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How to cite:

Gillespie, Marie (2013). BBC Arabic, social media and citizen production: an experiment in digital democracy before the Arab Spring. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30(4) pp. 92–130.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/0263276413482382>

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BBC Arabic, Social Media and Citizen Production An Experiment in Digital Democracy before the Arab Spring

Abstract

This article examines an innovative experiment in democratising international broadcasting through embracing a participatory model of production. In spring 2010, a political debate television series was co-created by BBC Arabic and citizen producers, using social media tools. Based around interviews with prominent political and controversial public figures, the show (G710) was broadcast weekly on satellite TV across the Middle East and the Arabic-speaking world. Combining collaborative ethnography with corporate 'big data' analysis, the research team followed the experiment from conception to premature closure. The article argues that the kinds of digital tools deployed in producing the show, and used by BBC audience research to monitor user practices in real time, have become essential to corporate processes of BBC World Service governance, strategy, accountability, marketing and editorial decision-making. They act as change agents, presenting methodological problems and opportunities for the BBC's audience researchers and academic researchers, as well as symbolising the contradictory logic of empowerment and surveillance.

Keywords:

International Broadcasting, BBC Arabic, citizen production, social media, real-time media monitoring, digital democracy.

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Introduction

State-funded, multilingual international broadcasters, such as BBC World Service, Voice of America, Deutsche Welle and France 24 once enjoyed a privileged position in the Middle East. They now operate in an intensely competitive media arena. As news organisations with a more or less overt diplomatic function, they face an uncertain and volatile geopolitical environment and unprecedented funding, technological and editorial challenges. In order to survive in the digital age, they have to develop new ways of engaging Arabic-speaking audiences through social media. In so doing they employ real-time monitoring methods to gauge user engagement, make editorial choices, evaluate their success, create new projects and satisfy their audiences, and their funders and political masters.

The adoption of social media in the newsroom comes with great expectations as well as high risks, especially with regards to the credibility, authority, reputation and trustworthiness of long established international public service news organisations. This article examines the possibilities and limitations of social media as a tool for broadcasters and researchers. It analyses the differences that can be observed between the rhetoric and reality of social media use, and evaluates whether social media can facilitate, as the BBC hopes, a ‘global conversation’ in which informed democratic debate takes place. These issues are examined through the prism of an innovative experiment in participatory production that tested the boundaries of conventional BBC production.

G710 (hereafter G710), a weekly, political debate series, was co-created by BBC Arabic and self-appointed citizen producers using social media in the Spring of 2010. It was broadcast on satellite TV across the Middle East and the Arabic-speaking world at 7:10pm Greenwich Mean Time and foreshadowed, albeit in microcosm, some of the network and discursive features of the Arab Spring 2011. However, after only six weeks, G710 was suddenly pulled. Why? Had the boundaries of conventional and/or acceptable BBC journalistic practice been pushed too far? Was it a question mainly of resources, politics, personalities, or some combination of all of these factors?

G710 presents an intriguing opportunity to investigate the tensions between the democratic potential of social media and the practical and more fundamental problems involved in employing social media as a platform for widening participation and promoting democratic debate by international broadcasters. In particular, the article underscores the tricky trade-offs between empowering and monitoring users, creative innovation and traditional journalism, transparency and editorial control, immediacy and predictability, and commercial imperatives versus public service values.

The analysis presented here is based on a collaborative ethnography of the experiment from conception to termination. A multi-disciplinary team of academic researchers was granted full access to production processes and to the BBC’s real-time media monitoring data¹. The article addresses issues at the heart of ‘the social life of methods’ – ways of doing and knowing that are embedded in institutional contexts and social relations, and which in turn, shape those contexts and relations.

In the first part of the article, the case study is set in the context of relevant academic literature and debates about participatory production and digital democracy. Second, the BBC Arabic Service is situated in its political, economic and policy context – specifically its relationship with its funders, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the public diplomacy aspirations that are embedded in the concept of the ‘global conversation’, and the BBC World Service’s remit as a public service broadcaster. The third part of the article addresses issues of methods and the challenges of digital data. The fourth part explains how the participatory model of production worked in practice, while the fifth part highlights the relevance of discourses on the virtual or *Iftiradi* in the Arab media sphere relating to G710. Finally, the article examines practices of real-time media monitoring in relation to ethical questions, ending with some reflections on how this experiment resonates with the Arab Spring 2011. It will be argued that social media have yet to fulfil the much hyped aspirations around digital democracy. Nevertheless we have much to learn from failed experiments like G710 which test the boundaries, helping us better to understand the obstacles to informed digital debate.

Participatory production: empowerment and surveillance

Participatory production represents a new trend in broadcasting but the proliferation of terms used to describe such developments has tended to obscure our understanding of their significance. Whether we refer to ‘produser-led’ or ‘peer-to-peer’ production, ‘user-generated content’ or ‘citizen journalism’ or ‘citizen producers’, the underlying principles of open participation, democratic decision-making, fluid heterarchy and ad hoc meritocracy are usually the same (Bauwens, 2005).

Bruns, for example, uses the term produsage to signal the dual status of users as producers, arguing that the process itself is ‘built on the affordances of the techno-social framework of the networked environment ... especially the harnessing of user communities that is made possible by their networking through many-to-many communications media’ (Bruns, 2007). Benkler and Nissenbaum argue that peer-to-peer production, as a socio-technical system, has the potential to foster moral and political virtues – democracy, social justice, autonomy (2006:1). Allen (2009) emphasises the way citizen journalism is associated with crises and catastrophes which compel people to bear witness and articulate their voice in the fight for democracy and dignity in many parts of the world. Uses of social media by citizen journalists, in particular, were instrumental in the organisation of the uprisings during the Arab Spring (Lotan et al 2011)

These new trends in production are part of what Jenkins (2006) refers to as convergence culture - an unstable cultural process which catalyses a series of unpredictable interactions between different media systems and users (radio, television and online) capable of generating new forms of participatory culture and social and political organisation. Participation in politics depends on media and the digital public sphere affords new possibilities for democratic communication (Dahlgren, 2005; Gripsrud and Moe, 2011).

In much of the relevant literature, it would seem that participatory production is almost inevitably a positive development. But terms like citizen journalism and participatory journalism production are highly contested notions that encompass diverse practices across multiple technologies, genres, and formats. An emphasis on

the empowering and transformative opportunities, welcome as that may be, may serve to mask the inequalities, exclusions, silencing and surveillance qualities of digitally networked initiatives for as ‘power moves with the speed of electronic signals in the fluidity of liquid modernity, transparency is simultaneously increased for some and decreased for others (Bauman and Lyon, 2013:12). If social media are used by citizen producers for their own purposes, how do corporations and governments respond when those purposes oppose their interests? What happens when social media trails are used to track, trap and crack down on protesters? Clearly social media projects are good at creating networks with weak ties, expanding participation and challenging power in the short term, but it remains to be seen if they have the power to effect enduring change.

In citizen producer projects like G710 users volunteer their services according to their personal skills, interests, and knowledge in an often intense social and learning experience to create a common object or property. They usually permit non-commercial use and adaptation of their intellectual property, have the hope of being rewarded with status and social capital, and may be equipped with media skills, training and experience to be added to the resume (Frohlich, Quiring, Engesser, 2012). But participatory production requires certain preconditions to succeed, including egalitarian forms of decision-making and social relations. (Bruns, 2007). If these are not present then there is a high risk of participants being exploited without financial reward. And there are many other problems associated with such projects such as the accidental or deliberate introduction of errors, limited knowledge and poor quality content and production values. Diversity in the online community may be lacking, leading to ‘group think’. Internal disagreements may flare and the community may collapse if the moderation skills needed for effective conflict resolution are absent. Hierarchies and power relations online tend to mimic and reproduce those operating offline. And it is important to understand the structural as well as the processual features of participatory production.

Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006) identify three structural properties inherent in the objects of peer-to-peer production. First, they must be *modular* – consist in individual components which can be independently developed so that individuals with varying competencies can contribute at different times. Second they must be *granular* – the modules need to be fine-grained so that they require little time, effort or motivation and can easily be aggregated. Third, they must permit *low-cost integration* of modules into the end product. In other words, they must be cheap. The drawing of the G710 concept by its creator Hosam Soakkari Head, of the BBC’s Arabic Service at the time, (fig 1) clearly captures the attributes of modularity and granularity in visual form - a point to which we will return.

The focus on granularity is also a feature of new corporate data sources and the search for particularistic identifiers (demographic or socio-spatial) by corporations, states and marketing firms to identify niche populations for the purpose of generating new markets and/or for surveillance. Such new digital data sources, though produced in relation to ‘whole populations’, drive a concern with the microscopic as ‘amalgamations of databases can allow ever more granular, unique specification... which generates a politics of mash-ups, compilations, and data assemblages’ (Savage, Ruppert and Law, 2011:12). These new ‘data assemblages’ are often represented as visualisations of spatial networks and mobilities with few or no geographic or

territorial or human reference points, depicting transactions and connections, and networks of networks. Visualisations of digital data may privilege non-humanist approaches to social science but they do require human interpretation (as is evident in the webometric diagrams in the appendix).

Digital transactions and projects, and the automated data they generate, work in a mutually constitutive relationship. They also operate within established institutional contexts, in which old and new ways of knowing and doing are juxtaposed. Citizen journalism and social media pose major challenges to established principles and practices of journalism. The informal rhetorical style of user-generated content and social media has to be reconciled with 'factuality' and being 'on message'. Further problems surround the authority and credibility of traditional channels and formats when user generated content is introduced. Working in real-time requires rapid responses based on real-time media monitoring data but overreliance on such data stifles creativity while ignoring it may result in a failure to respond to the information needs and interests of audiences and a drop in market share. Problems of editorial control, gate-keeping, gate-watching, moderation, freedom of expression, and the (self-) regulation of online communities proliferate.

Integrating online media with radio and television re-draws hierarchies and roles in news organisations, shifting the boundaries between producers and consumers, and blurring definitions between audiences as users, fans, citizens and publics. Terms change as fast as strategies in international broadcasting. Incorporating 'citizen producers' in social media experiments such as G710 might have been the strategy in 2010 but by 2011, it disappeared from the lexicon of the BBC's corporate strategy as senior management recoiled at the idea that BBC professionalism and impartiality might be undermined by amateurs. The more neutral term, user generated content, became current. Moreover, a project may be open to all but the result may not be inclusive. Projects in like G710 with an overtly political thrust are particularly vulnerable to being hijacked by saboteurs of extreme ideological persuasion or pranksters. So it is important not to presume outcomes but to understand the structural qualities of participatory production, the organisational dynamics and political factors that constrain such experiments and assess theory through empirical case studies, such as this.

The BBC Arabic Service: Digital Media and Diplomatic Imperatives

G710 was conceived by Hosam Sokkari, former Head of the BBC Arabic Services (2001-10). Arabic is currently one of the 27 foreign language services in which the BBC World Service broadcasts. BBC Arabic became a tri-platform service (radio, TV and online) in 2007 after the controversial closure of ten, mainly eastern European, language services released the resources required to set up the television station. The resources for BBC Arabic TV remain very limited (£22.5m operating expenditure in 2010-11) compared with its key competitors in the region, Al Jazeera and Al Arabya, but generous when compared with the BBC's other foreign language services (The entire African Service's operating expenditure 2010-11 was only £11.9m).ⁱⁱ

The launch of BBC Arabic TV was accompanied by great expectations as both a business and a diplomatic proposition in a post 9/11 world (Hill and Ashfaer, 2010; el Issawi and Baumann, 2010). Sokkari described his vision of BBC Arabic TV as that

of ‘piercing the blood-brain barrier that exists between the Anglo and Arab media spheres and facilitating an increased flow of high quality, impartial news and debate from the UK to the Middle East and vice versa.’ⁱⁱⁱ The brand image for G7:10 (Fig 1), designed by Sokkari, illustrates his self-declared preoccupation with brain chemistry and his intention of re-wiring habitual responses to news about the world. His cartoon face is embedded in the image and suggests that G710 is his brainchild and that he is the brain behind it. However, his vision proved rather ambitious given the highly competitive market in which BBC Arabic operates, the hegemony of Al Jazeera in the region, and inherently sceptical Arabic audiences. Since its advent as the BBC’s first overseas foreign language service in 1938, it has always had to battle with pervasive regional perceptions of its radio operations as an instrument of British foreign policy.^{iv}

Fig 1 The corporate branding cartoon of G710 designed by Hosam Sokkari.

BBC Arabic’s tri-platform operations need to be understood in the wider context of the Operating Agreement between the BBC World Service (BBCWS) and its governing body, the BBC Trust who define its remit, and its funders, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The BBCWS is one of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s (FCO) four main public diplomacy partners.^v It is funded by a grant-in-aid administered by the FCO, with a total budget of approximately £256m for 2010/11. Shifting geopolitical imperatives and British diplomatic priorities drive decision-making at the FCO, which has a right to dictate in which languages and regions the BBCWS may broadcast – and to open and close services. But the BBCWS maintains operational and editorial control, and would reject any attempt at interference from the FCO, except at times of war. From an FCO perspective, the potential diplomatic value of an Arabic TV Service integrated with its radio and online outputs was very valuable but uncertain and required close monitoring and evaluation.^{vi}

The BBCWS, as part of the BBC Global News Division, aspires to being ‘the world’s best known, most creative, and most respected voice in international news’, according to the BBC Trust’s Operating Agreement (2007:1). One of the key aims of the BBCWS is to foster a ‘global conversation’ by promoting:

an informed and intelligent dialogue which transcends international borders and cultural divides; by giving communities around the world opportunities to create, publish, and share their own views and stories; and, thereby, enabling people to make sense of increasingly complex regional and global events and developments.^{vii}

The ‘global conversation’ fostered in the spaces of interactive debate at the BBCWS is intended to contribute to sustaining citizenship around the world by providing independent analysis of events with an international perspective. From an FCO perspective its services should reap diplomatic benefits for Britain – though BBCW journalists do not see their work in such terms. The relationship between the senior management at FCO and BBCWS is one that has long been conducted by ‘gentlemanly agreement’ rather than overt pressure and yet it is a relationship in which the FCO exerts considerable power (Gillespie, Webb and Baumann, 2008)

Changes to the funding and governance structures of the BBCWS, following the UK Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010, mean that its relationships with the FCO, with overseas audiences, and with British taxpayers (when it comes under licence fee control in 2014), are at a critical turning point.^{viii} The very purpose of the BBCWS, with its rapidly declining number of foreign language services and diminishing radio audiences in many parts of the world (5 disappeared in 2010-11), is being re-defined at breakneck speed.^{ix} Its future status, distinctiveness and autonomy are under threat as it sheds staff and becomes incorporated into the multilingual ‘hubs’ of the BBC’s Global News Division. What is clear, however, is that interactive social media initiatives will play a much more important role in the future. Such new practices in engaging audiences are risky and the BBCWS is also closely monitoring and evaluating the impact of new initiatives. Real-time media monitoring tools, in particular, and the digital data analytics that are an automatic by product of social media use, are now integral to corporate processes of editorial decision-making, strategy, governance and accountability.^x

The Public Life of Methods: Corporate Research and Collaborative Ethnography

BBCWS have long been required to commission large-scale audience surveys from market research companies for the FCO’s annual audit and accountability procedures, to decide and justify its budget allocation. Funding can be withdrawn or increased according to various performance measures such as ‘trustworthiness’, ‘credibility’ and ‘impartiality’ and ‘relevance’. We were granted full access to the corporate audience research data that is routinely commissioned by the BBCWS.^{xi} The data was usually presented in the form of colourful Powerpoint visualisations. Strategic, managerial and editorial decisions are shaped by this form of knowledge formatting. Sometimes, we also had access to the raw data on which they based their summaries, allowing us to dig deeper. We worked closely with BBC audience researchers examining the history, designs and devices of the BBC’s audience research methods (Gillespie, Mackay and Webb, 2011). The data mobilised in accountability procedures and

performance measures shapes organisational practices at BBCWS in significant ways, sometimes informing decision making and at other times justifying it. It is in this sense that data are both performative and transformative.^{xii}

This article draws on a larger academic research project (begun in 2006), developed in partnership with the BBCWS, which involves a multi-sited, methodologically pluralistic approach to the organisation as a space of ‘diasporic contact zones’.^{xiii} In designing this project, I also drew on prior practices of collaborative ethnography that I have been developing over a number of studies on transnational news cultures, public engagement and issues of citizenship (Gillespie, 2006 and 2007; Gillespie and Webb, 2013). In these studies, collaborative ethnography is a form of action research in which publics and public institutions become the site and focus of ethnographic research that seeks to promote public understanding of the relationship between institutions and publics in multi-ethnic milieu, and to make policy interventions inside and outside their walls. It involves assembling multi-lingual, multi-disciplinary teams in research which shares an analytical framework but enables researchers to operate semi-independently and locally, undertaking participant observation in situ, in news organisations and other public organisations. Audiences-cum-publics are researched in household settings in different cities to explore, comparatively, how public issues are negotiated in private contexts. The research team share, exchange and co-analysing corporate and academic data as it is gathered and produced via digital project management systems such as NVivo (Gillespie, 2006 and 2007).

Early on in this wider project, corporate digital data were re-analysed and we found, to our surprise, that over 50% of online users of most of the BBC’s foreign language services were from outside the regional markets that are the primary targets of BBCWS, as dictated by the FCO. These audiences can be analysed as digital diasporas (Andersson, Gillespie and Mackay, 2009). Diasporic networks are an institutional by-product of the digital services of the BBCWS, an unintended consequence of their operations and even a nuisance for those trying to target audiences in regional markets. Diasporic networking inflects and shapes the BBCWS’ ‘global conversations’ in specific ways, at times bringing diasporic nationalist and cosmopolitan discourses into dialogue. At other times diasporic users take up the role of mediators in heated and emotionally charged debates around ‘critical events’ (Gillespie, Herbert and Andersson, 2009). Via a series of case studies of digital debates in the Arabic and South Asian language Services, we were able to evaluate their democratic potential (Herbert and Aly, 2010; Hill and Ashaef, 2010; Cheesman and Nohl, 2010; Abdel Sattar et al, 2012).

We re-analysed corporate user data on the demographic and interactive features of the BBC’s online interactive forums, juxtaposing it with fine-grained discourse analysis of the ‘global conversations’ and with ethnographic observations on the production contexts. Such a mix of corporate and academic methods and data analysis was possible because our research team was ‘embedded’ at the BBCWS. This enabled us to analyse and evaluate the quality, nature, content and extent of interactivity of the BBC’s ‘global conversation’ forums and to share our evaluations with staff. Corporate data sets of the BBCWS are of course more totalising and instrumental than our more particular analyses, but we were able to bring new concepts (diasporas), methods (collaborative ethnography) and styles of analysis (discourse analysis) that the BBCWS does not normally use, to their discussions and operations. The relationship

between academics and broadcasters is not always easy given the different timelines to which we work and specialist languages that we use, but if at the start of our project the term ‘diaspora’ was met with bewilderment, by the end, it had entered organisational discourse.^{xiv}

Our case studies show that, while attempts at promoting a ‘global conversation’ via interactive media may be open in principle, in practice they are neither diverse nor inclusive. Participants are invariably confined to a specific demographic group: highly educated males in the 18-30 age group. And when the debate forums were judged according to Habermassian criteria of democratic communication of independence, equality, plurality and reciprocity, it became clear that the gap between principles and practice was much wider than we expected. Moreover, our research showed that users did not instigate the topics of debate. Moderating online conversations requires specific skills and these were rarely displayed. Using social media as an adjunct to existing news output does not always work in the intended way.

This G710 case study was only possible because our prior research, which we shared with Sokkari and his staff, generated trust despite being critical. Sokkari involved us in discussions from the earliest stage of the G710 project and was keen at the prospect of us evaluating this novel experiment. For him, it was an experiment in digital democracy involving the ‘production’ of ‘citizens of the G710 republic’ who would not only set the agenda for political debate but fulfil an important democratic function as well as challenge and even subvert professional journalism^{xv}. Details of our research were posted on the G710 Facebook Group and, in the best traditions of anthropological ethnography, I and my research team, became G710 members.

Social media generate trade-offs between values, such as transparency and professional control. In participatory projects like G710, the role of journalists is transformed, becoming highly personalised and intimate as they become accessible ‘friends’, mentors, trainers and ‘colleagues’ in a shared production process. Every detail, not only of the production process and the behind-the-scenes ups and downs, professional and sometimes personal, of the G710 BBC team, is shared on Facebook and Twitter, as are the technological problems. Mohammed Abdul Qadar, online video editor at BBC Arabic and a key member of the team, recalled his struggles with technology: ‘[...] actually I did not know that people can, in the window of Ustream, interact with us... so I was looking at Twitter and I didn’t know that they [the fans] were asking questions... and some of them were shouting and saying, “No one is hearing us; they obviously don’t know that we are here,” and they were asking questions but we were not aware of it.’

Fig 2

Mohammed Abdul Qadar's mind map of G710

As part of our collaborative ethnography, we made extensive use of drawings to map different dimensions and changing dynamics of the project as it unfolded which were very revealing. Mohammed's representation of G710 offers a very accurate image of the structural and organisational dynamics that framed G710 and contributed to its failure. What is interesting about his mind map (fig 2) is that, contrary to the principles of participatory production, the BBC organisation remains at the top of the hierarchy, appears to exercise top down influence, and seems only to connect to BBC Arabic TV. The intensity of the multi-directional flows of communication and transactions between, devices and platforms beneath reflect the technological, informational and social complexity and fluidity of the project. G710 is not an integral part of the BBC but an experiment that exists independently with its own dynamics.

The BBC Arabic production team moved physically between London, Cairo, Dubai, and other sites in the Middle East to produce the programme, while the research team in London were both participants in and observers of the experiment. We followed: (1) '*citizen producers*' - how social hierarchies, identities and relationships were performed and how they evolved during the co-production of G710; (2) '*digital platforms and devices*' - how different interactive social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and other websites) were mobilised at different moments in creating the TV programme as well as by the BBC to monitor the experiment; (3) '*digital networking and debate*' - whether and how citizen producers initiated, framed, and debated issues.^{xvi}

As researchers, we struggled to keep up with the intensity of the process to the point where we became as exhausted as the production team, who were also struggling on a shoe-string budget with resource, technological and logistical problems. In fact the

resources that were allocated, expected and required to make a success of the project were not forthcoming from BBCWS and this lack of resources was to prove a fatal blow.

For three months, the research team participated in this project. We documented the ways in which digital devices materialised and mobilised social relations among BBC Arabic staff, the citizen producers, the Facebook fans, the Twitter followers and researchers. Like the citizen producers, we also experienced the intensity, frustrations and, sometimes the pleasures of perpetual communication, the emotional turbulence at times of conflict in the online community, and the sense of shock, disbelief and disappointment at the project's termination after only 5 episodes.

Greenwich 710: A Political Chat Show with a Difference

Greenwich 710 was a 50-minute show, aired on satellite TV across the Arabic-speaking world every Thursday evening at 7:10pm Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). It was also available online globally.^{xvii} The GMT time reference is a branding device, an appointment to view, and a potent symbolic, British imperial reference point which is not lost on Arab audiences, whose 'love-hate' relationship with the BBC and its home in London started in 1938 when the first BBC radio broadcasts in Arabic were initiated to counter fascist propaganda (Aly and Bauman, 2013; Sreberny, Gillespie, Baumann, 2010; Vaughan, 2008). G710 was a political chat show with a difference, produced collaboratively using social media by BBC Arabic producers and a core group of 15 or so volunteer citizen producers who participate in every stage of the production process, and a wider group of fans who participated in varying ways and degrees.

According to Sokkari, there have been four generations of interactivity:

First the public provided quotes and ideas by SMS. Citizen journalism was then used within programmes. Then visual user generated content was integrated into shows and became an integral part or even the basis of some formats. We are looking to go one step further now. They want to interact and take part. The viewers have the opportunity not just to be reporters or contributors but to actually research and produce the show. We can put them in the director's seat.^{xviii}

Launched on 4 March 2010, G710 set out to reverse the usual process whereby a radio or TV programme is the starting point and catalyst of subsequent audience participation and discussion on social networking sites. Instead, citizen producers were invited to make and shape the agenda of the programme by selecting the topic of debate, nominating then voting for particular candidates to be interviewed, researching the interviewee and debate topic, providing relevant material for the interviewer, selecting and editing the TV programme.

Hosam Sokkari's hourglass image of G710 cleverly depicts this reverse process and his vision of the project. It is also suggestive of two key structural properties of participatory production - modularity and granularity (fig. 2). Large numbers of online users or 'citizens of the republic of Greenwich 710', voluntarily contribute modules: individual components which can be independently developed so that people with varying competencies can contribute at different times. The modules are

fine-grained, each requiring relatively little time, effort or motivation and can easily be aggregated to make the TV political show. And yet the narrow waist of the hour glass suggests that a very restricted pathway and stringent gatekeeping/gatewatching procedures are in place, filtering citizen journalists' access to the corporation as a broadcaster. Although in this picture the citizen is on the top, rather than the BBC, the narrow bottleneck suggests that the corporation's power is firmly in place.

Fig 2 Hosam Sokkari's drawing of the G710 experiment

G710 citizens were offered training as 'citizen producers' and inducted into the BBC's professional journalistic ethos. In presenting their research materials, they were required to provide reliable evidence, confirmed by at least two respectable sources, in the form of quotes from newspaper articles, TV clips, or weblinks to articles or reports. Involvement was intensive and time-consuming for individual citizen producers but, judging from their online feedback, they reaped many rewards including status and social capital, as well as technical and journalism skills. Of course, they also provided BBC Arabic with an eager pool of unpaid researchers, writers and production assistants, and as will become clear, their participation in the production of programme was perhaps not as open or equal or integral as it might have been.

Sokkari, a charismatic radio and TV presenter, was already well known in the Arab media sphere, especially Egypt, as a journalist, cartoonist, and a conspicuous advocate of the uses of interactive media to promote citizen participation and democratic debate, and to win audiences. He was very much a celebrity attraction for G710 Facebook fans and Tweepers and became a key influencer in the Arab Twitter sphere during the Arab Spring.^{xix} Getting 'up close and personal' to him as a media celebrity and trainer was as much a key attraction for citizen producers as the learning experience. The social capital accrued on the project was clearly valued.

To create the G710 project and test its feasibility, Sokkari travelled to Cairo and assembled a group of influential social media activists he referred to as G710's 'Board of Wise Men'. Sokkari knew that if the project was to be a success he would have to get them on board and work hard to dispel their disdain for state-funded international broadcasters who were viewed as allies of the Mubarak regime. Sokkari's 'board' established a closed Facebook group and invited a number of well-established Arabic bloggers and internet activists to join them to discuss the project and advise Sokkari and his team about technological, editorial and political issues. It was the Board who advised Sokkari that social networking sites should be harnessed to give a platform to and connect Arabic speaking citizens who usually had no voice in producing conventional TV political talk shows. This was preferred to the alternative of online collaborative production via a website, which would require funds to set up and time to become known and visited.

Members of the G710 'board' later played very active role in political protests in Cairo – an expression of the mutual influence and interactions of diverse multilayered digital networks in the Arab public sphere at the time. Sokkari's links to them are evident in Kovas Boguta's visualisation of the 'self-organizing system' of influential Arabic- and English-language Twitter users associated with the pro-democracy movement^{xx}. A key point to note is that the social networks developed in and through G710 reflect in microcosm the rise of the influential blogger/tweeter/Facebooker as a key node and transmitter of ideas in contemporary national and transnational movements.

The main G710 discussion site was Facebook. Despite G710 having profiles on Twitter, Blogspot, bbc.co.uk, and YouTube (the latter mainly for uploads), Facebook became the preferred place where fans placed their postings, discussions, and updates. It emerged as the pre-eminent platform because it was the most versatile in allowing members to share posts easily on the same page and to discuss ideas and material. The Facebook Wall was used for general updates by the administrators, nominations and votes for guests, and comments by members. Names of proposed guests, questions to interviewees and researched material were posted on the discussion section, in separate folders so that each candidate's folder could be examined and, depending on the evaluation of the material, could be voted for or against. The correctness of the voting procedure was deemed important by the production team – as if the citizen producers were taking part in a mini election and being given an induction into democratic values and processes, as well as into the rigours of BBC-style citizen journalism. This 'culturally didactic' aspect of the process matched its function as a training-ground in media skills.

The G710 experiment, and the political debates generated among its co-creators, certainly did show the potential and incipient power of citizen journalism. This only became apparent at a later date. G 7:10 foreshadowed the form and content of wider political debates among 'dissenting citizens' one year later during the protests of January and February 2011, which spread from Tunisia and Egypt throughout the Arab world. Digital networking and the many spaces of online political debate that flourished in recent years across Egypt did not, of course, cause or precipitate the 'Arab Spring'. But digital technologies were mobilised when it became clear that all conventional means of political communication and protest at oppression, exclusion

and corruption were bound to fail, and G710 played a role in developing citizens' capacities to deploy social media to give voice to their dissatisfaction and demand political change.

***Iftiradi* and the Arab Media Sphere**

It is impossible to understand the political significance of the G710 experiment without some reflection on discourses of the virtual or *Iftiradi* at that time in Egypt. Social media in the Arab world function much like elsewhere. In Egypt in particular, even prior to the uprisings in February 2011, they have been influential in political mobilisations: the *Kefaya* (Enough) movement (2004/5), the 6th of April 2007 movement. The latter called for citizens to support the opposition candidate, Dr Mohammed El Baradie in his calls for major constitutional reforms. It attracted hundreds of thousands of Egyptian Facebookers. Due to the restrictive laws on public gatherings and political activity, Baradie had resorted to communicating online. The government responded with a media campaign against virtual worlds or *Iftiradi* ('fake') as having no bearing on reality or real people, lacking a real following or political legitimacy. This met with fierce resistance, especially among young people. I

The resort to social media was not so much a choice as a necessity. According to Ramy Aly, an Egyptian-Londoner and member of our research team: 'The majority of political activists would have preferred to engage the largely non-IT literate Egyptian public but had no choice but to engage a more limited yet influential constituency online.'^{xxi} A similar point can be made in relation to G710. Access to Egyptian media institutions and opportunities to protest publicly would have been preferable to communicating online. However participation in broadcasting is very limited especially for young people. G710 provided a chance to be broadcast or to produce. But G710 also showed that this was far from 'free', in financial and human resource terms. In fact the significant time resources required may have been one of the reasons why it was pulled: if it had grown, it would have required much greater levels of staffing in order to manage it.

In capitalising on social networking trends in the Arab media sphere, the G710 team's aim was to democratise production in order to promote democratic political participation. The intention was to create a political chat show that would debate issues that were taboo on other channels. High minded goals are matched by the desire to increase market share, even among public service broadcasters. If not overtly stated, the BBC Arabic team hoped to raise the flagging profile and performance of BBC Arabic TV in the region. In doing so they came up against another structural problem of BBC Arabic. The majority of BBC Arabic producers, now as well as in the past, originate from Egypt, and unsurprisingly the structural features of BBC Arabic were reflected in the online community forged around G710 became a problem. Ramy Aly, after initial scepticism about G710, reported in April 2010: 'G710 is providing a new way for young Egyptians to participate in the media revolution in a way they have not been invited to do before. This and similar initiatives will have long term effects on the way in which participation and the public sphere are understood in Egypt.'^{xxii} Ramy's words were to be realised in ways that, at the time of our research, none of us could have imagined, as his later fieldwork reports from Tahrir Square also document^{xxiii}.

The show aired five episodes between 4th March and 1st April 2010, each with controversial political or public guests. Arabic reality TV has been described as a ‘modernity academy’ where, in the heated polemic of public debate, the meanings of modernity are contested (Kraidy, 2010:202). One G710 guest was the Egyptian Minister of Culture, Farooq Hosni.^{xxiv} Questions directed at him by citizen producers, some from an Islamic, anti-modern perspective, included: why had he remained so long in office (22 years) without being elected? His allegedly positive views on homosexuality, negative attitude to women wearing the hijab, and apparent disregard for Islam more generally were also addressed. At the dramatic high point of the interview, Sokkari showed him a screenshot of a Facebook group demanding his resignation, alongside a stream of other calls for him to step down. Although Sokkari apologised for the ‘harsh comments’, he actively held Hosni to account.

Probing questioning of public figures and exposure of popular anti-government sentiment enabled G710 – despite its relatively small digital network – to legitimise in public space the political demands that citizens were articulating in their private and small virtual worlds. The team of citizen producers believed that they were making a vital link between their real and virtual social worlds – a link that, at that time, the Egyptian government and public figures were refusing to acknowledge, using the discourse of *Iftiradi* to de-legitimise the virtual world as fake and inconsequential. Sokkari’s public interrogations, triggered by the citizen producers, were not so unusual for Arabic TV audiences. They provide a paradigmatic example of the ‘endless trial’ commonly conducted in Arabic reality TV shows, where diverse counter-publics play the roles of plaintiff, prosecutor, defendant and judge – a genre at once less debasing and more didactic than its Anglosphere counterparts, where trials of humiliation and degradation are a common media sport (Kraidy, 2010: 202; Sakr, 2007). The difference with G710 was that, at least in principle, the citizen producers called the shots and expanded the sphere of legitimate political discourse.

The broadcast featuring Dr Aymen Nour, the leader of Egyptian opposition party Al-Ghad,^{xxv} was regarded by the production team as best exemplifying the G710 concept. This broadcast received very positive coverage in the Arab press, as documented by co-ethnographer Mina Al Lami, who attended all the in-house BBC Arabic production and feedback sessions and researched this episode in depth. Aymen Nour is well known for his progressive liberal views. His imprisonment by the Egyptian government in 2005 created public anger inside Egypt and beyond. He was released in February 2009 on health grounds. However, it should be noted that Nour’s name was actually suggested by the BBC team *after* securing an agreement from him for an interview - pointing to the limits of sustaining the democratic procedures that the team had tried to instigate when working under intense pressure to produce a weekly TV show on extremely limited resources. The Facebook folder for Nour received relatively few postings (only 26 from 10 participants) at a time when the group had around 700 members and postings for some other suggested guests were in their 100s. The BBC team were it seems firmly in control.

On the show, Nour, assuming a TV audience of mainly Internet-savvy youth argued that young bloggers had a valuable and important role in pressurising the government and catalysing change, and marvelled at the progressive potential of social media:^{xxvi} ‘What’s happening in the virtual world is a revolution of a different kind. I have come across potential leaders on the Internet. I’ve come across excellent young men there.’

Egyptian youth, Nour predicted, would soon lead a big revolution of change in the country. He invited them not to despair, despite corruption, but participate in politics, to right the wrongs. Hosam showed Nour a Youtube clip made by a young Egyptian woman who calls herself 'Salma, the duck symbol'.^{xxvii} In this clip she sarcastically but eloquently states her right to run in the next Egyptian presidential elections, in the process ridiculing the current state of affairs in Egypt. To this clip, Nour replies:

We should all fight for Salma's right to nominate herself for this post, as we must for every Egyptian who finds her/himself qualified to do so. Every person has the right to have such opportunities. What Salma is doing, by the way, is a form of protest against the restrictions on and monopoly of presidential nominations in Egypt. This satirical dark-comedy clip is a message, and a strong one too. I hope Hosni Mubarak receives it.

Such direct criticism of the Egyptian regime by a young female Arab was both brave and dangerous. Sokkari commented on the Facebook wall, Salma's video was 'something you probably wouldn't have seen on TV' (18 March). Showing this clip on a BBC prime-time show dramatically increased its number of viewers, and it received attention later in several Arabic forums (as is reflected in the peaks in traffic on 19 March in Facebook fan data in figs 7-9 in the Appendix). Controversy courts audiences and increases traffic and levels of engagement.

After the G710 experiment was axed, the reason given by the majority of citizen producers as the cause was this episode with Nour and Salma. By hosting a prominent dissident and promoting a parodic viral attack on the Egyptian political process, the show is very likely to have upset Egyptian government watchers (at the FCO possibly) at a time when Egypt and Britain and the USA were still close diplomatic allies. Whether that directly caused the closure of G710, we cannot be sure. Internet parody producers are a significant new trend in digital activism, at times intervening in institutional and political settings in productive and progressive ways, and at other times falling far short of what Duncombe (2007) refers to as 'ethical spectacle'. Monitoring data shows parody is popular even if its political efficacy is uncertain but likely to be didactic (Jenkins, 2008: 288).

Producing Citizens Journalists, Monitoring Social Media

As well as following the G710 production process and the social media interactions accompanying and informing it, we were also observing the way the BBCWS was using monitoring tools. Who and what were they monitoring and why? Would the qualitative and ethnographic data gathered by our research team complement or contradict the BBC's digital data? How would the data circulate and be used within the organisation? The real-time media monitoring tools used by the BBCWS to monitor the development of the project and evaluate its projects are not neutral devices. They embed values such as transparency, immediacy and predictability. They also create tensions as the same tools can be used for surveillance purposes and governing projects – however well motivated.

BBC Arabic and the BBCWS more generally, via its aim of promoting a 'global conversation', is explicitly tasked with instilling the virtues of democratic political debate such as reciprocity, equality, and 'rationality', encouraging the makers, co-makers of programmes and the users who interact with them to base their contributions on the 'evidence' rather than emotions. Media monitoring tools also

embed ways of conceiving users: as audiences, users, citizen producers, fans, followers, publics, and communities. These tools produce and reproduce G710s 'citizen producers' as social agents and categories. And as always, social technologies interact with both geopolitical and local contexts and contingencies to shape activities and outcomes.

Real-time monitoring of programme makers is nothing new. The BBC for long employed 'switch censors' to monitor translated output and broadcasts by diasporic personnel (often suspected as spies during the World War Two). If announcers departed from centrally produced news scripts, the broadcast would be shut down (Scammel, 2003:169; Mansell, 1982). But before webometric analysis emerged, real-time audience response monitoring was slow, expensive and unreliable, being based on samples of potential audience members (Thelwell, 2009: 42-43). Webometric tools, ironically, are likely to have contributed to G710's closure. The Facebook graphs show a steady growth in the G710 fan base over a five-week period (see figs 7-9 in Appendix) and according to Sokkari, G 710s Facebook fan base grew faster and was bigger (1,072) than that of BBC 2's Newsnight's at the time (which had well under 1,000 fans). But G710's online users and its TV audiences would hardly have impressed senior management at the BBC, even if unsubscribed rates were consistently low (fig 5).

Web tools designed by market research companies claim to capture instantaneous micro-shifts in attitudes and sentiments to brands and products, including online news and political debate on social media, as they unfold.^{xxviii} We can, for example, see a snapshot of how bbc.arabic.com links to other sites in the Arabic web universe and when examined over time see how that web environment is changing (see Appendix). For those familiar with the Arabic digital public sphere, these diagrams present intriguing network maps which allow for actual and ideological linkages between different news agencies and users to be interpreted. Anstead and O'Loughlin (2010) analysed the responses to far right politician, Nick Griffin's appearance on BBC One's political debate programme 'Question Time' on Twitter; they posit an emerging 'viewertariat' enabled by social networking.

Real-time monitoring technologies are becoming more sophisticated and creating 'data subjects' who, through what they do and say, make it possible for organisations like the BBCWS to know them, and then to act on them, and reproduce them as particular kinds of subjects (Ruppert, 2010). Such data contribute to constructing new audience segments ('the worldly wise', the 'open optimists', 'crisis audiences', 'influencers', 'cosmopolitans' are market categories used by BBCWS), organising social relations, providing more efficient or personalised delivery of services and, importantly, predicting future behaviour. Real-time social media monitoring makes what users do at least as important as who users are. What they do at one moment is indicative of what they will do next, and that means being in a better position able to provide goods and experiences that match what 'data subjects' are likely to do. Transparency, immediacy and predictability are now the key values in social media marketing worlds.

Monitoring mobile users in real time as they move across media and social spaces creates new kinds of power dynamics, as 'data subjects' make what they do (as opposed to what they say they do in interview and survey methods) immediately

visible, audible and legible to organisations and governments. Digital data are commonly perceived as more accurate, precise, and objective than ‘human gathered’ data, which is notoriously unreliable, subjective, and open to interpretation. The perceived polarisation between the human and the digital in ‘big data’ will only grow as data sets reach scales unimagined a few years ago. What are the implications of the supreme value afforded to real-time digital data, not just for empirical sociology (Savage and Burrows, 2009) but for citizens, consumers, and social life more generally? Will it for example improve the quality of news?

The BBC also use page hits or visitor counts to monitor users. Many news sites display lists of the most read pages or stories over the previous hour or day. These data are also used for internal purposes to analyse which types of story attract the most interest and this, in turn, feeds into editorial decision-making. Such counts mostly reveal country or city of origin but give no age or gender breakdown of the users. But Web 2.0 sites like Facebook, YouTube or Twitter have embedded tools that offer detailed ‘granular’ demographic data about users. This allows unprecedented access to free, instant audience data and, in theory, can make international broadcasters like the BBCWS far more responsive to transnational users and a range of ‘digital diasporas’ who connect via interactive ‘Have Your Say’ websites and experiments like G710, in which broadcast content is based on social media interaction.

The Facebook graphs in the Appendix visualise the data about users are available, for free, to the G710 Facebook page ‘administrators’. These graphics are based on data about subscribers to the fan page, encompassing self-reported age, gender, and country of origin.^{xxix} The data can be tracked over time to identify trends. Facebook also gives administrators extensive information about member activities. The data comes in the form of simple, colourful and customisable graphs, easy to access and use, as well as raw form. Spikes in graphs can correlate important events with surges in activity, as illustrated in the preceding section.

All creators of fan pages in Facebook get access to real-time data about users and interactions. This would be very expensive to commission but is free from Facebook who thereby can enhance the value of its service. The data can help ‘owners’ make their pages more successful. As an incentive for growth, more detailed ‘post analytics’ are available for pages with over 10,000 fans. One key political implication is that this free data can help smaller-scale media producers understand consumer feedback on their product and grow their audiences via the personalisation of products in ways that they could not afford to before^{xxx}.

Facebook usage data are extremely useful for media monitoring. For instance, a spike in new memberships may signal a particularly interesting post or G710 broadcast (see figs 1 and 7 in Appendix). When the nationality profile of users revealed the Egyptian bias, the producers could decide whether to react by following up the Egyptian success with more Egypt-oriented content or, alternatively, by making efforts to attract non-Egyptians (see fig.8). 72% G710 fans/members were males and 58% were between 18-34 years old. Just because a project is open to all it is not necessarily inclusive. The limitations of participation were disappointing to the BBC and citizen producers alike.

In the context of very high levels of uncertainty and risk in media organisations like BBCWS, it remains imperative to pursue conventional market research. Collaborative ethnography also has a role to play, as it can capture the quality of human interactions around points of convergence, consensus and conflict relating to online user-generated content, in ways that computational monitoring tools cannot. But such research faces its own dilemmas.

The Ethics of Real Time Social Media Monitoring

Monitoring users of the Facebook page creates complicated ethical issues for researchers. The ethical implications of ‘listening in’ on people’s online conversations for the purposes of research, with or without their consent, are significant. Facebook members sign up to a wide-ranging standard agreement with Facebook that allows their data to be used in many ways. Facebook data delivered to fan page owners does not give information on individual members, but this is still a kind of electronic surveillance, in the sense of monitoring people without their awareness and taking actions that may affect those individuals based upon that information. The typical fan page owner will probably not consider this issue, but the research team announced their presence clearly on the G710 fan page because social research ethics are typically more stringent than legal considerations for the use of analytics by most non-researchers, or non-academic researchers.

Our research team was able to archive copies of the G710 page content from Facebook to our own servers, and study it even after the page administrators had deleted it. The conflict between ‘B’ and ‘H’ below illustrates how ethical issues pertain not only to researchers but also to the online community being researched, in incidents that participants would perhaps prefer to forget, but which endure in the digital archive, and may come back to haunt those involved if verifiable identities are revealed.

The following exchange highlights three issues: first, the ethics of digital subjectivities; second, representational bias; third, interactional norms and codes of behaviour. ‘B’ is a Facebook group member who presented himself as a liberal Syrian citizen, and a doctor in medicine, working and living in Germany. ‘H’, self-presents as an Egyptian woman. In the exchange below, she uses the term ‘*feshar*’ (‘liar’) to refer to the Syrian President El Assad. ‘B’ is angered:

- B I hope this program is not going to be 100% Egyptian ... This is not an encouraging start.
- H That’s how it is, Egyptians are the highest number in the Arabic world, and who do you want us to invite, your *feshar* El Assad, or who ?
- G710 Step by step and if you choose any personality, we’ll try to see the material and we’ll invite him.
- B Ahmed Choubir ... Ayman Noor ... Amro Dib ... What a coincidence!
- H Did you forget to add Farouk Housni, the Egyptian Minister of Culture, I hope you are going to complain to the Security Council.
- B This is too much. [By the way] in my culture, when men talk women should shut up!
- H I swear by God you look really childish.

The conversation about the Egyptian bias of G710 quickly turned into a wider argument in which the political conflicts between Egyptians and Syrians were played out in a particularly intense way^{xxxi}. As democratic as G710 attempted to be, this incident revealed the limited extent to which a non-Egyptian Arab or Muslim citizen could participate in its debates and voice opinions. Gender politics also disrupted the relative equilibrium that the G710 online group had developed over a month or so of intense interactivity. And there was strong criticism from G710 citizen producers about the failure of the BBC producers to intervene and to moderate the conflict. Yet this argument drove a widening and enriching of the debate on G710 Facebook site. Immediately after, the discussion board was full of suggestions for guests from diverse Arabic-speaking countries, suggesting a strong self-regulating element to online socialities. But after H withdrew from Facebook, the G710 team expressed great disappointment on the wall. It was later revealed that H was logged on to Facebook as an avatar, so his/her true gender identity remains unknown but some suspected that H was not being entirely honest. Digital subjectivities are uncertain, fluid and performative and not necessarily related to offline subjectivities. As such questions of ethics and subjectivity are vexed in online research, and social network sites in particular. Digital data, like all data, may be false and misleading. And just because social media are open, it doesn't mean that they are inclusive. A major weakness of this online community – its overwhelming Egyptian bias – also demonstrated the limits of civility.

The possibility of archiving everything is inherent in web technology, but creators of digital archives (including content deleted from digital public spaces) should arguably be asked again for permission to use it. This is likely to be very impractical, however. A related ethical issue is that of anonymity: Facebook page members are not (necessarily) anonymous, and anyone could join the page and discover their identity or avatar, but discussing anyone by name in an academic publication might draw attention to them, with unknown consequences, particular if they are associated with repressive regimes which use all manner of insidious techniques of surveillance to track expatriate diasporics. Hence it seems prudent to avoid naming individuals, even though their interactions are – or were – public.

There are then specific problems with the trustworthiness of online data even while recognising the pitfalls of naïve realism. How do we factor in the uncertainty and inscrutability of virtual identities and relationships in the processes of doing and writing up research? Neither singly nor in aggregate do the views and opinions expressed online on G710 'represent' those of an Arab public, but networked publics as well as producers are produced via such media experiments and data sets, and at times, they cascade into wider more politically influential networks. Projects like G710 certainly offer a useful way into researching the interconnectedness of the real and the virtual, and of old and new media that intersect as 'critical events' unfold and as digital devices become implicated in socio-political processes. And collaborative public ethnography, combined with re-analyses of corporate data, can challenge how we conceive of and research the changing meanings of the social, the empirical and the political, and the values embedded in and enacted by digital technologies. The crisis of empirical sociology may be on the horizon, but it has not yet arrived.

The Afterlife of G710 and the Egyptian Uprisings

As I have argued, G710 foreshadowed in interesting ways the events leading up to Mubarak's resignation, and the way that digital devices and data were implicated in these events. After Ramy Aly came back from Tahrir Square, we picked up the G710 project and returned to BBC Arabic staff to discuss how notions of the digital were mobilised and reconfigured before, during and after the downfall of Mubarak. After G710 was axed, its digital network had lain dormant for a while but was re-animated by the uprisings. For example, Sokkari and other G710 members began to raise the issue of torture practised by the Egyptian army before and during the protests on G710's Facebook pages.^{xxxii} Online groups assemble, disappear and re-appear, and these can be tracked, raising challenges for the way we understand the changing meanings of the empirical and the shifting socialities (online and offline) that underpin public and political mobilisations. The socio-spatial dimensions of the events are also very intriguing: not just the transnational and translocal circuits, the ways in which texts, images and audio objects circulate across time and space, but also the more 'banal' role that digital devices play as Ramy pointed out: for example, in circulating maps of how to get from Tahrir Square to the state TV building, while avoiding the security service thugs. Transactions taking place among different actors, technologies and objects require re-thinking: how certain influential bloggers acted as receptors and transmitters of information unavailable elsewhere and how complex multilingual communication networks were forged by people masking their identities to subvert state authority.

G710 was, is, and will be just one of a multitude of such platform-events which provide us with a close-up example of wider patterns, processes, transactions. Media assemblages interactively connect new and old technologies, from Facebook to leaflets to sermons and debates in mosques, and G710 showed how discourses of the difference between the 'real' and the 'digital' (*iftiradi*: the virtual as the fake) are co-opted by various constituencies for competing political purposes. When the old guard in Egypt say this was a 'Facebook revolution' among the young, they mean only to undermine the scale of the revolt and the breadth of its social base. There are further demographic dimensions here: the middle classes were very involved in using technologies and to begin with theirs was an armchair protest, from their laptops. Only when the internet was blacked out by the regime koccurred (ironically) did they leave their keyboards and move to the streets. Digital literacy is very low in Egypt and so TV remained the main source of news. Hosam tweeted: 'the Egyptian revolution will be made with blood, sweat and tweets!'^{xxxiii} But tweets and social media were only part of a story and it is quite clear that, to put things in perspective, the turning point came when the bakers, grocers, transport workers and other workers went on strike.

Conclusions

This article identifies three types of problems in BBC Arabic's experiment in citizen production which aimed to democratise production practices and political debate within the service. First, there is a set of practical problems. The experiment showed that employing citizen producers and social media to foster democratic dialogue requires considerable resources, including an editorial team that invests a great deal of time and energy in facilitating the training, production, editorial and moderating requirements of producing a weekly television debate show. Such editorial involvement, in turn, raises questions concerning the sustainability of such experiments in 'digital democracy', and the extent of editorial gatewatching and

gatekeeping. Second, there are a number of more fundamental issues regarding the empowerment, exploitation and surveillance of users. There is an unresolvable contradiction between deploying citizen producers, enhancing debate between citizens, and monitoring users as 'data subjects'. G 710 certainly facilitated liberal democratic discourse on political matters in the Middle East but it pushed controversial political questions to the limits from a BBCWS editorial perspective. Although politics and personalities were given as the reason for the show's demise by its creator, Hosam Sokkari, it is clear that the programme's radical concept of handing over editorial control to audiences and citizen producers threatened established BBC journalistic practices and risked damaging the BBC World Service's brand and reputation for impartiality. Yet, the kind of interactive process between international broadcasters (BBC World Service) and the social media (Facebook) that G710 represents is critical to the contemporary relationship between media and politics and not only in the Middle East, whether such an experiment is successful or not. The article illustrates how and through what processes political debates based on the liberal democratic principles are being promoted in the Arabic media sphere by BBC World Service and fulfil, albeit indirectly, diplomatic imperatives.

The G710 project was analysed through the prism of the policy and governance objectives of the BBC Trust and the FCO, especially the promotion of a 'global conversation'. This remit is creatively and selectively interpreted, managed and contested by different echelons of the BBC World Service. In a similar vein, the monitoring methods, corporate 'big data', and re-formatting of knowledge about audiences, do not displace the manifold forms of tacit knowledge which BBC Arabic producers deploy on daily basis. Tacit forms of knowledge still drive how Middle Eastern and Arab diaspora audiences and users are imagined by the BBC's producers and pose obstacles to re-imagining them as, for example, citizen producers as well as 'citizens of the G710 republic'.

Third, there are problems around actual participation and representation with men between the ages of 18-34 dominating the G710 Facebook activities. Inequalities in the shape of the digital divide online reflect those offline begging questions about the politics of participation and regimes of representation. Volunteer citizen producers are engaged simultaneously in practices of citizenship and media production even if ambivalently so, posing further questions about rights and responsibilities, membership, exclusions and belonging, imagined states, institution or communities that are neither national nor state-based but networked. Citizen producers were 'produced' by BBCWS at the intersections of the experimental methods of digital production and the monitoring methods mobilised to assess the G710 project. As such they were caught between the competing objectives of democratising production and the exigencies of BBC's reputational and brand management. They were deeply disappointed that the experiment failed. The article addressed the challenging ethical dilemmas of such projects.

The article also highlighted how methods reconfigure relations between producers and users, and how real-time media monitoring data becomes implicated in corporate processes as a change agent entailing new knowledge practices. Bringing corporate and ethnographic methods into dialogue can help make useful interventions in public life and policy process. All research is an intervention of one sort or another. In this case, the G710 project took on a social and political life of its own beyond the BBC,

with unexpected consequences as G710 prefigured and connected with the Arab Spring a year later. Perhaps most of all, this case study, suggests that instrumentalist accounts of methods cannot afford to remain narrowly preoccupied with technical matters. The glimpse into the ‘after-life’ G710 shows that questions about *how* we know are as important as the answers we may think we have.

APPENDIX

Figure 1. This shows the growth in the G710 fan base over time. It shows steady growth but with a surge in mid-March following the Nour/Salma broadcast.

Figure 2. Age and gender breakdown of all G710 Facebook fans, based on self-reported Facebook member characteristics.

Figure 3. Timeline showing how often photos in the fan page were viewed – the spikes coincide with new photos being placed online.

Top Countries		Top Cities		Top Languages	
Egypt	500	Riyadh	60	English (US)	545
Morocco	132	Washington	22	English (UK)	198
United States	82	London	19	Arabic	170
Saudi Arabia	58	Palo Alto	15	French (France)	131
United Kingdom	53			German	5
United Arab Emirates	38			Spanish	4
Palestine	17			Italian	3
Jordan	14			Spanish (Spain)	2
Germany	11			Greek	1
Netherlands	11			French (Canada)	1
Qatar	11			Indonesian	1
Sudan	11			Dutch	1
France	10			Portuguese (Brazil)	1
Tunisia	10			Russian	1
Kuwait	9				
Yemen	9				
Belgium	8				
Canada	7				
Algeria	7				
Spain	7				

Figure 4. Country, city and language breakdown of G710 Facebook fans, based on self-reported Facebook member characteristics.

Figure 5. Timeline showing when members of the G710 Facebook fan page decided to unsubscribe from it. There is a consistent low rate. Nothing in particular has alienated members to make them give up.

Figure 6. Age and gender breakdown of G710 Facebook fans over time, based on self-reported Facebook member characteristics. Males 18-34 are clearly in a majority.

Figure 7. Page views for G710 Facebook over time – an activity level indicator. The big spike coincides with Nour/Salma broadcast, which clearly provoked the most interest. It is noticeable that there is no correlation with activity around the other dates of the broadcast – March 12, March 16, April 2. This may have influenced the decision to axe the programme.

Figure 8. A country breakdown of G710 Facebook fans over time, based on self-reported Facebook member characteristics. Almost from the start, Egypt was dominant. The UK appears in second place suggesting a diasporic following.

Figure 9. Timeline showing a wide variety of activities on the Facebook fan page. It is interesting that it does not match the page views graph (Fig 6) This graph probably reflects the more dedicated members, showing a consistent rhythm of activities centred around programme broadcasts.

APPENDIX 2

Web Environment

Figure 10 is a graphical representation of the “Web Environment” of BBC Arabic. It shows the 50 web sites that are most frequently linked to by pages that link to BBC Arabic (a co-inlink diagram in webometrics jargon). Sites in the diagram are apparently seen as important enough to link to by people using websites which also link to BBC Arabic. Lines between web sites indicate when the two sites are frequently both linked to from the same page, and proximity or distance to/from BBC Arabic. The size of dots indicates the relative intensity and strength of linkages to/from competing news agencies and BBC Arabic.

Figure 10: Web environment network for BBC Arabic at the end of 2009. Created by prof. Mike Thelwell, University of Wolverhampton.

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NOTES

ⁱ The research team included Mina Al-Lami (London School of Economics), Latefa Guemar (Swansea University) Dr Ramy Ali (Sussex University). Professor Mike Thelwell (Wolverhampton University) created the webometric visualisations and assisted with the Facebook analytics.

ⁱⁱ http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/ara2010_11/world_service.pdf
See page 18 (accessed 20 January 2012)

ⁱⁱⁱ Personal interview with Hosam Sökkari by Marie Gillespie 13 Sept. 2008

^{iv} These issues were explored in a special journal issue exploring the role of the BBC in the Middle East from 1938 to present day. See Sreberny, A., Gillespie, M., and Baumann, G., eds. 2010. The BBC World Service and the Greater Middle East: Comparisons, Contrasts, Conflicts. Special Issue, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 3(2).

^v The relationship between the FCO/BBCWS is defined by the Broadcasting Agreement (2005) which lists six key public purposes which underpin the relationship

www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/us/FinMem2005.pdf (accessed 20 January 2012).

See also <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/what-we-do/spend-our-budget/public-diplomacy/> accessed 20 January 2012).

^{vi} For example, the BBC Trust asked our research team to produce a report on our research findings to evaluate the first year of BBC Arabic's operations.

Report available at <http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/publications/>

^{vii} The Operating The Operating Agreement with the BBC Trust (2007) defines its remit and includes its definition of the 'global conversation'

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/regulatory_framework/other_activities/world_service_op_agreement.txt (accessed 20 January 2012).

^{viii} For further details see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/organgrinder/2010/oct/25/csr-bbc-independence-steve-hewlett> (Accessed 20 January 2012).

^{ix} See <http://www.cja-uk.org/news/bbc-executive-grilled-over-world-service-cuts/>
<http://blogs.edelman.co.uk/richardsambrook/2011/01/31/the-future-of-the-bbc-world-service/#>.
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^x See Director of BBC World Service, Peter Horrocks' blog 'The End Of Fortress Journalism'. http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2009/07/the_end_of_fortress_journalism.html (Accessed 20 January 2012).

^{xi} Audience research at BBCWS has two main components. *Performance Measurement* involves large-scale, standardised, quantitative, in-country, annual surveys measuring performance on criteria such as reach, reputation, impartiality and other scores, on behalf of the FCO and for BBCWS Marketing and Communications. Colin Wilding (former Senior Analyst, Performance and Assessment Data at BBCWS) notes: 'The more measures there are, and the more people are judged by them, the more those people will direct their efforts towards success in terms of measures.' The second component, *Audience Insights*, provides data and analysis to key stakeholders including the FCO, Business Development, Regional Heads of Language Services, and the Strategy Team. Audience research is, in the words of one interviewee, 'regarded as a necessary evil [...] sometimes audience data shapes policy and other times it provides evidence for decision that have already been made.' (March 2011).

^{xii} For further academic research on the history of BBC audience research viewed through the lens of CReSC's social life of methods theme see <http://www.cresc.ac.uk/our-research/social-life-of-methods> and Gillespie, M. Mackay, A. and Webb, A. eds. 2011. *Designs & devices: Towards a genealogy of*

audience research methods at the BBC World Service. *Participations: The International Journal of Audience Research* Vol 8 No1 <http://www.participations.org/Volume%208/Issue%201/contents.htm> (accessed 20 January 2012)

^{xiii} This study forms part of a three-year AHRC funded project ‘Tuning In: Diasporic Contact Zones at BBCWS’: see <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/>. Award Ref: AH/ES58693/1. The project is based at the ESRC-funded Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change at the Open University (see www.cresc.ac.uk).

^{xiv} BBCWS commissioned research on media consumption in the Pakistani diaspora from the research team. See <http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/publications/other/pakistan-connection-audience-research-report> (accessed 20 January 2012)

^{xv} This and all subsequent quotes not otherwise referenced are from personal interviews and conversations with Marie Gillespie during the experiment.

^{xvi} In presenting the G710 story, I am indebted to the researchers who participated in an intensive, indeed exhausting research process and who contributed important analyses and insights, in their research reports for the project as well as in personal communication, and these contributions are acknowledged in the article and notes below. Any errors are of course my own.

^{xvii} For further details of G710 see these links: (1) promotional page at BBC Arabic:

<http://www.bbcarabic.com/710>; (2) Facebook fan page:

<http://www.facebook.com/album.php?profile=1&id=256470558360>; (3) Twitter account:

<http://twitter.com/710g>; (4) YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/710GMT>; (5) blog:

<http://710g.blogspot.com/>. (Accessed 20 January 2012).

^{xviii} <http://www.digitalproductionme.com/article-2543-citizen-producers/#.UM9DNuS6fSg>

(Accessed 20 January 2012)

^{xix} <http://www.linkedin.com/in/sokkari>. See also link below where Sokkari is a key influential figure.

^{xx} ‘Egypt Influence Network’, presented at <http://www.kovasboguta.com/>, accessed 11 February 2011.

^{xxi} Interview with R.A. April 2010.

^{xxii} Interview with R.A. April 2010.

^{xxiii} Fieldwork reports mentioned in this article are available on request marie.gillespie@open.ac.uk

^{xxiv} G710, 11 March 2010.

<http://www.youtube.com/710gmt#p/c/9E36FD1803C4838A/0/q2T6hTMI9PQ>

^{xxv} 18 March 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/710gmt#p/c/7AE44247A1269852/0/KpV88u7T0to>

^{xxvi} In fact, audience data later revealed a much older demographic (mainly 40-65 age group) for the TV show than was originally thought and thus a polarisation of the online and TV audience with very different tastes and orientations.

^{xxvii} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-h0MroW-iY0>.

^{xxviii} Attentio (<http://attentio.com>) offers multilingual social media monitoring tools to ‘track millions of voices around the world in social media and online news [...] to provide insights into what the world is saying about your brand with sentiment analysis and emerging discussion topics’. Sysomos offers ‘heartbeat’: ‘provides constantly updated snapshots of online conversations, including a variety of user-friendly and informative graphics’ (<http://www.sysomos.com/products/overview/heartbeat/>).

^{xxix} I am grateful to Prof. Mike Thelwell for creating the webometric charts and for extracting the Facebook Fan graphs, and for his insights on interpreting them.

^{xxx} Mike Thelwell’s research report informed this section of the article.

^{xxxi} I am grateful to Latefa Guemar for the insights which she offered in this section of the article.

^{xxxii} Hosam Sokkari was asked by G710 members to raise the issue of torture and arrests of demonstrators by the army at Tahrir during and after the Arab Spring 2011. The use of G710s network to raise the issue strengthens the argument of this article that access to influential bloggers and media celebrities affords social and transnational networking capital that can be exchanged for influence. Sokkari posted the video on his own Facebook page at the request of G710 members. The video may cause distress.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDrbkOefx3Q&feature=related&skipcontrinter=1>.

^{xxxiii} See <http://pintak.com/2011/12/12/crowd-sourcing-tunisia-separating-electronic-rumor-from-reality-the-seattle-times/> (Accessed 20 January 2012)