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How the Internet can Influence the Iranian Readers

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Abstract

The Internet could be the major media to promote the reading level in the world, but first the backgrounds for taking the advantages of Internet as a media for reading should be prepared. This article intends to deal with four factors affecting the reading through Internet in developing countries with emphasis of the situation in Iran.

These factors are outlined as:

- *The level of access to Internet*
- *The cultural background and education of the readers*
- *The language barriers*
- *Literacy of the readers to information technology and Internet*
- *The status of online publishing*

In this article, we are also going to discuss how adequate access and knowledge of using Internet and necessary cultural background could influence the use of Internet for reading purposes in a developing country like Iran.

Finally some recommendations have been made to enable developing countries to take the advantages of Internet for reading and educational purposes.

Introduction

It is widely believed that information and knowledge is the key to economic development. The Internet facilitates, classifies and enables the exchange of information, knowledge and news. The information can vary from local news to business or education developments to health, and therefore help enhance the standard of living of its users or viewers.

Rapid growth of the Internet holds substantial positive promise effects on developing countries. The transition of information to electronic media is making information resources of the world available to more audience. The Internet has a major effect on the methods, the knowledge and information distribute among the consumers.

There is no doubt that online computer use is widespread and growing. The census of people using Internet is growing and this is the case everywhere in the world, although the rate is very different among the developed and developing countries.

Internet has not developed throughout the world in a uniform way. How many users and how many hosts are connected to the Internet are the two most widely used indicators of development of this emerging medium (ITU, 2000). For instance, the percentage of the population which is a regular user ranges from over 50% in Scandinavia to less than 1% in many underdeveloped African, Central American, and South Asian countries. The number of hosts, i.e. computers linked to the Internet, is also uneven, ranging from more than one for every 10 people to less than one for every 10,000 (ITU, 2000). (4)

Few years ago Internet was a luxury good. At the present, although the Internet may not be a luxury in the richest countries, it is still beyond the bulk of world's population. Though it is clear that all aspects of life are going to be touched with Internet in one way or another. This would be the case for every country with lag of time.

In January 2000 there were about 72.4 million hosts on the Internet. For a long time the number of hosts has doubled every year. The Third World is still participating with a mere three percent, while the United States get about 72 per cent of all Internet hosts. About 85.3% of worldwide Internet hosts are in the G7-countries, which make up only about ten per cent of world population. The most populated countries of the Third World, China, India, Brazil and Nigeria all together make up only 0.75% of all hosts although they possess more than 40% of the world's population.

Africa's 780 million people, which make up 13% of the world's population share 0.3% of world's total according to the Internet Software Consortium. The next least served region is Latin America with 1.4 per cent of the world's hosts.

World Total	272.54 million
Africa	2.46 million
Asia/Pacific	54.90 million
Europe	71.99million
Middle East	1.29 million
Canada & USA	136.06 million
Latin America	8.79 million

Table 1 Distribution of Internet users

Access to the Internet in Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran occupies the entire eastern Gulf and dominates the strait through which much of the world's oil supply travels, making it of great interest and concern to others. Only slightly (16 percent) smaller than the region's largest country, Saudi Arabia, Iran is by far one of the most populated countries of the region. It is the only non-Arab country proximal to the Persian Gulf; the majority of its inhabitants are of Persian descent, although there are significant Arab and non-Arab minorities. The formal language is Persian. English is used as second language among educated people.

Iran's entrance into the Internet managed by Institute for Theoretical Physics and Mathematics (IPM). The link was at first through the BITNET network and Iran's membership in EARN (which developed later to Trans-European Research and Educational Networking Association - TERENA). It consisted of a single 9600 baud leased line to the University of Vienna in Austria in January 1993. The first email from Iran was a simple greeting from IPM's director to Vienna University administrators.

The connection to Internet later developed into a full-fledged Internet link with the assignment of 500 IP addresses to the county and acceptance of Iran as a Class C node. Primary users of connection at first were academics and research institutions, all being served through their own connections to IPM.

Over the past few years, domestic Internet connections have grown very rapidly, at times placing Iran among the top countries in terms of rate of growth of Internet access. The present Iranian Internet scene, more than 9 years after the original connection, is still a very dynamic one, with tens of thousands of mostly academic users and with networks and bulletin boards expanding everywhere. Recently however additional outside links have been put into operation by the Iranian PTT, serving mostly commercial entities and government agencies. Ambitious plans for expanding Internet access and availability nationwide have also been announced.

In Iran both government and private sectors are trying to promote the access to Internet. The government is a major source to provide the access to Internet to people working in the public sector.

For instance, in recent years many universities have established computer sites to promote the access of students and professors to this media. The Iranian Center for Scientific and Technical research and Ministry of Telephone and communications are main providers of Internet to the Ministry of Higher Education and Research and Technology subdivisions, like universities and research institutes in the public sectors. The private sectors also have made positive efforts to publicize the Internet use. There are also some attempts to provide the access for high school students. But the majority of public Iranian high schools are deprived from access to Internet yet.

Iran's IP based Public Data Network (Upgraded IRANPAC) is currently in operation in more than 170 locations nationwide. Almost all major cities are connected through multiple 64 kbps lines (see Fig. 2.1), though not all are being actually used. The technical know-how for putting very fast links into operation in Iran is certainly there.

It is clear is that the Internet is expanding very rapidly in the country, despite the various problems, and past and present strategic mistakes. The government is certainly supportive of the effort, providing the underlying physical infrastructure, and leaving content and access provision to others – there is good hope for Internet's future path in Iran. In any case, it is hard to imagine Iran in the future without reliable Internet access, at the very least for universities, research and education centers, and major industries.

Cultural Background of the Readers

Reading is a phenomenon, which can be done for different purposes such as acquiring information, education, leisure and etc. The printed publications were the main medium for traditional reading. As the format of the reading mediums are going to be changed to online, especially through Internet, the factors and the methods influence on the reading, as a recognized human being action can be changed.

The effect of Internet on reading depends on cultural background, values and also on education level of the users. The reading can be done for different purposes. It can be done just for the purpose of acquiring information, for the purpose of education and research or for filling the leisure time. The rate of reading is very different among countries. In some developed countries people with average education spent many hours to read. Also there countries among developing countries that even many educated people spend less than 20 minutes to acquire information. If the cultural, social and political background of a country were information based, the value of reading would be more obvious....

Reading status in Iran

To clarify the status of reading in Iran, I summarized the result of a public survey conducted in May by the morning Daily newspaper "Iran" about books, book reading and the needs of readers coinciding with The International Book Fair held in Tehran.

The population in the survey included 60.3% women and 39.7% men. Of the total respondents, 43.6% were between 20 to 25 years of age, 34.6% between 25 to 35 years old, 16.7% between 35 to 55 years and 5.1% were over 55 years.

Majority of the people participating in the survey were in the higher educational strata, either pursuing collegiate or graduate studies. Diploma holders and those with lower levels of formal education made up 16.6%, university students comprised 38.8% while the remainder had either postgraduate

Degrees or were enrolled in graduate courses. With regards to occupation, 19.9% of those interviewed were office workers, 27.6% were teachers, professors and journalists, 6.4% were medical doctors and 40.4% were engaged in other professions or were working freelance.

Diploma or lower 16.6% University students 38.5% Associate degree 6.4%, Bachelor's degree 27.0% Master or higher 11.5% Asked whether they read books, 44.5% of participants said they did occasionally, 43.2% regularly, while 12.3% stated that they did not read books.

As to reading time, 42.6% reported duration of less than one hour a day and 28.7% mentioned reading for two hours a day on a regular basis.

Only 5.5% of those interviewed said that they read and studied for over six hours a day. Based on figures gathered during the survey, reading time was computed to be an average of one hour and 49 minutes.

Statistical figures in many countries shows that over seven hours a day are devoted to this activity; this average in Iran is likewise below the standard set by the world's cultural institutions including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Given indications that the culture of book reading had not been well entrenched in the country, the survey tried to reveal the factors that hindered the perusal of books. Forty percent of participants mentioned lack of time prevented them from reading on a regular basis or from reading at all. Many respondents adding that they had two jobs or were tied up with their professional activities.

The high costs of books were blamed by 38% of respondents.

The unavailability or lack of access to favorite books prevented 10.5% from reading.

Concerning types of reading material, 25.9% of those participants said they preferred novels and 22.4% stated their interest was in reading literary pieces. Only 2% reported the study of medical subjects. Novels 25.9% Poetry and literature 22.4% Scientific topics 16.9% History and philosophy 14.9% Social sciences 17.7% Arts 2.0% Medical subjects 2.0% Of those who read books regularly or occasionally, 71% did so mostly at home, 11.6% in the university, and 5.8% in libraries. The office or workplace was also mentioned as a reading area by 8.7% while the rest perused books at any appropriate location.

The lower percentage of library users indicated that libraries were not attractive to book readers, and there is a need for officials responsible for cultural affairs in the country to promote facilities for study by upgrading the efficiency of libraries to attract more people.

Complaints were voiced by 53.7% of those polled, about the excessive prices of books, and 16.4% deduced that the scarcity of favored reading material was a factor that drove prices up. The quality of printing as not being up to standard was lamented by 12.7%. Exorbitant prices, pricing irregularities 53.7% Scarcity of books 16.4% Low quality of printing 12.7% limited number of new titles, rather old titles

17.2% those polled said the last book they had read was about history and it was over a week ago and 14.5% reported they had not read any book in the past six months.

The survey showed that an inverse relationship existed between reading and age, meaning that the time for regular book perusal decreased as the readers' age increased. People with advanced ages tended to read less compared to those who were below 25 years. Moreover, the amount of time devoted to reading was also affected by academic studies, as university students read books regularly more than other people.

People whose professions involved cultural and academic work read more and at a regular basis, whereas office workers, housewives and those who were engaged in freelance work devoted lesser time to books. Office workers, among all respondents, allotted the least amount of time to reading.

Studying the relationship between the readers' gender and the subject matter that they were predisposed to, the survey results indicated that women were more inclined towards novels, poetry and literature while men were more particular to historical and philosophical topics. The male readers also preferred the basic sciences more than the females.

People below 25 years were the most prolific readers of novels, poems and other literary material. But as the readers' age progressed, there was a heightened interest in historical subjects. And while the younger readers were absorbed with scientific topics including medical subjects, the opposite trend was exhibited by the older readers.

The last point analyzed was the relationship between occupation and the subjects with which the readers were predisposed to. The material favored by housewives and office workers were literary pieces, novels and poetry. But academics, and college students read scientific subjects in professionals in medicine different areas.

Those who were involved in freelance work also liked novels, poetry and literature; as a matter of fact, they favored these materials more than readers in other lines of work. On the whole, the results of the survey, indicates the preference of readers for novels. This point is eye-catching compared with other

Variables including the level of study, sex and age (7)

The results of this public opinion survey conducted in Tehran indicate that people spend an average of one hour and forty-nine minutes in reading books. The Factors that were mentioned as having a negative effect on book reading are Shortage of time, the high cost of books, unavailability of favored reading matter and poor printing quality. Novel, poetry and literature stand high in the readers' preferences while medical subjects are of least interest. The main point about this survey is that the majority of highly educated people lives in Tehran and also goes to places like the International Book Fair and naturally should have enough motivation for reading. But if similar surveys cover the population of the county in smaller cities and rural areas, the reading level probably would be less than the result of this survey. A main question that should be answered through a research is that, how we, as librarian could motivate the people with low motivation for reading to use the Internet for the same purpose?

Language Barriers

The language is a main factor for reading purpose. Most of the reading sources on the Internet are provided in English language. The language is major barrier for many people who like to read the material provided on the Internet. In the countries, which, English is known as a formal language, there are minor barriers to use the Internet resources, mostly written in English.

The amount of information sources in local language has also a major impact on the level of reading among the average people, who mostly prefer to use national language on reading. Although there are good progress for the development of Persian sites on the Internet, but the scientific information are mostly produced in English and production of community information useful for the public is very low. Promoting the existing situation, would be possible through the promotion of English knowledge in educational programs and systems of the country and also an urgent plan is required to produce local and community information on the net and translate the scientific sources to local language.

Readers Literacy to Information Technology and Internet

Iran, with population of 65 million and literacy rate of more than 72% holds almost one of the most educated people of the region. About 34 % of the population are under the age 16. Although the young population of the country create a potential market for the Internet use in the country, but presently, the majority of high school students, especially in smaller cities and towns are deprived from enough access to Internet.

The level of income of the Iranian family also has a major effect on the level of literacy of the people to information technology and also to their access to Internet. Providing access to Internet for kids in highly educated and also rich families is not any more a dream. Although the majority of Iranian students especially in smaller cities and towns have not enough access to Internet, but there are minorities who can provide very good access to Internet for their kids at their home.

Use of the Internet requires a fairly complex set of skills and technology. At the very least, one must have electricity, a communications line, a terminal capable of interacting across the communications line and (in most cases) a reasonable fluency in English (80 percent of the material on the World Wide Web is written in English; however, a movement to replace some English-language Web pages with other language is growing.

Though Internet is a very user-friendly media but an especial educational and cultural background is necessary to use Internet for different purposes. This background can be acquired through enough access and also education. The governments are responsible to have a formal policy to equip the different categories of the people to use Internet effectively. Universal and international organizations have a greater responsibility to find out about the solutions that can fill the gap between the developed world and developing countries and also among the reach and poor within each country.

The status of online publishing in Iran

The electronic publishing of local sources and community information can have a very positive effect on the rate of reading through the Internet. The electronic publishing is going to grow as a consequence of Internet. There are many advantages for electronic publishing comparing to printed publishing. These advantages are noted as:

- The speed of electronic publishing is much faster than printed publishing
- Editorial process of online publishing is much easier and faster than the printed resources.
- The physical spaces needed to store electronic publishing is not even comparable to printed material
- The expenses for electronic publishing are less than the printed material.
- The dissemination of electronic publishing is very easy and cheap
- The on-line shopping for electronic publishing seems more realistic
- The out of print phrase seems meaningless in an electronic publishing process
- It is very time consuming and as a conclusion the rate of publishing can be higher comparing to printing publishing
- The production multimedia on line sources is more fascinating than the traditional ones.

There are also barriers for electronic publishing in countries like Iran which can be noted as:

- The level of access to Internet
- The level of literacy to information technology of the local publishers
- The cultural background and facilities for using on-line published resources
- The traditional interests of the people to use the printed material
- The methods of education and learning, which are mostly traditional.
- The lack of a national policy to encourage online publishing
- The lack of clear copyright regulations

The main solution for promotion of electronic publishing in the country is education and training of local publishers for the use of Internet for electronic publishing. A national plan and framework should be recommended for conversion of print publishing to online and Internet publishing. Universities have a major role in production of scientific publishing; they should be a pioneer in electronic publishing. They also have enough knowledge to arrange academic courses for local publishers to be acquainted with the process of electronic publishing and motivate them for online publishing through Internet.

Conclusions

Although Internet and online publishing could have a very positive impact on the flow of information and also reading level and education, even in developing countries, but there are barriers which seriously widen the gaps among the people in the world and even among people within a country.

Providing the equal access to Internet and reading resources on the Internet needs an international effort by organization like UNESCO

“UNESCO’s objective is to develop a scale of values in cyberspace, to reinforce the free flow of information, and to head off any over-reaction that might lead to excessive regulation of

the communication networks. This February, UNESCO's new director-general, Koichiro Matsuura, pledged to continue the policy. Given the organization's membership, this is a significant promise (7).

The serious approach of local government to overcome the existing barriers could be a positive effort to take the advantage of Internet for reading and community welfare. Training of the public would prepare them to take the advantages of Internet. This is a growing responsibility for everyone involved in the field of education. Through education the people can realize the advantage of Internet not only for reading but also use reading on the Internet to find out about their essential needs and also to take a major role in the development of their countries. Through formal education the majority of people, especially young could realize Internet positive impacts and benefits of Internet use on major problems such as:

- Job creation: Creation of new jobs and possibilities in the information technology and better statistics about the situation of the employment.
- Health: Setting up of health information systems and use of tele-medicine for remote areas.
- Education and research: Tele-learning, interconnection of research institutions at regional and worldwide level, and reduction of costs.
- Commerce and trade: Access to information over import and export of products, developing and marketing of news products.
- Tourism: Strengthening of international tourism, reducing costs for advertising.
- Improvement of import and export of agriculture products, improvement of production, reducing the premature decay of food by means of better distribution.
- Improvement of rights and possibilities of women, use of new technologies for propagating gender equality.
- Natural disaster: warning systems can inform the people of the country to confront the natural disaster and decrease the consequences.
- Using multimedia tools, alphabet recognition can be enhanced. The Internet can take part in literacy promotion. It is possible for the user to gain an understanding at his/her own pace.
- Educational material can be transmitted using the Internet.
- General reference sources such as Encyclopedias, geographic information and games, otherwise unaffordable for the majority, can be provided for free through the Internet.
- Rural schools could be adopted by city schools and provided with up-to-dated content through the Internet.

Developing countries should establish IT plans and policies, which take into, account social, cultural, and ethical as factors contributing towards agreed human goals. IT transfer should be supported by education in computer literacy and Local information in local languages with respect to local culture. Easy access to Internet and enough educational background are prerequisite for motivating people to use this media for reading purposes

When the people realize the positive impact of Internet on their daily life, they will use this media to read and acquire their needed information and also fill their leisure time with the positive use of this technology.

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