Persian-Language Media Overseas as the Western Tools of Public Diplomacy: Framing COVID-19 Pandemics in Iran by VOA and BBC

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has attracted the international media since the first infection was identified in Wuhan, China in late 2019. Despite the similar frames all around the world, the present study assumes that international media have not portrayed the countries with confirmed outburst of the disease in similar terms. It is believed that diseases in the world are both political and biological. The present study, therefore, employs media framing, as conducted by Entman and Van Gorp, to analyze the first fifty VOA and BBC Persian news that covered the spread of COVID-19 in Iran. These agencies are chosen for their significant position in the western public diplomacy and their probable influence within the country. The results indicate that the outbreak of COVID-19 in Iran is framed in seven major frame packages: Iran at crisis, Iran as the source of regional and international threatening virus, lack of determination and confidence in decision making in Iran, Iran's incompetence and disqualification as an ill-equipped system, lying and hypocrisy in Iran, violation of human rights, and finally, Islamic political ideology as a source of corruption.

Introduction

Pandemics are not a new phenomenon in human history. They have at times changed the course of history and have altered the human way of life. Pandemics have even changed the political order of countries and continents. The Black Death, for instance, is marked as the end of the Middle Ages and the rule of Church in Europe (Gottfried, 1985). History reveals that the world after pandemics is a different world and despite all scientific advances, no one can remain immune from their devastating effects.

The political impact of pandemics is not a new phenomenon. However, in the contemporary era, pandemics seem to have a new function, that of being employed as political instruments for reaching specific political purposes. The present article attempts to indicate how a global pandemic such as COVID-19 can be used by political actors, such as media, as a tool for public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy in a conventional meaning is defined by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy as "means by which a sovereign country communicates with publics in other countries aimed at informing and influencing audiences overseas for the purpose of promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals" (USC Center for Public Diplomacy, n.d.). Academic exchange programs, cultural events, language courses, television, radio broadcasting services, etc. are put in the agenda to reinforce "the "sending" country's image or reputation as a way to shape the wider policy environment in the "receiving" country" (USC Center for Public Diplomacy, n.d.).

Influencing public opinion is a critical and essential element of power; Joseph Nye (2004) discusses the role of soft power and defines it as the ability of a state to shape the preferences of others through the attractiveness of an actor's culture or values (Nye,

2004). The dynamics of power have changed during the 21st century: it has become diffused, and the digital revolution has made it possible for citizens to come together and shape influential groups within and beyond countries. In this situation, soft power is significantly essential to the shaping of the outcomes (McClory & Harvey, 2016). In this regard, certain scholars believe that Western countries, especially the United States, have added "weapons of mass communication to weapons of war" as the revolution in communications, has even made diplomacy more public (Hoffman, 2002, p. 84).

In the age of information and technology, public diplomacy is at the heart of foreign policy (Melissen, 2005): a "new public diplomacy" (NPD) is therefore raised, which is mostly linked to communications and media. The new public diplomacy "can be characterized as a blurring of traditional distinctions between international and domestic information activities, between public and traditional diplomacy, and between cultural diplomacy, marketing and news management" (Vickers, 2004, p. 191). The interactivity between the states and non-state actors, along with media framing and information management are therefore among the major characteristics of the new public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2006).

Bruce Gregory (2008) argues that in the 21st century, which is the century of market- based globalization as well as the era of new digital and media environment, public diplomacy is not being conducted only by foreign ministers and government agencies. Rather, public diplomacy is conducted by the associations of states, along with sub-state and non-state actors. The old and new models of diplomacy are also different in their objectives: the latter does not look for persuasion, but seeks to understand the cultures, attitudes and behaviors in order to "build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance [one's]

interests and values" (Gregory, 2008). Meanwhile, NPD is not a postmodern propaganda; it serves as an emerging lifestyle in the 21st century, in which citizens have become independent observers as well as "assertive participants in international politics" regarding their access to information, (Melissen, 2005, p. 24). NPD, then, represents the role of non-state actors, the growing influence of transnational protest movements and the rise of new media, which put high restrictions on the power of official diplomacy (Melissen, 2005)

By launching their Persian language sections, Voice of America (VOA) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) are serving in accordance with the "new public diplomacy" of the West against Iran. The new pandemic of the Corona virus, then, is counted to be a tactical opportunity to measure the function of such diplomacy tools. For Iranians, though, using the media by their Anglo-Saxon rivals is not a new phenomenon, recalling the 1953 coup d'état, carried out by the United States and Britain (Wilber, 2000), relying on the remarkable role of the media and its propaganda against Mosaddegh (Sreberny & Torfeh, 2008).

The present research is an attempt to answer the following question: Through which framing techniques and portrayals, is Iran framed in the first fifty news items of VOA and BBC during the first month of the coronavirus outbreak as an extraordinary situation? According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 were acknowledged in Iran on February 19, 2020, with six cases, and continued to rise to 3.111 cases by the end of March, which corresponds to the period covered in this paper (World Health Organization, n.d.)

Providing a literature on similar uses of American media framing as its theoretical and methodological foundations as employed by Robert Entman (1993) and Baldwin Van Gorp (2010),

the present study extracts the founding frame packages in BBC Persian and VOA Persian. These two media outlets specifically stand among other foreign-language media, employed by Western countries for regime change in Iran (Levitsky & Way, 2006; Lewis, 2008).

Review of Literature

The social, political and economic attributes of a media system influence the way in which news is shaped (Duru, 2019): media carries out the agenda-setting role by highlighting certain issues and framing their causes and solutions (McCombs, 2005; Tian & Stewart, 2005). Western media is under the influence of the West's ideological position and its members' national interests, using their hegemonic power to construct negative images of the underprivileged Others, which normally consist of less developed countries (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1984). The western press has been criticized for being biased and inaccurate in their negative coverage of the so-called "third world" nations, looking down on poor and developing countries in crisis and deficiency (Huang & McAdams, 1999; Van Dijk, 1987; Merril, 2004).

There is a kind of inclination in western press toward framing a negative stereotype regarding the Other. This is what Edward Said argues in his classic work, *Orientalism:* the West constructs the Image of the Other to solidify its identity and rationalize its political oppressions (Said, 1979). Media framing, as a mechanism of constructing the social reality (Carter, 2013), can create improper assumptions and false international understanding, prevent international cooperation, and cause national and international divisions and hostility (Dodd, 1998). The international experiences of media framing during pandemics interestingly confirms such consequences.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the world has faced epidemic and pandemic diseases, among which are Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), Ebola Virus, and Coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19). In many cases, these epidemics and pandemics have inhumanly been used as a means of political campaign against a rival or enemy. Many scholars believe that national and global responses to epidemic diseases are innately political: "The experts selected for consultation, the evidence used to inform response pathways, and narratives of blame, vulnerability, and responsibility, are politically driven" (Kapiriri & Ross, 2018, p. 1).

Framing a negative image of the "Other" is not an unprecedented issue in similar situations. A study indicates that during the SARS pandemic, the western-led English-language media, including *Washington Post* (USA) and *The Times* (UK) framed China as an unfavorable actor and a negative Other (Leung & Huang, 2007). In another study, Leung and Huang, relying on the concept of "media representation of the Other," try to illustrate the way in which the western-led media displayed a biased attitude toward the "third world" countries and framed them as negative actors. They specifically investigated the three mainstream western media to examine how China and Vietnam were portrayed during SARS crisis. The Study concluded that these two countries received different treatments and China was portrayed as the bad Other (Huang & Leung, 2005). In 2014, during the Ebola outbreak, the flow of news from western media, mostly from UK and the United States, emphasized the problems and limitations of Africa and restored the ancient stereotypes of backwardness about this continent (Duru, 2020; Zhang & Matingwina, 2016). The English language press framed the problem in terms of "primitive" lifestyle and insufficient humanitarian aid (Gerlach, 2016).

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Globalization and access to mass media and social networks have provided a platform for political campaigns; the critics therefore argue that there is an interrelation between the media and crisis (Ma, 2005; Tumber & Palmer, 2004). The capability of the West's global media and their hegemonic power to shape the international image of peace and crisis shall not be undermined (Herbert, 2000).

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The present paper attempts to reveal the way in which the framing of an apparently "objective", "neutral" and biological issue, such as the COVID-19, by the international media would serve political and ideological purposes. It uses Robert M. Entman's framing theory to indicate the quality and complications of imposing frames on media by various political actors. It also attempts to unveil the way in which developing a particular understanding of Iran, as an "evil" and "enemy" by western media can bring its own interpretive consequences and influence the evaluations of Iranian citizens about the political rule and social security under the Islamic Republic.

In the eyes of the audience, the news is normally expected to be "a true reflection of reality"; however, the fact is that it solely provides "a frame or window on reality that seeks to or can only reflect part of [that] reality" (Fourie & Oosthuizen, 2001, p. 465).

The concept of framing was first introduced by Erving Goffman in his *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of the Experience* (1974), where he defined the frame as "schemata of interpretation" employed "to locate, perceive, identify and label" instances and incidents (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). For Goffman, framing is the means of (de)constructing the meaning; it is not

limited to communications, but can be used in various fields such as psychology, sociology and political science (Benford & Snow, 2000). Framing is currently extensively used in the context of media studies and news analysis. According to Robert M. Entman (1993), framing implies to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). For Entman, a constituting element of a frame is its functions: it should carry out at least two of the following four functions: defining a particular problem, discussing its causing roots, raising moral judgements and evaluations, and recommending proper treatments or solutions (Entman, 1993).

Framing, in Entman's view, is substantially political. Journalists seek information in governments. The officials and the political elites make the ideas, rhetoric and sentiments flow to the press and the public like a cascading waterfall. In fact, frames "reside in specific properties of the news narrative", such as keywords, symbols, metaphors and images that inspire those thinking about an event to perceive and understand it in a particular way (Entman, 1991, p. 7). With developing the "cascading activation model", Entman illustrates how the media products prudently choose their frames on a foreign state, specific issue or particular entity in consistency with the political priorities recognized by the referent political elites (Entman, 2003).

Entman conceives the "salience" or "elevating" of favorite images through media as the inextricable element of framing. Salience implies the availability and accessibility of "some bits of information about an item", as well as fitting and firming up the prominence of the favorite portrayals and interpretations (Entman, 2007, p. 164).

Frames are not functioning in a vacuum: the content and the composition of a frame depend on its culturally-derived significance. The "culturally embedded frames" (Van Gorp, 2010,

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p. 86) or the correspondence between the news and the cultural narrations reinforce the "believability" of its evidences and intensify the "empirical credibility" of the reality of the social problem that is framed (Berkowitz, 2011, p. 272).

The present paper also uses Baldwin Van Gorp's methodological approach on framing analysis based on an inductive coding process with three coding procedures: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. First, in **open coding**, with no "pre-defined coding instrument", the choices that the journalist has made to manufacture the news narrative or the "reasoning devices" used to frame an issue are extracted by the researcher. He is not expected, thus, to explore the subject of the news, nor to examine the factuality of its data or scientific standards (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 95) Second, to draw the **axial coding**, the researcher collects and organizes the open codes around the primary categories of ideas around which the logical and argumentation devices have taken shape. Finally, at the level of **selective coding**, through a constant comparative method of finding similarities and differences among codes and categories, a number of mutually exclusive "frame packages" would be developed.

The present study, then, has employed Van Gorp's method for finding and drawing frames used by VOA and BBC to represent Iran at the outbreak of COVID-19 through their first fifty pieces of news, which cover about 100 pages. For coding, open coding was conducted through different phases of reading the text and finding the most frequent and valued terms and concepts. Each text is independently coded and the clustered concepts as open codes are matched for finding equivalents in both VOA and BBC to be presented and reported. In the second stage, the open codes, which have common political functions and look interlinked in meaning-

making are intertwined in bigger categories to provide a more vivid image of frame packages. Here, the number of open codes are not abundant enough to require both axial and selective processes to be applied. A holistic image of codes and frame packages is available in Table 1.

Discussion and Findings: Iran at the COVID-19 Crisis through the Lens of VOA and BBC

The global pandemic of COVID-19 overwhelmed 213 countries; it has been challenging for almost all countries; even the most advanced ones have been desperately caught in increasing rates of unemployment and job loss, ill-equipped medical workforce, and rising number of casualties. Iran was not an exception. Caught by surprise and not ready for this disastrous pandemic since its outbreak, Iran has been dealing with various difficulties and problems. However, it seems that western media, specially the foreign Persian-language ones, took this opportunity to depict an inhumane, abnormal and anomalous image of Iran. The VOA and BBC are two primary media outlets, which carry the western public diplomacy agenda and its imperial machine against Iran. The otherization of Iran by the Western media is an old trend, and coronavirus outbreak provided an opportunity to fuel this trend against Iran.

In framing Iran and the quality of facing such a serious challenge, the present paper seeks to decode the political purposes of these media outlets, which are in line with the western public diplomacy agenda against Iran. The major selective codes with their constructing opening codes are listed below in Table 1, and will be further discussed in order to map the issues of high priority and the ultimate image the media has framed about Iran.

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Table 1: Frame Packages

Master Package	Issue-Specific Frames	Issues at BBC	Issues at VOA	Frame Presence BBC	Frame Presence VOA
Iran at Crisis	Critically Trapped by COVID-19	72	73	96	115
	An Amalgamation of Socio-economic Problems	24	42		
Lying and Hypocrisy	Denial of the Outbreak	12	96	118	132
	Lying about the number of casualties	68	34		
	Political Hypocrisy to hold the election and face-saving	38	2		
Islamic Ideology Affecting Corona Policies	Islamic Republic as a Theocracy	34		70	10
	Clergies Conservative Ideology with Bad Social Impacts	22			
	Religious Customs and Superstitions as Obstacles to Contain Disease	14	10		
Systematic Disqualification as an Ill-equipped System	Institutional Disqualification	58	36	139	55
	Lack of Confidence in Decision Making and Determinatio*n*	33	5		
	Scarcity in Resources, Equipment and Medicine	48	14		
Iran as a Major Source of International Pandemics		37	21	37	21
Human Rights	Harsh Suppression of Human Rights Activists and Ignorance of Civil Rights	31	1	60	54
	Political Prisoners at Risk	9	33		
	Humanitarian Aspects of Human Rights	20	20		

First, *Crisis*: Crisis would be a proper code to indicate BBC and VOA's coverage of COVID-19 in Iran. The infinite number of

patients and uncontrollable critical situation of various provinces is the first image their audience faces. The selected quotes from the local authorities describe it "very terrible", "very critical situation" and "worrying" (Iran features Group of Persian BBC, 2020d) & (Poursaleh, 2020) & (Science Group of Persian BBC, 2020) as the news wordings communicates a sense of indifference of authorities with calling the deaths "Talafat", meaning losses caused by inattentiveness (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020a). These media outlets frequently cover the rapid increasing in the number of patients "hour by hour…" (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020l) as for indicating the graveness of the crisis. They extensively cover the death news of Iranian authorities, including parliament members, government officials, diplomats and local authorities (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020a; Iran features Group of Persian BBC, 2020e).

The other open code that enjoins the previous one to frame the crisis is formulating the COVID-19 as being in conjuncture with a variety of other economic and socio-political problems as an indication of a harsh pressure on and affliction of the Iranian nation. The news highlights the protests for the petroleum price hike in November 2019, the Ukrainian passenger jet shot-down in January 2020, the deferred payments of the medical workforce, the coming summer's drought and shortage of water, the decrease of blood donation and its serious shortage in hospitals, alcohol poisoning of people in Tehran and Ahvaz, Internet disruption, and the economic consequences, such as job loss, in particular in respect to the downturn of tourism industry in Nowruz (Poursaleh, 2020; Nouri, 2020; Business Group of Persian BBC, 2020; Montazeri, 2020; Iran features Group of Persian BBC, 2020c; Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020n; Latest News of VOA, 2020a; Latest News of VOA, 2020b).

Along with this crisis, one of the intersecting problems, which has received a constant echo, is the vagueness and confusion about the condition of the education of children. This issue is essential for most Iranian families, even lower classes, who seek future jobs and opportunities of their children, which depend on the quality of the education they receive today. The "frequent shut down" of schools and universities for various reasons such as air pollution, heavy snow and COVID-19 is underscored; parents are concerned about their children falling behind, and feel uncertain about the quality of e-education (Mohajer, 2020).

The other indication of Iran's critical situation is illustrated by the fact that all neighboring or close countries such as Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Georgia, and Armenia have closed their borders and canceled air travels with Iran. The common borders with Turkey especially matter for the economic downturn they brought in consequence of halting non-oil exports, which were becoming stronger during the three months leading to the coronavirus outbreak: $650 million to Turkey and $400 million to Iraq (Batmanghelidj, 2020). One may add to such a vast isolating environment, the scare stories on Canada's foreign ministry, which urged its citizens, in particular Canadian-Iranians, to leave the country and BBC narrative on those "trapped" asking for help even to be shipped to a neighboring country to find a flight (Payam, 2020). Meanwhile, countries such as Sweden decide to ban travel to/from Iran (Persian News World Group of VOA, 2020b).

Second, *Source of Regional and International Threatening Virus:* Iran is recognized in various pieces as the source of the dissemination and outward outbreak of the disease both in the region and beyond. It is frequently repeated that the first cases in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Emirates, Qatar, Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the Unites States (in New York), Georgia, Azerbaijan, and

Armenia have been observed among passengers from Iran. The first cases in Britain, Belarus, Estonia, New Zealand and Canada also are claimed to have come from Iran (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020c); (World News Group of Persian BBC, 2020a) & (Persian News World Group of VOA, 2020a). The politicized image of Iran, as a source of pollution and international threat in excuse of spreading Corona virus can be seized in various items as Saudi Arabia's authorities are being quoted by BBC condemning Iran for being "explicitly responsible for the Corona pandemics all through the world" (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020n). VOA confirms the same idea, identifying Iran as " one of the major epicenters of corona outbreak in the world…" (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020f). VOA also highlights the benefit of the isolation of Iranians, as countries like the United States and Sweden ban travels, due to the deplorable situation of corona in Iran (Persian News America Group of VOA, 2020a).

Third, *Lack of Determination and Confidence in Decision Making***:** The news coding unveils another major frame to be Iran's lack of determination to account for the critical situation, not caring even for its own people's lives, with simultaneous lack of confidence in crisis management. According to BBC and VOA reports, "authorities didn't take the disease serious and their attention was only attracted when the virus had been disseminated", "the final decision is not taken yet", the parliament's representatives from the affected provinces wrote open letters to the president to urge him not to hesitate to declare the "red status" there, authorities avoided to confirm quarantine in Qom, which is a culturally and politically-strategic place, at the outset of the disease outbreak (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020l; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020k; Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020j). Complaints from the local authorities from different provinces worrying about the

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human disaster against the cold-blood of higher ranks in Tehran is another sign of inconsistency between authorities on local, national and the executive system of the country (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020j). To prove the given arguments, the foreign sources such as the Saudi consistently criticize Iran for its "irresponsible" approach (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020o; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020n).

Fourth, *Incompetence and Disqualification as an Ill-equipped System***:** The first fifty news broadcasted on both BBC and VOA similarly indicate that the Iranian government is not capable of adjusting a proper institutional and intersectional discipline within the government or outside with the private sector, shuddering against the imaged catastrophe of COVID-19. To trivialize, the public health disaster in its primitive stages would be followed by disorderliness in practice as BBC and VOA maintain. The conflict between the announced programs by government and the reality in action is highlighted in a variety of items: supporting the patients with designating specialized hospitals and the projection of its limitations as "COVID-19 referral hospitals had not arranged appropriate and standard specialized teams" (Montazeri, 2020). In addition, the promise to control the transportation and people's body temperature at checkpoints is not well kept, with frequent complaints of local authorities indicating "no practical and concentrated control is conducted on roads and intra-providential passengers" (Iran features Group of Persian BBC, 2020c). In the coverage by VOA, though, the issue of hesitating to "prevent Chinese citizens from travelling to Iran" after the authorities knew about the outbreak in China is still very central (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020d). Meanwhile, it underscores the absence of Iranian authorities in the media to explain the situation to people, while it claims, "the leaders of other countries of the world inform

the people about their actions on a daily basis" (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020l).

Additionally, from the substantial essence of this frame is an overemphasis on the motif of scarcity in resources, equipment and medicine. Hospitals and the medical workforce are portrayed in danger and pressure for the acute shortage of masks, gloves, eyewear, sanitary gel, disinfectants, test kits and ventilators, which has made "the treatment process difficult" against a crush of patients (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020i; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020p; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020l; Montazeri, 2020; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020m). The situation is drawn to be worse even in other major provinces and cities such Yazd, Azerbaijan, Gilan, etc., compared to the capital: obtaining lab results is postponed for sending the samples to Tehran (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020k; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020j). Lack of appropriate infrastructure would be added to black markets and hoarders, which sound to be out of the control of the government (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020e).

*__Fifth, Lying and Hypocrisy__***:** The major frame package entitled "lying and hypocrisy" stands at the top of framing codes in quantity and material proportion in both VOA and BBC coverages. The Islamic Republic is explicitly accused of denying the existence of COVID-19, then, refusing to quarantine Qom, which is believed to cause the national epidemic and international spread of the virus. Moreover, BBC gives a variety of references to the Supreme Leader, the president and other authorities in Iran who, they claim, denounced the virus news as a negative propaganda by "enemies" to sabotage the general election (Sabeti, 2020; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020h; Iran features Group of Persian BBC, 2020c; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020g; Iran features Group of

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Persian BBC, 2020e). BBC and VOA, then, judge the situation as hiding the truth, which, according to them, has become a backlash as it has caused serious damage or death for some recently-elected PMs. However, the authorities' infection in other countries sounds natural and inevitable (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020h). The other symptom of hypocrisy for BBC is the "secrecy" over the real scale of the outbreak along with the number of virus infections and the death toll. Covering-up the truth and withholding the information is frequently attributed to the Islamic Republic as BBC's narrative on Corona is interwoven with Iran's nuclear dossier, giving an authoritative voice to the West, which is reflected in the US secretary of State, Pompeo's discourse regarding Iran's record of lying, as perceived in its nuclear activities, which should be made absolutely transparent (World News Group of Persian BBC, 2020b; Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020h).

The "distrust of the public opinion" is the core notion that mainly stands on the social gap between the authorities and the people. Simultaneous with providing various news on the rare access to test kits, BBC frequently questions the PMs and other officials, whose positive test implies their full access to kits (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020g; Iran's Corona News Group of Anadolu Agency, 2020; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020f). It even fuels a "natural" distrust to the "specialized institutions", (Moradi, 2020) contaminated by a systematic hypocrisy, including restrictions to access information for the "local media" vs. IRIB or the denial of the doctors' right to conduct Corona tests in hospitals (Iran features Group of Persian BBC, 2020b). The "Lying and Hypocrisy" frame package nurtures the sense of suspicion and skepticism by constant references to the confidential sources such as ordinary citizens or local journalists who are presented

responsible enough to unveil "realities" with assertions of not revealing their identities for fear of punishment (Payam, 2020; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020p; Iran features Group of Persian BBC, 2020e). Similar to BBC, VOA reports the "high number" of casualties and quotes anonymous "international health experts" who believe that "the relatively high rate of corona casualties in Iran indicates that the authorities do not report all the facts" (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020d). Contradiction in statistics (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020i; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020i) is the most repeated argument with references to anonymous sources as mentioned, or quoted from foreign experts who say, "no one believes the statistics released by Tehran [Iranian Regime]" (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020m).

Sixth, *Violation of Human Rights***:** One of the major frame packages through which Iran is generally represented is the violation of the human rights. As a politicized issue, both BBC and VOA extensively invest on Iran's human rights records. To highlight an afflicting portrayal of the "overcrowded, unsanitary and cramped conditions" or "inhumane" situation in prisons, putting the so-called "political prisoners'" lives at risk due to lack of hygiene and sanitary equipment, and the poor medical facilities in the Corona situation for those seeking healthcare in a very critical condition contribute to the depiction of such an image (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020d; Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020b). BBC provides codes such as worrying families of the "political prisoner" and "human rights activists" complaining about their lack of access to their "loved" family members in order to stimulate the audiences' sentiments against the Islamic Republic (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020b). Moreover, the remarks provided by the UN and western countries' authorities are over emphasized to

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urge Iran to release prisoners and simultaneously consolidate old allegations concerning violation of core civil and political rights by Iran (Persian News Iran Group Of VOA, 2020k; Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020q).

VOA gives more emphasis on the human rights side compared to BBC Persian, and provides reports with no single evidence to support. For examples, it reports, "…Prisoners' requests for masks, gloves, antiseptic gels, and alcohol have been repeatedly denied by prison officials…" (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020c), or that the prisoners who tested positive for COVID-19 do not receive the care they need (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020b). However, from the beginning of the pandemic, Iranian Head of Judiciary issued an order to release thousands of prisoners, including political prisoners such as Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has been charged with "plotting to topple the Iranian government" (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020b). Calling for the Western, particularly American saviors is another motif regarding the human rights frame package. VOA, for instance, calls the "political prisoners" with dual Iranian-American nationalities, charged with spying, as "hostages", recalling so-called "hostage crisis" in the harsh Corona situation, and looks for pressuring Iranian authorities to release them (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020b).

Discussing the sanctions and their humanitarian aspects is another motif covered by the human rights. Sanctions are concentrated since they affect the lives of ordinary people and the western front is presented to be pro relief and worried about people's sufferings. BBC and VOA repeatedly quote the United States' president and other authorities about their intention of relief, claiming that sanctions are not obstacles for "humanitarian

contributions" (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020f; Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020m; World News Group of Persian BBC, 2020b). Part of the voice in few news is given to the Iranian side that usually presents like political uproar and accusing the West for national lack of efficiency (World News Group of Persian BBC, 2020b).

Seventh, *Islamic Political Ideology as a Source of Corruption***:** The media portrayal of COVID-19 is normally focused on infection prevention or implementing protective instructions. One of its highly frequent and exceptional frames about Iran, nevertheless, is the relevance of the religious political ideology and its prevalence over public health. BBC underscores the position of Jurisprudence and the issuance of *fatwas* in social policy-making in Iran. It signifies the authority of the seminary at Qom and the head of holy shrines in national security (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020b). Iran is portrayed as a nation of fantasy and superstition from a "modern" and "secular" lens. For instance, different news items cover clergies who guide people only to recite the Quran and other holy Shi'ite texts, while they avoid providing any practical contributions (Mirdamadi, 2020). They do not even put their position at risk and, according to BBC, hypocritically remain silent to see whether any decision would be taken about closing the shrines. On the other hand, it is also emphasized by BBC that after weeks, when the government ultimately decided to be firm on controlling the disease, clergies put an obstacle on their way with prejudice about mosques and shrines as the head of the shrine in Qom is referred saying that "We consider this holy shrine to be a place of healing. That means people should come here to heal from spiritual and physical diseases" (Mirdamadi, 2020). Such claims can be put against the reality in action as from the early stages of the epidemic, hundreds of young clerics rushed into hospitals,

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aiding nurses in care work and delivering food and medicine to those infected by the disease. They mobilized to sterilize the streets with disinfectants, risked their lives with meeting those in isolation in order to give them strength and comfort and helped to conduct the funeral of the dead bodies (Iran News Group of Irna, 2020).

The other motif in this frame package is constructed through concentrating on Qom and Mashhad, hosting central Shi'ite sites and shrines, whose numerous groups of pilgrims, from within the country and abroad are acknowledged as the major cause of international epidemics after China. Qom is undoubtedly the center of BBC's attention with detailed reports on its demography and geography, city life, medical facilities, pilgrimage and transportation, and natural disaster in recent decades (Iran features Group of Persian BBC, 2020a). The city is particularly highlighted for the integration of seminary and the political power in their claimed "autocratic" Islamic Republic. The quality of "conservativism" among the great *Marjá*, sources of current jurisprudence, is independently discussed in excuse of the corona outbreak with a detailed debate on Wali Al-Faqih, the position of the Supreme Leader, and how the secularization of Muslim societies, as BBC claims, has abandoned great clerics and has made them isolated and less "emboldened" to intervene in civil issues (Iran News Group of Persian BBC, 2020b). Unlike BBC, however, the VOA did not pay much attention to the issue of religion. Yet, it has unapproved theories on the role of "religious leaders" and "security institutions" in "preventing quarantine of religious cities" and their "disagreement with closure of religious places" (Persian News Iran Group of VOA, 2020i); VOA's depth of discussion on the political ideology behind the Islamic Republic is less significant.

The present paper explores the prominent frame packages in imaging the COVID-19 outbreak in Iran and the way in which it is portrayed by the two western media outlets BBC and VOA in Persian, addressing the Iranian audience and providing a lens through which they can look at themselves. Seven major frames have been extracted, acknowledged, and illustrated by examples to share their constructed images of Iran as a source of international corruption, irresponsible and disqualified in national scale and abnormal actor violating global rules and regulations.

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic outbreak has caught many countries in surprise, as even the rich, "developed" and "the first world" struggle with numerous new challenges. The statistical reports of cases and deaths, the coverage of the shared problems of panic buying in supermarkets, shortage of masks and sanitizers, and sacrifices by doctors and nurses to fight against the novel virus have been among the common media outlets in the recent months.

The media frames and portrayals of the COVID-19 and its devastating consequences are assumed to be diverse and not equally undesirable in international outlets. The dissemination of the political distrust and the blame on countries such as China and Iran for international health concerns, representing them as nodes of exporting the virus, barring their tourists and humiliating their native cultures by the Western media are the indications of the hypocrisy and backwardness that have been conventionally referred to the East, otherized against the West.

During the first month of the coronavirus outbreak, Iran, like any other country in the world, suffered and struggled to contain this deadly virus. However, Western media, particularly Persian-

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language news outlets, took the pandemic as an opportunity to advance the western political agenda against Iran **.**

The present study examined BBC and VOA Persian samples of the Anglo-Saxon camp and the western public diplomacy apparatus against Iran. It analyzed the first fifty news items of these two state-backed media to portray their prevalent frames on Iran and its confrontation with COVID-19. Media framing, as theory and method conducted by Entman and Van Gorp, was employed to facilitate the coding process in two phases of determining open codes and extracting the selective ones**.** Seven principal frame packages were extracted from the analysis, as indicated below:

First, Iran is framed as a country in crisis, suffering an uncontrollable critical situation of high casualties amid an endless list of the socio-economic problems **;**

Second, Iran is framed as the exporting source of the threatening virus both in the regional and international arena**;**

Third, Iran is depicted as a country with lack of determination and confidence in decision making, implying a careless and irresponsible approach to the citizens; at the same time, there is significant inconsistency between authorities on local, national and the executive parts of the country**;**

Fourth, Iran is illustrated with incompetence and disqualification, an ill-equipped system, with a harsh dissonance among the internal actors and administrative sections, while people and the medical workforce are suffering severe scarcity in resources, equipment, and medicine **;**

Fifth, lying and hypocrisy are frequently mentioned in news about Iran's situation, with the implication that Iran has denied the existence of COVID-19 and has continued with "secrecy" over

the real scale of the outbreak. This has caused the distrust of the people, even to the specialized institutions, and constant skepticism among ordinary citizens**.**

Sixth, Iran is depicted as violating human rights, with specific emphasis on the "political prisoners" and "human rights activists" and their release plots**.**

Seventh, Islamic political ideology is depicted as the source of corruption, unlike usual focus on pandemics, infection prevention, and protective policies, here the power of the political Islam and the claims on its undemocratic and illiberal consequences are underlined**.**

To portray these major frame packages, as signified by the BBC and VOA, their unique news coverage techniques are of significance for further studies. For instance, one may work on the various setting of Iran vs. Saudi Arabia as a symbol of Islamic rationality by VOA, or its investment to highlight the systematic confrontations between the people vs. the authorities on one hand, and the Supreme Leader vs. the president and PMs, on the other hand. Alternatively, BBC's concentration on political Islam and the power of the Wali-e-Faqih against VOA's focus on more global agenda such as fighting the violation of human rights can be investigated in independent projects. The two new agencies' different approaches are also evident: the VOA has an intense concentration on human rights, not for all Iranians, but for foreigners, such as "political prisons"; it boasts the Americans' good intentions to aid Iran and propagates Iran's rejection, a claim that can be seriously under question. BBC, then, is more successful in projecting a fair image of itself as it sometimes covers Iran's national improvements and attempts to contain the disease.

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