



## An exploration of Iranian communication to multiple target audiences<sup>☆</sup>

Kaye D. Sweetser<sup>a,\*</sup>, Charles W. Brown<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication, 223-C Journalism Building, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, United States

<sup>b</sup> U.S. Navy, Washington, DC, United States

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 31 July 2009

Received in revised form 13 March 2010

Accepted 22 March 2010

#### Keywords:

Propaganda

Second-level agenda setting

Attribute agenda-setting

Iran

### ABSTRACT

State-controlled media use similar message techniques to target specific publics that counterparts in democratic societies use. We explore talking points (attributes) and themes (frames) through content analysis in state-produced propaganda directed at two different audiences. Domestic and internationally targeted propaganda ( $N=1491$ ) from Iran regarding the issue of regional security was reviewed. Results indicated Iran emphasized different attributes and frames based on audiences. Themes about enemy correlated, and relationships between officials and themes were explored.

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

Public relations, along with the government information-service equivalent called public affairs, play a pivotal role in democracies. Freedom of press creates a watchdog role for the media, with practitioners acting as mediators to grant journalists access to information and facilitate coverage in a transparent world driven by the 24-h news cycle. Yet, not all nations operate under such free and transparent edicts. Even today, there are many nations around the world with ministries of information that – to varying degrees in each country – watch over and govern their national press (Lynch, 2006). In these countries, public relations practitioners are reduced to propagandists and instructed to strategically shape messages, which undoubtedly are carried unfiltered and without question by state-controlled media.

Yet, even in these far corners of the world where information is controlled by the state, communicators use the same message techniques to target specific publics that practitioners in democratic societies use. In an effort to understand the varying issue attributes and framing techniques that a single propaganda-producing government uses to present an issue to varying publics, this study seeks to explore the differences between propaganda messages intended for domestic, internal audiences and those targeted to an external, international audience.

The purpose of this study is to compare the varying message attributes and frames regarding an issue used by a single country in their domestic and international audience propaganda. In doing so, this research will examine Iran's discussion of regional security. This nation and issue was specifically chosen because, anecdotally, some would characterize Iran's use of propaganda as "speaking with a 'forked tongue'", as state-released news and information is largely questioned in the

<sup>☆</sup> Note: The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document represent the views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the view or official positions of the U.S. government, Department of Defense or U.S. Navy. The authors wish to thank their small army of coders. An earlier version of this manuscript was presented to the Public Relations division at the National Communication Association annual conference in San Diego, November 2008.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 706 542 2409.

E-mail addresses: [sweetser@uga.edu](mailto:sweetser@uga.edu) (K.D. Sweetser), [charles.w.brown2@navy.mil](mailto:charles.w.brown2@navy.mil) (C.W. Brown).

western world. Using second-level agenda-setting and framing theory to quantify the various attributes (talking points) and frames (themes) of an issue, this study will reveal how a government-controlled, closed-media society communicates to the people within the country and an international, external audience. Through content analysis, this study hopes to shed light on modern propaganda to determine which messages are being communicated to each audience.

## 2. Theoretical perspective

### 2.1. Propaganda

In 1927, Harold Lasswell published his seminal book, *Propaganda Techniques in World War*, and this scholarship defined propaganda: “It refers solely to the control of opinion by significant symbols, or, to speak more concretely and less accurately, by stories, rumors, reports, pictures, and other forms of social communication” (Lasswell, 1927, p. 9). Lasswell identified four major objectives: mobilizing hatred towards the enemy, preservation of allies’ friendship, preservations of neutral party’s friendship, and demoralization of the enemy (Lasswell, 1927). Prior to public relations practice becoming a more professional field, propaganda was another form of message strategy; however, in the past 50 years the term has a negative connotation. Today, propaganda is considered state-controlled information to strategically (and often falsely) communicate to a target public in a persuasive manner.

Research on persuasion has identified seven propaganda devices: name calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon. These devices are commonly covered in both public relations and communication theory textbooks and provide a basis for understanding the methods of propaganda. Currently, an example of the name-calling device is defining enemies as “terrorists” and certain regimes as the “axis of evil” or referring to the United States as the “Great Satan” or “global arrogance.” Glittering generalities such as broadly referring to enemies as “evildoers” or saying “they hate our values” can achieve the effect of negatively portraying enemies, without providing specifics. Transfer is used to create associations between music and symbols with something else. For example, the flag, patriotism, freedom, and democracy are concepts that are linked with specific military action. Testimonial is a device by which the use of a respected or well-known individual advocates something to influence the masses. The plain folks technique is adopted by a speaker who wants his or her audience to consider them to be just “one of us.” Card stacking is a technique by which only partial or inaccurate facts may be used to portray either a best- or worst-case scenario, in order to elicit an emotional response from a mass audience. The bandwagon technique is one in which audience are manipulated to believe that many members of society are aligning themselves with a particular movement, program, or plan of action, in order to convince the audience members that they too should follow the crowd or be left out.

Last century, propaganda in a democracy was said to be meant to provoke group discussions and persuade the masses (Perry, 1942). To be effective, propaganda messages must be credible and truthful (Herz, 1949). If used correctly, propaganda can tie together a similar group of people so strongly that nothing can break them apart. In many cases, propaganda inspires patriotism and unconditional support toward the cause and government at hand (Perry, 1942). Yet, propaganda is not always used in a democracy. And, in some cases, it can be used to mislead people through a false representation of facts.

### 2.2. Attribute-agenda setting and framing

A single issue may have several, very different publics. In propaganda, this distinction between target publics is vital. To better understand the how a single issue is discussed to the various publics, this study uses an attribute agenda-setting and framing approach. As previous studies have set the precedent for operationalizing agenda-setting attributes as talking points (Sweetser & Brown, 2008), this study will continue such operationalizing techniques while adding the dimension of frame analysis through the consideration of message themes. By doing so, this study will be able to examine the talking points (attributes) and themes (frames) used to communicate the state’s stance on the issue to two very different publics: (1) the internal, domestic audience and (2) the external, international audience.

Attribute agenda setting, also called second-level agenda setting, is a derivative of the often-studied agenda-setting theory, which posits that the media does not tell us what to think, rather it tells us what to think about (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting theory has developed into a multi-layered theory, which includes study of the object, or issue (the first layer), and examination of attributes describing or delineating that issue object (the second layer). These attributes fill out the total picture and understanding of the issue among the public (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, 2000). Attributes have been studied as objects (i.e., sub-topics of an issue) and characteristics (i.e., personality attributes of a person like a political candidate), depending on the subject being studied (Golan & Wanta, 2001). Additionally, public relations research has operationalized message strategy talking points as attributes (Sweetser & Brown, 2008).

Looking at the attributes associated with communicating about a particular issue allows researchers to understand what pieces of the issue the communicator finds most important. Understanding attributes are important because it reveals not only what the communicator wants to draw attention to with regard to the issue, but also the attention that is drawn away from other attributes (McCombs & Estrada, 1997). Lee and Yoo (2004) found that exposure to contradictory attributes of a same issue (e.g., opposing arguments on an issue) raised the overall perception of that issue’s importance to the audience – regardless of the ways of presentation. As such, we know that the use of attributes – or talking points as they are also called

here – are important constructs in communicating the importance of an issue. McCombs and others (Kiousis, Bantimaroudis, & Ban, 1999; McCombs, 1997; McCombs & Estrada, 1997) have said that attributes are similar to media frames. Indeed, Tankard's (Tankard, 2001; Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1999) often cited definition that a frame is a "central organizing idea" is inline with this idea that attributes and frames can be either pieces of an issue or a way to present a particular issue. Taking a different approach, this study will look at both attributes and themes, but classify these journalistic notions within standard public relations practice. That is, attributes will refer to the specific talking points used to communicate, illustrate or support an issue, whereas frames will refer to the general theme that several grouped talking points might support.

### 2.3. *Research questions and hypotheses*

This study seeks to identify how one communicator's use of specific talking points and themes may differ based on the target audience. Here, the communicator is the Islamic Republic of Iran and the issue is regional security. The items examined here are Iran's domestic and international propaganda. Which attributes and themes are stressed to one audience and are they different from those communicated to the other? In asking this basic question, this study will shed light on how a nation's domestic propaganda may differ from the attributes and themes they rely on when communicating to an external, international audience. Specifically, we ask:

RQ1: Are different attributes being emphasized to different audiences? If so, which?

RQ2: Are different themes being emphasized to different audiences? If so, which?

RQ3: Are there any relationships between themes present in the propaganda?

RQ4: Is there a relationship between communicator (i.e., source) and themes?

## 3. Method

This quantitative content analysis analyzed the attributes or talking points present in domestic and external propaganda produced by Iran regarding Gulf regional security. Iran's closed-media system tightly controls dissemination of information, and the country communicates to their domestic audience in the country's native language (Persian) and to external audiences in Arabic (targeted to the region) and English (targeted to the West), as well as other languages. Iranian media ranges from semi-independent, such as the collection of Tehran-based Persian language newspapers individually backed by various members of the governing establishment, to the fully controlled state-run media such as the Islamic Republic News Agency and Islamic Republic of Iran News Network Television. Regardless of the official publisher, all outlets are subject to censorship, and it is not uncommon for "independent" newspapers to be suspended from production for crossing the government's lines. Iranian media includes (but is not limited to) newspapers such as *Keyhan* (Persian) or *Tehran Times* (English); broadcast such as the various Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran stations (Persian) or Al-Alam TV (Arabic); and news agencies such as Mehr News Agency (English and Persian), Fars News Agency (English and Persian), Iranian Students News Agency (English and Persian), Iranian Labor News Agency (Persian), and Islamic Republic News Agency (English and Persian). While many of these agencies publish in other languages, like French and German, only the English, Arabic, and Persian content were examined here.

### 3.1. *Sample*

The analysis here included print and broadcast items from Iranian state-controlled media organizations. The unit of analysis was the article or TV video segment from these sources ( $N = 1491$ ), which had to discuss the issue of regional Gulf security or the escalating regional/international tensions with regard to Iran for inclusion in this analysis. This included items focused on Iran and regional security, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nuclear programs, balance of power in the region (regional superpowers), bilateral relationships related to aspects of security, regional implications of Iran's nuclear program, Iran's naval assets and/or operations, and U.S./coalition naval assets operating in the region. General or political articles about Iran's nuclear program (without mention of regional security) were not considered, as the nuclear program by itself is a separate issue object.

Items fitting this definition from the propaganda state-run media sources were collected during a three-month period from December 1, 2006–February 28, 2007. Items were collected through visiting the Web sites of the news agencies and media sources, as well as through media archiving database searches. Items were print or broadcast in English, Persian, and Arabic. Non-English items were translated and obtained through a media database archive and were often available the same day as published/aired.

### 3.2. *Coding categories*

Basic demographic data from each item was analyzed. Such data included recording item type (e.g., print, broadcast, opinion), source, item headline/title, audience to which item was marketed and original publication/air language. Items in

Persian were said to be marketed to a domestic Iranian audience, items in Arabic to a Pan-Arab regional audience, and items in English to a western audience.

Attribute categories coded here were created inductively from an initial review of coverage of the Iranian propaganda (all markets) and western media coverage, so as to mark for the possible presence of competing western talking points as well. A total of 49 talking point attributes were constructed for this exploratory study. See [Appendix A](#) for code sheet listing all 49 talking point attributes.

These talking points were used to create a series of “present/absent” dichotomously coded items. Categories included the discussion of military assets or operations (e.g., U.S./Coalition, Iran, GCC), threatening/intimidating nature of one nation against another (e.g., U.S. threatening Iran, Iran threatening regional country, U.S./coalition threatening regional nation), bilateral relationships, “reasons” for nuclear program related to regional security (e.g., Iran has “right” to nuclear energy/power, nuclear program is merely for civilian/peaceful/energy purposes), among other things.

Sources quoted or attributed in each item were also recorded. Because many of the articles dealt with Iran responding the enemy’s naval threat, the source included two distinct levels of military naval officials in addition to the traditional concept of “official.” Items were reviewed for the presence/absence of the following Iranian sources (quoted or paraphrased): president, Iranian Navy official, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy official, and government official.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.3. Coding process and reliability

Coders were trained during a 2-h session, which included training on the code book and initial assessments of intercoder reliability. After the training session, coders were individually assigned items to practice coding on their own, and training continued on this individual basis until a coder reached a pre-determined level of skill (set by the researchers). Once a coder was operating within an acceptable level of reliability (missing no more than 4 variables per item), the coder was cleared to begin coding items used in this analysis. Coders were instructed to refer to the code book prior to making a determination on each variable, read an article and then input data through a Web-based survey for each article.

Intercoder reliability was established after coder training through randomly reviewing items coded by each coder to determine if the correct (code book-directed) determinations were made for each variable. Random intercoder reliability checks continued for each coder throughout the coding process to ensure the quality of coding remained high. Differences were reconciled as they were discovered. Intercoder reliability was determined through a review of a random selection of 10% of the dual-coded items to establish coder consistency and accuracy. The intercoder reliability was .922 across all categories, tested using Holsti’s formula to test the percentage of agreement.

### 3.4. Data analysis

This exploratory analysis looked at both the specific attributes, or talking points, and the themes that these attributes make up (frames). Such a review is in keeping with the practice of public relations, as practitioners will often draft overarching communication themes followed by specific talking points to support and illustrate those themes.

To understand how the specific attributes group, into constructs similar to frames, indices of the specific attribute talking points were constructed. The indices were: military power, good neighbor, reasons for nuclear program, enemy military power, and enemy threat.

The composition of the attributes was based on construct likeness. That is, similar talking points were linked together to represent a larger manifestation of an attribute theme. As such, it is not uncommon that only one of the talking points from the index would appear in a single article because the specific talking point is an operationalization of the larger theme. To put it another way, these indices represent an overall message theme (similar to frame) and the specific talking point attributes are different options the communicator has to operationalize that theme. That said, it was expected that the alphas for these indices would be low. A further examination of the reliability scores revealed that the reliability would not have been greatly improved with deleting specific attribute talking points, and so none were deleted. The means reported below are based on the raw computed index score.

The military power index was comprised of eight attributes: able to defeat enemy, monitoring enemy, discussed assets or operations, military is for defense purposes only, developing new weapons capabilities, mine laying capabilities, able to close the Strait of Hormuz, power through proxy groups (e.g., Hezbollah), and provide security in the Gulf. The overall mean for all items in the data set was .48 ( $SD = .82$ ), and scores ranged from 0 to 6 attributes in an article. The Cronbach’s interitem correlation coefficient was .398. A total of 34.2% of all the articles mentioned at least one of the attributes in this index.

The Iran as a good neighbor index was comprised of three attributes: good relationship with regional nations, GCC nation says they are friendly toward/not afraid of Iran, and helps/supportive of regional commerce. The overall mean for all items in the data set was .38 ( $SD = .59$ ), and scores ranged from 0 to 3. The Cronbach’s interitem correlation coefficient was .299. A total of 32.9% of all the articles mentioned at least one of the attributes in this index.

<sup>1</sup> Iran has two navies: regular Navy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN).

The reasons for a nuclear program index was comprised of two attributes: nuclear program is a nation's sovereign right and program is for peaceful/civilian purposes of energy production. The overall mean for all items in the data set was .31 ( $SD = .62$ ), and scores ranged from 0 to 2. The Cronbach's interitem correlation coefficient was .629. A total of 23.2% of all the articles mentioned at least one of the attributes in this index.

The coalition military power index was comprised of nine attributes: U.S./coalition able to defeat Iran, U.S./coalition monitoring Iranian forces, discussion of U.S./coalition assets or operations, U.S./coalition perform maritime security operations in the Gulf, change in force structure for U.S./coalition assets in Gulf, U.S./coalition have contingencies prepared to deal with Iran, U.S./coalition have minesweeping capabilities, U.S./coalition have freedom to access/transit the Strait of Hormuz, and U.S./coalition keep the Strait of Hormuz open. The overall mean for all items in the data set was .32 ( $SD = .59$ ), and scores ranged from 0 to 4. The Cronbach's interitem correlation coefficient was .283. A total of 26.0% of all the articles mentioned at least one of the attributes in this index.

The enemy threat index measured mentions of the U.S./coalition forces categorized as a threat or intimidator to Iran or within in the region and was comprised of seven attributes: U.S./coalition threatens/intimidates Iran, U.S./coalition threatens/intimidates GCC nation, U.S./coalition exploits regional commerce, only regional countries should provide security in the Gulf, U.S./coalition instigate Shia-Sunni divide/sectarian strife, U.S./coalition arrested Iranian diplomats, and U.S./coalition use of psychological warfare. The overall mean for all items in the data set was 1.08 ( $SD = .99$ ), and scores ranged from 0 to 7. The Cronbach's interitem correlation coefficient was .172. A total of 66.9% of all the articles mentioned at least one of the attributes in this index.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Talking point attributes

Before looking at the overall themes communicated to different audiences, we wanted to explore the use of the specific talking point attributes communicated. To do so, all 49 specific talking points were rank ordered for the overall data set (all propaganda during this period), domestic propaganda (Persian items), and internationally targeted propaganda (Arabic and English items). Addressing RQ1, A spearman's rho rank order correlation found that the attribute agendas for both audiences (domestic and international) were not similar, meaning Iran emphasized different talking points to the two audiences,  $r = .268$ ,  $p = .486$ . Table 1 outlines the rank order for each group.

The primary talking point emphasized to the domestic audience was that the enemy (U.S./coalition) intimidates Iran. Along the same line, there was an emphasis on the enemy's use of psychological warfare and discussion of their assets operating within the region. Other domestic talking points included religious and historical references.

For the international audience, the propaganda instead emphasized the regional relationships Iran forged with its neighbors. While many of the same talking points were used in this audience as those used for the domestic audience (evidenced by the weak, though not significant correlation), the emphasis (i.e., rank order) differed.

Based on these findings, RQ1 is answered in that Iran indeed emphasizes different attributes to their multiple target audiences. While the overall agendas may have some similarities, the communication strategy is markedly different. This paves way for a deeper inquiry through RQ2 as to the emphasized themes (frames) communicated to each audience.

### 4.2. Themes

Given that Iran emphasizes different specific talking point attributes to different audiences, it seems natural for this research to group these individual talking point attributes into a bigger picture, more meaningful thematic construct. RQ2 asked if Iran emphasizes different themes (frames) to their multiple audiences.

A series of independent samples t tests comparing the use of each index for the two target audiences were run. See Table 2 for a complete comparison of mean scores. Results indicated that the differences between domestic and internationally targeted propaganda were statically significant for all five indices.

Domestic propaganda stressed Iran's military power ( $t = 51.11$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ), coalition military power ( $t = 25.79$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ), and the enemy threat ( $t = 27.01$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) more often than international propaganda. Communicating the enemy threat occurred the most often, with a mean of 1.21 in the domestic propaganda and 1.03 in the international propaganda.

International propaganda had a larger emphasis on the regional neighbor theme ( $t = 141.95$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) and explanations for Iran's nuclear program ( $t = 8.57$ ,  $p \leq .005$ ).

### 4.3. Relationships between themes

Next, a series of correlations were run to determine if there was a relationship between any themes in order to answer RQ3. The only meaningful and statistically significant correlation that emerged occurred between use of the enemy threat and enemy military power indices,  $r = .293$ ,  $p \leq .001$ .

**Table 1**  
Rank order talking point attributes in Iranian propaganda.

All propaganda (n = 1491)		Domestic propaganda (n = 415)		International propaganda (n = 1046)	
Talking point attribute	%	Talking point attribute	%	Talking point attribute	%
1. Enemy intimidates	38.2	1. Enemy intimidates	46.3	1. Good relationship with region	35.7
2. Good relationship with region	31.2	2. Religious mention	34.9	2. Enemy intimidates	35.0
3. Religion mention	30.0	3. Historical mention	28.7	3. Religious mention	28.2
4. Only regional countries should provide security	21.9	4. Enemy use of diplomacy	24.3	4. Only regional countries should provide security	23.0
5. Enemy military assets/operations	21.5	5. Enemy assets or operations	23.4	5. Enemy assets or operations	20.8
6. Enemy use of diplomacy	20.4	6. Good relationship with region	19.5	6. Nuclear program peaceful	20.5
7. Nuclear program is peaceful	19.3	7. Only regional countries should provide security	18.8	7. Enemy use of diplomacy	18.9
8. Historical mention	19.1	8. Military assets or operations	18.1	8. Enemy arrests diplomats	15.9
9. Enemy arrests diplomats	24.6	9. Enemy psychological warfare	17.3	9. Historical mention	15.4
10. Iran provides security in Gulf	13.8	10. Enemy <sup>a</sup> arrests diplomats	16.1	10. Iran provides security in Gulf	14.5
		Nuclear program peaceful			

Note: Domestic and international propaganda attribute rank correlation was not statistically significant,  $r = .268$ ,  $p = .486$ .

<sup>a</sup> Attribute rank tied with attribute beneath it, items arranged alphabetically.

**Table 2**  
Comparison of mean scores for the themes in propaganda.

	Domestic audience	International audience
Military power <sup>*</sup>	<b>.67</b>	.41
Good regional neighbor <sup>*</sup>	.22	<b>.44</b>
Reasons for nuclear program <sup>**</sup>	.27	<b>.33</b>
Enemy military power <sup>*</sup>	<b>.38</b>	.29
Enemy threat <sup>*</sup>	<b>1.21</b>	1.03

Note: Themes are indices created from specific talking point attributes. Higher mean is in bold.

<sup>\*</sup> Difference is statistically significant,  $p \leq .001$ .

<sup>\*\*</sup> Difference is statistically significant,  $p \leq .005$ .

#### 4.4. Relationships between source and themes

To answer RQ4, correlations were run to determine if there was a relationship between sources quoted and specific themes investigated here. There was a very weak, positive correlation between items that quoted the president and those that contained the explanations for Iran's nuclear program,  $r = .102, p \leq .001$ . There positive, weak correlations between items that quoted government officials and those mentioning the following themes: military power ( $r = .116, p \leq .001$ ) and Iran as a good regional neighbor ( $r = .073, p \leq .005$ ). Both naval Iranian Navy ( $r = .157, p \leq .001$ ) and IRGCN ( $r = .242, p \leq .001$ ) officials had weak, positive correlations with the military power theme. There was a weak, positive correlation between the regular naval official and the enemy's military power,  $r = .052, p \leq .05$ .

### 5. Discussion

The data here indicate that indeed Iran speaks with the metaphorical "forked tongue." That is to say that the state-controlled media emphasize different talking points and overall message themes based on audience. Harkening back to Lasswell's (1927) work on propaganda, Iran appears to use their media domestically to mobilize hatred toward the enemy and stressing relationships with regional allies/neutral parties through their international propaganda.

#### 5.1. Attribute emphasis

In looking at the findings that emerged from RQ1, there appears a stark difference between the talking points based on audience. For the domestic audience, the emphasis of propaganda lies in painting the enemy as an intimidator – supported by the high-ranking presence of attributes that illustrate that intimidation, such as the enemy's use of so-called psychological warfare and the arrest of Iranian "diplomats" (the west claimed they were terrorists/insurgents operating in Iraq under Iranian diplomatic status) and a raid on an embassy in Arbil. Even the high occurrence of "enemy use of diplomacy" in this case is in support of portraying the enemy as an intimidator, as these items often discussed the U.N. sanctions against Iran and claimed that the west was applying sanctions as a means to intimidate the nation.

The domestic propaganda also worked to elicit patriotism among Iranians. The high occurrence of religious and historical mentions in domestic propaganda could accomplish this. Such mentions talked about Muslim unity and made historical references to important moments for the Islamic Republic of Iran. In speaking of their military power, Iran continued to draw on patriotic message themes when talking about the how much of Iranian weapons were indigenous to the Islamic Republic – as having been designed and produced within the country through "Persian ingenuity." This independence – as a nation, economy, military, and people – appeared to be a point of pride in much of the domestically targeted rhetoric, which lies in stark contrast to the top talking points communicated to the international audience about partnerships with regional nations.

Communication in the internationally targeted propaganda seemed, at many times, to stress the exact opposite of what was being said to a domestic audience. Here, internationally targeted propaganda stressed relationships with allies and neutral parties as the most popular talking point attribute. Many of the items for this audience were announcements of bilateral talks between Iran and other regional countries or Iran's position statement on a regional issue (e.g., security in Iraq) and their willingness to help.

The largest difference between the propaganda based on audience was that to their internal audience, Iran wanted to appear strong, independent, and stress cultural values. Yet, to the international audience, the propaganda focused on Iran's relationships with other countries and willingness to help provide security in the region.

Given that the nuclear issue is so pervasive in any look at Iran, it could not be ignored here. Iran's two main talking points regarding their nuclear program are first that it is any nation's sovereign right to pursue nuclear energy, and second, their program is a civilian one, built entirely for energy production and based in peaceful purposes. To the domestic audience, the nuclear issue is not as important as other topics regarding regional security. Yet, inter-

nationally, many argue that Iran's nuclear program causes regional instability. This appears to be addressed in the nation's propaganda, as internationally targeted items mention a nuclear program talking point more often than domestic propaganda.

### 5.2. *Theme emphasis*

The examination of talking point attributes and previous literature assisted in the grouping of specific thematic frames employed by Iran in their domestic and international propaganda. The use of themes here further align this research with standard message strategy techniques employed by practitioners around the globe.

Here, the themes, similar to the earlier findings on attributes, featured a different focus based on audience. Again, the international audience was communicated the "Iran the friend" message, with a greater reliance on mention of regional partnerships and how Iran helps the region. Additionally, due to the international eye on Iran's nuclear program, the external audience propaganda featured a greater number of items stressing the intentions of Iran's nuclear program (peaceful purposes) and their right as a nation to explore nuclear energy. Conversely, mirroring the attribute findings, the domestic propaganda focused on the enemy threat (operationalized through many of the attributes in Table 1), the enemy's military power operating in the region (presumably as a furtherance of point that the enemy was a threat), and Iran's military power. Based on the themes here, one might say that while Iran beats its chest inwardly to their domestic audience, they present themselves externally as being bilateral diplomats, interested in assisting other regional nations by providing security and justifying their nuclear aspirations.

### 5.3. *Relationships between themes*

The themes, for the most part, did not correlate with one another. This suggests that the propaganda items were focused on single topics. The exception to this is that the enemy threat index correlated with the enemy military power index. Such is likely the case because in making the case for the enemy as a threat, many items also mentioned the U.S./coalition military build-up in the region as further evidence that Iranians should be concerned about the enemy.

### 5.4. *Relationships between source and themes*

The final results reported here examined the attributed or quoted sources in the propaganda and the themes present in propaganda. For the most part, correlations were not strong between source and frame. This is most likely due to the fact that much of the propaganda by the news agencies (which makes up for the largest margin of items analyzed here) report information much like statements (i.e., press releases) released from the government.

When sources are given in items, the president was significant correlation with explanations about Iran's nuclear program. Many in the western media assert that the president is out of touch with the people of and other leaders in Iran regarding the nuclear program, and that his support for it is not equaled. The findings here lay the groundwork for supporting that argument, but more research must be done before asserting that indeed is the case.

Not surprisingly, government officials as sources correlated with Iran being a good neighbor in the region. This is likely the case because many of the items discussing regional security that covered bilateral talks announced an Iranian official meeting with an official from another country. These items typically quoted the Iranian official and sometimes featured quotes from the official from the other nation as well.

Finally, military spokesman are perhaps the best suited to discuss their nation's own military power and the enemy's capabilities as well. It should be noted here that while the IRGCN officials significantly correlated with their own military power and the regular navy correlated with enemy power, that the IRGCN seized 15 British ("enemy") naval personnel in the Gulf in the month following the time period included in this sample.

### 5.5. *Limitations*

This study is not without limitations. First, the study concentrated on an issue with numerous players and attributes – regional security in the Arabian Gulf. As such, there were numerous specific talking point attribute variables – both Iranian messages and competing messages from the enemy. While this helps in painting a very specific picture of exactly what is being said, it was also cumbersome to group talking points and arrange them into meaningful categories, and in the process some of the specific attributes were lost. Additionally, this research relied on translations of non-English items – rather than having native speakers code the items directly. Finally, the collection process of items within a large sample such as this always leaves room for possible error in that some items might have

been missed from specific sources, based on availability of the items in the databases used to access the propaganda.

### 5.6. Future research

In closed-media systems like Iran, it is difficult for “real” information (i.e., a representation other than what the government endorses) to get out. As such, journalists in other nations interested in the news emerging from a closed-media society must rely on the official reports from state-sponsored media or semi-independent news agencies. Anecdotally, this is noticeable in the number of western news reports that quote Iranian news agencies or state television broadcasts. Now that data show a difference between the messages communicated to domestic and external audiences, researchers should begin to investigate how the internationally targeted propaganda is used in western, fact-based reporting. Do journalists qualify information as being “state-controlled” or merely cite the source (e.g., Mehr News Agency), not pointing out to readers that a Mehr product might not have the same unbiased viewpoint as something from western wire services? Some western news organizations have permanent staff or stringers in Iran (e.g., Reuters, *New York Times*) – do the reports from these journalists differ from their organizational counterparts? Are the reports more similar to state-controlled reports or do they contain a higher ratio of Iranian-to-western talking points? With little direct access to the government, even when operating within the country, do Iran-based journalists report any different than remotely located journalists? With regard to journalists operating outside of Iran, future research might compare the ratio of Iranian talking points to western talking points present in western media sources. Finally, future research might employ audience research to understand whether the salience of these attributes and frames are successfully transferred to the audience and which attributes or frames are more effective.

### 5.7. Conclusion

As an initial step in understanding modern propaganda, this study used Iranian-controlled media as an attempt to understand how attributes and frames operate in propaganda. Here, Iranian propagandists appear to be using audience-targeting techniques similar to their counterparts in democratic nations: they understand that one can communicate different messages to different publics and they strategically do so in their official communication. In operationalizing their communication, they employ the standard public relations techniques of devising themes (frames) and talking points (attributes) to illustrate or support those frames.

During the height of academic inquiry on propaganda, Perry (1942) and Herz (1949) asserted that propaganda should be based in truth and that it was meant to persuade. It is assumed here that the domestic propaganda, then, would be more effective on their audience than the international propaganda. Such an assertion is made here because the internal audience messages are focused on discounting the enemy and portraying it as a threat in many ways. Additionally, the internal audience has very little access to external information, with the state controlling the people’s access to information (including the Internet). Therefore, given that the enemy is portrayed as a bullying, amoral threat to Iran and the people’s lack of access to information to dispute such assertions, it is believed that the domestic propaganda is the most successful of the two types examined here.

That said, the external propaganda remains a well-crafted message strategy. Cognizant that the western media and leaders are portraying Iran as dangerous and power hungry in their nuclear power aspirations, the external propaganda has effectively crafted a message to counter those assertions. In their external communication, Iran emphasizes itself as a good neighbor willing to help the region become more secure and prosperous, while explaining that their nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. Here, the message strategy directly counters the west’s portrayal of the Islamic Republic – showing a command of understanding one’s target audience.

In public relations sectioning off publics and creating specific communication strategies for them is not rare. Practitioners understand that different publics are best approached separately, sometimes with an emphasis on different messages tailored for that audience. Yet, the similarities end there. Public relations practitioners, ethically, do not communicate competing messages – saying one thing to one public and then communicating the exact opposite of that message to another. This metaphorical “forked tongue” approach is what makes Iran’s communication strategy pure propaganda, rather than modern public relations.

## Appendix A. Code sheet

### Original Language Item Published/Aired In:

English  
Farsi  
Arabic  
Other:

**Which of the following was MILITARY OPERATIONS/CAPABILITIES were mentioned:**

MOC1	U.S./coalition has military capability to defeat threats in Gulf
MOC2	Iran has military capability to defeat U.S./coalition forces
MOC3	U.S./coalition forces monitoring Iran
MOC4	Iran monitoring U.S./coalition forces
MOC5	Discussed U.S./coalition assets or operations (weapons, exercises)
MOC6	Discussed Iranian assets or operations (weapons, exercises)
MOC7	Discussed GCC assets or operations (weapons, exercises)
MOC8	Iran's military activity is provocative
MOC9	Purpose of Iran military forces in the Gulf is defense
MOC10	U.S./coalition forces in the Gulf conducting Maritime Security Operations
MOC11	Changes in U.S./coalition force structure
MOC12	U.S./coalition have contingencies prepared to deal with Iran
MOC13	U.S./coalition has mine sweeping capability
MOC14	Iran has mine laying capability
MOC15	Iran developing new weapons capabilities
MOC16	Iran emphasizes undersea warfare capabilities
MOC17	Iran has the capability to close the Strait of Hormuz
MOC18	Closing the Strait of Hormuz would harm Iran
MOC19	Closing the Strait of Hormuz would harm the region &/or world commerce
MOC20	U.S./coalition has freedom of access/navigation for the Strait of Hormuz
MOC21	U.S./coalition will work to keep the Strait of Hormuz free/open
MOC22	U.S. Navy interaction with Iran is professional & courteous
MOC23	Iranian diplomatic arrests
MOC24	Psychological warfare

**Which of the following mentioned the RELATIONSHIP WITH ARAB/REGIONAL COUNTRIES:**

RAC1	U.S./coalition has good relationship with regional countries
RAC2	Iran has good relationship with regional countries
RAC3	U.S./coalition is intimidating/threatening Iran
RAC4	Iran is intimidating/threatening GCC
RAC5	U.S./coalition is intimidating/threatening GCC
RAC6	GCC says NOT intimidated/threatened by or is friendly toward Iran
RAC7	Iran exercises power through proxies (Hezbollah, Iraq, etc.)
RAC8	Iran wants to ensure commerce of the region benefits the region/world
RAC9	U.S./coalition presence benefits commerce of the region
RAC10	Iran threatens regional commerce
RAC11	U.S./coalition exploits regional commerce/resources
RAC12	U.S./coalition provides security in the Gulf
RAC13	Iran provides security in the Gulf
RAC14	U.S./coalition complements security efforts of regional countries
RAC15	Only regional countries can/should provide security
RAC16	Iran's pursuit of nuclear program causes instability
RAC17	Iran's pursuit of nuclear program is their sovereign right
RAC18	U.S./coalition using diplomacy to address Iran/nuclear issues
RAC19	Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program is based on peaceful intentions
RAC20	Iran's pursuit of nuclear program is unsafe for the region (i.e., environmental factors)
RAC21	Attack on Iran's nuclear facilities unsafe for region
RAC22	GCC or members pursuing nuclear program
RAC23	Appeal with/to religion
RAC24	Appeal through history
RAC25	Coalition instigates sectarian divide

**Which of the following PEOPLE WERE QUOTED in the item:**

S1	Iranian president
S2	Iranian Navy representative
S3	Islamic Republican Guard Corps (Navy) representative
S4	Other Iranian government official

**References**

- Cohen, B. C. (1963). *The press and foreign policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Golan, G., & Wanta, W. (2001). Second-level agenda setting in the New Hampshire Primary: A comparison of coverage in three newspapers and public perceptions of candidates. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 78(2), 247–259.
- Herz, M. F. (1949). Some psychological lessons learned from leaflet propaganda used in World War II. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 13(3), 471–486.
- Kiousis, S., Bantimaroudis, P., & Ban, H. (1999). Candidate image attributes: Experiments on the substantive dimension of second level agenda setting. *Communication Research*, 26(4), 414–428.
- Lasswell, H. D. (1927). *Propaganda techniques in world war*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Lee, G., & Yoo, C. Y. (2004). *Attribute salience transfer of global warming issue from online papers to the public: Attribute of environment vs. attribute of economy*. Paper presented at AEJMC annual conference, Toronto.
- Lynch, M. (2006). *Voices of the new Arab public: Iraq, al-Jazeera, and Middle East politics today*. New York, New York: Columbia University Press.
- McCombs, M. E. (1997, August). *New frontiers in agenda setting: Agendas of attributes and frames*. Paper presented to the Association for Education and Journalism and Mass Communication, Chicago.
- McCombs, M. E., & Estrada, G. (1997). The news media and the pictures in our heads. In S. Iyengar, & R. Reeves (Eds.), *Do the media govern? Politicians, voters, and reporters in America* (pp. 237–247). London: Sage.
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 176–187.

- McCombs, M. E., Lopez-Escobar, E., & Llamas, J. P. (2000). Setting the agenda of attributes in the 1996 Spanish general election. *Journal of Communication*, 50(2), 77–92.
- Perry, J. (1942). War propaganda for democracy. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 6(3), 437–443.
- Sweetser, K. D., & Brown, C. W. (2008). Information subsidies and agenda-building during the Israel-Lebanon crisis. *Public Relations Review*, 34(4), 359–366.
- Tankard, J. W., Jr. (2001). The empirical approach to the study of media framing. In S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy Jr., & A. E. Grant (Eds.), *Framing public life: Perspectives on the media and our understandings of the social world* (pp. 95–106). Mahwah, NJ: LEA.
- Tankard, J., Hendrickson, L., Silberman, J., Bliss, K., & Ghanem, S. (1991). *Media frames: Approaches to conceptualization and measurement*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Boston.