

Media framing: iran's
nuclear weapons
program essay
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1. Introduction and Objective

The United States is today the richest and most powerful nation in the world. Its wealth, massive repository of human talent, the technology at its disposal and huge armory of sophisticated weapons allows it the power to engage most nations in the world with the confidence of a goliath staring across the battlefield. Its huge economic influence enables it to bully mostly all nations into submission and force them into alliances and agreements, often inimical to their interests.

The only area of discomfiture is the presence of a handful of other nations who have access to nuclear weapons, and though far poorer, have the military capability to cause horrific devastation. Nevertheless, as a global force capable of influencing events, even the United States acknowledges the supremacy of the power of the media and its ability to change the course of events, locally in the United States and elsewhere in the world. The importance of having the media on its side is the most important item on the agenda of the US government, possibly even more important than controlling the vote at the United Nations.

The US is now engaged in a bitter war over terrorism, a conflict that has taken serious shape after the terror attacks of September 11 and led to wars and deployment of western armies in Afghanistan and Iraq. The prime enemy is Islamic militancy, a force that is also pan global, and while nowhere near the US in wealth and power uses fanatical and brain washed people to carry out its aggression. Even the pan Islamic terrorists recognize the enormous reach of the media and make efforts to use it to reach out with

their message of Islamic outrage and confrontation with their actual and perceived enemies.

The power of the media and its responsibilities have been recognized for several years, especially in the US, where it has, on various occasions been able to cause a paradigm shift in public opinion and changed the course of events. The example of George Bush Sr. is a case in point. After the conclusion of the gulf war in 1991, Bush's popularity rating went up to a high of 91%, the highest a President has got in American history, primarily because of the extensive media coverage of his firm leadership. Yet, a year later, he lost at the polls, apparently without any scandal or public debacle to account for the embarrassment.

While many put this reversal of the status quo down to unreliable and capricious public opinion, analysts feel that this was mainly due to a media led shift in public perception, which veered away from the war and focused on the economic travails that had beset the United States. Minor changes in presentation of the economic scenario led to significant shifts in public perception and caused the sharpest decline in popularity ratings.

The answer to national mood swings appears to be psychological rather than logical. Seemingly, inconsequential changes in issue presentation have been shown to cause dramatic shifts in public preference. Researchers Krosnick & Brannon (1993) used national survey data to answer this very question.

During 1992, the media refocused its attentions from the war to the national economy. Based on sophisticated statistical analyses, Krosnick & Brannon

demonstrated that this media refocus largely accounted for Bush's declining popularity in 1992. (Rhodes, 1997)

Hypotheses like these argue that the average recipients of media information are gullible and easily led. Their other preoccupations and lack of time lead them into believing media statements without thinking for themselves. " Communications scientist Robert Entman states that " Journalists may follow the rules for objective reporting and yet convey a dominant framing of the news that prevents most audience members from making a balanced assessment of a situation." (Rhodes, 1997)

It is the object of this research assignment to analyze the issue of Media Framing and how through predetermined interpretation of actual news events in the media, public perceptions and later opinions go through large swings and lead to decisions that, on occasions may have profound effects on national and global affairs. The researcher has attempted an analysis of the role of media framing in the USA, and by extension, to a certain extent in Europe, on the topic of Iran's nuclear intentions, peaceful or otherwise, to arrive at conclusions on the magnitude of the concern, especially with relevance to its potentially huge global impact.

2. Media Framing

It is a stock argument of media manipulators to come forth with the case that most often news biases are involuntary and inescapable, mostly so because of pressures arising from difficult deadlines, human misinterpretations, costs and the necessity of making a complex issue understandable.

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A certain amount of selectivity is inescapable. Statements like these justify various methods of news distortion, chief among the being the deliberate suppression of facts by selective omission, direct editorial and television speaker attacks, labeling and acceptance of false statements at face value. By far the most effective way to manipulate opinion is through framing.

Framing depends upon bending the truth rather than on deliberate lies and gives a great deal of coherence and basis to propagation of false information. Journalists, TV presenters and other media communicators use selective emphasis, determined trimmings and flourishes to spread a message that is significantly different from the position on the ground without losing the pretence of objectivity. A frame thus becomes the key concept or idea on which relevant events focus to emphasize the theme. Thus, news and information is rooted in a significant context to carry the message of the frame.

Framing is achieved in the way the news is packaged, the amount of exposure, the placement (front page or buried within, lead story or last), the tone of presentation (sympathetic or slighting), the headlines and photographs, and, in the case of broadcast media, the accompanying visual and auditory effects. Newscasters use themselves as auxiliary embellishments. They cultivate a smooth delivery and try to convey an impression of detachment that places them above the rough and tumble of their subject matter.

Television commentators and newspaper editorialists and columnists affect a knowing style and tone designed to foster credibility and an aura of

certitude—or what might be called authoritative ignorance—as expressed in remarks like “ How will this situation end? Only time will tell” or “ No one can say for sure” (better translated as, “ I don’t know and if I don’t know then nobody does”). Sometimes the aura of authoritative credibility is preserved by palming off trite truisms as penetrating truths. So newscasters learn to fashion sentences like “ The space launching will take place as scheduled if no unexpected problems arise” and “ Because of lagging voter interest, election-day turnout is expected to be light” and “ Unless Congress acts soon, this bill is not likely to go anywhere.” (Parenti)

Use of framing thus becomes an extremely potent force in influencing public opinion and then using it to push through, or make it easier to take executive decisions that may have far-reaching effects, which would not have been possible otherwise. Framing is, most often, dependent upon sponsors who have an interest in the benefits that will arise for them through the change in public opinion. Framing thus does not occur in a cultural, political or social void. Political bodies, social groups, business or cultural elites and social movements influence the creation of frames, which then govern the interpretation of events to fit into particular frames.

News stories, then, become a forum for framing contests in which these actors compete in sponsoring their definitions of political issues. The ability of a frame to dominate news discourse depends on multiple complex factors, including its sponsor’s economic and cultural resources, its sponsor’s knowledge of journalistic practices, and its resonance with broader political values or tendencies in American culture. Given the practices of American journalism and the significance of resources in the successful sponsoring of

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frames, framing contests favor political and economic elites (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, (Ryan, Carragee, and Meinhofer 175)

Very often frames change in importance and prominence and change in response to the thinking of the sponsors or in their response to frames created by their opponents. The sponsors may, at times decide to restructure the frames to respond to changing environmental and political considerations. All the while, the public remains oblivious of the enormous actions that are taking place in the editorial rooms of newspapers and in the offices of TV companies in changing public opinion, believing that their opinion results only from an objective and intelligent analysis of events that are unfolding around them.

It is also but fair to stress that on many occasions framing is not done deliberately to brainwash the receivers with ideas that may not be correct. Sometimes it happens involuntarily and expresses the collective sensitivities of journalists to particular issues.

Shanto Iyengar, professor of political science and communication studies at UCLA, has pioneered the research in the framing effects of news coverage on public opinion and political choice. He explains that viewers are “ sensitive to contextual cues when they reason about national affairs.

Their explanations of issues like terrorism or poverty are critically dependent upon the particular reference points furnished in media presentations.” The frames for a given story are seldom conscientiously chosen but represent instead the effort of the journalist or sponsor to convey a story in a direct and meaningful way. As such, news frames are frequently drawn from, and <https://assignbuster.com/media-framing-irans-nuclear-weapons-program-essay-sample/>

reflective of, shared cultural narratives and myths and resonate with the larger social themes to which journalists tend to be acutely sensitive.

(London)

3. Media Framing of the Coverage of Iran's Nuclear plans

The issue of the US response to Iran concerns not just Americans but people all over the world, especially the citizens of western democracies, Israel and the Islamic nations. The US response to Iran at various global forums and at the United Nations has been stridently aggressive and called for severe actions against the nation, economic and possibly, also military if it continues with its nuclear program. This issue is of recent origin and after the Iraq WMD fiasco, there are many who believe that the US is again building up a trumped up case against Iran, similar in approach to the one conducted against Iraq.

The situation this time is however quite different. The absence of a tyrant like Saddam Hussein and the fact that Iran, to date does not have a history of unilateral aggression or global or regional adventurism, robs the anti Iran group of a focal point, which was so easily available in the case of Iraq. The unmasking of the untruth regarding Iraq's WMD capability as well as the large number of American lives lost in Afghanistan and Iraq have also made the US public apprehensive of committing themselves to another expensive, bloody and futile war and made them far more skeptical of reasons to take on a sharply aggressive posture on Iran.

The situation now involves two media frames one constructed by the stridently anti Iranian lobby and the other by groups who oppose any further

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American adventurism. These two media frames are working against each other. While the majority of the receivers feel the Iranian regime to be fundamental, orthodox, dictatorial and anti feminist, large-scale conviction about Iran's nuclear weapons plans still does not exist.

The proponents of peace and non-interference with Iran state that the Iran invasion would constitute the fourth aggression by the US after Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, the feeling is that it is already underway, not just with verbal attacks but also through aerial surveillance, intrusion by surveillance groups and bolstering of terrorist groups that are inimical to the Iranian regime. Edward Herman and David Peterson in their essay on US Aggression: target Iran (2005) state that numerous frames constructed to mobilize public opinion, suppress the following facts.

- There is no proof that Iran plans to go beyond the civilian uses of nuclear materials to which it is entitled under the NPT and the IAEA has never claimed that it has evidence of such weapons efforts or plans
- Both the United States and Israel possess large and usable nuclear arsenals, 18 and both have attacked other countries in violation of the UN Charter, which Iran has not yet done
- Iran is far less dangerous than Israel and the United States because it is very much weaker than the two that threaten it, and could only use nuclear weapons in self-defense-offensive use would be suicidal, which is not the case should the United States and Israel attack Iran
- Iran was secretive about its nuclear program because it recognized that the United States and Israel would have opposed it bitterly, but

Iran at least did sign up with the NPT and has allowed numerous
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intrusive inspections, whereas Israel was allowed to develop a nuclear weapons program secretly, with U. S., French and Norwegian aid, refused to join the NPT, and remains outside the inspections system

- Both the United States and Israel are virtual theocratic states, profoundly influenced by religious parties whose leaders are arrogant, racist, and militaristic, and who have posed persistent threats to international peace and security
- Both the United States and Israel have supported terrorists on a larger scale than Iran (e. g., Posada, Bosch and the Cuban terrorist network, the Nicaraguan contras, Savimbi and UNITA, the South Lebanon Army, among many others)
- The United States and Israel have destabilized the Middle East, by aggression and ethnic cleansing in violation of international law and by forcing a huge imbalance in which only Israel is allowed nuclear weapons among the countries of the Middle East, a condition which allowed Israel to invade Lebanon and enables it to ethnically cleanse the West Bank without threat of retaliation.

Similarly, there is no mention of the news report about the following September 19, 2005 statement made by the Mohamed El Baradei.

In a Sept. 19 statement accompanying his latest report to a meeting of the 35-country board of governors of the U. N.'s nuclear watchdog, International Atomic Energy Agency director general Mohammed El Baradei declared that " Iran continues to fulfill its obligations under the [I. A. E. A.] safeguards agreement and additional protocol by providing timely access to nuclear material, facilities and other locations." He added that I. A. E. A. inspectors

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have found no evidence that Iran has breached its commitments under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. (Lorimer)

Suppression of these key facts accompanies regular news reports and TV chat shows taking up the issue of human rights, women's suppression and the statements of Iranian leaders, illustrated below.

- Iran's top nuclear negotiator, in a speech to the nation's leading Islamic clerics and academics, has admitted what many in U. S. intelligence have been saying all along – namely, Tehran duped the West on its nuclear program by continuing its development while using diplomatic talks to lull the Europeans into inaction.
- At the closed meeting of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, Rowhani boasted that during talks to forestall Iran's nuclear program, which intelligence sources in the U. S. saw as part of an effort to build nuclear weapons, Tehran completed the installation of equipment needed to convert yellowcake at its Isfahan plant. The Europeans, he said, were convinced nothing was occurring at the plant.
- Libya's decision to negotiate with the U. S. and Britain to end its own nuclear program brought to light the proliferation network run by Pakistan atomic scientist A. Q. Khan. Khan's role in supplying nuclear-related equipment to Libya, revealed in surrendered documents, also exposed the fact he had supplied advanced centrifuges to Iran.
- Iran has just completed failed talks with Russia, which opposes U. N. sanctions, to find a way around the impasse
- The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), an opposition group

responsible for many of the revelations about Iran's secret program, <https://assignbuster.com/media-framing-irans-nuclear-weapons-program-essay-sample/>

has obtained a confidential parliamentary report revealing that Iran's legislators were unaware of the nuclear project and that it was funded off the books.

- *Iran is concealing many of its nuclear facilities from international controls and the activities show it is seeking nuclear weapons, according to a U. S. government report.*
- *Iran's past history of concealment and deception and nuclear fuel cycle infrastructure are most consistent with intent to acquire nuclear weapons," the report said.*

The above statements from an article on " Nuclear War Fear" are illustrative of the comments and news articles that keep on coming out in the media and are illustrative of the tenor of many television programs. Thus the frames for the American response to Iran's nuclear program are being constructed through a combination of suppression and distortion of facts and while it is still too early to predict the final outcome of the global response the motive is to steer national, European and global opinion away from Iran and to isolate it physically and politically.

4, The Internet Factor

The rapid proliferation of the internet and the relative ease with which it can be used as an opinion and information vehicle has made it the biggest chink in the media framing apparatus. The internet through its various sites, easily traceable through increasingly sophisticated search engines opens up contentious issues to numerous opinions of internet users and provides a

forum for exchange of ideas that may be radically different from the sponsors of media framing.

These sites serve as forums for free and frank public argument and their increasing popularity points to the disillusionment of common citizens with regular media, including their provisions for public debate like "the letters to the editor" column. While the opportunity for free debate often results in use of language that is not polite, these blog sites do serve the extremely useful facility of letting citizens express their opinion and undermine the efforts of sponsored media framing. A few excerpts from an AmericaBlog response to a Republican official's provocative speech on Iran will illustrate the nature of these responses.

- *In my opinion, the right way to respond to this is to sidestep the name calling and ask relentless questions regarding where bin Laden is, why he hasn't been captured, why things are going so badly in Iraq, what our exit strategy is, and so on. Let them call names. We'll respond with substance that matters increasingly to the American people, and we'll win the debate.*

Jonathan | 06. 23. 05 - 8: 31 pm |

- *I have to ask why the masses aren't outraged. I have to admit AmericaBlog and rawstory are where I get all of my news.*
- *They recruit the sons and daughters in our nations poorest school districts*
And to think those young soldiers don't even have the amour they need protect them.

These comments are also representative of the opinions of citizens and reveal a side of public opinion, suppressed by sponsored media framing. The internet could possibly, because of its free and untrammelled way of working be used as a significant force to oppose media framing.

5. Analysis and Conclusion

American media is today associated with media framing and the construction of public opinion, mostly in political and social matters. Media framing occasionally happens unconsciously without any real intent to frame public opinion and arises out of the sensitivity of particular journalists to events that they are in the process of covering. This is by far the lesser problem and is self-correcting to the extent that, on most occasions there will be differing points of view that will enable the recipients of information to get a fuller picture.

The danger occurs when powerful and elitist sponsors construct media frames to influence public opinion towards their causes by through selective omission and interpretive methods. Actions like these constitute a frontal attack on civil liberties, the right to obtain correct information and decide intelligently and freely on issues of concern. When the media fails in providing citizens with correct and unbiased information it fails in its basic purpose of a free press and the issue becomes a matter of great concern for free democracies that look upon the free press as one of its' important pillars.

The job of ... media is to make the universe of discourse safe for ... America, telling us what to think about the world before we have a chance to think

about it for ourselves. When we understand that news selectivity is likely to favor those who have power, position, and wealth, we move from a liberal complaint about the press' sloppy performance to a radical analysis of how the media serve the ruling circles all too well with much skill and craft.

It is important for the people of free democracies to realize that it will be difficult to develop a democratic society until citizens realize the extent of manipulation entrenched in the daily production of news and learn to differentiate and decide the validity of interpretations on their own. This is equally true of the Iran nuclear issue as well as a number of other causes, important to citizens.

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