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UK Press and Tourist Discourses of Iran: a Study in Multiple Realities

The aim of this article is to investigate the competing discourses of Iran currently circulating in British society, and their influence on the tourist destination image of that country. A mixed method approach was adopted within a social constructionist perspective: this consisted of a Foucauldian discourse analysis of news reports in a range of British broadsheet newspapers, interviews with tourists who had visited Iran, and analysis of travel blogs written by a second group of tourists who had also previously visited the country. The findings show that the leading British broadsheets examined exclusively circulate an extremely negative discourse of Iran-as-Polity, originating in United States and mediated by the British political field, whose main components are nuclear issues, danger, hostility and terrorism. Though UK tourists to the country are often drawn there initially by a largely Orientalist discourse of Iran-as-Persia, i.e. as a site of historical monuments, during and post-visit they develop a counter-discourse of Iran-as-Society which concentrates on the modernity of certain aspects of the country and above all the hospitality of its citizens, a discourse which is then further disseminated in the form of travel blogs. The article also mobilises Bourdieu's concept of academic capital to examine the role of education in providing resources to resist the discourse of Iran-as-Polity. In its range of sources analysed, the article offers a relatively novel approach to investigating the role of media discourse and the internet – the latter framed using Foucault's 'genealogical' approach – in the formation of competing tourist destination images of Iran.

Introduction

Iran was one of the Middle East's top tourist attractions in the period 1967-1977 (Morakabati, 2011), a situation which changed radically after the 1979 revolution. Visitor numbers from the UK (the focus of this study) fell rapidly, dropping during our research time-frame of 2007-2011 from an already meagre 7,800 to an exiguous 5,500 per annum (Euromonitor International, 2013, p. 15). The role of destination image in the travel decision process has been extensively studied, and there can be little doubt that

the at times extremely negative coverage Iran has suffered from in the UK is a key factor here. In this article we look at the role the UK press has played in this process as well as the alternative discourses both consumed and generated by British tourists themselves, enabling them to re-imagine Iran as a destination worth visiting.

The Role of the Media in the Formation of Destination Images

The mass media play a significant role in agenda-setting (McCombs, 2004), shaping public opinion (Cohen, 1963) and indeed in the perpetuation of bias (Entman, 2007). Gamson and Modigliani (1989, p. 1), for example, argue that ‘media discourse and public opinion are treated as two parallel systems of constructing meaning’, while for Behnam and Zenouz (2008, p. 199), ‘The media has the ability to construct the way we think about a subject, whether as a benevolent or a malevolent construction’. As a primary source of public opinion formation, the media can, therefore, be simultaneously viewed as a key organic information source (Gunn, 1972) impacting on tourism image development (Gartner, 1994; Mercille, 2005). In a now well-known empirical study Baloglu and McCleary (1999) developed a model to determine which factors influence and form the image of a destination. They suggest two main vectors – Personal Factors and Stimulus Factors – the second of which include the media. Tasci and Gartner (2007) suggest that news media in particular, because of their credibility and market penetration, can be highly influential in image formation, particularly when they portray dramatic events such as political upheaval, riots, terrorism, insurgency, crime and war.

Despite these useful suggestions, however, the role of the media has not been thoroughly investigated in the field of tourism research, even less so in the case of Iran. This article will show how, in relation to the specific case of Iran, the UK news media

play an important role in ‘shaping the individual and collective consciousness by organising and circulating the knowledge which people have of their own everyday life and of the more remote contexts of their lives’ (Adoni and Mane, 1984, p. 325).

Methodology

We approached our topic from a social constructionist perspective, since the concept of ‘image’ and its formation process is a complex area in which not only individuals’ personal factors and characteristics but more importantly societal and media discourses are also major determinants. Our approach was inductive and therefore driven by the data gathered, and the units of analysis were the various texts generated by the interviews which we held and by the newspaper and internet searches which followed.

The period 2007-2011 was chosen due to its significance in Iran’s recent political history, both nationally and internationally. Vali Nasr – a Senior Advisor to American Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke – has pointed out that during this period ‘U.S.-Iran relations [reached] today’s low point of incessant talk of incipient war’ (2013, p. 100). A few pages later (2013, p. 109), referring to the change in US policy in 2003 when a uranium-enrichment facility was discovered at Natanz in Iran, he enumerated a number of fears which will recur in our analysis:

From the outset, Washington declared a nuclear Iran to be unacceptable ... Iran’s nuclear capability could also breathe new life into Islamic fundamentalism, energizing an ideology that Washington hopes will end up in the trash bin of history. Finally, Iran’s nuclear arsenal could spark proliferation throughout one of the world’s most volatile regions – not a comforting prospect for the West...

In addition the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in the 2005 and 2009

elections, which were followed by a continuous and steep deterioration in Iran's political projection in the west, likewise played a key role in our choice of time-frame.

The first phase of the project took the form of post-visit semi-structured interviews with British cultural tourists who had visited Iran in the period 2007-2011. As mentioned above, the number of UK tourists visiting Iran during this period was very small. For reasons of client confidentiality, respondents proved extremely difficult to identify, and a number of those eventually located declined our requests for interviews. Even so ten interviews were conducted between May 2009 and October 2011 in order to establish respondents' understandings of the country both before and after visiting it. Outline demographics and news-source preferences are provided in Table 1:

[Table 1 here]

Given the small number of interviews we were able to secure we then turned our attention to travel-blogs as complementary sources of destination image formation. Travel blogs constitute an extremely valuable but so far relatively overlooked resource in this area of tourism study: as Choi et al. (2007, p. 118) point out, 'research on the Internet as an image formation agent is still at an infancy stage'. In total fifty-two travel-blog entries posted by twenty British tourists who had visited Iran between 2007 and 2011 were identified and reviewed, expanding our source material considerably. These were collected from two of the most popular online travel-blogs: <http://www.travelblog.org/> and <http://www.travelpod.com/>.

The third element in the investigation was the analysis of articles from a number of leading British broadsheets, the form of news consumption most frequently

mentioned by our respondents (see Table 1). Articles were identified by conducting an advanced search on the *ProQuest* newspapers database and 108, again from the period 2007 to 2011, were selected from four Sunday broadsheets – *Observer*, *Sunday Times*, *Independent on Sunday* and *Sunday Telegraph*. The Sunday editions were chosen to reduce the number of articles to a manageable quantity due to the very large volume of news items identified in an initial all-week sweep: for instance, the initial search on the *Guardian* (the *Observer*'s sister daily paper) alone produced more than 3500 articles on Iran during this period. The final breakdown per title was as follows:

- *Observer*: 38 articles
- *Sunday Times*: 37 articles
- *Independent on Sunday*: 8 articles
- *Sunday Telegraph*: 25 articles

The articles on Iran produced by our search originated without exception from the political and international sections of these newspapers. Though we did not restrict the search to these sections, no articles relating to Iran were identified in any other section such as Leisure or Tourism.

Analytical Approach

Our analysis of the data collected – which is based on Michel Foucault's thinking on discourse primarily as developed in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) – identifies three separate discourses at play: Iran-as-Polity, Iran-as-Persia and Iran-as-Society. This kind of analysis is, in our view, by far the most appropriate for a study located within a social constructionist ontology: As Strydom argues, the 'discursive field' is to be understood 'in the sense of the structured context of the constructive activities of

collective actors who produce and reproduce reality' (2000, p. 82). For Foucault discursive formations are 'systems of dispersion' (1972, p. 41): 'dispersion' because they are spread over very numerous sites, and 'systems' because they are not simply spaces of unrestrained creativity but are places where particular constructions of reality are repeatedly articulated. Since we are dealing with numerous texts from different sources (newspapers, blogs, interviews) and are searching for the regularly recurring elements across this range of texts, such an approach proved particularly productive.

Any discourse analysis mobilising the concepts and insights developed by Foucault will rest on a number of basic principles:

- A discourse is reproduced by repetitive articulation of statements across a range of sources
- Though too numerous to be counted, these statements have a material existence as actual utterances and as events with precise spatio-temporal coordinates
- Statements are uttered from institutional or other 'surfaces of emergence' (the media, political, commercial, religious institutions, the blogosphere) which largely determine their reach, their texture and their credibility
- While statements may have identifiable authors, and the identity of these authors may be important from other points of view, from a Foucauldian perspective discourses are anonymous in the sense that the existence of the statements, and the surfaces and corresponding subject positions from which they emerge, are more important than the individual who utters them
- Discourses do not in any sense describe, but, as required by a social constructionist ontology, *produce* their object

Where Foucauldian discourse analysis differs most strikingly from other forms of textual analysis is in its refusal to indulge in textual exegesis. As Foucault puts it in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972, p. 84):

What are described as ‘systems of formation’ do not constitute the terminal stage of discourse, if by that term one means the texts (or words) as they appear, with their vocabulary, syntax, logical structure, or rhetorical organization. Analysis remains anterior to this manifest level ... in seeking the law of the dispersion of concepts... it questions neither the style nor the succession of the sentences; in short it leaves the final placing of the text in dotted outline.

The focus is always on the discursive formation as a dispersion, and its links with non-discursive institutional elements (the political field, the educational field), never on the isolated text. While we primarily mobilise Foucault’s ‘archaeological’ approach to discourse due to its ability to generate ‘a horizontal cross-section of the mechanisms which articulate different discursive events – local knowledges – to power’ (Revel, 2010, p. 80), we will address what is known as his ‘genealogical’ approach in our consideration later of what we have called the discourse of Iran-as-Society.

Since our approach is Foucauldian in inspiration, our research is not a search for ‘truth’, but an attempt to identify what Foucault himself calls ‘regimes of truth’:

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true (1980, p. 131).

In other words our concern is not to establish whether any of the discourses of Iran is in any sense ‘truer’ than any other, or indeed ‘true’ in any other sense: our aim is to identify the ‘regimes of truth’ at play, and the different versions of Iran which they produce.

This research was not originally conceived, nor in the event carried out within a specifically Orientalist frame. Nonetheless, the data gathered clearly supports Edward Said's central argument in *Orientalism* (1981) that the West produces the East according to its own (i.e. the West's) requirements, and that a certain understanding of Iran – as of Islam, the overall focus of his later book *Covering Islam* (1997) – has become 'an orthodoxy of [western] society. It enters the cultural canon, and this makes the task of changing it very difficult indeed' (1997, p. 157). In *Orientalism* he expressly acknowledges the influence of Foucault in its opening pages (1981, p. 3) and uses the term 'Orientalism' to refer to what he sees as a constellation of institutionalised discourses underlying Western attitudes toward the Middle East. Said argues that the institutionalisation of romanticised images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture was mainly an implicit justification for European and American colonial and imperial ambitions: in his own words, 'Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness' (1981, p. 204).

Newspaper Discourse: Iran-as-Polity

The analysis of the articles selected reveals that British broadsheets are heavily and consistently involved in the more or less constant (re)production of a dominant discourse which we might term Iran-as-Polity, a discourse deriving ultimately from the American political field – American political actors are frequently mentioned by name – and mediated by the UK political field as a result of its close alliance with the United States on this issue. Below we provide some examples of how the various elements of this discourse are realised in actual texts (limitations of space mean that this sample is necessarily small, but it is broadly representative of the discourse as it emerges over the

one hundred plus newspapers texts analysed).

Nuclear Issues

This element of the discourse is reproduced across the full range of newspapers analysed, irrespective of political inclination – from the conservative *Sunday Telegraph* and *Sunday Times* through the centrist *Independent on Sunday* to the left-leaning *Observer* – and is often quite explicitly a reproduction of a discourse emanating from the United States:

Dick Cheney, the [American] vice-president, piled on the pressure last week, calling Iran a ‘growing obstacle to peace in the Middle East’ and vowing ‘serious consequences’ if it persisted with its nuclear programme (news article 40).

President Barack Obama added later that global leaders were ‘deeply troubled’ by Iran’s nuclear programme. Obama warned Iran on Friday that the world would not wait indefinitely for it to end its nuclear defiance (news article 20).

Iran’s ‘nuclear issues are strongly associated with the development of nuclear weapons. In a clear expression of ‘the Eurocentric tendencies of the media apparatus’ (Shohat and Stam, 1994, p. 125) – for these authors the phenomenon of Eurocentrism includes countries such as Australia and the United States as well as Europe more strictly geographically defined – this discourse likewise sets up a divide between a peace-loving western ‘us’ and a despotic Iran acting in ‘defiance’ of the civilised world.

Danger/Risk

A second repeatedly occurring theme represents Iran as an inherently dangerous place, in this case to its *own* population since here ordinary Iranians are the victims of the violence:

Terror in Tehran. Ahmadinejad wins again. A smash in the face, a kick in the balls – that’s how police deal with protestors after Iran’s poll kept the hardliners in power (news article 81).

There has been a global campaign to persuade Iran to end stoning, a disgustingly barbaric punishment which inflicts pain of the same order as impaling, Genghis Khan’s favourite method of execution. The reason is that a large portion of Iran’s leadership, and of its population, is not ashamed or embarrassed: they think stoning is entirely right and proper (news article 84).

Years on death row for bride, 15, too young to be stoned. She was only 14 years old when she was forced into a loveless marriage with an older man. Yet within a year of her wedding Azar Vagheri had been charged with adultery and sentenced to be stoned to death (news article 69).

Although Islam is not specifically mentioned here, the references to stoning – an expression of westerners’ ‘morbid fascination with “Islamic punishment”’ (Said, 1981, p. 60) – make it clear that this is what is being referred to. The journalists are, therefore, reproducing a likewise long-standing American-inspired discourse which Said identifies as emerging in the early nineteen-eighties when ‘the daily [American] press discovered Islam’s ascendancy and the medieval attributes of its punishments, jurisprudence, and conception of women’ (ibid., p. 71). As a result, he argues, ‘To Westerners and Americans, “Islam” represents a resurgent atavism, which suggests not only the threat of a return to the Middle Ages but the destruction of what is regularly referred to as the democratic order in the Western world’ (ibid.: 55). A little later he adds: ‘The irony is that Western views of Islam on the whole prefer to associate “Islam” with what many Muslims themselves are opposed to in the current scene: punishment, autocracy, medieval modes of logic, theocracy’ (ibid., p. 64).

Hostility

Hostility to *other* countries and nationals is the third dominant recurring theme, which again can be found across all the titles analysed, irrespective of political preferences or leanings. Victims of this hostility are primarily British or American:

Appearance of senior staff member in a mass trial in Tehran is condemned as ‘an outrage’. The Foreign Office reacted with fury last night after a senior worker at the British embassy in Iran was charged with spying (news article 80).

Journalist ‘tricked’ by Iran into spy confession is jailed for eight years. A former BBC journalist and beauty queen has been sentenced to eight year in prison in Iran for spying for the US after being ‘tricked’ into confessing, her father said yesterday (news article 98).

US student held in Iran torture prison. ESHA MOMENI, an American student visiting Iran, has been arrested and held in solitary confinement in the notorious section 209 of Tehran’s Evin prison for daring to campaign for women’s rights (news article 44).

This theme is quite specifically reproduced in the recent travel advice issued by the British government to anyone considering visiting Iran (2014):

British travellers to Iran face greater risks than nationals of many other countries due to high levels of suspicion about the UK and the UK government’s limited ability to assist in any difficulty. There’s a risk that British nationals could be arbitrarily detained in Iran despite their complete innocence. British nationals were arbitrarily detained in 2010 and 2011, and there is a risk of this occurring again (www.gov.uk).

This is a very clear example of the same discourse being reproduced across a range of sites and by different institutional actors.

Terrorism

A further repeatedly occurring theme is ‘terrorism’, which Iran is accused of supporting

both regionally and internationally.

British Special Forces operating on the border between Afghanistan and Iran have uncovered fresh evidence that Tehran is actively backing insurgents fighting UK troops. Documented proof that Iran is supplying the Taliban with devastating roadside bomb-making equipment has been passed by British officials to Tehran, prompting fears that the war in Afghanistan may escalate into a regional armed conflict (news article 37).

The Tehran regime has been a sponsor of terrorism across the Middle East, not least Iraq, where its agents played a key part in the humiliating defeat of Britain's army of occupation (news article 90).

This theme is the only one to expressly (rather than implicitly) raise the issue of Islam:

Danger of Iran's continuing support for Islamic terrorist groups and its controversial uranium enrichment programme (news article 101).

In this it appears again to reproduce a primarily American discourse, in relation to which Said (1981: 77) argued almost thirty-five years ago that:

To sift through the immense amount of material generated by the takeover of the United States Embassy in Tehran is to be struck by a number of things. First of all, it seemed that "we" were at bay, and with us the normal, democratic, rational order of things. Out there, writhing in self-provoked frenzy was "Islam" in general, whose manifestation of the hour was a disturbingly neurotic Iran.

Summary of Iran-as-Polity

The above (relatively small) sample from our much larger corpus of articles demonstrates the extent to which British broadsheets are actively involved in the (re)production and circulation of a relentlessly damaging discourse of Iran. None of the 108 articles reviewed as part of this research – nor indeed any part of the newspapers in

question – projected Iran in a less one-sided, far less an even remotely positive manner. We are therefore dealing, at least as far as the official public sphere is concerned, with a truly ‘hegemonic discourse ... which overwhelms or suppresses’ competing discourses on the same topic (Strydom, 2000, p. 51), these being thereby ‘disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 82).

A Mediating Discourse: Iran-as-Persia

A second discourse which is also largely institutional in nature – though emanating from the educational rather than the political field, and therefore also counting among Personal Factors as far as destination-image formation is concerned – is one we have named Iran-as-Persia. This discourse, which is found throughout the blogs analysed and also appears to some extent in the interviews, produces Iran as the coincidental geographical site of historical wonders of various kinds. It contains many references to *Lonely Planet* – our interviewees’ guide book of choice (see Table 1) – and ample evidence of obvious educational capital:

I wanted to visit the ruins of Persepolis – the ancient ceremonial capital of Persia that was destroyed by Alexander the Great in 330 BC. I read about Persepolis from the ancient Greek historian Herodotus who recounted strange and lurid tales of Persian, Median and Babylonian kings (blog 5).

It’s a source of great excitement for me to revisit, at least in my mind, the wonderful city of Esfahan. Good ole Lonely Planet describes Esfahan as ‘Iran’s masterpiece, the jewel of ancient Persia and one of the finest cities in the Islamic world’ ... Robert Byron was also clearly impressed when he ranked ‘Isfahan among those rarer places like Athens or Rome, which are the common refreshment of humanity’ (blog 24).

This discourse also relies heavily on photographs structured around a cultured and cultural ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry, 1990), foregrounding buildings and architecture to the almost complete exclusion of people: such images are in fact strongly reminiscent of the tourist photographs analysed by Bourdieu in his research into the ‘middle-brow art’ of amateur photography (1990, pp. 36-7):

Especially typical is the photograph in which one can just make out P. [the photographer’s wife], a tiny dot waving her arm, in front of the Sacré-Coeur, taken, as so often, from a long way off, because the photographer wants to capture the whole monument as well as the person: in order to spot the person one must, as they say, ‘know that she’s there’.

In some ways this discourse offers a mirror image of Iran-as-Polity, presenting a beautiful and reassuring Persia of the past in stark contrast to the ugly and threatening Iran of the present, which is merely its geographical container. In the interviewees some even openly acknowledged the Orientalist nature of this vision:

To a certain extent I went with a kind of Orientalist point of view looking for kind of, certain ideas about Iran and Persia as a kind of luxurious place with mystery, poetry and roses and it is always kinds of clichés (Interviewee 3).

But while it is romanticising rather than demonising, both discourses are totalising in their intent and avoid any real engagement with the lives of Iranian citizens in the here and now. Iran-as-Persia does, nonetheless, operate as a mediating discourse which allows cultural tourists to imagine Iran as a very different place which they would like to visit.

Tourist Discourse: Iran-as-Society

Neither the interviewees nor the bloggers were in any sense naïve about the political

problems in Iran, as the following quotes will show:

I mean people were fine and were lovely. I wouldn't have any fear of the Iranian people. The government that you have now ... well I won't say anything about that (Interviewee 4).

That's not to say that Iran does [not] have a definite image problem. It's a member of the 'Axis of Evil' – according to the Bush administration, then it's the whole Islamic theocracy of a government (the enforced wearing of the veil for women, the banning of alcohol, Western music, ties and even 'decadent' Western hairstyles such as the beloved mullet, etcetera), or the *we-want-a-nuclear-option-because-we-think-that's-what-the-Middle-East-needs-right-now* – and being caught lying about it (blog 3).

There was also one reference to a certain level of apprehension regarding hair being on display, though the apprehension appears to be more the guide's (Ali) than the tourists:

When we arrived at bush camp, the women were allowed to lower their headscarf's but Ali told us to *always* have them in reach at all times, it was not so nice, we only had them on a day and we were all fed up with them already (blog 38).

Despite this, however, tourists returning from Iran were able to develop a counter-discourse of Iran-as-Society which was widely disseminated throughout the blogs and present in the interviews. Its main elements are surprise at unexpected signs of 'modernity' and above all appreciation of its inhabitants' hospitality.

The 'modernity' referred to here relates primarily to certain features of the infrastructure ('excellent roads'), an unexpected openness to a range of elements of 'western' culture, and in particular what is seen as the style sense of the younger women in Tehran:

Getting into Tehran was unreal: suddenly the women's headscarves were slipping back to reveal bands of hair and their clothes were getting tighter, brighter and less tent like. Everything was more modern and less uncomfortable (blog 48).

Islam in particular appears in a more 'negotiated' rather than 'oppressive' or atavistic form:

As well as being some of the friendliest people we have encountered ... the Iranians had a few other surprises in store for us. Firstly they were far less conservative than we had expected, with the boundaries of hejab being stretched to the absolute limits. Jeans and vast amounts of hair are regularly displayed by the females of the younger generation (blog 42).

Some bloggers express outright surprise and wonder to find that a range of British cultural products (television drama, football) are also available, suggesting a country which is in some senses at least much more open to the outside world than the Iran of Iran-as-Polity, routinely presented as a pariah. Friendly locals are even able to discuss these and other things in excellent English, again suggesting an openness to other cultures:

Get this: I'm actually watching the BBC hospital drama 'Casualty' in my room in Tehran. This is just one of many strange and wonderful things I've experienced since I arrived in the Islamic Republic of Iran (blog 3).

Perhaps *the* most repeatedly occurring theme is 'Iranian hospitality', in stark contrast to the newspaper discourse of hostility:

Everywhere we go the people are wonderful, usually greeting us with 'Welcome to Iran'. I have had a man stop the traffic for me and a family invite me to their home in Northern Iran if I am in the area! (blog 45).

‘Thank you for coming to my country.’ Wow. When was the last time you were in a foreign country and were thanked just for coming. ‘I hope you have a very good visit.’ With that he smiled and just wandered on his way (blog 25).

The interviewees in particular speak of their changed views of the country:

So actually that just gets blown away as soon as you arrive there, you think to yourself what was all the fuss about? Why did all of my friends say IRAN!! because you get there and you find it’s a great place to visit, it’s cheap, it’s got great weather, it’s got great food, it’s got friendly people and it’s got lots to see (Interviewee 2).

They are totally changed, totally, totally changed. I found that the people were just so, so friendly, in fact at times overly friendly (Interviewee 5).

The contrast between this ‘lived’ Iran and the Iran of the media is made clear:

On reflection we found Iran to be one of our favourite countries that we have visited. The friendliness and openness of its people is a far cry from the images of Islamic extremism painted by the Western media (blog 42).

This last quote clearly identifies the tourist-generated discourse of Iran-as-Society as a targeted counter-discourse to the dominant media discourse circulating in the UK. The discourse of Iran-as-Society in fact stands in contrast to both Iran-as-Polity and Iran-as-Persia in its willingness to acknowledge the complexity of the internal situation, and to engage directly with Iranian people in their everyday lives. Our interviews confirmed that, while the discourse of Iran-as-Society is clearly a minority discourse at a societal level in the UK, it nonetheless enjoys an almost hegemonic status amongst British tourists who have actually visited the country.

Academic/Educational Capital

Our interviews in particular showed that education played an important role both in maintaining the discourse of Iran-as-Persia and questioning Iran-as-Polity, a combination which subsequently enabled visiting Iran and the emergence of the discourse of Iran-as-Society. The tourists whom we interviewed were without exception well-educated professionals, and many of them described how they were able to access alternative discourses of Iran by reading histories of the country, its literature (in particular poetry) or following university courses on Iranian cinema. Comparing the journalistic field to that of the social sciences – though his comparison could easily be extended to the educational field in general – French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that ‘the journalistic field is characterized ... by a high degree of heteronomy. It is a very weakly autonomous field’ (2005, p. 33): in other words it is ‘increasingly subject to the constraints of the economy and of politics’ (2005, p. 40), or to what he calls ‘the field of power’ (Wacquant, 1993). The relatively greater (if diminishing) autonomy of the educational field has clearly allowed it to sustain spaces – in History, for example, or Film Studies (both mentioned by our interviewees) – where alternative understandings of Iran, partly mediated through the discourse of Persia, can be generated and maintained, along with a more critical stance vis-à-vis news media output relating to the country, which some described dismissively as ‘that sort of thing’ (Interviewee 1) or ‘the usual stuff/the usual clichés’ (Interviewee 6).

The notion of ‘academic/educational capital’ developed by Bourdieu is particularly productive here:

academic capital is in fact the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and cultural transmission by the school (the efficiency of which depends on the amount of cultural capital directly inherited from the family) (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 14-15).

Individuals with access to significant reserves of ‘educational capital’ are able to use this to acquire information from a range of sources different from those available to people without similar ‘educational capital’, including, in the case of our interviewees, other news sources (see Table 1). However, while Bourdieu sees the acquisition of such capital as primarily conservative in its effects – as the development of ‘a general, transposable disposition towards legitimate culture’ (1984, p. 15) – our research shows that this is not necessarily always the case, and while an interest in Iran-as-Persia may well come within ‘legitimate culture’ the module on Iranian cinema followed by Interviewee 6 does not. Talking of her course, she has this to say about Iran:

I also read more around it because when you are studying film you need to look at the context in which the films are produced etc. so I started reading more about the politics of the country and its history and now really kind of started my fascination on this.

The well-educated individuals interviewed here demonstrate that ‘educational capital’ can also be mobilised to ‘read against the grain’ of what is projected as the quasi-‘official’ understanding of Iran in the British broadsheets and to generate alternative knowledges to those produced and circulated by the discourse of Iran-as-Polity.

Conclusion

It is not our intention in this article to suggest either that the discourse of Iran-as-Polity is entirely lacking in foundation – Iran has never attempted, for example, to disguise its ambitions to be a dominant regional player – nor that UK journalists should not have covered these issues. Foucault’s own journalistic writings on the Iranian Revolution in 1978-79 show a clear movement from initial enthusiasm to eventual disappointment, the latter being attributed to the religious element of the revolution being unable or

unwilling to ‘efface itself for the benefit of more substantial forces and less “archaic” ideologies’, to ‘the institutional solidity of a clergy whose hold over the population was strong, and which had strong political ambitions’ and to ‘various forms of virulent xenophobia, as well as the global stakes and the regional rivalries And the subjugation of women, and so on’ (Afary and Anderson, 2005, p. 265). Much of this was still in evidence when our data gathering took place, not to mention the well-documented brutality of the Ahmadinejad regime (Nasr, 2013: 116).

We do, however, want to critique what we see as the British newspapers’ slavish reproduction of what was in effect a USA agenda, their uncritical endorsement of the UK government’s position in relation to that, and above all the absence of any attempt to produce a more balanced and complex understanding of Iran as a country inhabited by almost seventy-eight million people. However, while the strength of the media-generated discourse of Iran-as-Polity cannot be ignored, our research has demonstrated that alternative discourse of Iran are indeed available in British society and recent technological advances have provided a platform through which they can be diffused on what is still a relatively small scale but one which nonetheless gives them much greater reach than they had at any time in the past.

While Foucault’s “architectural” approach allowed us to isolate the three discourses analysed above, his later ‘genealogical’ approach (developed in the nineteen-seventies) offers considerable insight into the emerging conditions of possibility which enabled the (as yet small scale, but growing) presence of the discourse of Iran-as-Society in the UK. In this later phase, Foucault turned his search for the drivers of change to the ‘inversion of the accidental over the allegedly inevitable’ (Prado, 2000, p. 34), of the chance entanglement of events which leads to the unpredictable

‘appropriation of a vocabulary against those who once used it’ (Foucault, 1998: 381). The result of unplanned individual initiatives made possible by the uncoordinated development and expansion of the internet and slowly combining in unpredictable ways from the mid-nineties on, blogs have now become ‘part of a fundamental shift in how we communicate ... We have moved from a culture dominated by mass media, using one-to-many communication, to one where participatory media, using many-to-many communication, is becoming the norm’ (Rettberg, 2008, p. 31). As this process continues, we can expect the ‘new vocabulary’ on Iran, and the new Iran it produces, to likewise develop with as yet unforeseeable consequence. And perhaps recent, and for some equally unpredictable, developments in Iran – the election of a new president in 2013 and the first signs of a more open political discourse in relation to the west – will enable the emergence of other as yet unforeseeable Irans in the future, ones which Britons may well experience as a more appealing tourist destination.

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| No | Age | M/F | Occupation | News sources |
|-----------|------------|------------|------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | 73 | F | Retired Professor of French | <i>Guardian, Observer, television</i> |
| 2 | 41 | M | Internet banking engineer | Internet websites (<i>Anti-war.com</i>), <i>Times, Sunday Times</i> |
| 3 | 43 | M | Lecturer | (No particular preference given) |
| 4 | 61 | F | Librarian | <i>Sunday Times</i> |
| 5 | 54 | F | Financial services | Television, newspapers |
| 6 | 21 | M | Full-time student | Aljazeera English, <i>Independent, Guardian, English edition of Le Monde</i> |
| 7 | 57 | M | Strategic communication consultant | <i>Times, Financial Times, New York Times, Washington Post Online, Guardian, Telegraph, Mail, Sun, Time, Economist</i> |
| 8 | 32 | F | Civil engineer | <i>Telegraph, Economist, Time</i> |
| 9 | 67 | F | Retired | (No particular preference given) |
| 10 | 28 | M | English teacher | <i>Times, Guardian, Telegraph, Independent</i> |

Table 1: Interviewee Profile