



Essay

The Utility of a Blog Site on a Futures-Oriented Journal

Umar Sheraz^{1,*}, Saba Nazir²

¹Futurist, Centre for Policy Studies, COMSATS University Islamabad, Pakistan

²Independent Scholar, Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Abstract

The JFS blog was created as an experiment to explore the utility and facilitation that a blog could provide to an academic journal. This article examines the progress and utility of the blog almost 2 years after its inception. Google Analytics was used to assess the JFSdigital Wordpress data. An analysis was performed from May 2018 to June 2020, of blog posts and unique page views. There were 70,515 unique page views of the 69 blog articles during the search period. The statistics and impact of the blog are encouraging and the blog is complementing the work of the academic journal.

Keywords

Blogs, Academic Cultures, Communities of Practice, Social Media, Online Learning

Introduction

The Journal of Futures Studies (JFS) is a global waterhole of foresight practitioners and is a globally-oriented, trans-disciplinary refereed journal. In 2018, the idea of a blog was presented to the JFS management, as an exciting and accessible medium of engagement, communications and influence. There were multiple reasons for presenting such a case. First and foremost, the institution of foresight is well established in the developed world. The developing world however has still not come to grips with futures thinking, as policy makers and institutions are stuck in the 'now' and find it hard to move from the rigors of today and the present. To quote directly from a policy maker, "foresight is a luxury for the developing world" (Asian Development Bank, 2020).

A connected second issue is that a lot of foresight relevant work is presented in voluminous form (e.g. books, monographs, white papers, etc) or in the form of journal publications (i.e. long read format) and policymakers/ audiences simply don't have the time or luxury to read such work. Blogs provide a rapid, casual, interactive and occasionally authoritative way of commenting on current issues, new papers or old controversies (Schmidt, 2008). A blog site on JFS, would present an opportunity for contributors to escape the limitations of journal publication and get their message across the global community, with their distinct flair in a hassle free and relaxed manner. Journal publications usually come with restrictions and are confined to text, technical graphs and charts. With blogs, creativity has no limit and additional media, color and innovative modes of play and presentation, come to the fore.

Finally there was a need to create a melting pot of ideas for contributors outside the domain of futures studies. These contributors are a valuable source of insights, disruptors and seeds of emerging wisdom from various facets of the knowledge ecosystem. So, whether the domain is think tanks or peacebuilding; health or nanotechnology, futures literacy or imagining a post-COVID-19 world, the blog would serve as an exchange point to explore how different knowledge domains interact with the world and contribute in shaping the future.

In May 2018, the JFS blog was launched as an experiment to explore the utility and facilitation that a blog could provide to an academic journal. This in itself is an innovation as academic journals are still grappling with the idea of a pop-corn medium like a blog site. Generally, the journal publication space is closed loop, written for and by subject experts and biased towards academics who have access to expensive digital libraries (open access journals

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: umar.sheraz@comsats.edu.pk (U. Sheraz), sabzz447@gmail.com (S. Nazir).

are a minor exception) and have no immediate feedback/critique. With open spaces, the praise or critique is immediate, bloggers can get their research and point of view across a wider audience plus they can be a bit more relaxed than while publishing a journal publication. At the JFS blog there is no fixation on technology as the Messiah; the blog does not follow a cult personality and is free from the politics of glorifying the West or the East, as an image of the future. Instead the JFS blog is a space for exploring transformative ideas for social and socio-ecological change as well as challenging “used futures” – i.e. powerful framings of and narratives and assumptions about the future which have been uncritically adopted (Inayatullah, 2006). In 2020, the JFS blog was renamed as JFS Perspectives.

Material and Methods

Editorial process

Submission to the blog is voluntary and authors who wish to write for the blog are welcome to contact the JFS editorial committee members directly. There are no limitations on who can author content, and content is welcome from a wide cross-section of society, which has attracted futurists, policy analysts, consultants, academics, graduate students, development practitioners, etc. Authors are encouraged to keep posts within 1500 to 2000 words and to properly cite references and graphics. Since the blog is part of a journal publication, all submitted blog posts undergo a thorough developmental editing process by a JFS blog committee, composed of academics and futurists from across the globe. Articles are screened for plagiarism, content, readability, and after the review is done, feedback is sent back to the author. The JFS blog is updated with new posts on a regular basis and is open for perusal to the public, free of charge.

Submissions data and analysis



Fig. 1: Country-wise breakdown of the JFS blog submissions and authors

The website for Journal of Futures Studies is www.jfsdigital.org, hosted on a WordPress Platform. Google Analytics was used to analyze data on the blog submissions and usage. Google Analytics is an open tool that provides free

quantitative data on website usage that can be leveraged for continual website improvements (Song et al., 2018). When the blog kicked off in March 2018, attracting submissions was a major concern. Initially authors were requested to resubmit their articles, which were published elsewhere. From 30 July 2018 to 30 June 2020, 69 submissions have been published by the JFS blog. Not surprisingly, in the first few months, these were mostly republished articles but since October 2018, there have been only 4 republished articles. In all there are 51 original articles and 13 republished articles published by the JFS blog (last updated 30th June, 2020). These submissions are from 56 authors from 17 countries, giving the blog an international and multicultural vibe. In terms of gender, there are 17 female and 39 male authors (see Fig. 1).

In terms of categories, the blog has attracted an assorted canopy of submission categories. These include 2 video blogs, 3 book reviews, 9 workshop proceedings, 5 interviews, 22 personal reflections, 14 policy analysis and 8 teaching/expert advice submissions. There are also 4 articles, 2 in Persian and 1 in Mandarin and 1 in Spanish, which are translations of published work on the JFS blog (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Breakdown of JFS blogs according to categories

Site Traffic and viewership

During the time period under study, the 69 blog articles attracted 70,515 unique page views from 202 countries. Page views are defined as the total number of times the content was viewed during a given period of time. The page view considerably increased after March 2020, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with more readers attracted to the JFS blog site.

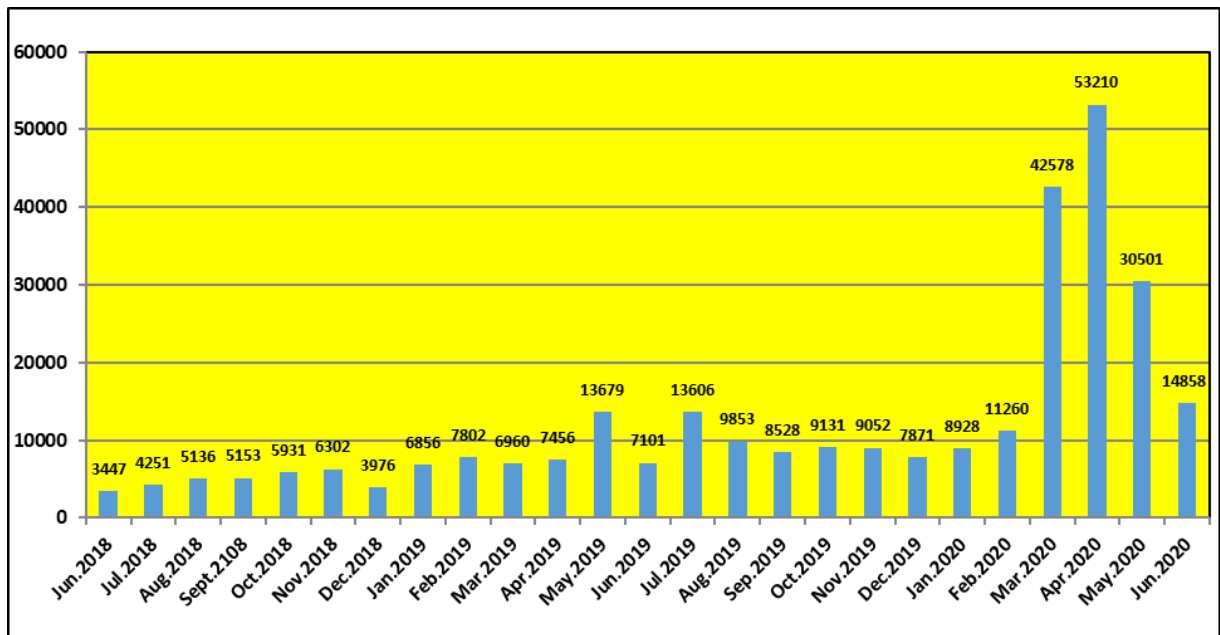


Fig. 3: Monthly breakdown of JFS site page views

The real heroes of the JFS blog are the authors who committed their time and effort in contributing to the JFS blog. The blog has found contributors outside the domain of futures studies who have provided valuable insights, disruptors and nuggets of emerging wisdom from various facets of the knowledge ecosystem. In terms of page views, the top 5 articles and their authors are given below.

Table 1: Top 5 articles and their authors

No	Name of Article	Author(s)	Page views
1	Neither A Black Swan Nor A Zombie Apocalypse: The Futures Of A World With The Covid-19 Coronavirus	Sohail Inayatullah, Peter Black	38,666
2	An Archetypal Eye on This Time of Change	Kristina Dryža	3088
3	The Seven Super Powers of Futurists	Sohail Inayatullah	3006
4	Three Scenarios for the Future of Education in the Anthropocene	Kathleen Kesson	2451
5	Exploring Foresight, Epidemiology and the Coronavirus Pandemic with Dr. Peter Black	Umar Sheraz	2114

Discussion

A forum for sharing unique and original ideas

The JFS blog was created as an experiment and it is exciting to note the uniqueness, diversity, quality and provocative nature of some of the blogs. So for example, a video log on NIUN, reimagines the conservative and patriarchal society in Saudi Arabia in a tech-savvy alternative future (Mogensen, 2018). Russell Clemens uses the blog space humorously, colorfully and intelligently in questioning elephant futures in his excellent article on “Can Elephants Fly?” (Clemens, 2019). A blog on the “Alternative Futures of Iran Nuclear Deal after the US Exit” by an Iranian author is one of the most read article with hundreds of viewers in the USA, European Union and other parts of the world (Motti, 2018). Interviews with thought leaders on diverse topics like anticipatory policing, future roles

of development banks, energy futures, linkages between innovation and foresight, etc provide a rich and unique experience to the readers.

Up and personal with futurists

For the readers, the blog affords the opportunity to listen to the original and unrestrained voices of professional futurists, providing more insights and pearls of wisdom. Take the example of Dr. Sohail Inayatullah, who is one of leading futurists in the world and has published more than 200 journal articles. Through the blog space, readers get to see another dimension of him as a futurist, where he has expressed himself more freely and on a wide range of topics, in a format, which is more relaxed and informal than academic publishing. On the JFS blog, he has published on workshop proceedings in Armenia in his own style; shared insights into his work with the PROUT parliament and lessons for policy makers; reflected on the seven super powers of futurists and how to be successful as a futurist; provided expert advice on disruptions in Asia 2038; and (my personal favorite) an insightful analysis of the power structure and power play in the Olympics, with his personal flair (Inayatullah, 2019). The blog also contains interviews conducted with him. So on a personal note, the JFS blog offers futurists the opportunity to showcase their inner self and display their artifacts using their persona, style and inner voice, in a diversity of submission categories.

Emergent role in a post-COVID19 world

In early-March 2020, COVID-19 accelerated through communities in the world and the world has since changed. The whole world is experiencing the current disruption, and in a scenario that most people never believed would happen, are questioning certainty and are looking for tools to manage “post normal times”. Foresight can be of tremendous help in such times as it creates internal tension, discussions, innovation-based projects, and planning on a new world. The authors at JFS blog published a series of articles on various aspects of the pandemic, including post-COVID scenarios, role of storytelling and narratives, interview with epidemiologists, country specific post-COVID scenarios, etc., to name a few.

These submissions have found readership and tremendous reception, from nearly 202 countries across the globe. So out of a total page views of 70,515, nearly 51,442 page views have been attracted since March 2020. This corresponds to about 73% of total page views in a two year time period.

Stories of impact

Authors of blogs at JFS Perspectives have occasionally reconnected with the JFS editorial board to share their stories of impact, after publishing with the blog. For example, an article on “Atlas of New Professions in Kazakhstan” (Nurbek & Moldakassimov, 2019) was published on the blog and the authors recalled how the publication had led to queries and further project proposals on similar topics (Personal email, 24 Feb 2020). A blog on COVID-19 scenarios for Pakistan (Inayatullah, Chaudhary, Raza, & Sheraz, 2019) garnered the attention of policy makers in one of the provinces in Pakistan (Personal email, 29 April 2020). An interview with Anita Hazenberg, on anticipatory policing at Interpol (Sheraz, 2019) was met with warm reception and there were stories from people who had taken initiatives to start foresight with their policing departments (personal correspondence with various people on WhatsApp). As mentioned earlier, articles on COVID-19 published after March 2020, were met with a warm reception and increased readership. One of the articles (Inayatullah & Black, 2020), garnered more than 41,591 page views and is the most viewed article on the JFS website.

Reaching out beyond an English audience

To make the JFS blog a more inclusive forum, a system of regional editors was introduced in November 2019. The purpose of this initiative was to draw from and develop more diverse viewpoints, cultural contexts and geographies that can enrich the collective imaginations of the blog audience. One of the key contributions from these regional editors was translations of popular articles into regional languages. In the given time period, 4 articles were translated into Persian, Spanish and Mandarin, which gained popular readership in their particular geographical areas. The total page views of translated articles is 2,437.

Table 2: Translated Articles and their Translators

No	Name of Original Article with author(s)	Name of Translated Article	Translator(s)	Page views
1	Neither A Black Swan Nor A Zombie Apocalypse: The Futures Of A World With The Covid-19 Coronavirus (Sohail Inayatullah and Peter Black)	黑天鵝效應或喪屍來襲：與 Covid-19 冠狀病毒共處世界之未來	Yu-Yi Liu & Kuo-Hua Chen	1233
2	Disruptions Asia 2038 (Sohail Inayatullah)	مسائل متحول كننده آسيا تا سال 2038	Muhammad-Ali Baradaran	420
3	The Seven Super Powers of Futurists (Sohail Inayatullah)	هفت نیروی شگرف در خدمت آینده پژوهان	Muhammad-Ali Baradaran	808
4	My Son Deals in Hamburgers and Other Futures: Causal Layered Analysis in Rio de Janeiro (Sohail Inayatullah and Jaqueline Weigel)	Meu Filho Está Lidando Com O Tráfico De Hambúrgueres: CLA No Rio De Janeiro	Jaqueline Weigel	72

Limitations

While unique in scope, this study has its limitations. Page views are at best an intelligent guess of the number of times a blog post has been read. However, simply because a blog post has been visited does not necessarily mean that it was fully read. Finally, we have excluded unique page views to the blog's landing home page, but technically, it had the highest number of unique page views. Google Analytics lacks the clarity to track how visitors navigate through the blog home page so we do not know if certain blog posts actually had more views than what our available datasets have captured.

We deliberately chose to disregard the bounce rate, which represents the percentage of visitors to a particular website who navigate away from the site after viewing only one page, as a reflection of the JFS blog's performance. This was very variable on the various blog posts and extracting any meaningful analysis and interpretation was not possible. Likewise, average user time per page was also not employed as it allows for multiple interpretations: a long session duration could be a result from increased engagement, but it could also result from a user keeping the webpage open while engaging in other irrelevant activities.

Concluding Remarks

Successful blogs teach readers something and can possibly make a difference in their lives. Two years since its inception, the JFS blog site provides value of discovering and exploring a diverse range of futures related content that is easy to digest and relate. The challenge for the blog is to maintain its credibility and build on innovations to keep its audience captivated and cultivated. This will require bringing together ideas from the best and brightest minds in the field of futures thinking and practice. There is also a need to continuously keep exploring, discovering and exploiting opportunities for the use of digital, virtual, social and interactive approaches to connecting with new audiences and co-creators.

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