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# Interactivity, the global conversation and World Service research: Digital China

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# Interactivity, the global conversation and World Service research: Digital China

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the relationship between a broadcaster's research methods and aspects of the environment in which it operates, specifically its accountability to its funders and the growth of interactivity by its users. It is concerned with (1) how the BBC World Service's funding by the UK government's Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) means that it has to account for its activities to some extent in terms of the global conversation which it fosters; and (2) how the recent growth of interactive and social media enhances possibilities for worldwide engagement and conversation, but also increases the complexities of measurement. This is because users are dispersed across the globe (they are no longer confined to a geographical area of radio reception) and they are interactive: instead of merely listening or viewing, they talk back to the BBC, and they talk with one another. New tools and techniques are needed to measure these new flows and forms of interaction (and they also beg new professional and organisational practices). In a case study of the BBC's Chinese service, the paper explores what the BBC knows of its audience or users; and, in a content analysis of online forums, it explores some of the issues and possibilities that arise in researching online interaction, the sort of research data and analysis that might be seen as necessary in the context of organisational accountability and the emerging interactive media environment.

**Keywords**: BBC World service; social media; interactivity; public diplomacy; Chinese service.

**Introduction**

This paper is concerned with the audience and users of the BBC Chinese service, one of the 27 language services provided by the BBC's World Service. The paper argues that both the tools of research and the forms of data that are gathered are shaped by aspects of the BBC's

environment – specifically, by the affordances of digital technology (and the expectations of its users) and by the line of funding and accountability of the World Service to the UK government's Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO).

The priorities and practices of broadcasting organisations have, from their earliest days, been shaped profoundly by the measurement and representation of 'the audience'. Feedback on audience preferences – whether in the form of numbers of listeners or viewers, their demographics or by means of appreciation indices – has provided a bedrock for broadcasting. This is especially so since the arrival of competition for the BBC with Radio Luxembourg from 1933 and ITV from 1956. Whether for the BBC to fulfil the remit of its Charter or to justify the licence fee in Charter reviews, or for commercial broadcasters to provide the data necessary for advertisers, audience measurement has played a crucial role in constituting the breadth of broadcasting practices, notably programming. To cope with categorising the vast diversity of listening and viewing meanings and practices, measurement tools and techniques have become increasingly sophisticated (Silvey, 1974; Mytton, 1999) .

However sophisticated these research tools, the audience has remained elusive.  A breadth of poststructural media theorists has flagged the impracticality of capturing the essence of something that exists only in the agglomerations of those who measure it (Hartley, 1987; Ang, 1991). For Ien Ang, for example, the audience is a discursive category, a shorthand for an infinite diversity of ever-changing practices. The complexity and diversity of meanings and uses that have been identified by ethnographic studies of media consumption (Morley, 1992) direct attention to some of the limitations of traditional measures and constructions of 'the audience'. Today the idea of 'the audience' is challenged further by the increasing diversity, fragmentation and complexity of broadcasting (more channels, more organisations, greater diversity of regulation, more technologies of delivery, more locales and practices of consumption etc) – developments which are made possible by digital technologies and the Internet.

As well as being shaped by research approaches and techniques, the opposite is also the case. New audience research tools are being developed and deployed because of how the World Service is organised. The World Service is funded by the UK government's FCO, to which the World Service is a key instrument of public diplomacy. This context – although due to change – is discussed in Section 1 of this paper. It means that the work of the World Service is judged in relation to specific annual targets; and it therefore has to develop and apply methods to generate relevant data. Rather than neutral measures of some external reality, we can see how the measures, tools and techniques that are used by the World Service to measure its audience are shaped by the social world.

One key dimension of recent media transformations is *interactivity*, the capacity of the audience to 'talk back', countering the one-way flow that characterises broadcasting and the press. The interactivity of the Internet also allows users to become producers, breaking down distinctions between producers and listeners, viewers or users (Bruns, 2006). Whilst the mass media have always been interactive to a degree – by letter, telephone, phone-in shows, etc – possibilities for such 'talking back' have been enhanced considerably with the Internet. One growing form of this new pattern of communication is the online forum, which has been embraced by the BBC and its World Service in its 'Have Your Say' forums, where listeners and users from around the world can 'talk back' and talk with one another.

The BBC's data on its Chinese service, our case study, is reported and discussed in Section 2, which outlines what the World Service knows about its audience's characteristics, preferences and habits. Little of this data, however, addresses interactivity, which is implicit in the nature of the 'global conversation' that the World Service is committed to facilitating. Recently the development of interactive media, notably in the form of 'Have Your Say' forums, has changed fundamentally the notion of 'London calling', allowing listeners or users to 'talk back'. Interactivity involves two- or multi-directional communication, so is more complex to measure and analyse than broadcasting. It begs new research methods which are only in their infancy.

Interactive forums and the 'global conversation' relate closely to debates about the public sphere and deliberative democracy. Habermas provides an argument about participatory democracy and how public opinion can be translated into political action (Habermas, 1989). For him, the public sphere is a space for political participation, separate from both the private sphere (of civil society) and the state; it is somewhere for individuals and groups to meet and deliberate on matters of common concern, with a view to achieving some consensus.

There are many critics of Habermas' work on the public sphere - among them those who point out that it was never or only very rarely thus; that his account is gender specific; and that it ignores the working classes (Calhoun, 1992). Most recently, critics have coalesced around the notions of plural public spheres, counter publics and public screens, different but related notions that direct our attention to dissent and contest in democratic and mediated cultures (Fraser, 1992; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Cottle, 2006).

The Internet is seen by many as offering enhanced possibilities for deliberative democracy. Empirical studies of electronic forums have, in some cases, found processes of deliberative democracy (Wright & Street, 2007); and in other cases have found this to be absent, with communication characterised by assertion of opposing perspectives, rather than rational discussion and deliberation (Bellamy & Raab, 1999; Wilhelm, 1998). Critics point to the

balkanisation of the Internet, where the huge diversity of forums and sites mean that people increasingly participate in forums that accord with their own preconceptions and views (Sunstein, 2007). Work on 'Have Your Say' forums has identified elements of deliberative democracy but also its absence (Gillespie *et al*, 2010; Herbert and Black, 2010).

In Section 3 we outline one, qualitative, form of analysis of interactivity on forums. We present some of our preliminary analysis of six months posts on four threads of the Chinese 'Have Your Say' forum. These forums are pre-moderated (that is to say, posts are 'queued' until read by an editor, who checks the post mainly for bad language or possible libel; and on this basis rejects or posts the comments. They involve users responding to a question and short preamble that has been set and written by the editorial team at the BBC. Whereas many other media organisations provide a facility for readers to comment on *any* story, the BBC separates out its forums from its editorial material. We report how 'Have Your Say' forums bring together those with opposing viewpoints on important issues and events, and the form that interactivity takes on them. Our analysis shows that, far from an example of deliberative democracy or a productive global conversation, the forum is characterised by what is often ill-informed or illogical assertion, sometimes expressed rudely, where different viewpoints are juxtaposed, rather than there being much deliberation.

We conclude by summarising some our findings about interactivity on these forums, in terms notions of deliberative democracy and the public sphere. We identify some implications of online and interactivity for research and policy at the BBC World Service. Finally, we explain how changing forms of accountability as well as interactive technologies are shaping the World Service's research methods as well as some of its organisational practices.

## 1. Accountability and responsibility: the FCO, the BBC Trust and editorial independence

This interactivity connects closely with the World Service's role in the UK government's FCO's programme of public diplomacy. The World Service is one the three main public diplomacy partners of the FCO (with the British Council and Wilton Park) and is funded by the FCO as a part of this programme. The FCO defines public diplomacy as:

> a process of achieving the UK's international; strategic priorities through engaging and forming partnerships with like-minded organisations and individuals in the public arena … It's not just about delivering messages but holding a two-way dialogue, listening to and learning from audiences around the world, in order to get a better understanding of the changing perceptions of the UK and its policies (FCO, 2010).

Public diplomacy is based on the principle that building links with overseas publics is a key component of foreign policy, complementing talking to governments. A term used first in 1965 by the US ambassador to Congo as a substitute for 'propaganda' (a practice attributed to Eastern bloc regimes), it is about engaging a population. To some extent this merely represents continuing recognition that power and influence depend as much on values and reputation as on military might (Leonard, 2000). Unlike propaganda or public relations, 'Public diplomacy also involves building long-term relationships that create an enabling environment for government policies' (Nye, 2010). It involves working with key individuals and civil society organisations. It is less about one-way communication and more about two-way dialogue – 'because soft power depends, first and foremost, upon understanding the minds of others' (Nye, 2010) – but in order to influence these foreign publics.

The World Service's reputation for trustworthy information and balanced analysis means that it well-placed to achieve these ends – hence it is funded by the FCO. As Mark Thompson said in his Chatham House speech, 'What the BBC, and in particular BBC journalism, stands for: accuracy, impartiality, independence and seriousness' (11 May 2010). In a similar vein, Peter Horrocks, Director, BBC World Service, refers to the World Service as, 'the world's most respected international news organisation' and to 'The enduring respect and affection people have for the World Service' (BBC, 2010, p. 2).

The World Service, working in a diplomatic context but not a diplomatic institution, sees its role not as public diplomacy but as disseminating reliable and trustworthy news and information around the world. The BBC Trust's protocol regarding the World Service states that:

> The BBC must agree with the Foreign Secretary, and publish, general long-term
> objectives for the World Service, including—
> (a) the provision of an accurate, unbiased and independent news service
> covering international and national developments;
> (b) the presentation of a balanced British view of those developments;
> and
> (c) the accurate and effective representation of British life, institutions
> and achievements. (BBC Trust, 2007)

Thus the World Service is accountable not only to the FCO but also to the BBC Trust.

Within the World Service, with its editorial independence, public diplomacy can be identified in the notion of the 'global conversation' that it facilitates. The World Service's Operating

Agreement with the BBC Trust, for example, shows the centrality of citizenship and global conversation. It defines the World Service's aims and objectives as follows:

> BBC World Service should, through demonstrating the BBC's values of impartiality, accuracy, independence and authoritativeness, provide a trusted, relevant, and high-quality international news service. It should make a significant contribution to sustaining citizenship around the world through providing an indispensable service of independent analysis and explanation, with an international perspective which promotes greater understanding of complex issues.

> It should connect and engage audiences by facilitating a 'global conversation' - an informed and intelligent dialogue which transcends international borders and cultural divides; by giving communities around the world opportunities to create, publish, and share their own views and stories; and, thereby, enabling people to make sense of increasingly complex regional and global events and developments (BBC, 2007).

This is undertaken by means of phone-in radio, and television programmes, video link-ups and interactive forums, with Facebook, Twitter and Flickr seen as increasingly important channels for facilitating this 'global conversation'.

The Broadcasting Agreement between the BBC and the FCO sets out the strategic objectives and broadcasting priorities of the World Service. Among the key objectives agreed by the World Service with the FCO for 2009-10 is to maintain radio audience levels; and the remaining objectives relate to Persian and Arabic language services. The specific targets that are relevant for the Chinese service (the case study for this paper) are (1) to reach 192m adults (weekly) on television, radio and online (when the actual figure is 180m); (2) reaching 23m in the non-English language services (when the actual figure is 17m); and (3) making the World Service 'rate higher than its closest international competitor for awareness, reach, objectivity, relevance, value and loyalty' (BBC, 2010, p.28).

Given the significant decline of shortwave transmission and listening, online is critical to achieving these 'reach' targets. Just as there are various ways of measuring listeners and viewers, so too are there tools and techniques for counting online uses and users. Measuring interactivity is important not only because users increasingly expect to interact; but also because interactivity chimes with notions of public diplomacy and the global conversation; and because of the line of accountability of the World Service to the FCO, itself an example of the growing concern to measure the value of public services.

## 2. The Chinese service: what the BBC knows about its audience

Our research on the Chinese service forum is contextualised by an account of the Chinese service, reporting what the World Service's knowledge of its Chinese audience, its internal research data.[1]

The BBC Chinese service (Mandarin, or Zhongwen) is delivered on radio, online (audio, text, graphics and video) and to mobiles. The websites, which have interactive forums, are in simple Chinese (http://www.bbc.co.uk/zhongwen/simp/) and traditional Chinese (http://www.bbc.co.uk/zhongwen/trad/). Most website users read the simplified site, with the traditional site read more by users in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the diaspora. There is in addition a website about studying and living in the UK and learning English, which has no 'hard' news and is not blocked (http://www.bbc.co.uk/ukchina/simp/ ); this last site is not the subject of the research reported in this paper, though it plays an important role in public diplomacy.

Although the BBC has been broadcasting in China since 1941, it has never achieved a weekly reach above 1%. Reasons for this include blocking (which means a varying picture but perhaps that only 15% of the population is able to receive BBC output); low awareness of the BBC brand (China has the lowest awareness of any country surveyed by the World Service); very low levels of trust in the BBC (as other foreign providers), which is not seen as objective or relevant; a highly competitive market; and television not radio being the main source of news in China.

The Chinese World Service, however, performs better than other international radio providers. In 2006 VoA had the same weekly reach as the BBC in 10 cities (0.6%), while Deutsche Welle (0.1%), ABC (0.03%) and RFI (0%) had smaller audiences. The BBC received better appreciation scores than VoA and CNN as 'a source you can trust', 'provides unbiased and objective news' and 'provides news that is relevant to me'. If one can generalise from the Chinese case, then Mark Thompson in his 2010 Chatham House speech could justifiably claim that 'the BBC continues to enjoy a level of trust from audiences across the world which is unique among international news-providers'.

Only 3% of users of the Chinese service are in mainland China – and these are probably government or international business users who enjoy less restricted access. This figure, however, is quite volatile: in March and April 2008 (when the site was not blocked) it was 20%, and prior to that it was just under 5%. In August 2010, 34% of users were in the USA, 12% in Hong Kong, 10% in Taiwan and 9% in the UK.

Online use necessitates a different, new, set of metrics. The World Service, like commercial sites, counts Unique Users (UUs) and Page Impressions (PIs). A UU is a visitor to a website, identified by an IP address and (usually) a cookie that is attached to the browser, and UUs are counted over a period of time. Return visits by the same user are not counted as a new user; but can be used to build up a profile of user behaviour. There are several limitations to the validity of the measure: deleting the cookie would mean that a returning user is counted as a new one; using a computer at work, another on the train and a third at home would count as three users; whilst an Internet café, school or workplace with many users would count as one. A PI is a request to load a page of a website, so counts the number of times that page, and the site, has been accessed. It does not, however, tell us which bits of it are read; for how long the user stayed on the page or website; where they went after accessing this page; or the significance or value of the content to them. So although widely used, it is a somewhat limited measure of the worth or significance of a web page (Hine .

Whatever the limitations, the UU is the measure used by the World Service – in relation to its challenging FCO target. In this context a UU is equivalent to a listener to the radio or viewer of television. Such arbitrary measures are widespread in audience measurement: BARB defines the reach of a television channel as the percentage of the population who watch a channel for more than 3 minutes in a given day or week; whilst RAJAR defines the reach of a radio station as the number of people who tune in for at least 5 minutes in a given week.

In June 2010 there were 140,000 weekly unique users of the Chinese service, who between them made 2.3m PIs; the average user spent 4.4 minutes on the site per visit. Peaks occurred in July 2009 due to ethnic violence against Muslim Uighurs, and in June 2010 due to floods in southern China.

The BBC Chinese website is the tenth largest World Service site, in terms of UUs, after Portuguese, Spanish, English, Persian, Arabic, Russian, Vietnamese, Learning English and Urdu. The Chinese mobile site (the website versioned for mobile devices) had only 3,000 weekly UUs in June 2010, and these users made 168,000 PIs – a miniscule number given the estimated 277m mobile Internet users in China in 2010 (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2010).

The news sites are blocked or filtered and shortwave radio is jammed by the Chinese government, so they enjoy a minimal reach in China. Blocking in China is particularly effective because of the distinct nature of the 'Great Firewall of China'. Unlike in Iran, where blocking takes places at ISP level, the Internet enters China via one route, so can be controlled more easily (Human Rights Watch, 2006; Deibert *et al* 2008). Streaming evades this blocking because it takes place from Akamai servers, an outsourcing service for delivering content to

websites that is used extensively in China, but there are only 80,000 streaming requests a week from China. Whilst circumvention technologies, notably proxy servers, can be and are used to evade blocking, this is cumbersome and only varyingly effective. When the World Service sites were unblocked during the Olympic Games, usage soared.

Few of the 180m listeners, viewers and users of the World Service, however, use World Service websites: all of the World Service sites together have only 6m UUs, and only 3% of these participate in forums. Given this marginality, it is unsurprising that little resource is allocated to researching forums. Their interactivity, however, makes them important, because it makes them capable of hosting the 'global conversation'. So a key issue for the 'Have Your Say' forums is whether (and the extent to which) the space is one where people from around the world debate issues of public concern, in the Habermasian ideal form in an informed and logical way, showing respect for the perspectives of others, arriving at consensus, and informing policy (Habermas, 1989).

Use of the 'Have Your Say' forum oscillates with use of the website – with a big news story on the site corresponding with a high number of PIs on the forum. Averaging about 40,000 PIs weekly, there was a peak of around 400,000 PIs around the time of the June 4th (Tiananmen Square) anniversary and of about 600,000 PIs at the time of the Urumqui riots, which broke out on 5 July 2009.

Resembling other 'Have Your Say' forums (Andersson *et al*, 2010; Gillespie *et al*, 2010; Herbert and Black, 2010) a remarkable 89% (of 2,008 respondents) of users of the website are male (PULSE survey Q3 2008). This, however, is a self-selecting sample of users who respond to a pop-up survey, so may over-represent men. 48% of users are aged under 35 and a further 13% are aged 15-24; only 9% are aged 55+. They are well-educated, and 32% are from mainland China and 53% are Chinese nationals (Oxford Research International, 2008).

Complementing these descriptive demographics are appreciation scores which show that the Chinese service scores lower than the average World Service site (in 2008). More specific qualitative research on attitudes to the BBC shows that it is held in low repute by its users. A survey to gauge reactions to the World Service coverage of the Tibetan crisis (Oxford Research International, 2008), for example, found that only about 20% of respondents thought the coverage 'unbiased and objective' and 'trustworthy' or 'detailed and thorough'. A majority 'disagreed strongly' with the idea that the coverage was 'unbiased and objective', and about half 'disagreed strongly' that it was 'trustworthy'. There is a clear and very important tension between the BBC's mission in China and the expectations of the Chinese audience. This data begs the question of why anyone uses the BBC Chinese service: unlike many other

countries where the BBC broadcasts, the UK and the BBC are not widely held in high respect in China. It is a relatively closed society and far from London in cultural as well as geographical terms. A recurrent theme in feedback on why it is used is for the coverage that it provides of issues that are unreported, or not reported in a balanced way, by the mainstream Chinese media.

This feedback comes from the final form of data collected by the World Service - which receives, collates and analyses qualitative data in the form of feedback from listeners or users in the form of emails and, to a limited extent, SMS and letter. In the period April-November 2009 it received between 123 and 656 of these per month (an average of 245 a month, with peaks around June 4th and the Xianjing riots). Many of these point to factual, translation and proof-reading errors (relating to Chinese characters); they raise a variety of technical problems; and raise concerns about issues they would like to see the BBC address (specific corruption cases, more discussion of Tiananmen Square etc.). There is praise for the BBC's coverage of 'forbidden' issues and for its objectivity, and criticism of its bias (both against and in favour of the CCP and Chinese authorities). This feedback is summarised, classified and fed back to the Chinese service each month in a short paper entitled 'What our Audiences are Saying'.

In sum, the BBC Chinese service website has about 140,000 weekly UUs, who spend an average of just over 4 minutes on the site. Traffic peaks (a) when the blocking is reduced or stopped, and (b) when there is a major news event in China. A tiny proportion of users are in mainland China, due in large part to the blocking of the site by the Chinese government; the country with the most users is the USA. The huge majority of users are men, the age profile is young and they are well-educated. The BBC enjoys a dismally low reputation in China, but a better reputation than other international (i.e. non-Chinese) news providers.

Clearly, interactivity transforms both possibilities and needs for audience or user data; at the same time, it poses new problems. A notable absence from the extensive set of World Service research data is the scale or significance of the interactivity of the service, and of the 'Have Your Say' forum in particular – the nature of the 'global conversation'. This is a matter not only of quantity but also of quality: who is engaging in debate? Are they key players in civil society? What is the quality of the debate that takes place (is it rational, informed and/ or deliberative)? Is the BBC shaping attitudes? Is it informing debate?

Given the significance of the 'global conversation' and the lines of accountability (to the FCO) that we have outlined, one might assume an increasing need to measure *impact* rather than mere *reach*; and for one to see the development of research methods to capture this engagement of foreign publics. Conversely, without the methods and data, World Service

activity and performance can be understood and configured only loosely. Next we offer a preliminary way of filling this gap by classifying and analysing a case of the global conversation and deliberative democracy, the interactivity on the BBC 'Have Your Say' Chinese forum.

**3. Discussion on the Chinese 'Have Your Say' forum**

Here we report in a preliminary way our research on the Chinese 'Have Your Say' forum (a) to provide a flavour of activity on the forum; (b) to demonstrate some methods of forum analysis; and (c) to identify whether and how interactivity on the forum might be seen as a part of the public sphere, as playing a role in deliberative democracy.

One could analyse a forum in terms of the extent to which it displays the characteristics of, say, liberal individualist, communitarian (mobilising) or deliberative (discussing) models – following Freelon's categorisation (Freelon, 2010). This sort of analysis would enable one to make sense of forum discussions in ways that connect with conventional categories of political analysis, politicians and political scientists. A forum can be analysed longitudinally to see whether opinions or attitudes change or debate develops. Or it can be analysed in terms of networks, to establish who is engaged with talking to whom, to establish dimensions of the 'global conversation' (Vergeer & Hermans, 2008). Given our interest in 'the global conversation', we have drawn on (and modified for the context of the Chinese service) the model developed and deployed by Marie Gillespie and David Herbert (2010) in their analysis of the BBC Arabic 'Have Your Say' forum; and, sharing his interest in 'the global conversation' on the BBC Arabic service, we have focused on the interactivity, authoritativeness and attitudes of posters, as indicators of deliberation. Our research design has been influenced, too, by the work of Wright and Street (2007) and Wilhelm (2000).

We have examined the Chinese 'Have Your Say' forum over a six month period, June-November 2009, and selected four threads for detailed analysis:
(1) 'Your comments on the fall of Berlin Wall at the 20th anniversary', from 6-26 Nov, 2009, 129 comments (Berlin Wall for short).
(2) 'Xinjiang Riot and Ethnic Relation', from July 6-August 14, 2009, 2,421 comments (Xinjiang Riot for short).
(3) 'Your thoughts on the 20th anniversary of the 'June 4th' event', from May-29 June 2009, 1,506 comments (June 4th for short).
(4) 'Your comments on the local governments' illegal detainment for petitioners', from 11-24 Nov 2009, 80 (Petitioners for short).

These four were selected because (1) they all relate to democratic and politically sensitive issues. Topics such as ethnic relation, June 4th, and the illegal detention of petitioners are

rarely discussed publicly in mainstream media in China; and (2) all of these threads have attracted a large number of comments.

The 'Berlin Wall' and 'Petitioners' threads were examined in their entirety; 'Xinjiang riots' and 'June 4th' have thousands of comments, so a 10% sample of comments was selected (3% from the beginning, 3% from the middle, and 3% from the end) for coding and analysis. Altogether we examined a total of 606 comments. Regarding each post we identified:

1) *Interactivity*: the form of interaction, or the extent to which interaction is taking place, e.g. whether or not there is a conversation taking place between posters (or merely assertion or opposition).

2) *Level of authoritativeness*: the logical argument and evidence that is involved.

3) *Attitudes of posters towards the actors involved* (such as CCP, BBC and Uighurs in the thread of Xinjiang riot; students in the June 4th thread; and petitioners in the Petitioners thread): are they reasonable, respectful, rude etc?

We examined *interactivity* by considering the extent to which posts provide information, seek information, or respond to another post; the extent to which 'providing' and 'responding' posts constitute informed contributions; whether 'responding' posts do so positively or negatively; and whether posts act as a seed (whether they attract a response). These matters are defined and exemplified in the following tables.

**Table 1.** Is the post 'providing information', 'seeking information', or 'responding'?

| Type of post | Definition | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Providing | A post that provides information or the poster's views, but does not respond to another post | Many strange things have happened in China. Have you heard about 'temporary rape'? The new vocabulary 'abnormal petition' invented by the Shenzhen City is strange. But recently, two policemen in China raped a high school girl. They turned themselves in afterwards and were sentenced in court. However, the court invented a new word claiming the two policemen committed a crime of 'temporary rape'. Have you heard about this? It is extremely ridiculous! What all the authority |

| | | has done is to bully ordinary people, especially disadvantaged people. Angry |
|---|---|---|
| Seeking | A post that raises a question or seeks information from, or the viewpoint of, another poster | Does Britain have a petition system, for example, to stop the Queen's car to tell Her Majesty what the people are suffering from? (poster: yasd) |
| Responding | A post that responds to another poster | Completely agree with this view! The CCP government has to take the responsibility for all what happened!!! (poster: Ah-budula Wulumuqi) |
| Irrelevant | A post that is irrelevant to the topic or issues being discussed | Finally successfully climbed over the wall :) (poster: climbing over the wall) |

Levels of interactivity and deliberation are complex notions that are not easily measured. However, our quantitative and qualitative analysis, shown in Table 2, found that:

1. A tiny proportion (1%-4 % depending on the thread) of posts seek information.
2. A similar proportion (0%-7%) of posts were classified as 'irrelevant'.
3. A majority of posts (53%-75%) provide information.
4. Quite a few posts (22%-43 %) respond to others' posts.

**Table 2.** Interaction on the four threads: providing, responding and seeking

| Threads names | Providing | Responding | Seeking | Irrelevant | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Berlin wall | 69 (53.5) | 55 (42.6%) | 5 (3.9%) | 0 | 129 (100%) |
| Xinjiang Riot | 150 (66.4) | 54 (23.9%) | 6 (2.6%) | 16 (7.1%) | 226 (100%) |
| June 4th | 102 (59.7%) | 59 (34.5%) | 4 (2.3%) | 6 (3.5%) | 171 (100%) |
| Petition | 60 (75%) | 18 (22.5%) | 1 (1.25%) | 1 (1.25%) | 80 (100%) |

One way of assessing interactivity is to identify the extent to which a post attracts a response, whether it seeds a response.

**Table 3.** Does the post act as a seed to a future post, or not?

| Type of comments | Definition | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Seed | A post that attracts the response of another poster | China today probably would have already become democratic, if there was no June 4<sup>th</sup> Turmoil event. (poster: I am a Chinese who truly understand Chinese style of democracy)<br><br>As a witness of June 4<sup>th</sup>, I agree with the view of "I am a Chinese who truly understand Chinese style of democracy", at least the political reform would be accelerated.<br>(poster: @angshansuya@ Melbourne) |
| Non-Seed | A post that does not attracts the response of another poster | We are longing for the revival of Wang Zheng !<br>(poster: Revival of Wang Zheng Africa) |

We found that the great majority (an average across the four threads of 82%) do not generate a response, whilst only 17% do so. (It was highest on the 'Berlin Wall' thread).

A response, of course, is very different from constructive engagement. We analysed the nature of 'responding'. Table 4 summarises the consensus level of the four threads. In general, positive responses were few – with the Xinjiang Riot thread having the highest level of consensus (the highest proportion of positive responses and the lowest proportion of negative responses). The differences between the threads, presumably, reflect the topics and how users relate to these. For example, many posters to the June 4<sup>th</sup> thread were participants in those events, so they hold very specific views on them; whereas the Xinjiang riots, although in China, were experienced personally by very few users; and the thread suggests widespread agreement about the role of people from ethnic minorities.

**Table 4.** The consensus level of the four threads

| Threads name | Responding positively | Responding negatively | Responding but neither positively nor negatively | Total number of comments in the thread |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Berlin wall | 4 (3.1%) | 31 (24%) | 20 (15.5%) | 129 (100%) |
| Xinjiang Riot | 14(6.1%) | 22 (9.7%) | 18 (7.9%) | 226 (100%) |
| June 4th | 2 (1.3%) | 55 (32.1%) | 2 (1.3%) | 171 (100%) |
| Petition | 4 (5%) | 10 (12.5%) | 4 (5%) | 80 (100%) |

Another way of analysing the development of debate or argument on a thread, which could be an indication or demonstration of participation in the thread and forum, is by examining the 'recommending' of a post. 'Recommending' is a way of demonstrating participation in a forum. The BBC China 'Have Your Say' forum has a tool to enable forum users to express their agreement with a post: at the foot of each comment is a 'Recommend' button. If a forum user agrees with or appreciates the view expressed in a comment, they can click the button to recommend it. But very few do so. Among the 2,421 comments in the thread 'Forum: Xinjiang Riot and Ethnic Relation', the comment that is the most recommended is recommended by only 20 people. On the English 'Have Your Say' forum, by contrast, a thread about 'is Britain a broken society' has 582 comments and 126 people have 'recommended' a comment.

**Table 5.** Average and maximum 'recommendation' frequencies of posts in the four threads

| Threads names | Maximum recommendation frequencies | Average recommendation frequencies |
|---|---|---|
| Berlin wall | 5 | 1.59 |
| Xinjiang Riot | 18 | 1.1 |
| June 4th | 12 | 1.46 |
| Petition | 7 | 1.95 |

The most-recommended comment was on the Xinjiang riot thread (recommended 18 times):

Do you still remember the words of your CCP robber ancestors? Where there is oppression, there is resistance.
(Voter Liberal democratic equal Republic of China)

And the second most-recommended comment was in the June 4th thread (recommended 12 times). (The '50-cent party' is a reference to those allegedly paid 50 cents per pro-government post by the Chinese government.)

> Reply fifty-cent party in London:
> What you said was just like what you named. If you want to discuss what those student leaders did in the post-June 4th time, why not discuss what the political leaders of China did. We can say that though have not contributed a lot, student leaders have done more constructive things than these political leaders in terms of democracy.
>
> By the way, student leaders planned the June 4th event, while Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng and others overwhelmed the June 4th event. Who made bigger mistakes? Do not steer away the topic of the conversation, killers are killers, you fifty-cent party will never have a high moral character.
> (11 11)

Another key aspect of forum interaction is the quality of the debate, the worth of the contributions. Is it crowd-sourcing, drawing in a multiplicity of informed and relevant comment; or is it merely an opinion, or ill-informed? We examined the level of *authoritativeness* of posts by quantifying whether they included information, opinions or neither.

**Table 6.** Do the 'providing' and 'responding' posts include information, opinions, or both?

| Type of comments | Definition | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Expressing an opinion without providing information | A post that merely expresses an opinion without providing information or explanation to support the view | The State should hold a strong attitude toward ethnic issues. (poster: Fu Ning) |
| Providing information without obviously expressing views or responding to others | A post that provides information relevant to the event without obviously expressing views | Before the debate starts, think about this: China probably will not shy away from the debate as to who was on the evil side in WW2. In fact, you can see tons and tons of movies and literature in China about the Sino-Japanese war. How many movies and literature about 1989 can be published in China? None. If the government was so justified, why does it need to shut people up? Can't it |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | withstand a debate? Why does it fear so much that magic number of 64? Where is its confidence? (poster: Sam Seattle) |
| Expressing a view and providing information | A post that not only expresses a view but also provides information or explanation to support the view | I am giving you an example. The soldiers listen to the Party. The party want them to kill people, they will kill people. The part want them to suppress ignoring human right, they will suppress. These soldiers can kill people not only without taking responsibility, but also helping the party. They are the honour of the party. On October 26, this year, hundreds of veteran solders came to Beijing from cities across China and petitioned for their benefits and job arrangement before the building of the people's liberal army's general office. They were taken by the officials from their hometowns' Beijing offices and disappeared. These soldiers couldn't believe that they would become victims to the tyranny that they once protected. (poster: voter liberal democratic equal republic of China) |

The majority of posts (an average across the four threads of 57.45%) included opinions but no information. Slightly fewer posts (an average across the four threads of 40.31%) both expressed a view *and* provided information. In other words, many posts were not without an evidential basis.

Finally, we explored the *attitudes* of posters in various ways.

**Table 7.** Do the 'responding' posts respond positively, negatively, or neither?

| Type of comment | Definition | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Responding positively to another's views | A post that responds to and agrees with another post | Completely agree with this view! The CCP government has to take the responsibility for all what happened!!! (poster: Ah-budula Wulumuqi) |

| Respond negatively to another's views | A post that responds to but disagrees with another post | TO Fake Democracy: I want to correct you: Dictatorship is led by people who have desire for dictatorship. The dictatorship and its continuity is guaranteed with untransparent operation and the untransparency of the system; However, in the "fake" democracy (in your terms), the transparency of legal system, who takes the power, and who makes regulations and moral standards for the society are guaranteed by the public election and the separation of the legislative, executive, and judicial functions of the government, which ensures the fairness of the system. Besides, is Obama an African rich? I did not say "western democracy is a universal value," I said democracy is (a universal value). Right, where is your true democracy? (poster: hujiajun kbr) |
|---|---|---|
| Respond to another's views (neither agreeing nor disagreeing,) | A post that responds to a comment, expressing a view or providing or correcting information, but with no discernible position on the subject | As early as in 1931, Mao Zedong asked Mongolia, Hui, Tibet, Miao, Li, and Koreans etc. to separate from China and become independent countries… The independence of Mongolia? The CCP thief traitors do not admit themselves traitorous, but want to escape from responsibility, fabricate against other people, and transfer the public's attention! This is because the great contaminated milk powder and the launch of Shenzhou 7 project.<br><br>Mao Zedong supported the democratic independence of ethnic minorities, however, changed his mind after he talked to Stalin. Do you think whether Stalin said: "I want to have more republic countries, if you do not want them, I want them." Is the independence a simple work? (poster: yip kc hong kong China) |

Across the four threads we found a consistent picture: a tiny proportion (1%-6%, depending on the thread) responded positively; 1%-15% responded neither positively or negatively; but the highest number (10%-32%) responded negatively. Negative comments on a thread were between one and a half and 25 times as frequent as positive comments.

Next we examined the level of authoritativeness and reasonableness of posts, by classifying posts in to one of the following six categories of styles of assertion or argument that the post involved.

**Table 8.** Level of authoritativeness and reasonableness of posts

| No. | Types of comments | Definition |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Assertion (measured) | Assertion, without explanation or evidence, in measured language and with an internal logic or coherent argument. |
| 2 | Assertion (angry or illogical) | Assertion without evidence or explanation, in a tone that is rude or angry, and/ or lacking logical argument, explanation or analysis. |
| 3 | Argument with evidence (measured) | Provides analysis or information to make an argument. Analogous to some 'letters to the editor' of a quality newspaper. |
| 4 | Argument with evidence (rant) | Provide analysis or information to make an argument. But either flawed argument, exaggerated or sweeping statements or crude language. |
| 5 | Poor argument but expressed reasonably | Some of what is written is illogical, muddled or makes no sense; the argument might not be clear; and/ or appropriate evidence might be lacking. The tone, however, is reasonable and not intemperate. |
| 6 | Poor argument and expressed rudely | Some of what is written is illogical, muddled or makes no sense; the argument might not be clear; and/ or appropriate evidence might be lacking. The tone is unreasonable, prejudiced, partial or includes personal attacks. The language might be abusive. |

We found that 11% of posts were 'rude, angry or illogical assertion', 'ranting argument without evidence' or 'poor argument and expressed rudely'. A further 15% were 'poor argument but expressed reasonably'. Thus (adding these together) about 24% of posts were fairly useless to readers. The great majority (74%), however, were either 'measured assertion' or 'measured

argument with evidence'. This is shown in Table 9.

**Table 9.** Level of authoritativeness and reasonableness

|  | Assertion (measured) | Assertion (rude, angry or illogical) | Argument with evidence (measured) | Argument without evidence (rant) | Poor argument but expressed reasonably | Poor argument and expressed rudely | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Berlin Wall | 55 (42.6%) | 8 (6.2%) | 35 (27.1%) | 10 (7.8%) | 14 (10.9%) | 7 (5.4%) | 129 |
| Xinjiang Riot | 85 (37.6%) | 13 (5.8%) | 82 (36.3%) | 6 (2.6%) | 36 (15.9%) | 4 (1.8%) | 226 |
| June 4th | 52 (30.4%) | 7 (4.1%) | 75 (43.9%) | 5 (2.9%) | 29 (17%) | 3 (2.7%) | 171 |
| Petition | 20 (25%) | 0 | 42 (52.5%) | 2 (2.5%) | 14 (17.5%) | 2 (2.5%) | 80 |
| Total | 212 (35%) | 28 (4.6%) | 234 (38.6%) | 23 (3.8%) | 93 (15.4%) | 16 (2.6) | 606 |

In sum, we found that the 'global conversation', as exemplified on the Chinese 'Have Your Say' forum, takes a distinct form. First, the forum brings together those with opposing perspectives on important events, and is a place where strongly-held and diverse views are expressed. However, there is a significant level of shouting or obscenity, which is likely to put off other (would-be) participants (Schultz, 2000); it might be that the heavy bias in favour of men on the forum is a factor here. With many posts there is a lack of clarity of expression; many posters seem to have insufficient knowledge to make a useful contribution because of their incapacity to make a rational argument, or necessary command of Chinese expressed via the keyboard. This points our attention to the skills that are needed to participate in online communication (Norris, 2001, cited by Vergeer & Hermans, 2008).

Even where there is calm assertion and measured argument with evidence, we found a relatively low level of engagement with previous postings – something that is commonly taken as a measure of interactivity on forums (Rafaeli, 1988). Whilst a few posters seek to trigger dialogue, most fail. The outcome is that we identified nothing that could be considered deliberative democracy. Rather, stereotypical views – notably regarding religious and ethnic minorities – are manifest and reinforced.

Rational deliberation, of course, is particularly problematic in a context like that of the BBC Chinese service. Debate is polarised, with pro- and anti-Chinese government/ Chinese Communist Party the prominent voices. Such extreme and deeply-held sentiments mean that

the Service is not popular with those in the other of these two factions. Whatever the attempts that are made, achieving balance seems problematic in this context.

Editors whom we interviewed suggested to us that 'balance' meant that all incoming viewpoints are represented – not that the main two (for or against) are represented in equal volume. To the contrary, as long as posts are not offensive or libellous, most that are submitted are posted – meaning that the loudest voices are the most prominent. Moderation did not involve any effort to achieve what is normally understood, in the context of journalism, as 'balance'. The forum is seen as 'open', rather than a place to steer a debate. There is no effort, for example, to summarise the debate, to provide evidence or argument that might contribute to it, to point to limitations in arguments put forward, or to raise new questions within a thread. Without such practices there seem to be serious limits to the quality of the 'global conversation'. Regardless of how professional and organisational practices might change, the sort of discourse or content analysis that we have demonstrated allows one to explore in fine-grained detail the sort of discussion or interaction that is taking place.

## 4. Conclusion

The main use of the forum that we analysed is as a platform for personal expression – the 'liberal individualist' model of forum (Dahlberg, 2001), involving monologue and flaming. This accords with Wright and Street's finding that political forums generally are

> facilitating self-expression and monologue, without in large measure the 'listening', responsiveness and dialogue that would promote communicative action (Wright & Street, 2007, p.98).

Critical for understanding the forum that we are analysing is the notion of balance. The meaning of 'balance' is problematic in a context characterised by the dualisms we have identified. Chinese national pride is strong and the key issue is whether you with us or against us. This is compounded by the fact that the mass media in China do not enjoy any tradition of criticising the state or holding the CCP to account, and doing so is seen as disloyal or worse. Investigative journalism in the west takes an adversarial position towards officialdom, but China is a very different situation (Wang, 2010). The obvious association of the BBC with the British state means that claims to 'balance' carry little credibility in some quarters.

In this context, the extent to which the sorts of claims apply to the BBC Chinese service forums is debatable. We know that uses and practices on forums depend on and vary between political and media systems (Vergeer & Hermans, 2008); which raises questions about the cultural specificity of both forms of interactivity and of BBC values. What is the

significance of engagement in a country like China which lacks a participatory political culture?

This research suggests that there is a huge gulf between the rhetoric of Thompson and Horrocks about BBC values (trustworthy, balanced, impartial, reliable, etc) and the views of many of the participants on the World Service Chinese forum. On the forum we read that the BBC should look less to the past (e.g. June 4th) and conflict (ethnic, religious, corruption) if the World Service is to have any credibility. The values that are widely embraced in China today are supporting economic development and the Chinese nation, and if one is against these, one is an enemy of China and lackey of western imperialism. So the forum is used to reaffirm traditional solidarities and to articulate resistance to the BBC and western discourses. Indeed, the forum provides a platform and channel and for such critiques. There are obvious implications for the BBC brand to be hosting this material.

As things stand, users of the Chinese forum are only loosely configured. Peter Horrocks, referring to interactive content, has written that interactive content 'applies the same high standards, ensuring that people with opposing views can disagree with one another, but we hold the ring in a rational and courteous way' (Horrocks, 2010). With our case study forum, this does not seem to be the case, suggesting two possible courses of action for the BBC.

*Either* forums need active moderation, in other words, there is a need to guide not just facilitate the conversation; and thus to modify journalistic practices in the light of the technology. In the spirit of Horrocks' exhortation, journalists need to work more with interactivity. There is some evidence that, historically, there has been little desire on the part of print and broadcasting journalists for feedback from their readers, listeners or viewers (Schultz, 2000). Moderation, however, is important for keeping engagement focused and is crucial to success (Kearns *et al*, 2002; Coleman and Gotze, 2001). Moderation could easily be more pro-active – as is done in distance education, for example by The Open University, where the moderator summarises the discussion periodically, adds evidence to support or criticise arguments, identifies logical inconsistencies in arguments, points users to other online and offline sources, and generally helps to keep a constructive tone to interactions. This is very different from what we were told by World Service moderators and editors – that they do not see this sort of guiding and developing of discussion as a part of their work *qua* journalists. These World Service editors saw moderation as not core to their work or professional identity; and involving little more than filtering for libel and obscenity. Although this would be time-consuming and expensive, it could be rather different, playing the role of democratic intermediary, enhancing the quality of discussions and contributing to interactivity on the forum and establishing new forms of professional practice (Edwards, 2002).

*The alternative* is to question whether forums are a feasible means of doing BBC work. Rather than engage in running forums, the BBC could use the web as a source of material; and allow cross-user interaction to take place on third party forums, e.g. Facebook. This is happening with BBC Hausa (Andersson, 2010) and leaves legal responsibility to Facebook, absolving the BBC of a task that might not be helping its reputation, while allowing the benefits of interactivity.

Whatever is done, there is likely to be a growing need to not just measure but analyse and understand new forms of media interaction, involving as they do voice and feedback. We can expect that new methods to capture the fluidity and complexity of these new patterns of communication will, like older audience measurement methods, have a significant impact on media organisations and their practices.

We can identify clearly associations between older audience research methods and the practices of broadcasting organisations. These methods have played a pivotal role in shaping broadcasting. New communication systems, characterised in particular by their interactivity, facilitate and require new forms of measurement and understanding. Subsequent to conducting this research we are aware that the World Service is using Sysomos, a tool that works across multiple languages to monitor social media and forums, from which it generates both geo-demographic data and sentiment analysis – what is being said about a specific topic or word, and whether this is positive or negative. It is likely that we shall see such tools and the data they generate, like measures of broadcasting audiences before them, shaping organisational priorities and practices.

Whilst many of the new forms of data capture we have discussed are used by many organisations with websites, in the case of the BBC World Service, their use will be shaped substantially by the requirements of accountability. For this reason we can expect to see the development of not only the conventional measures (UUs, PIs, location and demographics) but also, as long as the arrangement with the FCO is in place, analysis of *impact*: who is being engaged? Are discussions and opinions being shaped or informed by the World Service? Are people discussing ideas with others? What are the networks involved? Is the World Service being recommended to others as a source? Interactivity raises possibilities, and methods to answer such questions need to be developed and refined if one is to understand the nature of the global conversation. With the transfer of funding of the World Service from the FCO to the BBC licence fee payer from 2014, we may see a new set of priorities and forms of accountability put in place – which will create new demands for data gathering tools and techniques.

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