

The Impacts of the Arabian Gulf Crisis on Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya's English Facebook Pages Visual Propaganda Coverage of the Syrian Conflict.

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Abstract:

The crucial findings of the current study that analyzed the Facebook posts made by both Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya on the Syrian conflict before and after the gulf crisis using three frames; Overt vs Covert, Analytical vs Emotional and Human-interest vs Non-human-interest. The results indicated that the post from Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera differs on the frames of Analytical vs Emotional and Human-interest vs Non-human-interest before, while there was no significant shown in chi square test in their posts on all three frames after the crisis.

Keywords: Impacts ‘Arabian Gulf Crisis Facebook Pages Visual Propaganda ‘ Coverage.

1. Introduction:

In 2017, a Gulf Crisis emerged between Qatar on one side and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Egypt on the other. It led to a diplomatic crisis that caused the latter to cut its relationship with Qatar. The power politics between Saudi Arabia and Qatar were fought through the mass media, with the Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera news outlets playing critical roles in shaping public opinion about the Gulf Crisis, and particularly the ongoing Syrian conflict (Dabashi, 2018). Lynch, Freelon, and Addey (2014) agree that the Syrian conflict is the most socially visible civil conflict in world history, as analysis, commentary, and videos circulate through social media and continue to shape public opinion about the war.

The dissemination of unclear or manipulated news continues to raise questions about how Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are influenced by powerful political forces to shape public opinion about the Syrian conflict at the domestic, regional, and international levels (Al-Rawi, 2017). These news agencies are increasingly employing social media networks, especially Facebook and Twitter, to shape people's perceptions of the conflict in favor of Qatar or Saudi Arabia respectively, and it is apparent that these events are attracting international attention, especially from global powers such as the U.S., Britain, Russia, and China (Abdul-Mageed & Herring, 2008; Fahmy, Wanta, & Nisbet, 2012).

As a result, the primary objective of this study is to determine the impacts of the Arabian Gulf crisis on Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya's English-language Facebook pages, with a significant focus on how both news agencies employ visual propaganda in their coverage of the Syrian conflict. The study explored the role that the visual propaganda seen on Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya's English-language Facebook pages by analyzing the frames employed in their visual content between 2016 and 2018.

The findings of the study that analyzed the Facebook posts made by both Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya on the Gulf crisis before and after the Gulf crisis using three frames; Overt vs. Covert, Analytical vs. Emotional, and Human-interest vs. Non-human-interest. The results indicated that the posts from Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera differed on the frames of Analytical vs Emotional and Human-interest vs. Non-human-interest before, while there was no significant change shown in chi-square test in their posts on all three frames after the crisis.

2. Literature Review:

Visual communication is becoming increasingly essential and relevant in the 21st-century social media age, since individuals fancy visual content that is straightforward, easy to understand, and elicits emotion (Brantner, Lobinger, & Wetzstein, 2011). For instance, existing studies on Facebook reveal that pictures, photos, and video content evoke increased fan reactions or engagement compared to content that lacks images (Belicove, 2011; HubSpot, 2011). Moreover, the attractiveness of infographics or and visualizations of information and data is also soaring, as people continue to consume fast-paced information just as quickly, which increases the possibility that social media sites will influence public perceptions about the messenger and the content shared by that messenger (Seo, 2014).

The importance of visual communication is obvious when the intended content is broadcast across diverse countries and cultures (Brantner et al., 2011; Cloud, 2008), which explains why Qatar and Saudi Arabia are heavily investing funds in visual-oriented social media drives through Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya to engage the global public and spread messages about the Syrian conflict.

The Syrian conflict is appropriate for this study because it allows for an examination of the evolving relationship between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Both countries have been involved in the battle since the start, and these are differences played out in the media – particularly on social media networks, and especially in the English-language Facebook pages of the news outlets Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. Saudi Arabia and Qatar were allies in the Syrian conflict, and both provided assistance to rebel forces. Since both are Gulf countries, they are approaching the Syrian conflict as part of their larger regional ambitions, a situation that since 2011 has led to risk-taking, friction, and rhetorical escalation of the crisis (Hokayem, 2014).

At the beginning of Syrian crises, Saudi Arabia saw Qatar as an ally of its mortal enemy, Iran, which was also offering military assistance to the Assad Administration, and the war in Syrian as central to shaping the outcomes of the fast-changing power structure in the Middle East (Hokayem, 2014). Since the conflict in Syria remains a significant determinant of the outcome of the changing Middle East order, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are both heavily investing in victory, and the media plays a central role in

advancing each country's interests in the region (Al-Rawi, 2017).

As a result, both nations have created allies within regional media networks, with Qatar and Saudi Arabia settling on Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya satellite TV channels respectively. According to Fahmy, Wanta, & Nisbet, 2012, Al-Arabiya positions itself as a moderate alternative to Al-Jazeera's extreme position on domestic and international issues. Both news outlets are designed as independent voices modeled on similar broadcasting styles. In their attempts to provide varied perspectives on news events that interest Arab viewers, neither shies away from covering controversial news topics. The Syrian conflict is no exception, as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya have taken opposing stances to Saudi Arabia and Qatar respectively (Fahmy, Wanta, & Nisbet, 2012).

Consequently, the increases in new information communication technologies, especially the emergence and prevalence of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, provide avenues for political forces to spread propaganda (Lotan et al., 2011). Propaganda refers to any information that strives to support and uphold a specific political agenda and influences public opinion towards the plan (Cull et al., 2003; Jowett and O'Donnell, 2015). Social media allows parties engaged in conflicts to communicate and interact directly with target audiences without employing traditional channels such as the mass media (Khondker, 2011). For instance, an examination of visual images on Twitter posted by the Al Qassam Brigades from Hamas and the Israeli Defense Forces during the Gaza Conflict in 2012 demonstrated that each side employed various frames and themes to portray its rival as aggressive by stressing the fatalities on their side (Seo, 2014).

Moreover, the employment of multiple frames and themes on social network platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube was also clear in 2013, when opposing sides circulated explicit descriptions of Syrians injured and killed during chemical assaults by Assad's forces (Curry, 2013; Sadiki, 2012; Shehabat, 2012).

Therefore, the English-language Facebook pages of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya are appropriate for two main reasons. First, the English language is global, so both news agencies have an opportunity to convey news events and perspectives at both domestic and international levels. Moreover, Facebook is the world's largest social media site, so information posted on it reaches audiences around the globe.

When examining the role of graphic propaganda, it is vital to consider the framing techniques employed to improve the persuasiveness of a particular message. Framing is the ability of a communicator to shape and influence public opinion regarding an issue based on the manner in which the communicator presents the problem (Entman, 1993). A frame refers to a fundamental organizing concept that attaches importance to an emerging series of events by weaving a link through the events. According to Reese, 2007, it is also an organizing principle that is commonly shared and steady over time, and which works representatively to shape the social world meaningfully. Through framing, it is possible to select specific facets of an event and highlight them in communications, which explains why frames play an essential role in stimulating opposition to an issue or event by underscoring a specific ideology (Seo & Ebrahim, 2016).

Recent developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs), and particularly social media, continue to influence propaganda techniques (Sadiki, 2012; Shehabat, 2012). Social media is a collection of applications that allow individuals to communicate and cooperate by creating, sharing, and engaging with user-generated content through digital network tools (Seo & Ebrahim, 2016). As a result, social media allows organizations to communicate and interact directly with target audiences without having to resort to traditional channels of communication such as mass media. Various categories of social media serve different purposes. For instance, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter lean towards building and maintaining social relations; other sites, such as Flickr, YouTube, and Pinterest, focus on photo sharing and video sharing (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016). Today, social media networks pose challenges to political players, as individuals can access a range of channels where they can receive and share information, which increases the possibility that different actors can influence domestic, regional, and international political activities.

Historically, the Middle East remains an arena of power politics, and in 2017, the power politics between Saudi Arabia and Qatar were taking to the media, with Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera news outlets playing critical roles in shaping public opinion about the ongoing Crises, and particularly the Syrian conflict. Both news outlets employ visual propaganda in their coverage of the Syrian conflict to influence public, and it is through their actions that the study will fill the existing gap in the literature concerning the relationship between the Arabian Gulf Crisis and the visual propaganda coverage of the Syrian conflict.

3. Research Question:

Q1- Concerning propaganda frames, how do visual contents posted on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya's English-language Facebook pages differ from their coverage of the Syrian conflict before and after the Arabian Gulf crisis?

4. Method:

1. Data:

The study was conducted a content analysis of visual content posted on Al Arabiya English Facebook pages regarding the Syrian Conflict. The sample data for the study includes all visual content regarding the Syrian conflict posted on the English Facebook pages of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya news outlets between May 2016 and May 2018. During the two-year timeframe, the researcher collected 200 visuals posted on these channels' Facebook pages. The two-year period is appropriate because it covers events before and after the Arabian Gulf Crisis. Before the Arabian Gulf Crisis, Qatar and Saudi Arabia were allies, but after the Crisis, they disagreed about certain ongoing issues in the region. As a result, the data obtained from the study focuses on demonstrating how visual propaganda was employed by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya before and after the Arabian Gulf Crisis, with a focus on the conflict in Syria.

2. Coding Scheme and Theme:

The research employed three common coding categories to analyze the types of propaganda frames present on the English Facebook pages of Al Jazeera and Al-

Arabiya, namely Human-interest vs. Non-human interest, Overt vs. Covert, and Analytical vs. Emotional categories.

The Overt frame refers to visual content that openly promotes a political agenda or blames the Assad regime or his rivals for the continuing crisis by labeling them as aggressors. For instance, the Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya Facebook visual content that links Assad or his rivals with ISIS would fit within this frame. However, the Covert frame refers to visual content that promotes a political agenda in a hidden manner; a visual representation of Bashar Assad or his rivals receiving praise from Syrians fits this frame.

The Analytical frame refers to visual descriptions that focus on analytical interpretations, facts, and data regarding how Assad or his rivals protect or harm Syrians, and their respective strategies to defeat each other. The Emotional frame refers to visual content focused on evoking emotions such as compassion and hostility towards one of the opponents. Finally, the Non-human-interest frame refers to visual content that focuses on buildings or machines. The Human-interest frame covers refers to content that focuses on specific people or groups that suffer from the Syrian conflict and the side that is alleged to be responsible for this tragedy.

3. Inter-coder reliability:

For an inter-coder reliability test, two trained individuals coded the same 10 percent of sample visual content from AL Jazeera and Al-Arabiya's English-language Facebook Pages. Inter-coder reliability was determined using Krippendorff's Alpha. The inter-coder reliability score for the Overt vs. Covert themes was 0.74., Analytical vs. Emotional themes was 0.84. Human-interest vs. Non-human themes was 0.70.

4. Data Analysis:

All analysis was performed with the aid of SPSS. In order to provide concise and exhaustive answers to the research question, two statistical tools were used, namely: descriptive statistics (used to describe the measures of central tendency of the data), and a chi-square test (employed to test whether there is a significant difference in the visual coverage of the Syrian conflict posted to Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya's English Facebook before and after the Arabian Gulf crisis).

The analysis was twofold. The first part tested for existing significant differences between the content posted on the English-language Facebook platforms of Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya before the Arabian Gulf Crisis, while the second tested for existing significant differences between the two media channels after the Arabian Gulf Crisis.

5. Results and discussion:

As stated, the analysis was twofold. The Facebook content of Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya on the Gulf Crisis posted between June 2016 and April 2017 represented the first phase (before) and post (from June 2017 to present-day 2018) represented the second phase. 200 posts were randomly selected for this study, with each media channel's Facebook page having an equal share of 100 posts. Further details on the sampling breakdown is shown in the table below.

All analysis was done at 95% confidence level, which leaves the significance level at 0.05.

Table N° [01] : showing the sampling distribution.

| Sample size | Before Crisis | After Crisis | Total |
|--------------|---------------|--------------|------------|
| Al Jazeera | 50 | 50 | 100 |
| Al Arabiya | 50 | 50 | 100 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 200 |

The research question focused on giving answer based on the two-time frames (before and after the Gulf Crisis).

1. The result of Analysis Before:

Three propaganda frames were used in the analysis of the posts in this study: Overt vs. Covert, Analytical vs. Emotional, and Human-interest vs. Non-human interest. As shown in table 2, Al-Arabiya has a significantly higher proportion of posts that display the Overt form of propaganda compared in relative terms to Al-Jazeera, and a slightly higher proportion of posts in the Covert frame. According to the chi-square test with a p-value of 0.112, this difference was not statistically significant; therefore, before the Gulf Crisis, there was no difference in the Overt vs. Covert frames of the two media channels.

In the Analytical vs. Emotional frame, Al-Jazeera posts were more emotional (56%) than analytical (28%), while Al Arabiya’s posts were more analytical (56%) than emotional (38%). Furthermore, the chi-square test p-value of 0.013 revealed that there was a significant difference between the contents of these two powerful media channels in this frame. Al Arabiya posts contained data of how Bashar al Assad or his rivals were protecting or harming Syrians and, while Al Jazeera posts contained visual content focused on evoking emotions such as compassion and hostility towards the opposing sides.

Table N° [02] : Propaganda Frames (Before the crisis).

| Frame | Al-Jazeera Facebook page | | Al-Arabiya Facebook page | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| | Count | Percentage | Count | Percentage |
| Overt vs. Covert | | | | |
| Overt | 29 | 58% | 35 | 70% |
| Covert | 11 | 22% | 12 | 24% |
| Neither | 10 | 20% | 3 | 6% |
| Total | 50 | 100% | 50 | 100% |

Chi-square result $(\chi^2(2, df = 2) = 4.375, p = 0.112)$

Analytical vs. Emotional

| | | | | |
|--------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
| Analytical | 14 | 28% | 28 | 56% |
| Emotional | 28 | 56% | 19 | 38% |
| Neither | 8 | 16% | 3 | 6% |
| Total | 50 | 100% | 50 | 100% |

Chi-square result $(\chi^2(2, df = 2) = 8.663, p = 0.013)$

Human Interest vs. Non-Human Interest

| | | | | | |
|--------------------|-----------|-------------|--|-----------|-------------|
| Human Interest | 38 | 76% | | 29 | 58% |
| Non-Human Interest | 5 | 10% | | 21 | 42% |
| Neither | 7 | 14% | | 0 | 0% |
| Total | 50 | 100% | | 50 | 100% |

Chi-square result $(\chi^2(2, df = 2) = 18.055, p = 0.000)$

For the last frame, propaganda, the chi-square test analysis revealed a significant existing difference between the posts of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya in the Human-interest vs. Non-human-interest frame, with a p-value of 0.05. This is true despite the fact that the most Facebook posts from the two media channels appealed to human interest.

2. The result of Analysis After the Crisis:

The outcome of the analysis (as seen in table 3) revealed that none of the chi-square tests is significant, which means that the p-values are greater than 0.05 on all three frames used in this study; the scores were Overt vs. Covert (p-value = 0.831), analytical vs. emotional (pvalue = 0.178) and Human-interest vs. Non-human interest (p-value = 0.512). There was no significant difference between the Facebook posts of the two media channels after the Gulf Crisis.

On Overt vs. Covert, a significant proportion of Al Jazeera posts were neither covert nor overt (30%), while the larger proportion was Overt (46%). The trend is the same with posts from Al Arabiya, which had a significant proportion of posts that were neither Overt or Covert (26%), with Overt having the largest proportion (52%).

For both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, a larger proportion of their posts fall under the Emotional category, with both media outlets scoring 56% and 40% respectively; 32% and 36% were analytical, while the rest were neither analytical nor emotional.

Lastly, in the Human-interest vs. Non-Human-interest frame, for both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, the larger proportion of their posts fall under the Human-interest category. Both media outlets scored 58% and 52% respectively; 32% and 42% were geared towards Non-human-interest, while rest did not fall into either of the above categories.

Table N° [03] : Propaganda Frames (After Crisis)

| Frame | Al-Jazeera Facebook page | | Al-Arabiya Facebook page | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| | Count | Percentage | Count | Percentage |
| Overt vs. Covert | | | | |
| Overt | 23 | 46% | 26 | 52% |
| Covert | 12 | 24% | 11 | 22% |
| Neither | 15 | 30% | 13 | 26% |
| Total | 50 | 100% | 50 | 100% |

Chi-square result $(\chi^2(2, df = 2) = 0.370, p = 0.831)$

Analytical vs. Emotional

| | | | | | |
|--------------|-----------|-------------|--|-----------|-------------|
| Analytical | 16 | 32% | | 18 | 36% |
| Emotional | 28 | 56% | | 20 | 40% |
| Neither | 6 | 12% | | 12 | 24% |
| Total | 50 | 100% | | 50 | 100% |

Chi-square result $(\chi^2(2, df = 2) = 3.451, p = 0.178)$

Human Interest vs. Non-Human Interest

| | | | | | |
|--------------------|-----------|-------------|--|-----------|-------------|
| Human Interest | 29 | 58% | | 26 | 52% |
| Non-Human Interest | 16 | 32% | | 21 | 42% |
| Neither | 5 | 10% | | 3 | 6% |
| Total | 50 | 100% | | 50 | 100% |

Chi-square result $(\chi^2(2, df = 2) = 1.339, p = 0.512)$

The birth of the Internet gave rise to the spread of powerful social networks. This network provides easy and efficient ways of spreading information in the form of videos, audios, pictures, and text. Amongst these powerful social media sites is Facebook. In fact, a report from (Stats, Internet World, 2015) indicated that conflicting countries or parties make use of social media to promote their propaganda by posting attention-catching images.

The study analyzed the Facebook posts made by both Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya on the Gulf crisis before and after the Gulf crisis using three frames: Overt vs. Covert, Analytical vs. Emotional and Human-interest vs. Non-human-interest. The analysis revealed that the posts from Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera differed on the frames of Analytical vs. Emotional and Human-interest vs. Non-human-interest before, while there was no difference in their posts on all three frames after the crisis. The results show the significance of visual-oriented content broadcast in the social media by media agencies for engaging its audience that can also be used to spread the message of conflict as suggested by Brantner et al., (2011) and Cloud (2008)

The finding indicates framing is an essential aspect of visual political communication used by the two news agencies in their Facebook social media sites since the two used various images to support and solidify the narratives about the Syrian conflict such as showing the suffering and of the Syrian civilians. The results show the significance of human interests that is in line with the previous studies by demonstrating that the human-interest frame is largely utilized in the media reportage of international conflict (Schwalbe & Dougherty, 2015)

After the crisis, both media channels make Facebook posts more open and direct on their propaganda. They focus the majority of their posts on evoking inherent emotions of the audience. This finding is consistent with existing literature as reiterated by Abdul-Mageed & Herring, (2008) and Fahmy, Wanta, & Nisbet, (2012), who assume news agencies are increasingly adopting social media networks, such as Facebook, to shape people’s perception in the conflict in favor of either one party or the other. It is apparent these events are attracting international attention since it used to evoke emotions of audience.

Lastly, both media channels focus their Facebook posts on people or groups of people that have suffered from the Syrian crisis. This finding is in agreement with the assumption of Khondker (2011) that social media is used in conflicts to communicate and interact directly with target audiences without the use of traditional channels such as mass media.

6. Conclusion:

It is clear that social media platforms have been greatly used in the Syrian crises. Social media is used to spread visual contents that would trigger emotions. Each of the news channels has a social media tool that spreads its propaganda. While the visual communications are meant to broadcast reliable information, some media channels have craftily been spreading propaganda messages. The Syrian conflict has been used in this study as it would enable a cross-examination of the crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The use of visual content offers new insights into how news agencies such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya are using social media's visually oriented content to shape individuals' opinions. The rise of usage of the Internet led to the spread of cyberwar. The Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya are powerful media agencies that have explored the Internet to spread pictures, videos, texts, and audios. Since the Facebook platform is used by a majority of the people globally, it is used to spread propaganda by posting eye-catching images and videos. The study focused on the influence of Facebook posts before and after the Gulf crisis.

The research showed that before the Gulf crisis, the posts by Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya differed on the frames of Human-interest vs. Non-human-interest and Analytical vs. Emotional. But, after the crisis, there was no difference in the posts from the three frames: Overt vs. Non-covert, Analytical vs. Emotional, and Human-interest vs. Non-human-interest.

One of the limitations is that the visual contents were obtained from only one social media platform that is Facebook. Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya have accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Google+. An analysis of multiple social media platforms would draw a complete image of the real situation.

Future studies could compare frames and themes of the visual contents on the Syrian conflict in the various social media sites such as YouTube, Google+, and Twitter as they rely on them to support their agenda.

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