

An Audience Of One

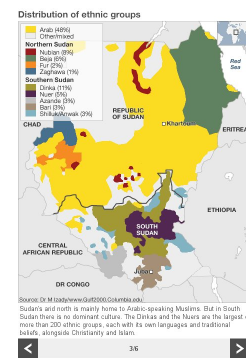
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1 Breaking News

This week, fighting broke out in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. I am working with a research agency based there, so the news from that normally distant country was of direct relevance to me.

As I always do at such times, I went straight to the BBC website to find out what was happening, and later for an update and for an understanding of the roots of the conflict. I wanted to be well informed on the events and their background – for myself, to plan my work and in order to be well prepared to discuss the topic with others. The BBC gave me just what I needed, and indeed more than I had expected: for example, a fascinating 6-layer map (click on image (right) to see the page). And, of course, there was plenty more to read if I had the time.



This episode gives me a valuable opportunity to examine what – as a loyal BBC user – are the values I associate with the BBC in general and with BBC World Service (WS) in particular, and how I might articulate those values in terms of the CV framework. So, for this purpose. I put myself in the top right quadrant and examine the view from there.

2 Unpicking

It was a simple decision quickly made, but the reasoning behind it demonstrates important points about the value of the BBC to at least one member of the audience. Why did I choose to go to the BBC site rather than anywhere else?

Accessibility: I knew where to go, the site is easy to navigate and I could be sure that there would be suitable material when I got there.

- Format:** I like the layout of the BBC site, it is clear and not plastered with adverts (for me, at least).
- Quality:** the material is knowledgeable. well researched and well written.
- Depth:** once I had gone beyond the breaking news I wanted to understand the roots of the conflict better; I knew the BBC would give me the background information that I needed. Further, I know that the BBC has journalists on the ground, especially thanks to the language services, who will have been following developments for many years rather than just being ‘parachuted in’ when there is a crisis.
- Breadth:** the BBC, as a global service, can put the latest developments in one country into the wider context. Beyond the main article there is much more material that I could move on to if I chose.
- Creativity:** I can hope that the BBC will deliver valuable content beyond my immediate expectations, as with the maps.
- Impartiality:** I know that the BBC is not selling a line, that its journalist will try to present the facts as they see them and not distort them to fit some political angle.

Note that I do not refer to *trustworthiness*. This is a much used concept, but it is not always clear what it means. BBC journalists may take it to mean that they can be trusted to tell the truth, and it may be seen as similar to impartiality. I would indeed see the BBC as trustworthy in these senses; but it occurred to me, looking at my own process of decision-making, that trustworthiness could also be seen as akin to *reliability*. I could have confidence that when I went to the BBC site I would find something that had the characteristics I list above. So trustworthiness functions in a way as an umbrella term, just as *quality* often does.

One could bring together *accessibility* with some of the aspects of *quality*, *depth* and *breadth* - those that deal with ‘reliably providing the information that I need’ under the heading of *usefulness*.

There are other aspects of the BBC that I value, but which did not play a direct role in my decision to use it. I take *pride* in the WS, not just because I used to work for the organisation but because I, like others, think that it is better at what it does than most other news providers, and that its commitment to truth, accuracy, impartiality, multiculturalism and so on reflect a set of values that bring credit to my country and help to make the world a better place. These are values that matter to me more as a citizen of the UK than as a member of the audience.

3 Habit

There is another important aspect of the decision I made. You will see that I went to the BBC site ‘as I always do. . .’. For me, as perhaps for many BBC users, my preference for the BBC is

a matter of habit. I know where to find the BBC and I have a degree of confidence that what I find will meet my needs.

Habit is not a substitute for judgement. Rather, it encapsulates judgements already made over a long period; it is not necessary to approach every decision as a clean slate. If the BBC starts to disappoint me I will change my habits (indeed it does, to my mind, have weaknesses in some areas which would lead me to look elsewhere for information about certain topics). But for now my habitual choice reflects my overall experience.

The importance of habitual use should not be underestimated. People who choose to continue to use the BBC do so for reasons, and their choice is based on experience. They need not have the high opinion that is apparent from my list above, it may be simply that the element of convenience is paramount. But the habitual users are more likely to value the BBC than casual users or people who come upon it by chance, and more likely to be able to articulate what they value.

4 A sample of one

How do the values I describe fit with the sorts of question that WS ask in surveys? If I were interviewed in a survey would I feel that my responses adequately expressed the way I feel about WS? Here are some of the most used questions with my thoughts – the headings indicate the labels used by the BBC when reporting results from each question.

4.1 Trust

Which of these news providers is a source you can trust?

There are other questions which address the same issue, such as *'How trustworthy would you say the BBC is?'* As discussed above, I do trust the BBC, but the question is open to differing interpretations and hence respondents are not necessarily answering the question that researchers think they asked.

4.2 Objectivity

Which of these news providers provides unbiased and objective news and information?

This statement deals directly with the issue of impartiality, which is important to me. However, it is not necessarily a good idea to bundle the two concepts, bias and objectivity, together. It is possible to be unbiased but not objective, and objectivity carries connotations of distance.

4.3 Relevance

Which of these news providers provides news that is relevant to you?

This question approaches some of the issues that are important to me, such as accessibility and providing the content that I need. However, it does not really hit the target and is again open to differing interpretations.

4.4 Quality

Which of these news providers is high quality?

This is certainly a key issue for me. The concept of ‘quality’ typically bundles together a number of factors, and these are likely to be different for different people. However, the question is probably a useful umbrella for the various aspects of the content that lead people to have a positive attitude.

4.5 Loyalty

Please let me know how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the statements about the BBC: You will continue to use the BBC.

Loyalty is certainly part of my attitude to the BBC. However, my feeling would be stronger: I will continue to use the BBC *by choice and habitually*.

4.6 Advocacy

Please let me know how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the statements about the BBC: You will recommend the BBC to others.

This question makes assumptions about people’s social behaviour. I would certainly recommend the BBC if people asked me. But they don’t, and I don’t spontaneously evangelise. In some countries recommending the BBC would get a person arrested.

4.7 Value

Please let me know how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the statements about the BBC: The BBC helps you to form your opinions on important issues.

'Forming my opinions' is not quite how I would put it; I want to be well informed but I am not necessarily looking to 'have an opinion' on the conflict in South Sudan. But this statement does at least approach the idea that I value WS because it informs me.

4.8 Accuracy

Which of these news providers provides accurate news and information?

This question is not generally used as a component of Key Performance Indicators.

This might be regarded as a 'hygiene' issue. It does not feature explicitly in my rationale for choosing the BBC but if I felt the BBC were inaccurate on important matters I would rate them significantly lower on quality and usefulness.

In summary, I feel that many of the questions go some way to encapsulating the values that matter to me in choosing to use the BBC, but they do not fully reflect my position. Issues of quality and impartiality are covered, but there is not enough of the things that come under *Usefulness*. *Relevance* is part of it, and *Value* – here in the specific sense of 'helping to form my opinions' – is in the right area; but *Accessibility* is not there. *Loyalty* and *Advocacy* do say something valuable about my commitment to WS as a habitual user.

5 Tanner

How well do the values I describe above fit into Simon Tanner's Value Drivers?

Utility: *People value the utility afforded through use of the (digital) resources now or sometime in the future.*

This label fits well with the values that I have grouped under the umbrella heading of 'usefulness'.

Existence/Prestige: *People derive value and benefit from knowing that a (digital) resource is cherished by persons living inside and outside their community. This value exists whether the resource is personally used or not.*

This does not apply to me but it might apply to people in some target audiences. For example, some Tamil speakers considered it a matter of pride that the BBC broadcast in their language.

Education: *People are aware that (digital) resources contribute to their own or to other people's sense of culture, education, knowledge and heritage and therefore value it.*

This does not apply to me, at least not in the case described. I sought to be informed, not educated. It would not be wise to conflate information with education: the BBC's mission to 'inform, educate and entertain' has three parts for a reason.

Community: *People benefit from the experience of being part of a community that is afforded by the (digital) resource.*

Again, this does not apply to me personally but fits well with concepts such as the 'global conversation'.

Inheritance/Bequest: *People derive benefit from the inheritance passed down to them and satisfaction from the fact that their descendants and other members of the community will in the future be able to enjoy a (digital) resource if they so choose.*

This does not apply to me and I am not sure that it is relevant to much of the WS audience. In places such as India where young people talk of the BBC as 'something their parents/grandparents used to listen to', this is not generally something that makes them more likely to use the BBC themselves; it is more likely to be a way of saying that the BBC is no longer relevant, necessary or accessible to themselves.

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| <p>In summary, the correspondence between the values I described above and Tanner's Drivers is not good. <i>Utility</i> works to some extent as a way to group some aspects, and <i>Prestige</i>, <i>Education</i>, and <i>Community</i> may apply to other members of the audience. But there are important values that underpin my choices but which do not fit at all comfortably with any of the Value Drivers.</p> |
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6 Conclusions

Three things strike me from this exercise in self-examination:

1. Many of the measures used in the past by WS appear relevant, at least to my own values.
2. Habitual, committed users of WS are an important resource for investigation of values and motivations.
3. We should not assume that audience values will fit into Tanner's Value Drivers.