

Mapping Digital Diasporas @ BBC World Service:

Users and Uses of the Persian and Arabic Websites

Matilda Andersson, Marie Gillespie and Hugh Mackay

Abstract

This article presents research on two key BBC World Service websites, BBC Persian Online and BBC Arabic Online. It draws on in-house BBC data, supplemented by our own semi-structured interviews with online editors and other key World Service staff. It examines where users of the two sites are located, their demographic characteristics and their views on and uses of the sites. The data is analyzed in the context of debates about the politics of diasporic media and communication networks and changing collective identities, the UK government's Foreign & Commonwealth Office's (FCO) strategy of 'digital diplomacy' and the World Service's stated public purpose of fostering a 'global conversation.' Our research has shown how the majority of users of both BBC Arabic and Persian Online services reside outside the geographical areas that the BBC World Service targets and may be defined as diasporic. And these two websites are not exceptional. Diasporic groups make increasing use of the BBC's online foreign language news sites but these transnational communication networks are an unintended consequence of the BBC's activities. We highlight how the internet is changing configurations of audiences and users at the BBC World Service as geographically dispersed language groups can log on to the news services from anywhere in the world. We argue that the BBC World Service can no longer be seen as an international broadcaster pursuing the BBC's motto 'nation shall speak peace unto nation.' Rather, as one of the world's largest news providers, it is implicated in the formation of new kinds of transnational communities and communications which

has as yet unforeseen consequences for national identifications and for strategies of public diplomacy.

Keywords: BBC World Service, digital diasporas, digital and public diplomacy, BBC Arabic Online, BBC Persian Online

This article reports on the digital diasporas that have come into being around two of the BBC World Service (BBCWS) websites, BBC Arabic Online and BBC Persian Online. We compare these websites because, as we shall see, they are strategically hugely important for the BBCWS and the FCO in economic, political, and diplomatic terms. Yet there are big differences in these online services and the profiles of their users. In the case of BBC Arabic Online, it has a huge regional market spanning all the Arabic speaking countries in the Middle East and its diasporas. BBC Persian Online attracts a much smaller market in Iran and the surrounding region and has a larger diasporic market.

In a mapping exercise, the article examines the (a) spatial dimensions (where users are in geographical terms); (b) social characteristics (who users are, their demographics); and (c) uses (why websites are used and valued or not) of these two websites.

The BBC World Service was established in 1932 as the Empire Service, with a part of its remit to serve Britons based abroad – so it has, since its foundation, served diasporas in some way (Baumann and Gillespie, 2007). Over the years the World Service has also been a major employer of diasporic writers, artists, poets, and intellectuals – often exiles, dissidents, and refugees (Gillespie, 2010). The World Service started its first Internet sites in Arabic and Chinese in 1997 and now provides

websites in English and 32 other languages – ‘Languages Other Than English Sites’ (LOTE)¹. The bulk of its audience listens to content on radio, mostly on shortwave but also on medium wave and FM. BBC World Service. It is an integral part of the BBC, sharing its general public service objectives as set out in the Royal Charter and is one part of the BBC Global News Division.

The BBC World Service is funded not by the license fee, like the BBC’s domestic services, but by Grant in Aid administered by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) which specifies the aims and objectives of the World Service, one of which is public diplomacy. This study reports on some of the 4 million weekly users of its 32 foreign language websites. Although numerically smaller than the 183 million weekly World Service radio listeners (BBC, 2008), it is the Internet that makes it possible for diaspora audiences to engage with BBC World Service content from any location from anywhere in the world.

The two languages selected for this study are of considerable strategic significance to the World Service and its funder, the FCO. Both BBC Arabic and BBC Persian have recently been launched on television (BBC Arabic in March 2008 and BBC Persian in January 2009) and are at the center of the organization’s expansion plans and move towards a multimedia strategy of news provision via radio, television, Internet, and mobile (BBC, 2008). The online sites are at the center of efforts to encourage people to interact and to contribute to programs online, on television, and on radio. Interactivity and fostering a global conversation are core elements of the BBC’s efforts to position itself in an increasingly crowded and competitive media market. The Internet also, of course, enables members of global diasporas to interact with the BBC and with one other.

The notion of diaspora is used and defined in a breadth of ways, so it is worth clarifying at the outset. It has been criticized by Rogers Brubaker for its application to any group dispersed in space, and he sees the term as most useful as a claim, or practice (Brubaker, 2005). However defined, diasporas are of growing economic, political, and cultural significance. They are a consequence of globalization and the growth and enhanced significance of emigration, supra-national politics, new communications technologies, and modern transport. Diasporas are transnationally dispersed groups of various kinds, including migrant and mobile, refugee and expatriate, dissident and disaffected groups. Members of a diasporic group may share a country or region of birth, a language, cultural tastes, religious practices, political experiences, economic interests, and/or ethno-political affiliations. How different diasporic groups use media is shaped by many factors but most important among these are their reason for emigration, status in the country of residence, level of educational and cultural capital, media and political literacy, attachments and identifications. These myriad and overlapping issues will be touched upon but not covered in great detail in this article, which aims simply to explore how two linguistically defined diasporas use two online sites. The new technology is enabling members of these diasporas to participate transnationally in debates and issues of common interest. It is in the light of aspects of debates about diasporas that the BBC World Service has started to pay increasing attention to diaspora audiences from its headquarters at Bush House.

It is with the arrival of the World Service's websites that the World Service has been able, or has had, to start to address its diaspora audiences. This has been recognized by its funder, and in July 2007 the HM Treasury awarded the World Service an additional £1million to develop content for linguistic diaspora groups of

geopolitical significance to the UK, coming into effect from 2009/2010. The language groups identified in relation to the BBC's bid for the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review in 2007² were Urdu, Bengali, and Somali. The claimed intention of the new diaspora services is to enrich BBC World Service global output by reflecting life in multicultural Britain and developing a dialog across geographies. The BBC World Service is one part of the BBC Global News Division which aims 'to connect and engage audiences by facilitating an informed and intelligent dialogue – a global conversation – which transcends international borders and cultural divides, and to give audiences opportunities to create, publish and share their own views and stories.'

Such interactivity has far-reaching implications for the World Service and for public diplomacy. As a radio service, the World Service has 'spoken to' its audience, or listeners. In one sense we can still conceive of the World Service as having an audience, its listeners. With the arrival of the Internet and the interactivity that it involves, however, radio audiences have become users in that they interact with producers and with one another, using the Internet as a communication medium. Thus the Internet makes communication processes more dynamic and active, both a collective and a more personalised individual experience. It also enhances possibilities for public diplomacy.

Diplomacy involves a government attempting to manage international relations by engaging with a foreign government, but public diplomacy extends this work, engaging a foreign public. It involves listening ('knowing your enemy'), advocacy, and cultural diplomacy. Public diplomacy is a term that was coined in 1965 by the US ambassador to the Congo as a substitute for 'propaganda', an activity associated with the Eastern bloc. Today, however, it is more than mere propaganda, in that it involves more serious engagement with a population. The BBC World Service

is one of the UK's FCO's four public diplomacy partners which also includes the British Council (www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/public-diplomacy-review), and is funded to provide both partial and independent news *and* a platform for debate.

Digital diplomacy is one means of public diplomacy and involves, for example, a growing number of UK ambassadors writing blogs. Better known are the World Service's 'Have Your Say' fora, the interactivity of which offers possibilities for listening, not just speaking. There are, of course, dangers of facilitating 'talking back,' in that criticism can be given a voice and policies can be challenged. Digital diplomacy necessitates new strategies for managing the responses of the public and for steering debate. The immediacy and interactivity of the Internet can pose problems for being 'on message,' and may challenge the authority, credibility and legitimacy of politicians, policymakers, professionals and top ranking-officials in large organizations. Its instantaneity challenges vetting or approval processes, transforming how organizations operate.

Within this context, the BBC World Service provides online services, mainly news, in 32 languages as well as in English. Nine out of these are updated 24 hours a day and comprise multimedia outputs (text, still images, and audio) and audience interactivity. Six of those sites additionally offer video material and the remaining sites are primarily for radio content. The nine key language sites selected for additional investment for a 24-hour service by the World Service and FCO are the Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Persian, Portuguese for Brazil, Russian, Spanish for Latin America, Urdu for Pakistan, and Vietnamese for Vietnam services. These languages have been selected because of their geopolitical and strategic importance for the BBC and the UK government³. Some of these websites are strategically important because online is the main distribution channel for the BBC. In Brazil, Latin America, and

Vietnam, for example, few listen to shortwave, and much FM transmission has been closed down, so online distribution is the only remaining channel – and Internet access is increasing. In the case of the Persian and Chinese sites, both are blocked in their target markets, Iran and China, but both are strategically or politically important, so these websites are maintained as 24/7 services and their diaspora users compensate for the lack of usage in the target markets. The Urdu and Arabic services have growing audiences both inside and outside their target markets, and are of high geopolitical importance. The BBC Russian service has increasingly had difficulties in achieving radio distribution in Russia and online is now the most reliable way of delivering news in the Russian market because the Internet is less heavily regulated than radio.

Each BBC LOTE site has a defined ‘target market,’ which is agreed between the World Service and the FCO. With radio, the target market is a language group in a geographically defined area, often coterminous with a nation state or set of nation states. Online services, however, require a radically different way of conceiving audiences, defying as they do the conventional target market categories. Internet users can login from anywhere in the world, and their location matters little. Such users are far from marginal, with 52% of users of World Service Internet sites coming from outside the ‘target country.’⁴

Obviously, users have many Internet sites and opportunities for diasporic engagement other than the BBC. One aspect of our ongoing research is how uses of World Service sites intersect with other Internet activity. At this stage, however, regarding non-World Service Internet sites, all we can do is flag some important aspects of other research. There are numerous studies of digital diasporas, some of which focus on the integration of the Internet into everyday life (Miller and Slater,

2000), whilst others are more concerned with life ‘behind the screen,’ focusing on virtual interaction (see Smith and Kollock, 1999). Some studies have focused explicitly on diaspora issues – support of and from ‘back home,’ connections with the homeland, and negotiation of place in a host society (Bakardjieva, 2006; Mitra, 2007). By contrast with these studies, our research focuses on two sites, run by one organization, the BBC, which is distinctive for its reputation and, in the case of its World Service, for its role in public diplomacy.

The 32 LOTE sites contain a mixture of translated material from the BBC news provision in English and stories written by the 32 different ‘language services.’ The language services employ staff from the target markets who speak and write the target language and have often worked as journalists in their home country or region prior to working for the World Service. These are diasporic staff and like many of the online users they have one foot in the country they have left and one in the host country where they now live and work. The context for this study is the fast-changing technological and political environment in which new initiatives in public diplomacy connect with technological developments, in the context of the BBC’s World Service with its distinctive history and ethos.

Research Methods

This article is based on the various data collected by the BBC World Service to measure performance of their websites. The scope of research data held by large (broadcasting) organizations is commonly beyond any data gathered by academic researchers. We are making this data available to a wider, external, audience, and connecting it with some core concepts from research on diaspora communities and the Internet. Our using such data, of course, raises some interesting questions about the

role of academic social scientists. This has been supplemented by interviews with the Online Editors of BBC Arabic Online and BBC Persian Online – online editors run the website and are editorially in charge of the content published on the site. These interviews were conducted in November 2007 and were supplemented by further discussions in April 2009. The interviews explored the editors’ awareness of, and news provision for, diasporic user groups, including how the website is run, what content is popular, and how the editors imagine their users. We explored what they think of new interactive tools and of facilitating a global conversation, and the role of the BBC World Service in public diplomacy. The initial interviews were recorded and transcribed, whereas notes were made and written up of the later discussions.

In contrast to television and radio audiences, Internet use leaves traces that can be logged and measured. Communication over the web is based on the requests and reception of files between servers and clients. All of the information from such requests are stored in log-files that can be analyzed (Bermejo, 2007). The BBC uses a customized tool (SAGE Analysis) to make sense of the data in server log-files that are generated by requests for and reception of information from BBC websites. The main measures used are Unique Users (UUs) and Page Impressions (PIs). Using log-files resembles an online census in that it is a methodology that relies not on a sample but on actual counts of all of the activity on a website (Bermejo, 2007); hence there are no problems of statistical representativeness in the data we present. However, log-file measures have their own limitations, since they involve all sorts of problems of over- and under-counting.

UU measures are based on cookie counts. Websites use cookies to recognize users who have previously visited them. UUs refer not to individuals but to a unique computer or a unique browser. When people delete their cookie information from

their computer they are likely to appear as two different users during a measured time period. Equally, problems arise when a website is accessed from a library or an Internet café because only one user is counted when, in reality, there may be many users. Similar is use from a workplace and via proxy servers, both of which mean that many users are represented by one IP (Internet Protocol) address. Despite these caveats, UUs remain the best available measure to arrive at a figure – though this, of course, tells us nothing about the duration or significance of use.

By tracking users' IP addresses, one can see the country wherein the user is based. The geographical location of users does not fluctuate a great deal over short time periods. February 2009 was a typical period in terms of the geographical distribution of audiences over a month and is used for our analysis.

PIs measure which pages each visitor opens on the site. PIs are used to understand the type of content that is being consumed. In this article PIs are used to explore what news genres on the BBC Persian and BBC Arabic websites are read by the users. Like UUs, PIs are a problematic measure, ignoring as they do the time a user spends on a page but also missing any dimension of the relative significance to the user of a given page (Hine, 2001).

The second source of data we use is the BBC World Service Internet PULSE, a quarterly audience response survey of BBC World Service Internet users. It covers selected English language sites and the nine key LOTE sites. The Internet PULSE uses pop-up surveys to gather data to construct audience appreciation indices and to find out what people like and dislike about the BBC World Service website.

A random sample of users is served a pop-up and asked if they want to take part in a BBC survey (cookies ensure that users are not invited more than once). This sample is self-selecting in that respondents choose whether to fill in the questionnaire.

Obviously, respondents are likely to be frequent users of the site since those who use the site more often are more likely to come across the pop-survey. All questionnaires are in the appropriate language and script. Currently 11 BBC World Service sites are surveyed each quarter, for five to six weeks. During the survey period data is gathered from at least 1,000 respondents on each site, generating over 11,000 completed questionnaires.

In addition to appreciation indices the PULSE survey asks about demographics – age, gender, and occupation – in order to create an audience profile of respondents. The audience profile is considered in this article alongside audience responses to an open-ended question in the survey asking what the audience likes or does not like about the site. The user comments were translated from Arabic and Persian into English for our analysis.

Spatial Dimensions of Digital Diasporas

The percentage of UUs of the nine key LOTE online sites coming from the target market (i.e. excluding the diaspora market) is shown in Figure 1. This shows the percentage of target market users in green versus the percentage of diaspora users in blue, for both BBC Arabic and BBC Persian Online. The remainder of the key BBC World Service LOTE websites are shown in shades of gray. BBC Vietnamese is the World Service site with the highest proportion of its audience in its geographical target, Vietnam. The BBC Brazil service also has more users in its target market than outside. Otherwise, diaspora audiences are at least as large in number as ‘local’ or target markets for these LOTE online sites.

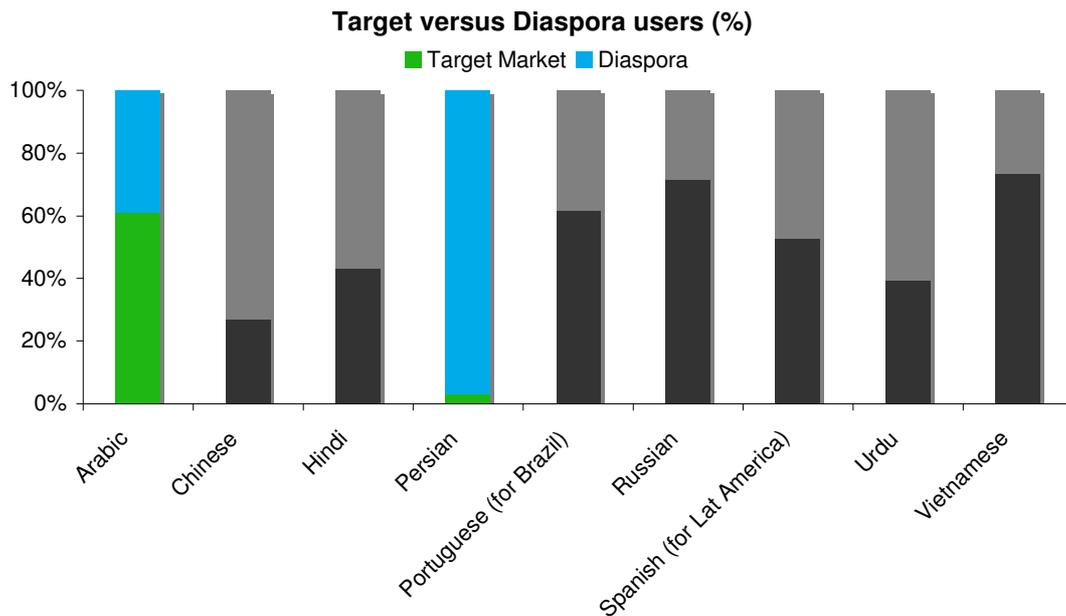


Figure 1. Unique Users from inside the defined Target Market for nine key LOTE sites

There are several reasons why diaspora users outweigh target market users. First, access to the Internet may be greater in the diaspora than at home, for political or economic reasons. In the case of BBC Persian Online and BBC Chinese Online, for example, the websites are blocked in Iran and China, so the majority of their users are abroad.

Second, many BBC World Service target markets have experienced large-scale emigration in recent times – this applies to the Chinese, Iranian, Indian, Russian, Pakistani, Latin American, and Arabic-speaking diasporas. In some cases this is because, as people move, they carry their media habits with them, so they continue with the BBC World Service. For refugees and asylum seekers from war torn countries for whom the BBC World Service has been the only or main source of impartial news and information, there is some continuity of media habits after emigration (Gillespie, 2007). This is especially the case among Persian, Arabic, Urdu,

and Somali speakers (see www.mediatingsecurity.com). Of course migrants and refugees also develop new media habits but among those we interviewed the BBCWS retains its ‘aura of impartiality.’

Third, the interactive sites provide the opportunity for virtual co-presence and participation in debates that are of personal or political salience for users in their own language but the consequences may be contradictory and highly variable. They may enable users to transcend both single national forms of identification and the binary relationship between home and away, incorporating them both in an imagined transnational community but equally they may reinforce nationalist and particularist identifications (Gillespie, Herbert, and Andersson, 2010). Whatever the political consequences, the Internet provides virtual social and cultural spaces where diasporic groups can debate matters of common concern.

Of course migrants have always bought (or read in the library) their ‘native’ newspapers, from home, and more recently many have been able to watch cable or satellite television channels as a way of keeping in touch. With the Internet, however, they are offered an instantaneity, at low or no cost, multimedia content and forms of interactivity. Nonetheless there remains the question that we address shortly: why do these people use BBC World Service sites? A substantial range of media provide alternatives to the BBC and other Internet news sites are available in their mother tongue – the BBC World Service is just one of many available news media.

BBC Persian and Arabic Services

The BBC Persian website is blocked in Iran which means that, although filter breakers are available inside Iran, very few are able to access it from inside the

country. Prior to the blocking, in January 2006, about 40% of users were in Iran. There was a sudden decline in users in Iran as successive ISP providers filtered the BBC domain. By February 2009 only 5% of UUs were in Iran, where the site is still now only available from certain government run organizations and universities. The remaining 95% of users are spread throughout the world, with the largest groups in North America and Western Europe. There are indications that users find the site using proxy servers (servers that sit between a client and a web server and represent themselves to each end as being the other), and some ISPs offer access to the BBC for an additional fee each month (despite government regulations). However, it is impossible with current measurements to estimate usage via proxy servers. Our discussion is confined to the official data from the BBC's web analytics system.

The proportion of users of BBC Persian Online from different countries is shown in Figure 2. The top five countries are the USA (27%), Canada (11%), the UK (9%), Germany (8%), and Iran (5%). The diaspora audience is mostly in urban centers in Europe (notably London and Frankfurt) and the East Coast and California in the USA.

Geo Distribution bbcpersian.com Feb 2009
 Source: BBC in house research

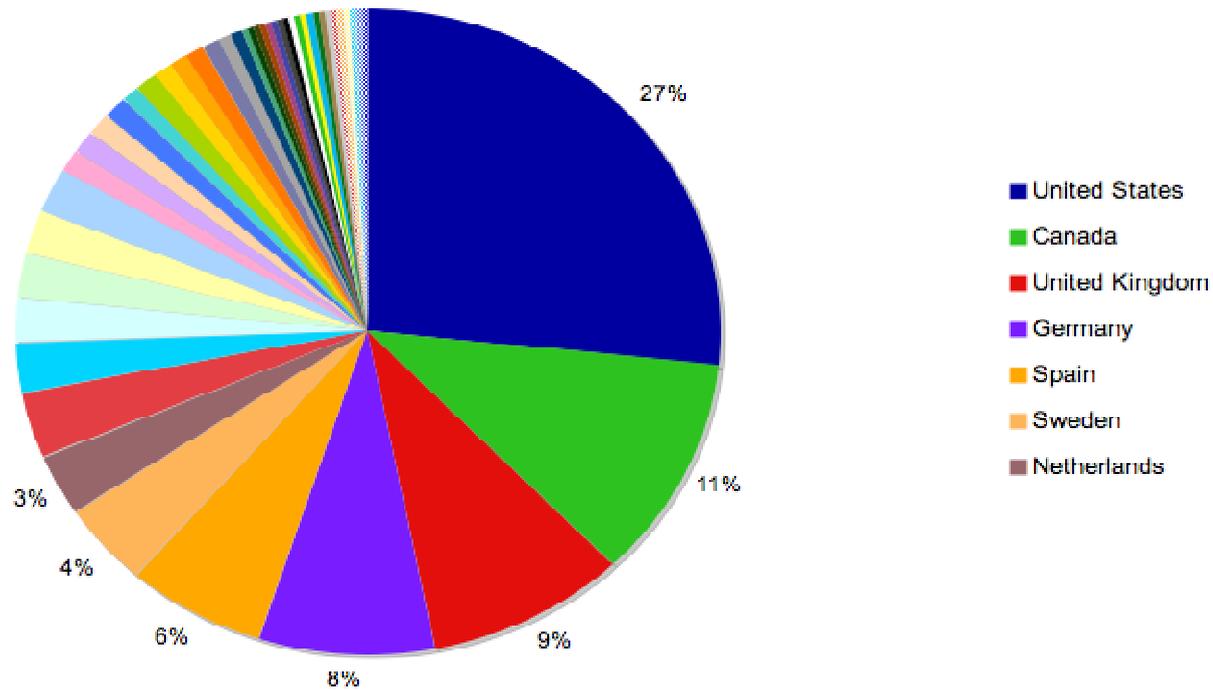


Figure 2. Geo distribution BBC Persian Online February 2009

The diaspora audience for BBC Arabic Online is mainly in the same locations in North America and Western Europe as is the BBC Persian Online audience. However, 61% of the UUs use the site from the target market (the Arabic speaking Middle East – 23 countries in total). The remaining 39% of users of BBC Arabic Online are distributed around the world. The number of users from the Middle East has gone up since the launch of Arabic TV, most of the audience of which is in the Middle East. The television channel has been actively promoting the website.

The countries with the highest proportion of users of BBC Arabic Online are shown in Figure 3: Egypt (19%), the USA (12%), Saudi Arabia (12%), the UK (5%), United Arab Emirates (5%), Germany (3%), and Canada (3%).

Geo Distribution bbc arabic.com Feb 2009
 Source: BBC in house research

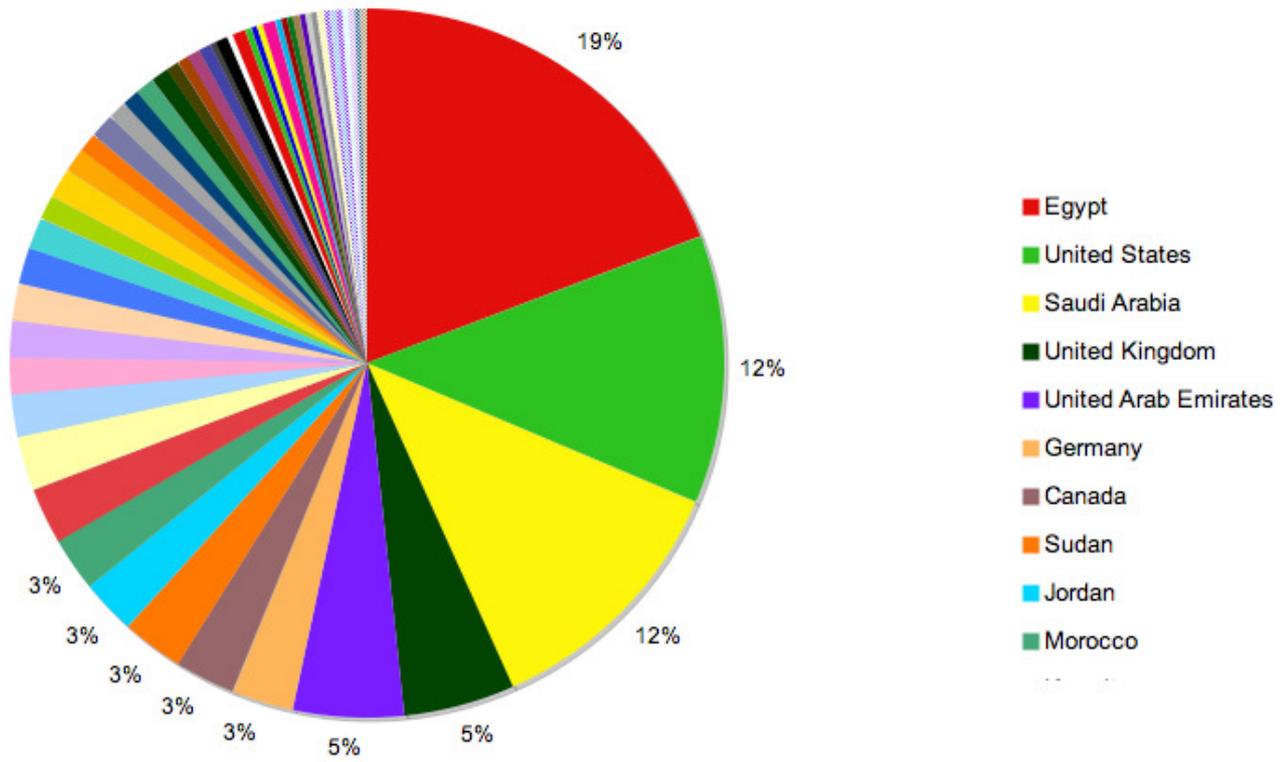


Figure 3. Geo distribution BBC Arabic Online, February 2009

Figure 3 shows that Britain is far from the only country where members of the Arabic and Persian diaspora use the BBC sites. Rather, what is striking is the number of geographic locations that bring together these transnational language communities across national boundaries. Far from the center – that, historically, spoke to the recipient nation – Britain appears in a relatively minor place in the global network. Clearly, this has implications for the World Service’s commitment to establishing conversations around the globe but also questions the idea of diasporas playing a role in the BBC’s purpose of bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK.

We know the geographical locations of users, but little more from this data. We have no idea from what country users originate, whether they are first or second generation Arab/Persian speakers, or whether they are permanent residents in the country where they are. We do, however, have some demographic data on these users.

Social characteristics

The demographics of frequent users of BBC Persian Online and BBC Arabic Online are similar.

Frequent users of BBC World Service LOTE sites are predominantly male. For both BBC Arabic and BBC Persian, 91% of the users are male (according to the PULSE survey Q4 2008). This is a remarkably high figure. There are slightly more females amongst diaspora users but there is still an extremely high male dominance. This might be because of a lack of Internet access or media literacy, it may reflect the appeal of the content or it could be for numerous other possible reasons.

The majority of users are aged between 25 and 44 years old (63% for BBC Arabic and 67% for BBC Persian) but weighted at the younger end of this scale. Both sites attract mostly skilled to highly skilled professionals – about 75% of the respondents range from skilled workers to top management. Obviously, it is impossible to say whether or not this is representative of the diaspora population.

In sum, most frequent visitors to both BBC Arabic Online and BBC Persian Online are young, professional, males. BBC Persian also has a large following amongst students (21% of the users are students). These users often visit both the LOTE and English sites. Many users are multilingual and cosmopolitan in orientation. This profile is the same for both sites regardless of geographical location. Although the Internet provides an opportunity to reach transnational communities there are

questions about who is included and who is excluded from the ‘global conversation.’ We do not know whether Internet services will trickle down to less affluent groups with increasing broadband penetration, but today BBC World Service LOTE sites services seem to be providing for a relatively exclusive group, profoundly gendered and with particular skills, interests, and levels of cultural capital, in both the target and diaspora markets.

Uses: why do users log on to BBC WSs Online?

BBC Persian Online

Persian is spoken in Afghanistan and Tadjikistan as well as Iran, and the website does attempt to address the three national markets. Nonetheless, the main reason why audiences (both diaspora and in Iran) come to the site is to read news about Iran from an independent source – specifically, a source that is independent of the state, the Islamic Republic of Iran⁶. Clearly there is a wide choice of sites from which the BBC is selected, perhaps in conjunction with other sources. Most of the globally dispersed Iranian diaspora was triggered by the 1979 revolution, with different waves leaving for various political, economic, and cultural reasons. The desire for independent news about and from Iran is backed up by analysis of the traffic⁷ (in terms of Page Impressions (PIs) to the site) which shows that about 40% of traffic is for news about Iran⁸.

The traffic (in terms of PIs) to different news genres on BBC Persian Online is shown in Figure 4. The vertical axis shows the percentage of PIs out of the top 500 PIs. These PI figures help us to understand what it is that is the most popular content. The consumption is measured by country for comparison, with chart bars for users in Iran, the USA, UK, and Canada.

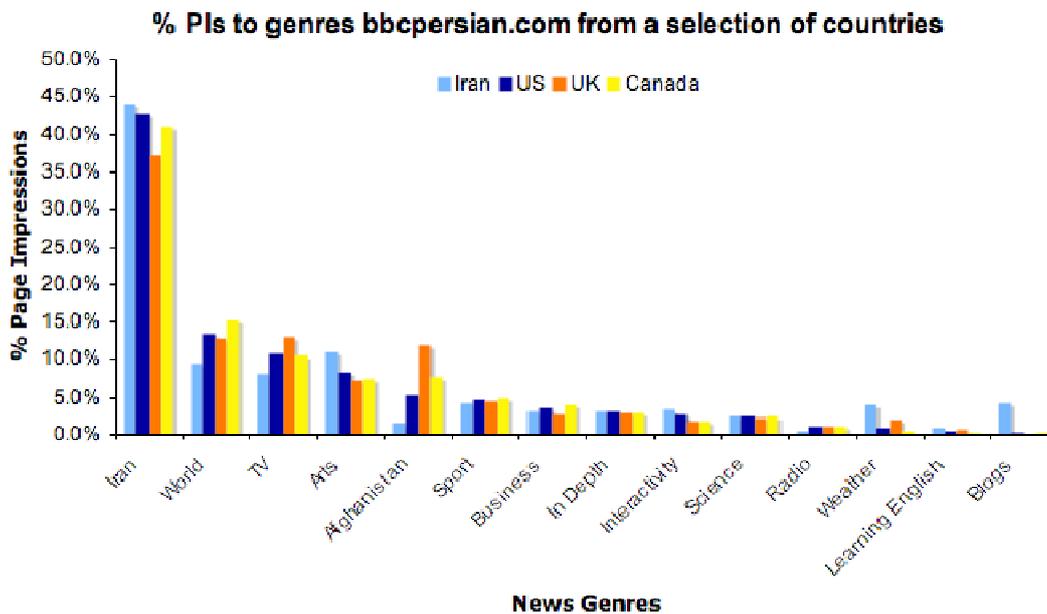


Figure 4. Percentage of Page Impressions per Genre, BBC Persian Online, in selected countries

One reason for users coming to BBC Persian Online is because they feel comfortable reading news in Persian. Another reason is that non-Iranian media do not cover Iran as extensively as does BBC Persian Online⁹. For example, February 2009 was the 30th anniversary of the Iranian revolution, so BBC Persian Online had a special index with stories from the revolution but also stories and memories from people who fled the country at that time. The anniversary coverage received 250,000 PIs in February and the most popular stories that month were about the revolution.

BBC Persian Online functions to share all aspects of life, culture, politics, and daily routines – so, unlike most other World Service sites, it is used for wider topics than just news¹⁰. The site also covers things that are happening in the diaspora, for example it produces special indexes with information, interactivity, and photographs

about what it is like to live as an Iranian in Canada or Australia. In March 2009 there was an index about the Iranian New Year with a photo gallery showing how Iranians from all over the world celebrated the New Year, which became one of the most viewed features on the site, with over 50,000 PIs in March 2008.

Conversation across borders takes place on the website via the interactive ‘Have Your Say’ fora, by sending in photos, and by the BBC Persian team using information, letters, and reports from its audience across the globe. In one week in April 2009, over half of the emails sent to BBC Persian Online were from diaspora audiences, particularly those living in the USA. However, interactivity remains a relatively small part of the activity on the BBC World Service LOTE sites. There are also cases where BBC Persian Online diaspora users have become BBC Persian stringers and correspondents. With some help from BBC journalists on how to write reports of events, they have written, for example, on diasporic Iranians in Canada and Australia.

Such online material opens up possibilities for citizen journalists but also jeopardizes the professional journalistic standards for which the BBC is so well-known. It certainly augments cultural traffic from Bush House to the recipient nation, by communicating across diverse nodes in diasporic networks – altering not only the direction of flows but also, arguably, power relations between producers and consumers.

News for and about Afghanistan is also popular, especially from users in the UK. Tajik news is not popular, due to lack of access in Tajikistan and the low numbers in the Tajik diaspora. International or world news attracts only around 15% of the traffic to BBC Persian Online, confirming that the main reason to visit is to maintain contact with Iranian society, culture, and politics.

BBC Persian TV has considerable significance for the BBC's presence in Iran but also in the Iranian diaspora. BBC Persian now reaches more people and the television channel has been well received by its audiences, according to BBC in-house research. For the Online team however, the launch of television has meant less focus on online and less resources and fewer people writing stories for Online. The BBC Persian TV stream and video content from the channels is available online but there is not enough time or resources to, for example, write special stories about life in the diaspora, as there was prior to the television channel¹¹. The Online Editor for BBC Persian Online feels that online is the future and that online audiences are opinion leaders and more news savvy than television audiences. He sees it as missing an opportunity to not maintain the online focus. The reach and usage of the site, however, has declined following the launch of television in January 2009, though it is on the ascendant again, probably because of interest in the Iranian election that is to take place in June 2009.

On the BBC quarterly PULSE survey, respondents are asked about what they like and what they dislike about the site. Examples of these positive and negative comments indicate diverse and conflicting views on the BBC Persian website (PULSE Q2 2007).

We analyzed a total of 658 positive and 451 negative comments, and identified three key themes.

First, the coverage of Iran is both praised and criticized. Stories about Iran are the most read stories on the Persian site, but these give rise to negative comments about how Iran is portrayed and some respondents want more detailed news about Iran, particularly local news about specific places in Iran. Sixty-six comments praise

news coverage about Iran whilst 52 comments refer to the lack of global, Iranian, and, in particular, locally based Iranian news. Many of these users who yearn for more news from inside Iran often want news about domestic politics and the conditions inside the country rather than more news on Iran in conflict with the West. One user left the comment, 'you (the BBC) should focus more on political news and socio-economical issues *inside* Iran.' Clearly, these mainly diaspora users want to know more about Iran, which is why they come to the site.

Second, the global perspective on international news coverage is appreciated. Although international news is secondary in terms of stories that are read, the presence and availability of international news and a global perspective is recognized and highly valued by at least 141 respondents to the PULSE survey. One user, for example, commented, 'BBC reports from around the globe and the Middle East very sharply. I can get all the information I need from BBC Persian website.'

Third, there are conflicting views on objectivity and bias. Many comments refer to the objectivity or bias of the site. Thirty-four comments praise BBC Persian Online for the objectivity of its news coverage, 'to be unbiased is the major characteristic of the BBC.' On the other hand, 157 comments refer to BBC Persian Online as biased. For example, 'this broadcasting agency historically is working to maintain western values and is against the independent countries like Iran. They use very complicated methods to manipulate people.' Users have complained about the use of the term 'the Gulf,' not 'the Persian Gulf': on BBC Persian Online the term 'the Persian Gulf' is used and Iranian users are demanding that the same term should be used on the English language site because, according to one survey respondent, 'the BBC is one BBC' (PULSE Q2 2007). Overall, however, respondents have conflicting views on the nature of the bias that they oppose. The specific biases that

they mentioned are: pro-Islamic Republic of Iran's regime (39 comments), pro-UK (17) and pro-Western (13). This distribution might suggest a certain even-handedness by the BBC.

The diverse answers are encouraging when assessing whether the site functions as a transnational public forum or contact zone for the Persian diaspora, bringing together diasporic Persians and Iranians¹² from all over the world to share topics of common interest. It allows members of diasporas to stay in contact with Iran and it represents diasporic Iranians and Persians. It gives a platform for them to read, share, and debate news about Iran from a political, cultural, and social point of view. The data raise the question of when neutrality or balance is desirable, and how this relates to notions of truth or objectivity. Justin Lewis *et al.* have discussed how in some contexts *balance* of viewpoints is appropriate and desirable journalism, whilst in others (the effects of MMR vaccine, causes of Aids, origins of the universe) *objectivity* should be prioritized (Lewis *et al.*, 2005). Such a distinction is hard to operationalize in the context of firmly felt beliefs.

BBC Arabic Online

Like BBC Persian Online, BBC Arabic Online brings together people in dispersed geographical locations. There are similar reasons why its audiences come to BBC Arabic Online, why they like staying in contact with back home and the Arabic community all over the world, and why they like reading news in Arabic. They are more comfortable reading news in Arabic and report that there is not enough coverage of the Middle East in non-Arabic media¹³.

Users of BBC Arabic Online visit more international news pages than do those who use BBC Persian Online. The traffic (PIs) to different news genres on BBC

Arabic Online is shown in Figure 5. The X-axis shows the different genres on the site, while the Y-axis shows the percentage of PIs out of the top 500 PIs, in February 2009. The popularity of content is measured by country for comparison: the USA (blue), UK (dark blue), Egypt (orange), and Saudi Arabia (yellow).

From 25-30% of the news that is consumed is about the Middle East and about 15% is international news. There are some differences in preferences amongst diaspora and target market audiences, for example in the USA users consume a slightly higher proportion of Middle Eastern news than do target market users who live in the region; Middle Eastern users consume more sport. However the most significant difference is that Egyptian users consume a great deal of content on their mobile phones. The BBC World Service Business Development Department has recently negotiated distribution via Egyptian mobile phone operators and better distribution now means that 80% of usage of BBC Arabic mobile content comes from Egypt. Mobile usage is seen as the largest growth potential for BBC Arabic in the Middle East at present because more people have access to mobile phones than computers¹⁴.

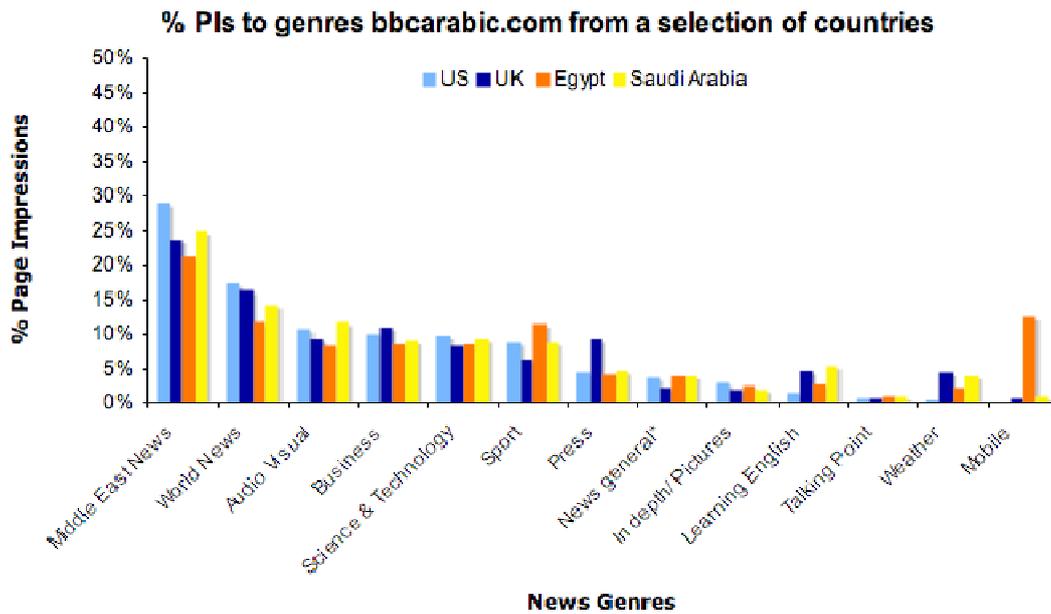


Figure 5. % PIs to genres on BBC Arabic Online from selected countries

In terms of international news, anything to do with terrorism and the war on terror attracts attention¹⁵. The main Middle Eastern news of interest to the audience is about Palestine, Iraq, and the BAE arms investigation. Stories about Arabs in the diaspora are also well read. For example, in the context of the sixth anniversary of the Iraq invasion, the site reported on Arab men who were fighting in the US army in Iraq. This was the most popular story on the site in June 2007 (over 120,000 PIs) and generated considerable discussion on the interactive fora. There was coverage on radio and television, and on the interactive programme *Talking Point*. Users interacted and discussed the topic on the *Have Your Say* forum, and recorded and submitted comments by webcams, sms, phone calls, and email. Figure 5, however, shows that *Talking Point* did not generate substantial PIs on the site in February 2009; the increased interactivity on television is not really benefiting the online audience¹⁶.

However the television audiences benefit from the comments that users leave online from all over the world because their views add to the debate and discussion on the *Talking Point* television program.

Sport is also popular, for example PIs to Zinedine Yazid Zidane (born in Algeria and living in France) during the football World Cup 2006 make him the all-time favorite sports celebrity on the site. In addition, people learn English on the site and share photographs and look at images. With the launch of the television channel, users can also catch up on past television programs and view video clips on the site.

In many cases, audiences come to the site to access a different perspective on events, even if they do not always agree with it, for example to follow the ‘war on terror’ or a social issue such as gay rights¹⁷. The ethic of impartiality means that different groups (such as liberals or conservatives) are given space in news coverage on BBC Arabic Online. This often results in conflicting views being expressed on the forum (ref Herbert) and in emails to the section. There are also conflicting ideas about the BBC Arabic site in the comments that users leave on the quarterly PULSE survey on the BBC website in Arabic (PULSE Q2 2007). How conflicts in values and views are debated and negotiated, and how the World Service functions as a cross and intra diasporic contact zone, has been explored in our project (Herbert and Aly, 2009).

From a total of 495 positive and 310 negative comments (PULSE Survey Q2 2007) we identified three themes.

First is the balance between objectivity and bias. We found no consistency in the comments that users left on the quarterly PULSE survey. Many (125) users think that the BBC provides objective news. One respondent, for example, wrote, ‘I have been listening to BBC Arabic for the past thirty years I really like this website, because it provides objective news. I like that there is always two sides to every story

and fair and just reporting, it gives everyone a chance.’ On the other hand, many (115) respondents felt that the site publishes biased news. The views of the nature of the bias differ, but most were about general bias or a pro-Western, anti-Arab, bias. The most common sources of bias mentioned were: generally biased service (47 comments), bias against Arabs (24), pro-Israel bias (18), general lack of objectivity (10), and pro-US bias (9). Comments included, for example, ‘I dislike the bias of English news, it portrays American and British views’ and ‘I dislike the reiteration of western views, there is an Israeli, American and British bias and those are the positions that are being portrayed.’

Second is the matter of cultural understanding and religious sensitivity. It is quite clear from the many comments (101) praising BBC Arabic that the site is well liked and has a loyal following. Thirty-seven comments referred specifically to the credibility of the news coverage. As one respondent wrote, ‘I really like how *Shiite* and *Sunni* quotes are used when referring to conflict. I also like the credibility of coverage of for example Iran.’ On the other hand, 21 comments criticized the site for having a lack of understanding of cultural and religious issues. Respondents expressed their concern about certain groups being given more coverage, for example, ‘I feel that Islamists are given priority in news coverage much more so compared to secularists.’

Third and finally was what might be seen as a tension, between those wanting more global news and those wanting more local news. There were more respondents who felt that the site covers a broad news agenda (86 comments) compared to those (69 comments) who complained about lack of coverage. The site is used mostly for reading international news, yet there were those who felt that it does not carry enough news from around the world. Others complained that there is not enough local news

from the Middle East suggesting a demand for more stories on the Middle East. It is difficult for BBC Arabic to cover all regional news stories relevant to its audience, since the service spans such a large geographical area and number of nations.

These comments illustrate the differences in point of view among the user community. BBC Persian Online is more of a diasporic site, bringing people from the diaspora and the Middle East together in dialog and cultural exchange. There are topics that unite and divide the audience but they share an interest in the Middle East and in international news from the BBC. The diversity of opinions that can be found and the wish to read other points of view also attracts them to the website. It is also clear that user perceptions of BBC bias are more one-sided in the case of BBC Arabic Online than is the case for BBC Persian Online, illustrating the tension between diversity (wanted in some cases, not in others) and truth (which is seen as more of an issue by BBC Arabic Online users).

Conclusion

The BBC World Service sites that we have discussed provide news and fora for diasporic communication, enabling people to sustain ties to their country or region of origin, and to engage with diasporic counterparts around the world. BBC Persian Online is largely a diaspora service with the vast majority of users outside Iran. Users come to the site primarily to consume news about Iran or 'back home.' The BBC Persian service caters for the diaspora by giving its members a voice on the site by means of special indexes about life in the diaspora. By contrast, BBC Arabic generates cultural and information traffic between the Middle East and the Arabic-speaking diasporas.

Digital diasporas have intriguing implications for how cultural identities and political conflicts are conceived, contested, and negotiated through everyday media practices. They also suggest the need for a radical reconsideration of how audiences are conceived and of the very notion of cultural exchange. Our research points us to ways in which the analysis of diasporas can extend how we can consider ‘the nation’ as opposed to ‘the state’ as something that is beyond geography or stretched across different geographical locations – with Iran constituted in part in the new Iranian-saturated locations of Los Angeles and Toronto¹⁸.

As well as a channel of communication for diasporic consciousness and perspectives that are to be found in migrant populations, these Internet sites mobilize and even construct diasporic communities. More than this, multilingual users of the LOTE sites also engage frequently with the English language World Service sites, so BBC World Service online services are multi-dimensional in that they function as both intra and cross-diasporic contact zones.

The Internet makes it easier in some ways for the BBC to realize its global ambitions as a *World Service* and to achieve its recent aim of fostering a ‘global conversation.’ Although changing, however, the World Service and FCO continue to a large extent to see their markets in *national* terms and to see the World Service as an inter-national broadcaster – nation speaking to nation. The Internet points us to a rather different understanding, of *transnational* audiences and global diasporas.

Diasporas are heterogeneous groups and highly differentiated internally along axes of class, generation, and gender, among other socio-cultural and political variables. Our most striking finding in this regard is the predominance of men as users of both BBC Arabic and BBC Persian websites.

Whilst older media have always had forms of interactivity (by letters and phone calls), with the Internet, user engagement is enhanced. Interactivity, however, challenges the power of broadcasters and can create tensions. It points to the limits of public or digital diplomacy: the Internet enables people to talk back (Herbert and Ramy, 2009). It provides enormous possibilities for public diplomacy, but its interactivity, the global conversation that it fosters, creates new and complex needs for influencing and managing the feedback that it engenders.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on an interdisciplinary collaborative research project entitled 'Tuning In: Diasporic Contact Zones at the BBC World Service.' It is funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council Programme 'Diasporas Migration and Identities' (Award reference AH/ES58693/1). The project is based at the Open University in Milton Keynes, UK and led by Professor Marie Gillespie. For further information see <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas>. We would like to thank: BBC World Service staff, past and present, who we interviewed and who contributed ideas to this article, especially Mohamed Yehia, Editor BBC Arabic Online, Sima Alinejad former Editor BBC Persian, and Jamshid Barzegar, Editor BBC Persian Online; Alan Booth, Jeremy Nye, and Colin Wilding who facilitated access to BBC World Service data; those who contributed and responded to an earlier version of this article that was presented by Matilda Andersson and Marie Gillespie at the *International Broadcasting, Public Diplomacy and Cultural Exchange* Conference to Evaluate 75 years of BBC Overseas Broadcasting, December 18-19 2007, School of Oriental and African Studies, London; Annabelle Sreberny for her comments on a draft of this paper.

ENDNOTES

-
- ¹ LOTE is a term used increasingly to describe languages other than English in organizations where the main operational language is English.
- ² Press Release on details of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review
http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2007/10_october/09/ws.shtml
- ³ Discussion with Sally Thompson, Head of Future Media, BBC World Service, November 2007.
- ⁴ Data from BBC in-house web-analytics SAGE system of e-metrics, gathered October 2007, December 2007, February 2009, and April 2009.
- ⁶ Online Editor for bbcpersian.com, November 2007
- ⁷ In this analysis the top 500 URLs were analyzed to identify the most popular content on the sites.
- ⁸ Further research on this is being undertaken in our project by Annabelle Sreberny and her team.
- ⁹ Online Editor for bbcpersian.com, November 2007
- ¹⁰ Online Editor for bbcpersian.com, November 2007
- ¹¹ Online Editor for bbpersian.com conversation April 2009
- ¹² Iranian and Persian identities should not be conflated. They have distinct and complex histories. Diasporic Iranians often refer to themselves as Persian and feel great pride in their Persian heritage. Iranian Kurds would not refer to themselves as Persian but as Kurds, for example. Sreberny's research in our project addresses the complexity of national and diasporic identity formations and diasporic nationalism; see <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/>
- ¹³ Online Editor for bbcarabic.com, November 2007
- ¹⁴ Online Editor for bbcarabic.com, April 2009
- ¹⁵ Online Editor for bbcarabic.com, November 2007
- ¹⁶ Online Editor for bbcarabic.com, April 2009
- ¹⁷ Online Editor for bbcarabic.com, November 2007
- ¹⁸ Thanks to Annabelle Sreberny for this comment.

References

Baumann, Gerd. & Gillespie, Marie (2007) 'Diasporic Citizenship, Cosmopolitanisms and the Paradox of Mediated Objectivity: An Interdisciplinary Study of the BBC World Service'; see <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/publications.htm>

BBC (2008) *World Service Annual Report 2007/2008*. London, BBC.

Bakardjieva, Maria (2006) *Internet Society. The Internet in Everyday Life*. London, Sage.

Bermejo, Ian (2007) *The Internet Audience Constitution & Measurement*, Lang Publishing, New York.

Brubaker, Rogers (2005) 'The 'diaspora' diaspora.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Vol.28, No.1, pp.1-19.

Gillespie, Marie (2007) 'Diasporic Contact Zones@ the BBC World Service'
<http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/publications.htm>

Gillespie, Marie., Herbert, David., and Andersson, Matilda., (2010) 'The Mumbai Attacks and Diasporic Nationalism: BBC World Service Forums as Contact, Conflict and Comfort Zones' in *South Asian Diaspora 2/1* pp.109-129

Gillespie, Marie (2010) 'Diasporic Creativity: Refugee Intellectuals, Exiled Poets and Corporate Cosmopolitanism at the BBC World Service' in Knott, K. and McLaughlin, S., *Diasporas* London Zed Books

Herbert, David and Aly, Ramy (2009) 'Participation, Dialogue and Public Diplomacy across English and Arabic Mediascapes: BBC, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya compared'; see <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/publications.htm>

Hine, Christine (2001) 'Web pages, authors and audiences: the Meaning of a Mouse Click.' *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 182-198.

Lewis, Justin, Inthorn, Sanna and Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin (2005) *Citizens or Consumers? What the Media Tell us About Political Participation*. Maidenhead, Open University Press.

Miller, Daniel and Slater, David (2000) *The Internet: an ethnographic approach*. Oxford, Berg.

Mitra, Ananda (2007) Virtual community: looking for India on the Internet in S Jones, Stephen (ed) *Virtual Culture*. London, Sage.

Savage, Mike and Burrows, Roger (2007) 'The coming crisis of empirical sociology' *Sociology*. Vol. 41, No. 6, pp. 885-899.

Smith, Marc and Kollock, Peter (1999) (eds) *Communities in Cyberspace* London, Routledge.

Contributors:

Matilda Andersson, Research Associate
M.Andersson@open.ac.uk

Marie Gillespie, Professor
M.Gillespie@open.ac.uk

Hugh Mackay, Senior Lecturer
A.H.Mackay@open.ac.uk

Department of Sociology
Faculty of Social Sciences
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA
UK
Tel. +44 (0)1908 274066