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Real-time media monitoring, digital diplomacy and mobile methods: A case study of BBC Arabic's social media experiment *Greenwich 7/10*

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Abstract

State-funded, international news broadcasters, such as *BBC World Service, Voice of America, Deutsch Welle* and *France 24*, now incorporate social media opportunities for news consumers as part of a wider strategy to engage overseas publics in participatory debate and pursue 'digital diplomacy' objectives – notably, projecting national perspectives onto the media screens of geopolitically strategic regions such as the Middle East. This article examines how BBC World Service gathers and uses the extensive digital data that real-time media monitoring and social listening tools produce about users and their online transactions. It draws on a collaborative research project about a short-lived social media experiment developed by the BBC Arabic Service, called *Greenwich 7/10*: a weekly TV political debate series, co-produced with users, and aired on satellite across the Middle East and the Arabic-speaking world. While the BBC production team itself moved between London, Cairo, Dubai, and other sites in the Middle East to produce the programme, our multi-lingual research team were both participants in and observers of the experiment. We followed: (1) *'produsers'* - how social identities and relationships were performed and evolved in the 'virtual' and 'real' worlds constructed around *G 7/10*; (2) *digital devices* – how different interactive social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and other websites) were mobilised in creating the TV programme; (3) *digital debate* – how 'produsers' initiated, framed, and debated issues and how these debates foreshadowed subsequent political protests in Egypt in January and February 2011. It will be argued that digital devices and data not only embed values but they also enact shifting socialities across transnational spaces and in doing so alter how we imagine and research the relationship between online and offline, and the social and media worlds of 'produsers'. It will also be argued that the digital traces that everyday online transactions produce and that are routinely stored by corporations like the BBC World Service have become integral to the production and mediation of public and political cultures, and to the contemporary wars of ideas and political protest.

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BBC World Service and Digital Diplomacy: Greenwich 7/10 in Context

This article focuses on an experimental social media project developed by the BBC Arabic Services (one of the – currently 28 - foreign language services provided by the BBC World Service in 2010) in order to examine the performativity of digital devices and data in informing and shaping institutional, policy, and editorial decision-making and practices. It sets this case study in the wider context of the Operating Agreement between the BBC World Service (BBCWS) and the BBC Trust 'to foster a global conversation', as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) puts it:

> an informed and intelligent dialogue which transcends international borders and cultural divides; by giving communities around the world opportunities to create, publish, and share their own views and stories; and, thereby, enabling people to make sense of increasingly complex regional and global events and developments.[i]

The 'global conversation' is intended to reap diplomatic benefits for Britain.[ii] Geopolitical imperatives and UK diplomatic priorities regarding the Middle East drive decision-making at the FCO, the current funders of the BBCWS. BBCWS have long been required to produce large amounts of audience data for the FCO's annual audit and accountability procedures, to justify its budget allocation. But proposed changes to the future funding and governance structures of the BBCWS, following the UK Government's Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010, mean that its relationship with the FCO, with its overseas audiences, with British taxpayers and with its corporate audience research division are at a critical turning point.[iii] The very purpose[iv] of the BBCWS with its rapidly declining number of foreign language services is being re-defined at breakneck speed. Its future status and autonomy is uncertain. What is clear, however, is that digital, interactive media will play a much more important role in the future. It is therefore important to understand how digital data, real-time media monitoring and social listening tools are implicated in corporate processes as change agents and new knowledge practices.[v]

The *G 7/10* experiment was pulled after only six weeks for reasons which remain unclear. It leaves us with some intriguing questions about how digital devices and data gathering affect how we imagine and research the relationship between social and virtual media life-worlds. The research reported here is part of a larger ongoing project in partnership with the BBCWS, which involves a multi-sited, methodologically pluralistic approach to the organisation as a space of 'disaporic contact zones'.[vi] This is work in progress. In writing up the *G 7/10* story, I have drawn on many insights and contributions offered by a research team who participated in an intensive, indeed exhausting research process (see Appendix for details of research team). I have acknowledged their contributions and sought their advice and only hope that I have done them justice. This article departs from the main purpose of our research, which will be written up collectively elsewhere (Aly, Al Lami, Gillespie and Guemar, forthcoming 2012). It is framed by the specific concerns of this special issue of *TCS* and attempts to stand back from our research process in order to examine the social life of our methods through our engagement with the *G 7/10* experiment. Further details of the research team can be found in Appendix 1. Visualisations by team member Mike Thelwell of audience/user data and the BBCWS Arabic web environment are in Appendices 2 and 3.

Greenwich 7/10 was an innovative political debate series, aired on satellite TV across the Arabic-speaking world every Thursday evening at 7.10pm Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). It was also available online globally.[vii] The GMT time reference is a branding device, an appointment to view, and a potent symbolic, imperial and nautical reference point which is not lost on Arab audiences, whose 'love-hate' relationship with the BBC started in 1938 when the first BBC radio broadcasts in Arabic were initiated to counter fascist propaganda (Sreberny, Gillespie, Baumann, 2010; Vaughan, 2008).

BBC Arabic became a tri-platform service (radio, TV and online) in 2007 after the closure of ten, mainly eastern European, language services released the required resources to set up the television station (Hill and Ashfaer, 2010; el Issawi and Baumann, 2010). The resources for BBC Arabic TV remain very limited compared with those of its key competitors in the region, Al Jazeera and Al Arabya. Despite this, the launch of BBC Arabic TV was accompanied by 'great expectations' as both a business and a diplomatic proposition. Hosam el Sokkari, Head of Arabic Service at the time, described the function of BBC Arabic TV as that of 'piercing the blood brain barrier that exists between the Anglo and Arab media spheres and facilitating an increased flow of high quality, impartial news and debate.'[viii] Not an easy task given the highly competitive market in which BBC Arabic operates, and pervasive regional perceptions of BBC Arabic as an instrument of British foreign policy.

Greenwich 7/10 was a political chat show with a difference, produced collaboratively online by BBC Arabic producers and audiences/users, involving a small, inner core of volunteer 'produsers' in every stage of the production process, and a wider group of fans who participated in varying ways and degrees. Launched on 4th March 2010, *G 7/10* set out to reverse the usual process whereby a radio or TV programme is the starting point and catalyst of subsequent debate on social networking sites. Instead, audiences/users were invited to identify and vote for key figures in the Arabic political and cultural world to be interviewed. The hourglass image drawn by Hosam Sokkari to convey his concept of the programme to our research team cleverly depicts this reverse process (Figure 1). Online users, in his words 'citizens of the republic of Greenwich 7/10', participated in the making of TV political show with the aim of democratising the process of production and opening up political debate.
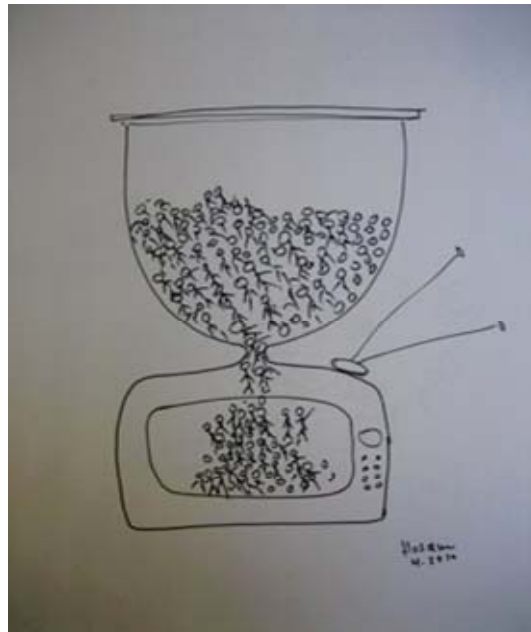
Fig. 1 Hosam Sokkari's drawing of the G 7/10 experiment

The '*G 7/10* citizens' not only selected a controversial public or political figure but also conducted online research on that person. They were offered training as 'citizen journalists' and inducted into the BBC's professional journalistic protocols. They were required to support questions to and statements about the interviewees with reliable evidence from at least two sources, in the form of quotes from newspaper articles, TV clips, or weblinks to articles or reports. Involvement for 'produsers' was intensely time-consuming. But, judging from their online comments, they reaped many rewards through this collaborative learning, and acquired media production and interviewing skills. Of course, they also provided BBC Arabic with an eager pool of amateur (unpaid) researchers and citizen journalists.

Hosam el Sokkari is well-known in the region as BBC Arabic radio and TV presenter, a cartoonist, and an advocate of interactive media to promote democratic debate and win audiences. He was very much a celebrity attraction for produsers.[ix] *G 7/10* fans followed Hosam on Twitter more than the programme itself at times. Getting 'up close and personal' to him as a media trainer was as much a key attraction as the learning experience.

Fig 2 The corporate branding cartoon of G 7/10,designed by Hosam Sokkari.
His face is embedded in the image

After only six weeks, *G 7/10* was pulled and Hosam resigned his post as head of the Arabic Service. For some in the BBCWS, the digital data on numbers of users was too pitifully low to warrant even a cursory glance at this experiment. But number crunching does not tell the full story. This flagship experiment was commissioned and designed to show the BBCWS how social media and digital technologies could revolutionise their output. The *G 7/10* experiment, and the political debates generated among is co-creators, certainly did that. It foreshadowed, albeit in microscopic scale, the wider political debates and revolution that ensued in Cairo in January and February 2011, before spreading more widely through the Arab world. As Raymond Williams pointed out with reference to television, the development of technologies may be intentional but their uses are not always be foreseen: they are socially shaped and shaping (1974:7). Digital technologies did not cause or precipitate the upsurge in political protest in Egypt and elsewhere. Rather, they were mobilised as a last resort when it became clear that all conventional means of political communication and protest were bound to fail.

Digital Assemblages and Collaborative Media Production

The main *Greenwich 7/10* discussion site soon became Facebook. Despite *G 7/10* having profiles on Twitter, Blogspot, bbc.co.uk, and YouTube (the latter mainly for uploads), Facebook became the preferred place where fans placed their postings, discussions, and updates. The pre-eminence of Facebook was not foreseen. It emerged as the pre-eminent platform because it was the most versatile in allowing members to share posts easily on the same page and to discuss ideas and material. The Facebook Wall was used for general updates by the administrators, nominations and votes for guests, and comments by members. Names of future guests were posted and questions to interviewees and researched material was posted on the discussion section, in separate folders so that each candidate's folder could be

examined and, depending on the evaluation of the material, could be voted for or against. The correctness of the voting procedure was deemed important by the production team – as if the 'produsers' were taking part in a mini election and being given an induction into democratic values and processes, as well as into the rigours of BBC-style citizen journalism. This 'culturally didactic' aspect of the process matched its function as a training-ground in media skills.

To create the *G 7/10* project and verify its feasibility, Hosam El Sokkari assembled a group of people he called 'the board of wise men'. This term was later used to describe the Egyptian social media activists in the Uprisings in January 2011. Hosam's 'board' established a closed Facebook group and invited a number of well-established Arabic bloggers and internet activists to join, to discuss the project and advise Hosam and his team about technological and editorial issues. The group advised Hosam that social networking sites should be harnessed to link with Arabic-speaking publics who usually had no voice in producing conventional TV political talk shows. This was preferred to the alternative of creating a website, which would require funds to set up and time to become known and visited. It took some time to settle on the *G 7/10* concept. Members of the *G 7/10* 'board' later played a very active role in political protests in Cairo. Hosam's links to them are evident in Kovas Boguta's stunning visualisation of the 'self-organizing system' of influential Arabic- and English-language Twitter users associated with the pro-democracy movement ('Egypt Influence Network', presented at http://www.kovasboguta.com/, 11 February 2011). The embryonic social networks developed in and through *G 7/10* reflect in microcosm the rise of the influential blogger/tweeter/Facebooker as a key node and transmitter of ideas in contemporary transnational movements.

Collaborative content creation, or user-led ('produser-led') or 'peer-to-peer' content production, represents a significant new trend in media production based on principles of open participation and democratic decision-making, fluid heterarchy and ad hoc meritocracy. Peer-to-peer production as a socio-technical system fosters moral and political virtues – democracy, social justice, autonomy. It involves: 'collaboration among large groups of individuals, sometimes in the order of tens or even hundreds of thousands, who cooperate effectively to provide information, knowledge, or cultural goods without relying on either market pricing or managerial hierarchies to coordinate their common enterprise' (Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006: 1). This potentially egalitarian form of networking challenges or even presents an alternative to capitalist forms of cultural production, with the potential to generate new forms of participatory culture and social organisation (Bauwens, 2005; 2006; Jenkins, 2006). But of course 'produsage' can also be understood as a new way of exploiting users to contribute, without financial reward, to a product which is just as dependent on the market as any other cultural or media production.

In digitally networked projects like *Greenwich 7/10,* 'produsers' participate according to their personal skills, interests, and knowledge in an often intense social and learning experience, to create a common property. They usually permit non-commercial use and adaptation of their intellectual property, and are rewarded by the status and social capital, as well as the media skills, gained through the process. Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006) identify three structural properties of the objects of peer–to-peer Production. First, they must be modular – individually produced, divisible components which permit asynchronous, incremental production. Second, they must be granular – small modules that are associated not attached, allowing for the pooling of many independent contributions. Third, they must permit low-cost integration of modules into the end product. The drawing of the *G 7/10* concept by Hosam (Figure 1) clearly captures each of these attributes. We can also see how the *G 7/10* experiment encapsulates several elements of the nine theses presented in the introduction to this special issue, including granularity, a point to which we will return (Savage, Ruppert and Law, 2011).

From the BBCWS perspective, G 7/10 was an experiment in digital diplomacy or 'solving foreign policy problems using the internet.' In this 'new public diplomacy', diplomats and policymakers do not just speak to overseas publics, but also listen to them.[x] This strategy may be interpreted as progressive (a genuine attempt to understand overseas publics and their responses to news or to British foreign policy) or as suspect (a form of surveillance). It may be mistrusted by some publics. Certainly, enabling overseas publics to 'talk back' raises challenges for both the BBCWS and the FCO – not least in measuring the impact and value of digital diplomacy initiatives. Our prior research had re-analysed corporate data and found that over 50% of online users of the BBC's foreign language services were from outside regional target markets and could be described as diasporic (Andersson, Gillespie and Mackay, 2009). Digital diasporas at the BBCWS are institutionally produced diasporas: an unintended consequence of digital media and migration. We went on to use a mix of mobile methods for analysing and evaluating the quality, nature, content and extent interactivity of the BBC's digital diasporas (Hill and Ashaef, 2010; Gillespie, Herbert and Andersson, 2009). These studies show that while promoting a 'global conversation' via interactive media is a good idea in principle, in practice it is very difficult to moderate intercultural dialogue and debate. Using social media as an adjunct to existing news output does not always work in the intended way.

Social media pose major challenges to established principles and practices of journalism and international communications. For example, the informal rhetorical style of social media has to be reconciled with 'factuality' and being 'on message'. Further issues surround the authority and credibility of traditional channels and formats. Working in real-time requires rapid responses based on real-time monitoring. Problems of editorial control, gate-keeping, gate-watching, moderation, freedom of expression, and the (self-) regulation of online communities proliferate. Integrating online media with radio and television re-draws hierarchies and roles in news organisations. It changes ways of working, writing and collaborating. And established notions of audiences, publics, and stakeholders are not only being reconfigured in relation to new technologies and media. Foreign policy objectives and diplomatic practices are also changing. Incorporating 'citizen journalists' in media experiments as 'messengers', 'influencers' and/or multipliers (of ideas) can assist governments in doing their persuasive diplomatic work What's in it for produsers though?

What struck the research team most in this experiment is the willingness of some volunteer Arabic produsers to invest immense amounts of time and effort in the project. They were hungry for a chance not only to voice their opinions but also, and even more importantly to them, to learn, practice and sharpen their media skills. Each of the core volunteers contributed in the areas they excelled in most. Muna confessed her weak technological abilities and lack of experience in social networking, so she focused her efforts on journalistic research, production and presentation quality (frequently commenting on the presentation of broadcast episodes as much as the content), and organisation of material and participants. Mohammed, a fresh journalism graduate (very active, politically, on both Facebook and Twitter) offered journalistic and technological skills; a few others offered only technical skills, stating that research was not their area of interest. Despite the availability of personal and social online spaces through which to express their views and demonstrate their media production skills, a show like *G 7/10* with its BBC affiliation gives them more legitimacy as potential journalists. Many will doubtless have put their participation in *G 7/10* in their CVs. Indeed, after the show was axed, in September 2010, Hosam used the *G 7/10* Facebook page, which was and still is active, to invite the participants apply for several Yahoo! Middle East positions.

G 7/10, *Iftiradi* and the Arab Media Sphere

Social media in the Arab world function much like elsewhere. In Egypt in particular, even prior to the uprisings in February 2011, they have been influential in political mobilisations: the *Kefaya* (Enough) movement (2004/5), the 6th of April movement (2007), and the more

recent support for Dr Mohammed El Baradie's calls for major constitutional reforms, which attracted hundreds of thousands of Egyptian Facebookers. Due to the restrictive laws on public gatherings and political activity, Baradie resorted to communicating online. The government responded with a media campaign against virtual worlds or *Iftiradi* ('fake') as having no bearing on reality or real people, lacking a real following or political legitimacy. This met with fierce resistance, especially among young people. It is important to emphasise that the resort to social media was not so much a choice as a necessity. According to Ramy Aly, a Egyptian-Londoner and member of our research team: 'The majority of political activists would have preferred to engage the largely non-IT literate Egyptian public but had no choice but to engage a more limited yet influential constituency online.'[xi] A similar point can be made in relation to *G 7/10*. Access to Egyptian media institutions and opportunities to protest publicly would have been preferable to communicating online. However participation in broadcasting for young people is very limited. *G 7/10* provided a chance to be broadcast or to produce. But *G 7/10* also showed that this was far from 'free', in financial and human resource terms. In fact the significant time resources required may have been one of the reasons why it was pulled: if it had grown, it would have required staffing in order to manage it.

In capitalising on social networking trends in the Arab media sphere, the *Greenwich 7/10* team hoped to provide an exciting user-generated TV programme and, if not overtly stated, to raise the flagging profile and performance of BBC Arabic TV in the region. The majority of BBC Arabic producers, now as well as in the past, originate from Egypt, and unsurprisingly the structural features of BBC Arabic were reflected in the online community forged around *G 7/10*. Ramy Aly, after initial scepticism about *G 7/10*, reported in April 2010: '*Greenwich 7/10* is providing a new way for young Egyptians to participate in the media revolution in a way they have not been invited to do before. This and similar initiatives will have long term effects on the way in which participation and the public sphere are understood in Egypt.'[xii] Ramy's words were to be realised in ways that, at the time of our research, none of us could have imagined, as his later fieldwork reports from Tahrir Square also document.

The show aired five episodes in total between 4th March and 1st April 2010, each with controversial political or public guests. Arabic reality TV has been described as a 'modernity academy' where, in the heated polemic of public debate, the meanings of modernity are contested (Kraidy, 2010:202). One guest was the Egyptian Minister of Culture, Farooq Hosni.[xiii] Questions directed at him included: why had he remained so long in office (22 years) without being elected? His allegedly positive views on homosexuality, negative attitude to women wearing the hijab, and apparent disregard for Islam more generally were also addressed. At the dramatic high point of the interview, Hosam showed him a screenshot of a Facebook group demanding his resignation, alongside a stream of other calls for him to step down. Hosam apologised for the 'harsh comments' but actively held him to account.

Probing questioning of public figures and exposure of popular anti-government sentiment enabled *G 7/10* – despite its relatively small digital network – to legitimise in public space the political demands that citizens were articulating in their private and small virtual worlds. The produser team believed that they were making a vital link between their real and virtual social worlds – a link that, at that time, the Egyptian government and public figures were refusing to acknowledge, using the discourse of *Iftiradi* to de-legitimise the virtual world as fake and inconsequential. But Hosam's public interrogations were not unprecedented for TV audiences. They provided a paradigmatic example of the 'endless trial' commonly conducted in Arabic reality TV shows, where diverse counter-publics play the roles of plaintiff, prosecutor, defendant and judge – a genre at once less debasing and more didactic than its Anglosphere counterparts, where trials of humiliation and degradation are a common media sport (Kraidy, 2010: 202; Sakr, 2007). The difference with G7/10 though was that, at least in principle, the audience as produsers called the shots and opened up the sphere of legitimate political discourse.

The episode featuring Dr. Aymen Nour, the leader of Egyptian opposition party Al-Ghad,[xiv] was regarded as best exemplifying the *G 7/10* concept by produsers and researchers alike, and received positive coverage in the Arab press, according to our co-ethnographer Mina Al Lami (a British-based Iraqi academic), who attended all the in-house BBC Arabic production and feedback sessions. Aymen Nour is a known for his progressive liberal views. His imprisonment by the Egyptian government in 2005 created public anger inside Egypt and beyond. He was released in February 2009 on health grounds. However, it should be noted that Nour's name was actually suggested by the team after having secured agreement from him for an interview - pointing to the limits of democratic procedures when working under intense pressure to produce a weekly TV show. The Facebook folder for Nour received only 26 postings from 10 participants, at a time when the group had around 700 members.

On the show, Nour, assuming a TV audience of mainly Internet-savvy youth,[xv] argued that young bloggers had an active role in pressurising the government and catalysing change, and marvelled at the progressive potential of social media: 'What's happening in the virtual world is a revolution of a different kind. I have come across potential leaders on the Internet. I've come across excellent young men there.' Egyptian youth, Nour predicted, would soon lead a big revolution of change in the country. He invited them not to despair, despite corruption, but participate in politics, to right the wrongs. Hosam showed Nour a self-made Youtube clip by a young Egyptian female who calls herself 'Salama, the duck symbol'.[xvi] In this clip she sarcastically but eloquently states her right to run in the next Egyptian presidential elections, in the process ridiculing the current state of affairs in Egypt. To this clip, Nour replies:

> We should all fight for Salma's right to nominate herself for this post, as we must for every Egyptian who finds her/himself qualified to do so. Every person has the right to have such opportunities. What Salma is doing, by the way, is a form of protest against the restrictions on and monopoly of presidential nominations in Egypt. This satirical dark-comedy clip is a message, and a strong one too. I hope Hosni Mubarak receives it.

Our researchers Mina, Ramy, and Latefa (a British academic of Algerian background) stressed that such direct criticism of the Egyptian regime by a young female Arab was both brave and dangerous. As Hosam commented on the Facebook wall, Salma's video was 'something you probably wouldn't have seen on TV' (18 Mar). Showing this clip on a BBC prime-time show increased its number of viewers, and it received attention later in several Arabic forums. After the *G 7/10* experiment was halted, the reason the majority of produsers cited was the episode with Nour and Salma. By hosting a prominent dissident and promoting a humorous viral attack on the political process, this show in particular may have upset the Egyptian government.

Juxtaposing Corporate Audience Research and Collaborative Ethnography

So how did our multilingual, multidisciplinary team set about researching *G 7/10* in real time and in particular, the way digital devices were implicated in the production and performance of online socialities? In designing this project, I drew on prior practices of collaborative ethnography that I have been developing over the last decade (Gillespie, 2006 & 2007) We had access to corporate (BBCWS) as well as academic, qualitative and quantitative audience research,[xvii] all aspects of the production, the producers, and the weekly de-brief meetings, as well as administrator's access to all the real-time tracking devices. Such transparency was unimaginable when we began our research on the BBCWS in 2007. Arguably, social media generate a trade off between transparency and impartiality. In such projects, the role of journalists is transformed, becoming highly personalised and intimate as they become accessible 'friends', mentors and tutors in a shared production process. Every detail, not only of the production process and the behind the scenes ups and downs of the *G 7/10* BBC team,

is shared on Facebook and Twitter, as are the technological problems. As researchers we struggled to keep up with the process to the point where we became as exhausted as the production team, who were also struggling on a shoe string budget. Mohammed Abdul Qadar, the online video editor, recalled: '[…] actually I did not know that people can, in the window of Ustream, interact with us… so I was looking at Twitter and I didn't know that they [the fans] were asking questions… and some of them were shouting and saying, "No one is hearing us; they obviously don't know that we are here," and they were asking questions but we were not aware of it.' The digital assemblages of multiple real-time devices, platforms, and interactions are as difficult to follow as Mohammed's mind map of his vision of *G 7/10* suggests (Figure 3).
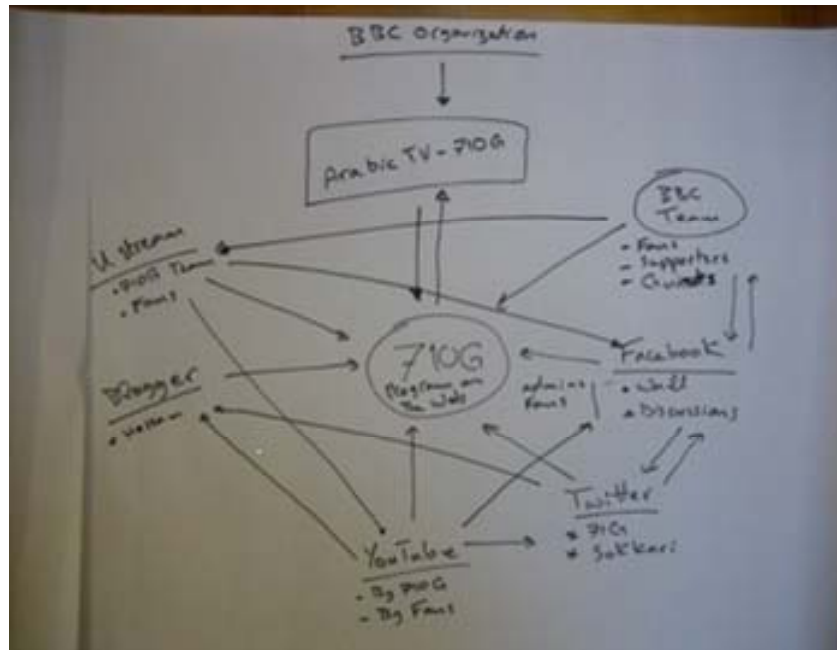

Fig. 3 Mohammed Abdul Qadar's vision of G 7/10

For nearly three months, members of our research team participated in and observed the unfolding of this project, in the full knowledge of the *G 7/10* team and fans. They documented in detail the ways in which digital devices materialised and mobilised social relations among BBC Arabic staff, produsers, fans, and researchers. Like the fans, we also experienced the intensity, frustrations and, sometimes the pleasures of perpetual communication, the emotional turbulence at times of conflict in the online community and the sense of disappointment at the project's termination. We followed produsers, digital devices and discourses, translating conversations, analysing decision-making and production processes, and produced much data which we are still analysing.

The following exchange highlighted a major weakness of the online community – its overwhelming Egyptian bias – and also demonstrated the limits of civility. Here, 'B' is a Facebook group member who presented himself as a liberal Syrian citizen, doctor in medicine, working and living in Germany. When 'H', self-presenting as an Egyptian woman, uses the term '*feshar*' ('liar') of Syrian President El Assad, B is angered:

- **B**: I hope this program is not going to be 100% Egyptian….this is not an encouraging start.

- **H**: that's how it is, Egyptians are the highest number in the Arabic world, and who do you want us to invite to your *feshar* El Assad , or who ?

- **G710**: Step by step and if you choose any personality, we'll try to see the material *and w*e'll invite him.

- **B**: Ahmed Choubir.... Ayman Noor ... Amro Dib ... What a coincidence!

- **H** : Did you forget to add Farouk Housni, the Egyptian Minister of Culture, I hope you are going to complain to the Security Council.

- **B**: this is too much [By the way] in my culture, when men talk women should shut up!

- **H** : I swear by God you look really childish. (2.09pm)

The debate on Egyptian bias quickly turned into a political argument. According to Latefa, the argument was a good illustration of the 'Egyptian mindset of *G 7/10*'. For Latefa, the political conflicts between different Arab nations in the Middle East were played out in *G 7/10*'s online community in a particularly intense way. As democratic as *G 7/10* attempted to be, this incident revealed the limited extent to which a non-Egyptian Arab or Muslim citizen could participate in its debates, and express views and opinions independently of the geopolitical atmosphere in which he/she lives. Gender politics also disrupted the equilibrium that the *G 7/10* online group had previously developed over a month or so of intense interactivity – and there was strong criticism from produsers about the failure of the BBC producers to intervene and to moderate the conflict. Yet this argument drove a widening and enriching of the debate on *G 7/10* Facebook site. Immediately after, the discussion board was full of suggestions for guests from diverse Arabic speaking countries, suggesting a strong self-regulating element to online socialities. But after H's withdrawal from Facebook, at which the *G 7/10* team expressed disappointment on the wall, it was revealed that H was logged on to Facebook as an avatar, so his/her true gender identity remains unknown. Questions of ethics and identity are vexed in online research, and social network sites in particular. Digital data, like all data, may be false and misleading. And just because social media are open, it doesn't mean that they are inclusive.

Tracking the Social: Digital Devices and Real-time Social Media Monitoring

As well as tracking the *G 7/10* production process and the social media interactions accompanying and informing it, we were also tracking the way the BBCWS was using tracking tools to monitor the experiment. Who and what were they tracking? Would the qualitative and ethnographic data gathered by our research team complement or contradict the BBC's digital data? The devices used by the BBCWS to track the development of the project and evaluate its successes and its failures embed values such as transparency and intimacy, collaboration and didacticism. BBCWS is

explicitly interested in instilling the virtues of democratic political debate such as reciprocity, equality, and 'rationality', encouraging fans to base their contributions on the 'evidence' rather than emotions. The BBCWS tracking tools also embed ways of conceiving users: as audiences, users, fans, followers, publics, and communities. They produce and reproduce

'produsers' as social agents and categories. And as always, social technologies interact with both geopolitical and local contexts and contingencies to shape activities, uses and outcomes.

Real-time monitoring of programme *makers* is nothing new. The BBC for long employed 'switch censors' to monitor translated output, and broadcasts by diasporic personnel (often suspected as spies during the war). If announcers departed from centrally produced news scripts, the broadcast would be shut down (Scammel, 2003:169; Mansell, 1982). But before webometrics emerged, real-time *audience response* tracking was slow, expensive and unreliable, being based on samples of potential audience members (Thelwell, 2009: 42-43). The new webometric tools, ironically, may have contributed to *G 7/10*'s closure. Web tools designed by market research companies claim to capture instantaneous micro-shifts in responses to brands and products, including online news and political debate on social media, as they unfold.[xviii] We can for example, see a snapshot of how bbc.arabic.com links to other sites in the Arabic web universe (see Appendix page X). Anstead and O'Loughlin (2010) analysed the responses to Nick Griffin's appearance on BBC One's 'Question Time' on Twitter; they posit an emerging 'Viewertariat' enabled by social networking. Ever more sophisticated real-time tracking technologies create 'data subjects' who, through what they do and say, make it possible for organisations like the BBCWS to know and then to act on them, and (re-)produce them as particular kinds of subjects (Ruppert, 2010). Such data contribute to constructing new audience segments ('the worldly wise', the 'open optimists', 'crisis audiences', 'influencers', 'cosmopolitans'), organising social relations, providing more efficient or personalised delivery of services and, importantly, predicting future behaviour. Real-time social media monitoring makes what users *do* at least as important as who users *are*. What they do now indicates what they will do next and that means being in a better position able to provide consumer goods and experiences that match what data subjects are likely to do. Immediacy and predictability are now the key values in social media marketing worlds.

Tracking mobile users in 'real-time' as they move across media and social spaces creates new kinds of power dynamics, as 'data subjects' make what they do (as opposed to what they say they do, or think they do) immediately visible, audible and legible to organisations and governments. Digital devices and data are commonly perceived as more accurate, precise, and objective than 'human–gathered' data, which is notoriously unreliable, subjective, and open to interpretation. The perceived polarisation between the human and the digital in data collection will only grow as data sets reach scales unimagined only a few years ago. What are the implications of the supreme value afforded to real-time digital data, not just for empirical sociology (Savage and Burrows, 2009) but for citizens, consumers, and social life more generally? Will it for example improve the quality of news?

For an online news site, crude audience tracking in real-time uses page hits or visitor counts. Many news sites display lists of the most read pages or stories over the previous hour or day. These statistics are also used for internal purposes to analyse which types of story attract the most interest and this, in turn, feeds into editorial decision-making. Such counts mostly reveal country or city of origin but give no age or gender breakdown of the users. But Web 2.0 sites like Facebook, YouTube or Twitter have embedded tools that offer detailed demographic data about members. This can allow unprecedented access to free, instant audience data and, in theory, make international broadcasters like the BBCWS far more responsive to transnational users and a range of 'digital diasporas' (previously referred to) who connect via interactive 'Have Your Say' websites and experiments like *Greenwich 7/10*, in which broadcast content is based on social media interaction.

The graphs in Appendix 2 visualise the data about users are available, for free, to the *Greenwich 7/10* Facebook page 'administrators'. These graphics, developed by Mike Thelwell, a computer scientist and member of the research team, are based on data about subscribers to the fan page, encompassing self-reported age, gender, and country of origin.

The data can be tracked over time to identify trends. Facebook also gives administrators extensive information about member activities. The data comes in the form of simple, colourful and customisable graphs, easy to access and use, as well as raw form. Spikes in graphs can correlate important events with surges in activity. The graphs shown are from the early days of *G 7/10*'s operation.

Facebook usage data are a potentially revolutionary tool for media monitoring. As Mike Thelwell explains in his field report, all creators of fan pages in Facebook get access to real-time data about users and interactions. This which would be very expensive to commission but is free to fan page 'owners' or 'administrators', presumably because Facebook wants to enhance the value of its service and the data can help 'owners' make their pages more successful. As an incentive for growth, more detailed 'post analytics' are available for pages with over 10,000 fans. A key political implication is that this free data can help smaller-scale media producers understand consumer feedback on their product and grow their audiences via personalisation of products in ways that they could not afford to before.

Digital data enable Facebook page owners to monitor their product's success in real time. For instance, a spike in new memberships may signal a particularly interesting post or *G 7/10* broadcast. When the nationality profile of users revealed the Egyptian bias, the producers could decide whether to react by following up the Egyptian success with more Egypt-oriented content or, alternatively, by making efforts to attract non-Egyptians. (In fact, Facebook data was not necessary to make the BBC team aware of the mainly Egyptian composition of the staff, produsers, fans, and audience.) Although the *G 7/10* project was part of the BBC, which has considerable corporate monitoring resources, it benefited enormously from Facebook since it lacked the budget to purchase equivalent commercial analytics.

But there are many uncertainties about which social networking technologies will stick and the extent to which internet genres and social media will stabilise (Nye, 2011). In the context of very high levels of uncertainty and risk in media organisations like BBCWS, it remains imperative to pursue conventional qualitative, ethnographic 'mobile methods'. These can capture vividly the quality of human interactions around points of convergence, consensus and conflict relating to online user-generated content, in ways that computational tracking tools cannot.

The Politics and Performativity of Social Media Monitoring

Monitoring users of the Facebook page creates ethical issues for researchers. The ethical implications of 'listening in' on people's online conversations for the purposes of research, with or without their consent, are significant. Facebook members sign up to a wide-ranging standard agreement with Facebook that allows their data to be used in many ways. Facebook data delivered to fan page owners does not give information on individual members, but this is still a kind of electronic surveillance, in the sense of monitoring people without their awareness and taking actions that may affect those individuals based upon that information. The typical fan page owner will probably not consider this issue, but the research team announced their presence clearly on the *G 7/10* fan page because social research ethics are typically more stringent than ethics or legal considerations for the use of analytics by non-researchers, or quite probably most non-academic researchers. Our research team was able to archive copies of the *G 7/10* page content from Facebook to our own servers, and study it even after the page administrators had deleted it. (For example the conflict between 'B' and 'H', cited above.) The possibility to archive everything is inherent in web technology, but creators of (publicly) deleted content should arguably be asked again for permission to use it. This would be impractical, however. A related ethical issue is that of anonymity: Facebook page members are not (necessarily) anonymous, and anyone could join the page and discover their identity, but discussing anyone by name in an academic publication might draw attention

to them, with unknown consequences. Hence it seems prudent to avoid naming individuals, even though there interactions are – or were – public.

There are then specific problems related to how we are to approach questions of the trustworthiness of online data even while recognising the pitfalls of naïve realism. How do we factor in the uncertainty and inscrutability of virtual identities and relationships in the processes of doing and writing up research? Neither singly nor in aggregate do the views and opinions expressed online on G 7/10 'represent' those of an Arab public, but networked publics are produced via such media experiments and, at times, they cascade into wider more politically influential networks. Projects like *Greenwich 7/10* certainly offer a useful way into researching the interconnectedness of the real and the virtual, and of old and new media assemblages that intersect as 'critical events' unfold and as digital devices become implicated in socio-political processes. And collaborative ethnography, combined with re-analyses of corporate data can challenge how we conceive of and research the changing meanings of the social, the empirical and the political and the values embedded and enacted by digital technologies.

The case of G 7/10 would suggest that there is a trade off between transparency and impartiality as core journalistic values in social media experiments. But it is a superficial transparency whereby participants are encouraged to think that evidence can be and is made public. But such implied values only mask the many concealements involved in the social and political relations inherent in and generated by experiments like G7/10 and the methods used to monitor then and their fans and publics. After all, what is the endgame of these experiments among the primary catalysers of these experiments? The appearance of online transparency helps to engaging overseas publics in global conversations aimed at creating rational political subjects in the style of western liberal democracies. Journalistic impartiality poses difficulties when 'citizens journalists' start making news and journalists become umpires and moderators, mediating partialities, as well as educators in media studies and trainers in media production.

Social media and tracking tools have, as we have seen, become part of the socio-political process. Whether they help to facilitate democratic debate or not remains to be seen. Certainly give the impression of a more participatory mediated democracy. *G 7/10* may not have set out with digital diplomacy goals, but analysis of interactions around it – which here could only be briefly hinted at – suggests a strongly pedagogic element and an attempt at an informal training of Arabic 'citizens of the *G 7/10* republic' (to use Hosam's phrase) in principles of democratic debate. This case study raises important issues around culturally distinctive styles of expressing political emotion and political rhetoric and reasoning and challenges the efforts in media and digital diplomacy of state funded international broadcasters of western, post-colonial nations in promoting Anglo- and Euro-centric styles of debate and rhetoric and western conceptions of liberal democracy. In any case, the Arabic services of the BBC, like those of *Voice of America* and *Deutsch Welle* and other broadcasters, remain epiphenomenal in the Arab media sphere where, at present, Al Jazeera's cultural hegemony remains secure. These channels are nevertheless important points of comparative reference for Arab audiences whose inherent distrust of all media mean that they are just as likely to use the BBC to verify and check news as a local or regional news provider, and to make use of its social media opportunities.

Inequalities offline are replicated online, especially regarding gender and class, age, nationality, and economic and political power. Well educated males in the 18-35 age group from a majority of online users. We saw signs that the didacticism inherent to *G 7/10* and other such social media projects may act as a leveller. But the heavy investment of personal energy and time required from the *G 7/10* team was unsustainable in the long run, and for the BBCWS it seems it was not delivering the audience expected. The tracking tools described in this paper showed a very slowly rising fan base on Facebook, and coupled with low audience ratings for the TV show, the project was cut. Media experiments like *G 7/10* need a critical

mass of self-motivated users who actually take over the production, otherwise their lifespan and therefore their transformative potential is limited. Success of social-media-based broadcasting must be measured by the creative and editorial autonomy of produsers. But insufficient market intelligence, uncertainty about technologies and formats, risk aversion on the part of BBCWS, and job insecurity among staff, in the end conspired against the success of this experiment. High ideals and ambitions were defeated by market forces and – as we must surmise – political constraints. *G 7/10* was both a success as a social and didactic experience for fans, as evidenced in their comments at its closure, and a failure in terms of BBCWS performance criteria and the diplomatic imperative to avoid upsetting the Egyptian political elite.

The Afterlife of *Greenwich 7/10* and the Egyptian Uprisings of January and February 2011

Greenwich 7/10 foreshadowed in interesting ways the events leading up to Mubarak's resignation, and the way that digital devices and data were implicated in these events. After Ramy Aly came back from Tahrir Square I talked at length to him and also to BBC Arabic staff about how notions of the digital were mobilised and reconfigured before, during and after the downfall of Mubarak and the research team came together again, as did G7/10.. After being axed – G 7/10 had lain dormant for a while but the digital network was being re-animated. For example, IHossam and other G7/10 members began to raise the issue of torture practised by the Egyptian army during and even before the revolution.[xix] t provides a fascinating case of how online groups assemble, disappear and re-appear, and how this can be tracked. It challenges how we understand the changing meanings of the empirical and the shifting socialities (online and offline) that underpin public and political mobilisations. The socio-spatial dimensions of the events are also very intriguing: not just the transnational and translocal circuits, the ways in which texts, images and audio objects circulated across time and space, but also the more 'banal' roles, as Ramy pointed out, that digital devices played: for example, in circulating maps of how to get from Tahrir Square to the state TV building, while avoiding the security service and thugs. Transactions taking place among different actors, technologies and objects require re-thinking: how certain influential bloggers acted as receptors and transmitters of information unavailable elsewhere and how complex multilingual communication networks were forged by people masking their identities to subvert state authority.

G 7/10 was, and is, and will be just one of a multitude of such platform-events which provide us with a close-up example of wider patterns, processes, transactions. Media assemblages interactively connect new and old technologies, from Facebook to leaflets to sermons and debates in mosques, and *G 7/10* showed how discourses of the difference between the 'real' and the 'digital' (*iftiradi*: the virtual as the fake) are co-opted by various constituencies for competing political purposes. When the old guard in Egypt say this was a 'Facebook revolution' among the young, they mean only to undermine the scale of the revolt and the breadth of its social base. There are further demographic dimensions here: the middle classes were very involved in using technologies and to begin with theirs was an armchair protest, from their laptops. Only when the internet blackout occurred (ironically) did they leave their keyboards and move to the streets. Digital literacy is very low in Egypt and so TV remained the main source of news. Hosam tweeted: 'the Egyptian revolution will be made with blood, sweat and tweets!' But tweets and social media were only part of a story and it is quite clear that, to put things in perspective, the turning point came when the bakers, grocers, transport workers and other workers went on strike.

The experimental digital production methods analysed in this article were, as we have seen, constituted by political relations and practices at the BBC ('public diplomacy', 'digital diplomacy').. The article has also highlighted how the very implementation of these methods

came to reconfigure these relations and practices, because digital data gathering, real-time media monitoring and social listening tools become implicated in corporate processes as change agents and new knowledge practices. I have also attempted to go further to show how bringing corporate and academic methods and data into dialogue – once 'in the field' and intervening in online and offline realities – took on a social and political life of their own with unexpected consequences. Instrumentalist accounts of methods – of media production and/or of media research – cannot afford to remain narrowly preoccupied with technical matters. The glimpse into the 'after-life' of the methods of Greenwich 7/10 and of our research team sums this argument up.

APPENDIX 1

The research team consists of the following people:

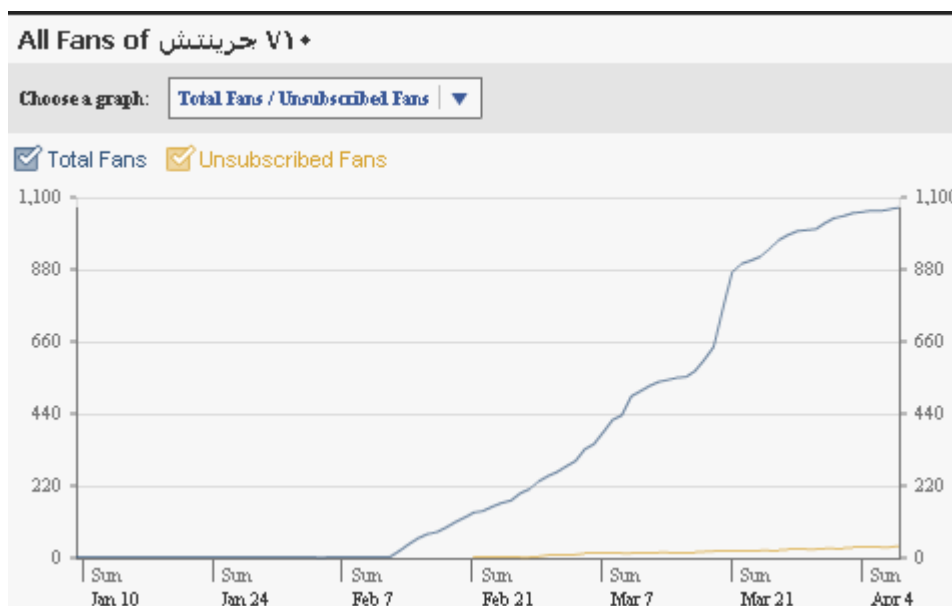|	
Marie Gillespie	Sociology, The Open University
Mina Al-Lami	Media@London School of Economics
Latefa Guemar	Development Studies, Swansea University
Ramy Ali	Cultural Studies, London School of EconomicsProfessor Mike
Thelwell	Computer Science, Wolverhampton University

APPENDIX 2

Figure 1.

This shows the growth in the fan base over time in terms of the total number of Facebook members that have subscribed to the fan page. This shows steady growth but with a surge in mid-March due to the rising popularity of the TV programme.
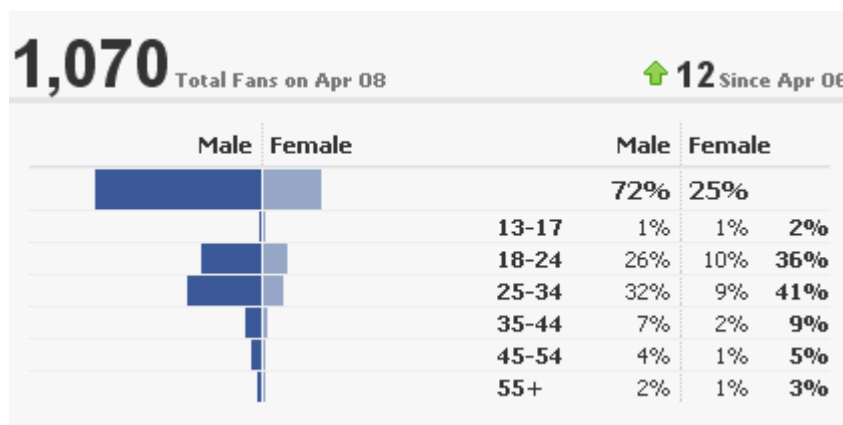

Figure 2.

This gives an age and gender breakdown of all Facebook fans, based on self-reported Facebook member characteristics.
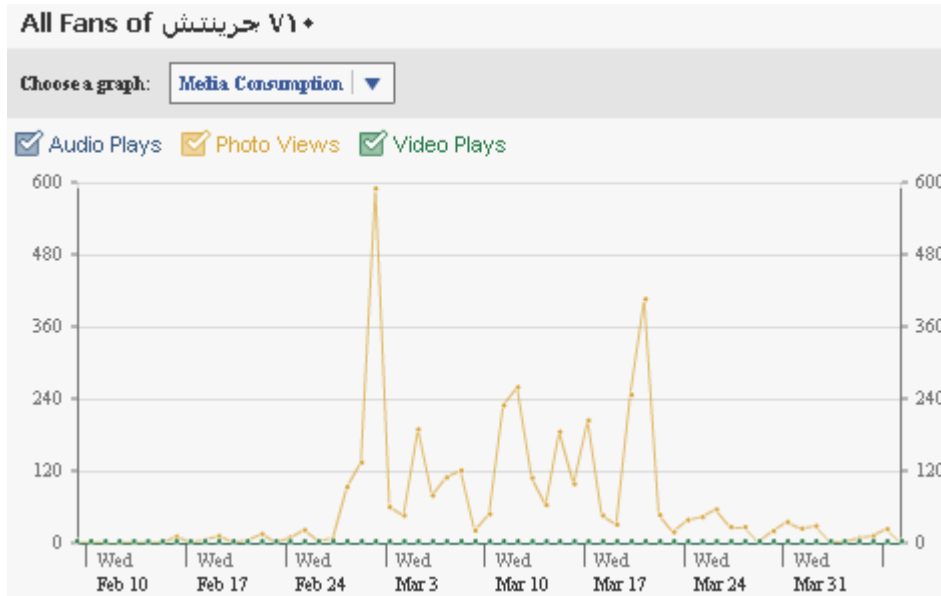
Figure 3.

This shows how often photos in the fan page were viewed – the spikes coincide with new photos being placed online

Top Countries		Top Cities		Top Languages	
Egypt	500	Riyadh	60	English (US)	545
Morocco	132	Washington	22		
United States	82	London	19	English (UK)	198
		Palo Alto	15		
Saudi Arabia	58			Arabic	170
				French (France)	131
United Kingdom	53			German	5
United Arab Emirates	38			Spanish	4
				Italian	3
Palestine	17			Spanish (Spain)	2
Jordan	14			Greek	1
Germany	11			French (Canada)	1
Netherlands	11				
Qatar	11			Indonesian	1
Sudan	11			Dutch	1
France	10			Portuguese (Brazil)	1
Tunisia	10				
Kuwait	9			Russian	1
Yemen	9				
Belgium	8				
Canada	7				
Algeria	7				
Spain	7				

Figure 4.

This gives country, city and language breakdown of Facebook fans, based on self-reported Facebook member characteristics.
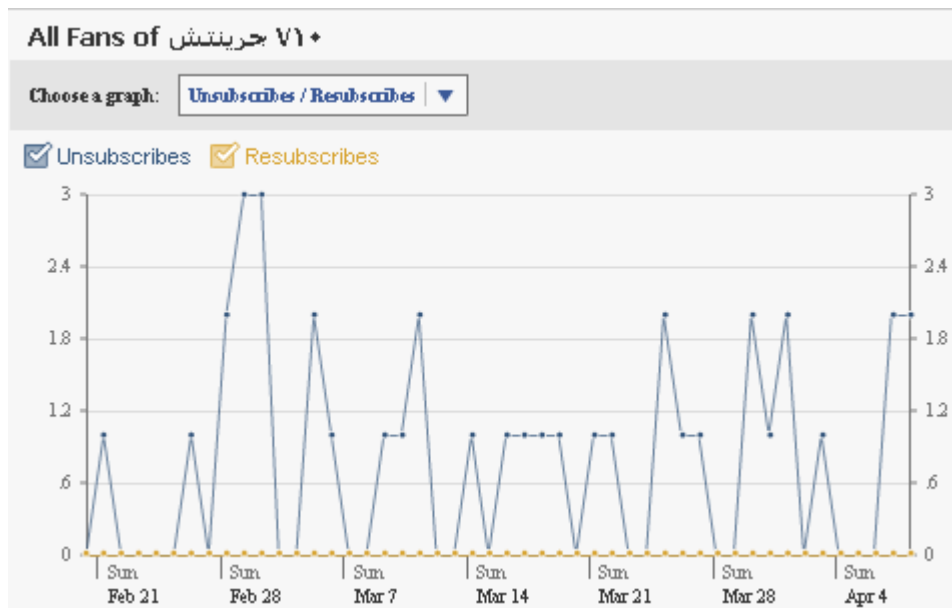
Figure 5.

This shows when members of the fan page decided to unsubscribe from it. There is a consistent low rate over time and that nothing in particular has alienated members to make them give up.
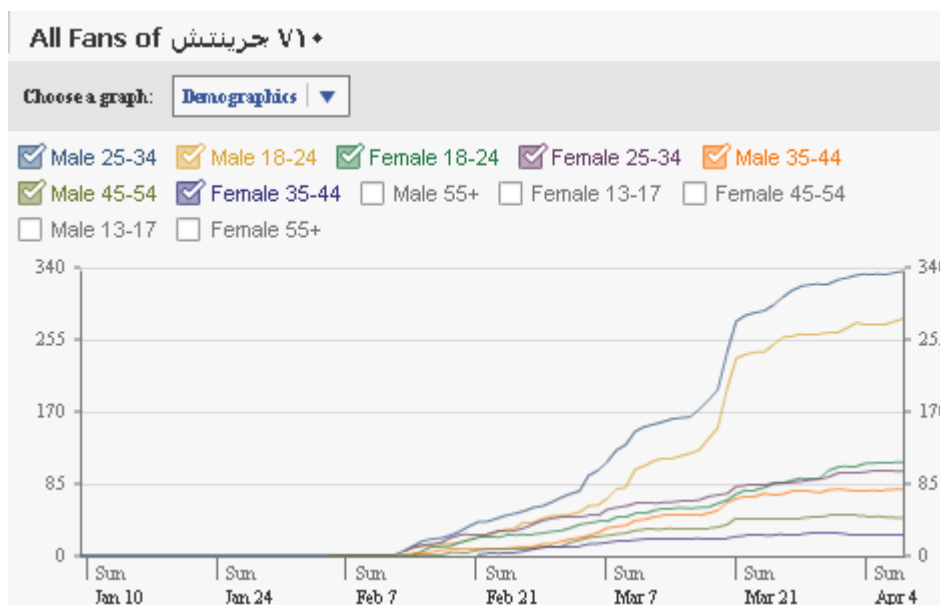

Figure 6.

This gives an age and gender breakdown of Facebook fans over time, based on self-reported Facebook member characteristics.
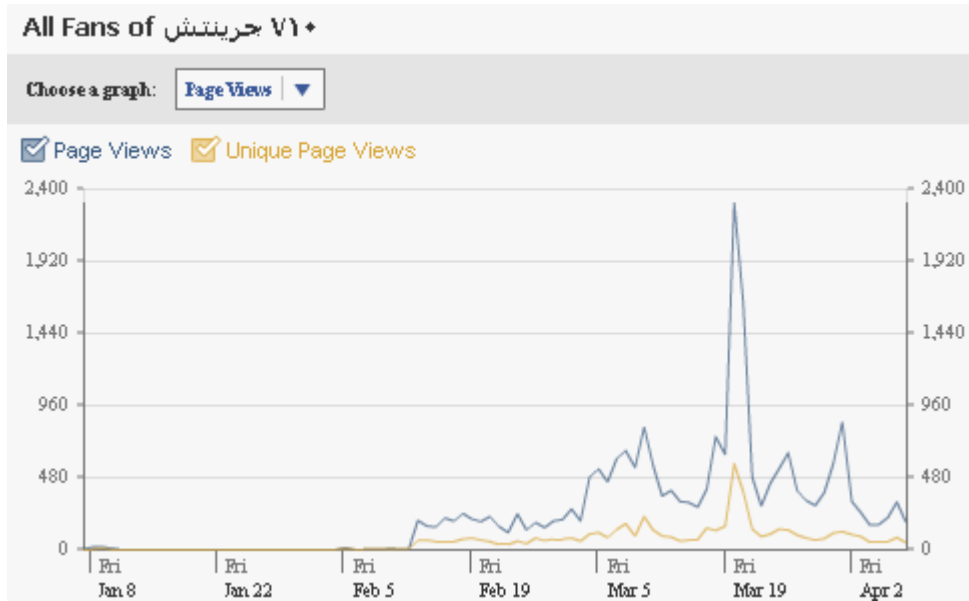
Figure 7.

This shows how many pages were accessed over time – an activity level indicator. The big spike coincides with the first broadcast, which clearly provoked the most interest.
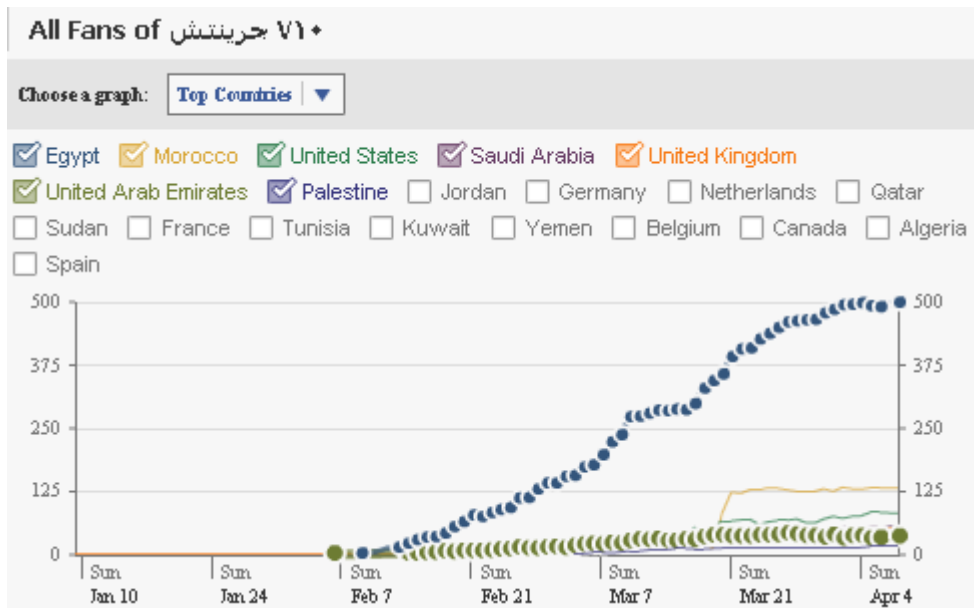

Figure 8.

This gives a country breakdown of Facebook fans over time, based on self-reported Facebook member characteristics. Almost from the start, Egypt has been dominant.
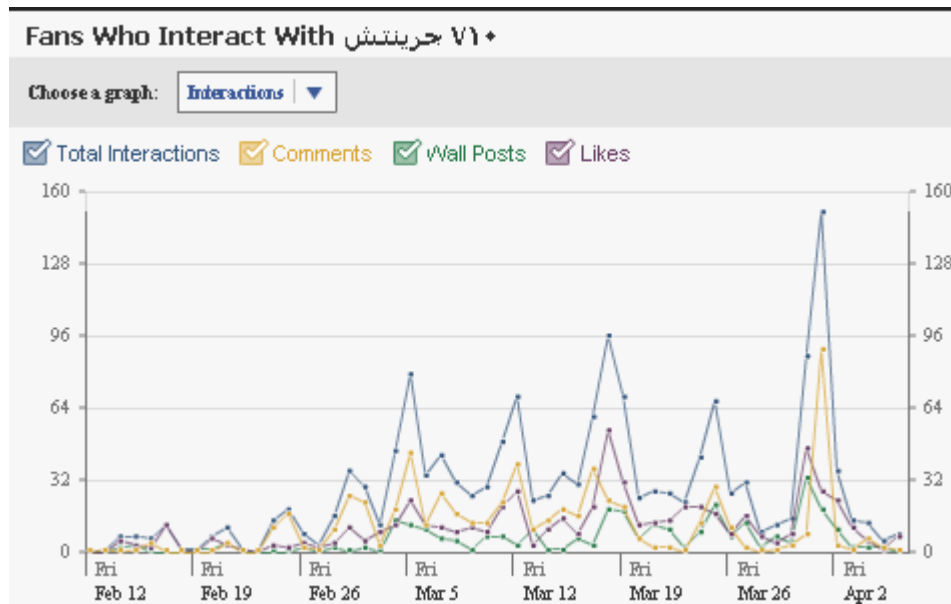
Figure 9.

This shows a wide variety of activities on the fan page over time. It is interesting that it does not match the page views graph – this graph probably reflects the more dedicated members – showing a consistent rhythm of activities centred around programme broadcasts.

APPENDIX 3

Web Environment

Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the "Web Environment" of BBC Arabic. It is the 50 web sites that are most frequently linked to by pages that link to BBC Arabic (a co-inlink diagram in webometrics jargon). All sites in the diagram are apparently seen as important enough to link to by people who link to BBC Arabic so this diagram illustrates the context or environment in which BBC Arabic appears on the web, from the perspective of web links. Lines between web sites indicate when the two sites are frequently both linked to from the same page.
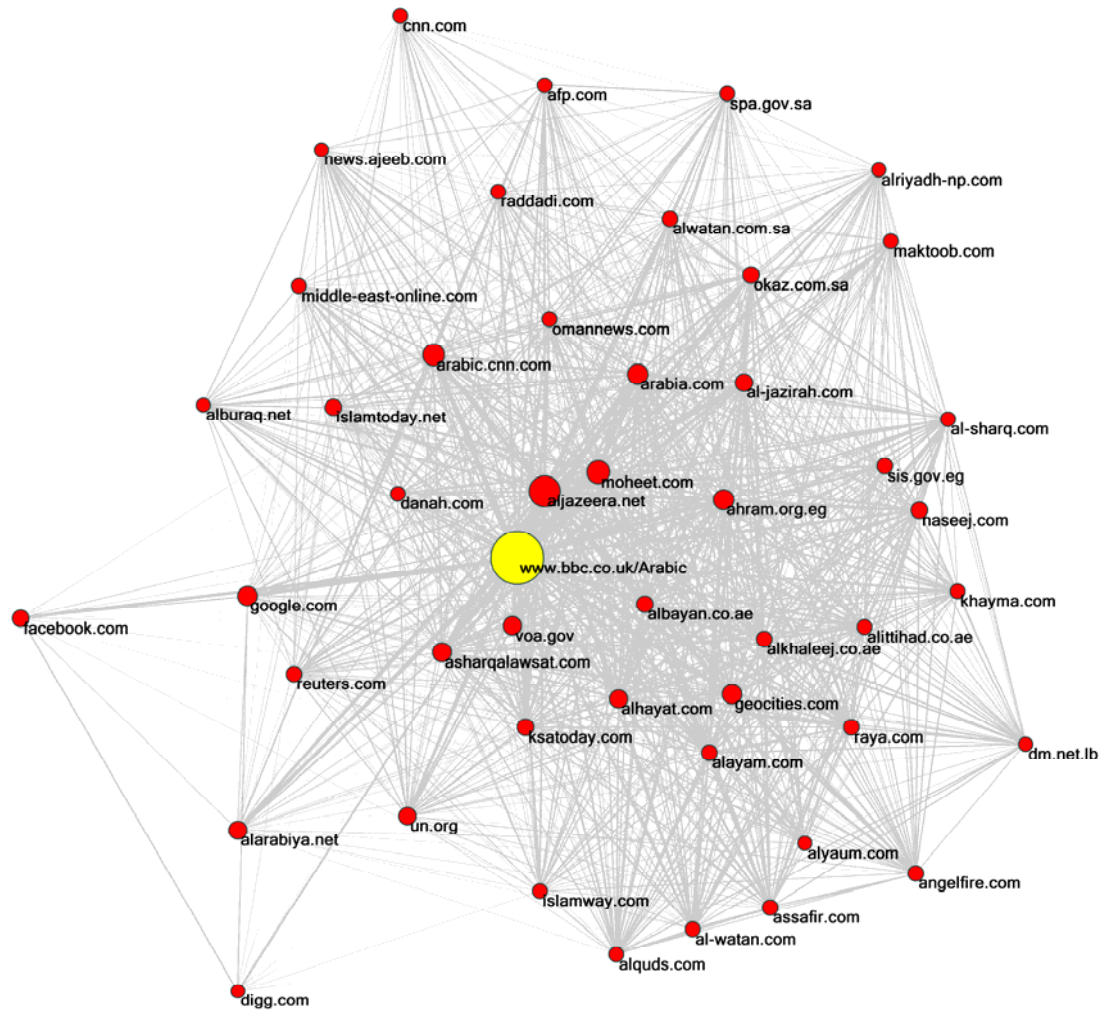

Figure 1: Web environment network for BBC Arabic at the end of 2009

Figure 2: Web environment network for BBC Arabic on March 2nd, 2011

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[i] http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/what-we-do/spend-our-budget/public-diplomacy/

[ii] The relationship is defined in the FCO/BBCWS Broadcasting Agreement (2005) which lists six key public purposes which underpin the relationship see *www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/us/FinMem2005.pdf*

[iii] http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/organgrinder/2010/oct/25/csr-bbc-independence-steve-hewlett

[iv] http://www.cja-uk.org/news/bbc-executive-grilled-over-world-service-cuts/

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[v] *Ariel* 9 Feb 2010:2 and Horrocks, P. (2009). 'The End Of Fortress Journalism'. *BBC in House Report*

[vi] This study forms part of a three-year AHRC funded project 'Tuning In: Disporic Contact Zones at BBCWS': see http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/. Award Ref: AH/ES58693/1. The project is based at the ESRC-funded Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change at the Open University (see www.cresc.ac.uk). Our wider research on *G 7/10* is examining: (a) the structure, moral economy, and ontology of this particular 'online community'; the boundaries between private and public; celebrity, authority, legitimacy; identities and differences, hierarchies and boundaries; the quality of political debate; conflicts and emotions; (b) produsers and produsage; user-led content;motivations and rewards; feedback loops; creativity and innovation, aptitudes and attitudes of users; (c) how the idea of the 'citizens of the *G 7/10* republic' is understood and enacted; *G7/10* in relation to mainstream media debate in the Arabic public sphere

vii For further details of *G 7/10* see these links: (1) promotional page at BBC Arabic: http://www.bbcarabic.com/710; (2) Facebook fan page: http://www.facebook.com/album.php?profile=1&id=256470558360; (3) Twitter account: http://twitter.com/710g; (4) YouTube channel: http://www.youtube.com/user/710GMT; (5) blog: http://710g.blogspot.com/

viii Interview with Hosam Sokkari by Marie Gillespie 13 Sept. 2008

ix http://www.linkedin.com/in/sokkari

x http://digitaldiplomacy.fco.gov.uk/en/about/digital-diplomacy/. And http://publicdiplomacy.wikia.com/wiki/BBC_Arabic_TV access on 4-5/07/10 The BBCWS, unlike the FCO or the British Council, does not engage directly in public or digital diplomacy because, as an editorially independent international broadcaster, it cannot act directly in pursuance of government objectives. The FCO can tell BBCWS where to broadcast but not what. Its budget is administered by the FCO under the rubric of Public Diplomacy (PD). The relationship is defined in the FCO/BBCWS Broadcasting Agreement (2005) which lists six key principles which underpin relations (www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/us/FinMem2005.pdf). When it comes to measuring the effectiveness of PD, the FCO do not include the WS directly; rather, it is included as part of the context. Projects like Greenwich 7/10 nevertheless are likely to have, as Lord Carter's Review on Public Diplomacy put it for the BBCWS' output more generally 'positive public diplomacy gains for the country [the UK] associated with that brand.' Lord Carter of Coles. Public Diplomacy review (Dec 2005)

xi Interview with R.A. April 2010

xii Interview with R.A. April 2010

xiii *G 7/10*, 11 March 2010. http://www.youtube.com/710gmt#p/c/9E36FD1803C4838A/0/q2T6hTMl9PQ

xiv 18 March 2010. http://www.youtube.com/710gmt#p/c/7AE44247A1269852/0/KpV88u7T0to

xv In fact, audience data later revealed a much older demographic (mainly 40-65 age group) for the TV show than was originally thought and thus a polarisation of the online and TV audience with very different tastes and orientations.

xvi http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-h0MroW-iY0 .

xvii Audience research at BBCWS has two main components. *Performance Measurement* involves large-scale, standardised, quantitative, in-country, annual surveys measuring performance on criteria such as reach, reputation, impartiality and other scores, on behalf of the FCO and for BBCWS Marketing and Communications. Colin Wilding (Senior Analyst, Performance and Assessment Data at BBCWS) notes: 'The more measures there are, and the more people are judged by them, the more those people will direct their efforts towards success in terms of measures.' The second component, *Audience Insights*, provides data and analysis to key stakeholders including the FCO, Business Development, Regional Heads of Language Services, and the Strategy Team. Audience research is, in the words of one interviewee, 'regarded as a necessary evil […] sometimes audience data shapes policy and other times it provides evidence for decision that have already been made.' (March 2011)

xviii Attentio (http://attentio.com) offers multilingual social media monitoring tools to 'track millions of voices around the world in social media and online news […] to provide insights into what the world is saying about your brand with sentiment analysis and emerging discussion topics'. Sysomos offers 'heartbeat': 'provides constantly updated snapshots of online conversations, including a variety of user-friendly and informative graphics' (http://www.sysomos.com/products/overview/heartbeat/).

xix Hosam was asked by numerous GM7/10 members to raise the issue of torture and arrests of demonstrators by the army at Tahrir during and after the revolution. The use of GM 7/10s network to raise the issue strengthens the argument of this article that access to influential bloggers and media celebrities affords social and transnational networking capital that can be exchanged for influence. Hosam posted the video on his own Facebook page at the request of G 7/10 members. The video is horrible! http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDrbkOefx3Q&feature=related&skipcontrinter=1