

The inescapable history and politics of Anglo-Iranian relations: Audience engagement at the BBC Persian Service during the London 2012 Olympics

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on how Persian-speaking audiences engaged with the London 2012 Olympics via the social media platforms of the BBC Persian Service and in the interactive TV programme 'Nobat-e Shoma' ('Your Turn'), which draws heavily on audience contributions. The paper demonstrates how Persian audiences reacted to Olympic sporting events through a highly politicised frame. They interpreted sporting events via the lens of Iran's specific social, political and economic situation and its relationship with the UK in its role as the host nation. The paper investigates the challenges that BBC Persian journalists face in their relationship with their audiences in Iran and in diaspora. These challenges are shaped by the fact that the BBC Persian Service is inextricably linked to the history of Anglo-Iranian relations. Persian audiences are often suspicious that the BBC's ethos of impartiality is a smokescreen for covert manipulation. We explore the practical problems involved for the BBC Persian Service in upholding impartiality and 'objective reporting' while also being responsive to the political and cultural sensibilities of audiences and the often profound tensions that this creates.

Keywords: BBC Persian Service, Twitter, social media and audience engagement, London Olympics 2012 , Nobat-e Shoma (trans. 'Your Turn')

Introduction

The BBC Persian Service was launched in 1940 as part of the BBC Overseas Service (formerly the BBC Empire Service), which in 1965 became the BBC World Service that we know today. Its creation was driven by the needs of the Foreign Office during World War II to counter

Persian-language broadcasts from Berlin (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013:33). Funded through Grant-in-Aid from the Foreign Office budget, the Persian Service was aligned with the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Information and often broadcast content provided by the Foreign Office. Editorial independence from government was achieved when the BBC Overseas Service was incorporated in the new BBC Charter in 1946. However, it continued to be funded by the Foreign Office, although at arm's length, a point that would prove crucial in Anglo-Iranian relations and the way that the Persian Services would come to be seen by Iranians.

In this article we will analyse audience interactions with the BBC Persian Service during the 2012 London Olympic Games. We complement the study of interactions on Twitter with an observational study of the interactive programme 'Nobat-e Shoma' (trans. 'Your Turn'), the Persian version of the BBC's 'Have Your Say' format.¹ The observational research provides important contextual insights into how BBC Persian's audiences are imagined, addressed and invited to participate. Our interest is in the engagement generated between BBC Persian journalists and their audiences, specifically Iranians in Iran (although where relevant we also mention other audiences from the Persian-speaking world, specifically Afghans and Tajiks), and in the Iranian diaspora. We study the challenges that journalists face in their relationship with their audiences because the BBC Persian Service is perceived as embedded in the history of Anglo-Iranian relations and because suspicions about the BBC's impartiality as a front for subtle manipulation are never far away. We unpack the practical problems involved in 'objective reporting' for journalists working in such an environment. Our data shows that the topics investigated in the wider Tweeting the Olympics project reported in this special section – nationalism, patriotism, gendered and religious identities, cosmopolitanism – were not prevalent in Twitter conversations. Instead, we found the sporting events themselves were being politicised to an extent that was not apparent in the other case studies in the study of the Arabic, Russian and English (bbc.com) Services. For example, controversial refereeing decisions were interpreted as scandals that were seen as indicative of a conspiracy against Iran and its athletes or that were symptomatic of a failure of the Iranian government and its officials to provide adequate support for the athletes.

In order to establish this context for the discussion of our findings, we first need to provide a brief overview of Anglo-Iranian relations and the role that the BBC Persian Service has played in a number of key events in the 75 years since its creation. It is important to consider this historical background when studying the Persian Service and its relationship with audiences in Iran and in diaspora (cf. Andersson, Gillespie and Mackay 2010). Without understanding the profound legacy of these events on the historical memory of Iranians which is passed down through generations, one cannot fully appreciate the current role of the BBC Persian Service, audience reactions to programmes and the interactions between its journalists and members of the audience.

Historical Background

Over the course of recent Iranian history, the BBC and its Persian Service have repeatedly played a role in changes of government – both constitutional and revolutionary ones – and have therefore inevitably been tied up in the changing fortunes of Anglo-Iranian relations. Below we briefly review some of the major milestones of the history of Iran, the roles that the BBC Persian Service has played in these events and the impact this has had on the way it was perceived by its Iranian audiences.

We will discuss three key points in history that have had a significant impact on Anglo-Iranian relations and also illustrate the changes in the relation between the BBC Persian Service and its funders, the UK's Foreign Office:

- the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941 that brought his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to power,
- the oil crisis and coup against Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1953 and
- the role of BBC Persian in the 1979 revolution that led to the establishment of today's Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Abdication of Reza Shah

At the time of the creation of the Persian service, the Foreign Office issued guidance to the BBC that the new service was to 'avoid going into Middle Eastern political questions' and that Reza Shah should be treated with respect since while he 'is not a popular figure, [he] is still in complete control and is likely to retain power'. Furthermore, 'emphasis might on suitable conditions be laid on the long-standing traditional friendship between the two countries... and care should be taken not to suggest that HM Government has any influence whatsoever on Iranian policy' (Foreign Office 1940).

As Reza Shah refused to cooperate with the British war efforts, preferring instead a position of neutrality, and was seen by the Allies as sympathetic to the Germans, it did not take long for the situation to change. In August 1941 British and Soviet forces invaded Iran (Ansari 2007) and BBC Persian Service broadcasts were used to weaken his position (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013:40). On 28th September, Reza Shah went into exile and his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, was installed as the new Shah – with reduced powers and a stronger parliament and Prime Minister (Ansari 2007:104).

In this early episode, the BBC Persian programming was directly influenced by the Foreign Office through a series of consultations and exchanges of memos, through which direct instructions were given as to the content of the broadcasts required by the Foreign Office. Despite this early episode of the BBC being 'closely associated with British political manipulation' (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013:46), the Persian Service retained an audience in Iran.

The Oil Crisis and the 1953 Coup Against Prime Minister Mossadeq

Rising nationalistic sentiments in the post-war period led to growing dissatisfaction with the terms of the oil concession held by Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. At the same time, the British approach to influencing politics abroad had changed from direct, military power (as in the 1941 invasion) to a more indirect influence through 'soft power' (Nye 2004). Even though the BBC World Service was editorially independent through its inclusion under the BBC Charter, it was still bound to consult the UK government on matters of national interest. In fact, cooperation between the World Service and the Foreign Office did not cease even though the World Service was working to establish a reputation as an independent and impartial source of information (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013:52).

As Iranian moves to nationalise oil became more and more likely, the Foreign Office turned to the BBC Persian Service as a way to influence public opinion by producing broadcasts that were designed to suggest that nationalising oil would have severe consequences for Iran's economy and its international standing (ibid.:53). The Iranian parliament nevertheless ratified the law on nationalisation and the Shah signed it. When nationalist Dr Mohammed Mossadeq became Prime Minister of Iran in 1951 (Ansari 2007:135), the oil conflict between the UK and Iran escalated. Increasingly critical reporting on Mossadeq in the BBC and other British media caused great problems for Iranian staff at the BBC Persian Service, who were uncomfortable criticising the Iranian Prime Minister and his approach towards the oil conflict. This led to some staff not turning up for work (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013:62) and having to be replaced with Persian-speaking English staff.

The British and Iranian sides were locked in a battle that prevented both sides from compromising and so the British government began planning moves to destabilise and overthrow Mossadeq's government (Ansari 2007:138). Bowing to British and American pressure, in August 1953 the Shah issued a decree dismissing Mossadeq as Prime Minister. This initial attempt to oust him was unsuccessful but a second attempt succeeded (ibid.:146), supported financially, through arms and through direction by the British and American governments (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013:73).

As Sreberny and Torfeh note, the BBC Persian Service was caught in a paradoxical situation where its mission is seen as exercising 'soft power' while at the same time, at crucial moments in time, it 'is under pressure to follow a strict diktat of information to be broadcast' – such as information that prepares moves to change a foreign government (ibid.:73). At the same time its staff consisted of Iranians, who felt supportive of Iran's position and withdrew their support for the BBC Persian service through an informal strike. Another contradiction that Sreberny and Torfeh note is the reaction of the audience, who continued to listen to the service despite widespread resentment of British interference in their country's affairs (ibid.).

The 1979 Revolution

The ousting of Mossadeq led to a shift in power back to the Shah, who 25 years later faced a popular uprising that would result in the 1979 revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power. In the years before 1979, the Shah would repeatedly complain to the British government and to the BBC about the coverage that the opposition to his reign was receiving (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013:77ff). While the British government was giving him assurances that they were supportive, they also pointed to the editorial independence of the BBC.

A review was held of the BBC Persian Service, with some pushing for its closure but in the end it was decided that it did serve the long-term interests of the nation to portray British values through providing 'accurate and unbiased news and fair and consistent analysis and comment' (BBC 1977) and thereby building and retaining credibility with its audiences. This time round, the long-term interests of exercising 'soft power' trumped immediate concerns about the increasing instability of the Shah's position.

The Shah saw the responses he was getting as evidence that the British government was not being honest in its dealings with him as he did not accept that the government had limited influence on the BBC (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013:84). As before during the oil conflict, in times of crisis, Iranians were increasingly tuning into the BBC's programmes and the audience for BBC Persian widened to people from all sections of society (ibid:78).

The role of BBC Persian became particularly important when Ayatollah Khomeini moved from his exile in Iraq to France and started a media campaign against the Shah from there, facilitated by access to international mass media. Khomeini's messages were included in broadcasts on the BBC Persian Service and so were available to millions of Iranians inside Iran but also to Iranians in the diaspora. The Shah responded by jamming the BBC's transmission – a tactic similar to the one used today, see below. He also shut down much of the country's own media, arguably leaving people dependent on the BBC broadcasts and achieving the opposite effect of what he intended (ibid.:93).

These historical examples of roles that the BBC Persian Service has played show why it can be no surprise that many Iranians view the service with a degree of scepticism and why they make a challenging audience to engage with. As Sreberny and Torfeh (2013:74) put it:

It left an indelible memory on the Persian psyche about the clandestine nature of British politics, creating notions of endless manipulation 'behind the curtain' ('posht-e parde'). It also left enduring confusion about the voice of the BBC Persian Service: was it independent or the voice of the master from London?

BBC Persian Today

The BBC Persian Service launched a television channel in January 2009 (Andersson, Gillespie and Mackay 2010; Sreberny and Torfeh 2013). The impetus for its creation came from the

fact that the BBC was unlikely to be able to establish FM band broadcasts in Iran to improve quality and reception but also from research that showed that more and more Iranians were switching to television for their consumption of news, especially the younger generation (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013:138). The BBC Persian Service today is staffed mostly by Iranians and is producing more original content than it has in the past. It is no longer dependent on the BBC newsroom for news and reports as it was when it was in its infancy.

The funding for the new channel was approved by the Foreign Office for two reasons: firstly, to establish a better direct communication channel with Persian-speaking populations in the interest of soft power and, secondly, to influence standards of news reporting in the region (ibid:139). BBC executives like Richard Sambrook, the director of Global News, were presenting the new service as an offering to the Iranian audience:

... we hope BBC Persian TV will build a following by providing free and independent news and information - the traditional role of the BBC World Service over the last 75 years - and provide a window for Iranian viewers to the rest of the world in an open and unbiased way. (Sambrook 2009)

However, he anticipated the challenges the new channel would face:

The Iranian authorities have been a little apprehensive about the launch, describing it as "an illegal channel", refusing us permission to work within Iran and suggesting anyone found working for it will be arrested as a spy. However, we hope once they have seen the service they may recognise the independence and quality of the channel - and hopefully take part in its programmes. (ibid.)

The timing of the launch of the service made it coincide with the Iranian presidential elections and, it turned out, with mass demonstrations after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was returned to office. The launch of the BBC Persian Television Service also coincided with rising tensions between Iran and Western powers over Iran's nuclear programme. For the Iranian government, the new channel was not an instrument of 'soft power' but of an indication of a 'soft war' against it with the BBC Persian Service as the key instrument on the British side. This view of the BBC Persian TV programme was entirely in line with how the Islamic Republic government saw the BBC Persian Service from the start, as a 'mouthpiece of world-guzzling capitalism' (Walker 1992:118, cited in Safiri and Shahidi 2003). It was not surprising that the channel was banned and Iranians were not allowed to collaborate with it in any form (ibid.).

Even though BBC Persian TV is frequently getting blocked in its core target market of Iran, it has been successful in attracting an audience there, not least during the 2009 demonstrations against Ahmadinejad's return to office, which sparked the largest demonstrations the country had seen since 1979 (Sreberny and Torfeh 2003:150). According

to a 2013 BBC survey,² the reach within Iran is 11.8 million for TV and radio combined. The channel also reaches a sizable Persian-speaking diaspora, which is also strategically important and a way to reach the target market indirectly. Diasporas form a significant proportion of the BBC World Service audience in general as demonstrated by the fact that ‘52% of users of World Service Internet sites [come] from outside the “target country”’ (Andersson, Gillespie and Mackay 2010:261). As the BBC Persian website is blocked in Iran (cf. discussion of filtering and censorship below), the proportion of users from within Iran is small at 5% compared to users from within the diaspora that make up the other 95% (ibid.:265). It is important to note, however, that measurements of website access are not a good proxy measure for overall usage of the service. Before the website started to be blocked in 2006, 40% of users were located in Iran (ibid.:265). Furthermore, the 95% attributed to the diaspora will include users accessing the website via technical measures such as proxies and virtual private networks that circumvent government filters.

Arguably, the attraction of the people inside Iran to the foreign news media in general and the BBC Persian Service in a particular is not necessarily or exclusively due to these media outlets being popular *per se*, rather it is because of the lack of popularity of the Iranian government controlled local media and audiences’ lack of trust in their reporting. Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) is the country’s largest media corporation and has a monopoly on broadcasting that is guaranteed by article 44 of the constitution. At the same time, article 175 states that the appointment and dismissal of the IRIB’s head is the prerogative of the Supreme Leader. Private news media exist only in the form of newspapers, online services and as broadcasts from outside Iran. If, as we argued, Iranians are critically engaging with the BBC Persian Service due to the history of Anglo-Iranian relations, it is also true that they view monopoly state broadcasts with a similar degree of scepticism. For Iranians within Iran as well as those living elsewhere, services such as the BBC Persian Service provide a way to obtain information that is independent of the Iranian state. For Iranians in the diaspora, they are a way to obtain information from within and about Iran (Andersson, Gillespie and Mackay 2010).

We now turn to the use of the Internet and social media in Iran before we discuss our study of the use of Twitter by BBC journalists and their audiences. The question of how Iranians access the Internet and services such as social media systems is important and many of the issues we discuss impact not just on Iranians inside Iran but also on people in the diaspora who have family in Iran or travel to Iran themselves. The question of online reach impacts directly on the work of BBC Persian Service journalists (cf. section on the Nobat-e Shoma programme below) and on the ability of the Service to utilise modern communication channels to engage with its audience and fulfil its mission.

Internet Use, Blogs and Social media and Iran

Data on Internet usage in Iran is sparse. The most recent World Bank³ figures are from 2013 and only count those people with access to the Internet from their home – a luxury that

only 31.4% of Iranians enjoyed that year. This, however, neglects the significant number of Iranians who access the Internet from Internet cafes. Figures produced by Iran's Cyber Police (FATA) and cited by the Iran Media Program put the number of users at 22% of the population.⁴

Just as Iranian governments have tried to maintain a level of control over the airways, by, for example, jamming satellite transmissions of the BBC or Voice of America (Small Media 2012), today measures are in place to block websites and other Internet services that are deemed undesirable (Small Media 2014, 2015). The Committee to Determine Instances of Criminal Content (CDICC) was established in May 2009, just prior to the presidential elections in June. In 2012 the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei instituted the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC). While the SCC is concerned mainly with matters of policy, the CDICC is concerned with the identification of specific content that is to be blocked. Recently, under the presidency of Hassan Rouhani, the relationship between the CDICC, which is largely controlled by the Supreme Leader, and the SCC, which is chaired by Rouhani, has been in the spotlight over attempts by the CDICC to block access to WhatsApp, an instant messaging app (Small Media 2015). In contrast to hardliners' insistence that these kinds of services are part of a 'soft war' waged against Iran and that they should be banned, reformists have argued that they should be utilized to re-engage a disaffected public.⁵

Censorship in Iran has always been subject to power struggles within Iranian governments and between government and other state organisations, between reformists and conservatives. This struggle goes back to ambiguities in the Iranian constitution, which contains articles on freedom of expression and diversity in the media but is 'riddled with a number of escape clauses through which the conservative judiciary may dilute any articles that are ostensibly in place to preserve freedom of expression' (Small Media 2015:5). While some services are permanently blocked, others are available or are blocked only at crucial times such as elections and religious festivals. Private satellite dishes were made illegal in 1994 but remain prevalent in the population (Small Media 2012). In direct contradiction to the law on private satellite dishes, the Iranian authorities themselves produce satellite television channels for both international and domestic consumption (ibid). Iranians are familiar with shifting grounds, with varying levels of enforcement of existing laws and with ways to circumvent restrictions. As our discussion of the Nobat-e Shoma programme below will show, this ability and willingness to circumvent government restrictions is crucial to the operation of audience engagement in the BBC Persian Service.

It is not surprising that the censorship of websites and other Internet services suffers from some of the same contradictions as other media and is subject to the same power struggles (Small Media 2015). Young Iranians are well versed in the use of tools to circumvent filtering such as proxy servers or virtual private networks (Small Media 2015:32). Many habitually change the methods they use to circumvent government control and filtering as the state moves to itself adapt filtering methods to changing policies, demands from the CDICC and prevailing methods to circumvent filtering. The tug of war between

Internet users and the authorities is largely an extension of previous struggles around earlier communication technologies and needs to be seen in the historical context of Iran's media (see above). Sreberny and Khiabany write: 'The nature of Iranian society, its political and economic contexts, the concerns of its people, mean that access and use of the internet takes on a different hue than in the USA and the UK' (2010:3).

Despite the various forms of policing and restrictions, there is evidence that millions of Iranians from all walks of life are using Facebook, Twitter and other social media systems and Internet services. Families join in with extended family members and defy the restrictions in place. In February 2015, Ali Jannati, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, claimed 9.5 million Iranians use Viber, an instant messaging and voice-over-IP service, and 4 to 4.5 million are on Facebook (Small Media 2015). As of the time of writing, the BBC Persian Facebook page has 2,371,685 likes and VOA's Persian Parazit Facebook page likes number 1,412,348. Before the advent and wider take-up of social media systems, Iranians were avid users of weblogs. Estimates for the number of Persian language blogs in 2009 range from 400,000 to 700,000 (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010).

BBC Persian and the London 2012 Olympics

With the BBC being the home nation broadcaster and investing heavily in covering as wide a range of events as possible through digital television channels but also through a massive online presence, the BBC World Service channels were faced with the unique opportunity and challenge to bring the Olympics to their target audiences and to foster a 'global conversation' with and among its audiences (BBC 2012). The BBC Persian Service, like other BBC World Service Language Services, had covered the run-up to the London 2012 games, produced features of athletes from the Persian-speaking world and reported on stories from previous Olympics such as the story of Ja'afar Salmassi,⁶ who won Iran's first ever Olympic medal – in London in 1948. During the Games, the service ran an active programme of audience engagement on social media, using mainly the @bbcpersiansport Twitter account, which was live-tweeting sports events, as well as through Facebook. As discussed in Dennis (this issue), our study focused on Twitter. The reasons for this are to do with research methodology (Twitter provides a robust way to capture data; cf. Procter, Voss and Lvov, this issue) but also with the fact that in 2012 it was seen as the social media platform most relevant to news coverage of unfolding events.

Figure 1 shows the number of tweets sent from @bbcpersiansport per day (blue line) and directed back at the account (red, dotted line). Most of the latter were original tweets directed at @bbcpersiansport, with only few people retweeting its content. As **Figure 1** shows, Twitter traffic rose significantly after the 8th of August, Iran's 'Golden Tuesday' and the number of audience responses broadly follows the same pattern as the level of Twitter-activity generated by @bbcpersiansport. The grey dashed line indicates the number of original tweets sent, i.e., tweets that are not retweets of others. Most tweets sent by the account fall into this category. However, we can see that there are days when a

significant number of audience tweets are being retweeted. The times when this happens correspond to specific events that led BBC Persian to change the way they use the account – from live-tweeting events to asking the audience for their opinion and retweeting selected answers. The number of responses directed at the @bbcpersiansport account is not very large – this is in line with the finding reported in Willis, Fisher and Lvov (this issue) that corporate accounts do not tend to attract many replies.

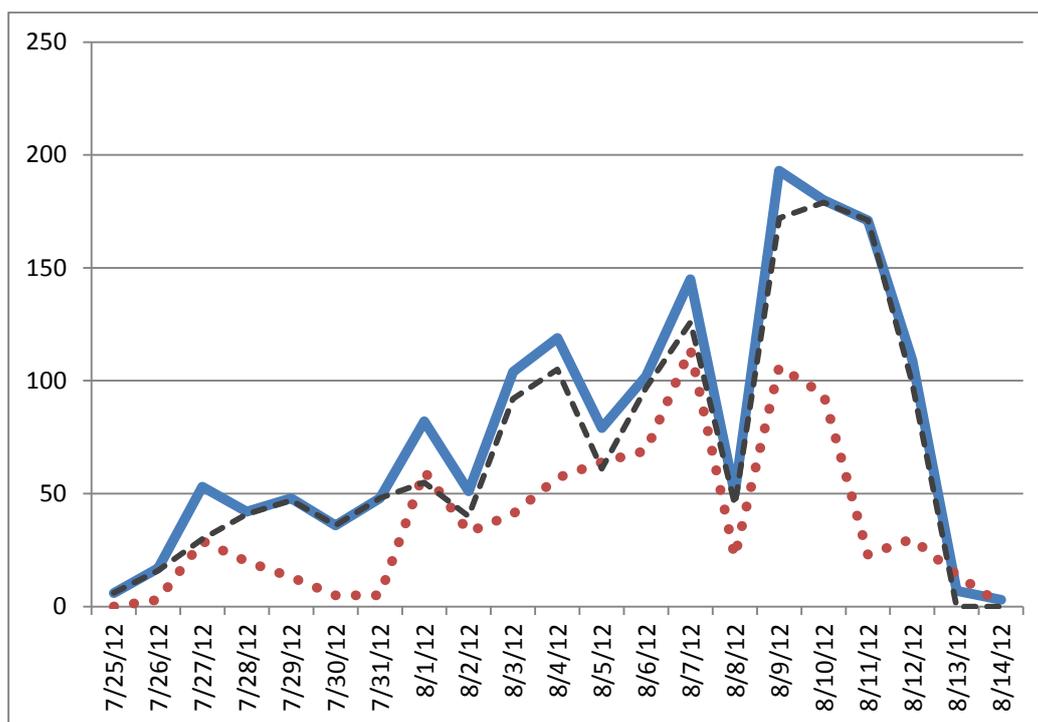


Figure 1: Tweets per day sent from @bbcpersiansport (blue line), original tweets of these (grey dashed line) and directed at @bbcpersiansport (red, dotted line)

Iran did well in the London Olympics 2012, coming 17th in the medal table with a total of 12 medals (4 gold, 5 silver, 3 bronze), the best result in an Olympic Games in the country's history. This was despite the fact that the team sent to London was smaller than the team at the Beijing Olympics. For the first time Afghan women took part in the Olympics and the Tajik boxer Mavzuna Chorjeva caused a sensation by winning the bronze medal in the womens' lightweight event.

The Iranian state broadcaster IRIB bought licence rights to be able to show the Olympics ceremonies, but showed only a few minutes because of the un-Islamic features such as dance performances during the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies. However, many Iranians would have watched these events via the illegal but prevalent satellite dishes on international channels. Similarly, coverage of the sporting events was guided by Islamic rules and therefore selective in the use of images from events that showed women competing or in the audience with 'un-Islamic' dress. It is standard practice for IRIB to show

programs with a delay that allows censors to select desired angles or replace undesired images with other material.

BBC Persian, Olympics and Twitter

To study audience engagement with the BBC Persian Service during the London 2012 Olympics, we analysed tweets sent by its accounts as well as their retweets and replies (cf. Procter, Voss and Lvov, this issue). The accounts we collected data on were @bbcpersian, @bbcpersiansport and @bbcshoma as well as two accounts by BBC Persian journalists, @niam and @khorshid. The first three were chosen to focus on BBC Persian as a whole and on a prominent interactive programme ('Nobat-e shoma', also see below) while the latter two were chosen as they were individual accounts with a relatively large number of followers.

Based on an initial screening of the tweets, we selected the following events for further analysis:

1. The disqualification of the Boxer Ali Mazaheri in his match against Cuban Larduet.
2. Saeed Abdevali's loss in a controversial decision against French wrestler Steeve Guenot.
3. 'Golden Tuesday' when Iran won four medals in Weightlifting, Wrestling and Athletics.
4. The opening ceremony and the reaction of the Persian-speaking world to the ceremony.

The opening ceremony was chosen as a key event that were also included in the other studies in this issue on the London 2012 Olympics. We did not choose the closing ceremony since the event was overshadowed by two earthquakes that killed hundreds in Azerbaijan province and changed the programme for BBC Persian. The other three events correspond to spikes in Twitter activities and at the same time were times when BBC Persian actively encouraged audience contributions (cf. **Figure 1**). We will also be looking at what comments were made about the BBC Persian Service's programmes and commentary.

Tweets were coded according to the common coding scheme developed for the Olympics project (Dennis, this issue), with extensions to capture specific aspects such as mentions of the historical and political context, which were of particular relevance to Iran. Each tweet could have more than one code applied. The categories of the original coding scheme reflected topics that the research team involved in the wider Olympics project had theorised would be of some significance during the Olympics. However, it turned out that in the case of BBC Persian the prevalence of these topics was less than anticipated. We will come back to this later but now wish to discuss the topic of politicisation of sport, that was not represented in our original coding scheme but turned out to be much more prevalent

than the previously theorised topics. The two controversial incidents that we discuss first both show how politics and the history of Anglo-Iranian relations played a role in how these events were interpreted and discussed in interactions between the BBC Persian Service and its audiences.

The Boxing Incident – Mazaheri’s Disqualification

On 1st August 2012, the Iranian heavyweight boxer Ali Mazaheri was disqualified in his bout with Cuba’s Larduet in a controversial decision by the German referee Frank Scharmach. The referee gave Mazaheri three warnings for holding within 56 seconds before disqualifying him. Mazaheri was stunned and outraged and refused to attend the announcement of the match result. Within minutes of the fight, many Iranians took to social networking websites such as Twitter, but more prominently to Facebook (on the main BBC page some 5000 comments were posted within two hours), claiming unfair judgement and match-fixing. Error! Reference source not found. shows an example of the comments people left on Facebook pages.

BBC Persian reported the match through their @bbcpersiansport Twitter account, describing the events as they unfolded and mentioning the comments made by BBC commentators (in the English commentary), who expressed surprise at the referee’s actions and sympathy for Mazaheri. Instead of commenting on the controversy themselves, the journalists invited the audience to have their say about the events:⁷

With regard to the fact that Mazaheri’s left the ring in protest, this can cause him being suspended. What is your opinion on his action? Tweet and mention @bbcpersiansport.

In total, 99 tweets were sent in response over the following 2 days, many criticising the referee’s decision and suggesting foul play, for example:

I who watch so many boxing matches have never seen such a thing in my life that a referee gives three warnings in less than a minute.



Figure 2: Reaction to Ali Mazaheri incident on BBC Sport (not -Persian) page

My friend have you watched the afternoon matches or not? They were touching each other more than this, Mazaheri has squashed his opponent, what is this not having a plan, they took his rights.

It is pretty clear that they want the Italian to win medals, the referee knew if Mazaheri wins, he will get the gold. Hands behind the curtain did not let Mazaheri to be himself.

While the first tweet provides a simple statement about the unusual manner of Mazaheri's disqualification, the second tweet makes the accusation explicit. The third links it to previous experiences of unfair treatment and clandestine forces at work against Iran. The expression used – 'posht-e parde' or the hands behind the curtain – is commonly used to describe outside forces influencing events in Iran. Other tweets direct their anger at the Iranian officials, who did not intervene immediately:

The incapable coach should have realised when the referee's mistake is so obvious that he is suspended, the coach should have protested there and then.

If the Iran team had a good manger, they could protest or go and confront Mazaheri at least but this committee is useless.

And in the middle of all of these, there is no sign of Iran's sport minister who may want to defend the rights of their country's athletes.

The view that Iranian athletes are not well supported by their government was expressed across the corpus (cf. also the wrestling case and the 'Golden Tuesday' below). The critique of officials stands in stark contrast to the celebration of athletes' performances. Many tweets expressed understanding and support for Mazaheri's reaction to his dismissal, leaving the ring:

I have not watched the game but if Ali Mazaheri's idea is that the referee has been unjust, then he has done the right thing.

In our eyes Mazaheri is the real winner, our athletes only shortcoming is that they don't have a supportive and strong team.

What could he do? It was the best thing! We are Kurdish, we cannot tolerate our rights being taken.

These examples illustrate the tendency to connect sporting events to the political context and seeing his disqualification as a politically motivated event rather than just an ordinary sport event. **Error! Reference source not found.** shows that the tweets reproduced above are typical of the wider conversations, which shows a strong tendency towards expressions

of benign nationalism (no antagonism to others) while placing the controversy around Mazaheri in the wider social, political and economic context.

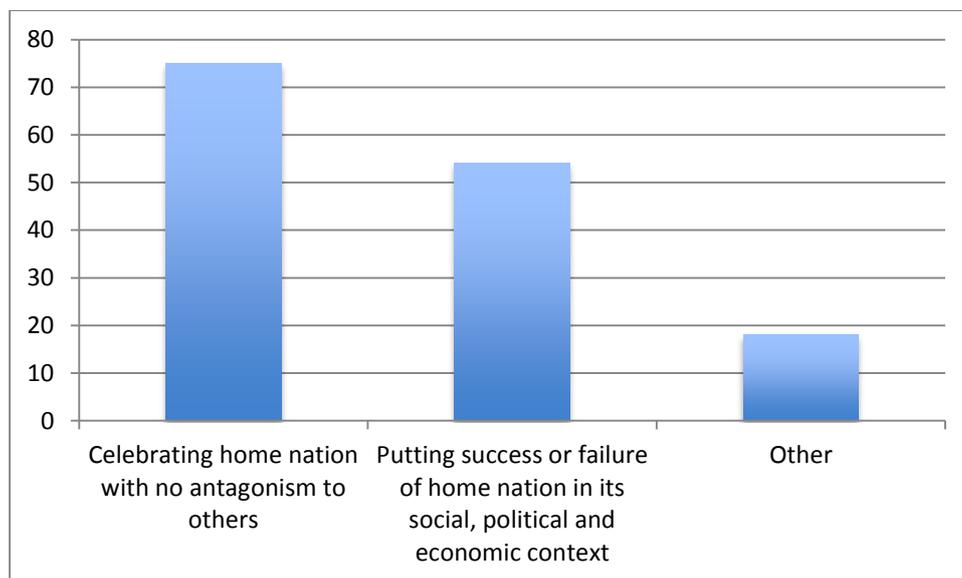


Figure 3: Audience reactions to Mazaheri's disqualification.

The wrestling incident

Another controversy occurred in wrestling on the 8th of August in Saeed Abdevali's quarter-final match against the French wrestler Steeve Guenot. He lost the match in what was widely regarded as a controversial decision by the referee, causing another storm of outrage



Figure 4: Facebook pages created in support of Saeid Abdevali and referring to his disqualification.

among Iranians, who immediately created Facebook pages in support of Abdevali. The BBC's Facebook page for the Olympics had to block Iranians who were leaving critical messages. Again, we are interested in this article in the interaction between BBC Persian and its audiences through the @bbcpersiansport Twitter account. As in the earlier case of Mazaheri, when Saeed Abdevali was dismissed, conspiracy theories began to emerge:

Please don't write that Abdevali was defeated by Guenot or Guenot defeated Abdevali, Abdevali lost the game to the referee.

If you have seen the slowmotion of it, he never touched the French guy's thigh, on the whole the refereeing was suspicious and biased.

Abdevali was defeated because of the nastiness of the referee and the hands behind the curtains of the British, death to those who cannot see the triumph of Iranian heroes and athletes.

I really cannot comprehend – in front of all these cameras – how can they so easily destroy this young man’s rights. Curse the mafia!

As in the Mazaheri case, the tweets show that while some in the audience blame the referee, others see a wider conspiracy at work. Direct reference is made to manipulation by outside powers – specifically the British. At the same time, Twitter users praised Abdevali for his performance and voiced their support:

Saied Abdevali is forever a hero for us.

Never mind Iran, why did they break this athlete’s heart who has worked for months for this medal, why?

Figure 4 shows the relatively high level of speculation and references to conspiracies as well as the appeals to fairness and tweets supporting the athlete.

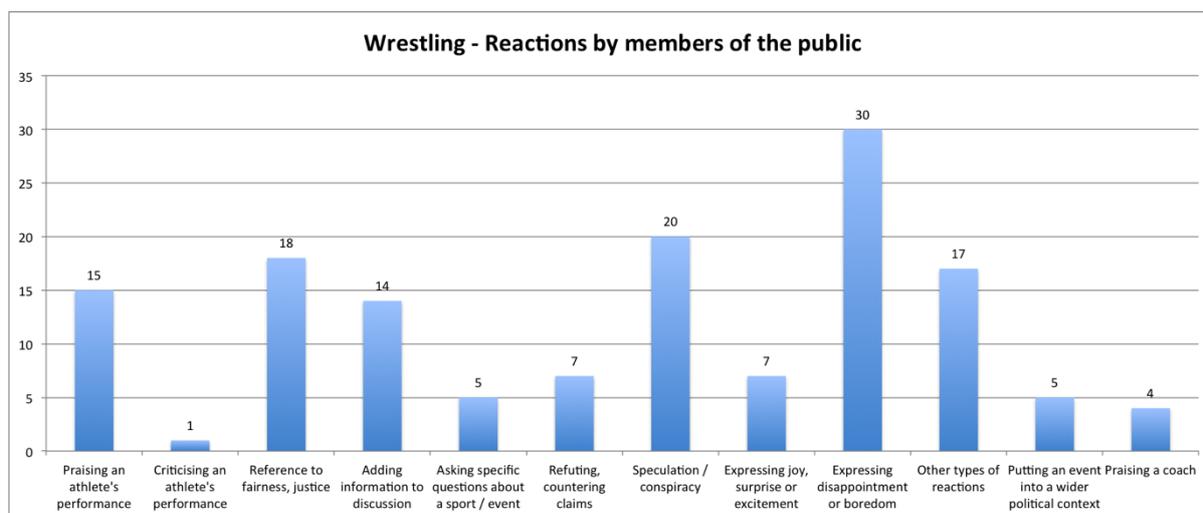


Figure 4: Reactions by members of the public to the wrestling incident

Cosmopolitanism and National Pride: 'Golden Tuesday'

We also coded for expressions of nationalism such as views of the home nation of the tweeter or view of other nations. Our analysis found that Persian speakers overwhelmingly celebrated success without expressing any rivalry or antagonism towards other nations – while there is evidence of national pride, this is not in conflict with the cosmopolitan spirit. 63% of the people supported Iran’s team during the Golden Tuesday without being negative about others (cf. **Figure 5**). The analysis of the corpus as a whole yields similar results. For example, during the match between Afghanistan & Iran, this tweet was sent:

I wish both teams could win, it's not nice among the neighbours, if one loses.

When Iran won the gold medal for Taekwondo in the final match against Afghanistan, who won the Bronze medal, one of the BBC Persian Service staff wrote:

The kind hearted neighbours harvested all the medals today.

In other words, there was some symmetry between the cosmopolitan attitudes expressed in BBC Persian tweets and users' tweets. As **Figure 5** shows, even in celebration there are tweets indicating the political and social contexts that surround the Iranian team's performance:

The Iranian Olympic team was unsupported [oppressed], the [Iranian] government has done nothing for them, their medals are entirely of their own making with effort and pride!

These are brave Iranian men who could achieve these honours under the oppressive whips of the mullahs' republic. Oh heroes!

I must tell the Sport minister that you are so hopeless and oppressed in the whole world and people are taking away your rights, it is only in Iran that you are the oppressor and oppressing the people.

Long live Ehsan Hadadi! With the scandalous situation that the marathon federation had made for him, we really didn't expect this medal.

Tweets tended to praise the athletes, their skills and commitment, while criticising the Iranian government for its lack of support and provision for the athletes (as was also evident in the cases of the two medal hopefuls who were disqualified through controversial refereeing decisions). **Figure 5** shows that the prevailing reactions by the audience were celebratory, praising athletes' performance but that even in this celebratory context 30 tweets were referring to the social, political and economic context – the conditions under which Iran's record medal haul was achieved.

The Opening Ceremony

We now turn to the reception of the opening ceremony. Judging by the comments on Twitter, those Persian-speaking people who tuned in to watch it certainly enjoyed it. Many praised the theatrical nature of the ceremony and its inclusiveness in terms of bringing in differently-abled children to participate in the ceremony.

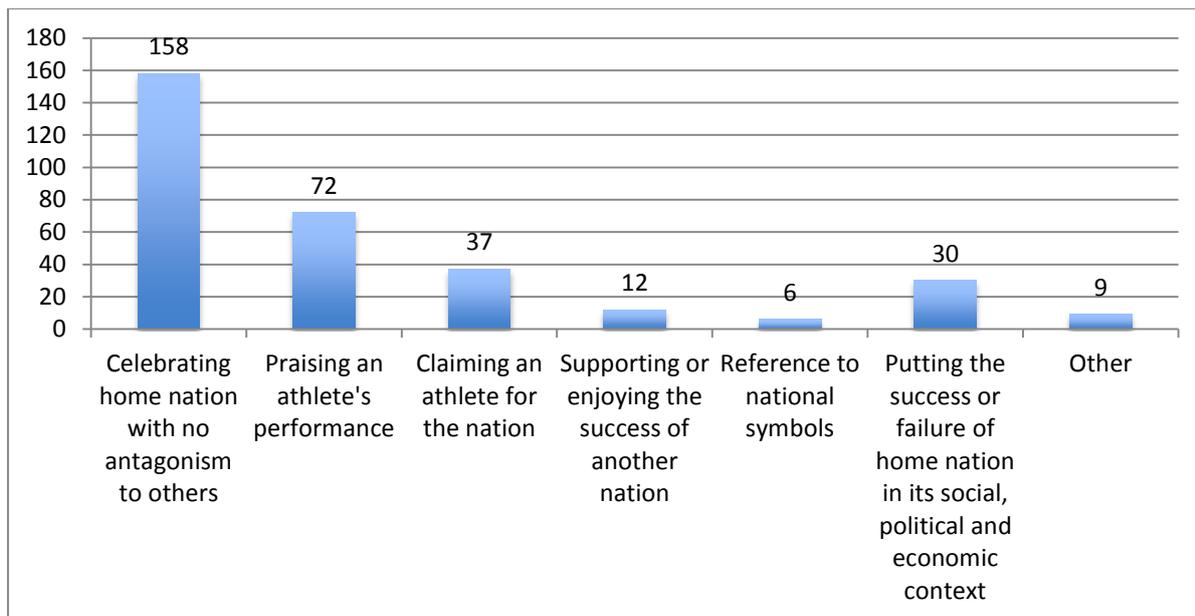


Figure 5: Patriotic feelings expressed on Golden Tuesday

In my view, the Opening ceremony this year was one of the most interesting, and the cultural references made it even more captivating.

It was the best Olympic ceremony, what a beautiful thing they have done to bring the disabled children in [to sing] their national anthem, it brought tears into my eyes.

Mr Bean managed to bring an international smile to everyone

The reference to Rowan Atkinson's character of Mr Bean is not surprising as he is one of the best-liked British comedians inside Iran. There were comments on Britain trying to forget its colonial past but during the opening ceremony, these references were relatively few (see **Figure 6**):

I remember Bruce Willis in [a movie] said we start the ceremony in our English way, he is right, no talk of colonialism.

In the opening, it was good that Britain's history was presented, but nothing about Britain's colonial past was mentioned!

One question about the opening ceremony was whether the BBC Persian Service did enough to inform people, to make those who visited its site interested in the human history of Britain. Considering the complex relationship between Britain and Iran, it could have played a vital role to inform Iranians about British culture and try to challenge the simplistic views of Britain as a homogeneous society. Elements of the opening ceremony could have served

to inspire discussions about history in terms of class struggle, social problems like poverty, lack of political representation (universal suffrage), lack of universal health care, etc.

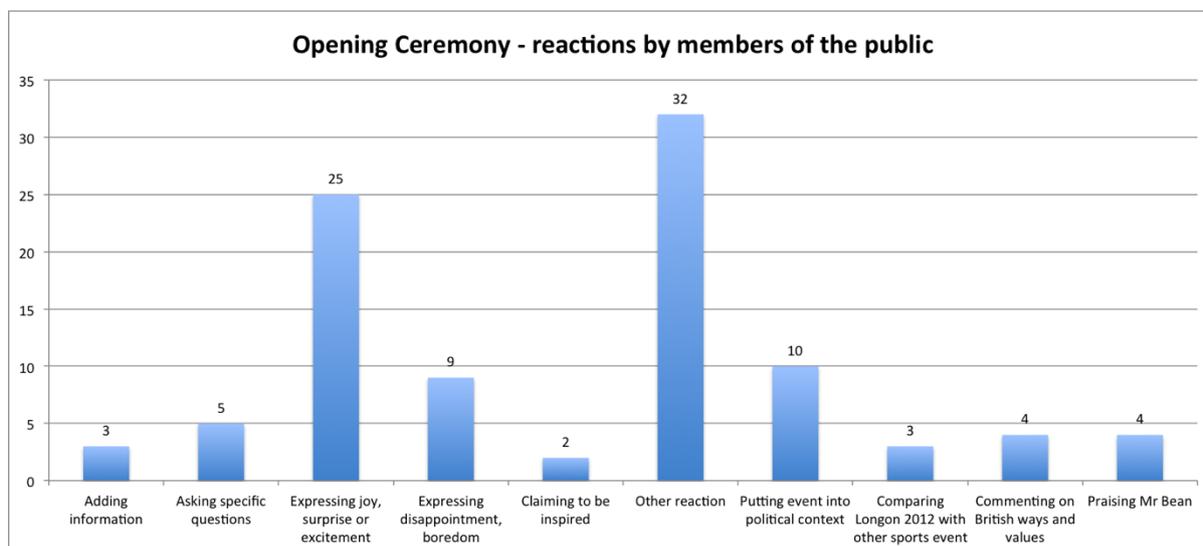


Figure 6: Tweet types during the opening ceremony in absolute numbers.

The @bbcpersiansport Twitter account was not used much to comment on the ceremony but simply introduced the scenes as they appeared in the show and retweeted selected audience tweets. This gives the impression that BBC Persian did not have enough advance notice of the opening ceremony – or enough resources – to prepare a more thorough commentary that could have been used to represent Britain and its history to Persian speakers. Given the usually simplistic portrayal of Britain (the ‘little satan’), the chance to elaborate on the imagery of the opening ceremony would arguably have been important for a service tasked with engendering a ‘global conversation’. That would have improved the Iranian understanding of the British society’s struggle to modernism as well as generating discussions and debate about the ceremony, perhaps similar to those reactions seen in the English Twitter sphere. There was also no material on BBC Persian’s website to exploit this opportunity after the event itself was over.

The Olympics, Religion and Women’s Participation

The Games took place during the holy month of Ramadan, during which observant Muslims fast while the sun is up and pay specific attention to the observance of other religious rules. Fasting can, of course, affect an athlete’s performance, especially as both eating and drinking are proscribed. It can also cause problems for the audience wanting to experience the Olympics as some of the following tweets illustrate:

It’s OK watching women beach volleyball during this month [Ramadan], but be courteous enough not to tweet about it.

At the end of the wrestling match, Sourian [the Iranian wrestler] mentioned Ramadan, what was the relevance?

The opening ceremony was so interesting that I slept in for my 'sahari' [the early morning Ramadan meal] & today I am fasting without 'sahari'.

There were only six references to religion or religious practices in the overall corpus. The issue of sport and religious observance did not seem to exercise the audience engaging with the BBC Persian Service much. In contrast, it had been commented on by a number of Western media and elsewhere on the web. A Google search for 'olympics 2012 ramadan fasting' returns 400,000 results (as of 13th May 2015), including articles from major international newspapers.

Similarly, gender-related tweets were also few, apart from the BBC Persian sport tweet coverage of the women's competitions, altogether there were only 11 tweets posted from members of the public. Again, this is in contrast to the coverage that the participation of women from Iran and Afghanistan received in the media:

The Tajik female boxer was making wonders.

@bbcpersiansport I am not talking about you but their own country supporters (Tajikestan) were absent, the hall was pretty empty, I thought the situation of sportswomen in Tajikestan was better than Iranians and Afghans.

@bbcpersiansport @[anonymised] this is a beautiful beginning for the girls and women of Afghanistan. I hope there will be more provision and support for them in terms of sport.

@bbcpersiansport the fact that she [Kohestani] has taken part and has reached the Olympics is beautiful, her participation and running was also beautiful. The Afghan women have proved that they are the strongest and they have succeeded in many things.

@khorshid you can follow Iran's female olympians results here: <http://t.co/KgW86vws> by @small_media #Iran #women #Olympics

@khorshid @small_media RESPECT TO ALL MY IRANIAN HOMEGIRLS KICKING MAJOR ASS!

@bbcshoma: Iranian women did not have the enthusiasm to win, they performed well but did not have the confidence to win.

As with the issue of religion, women's participation in the Olympics did not attract many comments on Twitter – in contrast to significant coverage in the Western media. There were no negative comments about gender and women but they were instead encouraging and

positive tweets. Tweets expressed happiness that Afghan women have taken part for the first time, and that the Tajik boxer Mavzuna Chorieva was doing well.

Reception of the BBC Persian Service’s Olympics Coverage

The BBC Persian Service made effective use of Twitter for attracting viewers and engaging them. The @bbcpersiansport account was the focus of much of the Olympics-related engagement through providing live updates on events (‘live-tweeting’ events). At key moments the audience was invited to get in touch and air their views about the Olympics or the BBC Persian Service’s performance. The account would then re-tweet selected tweets representing a wide range of views. The live-tweeting part turned out to be popular with the audience. This was reflected in 29 comments praising the BBC commentary – largely referring to the format of the live tweeting. However, there were an equal number of tweets criticising the commentary and this was mainly about the reporting style (Figure 7).

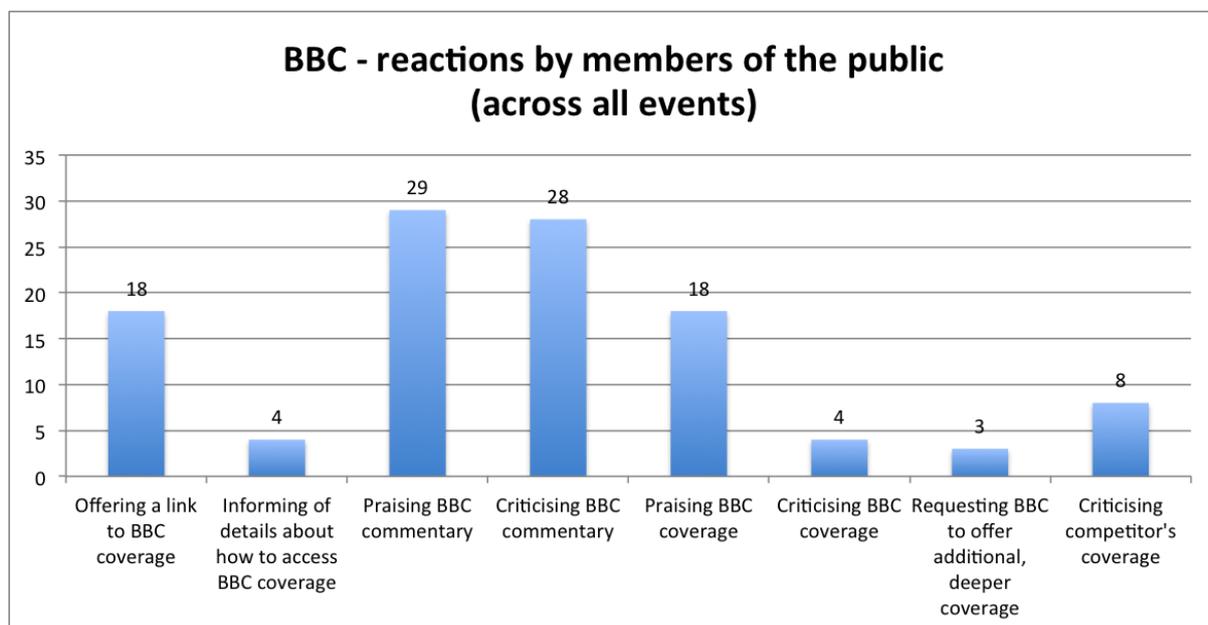


Figure 7: Reactions by member of the public aimed at BBC Persian accounts

We will expand on this point in the following example from the BBC Persian Sport tweet correspondence with the audience. When the wrestler Abdevali was disqualified in a controversial refereeing decision, Abdevali was shocked and outraged and so were many of his supporters. A tweet on the @bbcpersiansport account gave a factual account of what had happened:

Steve Gueno from France defeated Abdevali in Greco-Roman 66 kg and went to the next round.

Responses to this tweet called for the BBC Persian Service to acknowledge this as a controversial decision and to acknowledge and represent the outrage felt by Iranians following wrestling:

They could not defeat Abdevali, they made the French win.

Please don't write that Abdevali was defeated by Guenot or Guenot defeated Abdevali, Abdevali lost the game to the referee.

The BBC Persian Sport continued:

Abdevali is defeated but he has still got the chance to win the bronze medal.

Another user wrote:

Do not say he was defeated, say the unjust referee announced the useless guy as a winner

However, the coverage through @bbcpersiansport continued in the same factual style, until some of the people who were engaged in the conversation lost their temper and began leaving foulmouthed comments and left the scene. In essence, regarding the Abdevali incident, from there on people were either swearing at the BBC Persian Service or accusing the *'unseen hands of the British'* as the culprit for getting Abdevali disqualified. The factual nature of the BBC Persian Service's reporting failed to reflect the emotional response from the audience and to acknowledge the controversy around the refereeing decision.

In this specific case, the value of objectivity was arguably upheld by limiting reporting to the sheer facts but in the eyes of an emotional audience, this represented a form of bias. When it comes to objective broadcasting the Iranian public still have their reservations about BBC Persian being impartial. The distanced reporting style adopted by its staff did not help to improve this deep-rooted mistrust around the BBC Persian Service. When the Persian athlete Yousef Karimi was competing against a UK athlete in Taekwondo, some Iranians were questioning the patriotism of the Iranian staff at the Persian Service:

To the BBC (Persian) staff, in case of losing your job of being joyful about the wining of Yousef Karimi [as another fellow Iranian], you can always pretend the other side was Irish.

@bbcpersiansport with regard to the Mazaheri's incident the staff's tone at BBC Persian was so sarcastic and insensitive towards the Iranians feelings and their worries.

Overall, it seems that politicisation of every debate is inescapable among Iranians, even during the Olympics and the BBC Persian Service is inextricably linked with this. In comparison, we did not find much evidence of the topics we had previously theorised would feature such as nationalistic antagonism, discussions of religion and women's participation.

Nobat-e Shoma – Your Turn

In a complementary part of this study, we conducted a brief study of the interactive programme 'Nobat-e Shoma' ('Your turn'), using observation, interviews with the members of the production and broadcasting team and analysis of episodes of the programme. Here, we are turning to the issues faced by BBC Persian staff in their professional role and in the context of BBC Persian's history.

Our choice to conduct a short observational study of the Nobat-e Shoma programme was motivated by the fact that it was an established interactive programme (similar to the BBC World's long-running 'World Have Your Say') featuring audience contributions via social media, email and phone. The programme is broadcast five days a week from Saturday to Wednesday inclusive for 50 minutes each time, to Persian speaking audiences from around the world but it specifically targets the following three countries: Iran, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. The series began at the same time as the launch of BBC Persian TV in January 2009. Their major competitors are: Radio Farda,⁸ VOA Persian⁹ and Deutsche Welle Persian.¹⁰

During the Olympics, Nobat-e Shoma featured three dedicated half-hour programmes on the Olympics, which were aired each Friday. In order to capture the depth, and understand the structure of the programme, two sessions of the programme from birth to air were observed. The observation included the preparation and production of the programme, and the post-show discussion as well as critical evaluation of the show. Interviews with members of the production team were also conducted. The first episode observed was about ordinary Iranians' concern over the price of food while the second focused on new restrictions for women entering higher education.

Each episode begins by a subject matter chosen by the editorial team being put forward to the audience via the programme's website and its Facebook page two days earlier. The subject might have significant importance for people in terms of date, e.g, Persian New Year (Norouz), Ramadan or a news piece or any subject that has grabbed people's attention and matters to them. The team asks its viewers to get in touch and send their views via one of five methods: Telephone, email, text-message, Twitter, Facebook. If people are happy to participate in the live programme, they need to leave their telephone numbers and if they wish to join with webcam they should say so by putting a 'w' next to their request so that Staff at BBC Persian could capture them via Skype. It is important to note that, as mentioned earlier, all the above-mentioned tools are heavily monitored, tapped and filtered by the Iranian government, and those who have been in contact with

'foreign spies' (this includes the BBC Persian Service) face severe punishment. Despite these threats, people still get in touch and air their views on various topics.

In preparation for the programme, the phone producer member of the team goes through the details people have left via email or other methods and then calls them back to confirm their participation. The social media producer goes through the Twitter messages, Facebook comments and online material for balanced and representative views of people who have got in touch via these mediums. A co-presenter of the programme works very closely with video, phone and social media producers. The content producer also looks at the programme's website, chooses and moderates comments to be presented in the programme.

After the initial meeting in the morning to kick-start the show's work, the crew are left to get on with their work for a few hours and collect the necessary data. They are then called for a final meeting before the rehearsal. We observed the meeting where the phone producer presented the team with various views from the participants who had left their telephone number for the producers to get in touch during the show. The team were very receptive and cooperative in choosing who to call and stating their views. The team that included women in key positions were young, enthusiastic and technologically savvy with great respect for one another's views. Then the social media producers presented her findings and they discussed whose comments should be aired and why, their debate was short but decisive and everyone's views were taken into account. They finalised the meeting by quickly going over their choices, they then went to get ready for their rehearsal. Meanwhile, the person who was responsible for the programme's Twitter account was writing tweets about the programme and at the same time re-tweeting people's tweets that were directed at the @bbcshoma account, the official Twitter account of the programme. Immediately after each show there is a post-show meeting, discussing how the show went and reflecting on how the show could be improved. At this particular meeting the main discussion was about an abusive phone call.

The Nobat-e Shoma's team employs innovative methods to attract viewers from different walks of life from Iran and it has been very successful in doing so. This programme in its interaction with people in Iran is unique as it is extremely rare in the Islamic Republic's media that ordinary people's views, which may not be supportive of the government, are represented.

The programme has a live Twitter correspondent, who retweets audience contributions and replies to BBC Persian tweets, thus reflecting a whole conversation, providing a platform where various people and groups are brought together via this programme and generate discussions and debates. In this way the BBC Persian programme has played a vital role in bringing together people from different backgrounds who would not talk to one another outside such a platform. To illustrate the role their programme plays in bringing Iranians together, the social media person used the bridge metaphor

where ‘Nobat-e Shoma’ programme connects people through its interactive shows. He says the way we employ the media is to connect people to one another.

One of the successes of the programme lies in the fact that key figures of the team were among the first bloggers and online human right activists in Iran. One of them also runs BBC Persian Click, a show presenting technology news. This has allowed them to take social media seriously at the same time as being aware of its limitations. This was pointed out when they agreed that the social media plays an important role in their programme but at the same time they acknowledged that that Twitter, Facebook or the programme’s web pages are just tools which people use to express themselves. It is worth mentioning that the programme’s Facebook page is very active. Within a couple of hours after Ali Mazaheri’s boxing match, there were 1,109 comments on Facebook alone.

During the interview with the members of the production and broadcasting team, on many occasions, the discussions were about the difficulties and obstacles in producing and broadcasting the programme outside Iran. In the next section we will expand on the nature of those obstacles.

Difficulties the ‘Nobate Shoma’ Team Were Facing

Among the major difficulties for the members of the Nobat-e Shoma team was constant pressure and intimidation directed at the individual journalists. The harassments can take a psychological form or there have been cases of families of BBC staff who live in Iran being arrested (cf. Sreberny and Torfeh 2013:164). The family members were then interrogated and asked why their son/daughter is working for the BBC Persian Service and were threatened by imprisonment if their spouses, sons or daughters continued their job. The bullying and undermining of their work can take different forms depending on their gender,¹¹ it is harder for female staff since the harassments take on an appalling sexual turn by publishing offensive videos about them on YouTube. However, when the BBC director went public and supported BBC Persian staff whose family members had been arrested, things improved somewhat, so staff are hoping that the BBC is supportive of their work and if need be they would publicise their case.¹²

Another difficulty is the ‘existential’ problem that journalists face; the ordinary links between the journalist and the environment that he or she writes about has been severed by not being able to live in that environment. Many of the journalists can no longer go to Iran because of fear of persecution. These issues have enormous effects on their day-to-day jobs, where they have to make extra efforts to remain familiar with the country they are writing about from the outside world. Ultimately, this might have the effect of alienating audiences, who may perceive BBC Persian as a channel dominated by outsiders – strengthening the traditional reservations many have about its independence. Furthermore, as many staff are émigrés, the perception of bias against the current government may be strengthened and it becomes easier for the Iranian government to portray BBC Persian as being part of a ‘soft war’.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the BBC Persian Service is making efforts to attract audiences from a wide range of backgrounds in Iran and in diaspora and to engage them in debates through the Nobat-e Shoma programme and through social media. Its journalists are exercising great care to reflect a diversity of participants and a plurality of viewpoints in different strands of a debate. They have also made additional efforts to increase women's participation. For example, in one of the Nobat-e Shoma programmes where women's participation was lower than that of men the team decided to air more female views. With its innovative use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook, the BBC Persian service has managed to bring people from different backgrounds to speak with each other on different platforms.

Their success is hard-won, however, as the politicisation of any event – including Olympic sporting events – in the context of Iran's modern history means that the notion of impartiality is deeply scrutinised and contested. Our study of the Olympics shows that audiences connect sporting events to accounts of their historical experiences and those of the Iranian nation. In the case of the controversial disqualification of the boxer Mazaheri and the wrestler Abdevali, audience members were quick to raise suspicions of match-fixing against the Iranian athletes, invoking the concept of 'posht-e parde' – literally translated meaning 'manipulation behind the curtain' as experienced in the Iran of the 1940s and 1950s through British and American governments and suspected since then by Iranians of all political hues in a range of contexts. On the other hand, members of the audience also critique the behaviour of officials with equivalent outrage – venting on Twitter not only about the experience of losing in sport but also about wider social, political and economic losses in Iran. Sport is mobilised as a metaphor for Iranian society and international relations

The BBC Persian Service is inextricably linked to Iranians' perceptions of Anglo-Iranian relations and so, inevitably, claims about 'objective' reporting of BBC Persian are met with derision and or incredulity. BBC Persian Service journalists wish to reach out to citizens inside Iran – to inform them in ways that Iranian news media do not. They wish to be respected by their audiences for the quality of the Persian Service rather than being merely yet as another foreign broadcaster infiltrating Iranian cultural space with a UK political agenda. BBC Persian aspires to be better than the government-controlled national and local media. However, issues surrounding impartiality require more careful handling.

The BBC on the whole and BBC Persian in particular pride themselves in following the Editorial Guidelines as defined by the Corporation, consisting of a set of standards and values that the corporation has set itself over the years (BBC 2008). However claims of impartiality need unpacking. As John Tusa, the former Director-General of the BBC World Service, puts it: 'Fourth Estate or Fifth Column – it is not an antithesis, it is a choice. The media can be both at the same time' (1992:110). Jaber et al note (2012:172) that Tusa's dialectical statement was meant to emphasize the World Service's impartiality and that 'all answers to Tusa's riddle depend on each broadcaster's ability to gain or lose legitimacy and credibility' (Ibid.:172).

As the Persian saying goes, sometimes it may look like *the bowl gets hotter than the soup*, ('*kase daghtar az ash*'), that is sometimes the staff at the BBC Persian become too 'objective'. For, some of them having had the experience of working inside Iran under its controlled media atmosphere, when in the UK, they take the impartial reporting very seriously and they wish to be extra impartial to the point that their reporting looks indifferent, free from any content that suggests they, themselves, might be or have affiliations with Iran. That can cause the subject discussed to have an artificial 'aura of impartiality' and, ironically, make the audience inside Iran suspicious of the motive of the reporter.

Instead of encouraging impartiality, perhaps the BBC should be encouraging *creativity* in reporting in connecting with the socio-historical background of the audience at the same time as being professional - taking into account the sensitivities as well as being as faithful as possible to objective news reporting. The moment the balance is tipped is the moment that viewers lose trust and begin to suspect the integrity of a news organisation - hence allegations of 'Ayatollah BBC or spies of the foreign enemies UK/US'. 'Objective reporting' can alienate ordinary Iranians who see impartiality as a smokescreen.

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¹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/tv/2009/01/000000_ptv_your_turn

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2013/persian-arabic-audiences-rise>

³ <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2>

⁴ <http://iranmediaresearch.org/en/blog/218/13/04/08/1322/>

⁵ e.g., <http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2575876> (in Persian)

⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-19019742>

⁷ We anonymise the tweets from members of the audience that we reproduce in this paper to protect the identity of their authors and of others who might be mentioned in them. All tweets have been translated from the original Persian.

⁸ <http://www.radiofarda.com/>

⁹ <http://ir.voanews.com/>

¹⁰ <http://www.dw.de/dw/0,,9993,00.html>

¹¹ BBC Persian has gathered a database of insulting and defamatory articles and comments by the Islamic republic's cyber militia, in which they address BBC Persian staff as traitors and spies.

¹² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16874177>