

**Institution:** The Open University

**Unit of Assessment:** C23 Sociology

**Title of case study:** Impact on strategy and institutional memory at the BBC World Service

### 1. Summary of the impact

Since 2007, Open University (OU) researchers have been examining the BBC World Service (BBCWS) from the perspectives of its diaspora broadcasters in London and its diaspora audiences worldwide. Multilingual migrants have always enabled the BBCWS to broadcast in many languages, creating a cultural bridge to global audiences. Increasingly, BBCWS audiences themselves are diasporic: living outside territorial 'homelands'. The research made the BBC aware of its diasporas for the first time. By demonstrating their significance, it led to changes in BBCWS strategy, editorial practices, human resources management and institutional memory. The historic collaboration between the BBC and the OU has acquired new dimensions.

### 2. Underpinning research

The research builds on an influential body of interdisciplinary work on diaspora cultures at The OU, led by Stuart Hall. He understood diasporas as fluid, dispersed migrant formations, rather than bounded groups with fixed ethnicities. The project team drew on this research to develop an approach that viewed diasporas as shaped and sustained by cultural and media practices rather than entirely by 'race' and ethnicity.

In the aftermath of the Iraq War 2003, a time of intense suspicion about the putative threat of diasporic Muslims and media, Gillespie and her collaborators developed innovative multilingual methodologies (refined in subsequent projects) for researching diaspora news cultures (Section 3: E) (2004–07). Contrary to prevalent assumptions, British news media, particularly the BBCWS, proved to be a significant news source for diasporic groups. Afghans, Somalis, Persians and Iraqis were avid listeners of BBCWS radio and users of BBCWS online services. It was hypothesised that global diasporas connected by a common language and shared media habits were forging transnational ties around the BBCWS.

The 'Tuning In' project (Section 3: 2 and 3: D) (2007–10) tested this hypothesis. The research involved OU researchers (Gillespie [PI], Toynbee and Woodward [Co-Is], Andersson, Herbert, Hill, Mackay and Webb), leading international scholars, and 25 multilingual researchers. We investigated diasporic broadcasters and audiences in relation to genres (global sports, world music, drama for development), political and religious movements (Section 3: 6), the politics of translation, and new media (Section 3: 1). Outputs included six edited volumes, eight special issues of refereed journals, over 50 peer-reviewed papers, eight reports, contributions to seven BBC radio programmes, and over a dozen press articles (examples in Sections 3 and 5).

Research with diaspora broadcasters evidenced their pivotal role in mediating relations between the UK government, the BBC and overseas audiences (e.g. Section 3: 4). Our research opened up new ways of conceiving and studying audiences (Section 3: 1–3, 5, 6). As the Head of Audience Research at BBCWS noted: 'If at the start of the project the term "diaspora" seemed obscure, used mainly to reference expatriate communities, by the end it had become a live and relevant concept within BBCWS.' Re-analysing BBC data, we found that most users of a majority of BBCWS online services were located in diaspora, rather than in the regional target markets designated by BBCWS's funders, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).

The challenges of these 'digital diasporas' were further explored in an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Public Policy Fellowship, which placed three researchers managed by Gillespie within the BBCWS (Section 3: A) (2011–12). They had full access to production processes and audience research data, and attended editorial and strategy meetings – an indication of the exceptional trust between Gillespie and the BBC. Gillespie's team and the BBCWS Audience Research Unit have jointly developed new methods for studying online behaviour (Section 3: 3). The AHRC has since funded a project extending the work on the BBC's

diasporas to the British Council (Section 3: C) (2013–14).

### 3. References to the research

All publications appear in peer-reviewed journals and books.

1. Gillespie, M. (2013) 'BBC Arabic, social media and citizen production: An experiment in digital democracy before the Arab Spring', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 29, pp. 92–131.
2. Gillespie, M. and Webb, A., (eds) (2012) *Diasporas and Diplomacy: Cosmopolitan Contact Zones at the BBC World Service*, London and NY, Routledge.
3. Gillespie, M., Webb, A., and Mackay, H. (eds), (2011) 'Designs & Devices: Towards a Genealogy of Audience Research Methods at the BBC World Service 1932–2011'. Special Issue, *Participations: International Journal of Audience Research*, vol. 8, no. 1.
4. Gillespie, M. (2010a) 'Diasporic creativity: refugee intellectuals, exiled poets and corporate cosmopolitanism at the BBC World Service', in Knott, K. and McLaughlin, S. (eds.) *Diasporas*, London: Zed Books, pp. 236–243.
5. Andersson, M., Gillespie, M., and Mackay, H. (2010b) 'Mapping digital diasporas at the BBC World Service: Users and uses of the Persian and Arabic websites', in Sreberny, A., Gillespie, M. and Baumann, G. (eds) *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, vol. 3, no. 2, Special issue, pp. 256–278.
6. Gillespie, M., Herbert, D. and Andersson, M. (2010c) 'The Mumbai attacks and diasporic nationalism: World Service forums as conflict, contact and comfort zones', in Gillespie, M., Pinkerton, A., Baumann, G., and Thiranagama, S. (eds) *South Asian Diaspora*, vol. 2, no. 1, Special issue, pp. 109–29.

### Related research funding

- A. 2013–14. 'Understanding the Changing Cultural Value of the BBCW and British Council.' AHRC Cultural Value Project. £47,941. Bid was awarded three top grades.
- B. 2011–12. 'The Art of Intercultural Dialogue: Evaluating the Global Conversation at the BBC World Service'. AHRC Public Policy and Placement Fellowship. £89,000.
- C. 2007. *Pakistan Connection: Transnational Media and Communications Networks among British Pakistanis*. Principal Investigator. Research commissioned by BBC World Service. £70,000.
- D. 2007–10. 'Tuning In: Diasporic Contact Zones at the BBC World Service'. AHRC Diasporas, Migration and Identities Research Programme. £496,476.  
<http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/>
- E. 2004–07. 'Shifting Securities: News Cultures Before and Beyond the Iraq War 2003'. ESRC 'New Challenges to Security' Research Programme. £140,338. Ref: RES-223-25-0063.  
[www.mediatingsecurity.com](http://www.mediatingsecurity.com). Awarded 5 'outstanding' grades by anonymous reviewers.

### 4. Details of the impact

The Director of BBC World Service stated: 'The research that Professor Gillespie and her team have conducted over the last 6-7 years has made an extremely valuable contribution to our internal policy debates at BBC World Service on strategy and editorial matters.'

Since 2007 this team has created an enduring partnership with the BBCWS. Findings have been presented at over 20 workshops at the BBCWS and at an ongoing OU/BBCWS joint lunchtime seminar series (seven to date). Up to 30 BBCWS staff at all levels and across sections, as well as FCO officials, have come to debate our findings and gone on to translate them into policy, practice and programming decisions. Collaborations with the FCO led to Gillespie and Webb submitting evidence to the BBC Trust, the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, and the House of Lords Committee on Soft Power (Section 5: 4).

It is in **geopolitically strategic** services – BBC Arabic and Urdu – that our impact has been most direct, by enabling the BBCWS to reconceive its audiences as global diasporas.

**BBC Arabic Service:** Our research on BBC Arabic audiences' use of social media, presented at a

## Impact case study (REF3b)

lunchtime seminar and in a report circulated among senior management (Section 5: 3), directly influenced BBC Arabic's strategic 'Change Project' (2012). According to the Change Project Director: 'Your recommendations highlighted the lack of a cohesive social media policy across the service as a major problem and provided strong, independent, robust evidence that underpinned my decision to set up three major work streams as part of the BBC Arabic Change Project ... Your research was integral to these very positive developments ... Your report was very helpful indeed.'

Both the Change Project Director and the Head of Audiences stated that our recommendations led directly to:

- (i) **strategic change:** management re-structuring and the creation of social media and digital editorial posts
- (ii) **editorial change:** the flagship daily political talk show '*Talking Point*' was re-scheduled to accommodate diaspora audiences, and the '*100 Women Season*' created to tackle perceived under-representation of women
- (iii) **greater audience engagement:** a 60% increase in unique users at Arabic Online since January 2013.

**BBC Urdu Service:** Gillespie's briefing paper for the FCO on diaspora news consumption (Section 5: 4, 2007) contributed to a successful FCO bid for £1 million funding from HM Treasury for the BBCWS to work with diasporas in the UK. The BBCWS then commissioned Gillespie to research media use by the UK Pakistani diaspora (Section 5:3, 2007). The BBCWS Managing Editor of Future Media stated the findings were: 'really useful in providing evidence about this audience but also made us realise that we need to have a much more robust offer.' Our research catalysed strategic and editorial decisions at the BBCWS Urdu Service and the wider BBC including:

- (i) reduction of planned investment in online Urdu services for the diaspora, since Urdu literacy is limited;
- (ii) commissioning of a BBC1 serial about UK Pakistanis ('Citizen Khan') and the BBC's first Urdu TV programme ('Sairbeen' news/talkshow);
- (iii) avoidance of association of 'Pakistani' with 'terrorist' in BBC reporting.

**Human resources:** One of our reports to WS (Section 5:3, 2010) identified career progression concerns among staff in all the Language Services surveyed. The BBC's Human Resources Manager stated: 'Since that period, we have been placing more emphasis on strategic activities to help address some of the issues that the report raised.' Our research criticised 'language silos' and called for integration of multilingual BBCWS staff in working practices across the BBC. This informed decision-making during the BBCWS's move from Bush House to New Broadcasting House (2012).

**Institutional memory and OU/BBC Partnership:** Gillespie organised three witness seminars with serving and former diasporic broadcasters from BBCWS Bush House, and led collaborative research on creative writers who work(ed) for the service. Findings were published for non-academic audiences in *Wasafiri* magazine ('Writers at Bush House', 2011) and a commemorative volume, *Tales from Bush House* (eds, Ismailov, Gillespie, Aslanyan, 2012). The impact of this strand of research was that the BBC WS belatedly recognised its importance as a historic site of diasporic cultural creativity (Section 3: 4, 2010). BBCWS created a writer-in-residence post (from 2010) and consulted Gillespie for the Radio 4 programme '*World Service Writers*' (2012; audience c. 2.5 million). Further, as part of the BBC's International Playwriting Competition (IPC), the Georgi Markov Prize was instituted at Gillespie's instigation, marking the BBC's recognition of this eminent BBCWS broadcaster and writer, and Gillespie co-commissioned, with the OU, the BBC radio broadcasting of the IPC's winning plays, further cementing the enduring OU-BBCWS partnership.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

### 1. Individuals who can be contacted:

- Director, World Service and Global News (the influence of our research on internal policy debates at BBC World Service on strategy and editorial matters).
- Head of Change, BBC Global News (can testify to the impact of our research in

transforming the management structure, creating new roles and appointments, making changes to schedule to accommodate diaspora and global audiences, and increasing audience size and user engagement).

- Head of the Central Asian Service, World Service Writer-in-Residence (can confirm our impact on public recognition of the contribution of World Service writers to UK literary culture)
- Head of Audiences, World Service (can confirm the impact of our successive audience research projects in providing a picture across Language Services of World Service performance in relation to specific audiences).
- Head of BBC Global News Human Resources Team (that we provided independent corroboration of BBC research, contributing to the development of new working and management practices and strategic activities).

**2. Project website:** <http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/core-research>

**3. Research reports for BBCWS include:**

2012 – Abdel-Sattar, N., Gillespie, M., Lami, M., Sayed, N. and Wissam, M. (2012) 'Social Media at BBC Arabic: A Case Study of Nuqtat Hewar', available online at:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/publications/report/bbc-arabic-and-social-media-a-case-study-of-nuqtat-hewar>

2010 – Denselow, J., Taussig, A. and Gillespie, M. (2010) 'Managing Diversity: Career Trajectories at the BBC World Service', available online at:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/publications/report/career-trajectories-at-the-bbc-world-service-managing-diversity-research-report>

2007 – Gillespie, M. et al. (2007) 'Pakistan Connection: Transnational Media and Communications Networks among British Pakistanis', available online at:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/publications/other/pakistan-connection-audience-research-report>

**4. Reports/evidence submitted to FCO, BBC Trust and House of Lords**

2007 – Gillespie, M. (2007) 'News Consumption in Diasporic Communities', Briefing document to the FCO.

2009 – Gillespie, M. (2009) 'BBC Arabic TV: One Year On'. Report for the BBC Trust.

<http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/publications/report/bbc-arabic-television-research-report-for-bbc-trust>

2013 – Webb, A. and Gillespie, M. (2013) Evidence submitted to public consultation on BBC Trust governance of BBC World Service, via an operating licence. Available on request.

2013 – Gillespie, M and Webb, A. (2013) 'The BBC World Service and the British Council as Premier UK Soft Power Assets', Evidence submitted to House of Lords Committee on Soft Power. Available on request.

**5. Impact on WS programmes and outputs include:**

BBC World Drama. Georgi Markov Prize. International Playwriting competition and associated broadcasts. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0043kb2/features/prizes%20>

BBC Radio 4. 'World Service Writers'. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01kk4b>

Sport Across Diaspora, which was part of BBCWS Crossing Continents (23 August 2009; 23 December 2010; and 21 April 2011). <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qt55>

BBC Radio 4. 'Thinking Allowed', Interview with Marie Gillespie and Ramy Aly on 'Researching diasporas at the World Service', broadcast 16 October 2013.

BBC Writer-in-Residence <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/worldservice/writerinresidence/>

For full details of all media outputs and activity across projects see:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/events/media-activity>