**The BBC Asian Network, the Search for Younger Digital Listeners**

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# Abstract

In response to the increase of Asian radio in the U.K., the BBC’s only minority specific service The BBC Asian Network, a digital radio station, embraced a stronger social media policy to attract new audiences. The service faced potential closure in 2010 after failing to attract its target audience in significant numbers but was reprieved a year later. Internal BBC research has revealed that young British Asian’s engagement with social media is good and that the BBC Asian Network has secured a high level of smart phone listening. Therefore, the BBC Asian Network is attempting to appeal to a younger audience via social media, and to challenge the stereotypes that the station is for older people or immigrants. This chapter examines the uniqueness of this service within the BBC portfolio through in-depth interviews with staff who describe their strategy to target digital natives and the challenges this poses.

# Keywords

BBC; British Asian; radio; social media; ethnic minority media

# Introduction

This chapter examines a BBC digital radio service that specifically caters to the U.K.’s British Asian population, the BBC Asian Network. In Britain, the term “British Asian” refers to people who have descended from countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistani and Sri Lanka, and whoare estimated to be approximately four million (Census 2011) and forms the largest minority group in Britain, comprised of British Asians across generations. Third and fourth generation refers to young British Asians. The station is unique and is the only ethnic service within the BBC. The staff are predominantly from British Asian backgrounds and produce news and programs which represent British Asian audiences in authentic ways.

The station is targeting young British Asians in order to survive in the digital age and to compete with a flourishing minority ethnic media sector in the U.K. which predominantly targets first generation British Asians. Through one to one interviews with BBC staff, this chapter examines how social media is utilized to engage a young minority ethnic audience and argues that the BBC ought to re-valuate and negotiate their identity with British Asians in order to increase engagement with the station. I also argue that there is a disconnect between staff hired and the core working class audience. This could be a class issue, or a reflection of the fact the BBC has a problem engaging the young, working-class, and minority audiences, or BBC’s lacks cultural expertise (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2016). In 2016, a new Charter was agreed between the BBC and the Government which sets out the terms of operation and specifies the program areas or audiences which should be catered for. It forms the constitutional basis of the BBC’s existence and was updated in 2016 to include a new set of public purposes, including diversity. The broadcaster is required to “accurately and authentically represent and portray the lives of the people of the United Kingdom (Royal Charter for the continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation, 2016, sec. 6.4). Therefore, ahead of the publication of the White Paper, the organization sets out new targets to achieve 15% of staff and leadership from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds by 2020. The BBC is often accused by the Government of slow progress on this issue (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2016). The lack of diversity affects all U.K. media but the BBC appears to show willingness to cater for minority audiences more effectively whilst simultaneously addressing the barriers to employment within the organization.

# British Asians and U.K Media

A number of scholars have argued that the portrayal of minority ethnic communities in the media is characterised as *Other* (Said, 1978; Cottle, 2000). Research by Cottle (2000) found that programs often fail “to give robust representations to the diversity and difficulties of minority communities, cultures and identities” (p. 102). British Asians have often been stereotyped in the media as “passive, submissive, conformist and caught between two cultures” (Huq, 1996). Furthermore, often broadcasters assume that minority audiences themselves are “unwilling to participate in any aspect of broadcasting other than ‘just’ as listeners (the BBC model) or ‘just’ as consumers (the commercial model)” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 64). Subsequently, programming then provides “stereotyped and homogenized” (p.64) content.

Public service broadcasting (PSB) is renowned for reflecting a sense of national community within any country through impartial news and education programmes. However, Malik (2014) has noted that speciality minority programming, in this instance, the BBC Asian Network, can work against traditional public service value of universality because it only targets specific groups. A BBC Trust Review in 2012 noted that because people of British Asian descent form the largest ethnic minority group in the country, it is “unsurprising” that the BBC has a specialist service (BBC Trust, 2012, p. 11).

Interestingly although British Asian audiences rate the BBC highly for showcasing “different kinds of cultures,” almost one third of people who self-described as British Asian also felt under-represented in PSB (Ofcom, 2015). This is the conundrum faced by broadcasters such as the BBC which, as Malik (2008) argues, have moved to a strategy that “aims to integrate minorities into mainstream programming” (p. 346) in order appeal to a wider audience. This is evident at the BBC Asian Network where the policies aim to target all British Asians rather than specific groups by their faith or language. Such an aim is attributed to two reasons: first, for the station to maximize listener figures, and second, for the station being the only service for all British Asians. British Asians as a minority group have largely been understood through difference “by way of ‘ethnicity’ and through its associated connotations of religion, customs and culture (immigrant Other, culturally alien, religious fundamentalist)” as opposed to a hybrid of British and Asian (Malik, 2010, p. 175).

The growing Asian media industry, composed of established commercial radio stations such as Sunrise Radio[[1]](#endnote-1) in London and new community stations, on the other hand, do not actively target young audiences. Over 200 community stations were broadcasting in the U.K. in May 2013 (RadioCentre, 2012), and they serve geographical areas and provide a “forum for concerns specific to new immigrant and linguistic, ethnic, and racial minority communities” (Matsaganis & Katz, 2014, p. 928). Alongside radio, a growing number of satellite channels offer Asian television focusing on entertainment, music, news in South Asian languages, and sports. Subscription to Sky alone offers access to 45 South Asian specific channels, allowing the communities to maintain links to their heritage or language via these services. Ofcom (2013) research has also revealed that greater numbers of minority ethnic communities subscribe to satellite services, in comparison to the general British population. These services may provide audiences with programming in language of preference; however, it is questionable whether they provide audiences with essential information about the country they now reside in. The majority of satellite channels stream soaps and news programmes from India or Pakistan as opposed to content produced in the U.K. specifically for British Asians.

The BBC Asian Network does create content for young British Asians covering the issues faced by these communities with staff from those communities. I argue that there is an assumption made by the media that hiring minority staff can solve problematic representation. However, this implicitly requires ethnic staff to have a deep interest in ethnic issues. Third and fourth generation British Asians are arguably more integrated and assimilated to broader society, thus they are less likely to be interested in community issues. Furthermore, research into the creative industries also revealed that minority ethnic staff are complicit in “reproducing problematic and commonly held assumptions or stereotypes on race” (Saha, 2012, p. 436).

# Methodology

The material presented in this chapter is drawn from thirty face to face, semi-structured interviews with BBC staff working for the BBC Asian Network. The interviews were conducted within BBC buildings in New Broadcasting House in London and The Mailbox in Birmingham, or in coffee shops close to BBC offices between December 2014 and February 2016. Semi-structured interviews were chosen in order to allow the author to ask questions, probe, and clarify in order to obtain a detailed answer. The questions were open-ended and thus gave interviewees an opportunity to invoke points of view that had not been anticipated by the researcher. The interviewees were sought out based upon the principle of maximum variation (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and therefore, editors, broadcast journalists, presenters and assistant editors who work on a number of daytime programs on the BBC Asian Network were chosen. The overwhelming majority of the interviewees were born in the U.K. and aged between thirty and fifty years of age, from predominantly secondor third generation British Asian families and are broadly representative of the staff employed by the station. A handful of the older interviewees were born outside of the U.K. but have lived in Britain for the majority of their lives. In terms of education, the younger journalists are all degree-educated and many hold post-graduate degrees in journalism, which is common in the U.K. (Thurman et al., 2016). The older employees, however, may have undergraduate degrees but lack formal journalism training.

Anonymity was offered to all interviewees, and over half of the journalists and producers at the lower end of the pay scales, opted to pursue this option, whilst people in senior roles chose to be identified. Anonymized contributors are identified by pseudonyms and job title, whereas others are identified by their name and job title. Anonymity allowed interviewees the confidence to speak freely and openly which then provided “rich data” revealing “participants’ views, feelings, intentions and actions” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 23).

# The BBC Asian Network Remit

The BBC Asian Network was launched as a national digital station in 2002 alongside 1xtra, the BBC’s new urban service. 1xtra has a strong appeal to Black audiences but is not defined by the BBC as being a “Black” and instead is described as urban. The BBC Asian Network, on the other hand, is defined by the audience that it serves. The station broadcasts in English with a number of dedicated South Asian language programs in Gujarati, Punjabi, Urdu, Tamil, and Bengali broadcast on Sundays. These programs are not explicitly branded as “language” and are frequently presented in a hybrid of English and language to appeal more widely to audiences who may not understand or speak a South Asian language. The BBC has broadcast programs in foreign languages on television as early as 1965 in Hindi to help integrate new immigrants. The first daily radio program for British Asians emerged at Radio Leicester in the 1970s. During this period of time, the BBC had the upper hand in attracting minority audiences because Bollywood and Bhangra music were not available elsewhere.

The music policy was updated in 2016 to better connect with third- and fourth-generation British Asians to include mainstream U.K. chart music alongside Bollywood and bhangra. The remit does require that 30 percent of music is from British Asian artists because the station is required to offer a platform for these artists to make the station “highly distinctive” within the U.K. Asian media (BBC Trust, 2016). In contrast, the competitors focus on Bollywood music which is considered to be popular amongst the audience. One of the presenters interviewed for this study, Bobby Friction, explained that the BBC Trust music rules are too restrictive: “we’ve got to show that we are supporting British Asian music to keep getting our money to make sure we are still a station on the BBC” (Friction, Presenter).

In line with the BBC’s public service values, the journalism generated by journalists is news for and about the British Asian diaspora. BBC Asian Network journalists have cultural and language skills which allow unique access to South Asian communities and enable a wide range of voices from those communities to be heard on air. This is uncommon across mainstream media, who often rely upon the same official sources (Hall, 1978; Cottle, 2000). The BBC, itself describes the BBC Asian Network news as “distinctive” because it is not available elsewhere.

# Potential Closure 2009/2010

In 2009, as part of BBC financial cuts, the station was earmarked for closure after listener figures fell to 357,000. The dilemma the BBC faced was that if it closed the station, it had to find an alternative way to serve British Asian audiences. Plans for a regional Asian service via the BBC’s local radio stations was explored extensively but was more expensive. It took 12 months for the former BBC Trust to reprieve the service, because no other viable option could be found to serve this audience. Following its reprieve, the budget was cut by a third, the staff headcount was reduced by half and longer programs were introduced. The RadioCentre (2012), the industry body for U.K. commercial radio, in its response to the BBC Asian Network review, argued that the “ill-defined editorial direction has left Asian Network trying to do too much, appeal to too many, without a clear remit to reaching the intended audience” ( p. 3). This appears to be an apt description of the station at that time. The low listener rate suggested that the station was perceived as something for immigrants or older people, whereas internally the management had been trying to engage young British Asian audiences. Sam, an anonymized senior producer, explained that because the staff live a very different lifestyle to the listeners, presenters and reporters do not “sound like the people that we are broadcasting to.” Thus, as former News Editor, Kevin Silverton explained, it is vital that journalists are hired from diverse backgrounds because they can source original stories from the communities and allow “their understanding of the issues” to be heard. The problem seems to be, however, that most journalists are from groups who are educated to degree level whilst the listeners are more likely to be those who do not. Therefore, there is deep disconnect between the staff and listeners.

# Social Media Use at the BBC Asian Network

The RAJAR’s [[2]](#endnote-2) for 1st Quarter 2016 revealed that 562,000 people were listening, indicating the station is reaching new audiences with this strategy. However, they may not be the young digital British Asians the station seeks, because the analysis shows that the average listener is 37 years old and that the number of listeners aged under 25 is just 21% of the entire listenership (Eustace, 2016). In an attempt to attract the digital natives, the station has been organizing its own events which are shared on the red button. All staff are expected to create original content for social media, for example, news reporters film short videos in addition to their radio story to engage audiences who do not traditionally consume radio. Likes, shares, and retweets are measured and analyzed in addition to the traditional RAJARS to gauge interest and engagement on particular stories or interviews. Sam, a senior producer, explained that within the news team, they are finding that social media allows their original stories, generated specifically for Asian Network listeners, to simultaneously reach those audiences who do not listen to radio.

On the Asian Network Facebook page there will be a lot of people that don’t exactly listen to the output via the radio but they will engage via social media, literally from what we’re posting up there. So the way that people are approaching the Asian Network is changing. (Sam, Senior Producer)

Program producers specifically select guests who have a huge social media presence to appear as guests, which can often result in a spike in social media interaction or attention. Riaan, an anonymized producer, explained that because radio is far more visual, “I think that it’s pretty much instinctive now that every bit of editorial must also have a social media presence, or at least we calculate or decide whether this will work on social media or not” (Riaan, Producer). Although Riaan suggests that it is “instinctive,” the quote implies all the staff “must” consider social media, and those who do not will face consequences in terms of career advancement. The station, however, lacks an internal social media guide; instead each show team decides individually what may work, and therefore, it “is a little bit of trial and error” (Riaan, Producer). The Breakfast show creates a lot of original content for social media involving on-air guests. Former presenter, Tommy Sandhu, explained that the focus is on producing material which is sharable:

When celebrities come in be it Georgina Sanj, Shahruk Khan or Ranbir Kapoor we *(the “Breakfast” show team)* like to do videos with them and people go ‘oh my god, Tommy got them doing that; that’s fun and relates to their film release. (Sandhu, former presenter)

The videos tend to be popular, especially when a Bollywood star or a famous Bhangra artist is involved, the number of views easily exceed a million. The emphasis upon social media content is a policy led from the top down by Mark Strippel, who is Head of the Station:

The reality is there will be sections of the audience whose only engagement with the Asian Network, is our visual content online. I think people will be browsing YouTube and they are returning to our channel every week to watch things. (Strippel, Head of Asian Network)

For many journalists, social media responsibilities have simply been added to the job description; however, it is simplistic to assume that social media skills are a bolt on. Many editors, including the former BBC Asian Network news editor, Kevin Silverton, sees them as essential core journalistic skill. Riaan explained that social media is helpful because “it’s an effective form of communication in that you know they (i.e., the audience) are out there and you know that they are participating and they are interested” (Riaan, Producer).

Radio is consumed in lower numbers among minority ethnic people. For instance only 28% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities claim to listen to radio compared to a 42% of the general population (Ofcom, 2013). In addition, Indian and Bangladeshi households are less likely to own a DAB radio[[3]](#endnote-3) (Digital Audio Broadcast) compared to the general population (Ofcom, 2013). Thus, the BBC Asian Network faces a huge challenge in growing its digital radio audience whilst conversely, large numbers of British Asian audiences consume BBC Asian Network content on-demand. The BBC’s own internal research has found that BBC Asian Network, compared to the other BBC stations, has “the highest proportion of smart phone listenership” (Strippel, Head of BBC Asian Network).

A number of the BBC interviewees explained during the interviews that within the BBC itself, the BBC Asian Network is considered to be ahead in terms of social media usage. However, the staff did acknowledge that there are some problems. Neeta, an anonymized producer explained that “it is quite tough actually, we still need to evolve and use different forms and right now we are using video” to entice listeners (Neeta, producer). Sam, a senior producer, explained that despite the advances the station has made with in terms of the digital strategy the staff have to ensure they are on the right social media platforms, “unless we’re there and unless we’re relevant to them there then we’re not going to be relevant as a radio station either” (Sam, Senior Producer). Anish Shaikh, a daytime producer, explained that it is tough working for the station due to the huge number of changes taking place:

I think we are pulled in every direction; you’ve got to appeal to the young, you’ve got to appeal to the old, you’ve got to appeal to the traditional, you’ve got to appeal to the middle age and all that. I think that pressure can prove fatal for Asian Network (Shaikh, Producer)

This point is particularly interesting, because there have been at least three strategy changes to define the editorial direction. It is clear from the interview material that not all staff agree with decisions made at the top, and many felt that the wider BBC does not necessarily understand their audience. One important change was the removal from the station’s service license in August 2016, the specification for 20 hours of programming in South Asian languages. The purposive move allowed the station to lose heritage listeners in order to appeal to younger listeners. The former BBC Controller, Bob Shennan, quoted in a BBC press release, explained the changes were necessary “to help the station evolve its unique offer for the younger British Asian community whilst remaining as distinctive and relevant as ever” (BBC Media Centre, 2016). The Head of the BBC Asian Network, Mark Strippel, explained that they strive to be “distinctive,” and as a consequence “we are different from everyone else. We are a digitally savvy, youth focused British Asian platform” (Strippel, Head of Station). In some ways, Strippel highlights that the Asian ethnic media have very little to offer young British Asians, and the BBC is the only platform that focuses and reflects the contemporary British Asian lifestyle. The BBC may not always get it right, with its particular emphasis upon public service values of news and language over music (Aujla-Sidhu, 2017), and this appears to be reflected in the listener figures; RAJARS for both the BBC Asian Network and Sunrise Radio fluctuate frequently with one overtaking the other. However, the BBC benefits immensely from having an Asian service as part of its offer; the hiring of diverse journalists at the Asian Network helps the BBC to meet diversity targets, and other BBC outlets can use the original journalism as part of cross platform sharing. Head of the Station, Mark Strippel, explained that the station “symbolizes the best of our content” (Strippel, Head of station).

# Conclusion

To summarize, the BBC Asian Network has been using social media to specifically increase engagement with young British Asians who are currently not targeted by independent and commercial ethnic media. This young audience, according to BBC and Ofcom, is more engaged in digital platforms than their non-Asian peers. The key problem is that British Asians aged under 24 also listen to radio less, and therefore, attracting this audience via social media to engage with the BBC brand and BBC Asian Network content is logical. However, the BBC’s radio may not be as appealing for young audiences because of its restrictive music and news policies which conflict with the needs of young audiences, whilst older audiences may like the credibility and authority which the BBC brand is associated with. The BBC needs to re-valuate the identity of young Asian people and then naturally evolve with the output for this audience specifically, rather than attempting to please everyone whilst trying to increase listener figures. To conclude, the BBC Asian Network, despite the challenges, has demonstrated innovation and resilience in trying to attracting new audiences via social media to the BBC output.

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# Notes

1. Sunrise Radio, a commercial Asian station established in 1985. It is the only independent Asian station to subscribe to RAJARs. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Radio Joint Audience Research is the official body in charge of measuring radio audiences in the U.K. It is jointly owned by the BBC and the Radiocentre on behalf of the commercial sector. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB), also known as digital radio and high-definition radio, is audio broadcasting in which analog audio is converted into a digital signal and transmitted. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)