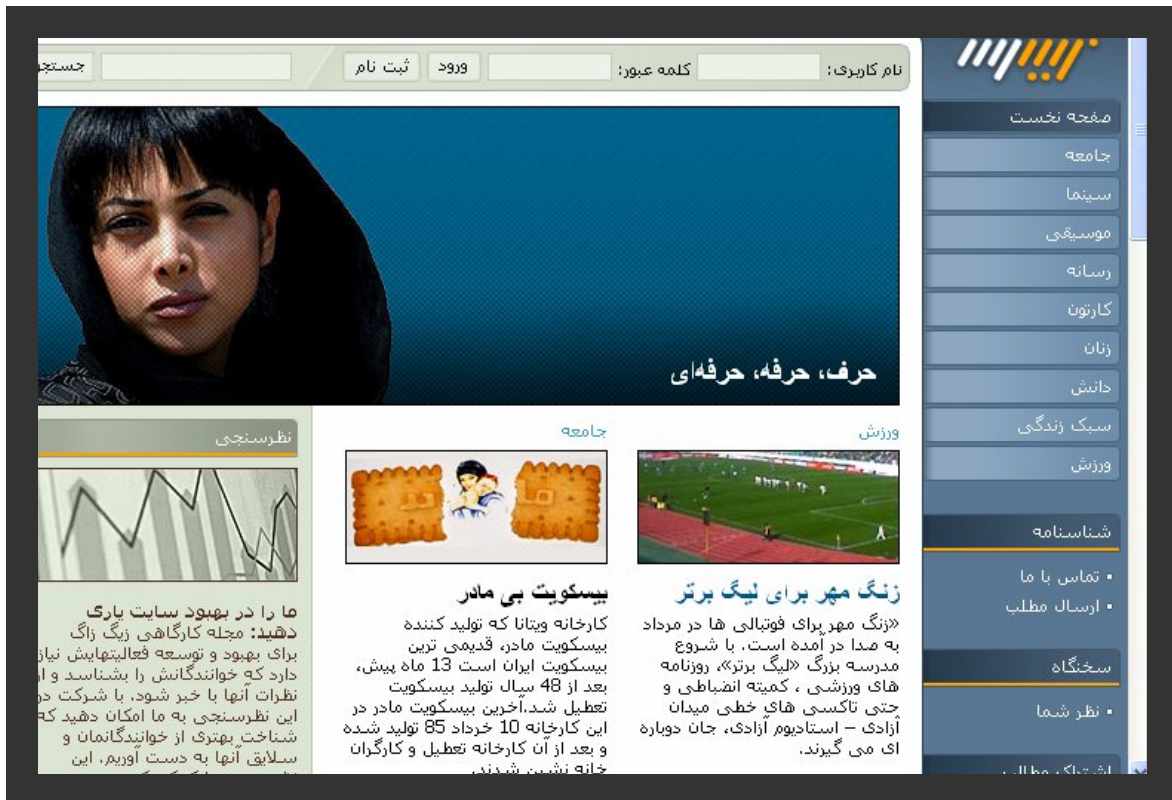


Generating new media and new participation in Iran: The Case of ZigZag



*Anna Godfrey
BBC World Service Trust, UK
Anna.godfrey@bbc.co.uk

Prof Michael Thelwall
University of Wolverhampton
Oxford Internet Institute, The University of
Oxford
M.Thelwall@wlv.ac.uk

Mahmood Enayat
BBC World Service Trust, UK
Oxford Internet Institute, The University of
Oxford
Mahmood.enayat@bbc.co.uk
Mahmood.enayat@oii.ac.uk

Research & Learning Group
BBC World Service Trust

Dr. Gerry Power, Director
Research & Knowledge
Management
Tel: +44 (0)20 7557 0509
Gerry.power@bbc.co.uk

www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/researchlearning

Generating new media and new participation in Iran: The Case of ZigZag¹

*Anna Godfrey, *BBC World Service Trust, UK*

Prof Michael Thelwall, *University of Wolverhampton, Oxford Internet Institute*

Mahmood Eneyat, *Oxford Internet Institute, BBC World Service Trust, UK*

This paper examines how a range of online research methods can facilitate learning about the delivery and impact of online media development projects in closed societies. Part I of this paper focuses on how conventional online research methods can be applied to online journalism training projects in closed media societies using the BBC World Service Trust's Iran Media Development Project, and its supporting research, as a case study. Part II of this paper examines how webometrics specifically facilitate the evaluation of such projects. Findings indicate that new media, specifically the internet, can effectively deliver journalism training and that projects such as the Iran Media Development Project can facilitate learning and networking among journalists and wider audiences in closed media environments. Blogs are particularly important in reaching a wider audience.

PART 1

در فضای روزنامه نگاری ایران روشهای جدید کم تجربه می شود
“*In Iran new journalistic styles are rarely experimented with*”.
Quote from a Zig Zag Registered User.

Introduction

The mass media has long been used in political, social and economic development. This is based on the premise that it can influence and transform traditional political structures, leading to political modernisation (e.g. Schramm, 1964). Nevertheless, some scholars doubt whether such a premise is applicable in countries where the media is frequently part of the state's power structure (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2000).

The emergence of the internet has given birth to claims that new media will bring about change in closed countries (Rahimi, 2003; Kelly and Etling 2008). Recognising the important role of new media in Iran, the BBC World Service Trust launched the Iran Media Development Project in 2005. It trains practising and aspiring Iranian journalists to generate high quality content for Persian-speaking audiences inside and outside Iran. The project uses long

¹ The authors wish to extend special thanks to Sonia Whitehead, Sina Motelabi, Adrienne Van Heteren, Behzad Bolour, Emily White, Lida Gheidary, Nick Raistrick, Emily LeRoux-Rutledge, Simon Derry, Dr Gerry Power and Prof. William Dutton for their contributions to this report.

distance mentoring, online learning modules, a Persian-language online magazine called ZigZag and an associated radio programme to provide a safe environment for trainees to learn about journalism ethics and online interactivity.

New media is embraced not only in delivering the project, but also in conducting the research. Research using online interviews, online surveys, trainee questionnaires and Google Analytics has explored the project's multiple audiences and the ways in which new media has facilitated learning and communication. In addition, a quantitative study undertaken in collaboration with the Oxford Internet Institute has explored the wider online environment. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how a range of online research methods have facilitated learning about the delivery and impact of an online media development project in a closed society.

About the BBC World Service Trust

The BBC World Service Trust was founded by the BBC in 1999. The Trust is an independent charity funded by external grants and voluntary contributions, mainly from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the European Union, UN agencies and charitable foundations. It receives a small amount of core support for its activities from the BBC. The Trust partners with civil society, the media, governments and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in order to strengthen the media sector, produce creative programmes and deliver research and learning to support Trust projects and the wider development community².

The Research & Learning Group

Research underpins all of the BBC World Service Trust's work, informing each stage of project delivery and helping to capture evidence of impact. This improves the quality of the Trust's outputs, and also ensures that the BBC World Service Trust is able to remain accountable to its donor organisations. Studies are conducted by the Research & Learning Group (R&L), an international group of research professionals from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the UK who have been recruited and trained by the BBC World Service Trust to specialise in media and audience research. To date, the R&L Group has delivered research in 22 languages across 39 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America³.

While R&L's research is largely applied, and designed to inform the development and evaluation of projects such as the Iran Media Development Project, the Trust recognises the value of the research to media development and academic

² The Trust's work focuses on three primary themes: Governance & Human Rights, Health and Emergency Response. In addition, the Trust has two subsidiary themes: Learning for Livelihoods and the Environment.

³ The R&L team focuses on four key activities: providing audience and media sector insights to inform project development throughout the project cycle; conducting qualitative and quantitative research studies to assess impact; building capacity in audience research skills in-country; and documenting and disseminating what has been learned.

research. The Trust's strong research orientation uniquely positions it between theory and practice, providing it with an opportunity to connect the two fields. Moreover, in developing Trust research to support media development projects, every effort is made to draw on current academic theory, while acknowledging that in many cases this theory, where it exists, has been developed in a Western context, and therefore must be carefully applied to developing countries.

Media Development

To help strengthen the media sector in developing and transitional countries, the Trust engages at four different levels: *the sector level* with policy and decision-makers; *the organisation level* with state, commercial and not-for-profit entities; *the practitioner level* with journalists, media professionals and opinion leaders; and *the individual level* with target audiences.

Different media and communication support strategies are adopted depending on whether a project is being delivered in a stable, conflict, transition or closed context. In the case of the latter three contexts, the Trust frequently uses online journalism training⁴ in its approach to media development. iLearn is an online learning system devised by the Trust specially for this purpose. The system contains dozens of modules – each explaining a different subject area. Trainers use these modules to create tailor-made courses, meeting the individual needs of each student.

iLearn has been customised to support a wide range of training projects worldwide. iLearn training projects have been delivered in Europe (Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania and Russia); Asia (India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia); Africa (Nigeria, Somalia and Somaliland); and a range of Middle Eastern countries including Syria, Oman, Yemen and Iran.

Iran

Iran, located in the Middle East, has a population of approximately 70 million (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2006). Following the overthrow of the Shah during the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iran became an Islamic Republic. Boosted by the Republic's free education and literacy campaigns, Iran's predominately young population is largely well educated⁵ yet subject to strict cultural and political controls. Speech, appearance and relations are all regulated within the Islamic Republic. Although there is widespread access to the television and radio, it is also subject to state control, and Iran ranks towards the bottom of many press freedom indices⁶. To circumvent censorship, Iranians are turning to new media. A 2007 Intermedia survey found that 10% of respondents had accessed the

⁴ Online is generally supplemented by one or more of the following: face-to-face training, mentoring, attachments and co-productions.

⁵ 84 % of population aged 6 years and over are literate (men 88.7% and women 80.3%), Statistical Centre of Iran (2006).

⁶ Iran is in the bottom three countries in the world in the Reporters Without Borders worldwide press freedom index. Iran scored 1.57, unsustainable mixed system) in IREX's Media Sustainability Index 2005.

internet in the last week, and 19% of respondents had used in the internet in the last month. This equates to 13 million accessing the internet from within Iran each month. Weblogs, a form of online diary, are also popular in Iran. It is estimated that Persian is among the top five most popular languages for keeping a blog (Khilabany and Sreberny, 2007). The total number of blogs in Iran is unknown and estimates have ranged from less than half a million to 800,000, although not all are active⁷.

In a closed society such as Iran, it has been suggested that the internet and blogosphere are important tools for information and communication, especially among the growing section of society which is young, well educated and internet savvy⁸. Weblogs serve both social and political functions concurrently by bringing people together within the country and exposing the outside world to Iranian culture (Simmons 2005). Blogs offer Iranians opportunities to communicate ideas and thoughts, publish content, co-ordinate activities and meet likeminded people. Much of this has been well documented in Nasrin Alavi's book on Iranian blogging and is true for ordinary Iranians and some politicians – both President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and former Vice President and current presidential advisor Mohammad Ali Abtahi keep a blog.

Blogs can also enable aspiring reporters, commonly referred to as citizen journalists, and practising journalists to publish uncensored reports and to interact with audiences inside and outside Iran. However, the internet has not remained untouched by state control and the country's strict social codes.

The internet is politically contentious in Iran. Kelly and Etling (2008) suggest that the internet could be used to promote democratic change in Iran. At the same time, or perhaps as a consequence, Iranian officials have identified the internet as one of the means by which the West, specifically the US, is attempting to subvert the Islamic Republic. Bloggers have been sent to jail, websites are being blocked, and user bandwidth is constricted (Kelly and Etling, 2008). Paradoxically, as noted by Khilabany and Sreberny (2007) some of the formal politics of the regime have migrated to the Web, with many government departments posting public statistics and other materials online.

About the Iran Media Development Project/ZigZag

Recognising the important role of new media in Iran, the BBC World Service Trust launched the Iran Media Development Project in 2005. The project trains journalists and bloggers in the importance of objectivity and balance in reporting, and in the importance of online journalism. The project aims to provide a safe environment for trainees to learn about journalism ethics and online interactivity.

⁷ Sources: www.canada.com, Wikipedia, www.haaretz.com

To complement iLearn and some limited face-to-face training, the project's Persian-language online magazine ZigZag affords trainees the opportunity to interact with trainers and mentors, registered users⁹, and each other, whilst putting knowledge and skills acquired via training into practice.

Through ZigZag's private and public fora, including a virtual newsroom (see figure 1), trainees receive support to develop and publish articles. The public forum is where any registered user — not just trainees — can submit a story for editing and feedback from the audience. The private forum allows trainees get help from BBC mentors or each other. Every single story that runs on ZigZag also has a discussion area where people can discuss the topic and the way the story was told. *Was it balanced? Was it fair?*

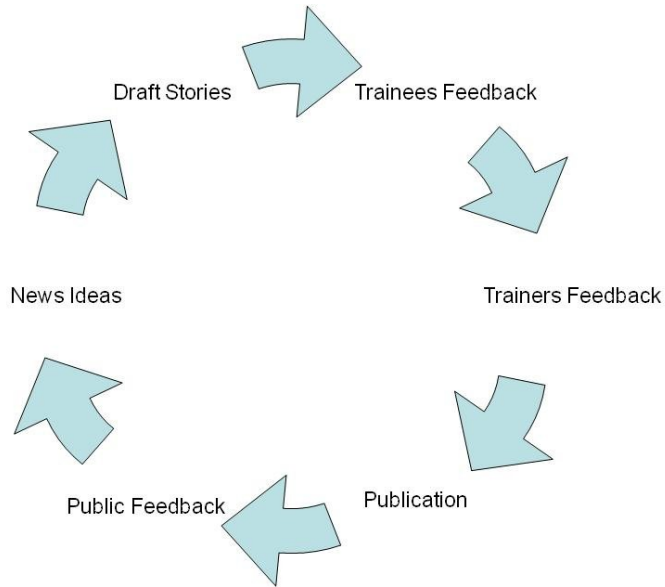


Figure 1: The Virtual Newsroom

Were the right sources interviewed and quoted correctly? Multiple discussions can be based around an article. One thread, about impartiality in the sourcing of a story, has had 1,000 visitors already.

In a complex country such as Iran, with a closed society and good Internet infrastructure, shifting training delivering online offered the project greater access to trainees. To date, 160 trainees have participated in the training, some of whom have graduated to become mentors to new trainees, online moderators of forums and sub-editors for the magazine and radio programme.

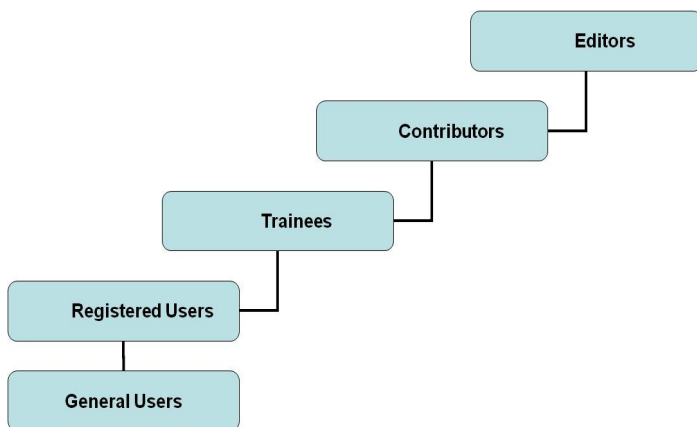


Figure 2: Moving up the Ladder

⁹ In order to post a comment on ZigZag website a user must be registered. Registration requires a valid email address only. Trainees are a small subgroup (between 5% and 10%) of registered users.

Articles and packages on Zigzag's online magazine and radio programme cover a wide variety of social, cultural and lifestyle issues. Since the ZigZag site launched in November 2006, it has received more than 1, 095,075 visits and served up 3.4 million page views. More importantly (given that the goal of the project is to train journalists, and not necessarily to create a mainstream Persian publication) 3,064 registered users of ZigZag have posted more than 7,500 comments to the site. In addition, many Iranian bloggers have written about the site and its articles and debates in their blogs, which have also made ZigZag more visible in Persian webspace. Similarly, on the radio show there are a number of calls and SMSs from listeners per show discussing issues from exams and high unemployment, to taboo topics such as dress code, slang, the increasing number of drug addicts and young prostitutes, and the hidden lives of homosexuals.

To date the articles and the radio programme have not dealt with sensitive political issues nor have they used a hard news approach. Instead, they have covered social, cultural, economic, gender and technological issues which are commonly overlooked by Iran's politically-dominated media. Although, as noted by Khilabany and Sreberny (2007), in a context where boundaries of public taste and morality are heavily controlled, discussion or action in regard to issue such dress code and talking to the opposite sex, can take on political meaning. Examples of some of the articles and associated discussions are outlined below:

“Crackdown on Hijab in Iran” – an analysis of the crackdown on females and the enforcement of wearing the Hijab in the name of promoting social security. It looks at the ways the events were circulated in the internet, weblogs and other media.

“Life in a death-field” – an article which tells the story of people whose homes are located in the middle of a minefield near the Iran-Iraq border. It explores government and one NGO's activities to actively clear the minefields, which still affect Iran two decades after the end of the war.

“Closure of a biscuit factory” an article which reports on the government's closure of an iconic biscuit factory, the local economic impact of this closure, and the accountability around the decision.

“Dancing in Tehran: the forbidden passion” – an article which reports on dance classes which are highly popular in Iran. Although these classes are not legal, they are becoming increasingly popular among women in the capital.

Research on the Iran Media Development Project/ZigZag

Like all BBC World Service Trust projects, research was embedded in the Iran Media Development project from the beginning. The research involved a 'toolkit'¹⁰ of research methods to capture the impact of the project on its multiple audiences (trainee journalists, registered users and visitors) and to evaluate this approach to media development.

In a closed society like Iran, conducting research online can give the research agenda more flexibility. For example, prior to the first round of introductory face-to-face training in Turkey, trainee attitudinal questionnaires administered electronically¹¹ helped to guide the parameters of the training, and to inform key training objectives. Trainers gained insight into the trainees' expectations of the programme, perceptions of the role of a journalist in Iranian society, and current working practices.

During the training programme the project team required feedback. As a result, and in addition to feedback received via iLearn¹², on and offline interviews were conducted throughout the training. These interviews generally focused on the trainees' experiences of the training and whether the online approach to journalism training had facilitated learning and communication among journalists in a closed media society.

¹⁰ Power, G (2005). Presentation at the first Global Forum for Media Development, Amman, Jordan.

¹¹ See Whitehead, S. and Saville, E (2008). Using content analysis to measure the influence of media development interventions: Elections training of journalists in Yemen. BBC World Service Trust Research Dissemination Series.

¹² All iLearn trainees must, upon completion of each course, provide feedback on how relevant they found the training, and the extent to which it has improved their knowledge of the topic

Examples of Research Insights from the Online Trainee Interviews

In the first wave of training, involving 60 trainees, a sample of 16 trainees was interviewed online in Farsi by an external research organisation. Among those trainees interviewed all respondents had taken part in iLearn and all but one had submitted articles to the website. A few were heavily involved in the production of the radio programme.

Findings revealed that through the training courses, feedback and discussions with fellow trainees, trainees felt they had improved writing and interpretation skills and improved understanding of journalism, specifically around journalism ethics.

“ I used to think that one has to have an intellectual perspective but now I think one has to convey things the way they are in an impartial manner. “

“The distinction between being a politician, journalist, analyst and propagandist are now very important to me”.

Moderator: How have you found this experience?

“Very, very interesting and useful. So much so that up to now I have been the producer of the programme seven times when the main producer was on leave. During that period I learnt how to manage the programme overall. I produced two of the programmes on my home computer. “

“...as a woman I have understood that I am no different from the men and in most cases I am braver than them.... I can now talk about the issues that girls face very openly for everyone to hear.... and I know that I can do many things that most men cannot do”.

Through exposure to alternative ways of thinking and international journalism standards, trainees judged that they had gained a greater appreciation of their role as journalists to produce output for their audience which was unbiased, accurate and well sourced.

Importantly, research also revealed that following initial face-to-face training, online training worked as a stand alone training tool. This was largely a product of:

- relationships developed between trainers and trainees;
- peer networks formed among trainees which offered a sense of community and professionalism;
- confidence gained through being part of the programme.

However, the research also highlighted the importance of feedback. Engagement with the training programme was directly related to the amount and quality of feedback by the trainers and mentors. The research also recommended that the project harness the strength of the online peer networks to ensure the sustainability of the project.

To assess the impact, and the extent to which the project's online approach to journalism training had facilitated learning and communication among journalists and audiences within a closed media society, a survey of registered users was conducted.

The specific research objectives of the survey were to understand:

- Who are the registered users (profile) contributing to ZigZag?
- What do they think of the website?
- What motivated them to register?
- Why are they coming back?
- Can they get this from anywhere else?
- What are the benefits of participating in discussions on ZigZag?

Around 240 online interviews were carried out with a sample of the then 1500 registered users during June and July 2007. The survey was administered using email.

Examples of Research Insights from the Online Trainee Interviews

Findings revealed that Zigzagmag.com registered users are predominantly young, well educated, male, Iranians, who are attracted to the site by the articles and discussions. Motivators for registration mostly centre on a desire to share information and ideas. Most registered visitors came to the site from links on other websites, including blogs and personal recommendations. Loyalty to the website was strong: 8 in 10 registered users said that they would continue to use the site and 7 in 10 visited at least once a week.

The combination of serious articles, participation and light-hearted content were important drivers to loyalty. The site scored 61/100 for uniqueness. Only 19% could name a website which they considered to be similar; 81% either could not name or able to remember the name of a website that was similar to ZigZag. When asked why they rated zigzagmag.com unique compared to other websites, answers were coded: Type of content (54%), Positive Attributes (44%), Transparency (19%), Participation (14%) and the Radio Programme (4%).

Quotes from Q10 'You said you think zigzagmag offers something unique. What do you think makes the zigzagmag.com unique or different from other sites?'

"I see this training workshop as a sample of the current status of the new generation of journalists".

"That some journalism trainees present their work and there is a discussion about that"

"It has a particular atmosphere which other sites do not have. It is full of energy".

"Interviews with special persons which I have not read anywhere else and also the opinions of people both for and against".

"The range of topics and separation of the two concepts of "discussion" and "argumentation" one of which I thought could be taken out of our vocabulary

For introducing snug places which is something I have seen for the first time and it certainly unique. Or to have the courage to interview homosexuals or rappers.

"Its lack of bias and attention to particular and taboo issues in the society".

"More trustworthy and cultural articles which are far from strong political slants"

'ZigZag attempts to create native content based on world standards. The site is a space for discussion that all other Iranian sites try to avoid.

ZigZag also had an educational benefit for registered users; three out of four respondents (76%) said that they had learnt from the site. Three key themes emerged when users explained what they have learnt from zigzag these included 'learning about journalism' (38%), 'learning about specific topic' (29%), and 'learning from others' (13%).

In addition to the research conducted by the Research and Learning Group, a further quantitative research study was conducted in collaboration with the Oxford Internet Institute to find out about the wider online context of ZigZag website. Part II of this paper will detail some of the findings from this quantitative study, and draw conclusions on adopting an online approach to journalism training in closed societies.

PART II

Webometric Research: Understanding Zigzag's online presence (tentative)

Introduction

This part of the paper examines how a relatively new quantitative research technique, webometrics, can be applied to assess the ways in which an online media development project connects people in a closed society.

To this end, the paper will illustrate how the technique was used in the case of the Iran Media Development Project. The specific questions that the research sought to address were:

- Has ZigZagMag had a significant online impact?
- What are the most commonly targeted pages within ZigZagMag?
- Is ZigZagMag ghettoised¹³ online amongst a group of similar websites (e.g., the Suntein fear) or is it reaching a wider audience?
- As a UK-based source, has ZigZagMag succeeded in having an impact within Iran or has its influence been mainly in the UK or Europe?

These questions were addressed through an analysis of the number and nature of hyperlinks pointing to ZigZagMag. The reason for choosing a hyperlink analysis was that hyperlinks are a relatively easily accessible and non-intrusive source of relevant information about websites in a closed society. Although only a minority of visitors to a web site create hyperlinks to that site, the number of links to a site can be an indirect indicator of its popularity, and the nature of those links can reveal information about what types of visitors use the site and where they come from.

Methodology

A comparative link analysis (Thelwall, 2004) was conducted, examining which web sites linked to ZigZagMag.com. This was necessary in order to have grounds for comparison, and to ensure that insights were grounded in the context

¹³ Confine to a particular area, category or viewpoint.

of a closed society. A survey of users of the site indicated that the following web sites were perceived as most similar to ZigZagmag.com. Therefore they were used in the comparison:

- 40cheragh - weekly magazine (40cheragh.org)
- 7Sang - e-magazine, started in 2002, covering "mostly cultural, artistic and literary subjects" (7sang.com)
- Balatarin - online Web 2.0 news sharing portal, a Farsi version of Digg.com, which began in August 16, 2006. It is a natural attractor of links because it is full of user-generated content (balatarin.com)
- Haftan - online portal/culture periodical (haftan.com)
- Jadid Media (jadidmedia.com, Dutch-funded)
- Jadid Media (jadidonline.com, Dutch-funded)
- Meydaan/Women's field - women's rights site with an English version (meydaan.org)
- Radio Zamaneh Amsterdam-based Persian language radio that began broadcasting on 4 August 2006 (radiozamaneh.info, Dutch-funded)
- Rang - online magazine (rangmagazine.com)
- Sobhaneh - online portal (sobhaneh.org)

The number of web sites linking to each of the above sites was calculated in two stages. First a Yahoo! advanced link search was constructed for each of the above sites in order to return URLs of pages containing a link to it (see below for an example of the search syntax). These searches were submitted to Yahoo! Using LexiURL Searcher and using the query splitting technique to get URLs beyond the 1,000 maximum normally returned by Yahoo! (Thelwall, 2008). For each of the target web sites, all the unique domain names of those URLs were extracted and these domain names counted. The reason for counting sites (by domain name) rather than URLs is that individual links are often replicated throughout a site so that counting URLs or pages is often not meaningful (Thelwall, 2004).

A link analysis (Thelwall, 2004) was conducted of web sites linked to ZigZagMag.com, to see what types of people or organisations were linking to it. For this, we submitted queries to Yahoo! using the following advanced search syntax: linkdomain:zigzagmag.com -site:zigzagmag.com -site:zigzagmag.net

This search matches all URLs of pages linking to any page in the zigzagmag.com web site, excluding pages in zigzagmag.com (including pages accessed with its alternative domain name zigzagmag.net). After downloading 8,749 of the pages matching this search (using query splitting - Thelwall, 2008) all the unique domain names of those URLs were extracted (e.g., www.bbc.co.uk, www.yahoo.com), a total of 575. A summary was then made of the number of domain names per web site (Table 1). For this purpose, a web site was equated

with the end of a domain name (e.g., www.bbc.co.uk is from the site bbc.co.uk, and www.yahoo.com is from yahoo.com).

To assess whether ZigZagMag had ghettoised online a second online analysis investigated the context in which zigzagmag.com was most linked. This was useful to show whether zigzagmag.com is part of an enclave of similar sites or whether it has a diverse context. The data used for this was the set of links found in all web pages linking to zigzagmag.com, as downloaded and extracted by SocSciBot. (If all the links are to similar sites, then this is indicative of an enclave. If the links are often to different sites, then this is indicative of diversity.) The above list of similar web sites were chosen as the candidate set for enclave sites.

Findings and Analysis

1. Has ZigZagMag had a significant online impact?

Figure 3 lists the number of sites linking to ZigZagMag and to each of the similar web sites. Although the main ZigZagMag web site (ZigZagMag.com) has attracted more links than any of the other sites, the more reliable estimator of impact is the number of different domains that link to each web site, as discussed in methodology. In terms of domains linking to ZigZagMag.com, it ranks as average in the list. This is a significant achievement for a website that has a training remit. Moreover, all of the web sites in the list are high profile, well-known sites that contain significant content, and are hence natural attractors of links. In addition, older web sites naturally attract more links than younger web sites.

This supports findings from an online survey, hosted on Zigzag for one month between 13th August and 12th September 2007, which revealed that 1 in 2 respondents visited zigzag at least once a week and a quarter were first time visitors – implying the majority who visited the site tended to do so regularly.

Figure 3 Links to ZigZagMag and comparator web sites.

Website (Name and Genre)	Estimated number of pages linking to site	Est. number of different sites (counted by domain name) linking to site	Est. number of different top level domains linking to site
Haftan - online portal (haftan.com)	31,300	1,556	22
Balatarin - online news sharing portal (balatarin.com)	57,400	1,455	28
7Sang - online magazine (7sang.com)	11,900	1,250	32
Meydaan - women's rights site (meydaan.org)	9,940	821	35
Sobhaneh - online portal (sobhaneh.org)	9,320	633	21
40cheragh - weekly magazine (40cheragh.org)	18,700	594	14
ZigZagMag (ZigZagMag.com)	64,300	575	21
Radio Zamaneh (radiozamaneh.info, Dutch- funded)	6,530	468	18
Rang - online magazine (rangmagazine.com)	9,330	346	14
Jadid Media (jadidmedia.com, Dutch-funded)	7,350	251	17
Jadid Media (jadidonline.com, Dutch-funded)	3,270	224	20
ZigZagMag (ZigZagMag.net - blocked in Iran)	48,400	91	14

2. What are the most commonly targeted pages within ZigZagMag?

Table 3a-c reports a list of pages in ZigZagMag that are most frequently linked to, counting web sites rather than pages, to avoid replicated URLs¹⁴.

The most common targets of links to web sites, in general, are the home pages rather than the content pages. For ZigZagMag, the home page has attracted more links than any other page, which is unsurprising, but it accounts for a minority of all links. This suggests that the content of ZigZagMag is read and valued, because links tend to be to specific parts. However, the most commonly linked-to stories in ZigZagMag were about youth culture and women's issues. This finding supports similar findings looking at the most visited (via Google

¹⁴ This data comes from 1) downloading all pages identified by the search engine searches as linking to zigzagmag, 2) extracting links to zigzagmag.com from the downloaded pages, and 3) removing all duplicate copies of links that occur more than once from different pages in the same web site. Step 3 is necessary because blogs often replicate links across different pages

Analytics) and most valued content (via an online survey hosted on Zigzag). Specifically, the online survey revealed that cartoons and articles were the main draws to the website and many respondents wished to see more content in these areas. In particular, women liked and wanted to see more content on ‘women-specific issues’.

3. Is ZigZagMag ghettoised online?

Figure 5 illustrates the 50 web sites that were most frequently linked to from pages linking to zigzagmag.com. Lines in the diagram are drawn between pairs of sites that are frequently linked to from the same page and circle area is proportional to the number of web sites linking to the named site.

The diagram confirms that ZigZagMag exists within a predominantly Farsi context but it is not an enclave: some of the sites listed above are present but they do not dominate. More general sources such as the BBC, YouTube and the English Wikipedia are also present.

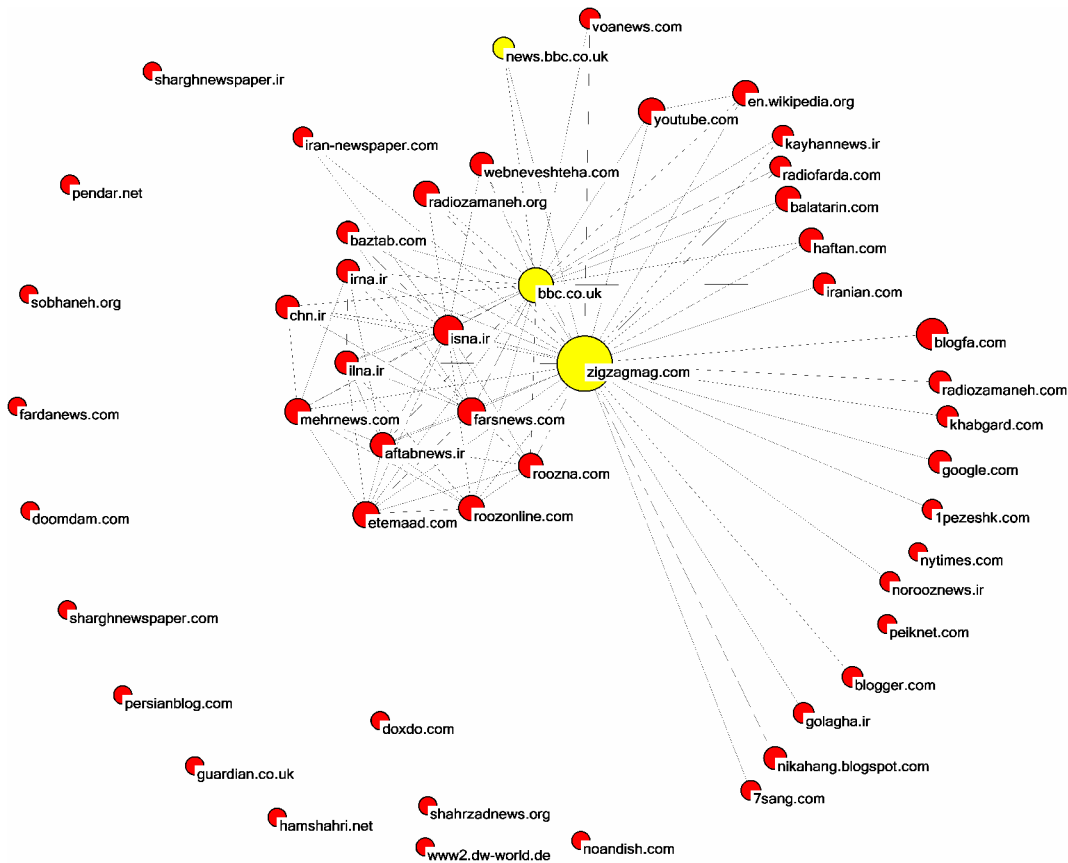


Figure 5. Network diagram of sites closely related to ZigZagMag.

These results are not dominated by the websites which users perceived to be similar to ZigZag. The findings indicate that a ‘ghettoising’ tendency is not present.

4. As a UK-based source, has ZigZagMag succeeded in having an impact within Iran or has its influence been mainly in the UK or Europe?

Figure 4 lists the host sites with most subsites linking to ZigZagMag. It reveals that Farsi language bloggers form a significant proportion of the links to zigzagmag.com. Over a fifth (21.2%) of the links originate from 122 bloggers from the Farsi blogfa.com blog hosting site and more originate within other Farsi blogging sites. The results overall suggested that about 90% of the links to ZigZagMag were from Farsi language sources of various kinds.

Figure 4. Hosting sites containing the most subsites (e.g., blogs) linking ZigZagMag.com.

Host sites	Type of site	Subsites/blogs linking to ZigZagMag.com
blogfa.com	Persian blogs	122 (21.2%)
blogspot.com	Blogs	27 (4.7%)
persianblog.ir	Persian blogs	11 (1.9%)
blogsky.com	Persian blogs	10 (1.7%)
blogfa.ir	Persian blogs	7 (1.2%)
mihanblog.com	Persian blogs	6 (1.0%)
g00ya.com	Persian portal	5 (0.9%)
iranblog.com	Persian blogs	5 (0.9%)
gooya.com	Persian portal	5 (0.9%)
stumbleupon.com	General link site	4 (0.7%)
yahoo.com	Blogs	3 (0.5%)
wordpress.com	Blogs	3 (0.5%)
gooya.name	Persian portal	3 (0.5%)
gooya.ws	Persian portal	3 (0.5%)

To some extent these findings supports earlier research. For example, the online survey hosted on Zigzag revealed that Zigzag's wider audience mirrors the profile of registered users, although there are a larger proportion of users living outside Iran (35% vs 24%).

Summarising the Webometric results, ZigZagMag has had a similar online impact to a range of other high profile Iranian web sites. It exists in a varied Farsi context online, and there is no evidence of it forming part of a narrow enclave of similar sites. These results are based upon a link analysis and the links are dominated by blogs, so it is possible that the conclusions would not be true for non-blogging visitors. This seems unlikely, however, since bloggers seem to be more likely to ghettoise than general internet users: indeed bloggers were singled out by Sunstein (2007) for this tendency. The potential influence of bloggers also means that the stories and ideas in ZigZagMag will be reaching a secondary audience, blog readers, in addition to its primary audience. In the context of Iran, where

there is some state control over the nature of news reporting, blogs may be particularly influential amongst Iranians who try to seek alternative viewpoints.

From the perspective of the ZigZagMag team, the results are a welcome indication that their initiative has a reach and impact beyond the trainees. They (project team and trainees) have created a training portal which is also a popular amongst a wider Iranian online audience and the site does not seem to be divisive or viewed from a narrow perspective but appeals to people from a range of perspectives.

Discussion

Of all the insights derived from using webmetrics for the Iran Media Development Project, one of the key insights was the prominence of links to Zigzag from Iranian blogs. Not only did this information enable project implementers to better understand the environment in which ZigZag was being used, it also opened up a potential avenue for future research: blogging.

In the West, blogging has been heralded as a potential transformer of journalism (Wall, 2005). In theory, anyone with access to the internet and minimal technical skills can set up a free blog and start to disseminate their views to the world. Bloggers can report the news, perhaps from places like Tehran, where there is little western reporting into the daily lives of citizens (Bond & Abtahi, 2005). They can also comment on the news in general or on a specific topic (Tremayne, Zheng, Lee, & Jeong, 2006), and in some cases blog posts can have significant repercussions, such in the scandal of Senator Lott (Thompson, 2003). At the apex of blogger influence are the 'A-list' blogs (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005) with readerships that surpass most U.S. newspapers, although the majority of blogs are non-political personal diaries (Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, & Wright, 2007; Thelwall, 2006), and the blogging format has been widely adopted and adapted by the mass media (Matheson, 2004).

A study of the Persian Blogosphere from July 2007 to March 2008 found that politics was well-represented. There was a significant amount of both secular/reformist blogs and conservative/religious blogs. In addition there were many blogs about Persian poetry and literature as well as diary blogs and blogs on various other topics, but it seems that diary style blogs, which are dominant in English, are much rarer in Persian (Kelly & Etling, 2008).

Although there are counter arguments¹⁵, blogs have been frequently seen as a democratising influence because they are not dominated by traditional mass media, and allow citizens to have a voice.

¹⁵ Against this view, the popular bloggers, at least in the U.S., tend to be part of the educated elite – see also Tremayne et al., 2006 – and hence do not necessarily represent a radical break from the mass-media status quo). A second argument, developed by Sunstein, is that the modern era is heralding an unprecedented ability for users to choose the news and other content that they receive. This allows people to select news sources (e.g., blogs, news organisations) that deliver

Given the transformative potential of blogging, the finding that ZigZag was extensively linked to through blogs prompted further research to be conducted with trainees on blogging. It also suggested a possible future direction for the project (one which incorporated the Persian blogosphere).

Conclusion

In this paper, we set out to understand if online journalism training can be applied in a closed society, and to use a new methodology to understand the wider online environment. Online research methods proved able to elicit valuable responses and feedback from the trainees and the wider online audience. These findings were then used to refine the project. For example, the research identified that engagement with the training was directly related to the amount and quality of feedback from trainers and mentors. The project has examined its uses of feedback as a result. In another example, articles on ZigZag, specifically those aimed at women, were also changed as a result of the findings from the online surveys.

The webometrics measured the wider impact of the project within Iran, extending beyond the journalists within the programme. The results showed that ZigZag was able to have a significant impact comparable to that of a range of other similar high-profile sites. This impact was particularly evident within the Persian blogosphere. This suggests that the active Persian blogosphere is free enough to support debates on cultural topics that are not discussed in the sanctioned press and that initiatives like ZigZag, although organised and funded from outside Iran, are able to play a role within an Iranian context.

Finally, the research showed that online media development has enabled learning and communication between journalists and wider online audiences in a closed society, particularly on the subject of journalism ethics.

information that exclusively fits their beliefs and hence potentially reduces people's exposure to a variety of perspectives (Sunstein, 2007). This is unhealthy for democracy because it reduces the chances for meaningful debate as well as creating the potential for more intolerance in society. A previous study of U.S. political blogs has shown this kind of division to be reflected (Adamic & Glance, 2005). It seems that bloggers can form political enclaves, debating primarily with likeminded bloggers.

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