From Koogle to Yideotube, efforts to provide a kosher Internet

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From a drab office in this ultra-Orthodox Jewish stronghold, three devout young women hunch over computers and surf the Internet - looking for pornography, celebrity gossip and a laundry list of other items banned by their rabbis.

It's odd work for this trio, dressed modestly and wearing wigs in keeping with their beliefs. But it's their job at Israel's first ultra-Orthodox Internet provider, Nativ, as it tries to launch a product that could transform the traditionally sheltered community: kosher Internet.

Because racy images of women are the most common offensive content found, the company decided it would be less objectionable to hire women to scour the Internet so ultra-Orthodox customers can surf without worry.

Lea Bernat, 22, a former kindergarten teacher, clicks through hundreds of web pages a day, using specialized software to open links and disable problematic content. "If it's clean, we release it," she said. "If it's really unclean, we tell the customer that the site isn't approved."

But is it kosher?

That's the question facing many ultra-Orthodox as they move online and are greeted by a fast-growing industry seeking to cater to their special needs, even though no one agrees yet exactly what a kosher Internet should look like.

There's Koogle, a Google-inspired searchable directory of kosher businesses offering, say, bargains on "modest" wedding dresses. Many rabbis frown on YouTube, so Yideotube offers a "daily online source of carefully screened videos," ranging from spoofs of anti-war activists to tips for buying a ceremonial kittel robe.

Worried about violating prohibitions against working on the Sabbath? Software vendor SaturdayGuard sells technology that enables websites to block access for Internet users, depending upon their time zone, between Friday and Saturday night.

There's even an online support group, GuardYourEyes.org, specializing in helping Orthodox Jews break "lust addictions" arising from Internet access. In addition to the usual 12-step programs and daily "strengthening" e-mails, the group offers tips for curtailing inappropriate surfing, including using software that automatically sends lists of visited websites to your spouse or rabbi.

Modern technology has long been viewed by many ultra-Orthodox rabbis as incompatible with a spiritual life. Television is banned and only "kosher" cellphones, which carry rabbinical stamps and have disabled Web browsing and text messaging, are accepted in ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, communities here.

Ultra-Orthodox Rabbis initially labeled the Internet as the biggest threat yet to Judaism, likening it to eating pork and calling it "1,000 times worse" than TV. As the technology spread, rabbis softened their stance and by 2005 allowed limited Internet use for work purposes only.

Now, as the Internet permeates most aspects of life, from banking to registering children at school, more Haredi families have no choice but to go online. About one-third admit to having Internet access at home, though the actual figure is believed to be about 50 percent.

With an outright ban on the Internet no longer feasible, ultra-Orthodox rabbis are realizing that their only option is to create a kosher variety.

"The overwhelming majority understand that if you can't fight it, join it," said Avi Greenzeig, believed to be Israel's first "kashrut monitor" - similar to those who inspect kosher restaurants. He was hired by rabbis to edit and censor one of Israel's most popular Haredi websites, Behadrei Haredim. "People can live without television, but the Internet is different," Greenzeig said. "It's impossible to tell people to go back to the caves. Technology is moving forward and people must move with it. But there are limits."

From the website's nondescript Jerusalem office, where there is no sign on the door and writers use pseudonyms because of the stigma of working for an Internet company, Greenzeig reviews every article and reader comment before it's posted online.

Greenzeig, only 24 and working at his first job, is younger than the writers and editors. But as the official eyes of the rabbis, he carries considerable clout because he's regularly in touch with the religious leaders.

A piece about a rabbi accused of sexually harassing male students? Greenzeig spiked it. He also killed a review of a band that performs for mixed audiences of men and women. Because the website workers are also Haredi, there's never a problem with profanity or inappropriate pictures, but Greenzeig says he often edits reader comments when they are disrespectful or criticize rabbinical decisions.

Creating a truly kosher Internet is no easy task, partly because of the unreliability of commercial filters. Already, frustrated Haredi youth are asking websites such as Answers.com, "How Do I Get Around Kosher Net?"

At the same time, Haredi rabbis remain deeply divided on what kosher Internet should look like, who should have access and which websites should be blocked.

"So far they haven't been able to find a clear line, as they have with cellphones," said Mordecai Plaut, an Orthodox rabbi who operates an English-language Haredi website. "They are still trying to figure out a way to throw out the bathwater and keep the baby."

For example, pornography isn't the only thing that upsets some rabbis. They've also expressed concern about websites that espouse other faiths, such as Christianity or Islam. They worry Haredim will waste too much time surfing trivial news and entertainment sites, and not spend enough time in religious reflection.

Access to the Internet has also exposed Haredim, who traditionally have taken their direction only from rabbis, to alternate opinions.

"It's also about control," said one ultra-Orthodox Internet professional who didn't want to be identified criticizing rabbis.

Hoping to fill the void, several Internet providers are developing customized products for the ultra-Orthodox community, combining filters, web-blocking software and dedicated servers designed to ensure control.

Nativ, which employs the female Web monitors, offers Internet service to about 20,000 ultra-Orthodox customers. The company, based in Bnei Berek just outside Tel Aviv, adheres to strict religious guidelines, employing only Haredi workers and taking instructions from rabbis.

Deputy chief executive Yechiel Twersky is dressed in a 19th century black suit with hat and sidelocks, yet has the very 21st century habit of

checking his Blackberry while holding conversations.

Twersky installs "unhackable" programs on customers' computers to ensure that all Internet access goes through Nativ. The standard service offers about 2,200 websites, mostly government agencies and Haredi businesses. All forms of social media, such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, are blocked, as are Google images. Customers who want access to anything else, such as a journalist who wants to read a particular news site or a doctor who needs a medical research page, must provide a letter from his or her rabbi. Then the female monitors inspect the site.

Software engineer Yaniv Sharon, a Haredi father of five from Rehovot, has tried all the providers, but says none offer the right balance of protection from inappropriate images and access to websites he needs for his Web-design business.

So Sharon is braving the Internet alone, even though he's worried about even inadvertent exposure to pictures of women.

"Just viewing such a picture damages the soul," he said. "I put my hand up and scroll the page down."

He's been advised to hang a picture of his rabbi on the computer to keep him focused. "It's a constant battle, though."

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