RESOURCES

An Overview of Urdu on the Web
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THE INTERNET presents itself as the most prevalent medium of our time, but few people know that Urdu, a language declared dead or dying by various experts and pundits, has completed 10 years on this medium. While we cannot say for sure when the first Urdu web page was created, we know that the first recorded footstep of Urdu on the Internet was the creation of a newsgroup called ALT.LANGUAGE.URDU.POETRY (ALUP) by Syed Zafar Kazmi on 5 May 1994.

In the beginning, there were just home pages where people had created one or more pages to show their love for Urdu by posting their favorite ghazals and *ash'ārs*. When I started my web site in January 1997, I wanted to present a different side of Urdu poetry, so my site was called "A Nazm A Month" and every effort was made to show that Urdu poetry is about much more than just love. Mine was the first web site created especially for Urdu which was not considered simply a home page. This trend is still visible in the Urdu virtual world, where most of the Urdu sites continue to be general in nature, trying to be all things to all people. Still there are some web sites which do specialize in just one area of Urdu studies. However, rather than just covering the history of Urdu web sites in this article, I would like to give an overview of some of the important sites.

The largest Urdu web sites continue to be Urdu newspapers, with *Jañg* leading the pack; almost all of the major Urdu newspapers of Pakistan and India have a presence on the web. It seems that they realize the power of the Internet, but, except for *Jañg*, no one has utilized the Internet's full potential by preparing content specifically for this new medium. All the other newspapers continue to simply duplicate on the web what they publish in their paper editions. To their credit, *Jañg* has launched font-based (rather than image-based) content so that users can actually search the news. Also, although *Jañg* stays current with regular updates as news occurs, they continue to lag behind the BBC's Urdu web site in this

regard. The BBC was the first to launch a complete site in Urdu font, and they not only have a search facility, they also have staff who update the site minute by minute as the news develops, with content written especially for the web.

The second most popular Urdu-based sites are those on religion and literature, along with sites that you might call web magazines because, like a magazine, they cover topics of general interest. One of the earliest sites, and currently the largest site, continues to be "UrduPoint" (www.urdupoint.com). It was started by Ali Chaudhry of Pakistan. This site is a classic example of a web magazine, offering news, articles, sections on religion and literature, and special corners for women and children. This model was followed by many other sites that came after "UrduPoint," e.g., "Al-Qamar Online" (www.alqamaronline.com) and "Pehchaan.com" (www.pehchaan.com). My own site, "Urdustan" (www.urdustan.com) was launched before "UrduPoint" and leans more towards literature than current affairs.

Urdu is not the language of only Muslims, but the majority of Urdu speakers happen to be Muslim. Religion plays an important part in the life of a Muslim. As mentioned above, almost all sites of general interest have a section on Islam, as do all the newspapers. Islamic sites in Urdu were the first ones to appear on the web, which bucked the trend of the general-nature Urdu web sites. One of the first sites was "Hadayet Net." Now there are numerous such sites of a religious nature—from Islamic madrasas, Islamic magazines and books, and the Qurʾān and hadith to religious sermons and *naʿts* and online fatwa sites. For a list of religious sites visit the Mazhab section of the "Urdustan.Net" U-Hoo! web site directory (http://www.urdustan.net).

Literature occupies a special place in the Urdu language and even an ordinary Urdu speaker has a basic knowledge of Urdu literature and literary figures. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first web pages and web sites of Urdu were for Urdu literature, and especially poetry. The economic environment for Urdu literature continues to worsen, with a falling number of subscriptions for Urdu literary magazines. However, this has not prevented the launch of new journals. This trend continues on the Internet too, with some Urdu literary magazines making the jump to the web either just to have a presence there or to, perhaps, generate some new subscriptions. This has definitely helped these magazines reach a much wider audience than would normally buy a literary magazine from a bookstall.

The Annual of Urdu Studies was the first English-language scholarly journal for Urdu to go online in its entirety (www.urdustudies.com), while the first literary magazine in the Urdu language to put its entire contents online was *Jadīd Adab* (www.jadeedadab.com). *Tashkīl* (www.urdustan.

net/tashkeel*)* and *Urdu Book Review* (www.urdustan.net/UBR) are two literary magazines that are putting a selection of their contents online, perhaps to encourage visitors to become subscribers. As the cost of publishing and distribution goes up, there will be some journals which may exist only on the web in order to make them more economically viable. Hopefully this will translate into more Urdu literary journals surviving and reaching a wider audience.

While the World Wide Web continues to be predominantly text based, slowly, sites are bringing audio and video to virtual life. *Meḫfil-e Mushā'ira* (www.mushaira.org) brings Urdu poetry to the Internet community in audio and video format with its clippings of a number of famous Urdu poets. Urdu poetry, especially ghazals, are supposed to be heard rather than read, so it is interesting that, even though there are many literary sites, only a few have audio sections. This may be due to the effort and resources involved in converting audio/video recordings to digital format; digital audio/video files also require more disk space and this may be beyond the means of many web site owners. Another noteworthy mention is "Radio Urdustan" (www.urdustan.com/aawaz), which is the first radio station of the Urdu language taking advantage of the changing nature of the Internet.

As mentioned above, Urdu web sites face resource problems; most of them continue to be supported by the owners themselves. Revenue generation on the Internet is either by subscription or advertising and Urdu web sites have failed to generate sufficient revenue by using either of these methods. No Urdu web site has yet experimented with getting paid subscribers and there are not enough advertising dollars available for Urdu sites. Some of the advertising agencies on the web (e.g., Google Ads, DoubleClick, etc.) do not purchase space for their advertisements on sites in the Urdu language.

The other major problem is technical in nature. Urdu is closely associated with the *nasta'līq* style of writing, and some people contend that dissociating Urdu from *nasta'līq* is robbing it of half its beauty. *Nasta'līq* is a very complex script and this makes it difficult to create an Urdu font that can faithfully represent all of its features. The result is, some fonts come closer to *naskh* than *nasta'līq*, which appears unsightly to Urdu readers. Urdu web sites use *InPage*, an Urdu word processor, which supports *nasta'līq* and generates output in GIF image format. This satisfies Urdu readers but makes it impossible to have a dynamic database-driven site or to search the Urdu text.

There have been attempts to change the script of the Urdu language since the days of Maulānā Āzād. If during these one hundred years readers have not accepted any changes in the script then it seems the only thing left to do is make technological advances that will preserve most of

the features of *nastaʿlīq* in an Urdu computing environment that will also meet the requirements of international standards such as Unicode. Such advances will make it possible for web programmers and webmasters to create dynamic Urdu sites and databases of useful information in the Urdu language.

To sum up, Urdu-lovers were instrumental in placing Urdu on the Internet from its beginning. The movement has continued to grow without any governmental or organizational help in this regard. Most of the work continues to be done by individuals or by a team of volunteers. It may be necessary to get some institutional help to speed up the development of Urdu in cyberspace.

Even without official help, however, Urdu-lovers will continue to work on an individual basis, as Faisal Naseem and Mustafa Ali have demonstrated. Mustafa Ali has created an online dictionary utilizing Unicode technology. Visitors to his "UrduWord" site (www.urduword.com) can search for the definition of words by typing Urdu directly into the search box.

Similarly, Faisal Naseem is the brain behind "ApniUrdu" (www.apniurdu.com), which is another technical advancement for Urdu web sites. Naseem attempts to translate common English sentences into Urdu which can then be copied or displayed on web pages. The best part is that he makes his services available so that other sites can deploy these items on their own sites. This opens a door of opportunity as it makes a wealth of English language information more accessible to the Urdu community.

These two examples show that the future of Urdu on the Internet is very bright indeed. Even without official patronage or a stable revenue stream, we will continue to see an increase in the number of Urdu pages due to the demand of visitors and the commitment of Urdu webmasters. There is still much room for growth in the Urdu cyber world. There is, for example, almost nothing available in the fields of health, sports and education. Hopefully within the next few years this gap will be filled and we will see Urdu-language web pages covering all aspects of life, creating a truly Urdu-web on the Internet. ❑