

A LOOK AT THE PRESENT STATUS OF ELECTRONIC PUBLISHING IN IRAN AT THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR 2009

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Abstract

The present status and future of electronic publishing in Iran does not seem to be very promising. The author, trying to gain some statistics on the issue, found almost no useful statistics. This paper that tries to give a picture of electronic publishing in Iran is based structurally on an article by Zahra Seifkashani (2003) entitled: "How the Internet can Influence the Iranian Readers"; it discusses the status of electronic publishing in Iran. The problems discussed by the author, as well as other problems, will be discussed in this article along with various suggestions on how to improve the Iranian electronic publishing scene.

Keywords: electronic publishing; Iran.

1. Introduction

The present status and future of electronic publishing in Iran does not seem to be very promising. The author, when trying to gain some statistics on the present status of electronic publishing in Iran, found less as he searched more. He not only searched Bookhouse, the most reliable site on the Iranian publishing industry, but also checked other links from that website to other relevant websites, such as: the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the ministry responsible for the publishing industry in Iran as well as, some ten reliable and related websites. No statistics were found. The only available statistics were those of Bookhouse, which stated that there were 101 electronic publishers active in the field, the total number of which when the figure was reconsidered in terms of geographical distribution

of publishers, summed up to 96! Bookhouse was checked at the end of December 2008 for statistics, though the figure was somewhat different from the one given by the head of the Association of Electronic Publishers (AEP) which was 205 active electronic publishers in Iran. Even the Iranian library and information science discussion group gave absolutely no response to the author!

What follows is an attempt to give a picture of electronic publishing in Iran. The paper will be based structurally on an article by Zahra Seifkashani [1]. Seifkashani, when discussing the status of electronic publishing in Iran, enumerated the following as the barriers for electronic publishing in Iran:

- 1) The level of literacy of local publishers in information technology
- 2) The cultural background and facilities for using on-line published resources
- 3) The traditional interest of the people in using printed material
- 4) The methods of education and learning, which are mostly traditional
- 5) The lack of a national policy to encourage online publishing
- 6) The lack of clear copyright regulations .

The paper will focus on the above six reasons in detail, covering a five year period up to 2008, but will also analyze other reasons why electronic publishing is not flourishing in Iran. The order of the presentation will be the same as the six questions. The facts stated by various Iranian authorities and experts, as well as some other facts, will be used as the content of the paper.

2. The level of literacy of the local publishers in information technology

Although there are no facts available on the level of literacy of the local publishers in information technology, one reason for the unwillingness of the publishers towards electronic publishing probably might be their limits in information technology literacy. Almost all of the local publishers in Iran have their own websites; however, that seems to be their only relationship with electronic publishing.

3. The cultural background and facilities for using on-line published resources

To discuss the above reason, quoting from some authorities might be enough. Khatibi, an electronic publisher believes that the entry of new technologies usually provokes some resistance, and various traditional publishers suppose that electronic publishing will make traditional publishing disappear. He considers the idea as wrong and the two ways of publishing as complementary. Razzazi, a lec-

turer at the School of Computer and IT of the Amirkabir University in Tehran, states that lack of access to Internet by the public is another problem related to electronic publishing. He continues that when a broad sector of society cannot have access to Internet and cyberspace, one cannot expect the development of electronic publishing in Iran. He also states that Iran is weak in terms of technical infrastructure. The publication of an electronic paper or book is a hard and time-consuming task due to the low speed of the network. Another problem, he believes, is the high cost of access to the network and its slow speed which has made people prefer not to pay much attention to electronic books in Internet. Some reasons of the publishers and disadvantages of electronic publishing in Iran can be enumerated as follows:

- a. Electronic publishing obviously needs the computer, and this is a serious barrier on the road to spreading electronic publishing;
- b. Publishers do not trust the web environment very much.

4. The traditional interests of the people in using printed material

Many authors of literary and artistic works do not show much willingness to present their works in new formats, and their reasons are understandable. Due to the popularity of websites and weblogs, it is now much easier for everyone to write; and for an author presenting his/her work in these environments, it is quite possible to misplace his/her work in cyberspace. Also, while there is no appropriate market for printed and traditional books, an author cannot hope to find a place for his/her work in the electronic environment. Khatibi, an electronic publisher, believes that in Iran people still prefer traditional books over electronic ones.

5. The methods of education and learning, which are mostly traditional

The methods of education and learning are mostly traditional; for example, textbooks that comprise some 65% of the total publications of the country are published in traditional formats. There seems to be almost no operational view towards electronic publishing in this regard by the Ministry of Education, the ministry responsible for elementary and secondary school education in Iran.

6. The lack of a national policy to encourage online publishing

Golpayegani, a member of the administrative board of AEP, mentions the two most serious barriers in the path of development of electronic publishing in Iran as: lack of an embodied strategy and comprehensive plan to develop the industry, and lack of intelligent management in the development and guidance of electronic publishing. From some Iranian experts' points of view on electronic publishing, the Iranian government supports traditional publishing and provides subsidies for it, while electronic publishing lacks this kind of support. The number of traditional publishers has grown four times in recent years, as the head of the AEP indicates, but that is not the reason for the quality of traditional publishing since most of these publishers have chosen to be publishers because of subsidies to paper by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, says Golpayegani.

7. The lack of clear copyright regulations

Copyright in electronic publishing is not considered important, and unauthorized copies are sold cheaply. The most basic support much needed for electronic publishing in Iran, as the head of the AEP indicates, is the implementation of copyright law. Until governmental agencies implement this law, the protection of electronic products is necessary. Razzazi, a professor from AmirKabir University in Tehran, enumerated the barriers in the development of electronic publishing in Iran and said copyright was the most important problem in this regard. He also said that if an author spent his/her time writing a book in an electronic format, he/she would not benefit much from it since due to the lack of the copyright law, his/her book would easily and cheaply be accessible to the public. Mokhtabad, a journalist and an expert in the field of books, believes that the copyright law in its present form is the same law for authors and composers approved in 1969 and its complement in 1973. He believes that in this copyright law, the current situation was not predicted and is not suitable for today's cultural and technological condition. The head of the AEP indicates that some ninety percent of electronic publishing problems have been solved and the only remaining one is the lack of copyright law. Khatibi, an electronic publisher, considers the lack of the copyright law as one of the biggest problems in Iranian electronic publishing. He also believes that the lack of a culture which uses original software is another problem. Due to the same problems, he states, no publisher is willing to present high quality electronic material to the market.

There are some other factors affecting electronic publishing in Iran. Shortage of expert workforce, ambiguity in the publishing market, unawareness of people and

even authorities towards this market, and their incorrect understanding of the issue are among other problems.

The before mentioned problem, that is, the unawareness of people and even authorities towards the publishing market and their incorrect understanding of the issue, seems to be the key problem. It seems that even citizens are more aware of the importance of electronic media than the authorities. As an example, only in the 2008 issue of the document, "Regulation for the promotion of faculty of the universities and institutions of higher education, research, and technology" [2], authorized by the Ministry of Sciences, Researches, and Technology (MSRT), an authentic document issued by an authoritative institution, dated 1987, 2002, and 2008 respectively, concepts such as "electronic book and journal" and "virtual syllabus" are seen, though not in its 2002 version. The findings of a research project carried out in Iran [3] also showed that high school students in Shiraz were more willing to use printed tools rather than electronic media for their homework, research, and recreation. The research also indicated that about 42% of school libraries lacked computers and only 32% had one to five computers. Researches carried out by Yaripour [4], Eslami [5], and Farhadi [6] demonstrated the same, as well as the fact, that most students accessed internet from homes and places other than schools. These researches somehow prove the unawareness and incorrect understanding by the Iranian Ministry of Education.

8. Conclusions and a suggestion

The reason why the present status and future of electronic publishing in Iran does not seem very promising lies in the unawareness and incorrect understanding by the Iranian authorities. Unless authoritative institutions such as the Ministry of Sciences, Researches, and Technology; Ministry of Education; and Ministry of Culture and Islamic guidance understand, become aware of, and encourage the use of information technology and electronic media in all its formats, concepts such as electronic publishing will not be rooted deeply in the traditional atmosphere of the publishing industry of Iran. The Iranian government's support of electronic publishing in absolutely all aspects is the key solution to all problems concerning electronic publishing in Iran.

Notes and references

Note: all the references are in Farsi.

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