for all faiths.

- Steven Spielberg's ambitious Voices of the Shoah project is now collecting 50,000 survivor testimonies and simultaneously organizing them on discs, with background research and educational material, for all ages.

3. NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW POSSIBILITIES

“Teach thy children,” the Talmud instructs us, and many opportunities for Jewish education already exist. In addition to those I’ve already mentioned, videoconferencing is emerging as an interesting means for providing education to far-flung audiences. While not yet widely available to individual users, this technology will eventually be part of the range of options provided by the Internet. Already, the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies is using videoconferencing technology to train teachers in Milwaukee in advanced methods of Jewish education. And recently the American Hillel organization linked up Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz to student groups all across America and in
research directly from libraries all over the world, as more and more documents, books, and articles are made available online.

- Yossi Abramovitz is the founder of the online Jewish Family and Life Magazine which he reports is generating 15,000 “hits” or visits a month. He hopes to create 18 of what he calls “Webzines,” magazine-like Websites on a wide variety of Jewish themes, from Shabbat observance to holidays and parenting.

- Lambda, an organization in Israel, one of whose partners is the former director of Israel Educational Television, is developing CD-ROMs of different books of the Bible, which will enable users to explore a wide range of textual interpretations — from the writings of the Rabbis to videotaped conversations with modern scholars.

- The “Virtual Jerusalem” site provides live pictures of the Western Wall in Jerusalem 24 hours a day and a way to send messages to its crevices from your home computer. It includes a walking tour of Jerusalem and received 9 million “hits” or visits from 1 million addresses last December, obviously not all of them Jewish. Over time, this kind of site provides interesting possibilities for interfaith connections.

- The Bill Moyers television series, Genesis: A Living Conversation, had the largest accompanying Internet strategy of any program in public broadcasting history. Thousands of people downloaded the weekly teaching material or had it e-mailed directly to them, and tens of thousands posted messages on PBS bulletin boards or on bulletin boards on other sites — Larry Yudelson’s Jewish Community Network ran an active discussion of each week’s show, drawing more participants...
I submit that it is a key to Jewish renewal because it is a way into the home and into the heads and hearts of young people, of children, and of families. It can renew our schools, empower our teachers, and allow our best institutions and most inspiring teachers into our homes and the lives of our children and grandchildren. The technological revolution does not replace the gifted teacher — but it does represent an extraordinary resource for the teacher. It offers new ways to interact with a broader world, opening doors to exciting new visual, textual, and intellectual discoveries and engaging students with Jewish history.

It is our generation’s challenge for the next century. It can create community, tell our story; it is infinite midrash, our electronic Talmud. What is happening is as profound as when our ancestors made the transition from the scroll to the book. We Jews became known as the people of the book and of “the word”; in the next century the telecommunications revolution will allow us to recover this proud past.

5.
A NEW CREATIVE INITIATIVE: AN INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR JEWISH MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

How do we go about doing this? Linking up Israel with Diaspora communities, and finding new and creative ways to impart Jewish teaching, are profoundly important tasks. Much of the framework for these activities already exists, but it is in its earliest stages — still very diffuse and of
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porting the best and

most talented people with the most creative ideas should be
its sole mission. The Jewish communities in all countries,
whose children and families will benefit, can eventually be
asked to contribute, but start-up funds will have to come
from major donors. It should come into being with at least
5-10 million a year for five years.

The Catalytic Role of
Jewish Organizational Leadership

Meetings of concerned and involved leaders in Jewish
education are critical, because they can help to produce an
action plan across a wide range of activities that would
strengthen the common culture and shared experience of
Jews wherever they live.

In addition, consultations should be held with leading
communications industry leaders in Israel and the U.S., and
with outstanding creative talent in film, television and
computer technology to develop a partnership that can bring
these new channels of Jewish unity into being.

Leading thinkers believe the world is in the midst of a
revolution as profound as the industrial revolution. It is the
information age and for the Jewish people, it is already filled
with possibility. As Israel moves into a new period of self-
confidence and economic maturity, it is time to forge a new
kind of partnership with Jewish communities around the
world based on mutual respect and shared experiences.
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The light in the candles of Israeli youth, which the whole world witnessed in the aftermath of the Rabin assassination, is the light of hope. We must not let it go out but must use it to light the way to a new world of Jewish unity and interaction. The opportunities to use technology are all about us, waiting to be harnessed in the next century to the great task of Jewish memory, education and renewal.