

Mapping digital diasporas

A major research project is focusing on BBC World Service diaspora audiences.

MATILDA ANDERSSON reports

What does a shop owner in Bradford have in common with a graduate from Princeton USA, a construction worker in the UAE and a banker in the city of London? Apart from being users of the bbc.com/urdu website they are also part of the global Pakistani diaspora.

The term diaspora derives from the Greek *diasperein* meaning to disperse, to sow or to scatter, and it came to refer to Jews scattered among gentiles. Today, the term is increasingly used to describe the global dispersal of migrant groups of various kinds – from intellectual dissidents to economic migrants and refugees.

Diasporas are of growing economic, political and cultural significance. In a world where migration, geopolitical dynamics and communication technology and transport links are continually changing, it's clear that culture and geography no longer map neatly on to one another.

Understanding diaspora groups inside and outside its base at Bush House is ever more important for BBC World Service, too. Diaspora audiences are influencing the conception of BBC audiences and output. For example, 60% of the weekly users of bbc.com/urdu are not from within Pakistan, a trend that has also been observed for other BBC language websites.

FROM ROOTS TO ROUTES

Of course, global diasporas are not identifiable communities in any clear cut geographic or cultural sense. Just because diasporic groups share roots – whether defined by a place of origin and/or history, language, ethnicity, religion or culture – it doesn't necessarily follow that their migratory routes are similar or that they even share a common sense of identity. Diasporic groups are complex social formations increasingly



CORBIS

engendered by communications and cultural networks – BBC World Service is one of those defining links.

Despite internal differences, it is likely that transnational communities, of all types, will play an ever more important role in shaping social, cultural, economic and political processes worldwide. Economic networks among Indians and Chinese, for example, fuel their national economies 'back home' through remittances.

BRIDGES BETWEEN CULTURES

Transnational networks can foster cosmopolitanism and build bridges between cultures, but they can also fuel regressive political formations and religious extremism. Recognising the heightened relevance of diasporas for peace and security, conflict resolution and diplomacy, the Arts Humanities Research Council (AHRC) has funded a five-year research programme. One part of this programme is *Tuning In: Diasporic Contact Zones at BBC World Service*, led by

↑ Recent conflicts and civil war have increased the Somali diaspora in countries such as the US. Many turn to bbcsomali.com for news of home

It's clear that culture and geography no longer map neatly on to one another

Professor Marie Gillespie from the Open University. It was awarded £500,000 for a three-year study involving partnerships between academics and BBC World Service practitioners. The project uses BBC World Service as a prism through which to view issues of diaspora, migration and identity – comparatively and historically.

The focus on diasporas at BBC World Service is not, of course, entirely new. When the service was set up in 1932 (as the Empire Service), part of its remit was to serve Britons based abroad. BBC World Service has in its time also been a key employer of diasporic writers, artists, poets and intellectuals – often exiles, dissidents and refugees. An important angle to our project will be focusing on the often unique and personal relationships built between diasporic broadcasters and their audiences via the BBC, including the role played by such contributors.

There are several examples of situations, too, in which exiles and dissidents have taken an active part in communicating conflict, organising aid and lobbying for a political



BETTY

Part of BBC World Service's funding settlement, an additional £1m (from April 2009) will be allocated to realising the provision of a diasporic service focusing on British diasporas, in particular Urdu, Somali and Bengali (pictured) communities. The intention behind this initiative is to enrich BBC World Service's global output by reflecting life in multicultural Britain and developing a dialogue across geographies.

Interactive forum connects Iranians

In April 2007 a round-table debate took place on bbcpersian.com between eight participants from Australia with Persian backgrounds.

The debate was about the problems of marriage for Iranians in Australia. Part of an initiative to connect Iranians living all over the world, it was hosted on a special section of the website. The picture galleries, interactive forums and other user-generated content was viewed by over 30,000 users in one week. It enabled Persian speakers all over the world to engage in conversations about life away from the homeland.

One of BBC World Service's most visited websites before it was blocked in Iran in December 2005, bbcpersian.com was also one of the most popular news websites in Iran itself. It is now used mostly by Persian speakers outside Iran but there are unofficial reports of many Iranians being able to use the site from inside the country via proxy servers.

Usage inside Iran doesn't vary that much from usage outside the country. Visitors mostly use bbcpersian.com to keep up to date with news about Iran. The most popular topics are political and social issues, but entertainment news rates well, too. There's a great appetite in Iran for blogging and interactivity – perhaps in reaction to constraints on self-expression. Users from outside Iran watch more video footage, which could partly be due to higher speed broadband connections in the US, UK and Germany where many of the diaspora users of bbcpersian.com are based.

As well as the Persian/Australian project, diaspora life in Canada has featured on the site. Initiatives such as these provide a true representation of life in a new country for diaspora audiences, building BBC World Service's unique opportunity to link people around the world in the global conversation.

bbcpersian.com

I can get more unbiased news from around the world as well as from my own country compared to any other Persian website

BBCPERSIAN.COM USER

outcome. Recently, we can point to the Tibetan freedom protests against Chinese rule but there is a precedent for involvement that dates back to the Second World War and the Cold War era. It's claimed, for example, that BBC Hungarian service radio programming helped keep "the home fires burning" in Hungary during the uprising of 1956.

DIVERSE DIASPORAS

Audiences for the BBC's 32 language services – whether on radio, TV or online – encompass diverse diaspora populations such as Iranians in Canada, Somalis in the UK and Burmese audiences in the USA.

While little is known about why and how certain groups connect with their home countries via BBC World Service, many praise its work and, increasingly, the opportunities it offers for online public debate are being capitalised upon. Diaspora groups are connecting to each other via online services and these myriad interactions present a real opportunity for enacting the kinds of 'global conversations' BBC World Service has been building into its strategy.

BBC World Service can no longer see itself as a broadcaster targeting audiences that are conceived of purely in national terms. It now needs to grapple with and understand how technology is building new audience configurations. Some of these configurations extend beyond diasporas, with certain audiences aligning themselves as communities of interest or of conviction.



HOWARD DAVIES/REPORT/DIGITAL

Burmese use blogs to beat government censorship

In September 2007, during the pro-democratic protests in Burma, people inside the country posted photos and videos of events as they unfolded on weblogs. This material, which was quickly picked up by mainstream media, circumvented censorship by the Burmese authorities by providing content that would otherwise have been impossible to source. It made it possible for the world to follow a censored political event. The website bbcburmese.com became a vital source of information for Burmese diasporas all over the world.

The user base of the BBC Burmese site quadrupled during the peak of the protests and the military junta crackdown on 26 September, reaching around 60,000 Burmese-speaking users around the globe within one week. The users of bbcburmese.com during this period were all based outside Burma, in countries such as the USA, Singapore and the UK, among others. Despite the efforts of those inside Burma to access news sites and blogs, the government closed down all internet access on 28 September.

bbcburmese.com

← Many Burmese have fled oppression by the military junta, some arriving in the UK as part of a UK Government resettlement programme. Media outlets such as BBC's Burmese service provide important connections to their home country and between diaspora groups

Politics and cultural groupings are challenging the significance of nationality as a defining factor for audiences.

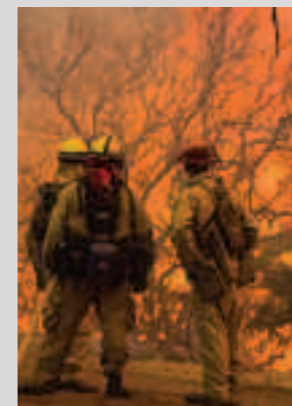
It is still true to say, however, that at times of crisis, war or natural disaster, diasporas continue to turn to BBC World Service websites for the news. The death of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 saw unique users of bbcdu.com double from 70,000 to over 140,000 on the day of the assassination – 36% of these were from outside Pakistan.

Likewise, during March and April 2008 while the Tibetan protests were occurring, use of bbcchinese.com grew by 26%. This represented a growth in domestic Chinese users, however 80% were still from the diaspora. The site created a platform on which Chinese speakers from all over the world could come together and where different views could be expressed.

Audiences also rely on BBC World Service for everyday connections. They use BBC sites for news and to share and discuss information about their lives.

In the wider sphere, such examples as the protest rallies led by Buddhist monks in

Somalis follow life in the diaspora



REUTERS

↑ Among those who tackled one of California's worst ever fires was a Somali-born firefighter whose heroic story was spread to the diaspora via BBC Worldservice

In October 2007, the US state of California experienced one of the worst wildfires in history.

Amongst the 6,000 fire-fighters working to get the fire under control was Cabdiweli Heybe, a Somali-born fire-fighter working in San Diego. Shortly afterwards, the story was published on bbcSomali.com and Somali speakers all over the world could read about his heroism.

It was a news story with personal resonance. Told from a Somali's perspective, it also revealed a tale of life in the diaspora and so, arguably bridged the gap between Somalis all over the world while contributing to a

sense of nationhood away from home.

Only 1-2% of users of bbcSomali.com are situated inside Somalia. Internet penetration is very low in the country and due to conflicts and civil wars in recent years the number of emigrants is ever increasing. The site connects Somali diasporas all over the world but also provides a lifeline back home. Every fourth user is based in the US, a large proportion are from the UK and the rest come to us from over 100 other countries worldwide.

"Before the internet," says Yusuf Garaad Omar, head of the BBC Somali service, "Somalis in the UK used to phone the BBC Somali service to ask what was going on in Somalia. Now people can read online about the country and, more importantly, listen to the BBC radio output online."

Nearly all who come to bbcSomali.com click and listen to the radio output of BBC Somali. It is the BBC World Service site with the most online listeners. Research shows that entire families gather around the computer listening to programmes and news bulletins from the BBC Somali service, the same programmes that can be heard on FM and shortwave in Somalia.

The story of a fire-fighting Somali hero in California is typical for the website. The interest among users in reading about other Somalis around the world – as well as in news from a Somali perspective – is huge. The language service is building on and providing for this interest with several initiatives on transnational communication, such as discussions about political Islam, diaspora aid to hospitals in Somalia and debates about Somali linguistics.

bbcSomali.com

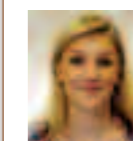
Burma in September 2007, the Tibetan protest against Chinese rule and the Olympic torch protests in April 2008 show how, by leading rallies and organising aid, diasporas can influence the political, social and economic agenda in the home country as well as mobilising initiatives that cross cultural boundaries.

DIASPORA USERS

Over 50% of the users to the BBC World Service sites in languages other than English can be defined as diaspora users. How should BBC World Service capitalise on this? Some diasporic user groups range over 150 countries extending to markets not usually defined as BBC World Service targets.

Initial findings from our project suggest that users of bbcpersian.com come to the site mainly to consume news about Iran. In addition, the BBC Persian service caters for diasporas by giving them a voice in the output of the site via special indexes about life in the diaspora. In contrast, bbcArabic.com generates more cultural and information traffic between the Middle East and the Arabic diaspora on topics such as religion, language and the 'war on terror'.

If BBC World Service is to maintain its global reputation as a leading news provider as well as a meeting point for the many cultures and peoples that comprise its audiences, then rethinking audiences and programmes as well as the use of platforms poses a real challenge – one that will continue to develop in the years to come. ■



● **MATILDA ANDERSSON** is leading the audience strand of the *Tuning In* project in partnership with the Open University. Prior to that she

worked as a Senior Insights Analyst – Digital Platforms at BBC World Service.

bbcworldservice.com

open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/

A special issue of the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and TV* entitled *BBC World Service, 1932-2007: Cultural Exchange and Public Diplomacy* is available from October 2008.