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Arguing About Religion: The BBC 'Have Your Say' Online Forums, Democratization and the Global Public Sphere

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Abstract

This paper examines how talk about religion is facilitated and conducted on the BBC online discussion forum *Have Your Say* (HYS), for 24 debates linked to BBC World Service programmes. Analysis of debates was supported by interviews with BBC staff to determine how far this type of online forum functions as a diasporic contact zone and global public sphere, providing spaces for democratic debate denied by repressive regimes and enabling public discussion at a global level. We found evidence that the forums operate both as contact zones for people with transnational, cultural and religious ties, and as an arena for global debate, where some users actively seek out others with perspectives different from their own. However, we also found that use of news events to generate public discussion tends to reinforce conflictual understandings of religion (conflictual framing), a pattern re-enforced by some technical features of forums. We argue that editorial anxiety about the inflammatory potential of religious topics produces a style of moderation which highlights a tension between the BBC's brand of impartiality and its aim to broaden public participation. In assessing the democratising potential of such forums, we argue that the diversity of global participation demonstrated should not obscure the absence of those unable to participate, and note the advantages afforded to participants with higher levels of access/technical competence.

Keywords

Religious Transnationalism w online forum w BBC w diasporic contact zone w public sphere w global conversation

Introduction

This paper reports on the first stage of research which examines how talk about religion is facilitated on and around the BBC World Service (WS). It explores how far an online news forum functions as a diasporic contact zone and transnational public sphere by encouraging discussion about issues involving religion. Optimism about the internet's potential to create transnational public discursive spaces has been accompanied by a rapid growth in corporate news media sites competing for global audiences. In response to the growing presence of online news sites and the increasing profile of religion in the news, this research examines how discussion about religion is shaped by the ways in which it is generated and embedded in news sites. Our focus in this paper is the online English language forum *Have Your Say* (HYS) which, while produced by BBC News.com division rather than the WS, was the most prominently displayed link on the WS homepage to online discussion forums during the period of our study, and carried debates for World Service programmes such as *Africa Have Your Say* (AFYS) and *World Have Your Say* (WHYS). This forum illuminates how different parts of the BBC intersect to produce what the BBC calls a 'global conversation' (Chapman 2005), which aims to engage an international audience in debate amidst a rapidly changing and competitive global media environment. Interviews with BBC staff have been combined with the main part of the study which monitored the discussion boards between January and August 2007, selecting twenty-four debates focusing on religion for detailed content analysis.

The Internet, public sphere, and deliberative democracy

In the excitement caused by the initial spread of internet access across the industrialised world and global elites in the 1990s, there was much talk of a new 'information politics' in which new politically active 'communities', 'independent of geography' would combine to form the basis of 'global civil society' (May 2002: 15; Casanova 1996). In particular, there was hope that the internet would re-invigorate democracy by enabling large-scale political discussions between dispersed participants, discussion needed for a discursive model of democracy in which political issues are talked through by the public, rather than delegated to elected representatives (Dryzeck 1990; Bonham 2005, Dahlberg 2006). Framed by the state-civil society model sed to characterise the transition from Communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the internet was seen as a potential counter-weight to the growing

surveillance powers of the state and the global reach of commercial corporations (Ramet 1995; Castells 1996). A decade later, this optimism is more muted as anxieties about terrorism have strengthened the case for state surveillance, and internet communication has become more associated with discordant self assertion and sexual and commercial exploitation than with informed and reasoned debate. In this context the online 'communities' created by the BBC forums provide an opportunity for a critical reappraisal of the democratising potential of the internet.

We understand the public sphere is understood as virtual or real sites in which debate about matters of shared concern can be aired and debated Since Habermas' influential history (1989 [1962]), the concept of the public sphere has been widely debated, criticised, and reformulated (Fraser 1992, Benhabib 1992). In the process Habermas' abstract concept modelled on a culturally limited range of historical examples has been challenged and largely replaced (Habermas 1996) by understandings which recognise diverse culturally embedded communication contexts both as multiple sites of the present public sphere, and as historical precedents shaping its formation (Mayhew 1997, van der Veer 1999, Herbert 2003, Bonham 2004). The value of multiple sites with different purposes has also been stressed in research on online forums (Jensens 2003: 372). Nonetheless, the idea of a forum in which individuals with a range of identities and affiliations can openly and freely debate matters of shared concern without fear of intimidation or regard to their social status arguably remains central to all these conceptions, and it is this understanding of the public sphere which we use in our analysis of the BBC forums.

Previous studies have often been more influenced by Habermas' more abstract theory of communicative action (1987) than by his earlier historical work on the public sphere (1989 [1962]) and later more culturally nuanced understanding (1996). For example, Dahlberg (2003: 622) assesses the extent to which online forums match Habermas' criteria of: (i) 'exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims'; (ii) 'reflexivity'; (iii) 'ideal role-taking'; (iv) 'sincerity'; (v) 'discursive inclusion and equality', and (vi) 'autonomy from state and economic power'. The forums that we analyse in this study cannot be guaranteed to meet any of these criteria, and some they cannot possibly meet. As there is no direct exchange between contributors on fully moderated conferences, (i) cannot be met; (ii) to (v) cannot be guaranteed to be met, and while the BBC values its tradition of impartiality, our paper will make clear that political and strategic considerations play a role in news gathering and coverage that influences agenda-setting on message boards, so (vi) cannot be met either. However, this does not mean that the message boards do not enable exchange of understandings between participants from diverse, albeit particular and non-representative, backgrounds, and it is this that we aim to assess.

Dahlberg (2005) has argued that currently the internet's potential to extend 'democratic culture' by facilitating 'critical communication', is restricted by what he terms the '*corporate colonization* of cyberspace' (ibid.: 162), where corporate portals and large commercial media sites dominate 'online attention for news, information, and interaction...while marginalizing many voices and critical forms of participation' (ibid.: 160). This is an important consideration for this study, but one which must be assessed alongside other factors. Thus Schultz's (2000) examination of the internet's capacity to broaden public access and provide a space for active citizenship (using online forums and reader email), found that while more contributors resulted in less time for listening to others, smaller groups have less social/political impact. Schultz therefore argues (ibid.: 208) that that there is a balance to be struck between interactivity and impact, and that because the interactive sites of established media (which benefit from professional editors, reach larger audiences, link to outside sites, and are viewed as a reliable source of information and 'serious debate') have greater potential for impact than the sites of smaller newsgroups, the internet's democratizing potential lies in using new technologies to re-invigorate mass media, rather than in opposing new to old media producers, a view which challenges Dahlberg's corporate colonization thesis.

Other commentators have emphasised the role of technology or internet 'architecture' in creating particular types of discourse spaces (Lessig 1999; Jones and Rafaeli 2000; Papacharissi 2002). Drawing on this research, Wright and Street (2007) have argued that polarised views (radically optimistic or pessimistic) on the internet's potential for deliberative democracy are misleading, because they tend to rest on the notion that technology is determinant. Instead, they propose that the form and character of websites vary because they 'are the product of technical, political and other choices' (ibid: 850). So more attention needs to be paid to political processes that precede the construction of websites, as these influence the format and operation of online discussions and shape the possibility of deliberation; hence we have tried to detail these processes in the case of BBC HYS. Stromer-Galley's (2003) study of political discussion on the internet, which used in-depth interviews, found that most participants in online political forums seek diversity, and enjoy interacting with those from different cultural backgrounds who hold divergent political views. In particular, she notes the influence of geographical proximity to certain events or 'first-hand knowledge' of topics

under discussion as highly valued by participants, because this gave access information and insight beyond the coverage of their own national media and mainstream international sources, and extended their knowledge of broader economic or political influences underlying national policies. In this context, the negative experience of being exposed to 'extreme' or racist views was outweighed by these perceived benefits. Stromer-Galley also shows the capacity of this type of interactive forum to facilitate reflection about one's own views and beliefs.

The Context of Production: BBC Finance, Governance and International News Organization

> 'The satellite dish and the internet are now among the greatest enemies of tyranny' (Then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, Straw 2002)

In contrast to the part of the BBC which is funded by the UK licence fee, the World Service receives a Grant-in-Aid from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Nevertheless, it remains a constituent part of the BBC, operating under the same Royal Charter and accountable to the corporation's independent governing body, the BBC Trust. While the World Service exercises independent editorial and managerial autonomy, a Broadcasting Agreement with the FCO delineates how its broader objectives are shaped by a set of 'strategic international priorities' (FCO 2006) produced by the UK government. These objectives, which are agreed with the Secretary of State, include identifying medium-term priority target audiences 'defined geographically and by audience segment', are outlined in an annually reviewed plan (FCO 2002).[1] The role of public diplomacy in helping to deliver the government's 'strategic priorities' was underlined in the FCO's decision to set up a Public Diplomacy Board to oversee diplomatic initiatives.[2]

> With the spread of satellite television and the internet, governments are increasingly influenced by public opinion, both domestic and from abroad. A wide range of organisations, some funded by the Government such as the British Council or BBC World Service, some with no links to Government, are actively involved in steering this debate in favour of the values of tolerance, free speech, respect for human rights and democracy. (FCO 2006)

Revised government priorities following the end of the 'cold war' aimed at increasing the UK presence in the Islamic world (Chapman 2005) prompted the 'reprioritisation' (Straw 2005) of World Service provision and the closure of its ten, mostly Eastern European language services, to make extra funding available for new Arabic and Farsi (Persian) satellite television channels. Attention was focussed on online activity as an important new sphere of influence, and a number of politically strategic (Arabic, Persian) language services received extra funding to develop online services and expand their audiences.

To make the BBC more flexible and responsive to the rapid changes shaping global media industries, bbcnews.com was made more internationally facing by linking different areas of the corporation. The Charter precludes separately funded bodies such BBC World and the World Service from being subsidised by the UK licence fee. To overcome this obstacle, the BBC's news gathering and broadcasting activities were merged, bringing together World Service radio, BBC World television and the international-facing online news services together under the BBC Global News Division.[3] New domestic and international versions of the BBC news online site were launched, with a slightly different balance of domestic and international content, and stories weighted differently depending on the audience. So while the World Service continues to be funded by the FCO and retains its own newsroom at Bush House, the reorganisation of news services has placed greater emphasis on centralisation and cross-fertilization, encouraging the World Service to feed stories to bbcnews.com to avoid duplication and maximise global reach.

The study revealed how structural changes which have created new pathways between different parts of the BBC are manifest in the development and design of online services where one can move seamlessly between the BBC World Service pages and bbcnews.com without realising that content comes from different parts of the BBC. This facilitates not only the movement of users, but also of news stories and programmes which appear on multiple sites and platforms. This is a deliberate strategy, which BBC editors argued capitalised on the dominance of the main online news site as an entry point to other BBC sites. In 2008, the BBC's international-facing online news sites, which include bbcworldservice.co.uk and bbcnews.com, were attracting 13 million weekly unique users[4] (BBC 2008). One World Service editor argued that although the World Service brought a different perspective to news stories and staff in their English Service newsroom were sometimes frustrated that news coverage was too 'domestic' or had a domestic slant, there was little value in continuing to produce stories expressly for a small 'World Service audience' when it was possible to reach a much bigger online audience by having items published by bbcnews.com.

'Have Your Say'

The BBC HYS message boards examined in this study sit within the bbcnews.com site and are a good example of how the World Service and bbcnews.com sites intersect under a new overarching management structure of the news divisions. The forum was partnered by a weekly phone-in television programme (also called 'Have Your Say'), which was broadcast simultaneously on radio and the internet, available on World Service radio, BBC news online and BBC World. Audiences were encouraged to contribute to the television programme, with the forum facilitating the continuation of the debate after the programme had ended. The online site also carried individual online debates for the topics discussed on each of the thrice-weekly AHYS phone-in programmes and occasionally for WHYS, both of which are funded by the World Service and based at Bush House.

The forerunner of HYS, 'Talking Point', was launched in 1998; one year after BBC News online was established. Initially, 'Talking Point' carried one debate on a key topic produced by cutting and pasting a small number of user emails. However, the huge volume of emails generated by 9/11 (2001), the Gujarat earthquake (2002) and the 2004 Tsunami, when people sent in their stories and sought information about friends and family, highlighted the potential for a more interactive site, and the index was redesigned with new software to cope with larger volumes of emails and video.[5] It was later renamed 'Have Your Say', with the existing World Service 'Talking Point' programme, now moved to BBC World, also renamed 'Have Your Say'; this was joined by the WHYS and AHYS programmes in 2005. In 2007, the HYS online site was attracting 11 million page impressions a month and publishing about 6,000 comments per day, which represented approximately half of those submitted.

Methodology

We monitored the HYS forum between 1 January and 1 July 2007, and selected twenty-four debates which focused on issues involving religion for detailed content analysis (Fig 1 – see Appendix 1). The debates were downloaded and printed before being coded. Some scholars have found computer aided analysis helpful in processing data, particularly when analysing large volumes of text from the same or a limited number of sources (Tian and Stewart 2005: 293). However, because the text being studied here comprised an unedited and diverse range of comments employing varying styles and levels of English, we decided against using computer aided analysis. Initially we compared the size and length of debates together with the number of comments received, published, rejected and unpublished. We were unable to gain access to the large volume of unpublished comments for our selected debates, so results should be viewed as an analysis only of the published debates. Similarly, although the BBC routinely collects data about online activity which enables the measurement of audience figures as both 'page impressions'[6] and 'unique users', this type of detailed data was not available for debates on the English HYS forum because of their large size and transience. For this reason, nationality and geographical location is based upon self-reporting by contributors.

As we were interested in how far the HYS message boards functioned as a virtual public sphere (rather than simply a forum for the stating of opinions) we coded the debates to reveal, for instance, levels of engagement with the main debate questions, interaction between users, and general comments about the debates. The text was also analysed to determine the numbers of registered users and recommendations, and the prevalence of religious references or language. This approach enabled a comparative analysis of debates to identify recurring themes and particular uses of the format, and highlighted how the character of particular debates is shaped both by the discussion topic and by the participants. This method also allowed us to investigate the impact of the moderation policy and explore how far discussion about religion was framed by the news stories used to generate discussion. The selected debates ranged from topics focusing on events happening in specific geographical locations or cultural contexts, to issues connected with a particular faith, as well as discussions where opinions had been sought on more general issues about religion. We also examined references to and criticism of the BBC. This information was combined with interviews with BBC staff from bbcnews.com and the World Service.

Insert: Fig. 1 HYS debates examined in the study: see Appendix 1

Analysis

The role of the message boards as a 'public sphere' is circumscribed by the BBC's role in agenda setting. HYS has space for up to six debates each day and new topics are chosen at a daily editorial meeting. While users can suggest topics for discussion via an electronic 'What do you want to talk about?' form, the majority of threads are initiated by HYS staff, with domestic and international indexes privileging different debates. Topics are mainly drawn from leading news reports, interspersed with occasional general interest subjects such as 'Do you spend too much time on Facebook?' Debates are always introduced by a summary of the topic and a question, frequently accompanied by links to a main story or related material on the BBC website.

The style of moderation used for these forums plays a major role in the type of debate that is produced. Wright and Street (2007) have argued that the benefits of a moderator in keeping large online discussions focused, have to be balanced against styles of moderation that create an atmosphere of unacknowledged censorship, or disrupt the flow of a discussion (ibid.: 857). HYS operates systems of 'reactive' and 'full' moderation – in the latter all comments are seen and approved by a moderator before being published. All the debates examined in this study were fully moderated. This facility was requested early on because editors anticipated that certain topics would attract significant amounts of 'defamatory', 'abusive' or 'illegal' comments. In particular, debates involving religion are viewed as having a high potential for racist comments, so full moderation helps minimise complaints from other readers.

HYS staff argued that, although this style of moderation is criticised as functioning as a form of censorship, it is necessary because the BBC is legally accountable for any material which appears on its website. The Editor of Interactivity maintained, moreover, that full moderation produced the kind of 'reasonable experience and [...] good strong debate' desired by users. Keeping a debate focussed was viewed as particularly important because only ten percent of people post comments; the other ninety percent are readers. A global conversation 'doesn't mean two people on a debate page slagging each other off ... [while] twenty five thousand are really fed up with it', the editor commented. Research findings indicated that the full moderation style used for the debates in this study militates somewhat against interaction between participants; submitted responses may not be posted at all, there are inevitably delays in posting, and multiple postings are not encouraged – all making for a somewhat fractured conversation. Comparison with the reactively moderated BBC Asian Network message boards, which show a much higher degree of interaction between participants, also suggested that the disparate nature of globally disperse participants also inhibits conversation. This was evident in the HYS debate, 'Should Shambo the bullock be saved from slaughter?' where a larger number of the contributors shared the same locality.

The resources required to run a large forum like HYS, using full moderation, are substantial and during our study, a team of moderators worked on the HYS website seven days a week between 0800 and 2300 GMT, but there were already plans to extend this working pattern to twenty-four hours a day. The importance of resources to run this type of online forum was highlighted by a preliminary survey of the other language service forums, which were often infrequently updated and attracted significantly less traffic.

In the expanding multi-media environment, content from one part of the BBC is now 'trailed' on another part and emails received by HYS may be read out on BBC World for example. This provides limited opportunities for 'media contraflow' (Cottle 2006: 162-4), that is for media content produced by users in locations historically peripheral to international media production to penetrate mainstream media. HYS working practices are beginning to reflect this crossover, and four members of their online team maintain specific links with the language services based at Bush House, with representatives attending joint meetings with World Service staff. Some of the items on the HYS site are derived from the language services, so something that begins as a Russian commission may be translated and put up on the HYS site to increase its audience. Similarly, if there is a hurricane in South America HYS will liaise with staff from the Spanish service, BBC Mundo. The majority of emails for AHYS come via HYS, which carries debates connected with the Africa Service radio programme, however during our study AHYS debates were only put up on the forum if they were deemed 'news-worthy', although they always appeared on the African index . Topics are less closely linked to major news stories instead targeting issues arising out of social trends or events happening across the

continent. Two debates in our study were from AHYS and both included links to the relevant listen-again radio discussion programmes.

The AHYS debates show something of the value of the message boards in providing a forum for discussion of controversial issues of broad concern across the continent, linking individuals across Africa and in diaspora. The debate 'Are religious leaders above the law?' was prompted by several unrelated reports criticising the behaviour of religious leaders. The message board for this topic was small compared with those in the rest of our study, attracting only eighty-six comments from seventy-five contributors. However, the degree of geographical participation was above average, with contributors based in at least thirty-two different countries, sixteen of which were African (fig. 2). This finding was consistent with the other AHYS debate analysed, 'Are funeral fundraisings costly?' which included contributors from nineteen African countries, with the largest numbers coming from Ghana and Nigeria, who top African audiences for English World Service radio (BBC Pulse Survey 2007). The BBC published 97.3% of the comments from this debate, the highest in our study, and almost all contributors included their geographical location and their nationality. Over 50% of the posts came from African countries, with a significant proportion of these from Nigeria; a large proportion of the remaining contributions were from Africans outside of Africa. Comments directly addressing the question were high at 48.8%, with the overwhelming majority of posts rejecting the idea that religious leaders should be above state law. However, without prompting by the BBC debate story, 10.5% of contributors suggested that a combination of poverty and financial opportunism were important factors in explaining why religious office in Africa was vulnerable to corrupt or unlawful practices:

> The media and the capitalist trend sweeping across the world are playing significant roles in the religious leaders' reign of deception. For one, people are desperately poor and would cling to any iota of hope no matter from whence it comes. Enter the pastors and imams. These "sharp men [and women]" capitalise on the gullibility and desperation of their followers by promising them heaven on earth and farfetched miracles and thus find their way into their pockets and their minds. Check them.
> **Frank ...., Boksburg, SA/Nigeria**

The high proportion of comments including religious references or language (thus potentially breaking the House Rules) was an unusual feature of this debate, and suggested a more relaxed publishing policy towards AHYS debates, presumably because they are deemed less politically sensitive. Apart from a few general comments about the debate, neither one of the AHYS debates contained interaction between contributors. This is mainly due to the high number of SMS comments submitted to the AHYS debates. While Africa continues to represent 50% of WS radio audience (BBC Pulse Survey 2007), many people still do not have access to online facilities, so the growth in mobile phone use has become an important way for listeners to contribute to discussion programmes like AHYS.

The HYS message boards include a 'recommendation' facility, which permits a user to recommend an unlimited number of comments. However, this option is restricted to 'registered' users, who can be identified by highlighted blue names, which form electronic links to individual pages listing all their comments. HYS staff viewed this privilege as a way of giving 'loyalty points' to registered users who, they argued, contributed to the maintenance of the forum. The feature also prevents multiple recommendations of one comment by a single user. Restricting this option clearly encourages users to register, although most register to 'recommend' comments rather than post. Significantly, the addition of a recommendation facility produces a ranked list of user comments for each debate, based on the numbers of recommendations received. Comments attracting the most recommendations are listed on a 'most recommended comments' page attached to each debate. HYS staff argued that most internet visitors do not have the time or inclination to read debates in full and want a quick overview of the discussion. An editor linked this trend to an aspect of internet use that foregrounds immediate gratification, which also explains people's willingness to take part in short online quizzes and questionnaires.

Our research found that the recommendation facility was not an accurate way of producing an overview of the entire debate. HYS stated that half of their users are registered, but this was not reflected in our study where registered users represented below half the number of contributors. One reason for this finding is internet access. In 'Are Religious Leaders Above the Law?', for instance, less than 20% of the posts were from 'registered' contributors, with only 3.5% of the posts receiving a recommendation. In contrast, in the US, where internet usage is high, greater numbers of users were registered. Thus, of the 63% of US posts in 'Have conservative religious leaders in the US 'hijacked' faith?' 50.7% were registered users. However, even in debates with a high proportion of registered users, we found

this facility led to high recommendations for comments that were not representative of the overall discussion, and thus distorted the summary. The separation of religion and politics was a major theme in this debate, but the most striking characteristic was the larger than average number of comments (10.2%) criticising the BBC - in this instance, for taking an anti-American stance or censoring more right-wing views in order to produce a 'pro-liberal' bias to the discussion. Significantly, although these comments represented a small part of the overall debate, they were privileged on the debate summary page. HYS said they received an equal amount of criticism accusing them of anti-Islamic bias, but this was not reflected in the published comments analysed in this study.

Seeing as the UK is being "hijacked" by Sharia perhaps you would, FOR ONCE concentrate on your own gigantic problems before trashing us to feel better about the mess you have made for yourselves.
Bill ..., **New York, United States**   **(Recommended by 9 people)**

OH COME ON!
Isn't your "What fuels anti-Americanism" thread enough to bash us today?
What happened to your impartiality review? I can see that it is business as usual here on the biased broadcasting co.
GET A LIFE!
Snidley ...   **(Recommended by 7 people)**

This problem was also evident in the debate, 'What do you think of Musharraf's policy on the Red Mosque?' HYS published 960 comments from 60 different countries (fig. 3), and there was a high level of engagement between those posting comments, with significant participation by users in the UK, US, Pakistan, and India. The debate contained considerable engagement between participants, who quoted or referred directly to earlier posts and made general comments about the character of the debate.

Added: Monday, 9 July, 2007, 13:24 GMT 14:24 UK
The situation is sad and should be dealt with force and no compromise. This is just a small incident on few hundred people among 160 million and we can not generalize it. Indian writers in this section are biased. They have BJP terrorist who killed 3000+ Muslims in Gujarat. Weakness of Muslim world and media did not raise issue. Neither people from Muslim countries took stand. The matter has been blown out of proportions. Extremist will always be in each religion and each country deal with it.
Zafar ..., Chicago USA   **(Recommended by 0 people)**

Added: Monday, 9 July, 2007, 14:14 GMT 15:14 UK
It sickens to see how many people in this board are willing to bring the mosque down in one shot. I think Musharraf is doing the right thing by waiting out the issue. I also think the last say for what happens with the Pakistani in the mosque lies with the people of Pakistan. Every life should be spared; I only wish someone like Musharraf was ruling India when a thousand Muslims were killed by Hindu fanatics during the Babri mosque incident.
Haroon ..., Lahore   **(Recommended by 3 people)**

Registered users comprised 241 of the total contributors in this debate, with the highest proportion from the UK (73), the US (44), Pakistan (25), and India (13). However, there were huge discrepancies in the volume of recommendations received by different posts in this four-day debate. One comment in the forum attracted 468 recommendations, with a small number of others receiving over 200 recommendations. This feature of the debate appeared to be the result of popular posts being viewed on the 'Most Recommended Comments' summary page, thereby automatically attracting more recommendations. Thus, the design feature intended to summarise the debate and thus appeal to users with limited time, actually tended to highlight the most uncompromising views:

Added: Monday, 9 July, 2007, 14:49 GMT 15:49 UK
"If you know so much about my religion, then you must know that these 'terrorists' represent less than 1% of the Muslim people."

Not really interested in your religion or any other for that matter. I am just sick and tired of hearing about radical Muslims intentionally bombing and torturing civilians in Pakistan, Iraq and a dozen other countries every week.

Instead of criticizing westerners for being concerned, I'd suggest looking inward.
Patrick ..., Bristol, United Kingdom   **(Recommended by 468 people)**

Added: Monday, 9 July, 2007, 15:12 GMT 16:12 UK
Indians and Pakistanis...
there are extremists on both sides."
CK, Paris

You cannot be more wrong. Unlike in Pakistan, the vast non Muslim population in India there are some with extreme opinions but never with a murderous desire to cause mayhem as Islamic terror groups. Most Indian diaspora live in great & gentle civility in their host country.
Krish ..., Bangalore, India   **(Recommended by 273 people)**

This problem was also a feature of 'Is Conflict Inevitable between Islam and the West?' Registered contributors submitted 252 comments and there was a higher than average number of posts recommended, with 597 comments receiving at least one recommendation. Eleven comments attracted over 200 recommendations, with the highest receiving 352.

Added: Friday, 16 February, 2007, 21:01 GMT 21:01 UK
Islam and the west were bound to clash. Islam is not a progressive religion. Its beliefs are of a lost age and time. The west on the other hand have moved on and progressed in leaps and bounds thereby contradict many Islamic beliefs. As long as ppl will start acknowledging that Islam needs to adapt, till then there will always be conflict. And it's not a conflict of Islam and the west. Its the conflict of Islam and rest of the non Islamic world which is slowly catching up with modern times.
Rakesh ..., India   **(Recommended by 352 people)**

Added: Monday, 19 February, 2007, 17:32 GMT 17:32 UK
I am very sorry to read, comments like, e.g., that of RAKESH, that "Islam is not a progressive religion". First, there is nothing like a progressive religion by the very definition of it. Second, the observed religious fundamentalism is not unique to Islam. Christianity has nothing to be jealous of either (c.f. Inquisition, or look at how "progressive" some Texans (with guns) are). The problem is the interpretation of religion for achieving one's (violent) purposes.
[anax....]   **(Recommended by 31 people)**

HYS acknowledged that there was a problem with the recommendation facility, arising from a small number of individuals who attempt to 'game the system' by recommending a comment early on, which statistically makes it difficult to displace. HYS said they were already investigating system changes to try to tackle this problem, but the problem underlines how the design of interactive forums are formed in response not only to technological innovation and economic or political considerations, but also in reaction to the ways in which sites are used. The study's findings reveal, moreover, how the increasing demand for short summaries or overviews of news extends to these types of online discussion spaces, where a forum's capacity to sustain complex discussion, has to be balanced with the BBC's desire to attract the largest possible audience. This dilemma situates forums within an online environment where editors are aware that many online visitors do not wish to spend long on a particular site. However, it could be argued that the dominance of these kinds of summaries or overviews have serious implications for news coverage of events connected with complex problems or contested ideas. The study thus tends to support Dahlberg's view that although large media sites seem to bring together multifarious perspectives or views, some of the methods they use to source or rank news stories limit diversity (2005: 166).

While it is clear that a large, unmoderated forum presents genuine problems, the full moderation style adopted by HYS reveals a tension between the BBC's concept of a 'conversation' and their desire to retain some control over what is said. Despite assurances that internal editing of comments is avoided, our research found that if moderators feel part of a comment is irrelevant or inflammatory and thus breaks the 'House Rules', they may delete part of the

comment. Judgements made by individual moderators should be situated within a broader institutional and political context where decision-makers, keen to protect the BBC's reputation for impartiality, are likely to take into account the sensitivities of influential groups or individuals. The impact of these factors on the ways in which 'conversations' are mediated is uneven and difficult to measure. Nevertheless, some BBC staff expressed concern that nervousness about public debate around certain topics such as religion or racism, which carry an increased risk of litigation, resulted in a more centralised news agenda. The desire within high-profile online forums, moreover, to control discussion which is thought to contravene matters of taste and decency also raises important questions about how the development of online services are shaped by the 'liberal' views of metropolitan elites, and how the notion of a 'global conversation' is premised on a model of liberal discourse that excludes those who express 'unacceptable' views.

A significant proportion of the analysed debates centred on the relationship between religion and politics, and in particular, religion and the state, with several debates exploring this in depth. 'What will constitution change mean for Egypt?' was prompted by the approval of amendments following the Egyptian referendum on constitutional change, which was boycotted by the Muslim Brotherhood. Posts came from at least eighteen countries, with a majority (24.36%) from Egypt. Registered users submitted 43.6% of the comments and 78.2% of all comments received at least one recommendation. Only a minority of published contributors supported the amendments, with some non-Egyptians living outside Egypt expressing relief at what they viewed as a restriction on official religious influence.

> I find it very funny that people make these judgements without even living in Egypt. I totally support the change. We need to separate government from religion. I don't see anyone objecting when some extremist groups torture and kill innocent people every day! Let's stop the attack on the Mubarak government and try to work with it to stop terrorism. Yes, democracy, as it is know to the world will not work in the Middle East, because of the Islamists that only teach terrorism, ban them! Good job
> **Mona ..., Cairo - Egypt**
>
> I think this is an incredible step for the Egyptian people. Imagine not being threatened by religious extremists every time you voted or had a different opinion. Imagine actually living your life free. Look at the religious Death squads, roaming the streets of so many countries-beheading people because of their beliefs or opinions are simply different. WHY? Who gives them this right? NO ONE!
> Every human being deserves freedom! CONGRATULATIONS EGYPT my favourite country.
> **Gregory ..., Georgia USA**

However, the complexity of the issue under discussion was brought out by many contributors who resisted the argument being framed as a choice between a secular and religious state, defending principles of openness and fairness in the workings of government. In this context, the debate also contained criticism of foreign powers viewed as complicit in keeping Mubarak in power, or promulgating a double-standard in their attitudes towards the role of religion and the state. Some contributors also suggested that suppressing political opposition (religious or secular) automatically encouraged political violence. The majority of contributors viewed the failure of Mubarak as increasing support for the Muslim Brotherhood, or creating the impression that the Brotherhood enjoyed more support than is actually the case. Even opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood voiced uneasiness about government policy.

> How is closing the door to religious groups who want to become involved in politics going to stem extremism? Kick them out of the political arena, and then can you blame them for taking up arms?!
> So much for democracy, this is a joke!
> **Faizal ..., Southampton**
>
> TO ACHIEVE DEMOCRACY, YOU NEED A LEADER WHO BELIEVE IN IT.SURELY, HE IS NOT MUBARK. He may be Amr MOUSA, Mahmoud ABAZA or Osama HARB. When one of those is at helm,it will be clear that brotherhood supporters is 25% only. These amendments pave the way for Gamal to succeed his father. I did not vote as I think it will be rigged. N.B I and a lot of Egyptians vote for Brotherhood as we hate MUBARAK more than we hate them.
> **mohammad ..., mansoura, Egypt**
>
> it will mean that we Copts will fear less of Islamists but more of the government
> **Mina .., Alexandria**

Where religion is caught up in wider social and political debates particularly at a state level, comments in several of the debates reflected a frustration that a media focus on religion was obscuring the real issues. In 'What Will Constitution Change Mean for Egypt?', for instance, some contributors suggested the emphasis on religion and the Muslim Brotherhood drew attention away from the detail of the constitutional changes and the wider implications they will have for democracy in Egypt:

> PEOPLE! FORGET the ban of religious parties. it is negligible to the other amendments: the removal of judicial supervision in future elections, the new 'terrorism' law which replaces the 26-year-old 'emergency' law! which incidentally give authority to the police to carry out arrests, search homes, conduct wiretaps and open mail without a warrant.. very democratic! it also gives the president the authority to order civilians tried by military courts, with limited rights. Very democratic..Sad!
> **marwa ..., Cairo (Egypt)**

> I see many people talking about the Muslim Brotherhood, but this is not the main problem. The main problem is that egyptians live under the control of the so called "emergency law", which started in 1981 and gives the right to police men to do practically any thing with the people, without any court being involved in the case. Now the new amendments give even more powers to those policemen and less rights to the citizens. Also the name "Muslim brotherhood" is just the monster used in this game!
> **Mohamed....**

This debate illustrates the capacity of the message boards to provide a public sphere of discussion for those living in a context where open debate is restricted. In Egypt, for instance, the press is subject to restrictions and periodic crackdowns and shortly after this debate was posted editors of several Egyptian newspapers were arrested for publishing rumours alleging that Mubarak had died. 'What will constitution change mean for Egypt?' also illustrates the capacity of the format to sustain quite complex debate successfully, a factor which arguably stands in tension with the manner of presentation and news orientation of the debate prompts.

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that the BBC HYS message boards function as kind of global public sphere in several significant senses. First, they provide opportunities participation in debate for those for whom such opportunities are otherwise restricted (e.g. politics in Egypt). Second, they bring into some sort of interaction individuals with common concerns who would otherwise be unlikely to interact (e.g. AHYS). Third, in spite of constraints on interactivity and imposed by the news media discourses in which debates are often framed, the message boards illustrate the capacity of the format to enable complex argument, a crucial element of a discursive public sphere. The forums also function as diasporic contact zones, in the sense that people of South Asian heritage (Red Mosque debate) or of African heritage (religious leaders debate) from across the world are able to discuss with others in their region of origin through these forums.

The paper has explored discussion about religion on the HYS message boards. It has argued that development of online forums are embedded in wider political, commercial and technological shifts that have created an elusive series of networks and alliances that shape the production and dissemination of news and information. The framing of debates together with the pathways that connect and radiate out from them create the feeling of freedom of movement and access to information across a wide range of topics and regional areas. However in the first instance, at least, these networks are routes to a selection of officially sanctioned sites and reflect the BBC and the FCO's desire to 'steer' public attention away from more contentious sources of information. Interactive sites such as those examined in this study emerge in response to a particular set of conditions and demands, and it is important to recognise the ways in which these influence forums for public debate.

This raises broader questions about the notion of a 'global conversation', which has been closely tied to the development of online interactive services variously represented as public spheres for democratic debate. As the paper has highlighted, a tension exists between values that promote an idea of free speech in these spaces, and a desire to control (to a greater or lesser extent) the type of conversation that takes place. This has particular implications for debates that involve discussion about religion. The study suggests that a 'global conversation' is one that is likely to

contain many tensions, where the views of one may be considered inflammatory by others and vice-verse. The BBC's role in mediating disparate views and modes of expression are also under-pinned by a particular set of values, which, contrary to the views of some politicians, are not universal. Perhaps the real value of these kinds of 'global conversations' lies in their capacity to enable meeting points between dispersed individuals who would otherwise be unlikely to interact, as well as bringing to public attention – insofar as the viewing figures for these forums far outweigh the number of actual contributors, and through some uptake and re-use of content by other BBC services - the views of those whose experiences are marginal to mainstream representations. Furthermore, greater collaboration across the language services of the World Service has the potential to widen such conversations further by accessing the views and experiences of communities that are currently under-represented in these kinds of debates.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[4] 'The FCO and World Service will meet regularly at working level. These contacts may be used to review World Service plans and performance, both by region and globally. The World Service regions and FCO geographical commands will maintain a regular dialogue which will inform the World Service of FCO thinking on the region concerned and the FCO about World Service activities.' BBC Broadcasting Agreement (FCO 2002).

[4] BBC Arabic television was allocated six million pounds per year; fifteen million pounds per annum were allocated for a Farsi (Persian) language channel for Iran.

[6] The BBC World Service Trust and BBC Monitoring are also part of Global News.

[7] Indicates a single individual website visitor.

[8] The software also had to be suitable for use by the other BBC language services.

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Appendix 1: Fig. 1 HYS debates examined in the study.

Debate Length (days)	Debate topic	Total Comments	Published Comments (% of total)		Rejected Comments	Unaccounted for Comments	Area/country specific & religion specific	
7	Should church be able to opt out of gay rights laws?	12912	1136	11%	75	11701	UK	Christianity
4	What do you think of Musharraf's policy on the Red Mosque?	4584	960	21%	160	3464	Pakistan	Islam
3	Would new gay rights laws lead to religious discrimination?	4403	1827	42%	24	2552	UK	multi-faith
1	Should the veil be banned in schools?	3572	432	12%	71	3069	UK	Islam
5	Is conflict inevitable between Islam and the West?	3212	622	19%	48	2542	No	Islam
2	Should religious symbols be kept out of the classroom?	3160	1275	40%	80	1805	UK	multi-faith
15	How can Turkey's political crisis be resolved?	2734	1011	36%	61	1662	Turkey	Islam
2	Should the UK fund the training of imams?	2352	241	10%	53	2058	UK	Islam
2	How often do you attend Church?	2234	695	31%	64	1475	UK	Christianity
8	What does election result mean for Turkey?	1671	1195	72%	71	405	Turkey	Islam
2	Should the church intervene in politics?	1540	647	42%	24	869	UK	Christianity
6	What did the Pope's visit to Brazil achieve?	1535	706	46%	115	714	Brazil	Christianity
2	Does Pakistan fatwa promote intolerance?	1204	235	20%	45	924	Pakistan	Islam
2	Will power-sharing work in Northern Ireland?	906	450	50%	33	423	Northern Ireland	Christianity
4	What impact will the Chief Justice controversy have on Pakistan?	810	543	67%	48	219	Pakistan	Islam
1	Were the Egyptian government right to prosecute?	322	67	21%	3	252	Egypt	Islam
2	What will constitution change mean for Egypt?	270	78	29%	17	175	Egypt	Islam
3	Are funeral fundings costly?	186	144	77%	9	33	Africa	multi-faith
2	Was Warsaw Archbishop right to resign?	184	114	62%	5	65	Poland	Christianity
1	Should Shambo the bullock be saved from slaughter?	152	142	93%	10	0	UK	Hinduism
2	Have conservative religious leaders in the US 'hijacked' faith?	107	69	64%	7	31	US	Christianity
3	Are religious leaders above the law?	88	86	98%	1	1	Africa	multi-faith
1	Are people in Northern Ireland more religious than average in the UK?	37	32	86%	5	0	Northern Ireland	Christianity
2	Is there a place for religion at work?	26	23	88%	1	2	US	multi-faith