BBC as a diasporic mass medium or an agent of public diplomacy: Users' perceptions in Pakistan and Germany

Dr. Bakht Rawan*  
Dr. Muhammad Zaman  
Dr Syed Abdul Siraj

Abstract

BBC World's Urdu Service is deemed as an important, free and fair mass medium in Pakistan, and is regarded as a good source of connecting Pakistani diaspora living in different parts of the world to their homeland and vice versa. However, shifts in global politics, especially the so called 'Global War on Terror' (which is considered to be a Western holy war against Islam) on one hand, and professional and technological developments in the field of mass communication in Pakistan, particularly the proliferation of indigenous private electronic news mass media on the other, have affected credibility of the BBC Urdu Service among users. This paper is based on empirical research in Pakistan and among the Pakistani diaspora in Germany. It investigates how the BBC Urdu Service is used on an everyday basis and at times of crisis. It situates the use of the BBC Urdu services in the wider context of news media consumption of our sample group. Through the use of group discussion, in-depth interview techniques and archival data from BBC we offer a unique analytical perspective on the changing role of the BBCWS (BBC Urdu Service) as an international broadcaster and as an agent of public diplomacy.

Key words: BBC World Service; global war on terror; Pakistani diaspora in Germany; BBC Urdu Service; international mass media; agent of public diplomacy

Introduction

Human history reveals that man has kept on migrating from one place to another since quite long. This movement is either caused by adverse social, political, economic, religious, ethnic, and environmental conditions, and/or others like trade, culture, imperial rule (Tsagarousianou, 2004). This is a continuous process, and even in the present age one can observe the influx of emigrants migrating from different parts of the world into countries that offer better opportunities to them. Nevertheless, these people after settling in and getting citizenship of the host countries still exhibit greater psychological proximity with their respective people and land. They identify themselves and like to keep

* The authors are: Assistant Professor; Free lancer and Chairman of Department of Mass Communication, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad – Pakistan, respectively.
themselves connected with their culture (Song, 2005, Moon, 2003), and they usually think about homeland (Tsagarousianou, 2004). They exhibit strong mental associations with the land and society back at home. No doubt diasporas of the present times like their predecessors have shifted their geographic locations and do live far away from their land of origin but unlike the displaced populations of the earlier times, they are closely connected to the peoples and countries of their origin as technological developments, especially those related to communication, have ceased time and vanished distances in the present age, and they live in a global village (McLuhan, 1987).

According to Silverstone (2005, p. 45), “Diasporas, as transnational communities, have always depended on mediation and networking for sustaining relations and communication.” In the contemporary age there is no dearth of diasporic media. These media include newspapers, radio, satellite television, and the fast-growing web sites. Mass media organizations of different countries, particularly the electronic news media organizations give their broadcasts in various languages and even for target populations based in other countries. These organizations definitely want to achieve certain objectives, which may be overt or covert.

The BBC also through its World Service in 33 different languages (www.bbc) caters of the media-related needs of speakers of these languages who are either at home or living abroad as diasporas. The BBC World Service began its Urdu transmissions in May, 1940 under Hindustani Service. However, BBC Urdu got its current name in 1966. Besides a good number of consumers across the globe, almost 13 million people in Pakistan are using BBC Urdu radio and online contents (www.bbc). BBC radio broadcasts three Urdu news bulletins i.e. Jahan Numa, Sairbeen, and Shabnama.

The present study is concerned with BBC World's Urdu Service, which is a multi-media broadcast service consisting of radio and its website “bbcurdu.com”. It has been observed that one of the main reasons of popularity of the BBC Urdu service among its consumers in Pakistan and the Pakistanis living abroad was the monopoly of the government over the electronic media i.e. Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) and Pakistan Television (PTV). Now the airwaves in the country have been liberated. This policy change has resulted into the proliferation of a greater number of private radio and television channels. Major daily newspapers launched e-editions and websites in the recent past. Besides these policy changes and technological developments, the so-called war on terror being fought in Iraq and Afghanistan has posed some serious threats to the perceived credibility and popularity of the BBC, which could negatively affect the ultimate use of the BBC Urdu Service among the Pakistanis both at home and abroad. Government control over mass media in Pakistan has always paved the way for international broadcasters to be greatly consumed by people here for presumed fair and free news and commentaries about issues and events relating to Pakistan and Pakistanis. Imposition of ban on selected private electronic news
media on certain occasions (for example, November, 2007) also results into turning of the media users in Pakistan to international broadcasters such as BBC, VOA, and CNN, etc.

To our knowledge no study has so far been conducted to explore that (1) whether and to what extent Pakistani diasporas, especially that living in Germany use BBC Urdu Service for their connectivity with their land, culture and people, (2) how do they perceive BBC Urdu Service, especially when the UK along with USA and others is combating the war-on-terror in Iraq and Afghanistan, crisis situation for instance earthquake and the recent political developments in Pakistan, like imposition of the state-of-emergency, suspension of the constitution and promulgation of Provisional Constitution Order (PCO), and ban on private television channels?

The present study was therefore, planned to explore the role of BBC Urdu Service (World Service) in the changing circumstances in connectivity of the Pakistani diaspora (in Germany) with their home country and culture, and also to investigate the perceptions of consumers of BBC Urdu Service in Pakistan about its role in the changing situations within and outside the country in informing and educating them as compared to other alternative news mass media.

There are various kinds of diasporas and on the bases of the reasons of diasporisation, they can be grouped into different types for example, victim, labour, trade, imperial and cultural diasporas (Cohen, 1997). However, Pakistani diasporas in Germany can generally be categorized into trade and labour diasporas. These groups are not exclusive as they are sharing the reasons of diasporisation.

**Research purpose and method**

The purpose of the present study was to know that (i) how do the Pakistani diaspora in Germany perceive BBC Urdu Service as a source of their connectivity to homeland, culture and people, (ii) to find out how do BBC's users in Pakistan perceive the role of BBC Urdu Service in informing and educating them on various important events/ issues happening at home and abroad, especially that relate to the interests of Pakistan and overseas Pakistanis, and (iii) to investigate that whether the changing political and technological environ has any effects on the perceived credibility of BBC Urdu Service among its users.

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, the researchers conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with Pakistani diaspora living in Leipzig, Germany and users of BBC Urdu Service both in urban and rural areas in Pakistan. Focus group discussions are a useful research strategy for understanding audiences' attitudes and behaviours and a technique of getting complete responses
BBC as a diasporic mass medium or an agent of public diplomacy

(Wimmer and Dominick 1995). Never the less, the researchers also used BBC archival data as secondary data sources for the study.

The researchers conducted three group interviews (FGDs) in Leipzig, and one each in Mardan, Vehari and Lahore. Each group was composed of six persons. The groups were formed while keeping in view the variables of occupation, income, education and gender of the respondents. One group of the Pakistani diaspora was represented by traders, the second one by labourers and the third one was composed of Pakistani students who are doing their higher education in the University of Leipzig. All the respondents were male. The mean education level of the traders and labourers was intermediate, while that of the students was masters. The mean age of the traders was 42, while that of the labourers and students was 31, and 25 respectively. The Pakistani and German groups (German-based Pakistanis) were slightly different from one another; respondents of the Pakistani groups were selected from urban and rural areas i.e., Mardan, Vehari (rural areas) and Lahore (urban area) whereas, participants of the FGDs in Germany were all from the city of Leipzig (urban area). The groups were selected through snowball sampling technique. All of them were light or frequent users of the BBC Urdu Service. Majority of respondents in Leipzig were using BBC Urdu service website, while in Pakistan, BBC Urdu radio was the main source. Similarly, in Vehari, the respondents were farmers, labourers, teachers, government employees and students. They have also various levels of education from intermediate to Masters.

The data were gathered in two different time periods from the Pakistani groups: first in July, 2007 and then in November, 2007 when the government banned the telecast of private television channels, promulgated Provisional Constitution Order (PCO) and imposed the state of emergency in the country. The group interviews with Pakistani diaspora based in Leipzig, Germany were conducted in August, 2007. The group discussions were recorded, and after completion of the data-collection process the recorded tapes were transcribed and the data were analyzed using the annotating the script method. The researchers want to clarify that as the data were collected in 2007 therefore, some of the respondents mentioned the name of Muhtarama Benazir Bhutto (late) in respect to media coverage. She was then alive.

**BBC Urdu Service's coverage of Pakistani politics and perceptions of the users**

BBC Urdu Service covers important political developments that happen around the world, and focuses more on issues/events that relate to Pakistan and India. Group discussions with its audience in both in Germany and Pakistan revealed that besides other important contents they expose themselves to BBC Urdu as well as other sources of information to keep themselves abreast of political developments particularly that happen in Pakistan or relate to Pakistan. The
respondents had varied attitude towards BBC's coverage of Pakistani politics. The nature and extent of BBC Urdu Service was also found differently in different groups.

Participants of the traders' group (Pakistani diaspora) in Leipzig were found to use internet as well as Pakistani private television (satellite) in Urdu language for keeping themselves informed of the political activities in Pakistan and/or other parts of the world that relate to Pakistan or Pakistanis. As far as internet is concerned, it was found that members of this group were users of bbcurdum.com as well as e-editions of various Pakistani newspapers, especially Urdu dailies like “Jang” and “Express”. Though they were consuming bbcurdum.com to varied degrees but their primary sources of information on such topics were Pakistani online newspapers, and private satellite television channels such as Geo and ARY. None of the participants mentioned the use of BBC radio. They expressed dissatisfaction over the freshness of BBC’s contents. They claimed that Pakistani-based daily newspapers are continuously updating their e-editions and sites, and are also giving more coverage to local events. They had similar views regarding private Pakistani television channels. None the less they were found satisfied with the objectivity, impartiality, language, and details of politics-related contents of the bbcurdum.com in general. Majority of the group members claimed that exposure to bbcurdum.com; especially its columns on politics are a good source of their understanding of Pakistani politics, and extending horizons of their political knowledge and help them adopting democratic values. However, there were also dissent voices.

The second group of Pakistani diaspora i.e. labourers did not have the facility of satellite television at their workplaces or residences; however they had the facility of internet mostly at workplaces. Hence their only source of information regarding Pakistan, particularly Pakistani politics, other than interpersonal communication channels, was internet. Participants of this group were using bbcurdum.com, Urdu language online newspapers and Geo television (on internet) so that to keep themselves aware of their country and society. The group members were not using BBC Urdu radio however; sometimes they do listen to Sairbeen, Jehan Numa, and/or Shabnama on radio player when they visit bbcurdum.com. They had also reservations about the freshness of contents of BBU Urdu service. They were giving preference to online editions of Pakistani Urdu newspapers over bbcurdum.com as according to them these online editions give fresher news than bbcurdum.com besides daily columns of popular Pakistani writers. In general the group viewed talk shows of Geo television and newspaper columns of the online editions of Pakistani newspapers as the best sources of their political knowledge and education for them. They considered BBC Urdu as number two source after Pakistani private channels and online newspapers of their connectivity with Pakistani politics.
The third group, composed of Pakistani students was found to be the frequent users of mass media. They were consuming BBC Urdu service's website (bbcurdu.com), Pakistani online newspapers, Pakistani private television channels on the internet, and also CNN for news and views, particularly that relate to Pakistan. However, they were very critical of bbcurdu.com. They alleged that BBC Urdu is not fair and impartial in its coverage of Pakistani politics. They claimed that BBC Urdu Service is biased in its coverage of certain Pakistani politicians and political parties. They believed that BBC Urdu Service is projecting western agenda in Pakistani politics. While discussing BBC Urdu service's coverage of Pakistani politics the respondents expressed the following views:

Ahtesham: Why do the BBC and other give so much coverage to Benazir....

Ijaz: Why does the BBC portrays Nawaz as fundamentalist....

Khalid: The Western media including BBC depicts Benazir as prime minister...

Ahtisham: See BBC Urdu coverage of August, it is just a deliberate attempt of convincing the young generation that the creation of Pakistan was unjustified.

Aamer: I think it is futile to expect fair and impartial reporting from BBC Urdu till their forces are engaged in Afghanistan, and they need Pakistan support in the “war on terror”....

Saleem: The West and Western media will support those who they consider are loyal to them and can serve their interest in the region....

They were very critical about BBC Urdu analyses regarding the situation in Baluchistan, and especially the articles placed on bbcurdu.com relating to creation of Pakistan in August 2007 on the eve of Independence Day coverage. Furthermore, they claimed that bbcurdu.com is giving old and trite news. As compared to BBC Urdu Pakistani online newspapers are updated regularly and giving fresh and updated news, they viewed. They said that BBC is tarnishing the image of Pakistan and Islam. In general the participants had negative attitude towards BBC Urdu service. When they were asked that when they were not satisfied with the BBC then why they expose themselves to its contents. The participants replied that they did so only to know how the international media, especially BBC Urdu service, which is presented in the national language of Pakistan, depict Pakistan.

Archival data also show such sentiments. For example, one person wrote to BBC:
“I feel the BBC programmes now reflect the policy of the UK government. Objective reporting is no more there. This sort of tilt does not befit with the standard of the BBC”. Gul Zeb Bahawalpur, Punjab (ACR October 2006).

Among the three FGDs in Pakistan, the Mardan and Vehari FGDs were conducted with BBC Radio listeners, while that of Lahore was undertaken with users of bbcurdu.com. Participants of these groups were also consuming other mass media. Respondents from Mardan and Vehari have had television sets in their homes but they had no access to transmission of Pakistani private television channels due to lack of facilities of cable and dish antenna. They were also lacking internet facility. Respondents in these groups were very pleased with BBC Radio. They viewed that BBC Radio was the best source for their information and education on national as well as international political affairs. They perceived BBC Urdu service as impartial, objective and balanced. They opined that BBC radio is playing a positive role in expanding their political insight. Some were claiming that BBC Radio is inculcating democratic values among its listeners. They were also found satisfied with the language, length and details of BBC news. As compared to BBC Urdu Service they were very critical of the news contents of Radio Pakistan. They were also users of Urdu news of Voice of America (VOA), All India Radio (AIR), Radio Tehran, and DW-Radio but BBC was found to be their favourite radio. BBC Urdu service also gives important news relating to overseas Pakistanis, they claimed. In addition to bbcurdu.com respondents of the Lahore group had access to private radio and private channels, and daily newspapers. As compared to bbcurdu.com they had positive attitude towards Pakistani private television channels, and the national online newspapers. Participants of FGD in Lahore were blaming the BBC for subjective reporting of selected events and issues. Majority of these groups blamed BBC for biased and unfair depiction of the Baluchistan crisis. Furthermore they accused that as Britain was fighting the so-called “war on terror” against Taliban in Afghanistan therefore, BBC had been giving negative coverage to all peace agreements between the Government of Pakistan and Taliban in tribal areas of Pakistan. They were also critical of the way the BBC covered the pre-military action in the Lal Masjid in Islamabad. However, they appreciated BBC for its coverage of the recent judicial crises, ban on mass media, etc.

Users’ perceptions of BBC coverage of crisis situations

The group of labour diaspora in Lepzig, and BBC radio listeners in Mardan and Vehari did not see anything wrong with BBC reporting of man-made crises within or outside Pakistan. In contrast to the made-made crisis situation, all the groups were appreciating BBC’s reporting of natural disasters, especially they mentioned the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. After imposition of Provisional Constitution Order, and ban on transmissions of private television channels in Pakistan in November 2007, the participants of FGD Lahore regarded BBC Urdu
BBC as a diasporic mass medium or an agent of public diplomacy

Service as their favourite service among all the available international mass media. BBC Urdu service increased its time and number of broadcasts from 3 services (Sairbeen, Jehan Numa and Shabnama) to 5 services (two emergency services), which attracted much attention and appreciated from the people in both Urban and rural areas.

As compared to BBC Urdu Service all the three groups of Pakistani diasporas in Germany and the participants of FGD in Lahore mentioned (in normal situations) Pakistani private television channels and online Urdu newspapers as the best sources of their information on any sort of natural or man-made disasters in Pakistan. Technology-assisted interpersonal communication channels like telephone and e-mail from homeland were also mentioned as important contact vehicles by the Germany-based Pakistani group. Telephone call rate from Germany to Pakistan and from Pakistan to Germany is one of the cheapest among all international calls. Secondly, in the recent past mobile telephone technology has boomed in Pakistan. In 2006 the total mobile telephone subscribers here were 48.2 million, while this number rose to 71.2 million in October 2007 (Bhatti, 2008). The intra-diasporic communication was viewed as another source of information in crises situations back in the country.

**BBC Urdu Service and coverage of Pakistani culture**

Respondents viewed that BBC Urdu Service was framing Islamic seminaries (Madrassas) and their students (Taliban) negatively. They perceived that the BBC is giving more coverage to those writers and the so-called intellectuals who are targeting Islamic values. They were referring to Salman Rushdi and Tasleema Nasreen. The case of a British born Pakistani (Mirza Tahir Hussain) who was awarded death sentence for killing a taxi driver in Pakistan was especially mentioned in this regard and the participants termed that it seemed like BBC was working for cultivation of British cultural values in other societies. The participants observed that at times BBC Urdu Service, particularly bbcurdu.com was making mockery of the Pakistani social norms and values.

BBC seems much concerned about the Muslim fundamentalism. Has BBC ever reported so extensively about Nazis, British National Party or racism in the West? Why is there so great hue and cry about Iranian nuclear programme? Has BBC ever reported and named the Christian terrorists, Jews terrorists or Hindu terrorists, if not then why always Muslim terrorists, asked Akram.

Archival data support this argument raised by the respondents.

Faiyaz Ansari, Azmat Garh, UP, wrote to BBC Urdu service: “The West is trying unsuccessfully to malign the Muslims all over the world by coining a
term ‘Islamic terrorism’. The reason behind it is not what they describe but it is the outcome of the cold war. The Muslims who are responsible for suicide attacks and explosions have been prepared and trained in the West itself” (ACR, 2006).

Some of the participants had the following observations:

Javed: I use Pakistani satellite channels as I can not watch German TV with my children and wife….

Butt: I like Pakistani mass media because it gives greater local information about people and localities that I know…

Mehmood: Pakistani channels present Pakistani culture. BBC and other media also have cultural contents but far less than national Pakistani media….

Jamal: I am interested in religious contents, that is why I watch only Q TV…

Zahir: At least Pakistani media are not promoting blasphemous writers and artists…

There were also some participants of the diasporic groups who viewed BBC reporting of Islamic and Pakistani social values like the issue of Hijab in countries such as France, Norway, Canada, etc and the consequent social and cultural problems as a positive step for socialisation of its consumers in these countries. The Pakistani groups' participants also were of the opinion that Pakistanis should give due respect to the social values of the societies where do they live to avoid any unwanted problems for themselves.

Conclusion

The study substantiates the view that diasporic communities use their ethnic media more for connectivity with their culture and land (Lee, 2004), and that they tend to use mass media that connote, interpret, and frame social realities closer to their cultural and social norms and values (Barkho, 2006) as it was found that Pakistani emigrants as well those media users in Pakistan who had multiple mass media resources at their disposal were inclined more towards the use of Pakistani satellite television channels, and online newspapers than BBC Urdu Service or any other international mass medium with their culture, people and society.
On the basis of the collected data we conclude that the so-called “war on terror” being fought by the Briton along with America has damaged the repute of the BBC Urdu service among its users. The war on terror is considered generally in Pakistan and the Pakistani diaspora as a war against Islam and Muslims. The BBC was viewed as an agent of public diplomacy instead of an impartial and objective international broadcaster. Similarly, the technological development in the field of mass media, and the recent growth of private mass media, resulted due to media policy easement in Pakistan, have provided an opportunity of critical evaluation to the Pakistani media consumers both at home and abroad. This media plurality has ceased, to a greater extent, their media dependency on international broadcasters.

We can also conclude that level of education, cultural ties, and availability of media outputs play key role in media consumption patterns of the respondents. Those who were more educated (students group) were more selective in their media/ contents. Similarly, those who had comparatively limited access to free mass media (rural groups both in Mardan and Vehari) were heavy users of BBC and were more dependent on it. They were considering BBC more reliable, authentic and impartial than those who had private television channels, internet, and daily newspapers at their disposal.

Unlike the old perception about media audiences, which viewed that audiences respond to media messages in a uniform way (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995) our data confirm that consumers' responses to media messages are not uniform and immediate, and they had their own interpretations of media offerings. Such findings confirm the thoughts and works of others such as Bauer (1964); Chaffee & Hochheimer (1982); DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach (1989); Burton (2005), etc. The data rejected the idea of passive audience and confirm the view that audiences are active in their media use behaviour (Katz, Blumer & Gurevitch, 1974; Palmgreen, Wenner & Rosengren, 1985; Littlejohn, 1999; Rubin, 2002) and are decoding media messages in a way that may or may not be in line with desired meaning (Morely, 1992; Power, Kubey & Kiousis, 2002).

References


About the Authors

(1) Dr. Bakht Rawan, is working as Assistant Professor in the Department of Mass Communication, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan. He is the principal author of this article. Dr. Rawan has done his Ph.D from the University of Leipzig, Germany. He may be contacted at: byusafzai@yahoo.com, Cell Nr. 0092-3329842245

(2) Dr. Muhammad Zaman has got his Ph.D degree from the Zentrum für Höhere Studien (Center for Advanced Study), University of Leipzig in Germany. He can be contacted at: Email: Zaman@uni-leipzig.de

(3) Dr Syed Abdul Siraj is the Chairman Department of Mass Communication, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad. He may be contacted at: sasiraj99@yahoo.com