Researching on the Edge: language issues surrounding research with Diaspora communities

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Background and rationale for Diaspora projects.

1. Perspectives of Iran.
2. Context: Why we work with Iran

The purpose of the British Council is to create international opportunities for and trust between the people of the UK and other countries worldwide.
3. Difficulties in working with Iran

November 2011, siege on British embassy compound in Tehran
What we do:

Strategy is about marrying ideas and capabilities with intuition and daring (P. Saul 1997)

• Work with partners

• Engage with Iranian Diaspora communities

• Engage with Iranians in Iran digitally

• Work with Iranians in 3rd countries

• Support UK-Iran initiatives
Iranian Diaspora communities

Est 4-5 million Iranians living abroad (www.migrationinformation.org)

- Turkey
- UAE (Dubai)
- India (Pune)
- Malaysia
The Diaspora Project: Market Research Objectives

To discover if there is an Iranian audience the British Council can engage with in countries where there is known to be a large Iranian Diaspora community, and if so,

Investigate what portfolio of products would be relevant to them, especially in the areas of Arts, English and Education.

Areas of research:

• The demographics of the Iranian Diaspora communities

• The nature and type of potential audience
Research Methods

Comprehensive desk research exercise to source and review available information on Iranian Diaspora communities and to put the findings in context.

Structured quantitative survey of Iranian Diaspora

• 150 face-to-face surveys with Iranian Diaspora (Farsi)
• online survey posted on the „Iranians In Turkey“ Facebook group, (English)

• In-depth qualitative interviews via telephone and face-to-face with a cross section of Iranian Diaspora. (Farsi)

• Two focus groups with Iranian Diaspora, each with 6 to 8 respondents, to provide in-depth qualitative insights of target audiences. One with students, the other with young professionals. (Farsi)
Issues

• Language used for interviews
• Security /Trust
• Comfort zones
• Cultural contexts
• Quality of data
Issues surrounding research with diaspora communities:

Some challenges and learning points

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Tricky overseas projects - a learning curve for a small agency from the Peak District!

2001:
Danny Sims starts DJS in his garden shed.
Staff = 1.

2012:
Research in…
Research with Diaspora: Desk research to understand cultural context can be useful

What our desk research told us:

...there are myriad refugees in Turkey who are not Iranian, it is specifically Iranian refugees who are most vulnerable. This is largely due to reports of Iranian security forces entering Turkey to pursue and terrorize asylum-seekers. Whether this is true or not, it is sufficient to spread fear and nurture suspicion among Turkey’s Iranian population.

Is this going to create challenges for the research…?
Engaging in English very difficult (despite high level of fluency)

Recruitment process (from UK) took multiple emails and conversations to provide reassurance and answer queries:

"Why are you targeting Iranians?"

"Are you the Government?"

"What is the link between the British Council and the Government?"

"Why do you want to audio-record it?"

"Can I see the questions in advance?"

"Can I see this ESOMAR code of conduct?"

...yes, it did create challenges!
Our Farsi speaking partners in Turkey had more success despite potentially facing bigger challenges.

“...Would you be willing to take part in an audio recorded discussion with other Iranians in a facility where British clients will be watching through a two way mirror...?”
Feedback in the discussions provided some context to these issues and guidance for future engagement.

“Iranians do not socialise with one another, only on Facebook. We don’t want to be in groups, we want to keep a low profile.”
Professional 25-35

“It is a bit difficult. Iranians are afraid of revealing their contact information.”
Student 18-24

“It is very difficult. Iranians are even afraid of each other.”
Student 18-24

“There are very few societies. It is because of political reasons...there are spies.”
Student 18-24

“I don’t want this group to be for only Persian people. No one would visit there...Well, I don’t want to say more about it. I mean... You would also wonder about what is behind it. It is something political. For that reason it should not be just for Persians but everyone.”
Professional 25-35
Other things we have learnt: *Communities and cultures are diverse and approaches need to be adapted*

- Other audiences have found contact from someone in England intriguing - it can help participation, and many welcome the opportunity to practice / show-off their English - *not in this case.*

- Recruitment through community groups and ‘snowballing’ can work well to target niche audiences (recent example: elderly Bangladeshi males that chew tobacco) - *not in this case.*

- It pays to understand the context and/or work with partners that do.
Other things we have learnt: **There is a social networking group for everything...**
Other things we have learnt: Seeing feedback first hand is invaluable

- It’s not just a jolly boss, honest!

- Transcripts never tell the full story

- Quality assurance, particularly around translation and interpretation of questions
We have learnt that translation can be highly subjective.

Massive potential impact on response, quality of data, client reputation.

Also, technology (e.g. online surveys) does not always get on well with certain languages.

Check the translation, then check it again, and then ask the client to check it…
Other things we have learnt: Work with a good local agency that will challenge what we are asking or amend it to fit local conditions

- A much easier / freer process in Dubai...

  “I don’t think there would be any problems engaging with Iranians here.” Male Student 18-24

- ...but there were still issues to consider:

  - Not a good idea to arrange focus groups in middle of Eid

  - Advised not to mix males and females in the groups
In Summary…

- Understand the audience and cultural issues
- Work with local experts, take advice, adapt approaches
- Native language speakers *usually* result in better engagement (see above)
- See and hear the feedback first hand where possible
- Check that translation!