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Review

**Yoel Cohen, *God, Jews and the Media: Religion and Israel's Media*
(New York and London: Routledge, 2012) 258 pp.
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The study of Jewish digital culture is a nascent field with significant work on virtual Jews and Judaism beginning to surface only fairly recently. Existing Jewish Studies scholarship on new media has tended to focus on what happens *online*, exploring the relationship between religion and interactive technologies. But, as might be expected, while research into online Judaism has been growing, it is restricted both geographically and denominationally, in that it is largely confined to the United States and Israel and *haredism*. Since *haredim* often have a fraught relationship with new technologies such as the Internet and cellular phones (Campbell 2010), their use in generalizing overall patterns to fit non-*haredi* Jews' relationship to such media is limited. Furthermore, since Jewish New Media research does not always benefit from a cross-disciplinary perspective, there is little transcultural comparative work and even less work which examines and compares Jewish self-definition globally.

Into this arena steps Yoel Cohen, an associate professor in the School of Communication at Ariel University Center in Israel, who aims to change all of that with his timely book, *God, Jews and the Media: Religion and Israel's Media*. In his Conclusion, 'Judaism in the

Information Age' he sets out his comparative agenda, arguing for the need to contrast both religions and societies; for example, comparing the Israeli Jewish and American Christian experiences.

The book is divided into three sections: 'Mediated Judaism', 'Media Culture Wars' and 'Issues in Mediated Judaism'. As Cohen ambitiously looks at the mass media, his purview includes print and broadcast journalism, as well as advertising and the internet. However, I suspect part three will be of most interest to readers of this journal, especially chapter eight, 'www.techno-Judaism', which covers the relationship between and impact of the Internet on the secular, *haredim* and modern Orthodoxy respectively, virtual synagogues in Second Life, and Jewish religious and educational websites.

Whilst the book's primary focus is Israel, as indicated by its subtitle and forms the majority of the content of its twelve chapters, other diaspora communities do get mentioned. In chapter eleven, 'At bay in the Diaspora', for example, Cohen explores the *Forward* (New York) and the *Jewish Chronicle* (London), as well as "the revolutionary role of the Internet in Diaspora networking" (p. 187). Again, while *haredim* form a substantial part of the material, other denominations, as well as secular Jews, are represented in his analysis.

I do have some quibbles. Cohen's review of the literature in chapter one (Media, Judaism and Culture) is useful, but he should have perhaps noted that research examining the *visual* element (e.g. digital art) seems to be entirely absent from Judaism and new media studies and perhaps he should have considered why this might be the case. His second chapter – 'The Jewish Theory of Communication' – seems to be misnamed – the definite article suggesting a monolithic theological position which does not adequately cover the full denominational and

post-denominational spectrum within Judaism. In his discussion of Second Life, nowhere does he mention Voloj (2008) (although he does list his shorter article in his select bibliography), possibly the only piece of scholarship to explore the topic to date. Social networking, such as Facebook, gets only a passing mention despite its importance in assisting young Jews to connect and form new grassroots, pop-up communities, particularly outside Israel. Twitter is ignored.

Later, Cohen describes the Diaspora relationship as “lopsided” in that it is “Israel-centred” (p. 195), which ignores new research which suggests “the end of diaspora” because the majority of Jews outside of Israel feel a sense of “*rootedness* in the places they live” and “no longer see themselves ‘in diaspora’ but instead see themselves at home, not pining for a Promised Land” (Aviv and Shneer 2005, p. xvi). As Israel matured into a secure and economically viable state, Diaspora communities are no longer feeling the need to build up or be eclipsed by Israel began to prioritize their own development, and commenced to come into their own.

Finally, and most egregiously in my opinion, is his assertion that “in the Diaspora, where Judaism is a minority faith which fails to get reflected in the American media culture, the media there does not reflect particularly Jewish motifs” (p. 232). I find this statement astonishing. Just exactly how American Jews have shaped the Hollywood movie industry, *to take but one example*, in their own image has been the subject of dozens of studies, not least my own (Abrams 2012).

Nevertheless, despite these infelicities, the book certainly makes a useful addition to the growing scholarship on the relationship between Jews, Judaism and new media and digital culture.

References

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