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The BBC World Service in the Middle East: Claims to impartiality, or a politics of translation?

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The BBC World Service in the Middle East:

Claims to impartiality, or a politics of translation?

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Abstract:

As the World Service's first foray into foreign-language broadcasting (1938) and its first initiative to branch out into non-English-language television (1994-96; 2008-present), BBC-Arabic has played a central role for the Corporation. Distrust of its claims to impartiality, however, persists. To assess both claims and critiques, we examine its politics of translation under four headings: transporting data from the field to the broadcaster; translating from one language into another; transposing data and message by inflexions of tone; and transmitting the result to selected audiences at selected times. We do so from both an etic ('outsiders') analysis of BBC output and an emic ('insiders') analysis of what audiences perceive and react to by way of critical receptions and reactions.

Keywords GLOBAL MEDIA, MIDDLE EAST, IMPARTIAL TRANSLATION, INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT, COMPARATIVE METHODOLOGIES.

'Fourth Estate or Fifth Column – it is not an antithesis, it is a choice. The media can be both at the same time.' This enigmatic motto is taken from John Tusa (1992: 110), the former Director- General of the BBC World Service, who is still revered in Bush House for having stared down any British government trying to render the World Service pliable for government interests by wielding its power of cutting the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) grant-in-aid that the World Service depends upon. Tusa's dialectic adage, meant to defend the World Service's aura of impartiality from its factual paymasters, can be tested especially well vis-à-vis the Middle East. The term 'Fourth Estate', coined by Edmund Burke in response to the French Revolution, accords the media a legitimate place in the constitution of a nation-state and in controlling and censuring government policies: akin to what today we would call civil society. The term 'Fifth Column', invented by the Fascist General Mola during the Spanish Civil War, refers to the infiltration and undermining of a state by combining external forces with internal opposition. As the practice of international broadcasting is by no means an established constitutional or internationally recognized right, all answers to Tusa's riddle depend on each broadcaster's ability to gain or lose legitimacy and credibility.

Launched in January 1938 as the BBC World Service's first non-English service, BBC Arabic was faced with this conundrum from the very start. After initial reluctance from within British diplomatic circles, the decision to peruse different vernacular radio broadcasts was clearly prompted by foreign policy considerations and driven by the 1934 initiation of Arabic-language broadcasts

by fascist Italy under the innocent-sounding name of 'Radio Bari' (Wood 1992: 38; Boyd 2003: 444). The launch of BBC-Arabic four years later sparked off what press media at the time termed as 'the Radio War' (*Time*, 11-01-1938); a media contest that the BBC would, in the end, count as a success. The irony of that success could not have been lost on the Foreign Office that, in the early years of the existence of the BBC-Arabic service, preferred the use of a more malleable and less independent voice in the region, the Palestine Broadcasting Station, later to be known as Al Sharq al Adna and shortly before its abolition as 'The Voice of Britain'; a station that had been established in the early 1940s to act, predominantly, as a tool of British propaganda in the Arab World (Boyd 2003: 446). As World War II drew to an end, and a new reality began to manifest itself in the Middle East, this instrument of war propaganda would ultimately succumb to the BBC Arabic Service (BBC 1988: 1; Boyd 2003: 446).

The significance of BBC Arabic Service in those early years, with regards to shaping the Arab media landscape and reaching Arab audiences, is undeniable. The hiring of a range of Arab newscasters, initially predominantly Egyptian but later from a wider spectrum, and the incorporation of prominent Arab politicians, musicians and singers into their programming, was an early indication of the effort the BBC was willing to exert to ensure increased listenership amongst the target audience (Boyd 2003: 445). Some of the Arab journalists, intellectuals, and musicians whom the BBC hired in those early years, individuals such as Isa Sabbagh, are still as famous among older Arab audiences as John Tusa is at Bush House. The BBC's early success can also be attributed to the particular characteristics of the very audience being targeted. Wood (1979) rightly

stressed some cultural and historical particularities of the Arab audience, such as great appreciation for oral culture and the historical vanguard position taken by foreign broadcasters in comparison to local alternatives, in explaining this phenomenon. Yet such attempted harmonizations of incommensurate relations were tested to breaking point by those various historic Middle East watersheds that, at times, saw the UK as a direct belligerent.

Three transformations in BBC-Arabic's Credibility:

Suez 1956, the Gulf Wars, and competing Arab media

The 1956 Suez Crisis can be seen as the earliest major benchmark test of the BBC's perceived impartiality. For the first time since its conception, the World Service found itself unable to report general British public support for the foreign policy ventures of a UK government (Mansell 1982: 227). While some at Number 10 expected the BBC to rally behind the government regardless of circumstance, the Director of External Broadcasting Services at the time, J.B. Clark, was aware that the BBC could not afford any differences, in tone and content, between its domestic and international broadcasts. The emergence of any such discrepancies, according to Clark, would have destroyed the BBC's aura of impartiality. As matters came to a head in October 1956, only days before the outbreak of the conflict, the FCO informed the BBC that it was dissatisfied with the World Service and would consequently cut the External Services grant-in-aid by one million pounds (Mansell 1982: 228). While the threatened funding cuts never materialized, lasting consequences are still with us today in the form of FCO officials taking seats on BBC supervisory and advisory boards. The thin end of the wedge of increased FCO involvement was

initially eased in by temporarily inserting a FCO Special Liaison Officer into the BBC Headquarters (Mansell 1982: 233), an arrangement that persists until now in elaborated forms.

Among Arab audiences, the developments of 1956 could only increase distrust against all British media, the more so as the World Service and the propagandist 'Voice of Britain' used the same relay station on Cyprus and, thus, the same consumers' short-wave-lengths (BBC 1988:2; Boyd 2003: 453). However, following the end of hostilities in the region, and the shutting down of the British propaganda competition in 1957, the BBC Arabic Service was able to gain in stature and even listeners' responses. These listeners' responses (at a time of type-writers addressing Bush House by franked international snail mail) increased from 8,000 a year, in 1955, to an average of 21,000 per year in the five years following Suez (BBC 1988: 2). This revival of BBC outreach was further aided by the increased resources which the government, under the White Paper of 1957, was now committing to the World Service (Mansell 1988: 238). Perhaps it was through the Suez Crisis that the British government appreciated the diplomatic benefits of monitoring, yet not controlling, its state-funded broadcaster.

Any such balance, however, proved increasingly difficult to sell to the BBC's Arab audiences with the ceaseless series of Middle East wars and uprisings since 1956. As a test case, let us take the 1990 Gulf War. Although Britain was again actively involved on the battlefield, unlike with Suez, the liberation of Kuwait enjoyed strong international support and had the backing of almost all

Arab governments. The implications this conflict had on the BBC Arabic Service, and international broadcasting more generally, were therefore not rooted in the repercussions of deteriorating Arab public opinion. Much rather, the 1990 Gulf War can be seen as a turning point of Western war reporting and as setting the standards for the coverage of any future global events (Hjarvard 1992: 111). It was the first international crisis to receive around the clock coverage through international news broadcasters and, in Western Europe and North America, even through ordinary television channels which dropped their schedules to provide instant updates on the war. The public was to be directly engaged in the Gulf War from the comfort of their homes. Major resources were allocated to guarantee twenty-four hour coverage of the conflict, especially by American TV channels that booked nearly the entire transmission capacity of the Intelsat satellite in the region (Jouët 1991: 39). Due to this technologically strategic advantage, and owing to the lead role of the United States in the conflict, it was not surprising that it was the American media, led by the news network CNN, which spearheaded this new approach to conflict coverage.

Despite CNN's strategic satellite advantage, the images actually emitted from the region were limited, partly due to on-the-ground technological reasons and partly due to war-time censorship on all sides. The initial so-called 'live coverage of the action' usually included little more than radio or telephone transmissions from the few ground-based journalists, spoken in front of a photographic backdrop image of the places in question. Most of the time was dedicated to interviewing experts in television studios hundreds or thousands of kilometers away from the developments. Although the television broadcasts of

the 1990 Gulf War seemed little more than radio aired on a screen, in retrospect, the coverage of the conflict undeniably presaged dramatically new constellations of media credibility and structures.

As early as 1994, the BBC World Service attempted to expand its reach to Arab audiences by establishing a television channel in co-operation with the Saudi-owned satellite cluster Orbit. Although the increased role of television in the news consumption habits of the Arab audience seemed to have been recognized early on, the experiment was abandoned in 1996, mainly due to Saudi editorial interference and limited take-up as a result of high fees (Select Committee Interview Chapman/Sambrook 2005: 30 ; see also El Issawi and Baumann, in press). Yet according to Hossam El Sokari, current Head of the Arabic Service, the 1994-1996 venture was 'the mother of all [Arab] channels, because from that channel came all the experienced staff who built Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and all the other channels afterwards' (Select Committee Interview Suag/Chebarro/Richardson 2005: 7, 14-15 ; see also Pintak 2007: 8). Although the respective directors of the channels mentioned by El Sokari downplay the essential founding role he prescribes, they do admit that the quality of staff, and to a certain degree the editorial standards, were influenced by the BBC's initial short-lived venture in the field (Select Committee Interview Suag/Chebarro/Richardson 2005: 7, 14-15). However the causality is interpreted, it is undeniable that the events of the early 1990s triggered a massive change in the Arab media landscape which not only witnessed the emergence of locally based international news networks, but also saw an ever increasing number of international broadcasters providing the region with similar

services. The radio, the crutch on which the BBC Arabic Service had been standing on for so long, was slowly losing its place in the hearts and minds of the Arab public as the only reliable medium to receive news from abroad.

After September 11th 2001, and with major British involvement in the two subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the BBC Arabic Service found itself in a drastically shifting credibility environment. As the polarization of the Islamic world and 'the West' grew ever more profound, the BBC found it increasingly difficult to claim any aura of impartiality; yet its audience numbers, while not increasing, held up, seemingly driven by the ever-growing cross-usage among consumers, as also perhaps the large numbers of labor migrants within the Middle East who often preferred listening to foreign broadcasters rather than the often government controlled local media (Sreberny 2001: 102).

Still, the 'West vs. Islam' polarization took its toll on the BBC. During the 2003 Iraq War, the BBC admitted to only catering to a limited niche market in most Arab countries (BBC 2004: 22-27). Within less than a decade, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya had come to claim audiences of 50 to 80 million viewers, at least four times the size of the 12.2 million listener base reported by the BBC in 2004 (Select Committee Interview Suag/Chebarro/Richardson 2005: 13, 16). By 2005, Al Jazeera had also surpassed the BBC as being, in the perception of the Arab audience, the most trusted and objective international news broadcaster (BBC Audience Research 2006: 1).

For a broadcasting service often dependent on crisis listening, the developments of 2003 were a stark indication of the altered environment the service found itself in. Recognizing the need to adapt to these changing circumstances, the World Service undertook a drastic restructuring in 2005; one which entailed the closure of ten vernacular radio services in favor of, amongst other changes, establishing a BBC-Arabic TV channel and expanding Arabic radio and internet services. How far these enormous investments can win over the hearts and minds of the Arab audiences will, with the changes in competition and news consumption habits, increasingly depend on the trust put into the BBC's 'politics of translation'.

As detailed in the Introduction to this Special Issue, the term 'politics of translation' distinguishes four processes: the transporting of data to Bush House or its regional sub-centers; translating in the strictly linguistic sense; transposing as a stylistic technique of 'tweaking' the data in the editorial process; and transmitting as an operation of selecting which audiences get which data or commentary at which times.

Transporting, translating, transposing, transmitting:

Interrogating four politics of translation by comparative methods

In interrogating these four politics of translation with regards to the BBC Arabic Service, we needed to combine several sources, especially as the processes of transporting data into Bush House or its regional centers could not be researched sufficiently. At the time of research, both Bush House and the regional centers were absorbed in establishing the new Arabic TV service, and

the research was not granted much insight into the network from stringers in Gaza to a correspondent in Cairo, nor (unlike Thiranagama 2010 in this Special Issue) to the in-house editorial mechanisms and daily routines. On the other hand, these lacunae sharpened our minds to compare the BBC's Arabic output to that of its competitors, and also, like Bulić (2010 in this Special Issue), to delve deeper into audiences' reactions.

Our first tool in studying these politics of translation was the long-established method of the media diary, i.e. keeping a systematic log of all headlines and the priority of news agenda during four weeks at fixed times of each day – just as a comparative user 'out there' would do. Here, we compared the BBC Arabic Service output with that of BBC News24 and CNN, all with their respective websites. This combination enabled us to enquire how different news providers covered the same, or indeed different, news and editorial inflections.

On transporting, the BBC Arabic Service unsurprisingly granted more space than any of the other providers to the MENA region and selected countries neighboring it, such as Pakistan, Chechnya, and Turkey. An example which illustrates this increased attention to Arab World and its peripheries, is the manner in which BBC-Arabic headlined, for three consecutive days, a peace summit held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia at the end of March 2007, while its English competitors only headlined the reaction to it by Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Another incident where BBC Arabic appeared to be noticeably incorporating more varied sources of information into its reporting was the March to April 2007 Iranian-British hostage crisis. Of all the providers examined,

only the BBC's Arabic service reported comments made by an Iraqi Naval Officer, Mr. Jasim that seemed to support the Iranian side of the story. As the incident threatened to escalate, BBC-Arabic also offered more translated sections of the speeches made by Iranian President Ahmedinejad and other Iranian officials than other competitors included in this media log. While these asymmetries can again be explained on the regional emphasis of the Arabic service, the international nature of this event made the continuously more detailed coverage on BBC Arabic slightly more puzzling than other transporting discrepancies.

Turning from transporting sources into Bush House to translating in the linguistic sense, one can usefully consult Holmes (1988) who distinguishes between naturalizing and exoticizing translations. As in anthropology, the naturalizing path renders the strange familiar; the exoticizing path makes the familiar look strange. As BBC-Arabic must use the supra-regional elite form of the language to encompass all users from Morocco to Iraq and beyond, the reliance on Modern Standard Arabic is a given. Yet one learns, or fails to learn, Modern Standard Arabic at school, but hardly ever speaks it at home or with friends, where one uses one of the highly variegated registers, dialects and sociolects of Modern Colloquial Arabic. These differ by nation-state or region, class or changing conventions, and can differ to the point of barring any easy mutual inter-intelligibility. On the other hand, Arab audiences are used to having all their news, government-announced or independent, in this high register of the Modern Standard Arabic, and many revere it as a commitment to pan-Arab unity, an achievement of education, and a resource for doing business within

the vast Arab World. As a general observation, the linguistic format of the Arabic Service is therefore predisposed toward a naturalizing effect (Holmes 1988: 48). Yet the BBC Arabic Service tends to tread a very careful line in its language register. One can see examples in the use of terms such as *al musallahun* to describe members of Iraqi resistance groups. Directly translated, the term means nothing more than ‘armed individuals’, and so it certainly does not have the negative connotations of going against state authority, as the English term ‘insurgent’ would have. This differs from the terms *al ’irhabi* (‘terrorists’) which is radically condemnatory, or *al muqawamah* (‘the resistance’) which can work either way, as condemnation or praise. The BBC is quite conscious of this neutralizing effect by stating that ‘the guerrilla / terrorist dilemma does not exist for Arab listeners, since the Service is able to use an expression which translates simply as fighters’ (Listener Correspondence IBAR 1990: 10). By contrast, there are examples indicating an ‘exoticization’ of the news featured on the BBC Arabic Service, such as referring to the 2003 Gulf War as ‘the American Invasion’ (*al ghazwah al amrikiyah*) rather than calling it by the more neutralizing ‘American-led invasion’ or ‘the 2003 invasion’ as is the case on some other news channels.

Turning to the third politics of translation, transposing, the most striking differences occurred when comparing the headlines of the different BBC services. On 5 April 2007, both BBC-Arabic and the international news website of the BBC covered the meeting between the British Consul in Jerusalem and Palestinian Prime Minister Haniyeh. The BBC’s approaches differed greatly by both tone and thus implicitly content. While the headline on BBC-Arabic radio

was *British Consul in Jerusalem meets with Palestinian PM Haniyeh in Jerusalem*, the headline on the BBC-English website reported *UK-Hamas Talks over Reporter*. The article on the BBC international news site also went to greater lengths to explain the stance taken by the UK and EU in viewing Hamas as a terrorist movement and refers to the Palestinian PM Haniyeh as a member of the militant group Hamas.

Transpositions can also occur when supplementing oral / aural and textual data with visual ones, as was the case when we accessed the video footage available on the BBC Arabic website. Even though the commentators in the videos continued to rely on Modern Standard Arabic, the use of visual images led to a far more personal and emotive approach than had previously been evident in the articles printed or stories broadcast on the BBC Arabic Service. By incorporating such videos into the website, the rather statistical approach taken by BBCWS Arabic in covering the violent events in areas such as Somalia or Iraq, was replaced by a more documentary-style of reporting; a style which, intentionally or not, more strongly emphasizes the 'human face' of events.

On the fourth politics of translation, transmitting, it was primarily the dissimilarities in the stories presented in the headlines of each of the different services which became evident. A striking example was the failure of the World Service's Arabic radio headlines to mention the Gaza sewage flood on March 27, 2007. This is peculiar, given that the horrendous events and the ensuing 'blame game' were covered openly on the BBC News 24, the World Service

extracts aimed at audiences in Britain, as well as by CNN and other Arab broadcasters.

To interpret the implications of these differential outputs, one has to enquire into the in-house routines of safeguarding editorial autonomy and cross-platform comparability. According to Hossam El Sokari, the Arabic Service's modus operandi is identical to that of the other vernacular services, and the application of the Editorial Guidelines and the basic principles of the Royal Charter is a consistent practice which is not language specific (Interview El Sokari 14/12/2007). The Editorial Guidelines are defined by the BBC as comprising a set of standards and values the Corporation has set itself over the years (Editorial Guidelines 2008: The BBC's Editorial Values). Similarly, the Royal Charter, which is revised every ten years, lays out the independence from government influence that the BBC enjoys; it also facilitates the formation of the BBC Trust which is charged with safeguarding the editorial independence and guidelines of the BBC (Royal Charter 2006). Given this controlled environment, the discrepancies identified in the reporting of BBC-Arabic were demonstrable, but never particular to the service.

In the editorial process, too, BBC-Arabic functions exactly like the other foreign language services. According to El Sokari, the majority of the material collected and presented by the Arabic Service is derived from a central core that is shared by all vernacular services at Bush House (Interview El Sokari 15/12/2007). The difference in content between different vernacular services is determined by the perceived needs and structurations of the audience.

Although the staff working at BBC-Arabic represents a broad spectrum of Arab nationalities, the majority of employees are of Egyptian, Iraqi and Lebanese descent. While there have been recruitment campaigns targeting regions such as the Gulf, any decision to employ an individual is based on merits and expertise rather than nationality. Regardless of origin, a particular emphasis is placed on ensuring that the various members of staff promote a pan-Arab feeling, rather than a national one, through the broadcasts of the Arabic Service. According to El Sokari, the cross-diasporic nature of the staff is an essential feature in sustaining this pan-Arab dimension to the service.

The headline structure of the Arabic Service is determined daily at the service internal editorial meeting and a cross-service meeting, or the so called '9 o'clock meeting', which gives members of all vernacular services the chance to consult about the news reporting priorities for their regions. These meetings give no instructions, but enable the exchange of news and information with other vernacular services. This goes some way toward explaining the oft-voiced complaints made by multi-media users that different language services and even different platforms in the same language can feature different headlines. Regular reviews of the different language services, which check their output, are in place to ensure that impartiality is retained in a wide sample of broadcasts. These reviews, according to El Sokari, are applied and enforced through checking mechanisms filtered from comparisons across languages, across internal and regional comparisons, to calibrations vis-à-vis the English Newsroom and the Global News Division.

In this process, nonetheless, all the different inputs are 're-versioned' by each language service. The notion of 're-versioning' entails molding the information to suit the perceived needs of the audience targeted or, in the Director-General's words, the ability of the editors and broadcasters of each vernacular service 'to turn that material, and obviously gather their own material, to make the programmes relative to their audiences' (Select Committee Interview Chapman/Sambrook 2005: 8).

This method prevents one central newsroom orthodoxy being translated into whatever language it is aired in. Yet at times of conflict, BBC listeners still tend to lose the impression of the Arabic Service being a separate entity owned, in a way, by the Arab audiences. In applying the term coined by Liebes (1979), it seems that the effects of 'soft hegemony', originally defined as the internalization of a lived system of meanings and values, is least effective at the times it should matter most: during crisis. To further understand this dilemma, we should listen to the audiences and their own perceptions of the techniques involved in transporting, translating, transposing and transmitting.

The politics of translation: when audiences talk back

Depending on the year and the intensity of crisis, the Arabic Service files between 10,000 and 70,000 items of correspondence from users. Naturally, through this interaction, the World Service is aware that, in the words of Nigel Chapman, its Director-General until 2009, the audiences in the Middle East are 'astute' and 'hop around' performing cross-comparisons, 'quite often about the nuances of coverage' (Select Committee Interview Chapman/Sambrook 2005:

22). The following extracts from users' correspondence are a good indication of such practices:

'How come your news in ARABIC are completely different from it in the other languages..!! I read it in Arabic and its OK, but when I read it in Bulgarian it is different (the Arabs are the terrorist).' (Abed Dawoud 18/03/02)

'I am asking why is the English version news interface different from the Arabic version. In my opinion, that is done deliberately to hide information or facts from your public not to know. This [is] done always in western media to deceive the people. You may have luck in doing this but it is limited for a short time and then the truth will float and the results will be not as you wish or your politicians wish.' – (anon., 02/01/02)

'I would like to ask you why in your BBC Arabic news you noted that the five killed Israeli students are military students, and in your Russian BBC news you note that they are just students (you didn't note at all that they were military students). Does this relate to the Jewish power in Russia which leads BBC Russia not to tell the truth?' (Ziad Estephan 09/03/02)

'You have bored us with the expressions such as Unbiased, Subjective.. etc .. etc.. I find this not to be true. What exactly do you mean by Excessive Force in Palestine? ... Why do you refer to Chechnya fighters

as rebels when everyone in the Muslim world refers to them as Mujahideen?’ (anon., Morocco, 13 March 2001)

The letters and e-mails received by the BBC also highlight lexical issues emerging from linguistic translation. These derive primarily from the BBC’s use of terms such as ‘liberation army’, ‘Moslem hard-liners’, ‘Islamist extremists’ and the assessment of ‘excessive force’. The criticisms put forward that relate to linguistic issues derive primarily, and almost ironically, from the BBC’s attempt to remain ‘impartial’ in its news broadcasting. The majority of the comments on translating we could review made suggestions such as replacing the terminology applied with regard to individuals killed in the Palestine-Israel or Iraq conflict with the term ‘martyr’, regardless of the cause of death, or using ‘devastating force’, rather than ‘excessive force’ when describing military actions carried out by Israel. An inverse example, presented in the BBC’s Annual Marketing Report, came from a listener in Egypt who criticized the use of the term ‘liberation army’ when describing a faction in the Second Sudanese Civil War (BBC May 1998: 2).

Turning from users’ analyses of translating to their receptions of transposing, there was both textual and visual awareness among BBC users of different platforms. In January 2002, a listener criticized the use of the phrase ‘shattering the relative calm’ when describing a deterioration of events in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. When twenty Palestinians had been killed in the period just before, what ‘relative calm’ was the BBC Arabic Service referring to? (BBC 2002: 2). Not surprisingly, however, it was the combination, or mismatch, of

texts and images that sparked most TV and internet users' critiques. Most of these were collected in the BBC's Market Research Reports:

'...for instance you're showing a picture of the bombing in Jerusalem, a whole series of them. But what about the camp refugee no sign the bombing took place for a reason.' (Ala Al Kassem 03/03/02)

'But from the 8 photos you show in your front page, it seems you believe only the 9 Israelis are the victims of this conflict. Why did you not show any pictures of the 90 Lebanese civilians killed by Israel' (Dr. El Tayeb 16/07/06)

'...I couldn't find the same title and pictures on the English web-site. So is it a policy of BBC to hide this kind of important evidences from the eyes of the world, and show them only to the Arabic world to get their trust? Do you think this is fair?' (Auday Al Ali 02/10/00)

Sometimes, audience correspondents interpreted these clashes in transposing as an attempt by the BBC to deceive the Arab public in particular; at other times as an attempt to fool the rest of the world about the Arab World. Although those who give feed-back to the World Service tend to be habitués rather than casual listeners, the users' correspondences must, by its very nature, be viewed as anecdotal. The question arising may best be phrased in reference to Bulic (2010 in this Special Issue) who examines the spread of 'conspiracy theories' among users of the BBC's Serbian services, both on radio and internet. Arab

users show a remarkably different pattern of reactions, and this can be quantified.

The BBC World Service Internet PULSE Survey is conducted on a quarterly basis through the use of pop-up surveys on all vernacular websites, including bbcarabic.com. It consists of nine multiple choice questions concluded with an open-ended question about quality and for possible critique. The sample size approximates a thousand responses and is collected over a four- to five- week period. To get an indication of audience perception, one of these surveys, conducted in the second quarter of 2007, was analyzed (BBC World Service Internet PULSE Q2 2007). Of 800 comments received, just fewer than 500 were positive, just over 300 negative. Most verbatim transcripts, however, show the same correspondents both praising and critiquing the BBC at the same time, and thus indicate a high standard of differentiation. Among the positive feedbacks, some 25% praised the BBC's impartiality; among the negative feedbacks, some 40% critiqued it on the same criteria, almost all of these suspecting a general bias or cultural incompetence of the BBC vis-à-vis Arab politics and culture.

While the BBC Arabic Service has been able to weather and even grow in such circumstances in the past, it now finds itself operating in a drastically changed environment dictated by a heated rivalry among news providers and a vastly higher level of users' cross-usage and cross-comparison. It will take a few years before it can be determined what impact the new BBC Arabic television channel, launched in March 2008, will have on the news consumption habits of

the Arabic audiences. It is however likely that, had the World Service not opted for its establishment, it would have found it increasingly difficult to retain, let alone expand, its Arab consumer base. As for the competition, international broadcasters such as Russia TV Today, France 24 and Deutsche Welle have all indicated an interest in expanding into the market with Arabic language channels (Heil Jr. 2007: 1-2). A good indication of the competition dilemma is presented by Pintak, who describes the increased popularity of Al Manar, the Hizbullah-run satellite channel, during the 2006 Lebanon War and the manner in which it 'galvanized audiences across the Arab world – many of whom switched to Al Manar from Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya – generating widespread support for Shiite Hizbullah among all Arabs, Sunni and Shia alike' (Pintak 2007: 3). Such 'switches' must, however, be seen in the context of an acute crisis, where anyone used to cross-comparing different news providers will, among all other options, turn to an inside voice that is close to the pulse of the streets and actively involved in political as well as military decision-making on a day-to-day basis.

Nonetheless, it is the astute nature of the cross-comparing Arabic publics that the World Service had so correctly identified, which seems to ensure that they are never beholden to any one broadcaster alone (Select Committee Interview Chapman/Sambrook 2005: 22). So the abiding question about impartiality and independence from state control may have changed altogether with the media avalanche flooding the Middle Eastern market and a public far more intent on comparing and contrasting the various politics of translation. Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General, said at the opening of the BBC's Washington DC news

bureau in 1999, that the BBC World Service was 'perhaps Britain's greatest gift to the world' in the 20th century.' The world's greatest gift to Britain, if one may reciprocate the argument, was the audiences' critical interest granted to the BBC World Service so far. Whether this relationship will continue, must depend on the audiences' perceptions of John Tusa's motto and how they decide to calibrate between viewing the Western global media as an infiltrating Fifth Column or as a Fourth Estate in a freer civil society.

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