



Framing Mahsa Amini and Iranian Protest: Comparative Analysis of Newspaper Narratives in Iran and U.S

Abstract: This study investigates how the Tehran Times (Iran) and The Wall Street Journal (U.S.) frame and report on the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini and the ensuing protests in Iran, analyzing the influence of geopolitical tensions on their news narratives. Framing analysis and valence assessments identify dominant perspectives within news stories, while rhetorical devices shed light on how competing narratives and national interests shape news media content. The study highlights the complex interplay between source selection and news objectivity, stressing the importance of balanced integration of diverse sources in attaining balance in news coverage. It advocates for integrating peace-oriented frames and enhancing media literacy to counter biased reporting and foster a more nuanced public discourse on international conflicts.

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Introduction

More than four decades after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, U.S.-Iran relations remain tense

(Center for Preventive Action, 2024). This revolution, marked by the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis, reshaped bilateral relations and ended diplomatic ties in 1980. This enduring conflict sets the stage for examining how newspapers from both countries frame discord in Iran (Humud & Thomas, 2022). Based on this background of conflict, the study conducts an analysis of disparate newspaper reporting patterns between the two nations through a case study focused on Mahsa Amini and the associated Iranian protests, which garnered significant news media attention.

On September 16, 2022, Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman, was arrested by Tehran's Morality Police for a hijab violation. Her death in police custody, amid allegations of severe police brutality, sparked

widespread women-led protests in Iran. The Iranian government attributed Amini's death to illness, not violence (The Hindu, 2022; The Guardian, 2022), leading to significant conflict between the government and civilians, especially Iranian women. This study explores how different types of news frames, valence, sources, and rhetorical devices are used by newspapers in Iran and the U.S. to represent this conflict.

News reporting employs framing, shaping and defining social or political issues for audiences. Frames craft clear, consistent news story summaries (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). Framing research investigates how media emphasize specific issue aspects (Entman, 2000). Thus, news is more than just facts. Understanding framing in conflict news between countries with strained diplomatic relationships, like Iran and the U.S., provides insights into news media narrative construction and its influence on public perception and political discourse.

Media freedom varies significantly between Iran and the U.S., affecting news analysis. Media censorship in Iran is deeply intertwined with its political and religious landscape. Iran ranks 178th out of 180 countries in the 2022 Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, with declining scores for "social context" and "judicial environment" following severe crackdowns on protests after Mahsa Amini's death (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). The Iranian government's response included increased media restrictions, heightened online censorship (United Nations, 2022), and intimidation of critical journalists. In contrast, the U.S., ranked 45th in the same index, enjoying a robust tradition of press freedom.



This study examines the Tehran Times and The Wall Street Journal, two prominent newspapers from Iran and the U.S., respectively. The Tehran Times, aligning with the Islamic Republic of Iran's ideology, is a leading English newspaper in Tehran. The Wall Street Journal, a globally recognized newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch, has the highest circulation in the U.S. (Turvill, 2022). Statista (2023) reported its average circulation exceeded 3.9 million in 2022, with substantial daily print and digital readership.

The study initially employed an inductive approach to identify the frames used by two newspapers. To assess the bias and perspectives of the news stories, we examined their frames and sources. Finally, we analyzed the rhetorical devices to understand the language and narrative style used in the articles.

Therefore, the present study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the key news frames and valence used in the Tehran Times and The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) to depict the Mahsa Amini case and the related Iranian protests? How do these differ between the two publications?
2. How do the Tehran Times and WSJ use sources to report the Mahsa Amini case and the Iranian protests?
3. What rhetorical devices are employed by the newspapers in their reporting of the Mahsa Amini case and the related Iranian protests?

Aim and Objectives

This study analyzes and compares how the Tehran Times and The Wall Street Journal framed Amini's death and the subsequent protests in Iran. It aims to identify the framing strategies employed by these newspapers and unveil biased reporting that restricts diverse perspectives.

Given the differences in the two newspaper's overall editorial perspectives, readerships, and the socio-political environments in which they operate, we anticipate that their coverage of the Iranian protests following Amini's death will vary. This study provides insight on how, in specific ways, news frames, valence, sources, and rhetorical devices employed in their reporting socially constructed different interpretations of the political turmoil in Iran.

Literature Review

Framing theory, rooted in Goffman's work (1975), asserts that how information is presented, or the "frame," significantly influences how individuals perceive and respond to it. In the field of news media analysis, Todd Gitlin (1980) and Gaye Tuchman, prominent researchers in the 1970s and 1980s, expanded upon Erving Goffman's concept of frames.

Entman (1993) argued that framing shapes how news is presented, promoting particular ideologies. Iyengar (1996) contended that news stories are narratives that influence readers by carefully choosing what information to convey. Research by Deligiaouri (2018) and Entman (1993) showed that the idea of completely objective news is unrealistic. Entman (1991) further suggested that the adoption of news framing strategies is central to the crisis of objectivity in news narratives.

Other forces shaping news stories include government restrictions on media freedom (Althusser, 2014; Altschull, 1984), the biases of news organizations' owners (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013), and the influence of news sources (Bennett, 1990; Ray & Lu, 2022). External factors like political and commercial pressures can compromise objectivity, diversity, and balance in news coverage, threatening a free press's principles and fostering media propaganda (Herman, 2000). Given this, exploring newspaper reporting patterns helps develop an understanding of how the Mahsa Amini case and associated protests are presented to different cultural and political audiences.

Newspapers are powerful agenda-setters (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Through strategic framing, the news media draws public attention to specific conflict aspects. This selective emphasis can either foster understanding or perpetuate stereotypes. For instance, Great Britain's television news coverage of the Iraq war significantly shaped public opinion, making it more supportive of government actions (Lewis, 2004).

In news reporting, sources, valence, and rhetorical devices are crucial. Gans (1979) explored the relationship between news sources and journalists, highlighting the power dynamics in these relationships and how they shape public



perception. Strömbäck et al. (2013) emphasized that the selection of sources influences news media's role in shaping public understanding of events and issues. Researchers also have examined the valence within frames, noting how positive, negative, or neutral tones affect audience perceptions (McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003). Additionally, rhetorical devices offer nuanced analyzes of the significance of language and narrative style in new stories (Entman, 1993).

Media biases significantly shape public perceptions of political protests, especially in authoritarian regimes. In Iran, state control over broadcasting and censorship of news content restricts critical discourse and silences opposition voices (Wojcieszak et al., 2018). Polyák (2019) showed how illiberal regimes suppress media pluralism, favoring ruling authorities. Biased reporting can frame protesters as adversaries of the regime, reducing their public support and demobilizing dissent (Susánszky, Kopper, & Frank, 2022; Weaver & Scacco, 2013; Kyriakidou & Osuna, 2017). In contrast, media freedom in the U.S. is constitutionally upheld, though it faces challenges from governmental regulations balancing freedoms with societal norms (Akrami, Ghafari, & Vali, 2022).

Analyzing news coverage of Iranian protests is crucial for understanding state-society relations. Shahi and Abdoh-Tabrizi (2020) noted that Iranian protests have evolved from passive resistance to bold defiance, challenging the regime's authority. Monshipouri and Zamiri (2023) argued that recent protests in Iran reflect broader dissatisfaction with the regime, encompassing issues like corruption and economic decline. Critically examining how countries are portrayed in other nations' newspapers amid diplomatic tensions is essential. Jahedi and Abdullah (2012) highlighted how Western news media, particularly *The New York Times*, framed Iran negatively during key political events. Similarly, Ahmadian (2014) stated that *The Los Angeles Times* and the *Tehran Times* presented Iran's nuclear program in different ways, reflecting each newspaper's ideological stance.

Peace journalism, rooted in Johan Galtung's work (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), promotes conflict resolution through non-violent means (Hanitzsch, 2004). It emphasizes the human cost

of violence and shifts the news media's role from passive observation to active peace promotion (Colbert, 2009). Peace journalism elevates ethical standards in reporting violent conflicts (Nohrstedt & Ottosen, 2015) by encouraging journalists to move away from sensationalism and binary, adversarial framing.

Cross-cultural comparison is vital for understanding how different news systems affect public opinion. By examining framing strategies, researchers can gain insights into how news narratives are constructed and have the potential to influence public perceptions and political discourse.

Methodology

For this study, a mixed-method approach was employed, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The definition of the universe from which a sample is drawn is shaped by the specified timeframe (Linström & Marais, 2012). The data collection process followed a purposive sampling method, enabling the precise collection of news stories concerning Amini's death in Iran and the subsequent protests within the timeframe of 16 September 2023 to 16 October 2023. Data collection commenced on the day of Amini's death and spanned one month, resulting in a total of 86 news stories (61 from the *Tehran Times* and 25 from *WSJ*). We analyzed news stories using content analysis. Frame types were identified through an inductive approach, where two coders independently analyzed and coded the data to uncover recurring themes and patterns. Quantitative data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), employing techniques such as frequency tables. Letters to the Editor and Opinion pieces were not included in the analysis.

The methodology employed in this study involves the identification of news frames, followed by the coding of valence into three categories: negative, neutral, and positive, the selection of sources in the news stories and rhetorical devices.

To establish the reliability of our content analysis, we employed Krippendorff's alpha, a measure of inter-coder reliability. This approach involved two independent coders evaluating the same samples, minimizing the influence of subjective biases inherent in qualitative data.

Krippendorff's Alpha, which considers chance, is a more accurate and trustworthy measure of inter-coder dependability than approaches that only calculate percent agreement. As a result, the significant agreement seen here reflects actual uniformity in how the news frames were evaluated. The alpha value is considered to assess the level of agreement. We obtained an alpha value of 0.8383, indicating substantial agreement between the two coders in assessing news frames.

Daya Analysis News Frames

The research findings in Table 1 indicate the news frames used by the *Tehran Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* in their coverage. The frames we identified were consistent with those proposed by several scholars (Boydston et al., 2013; Neuman et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Thankachan & Thomas, 2021; Blankenship, 2011).

Table 1. Frames of the news stories.

News Frames	Tehran Times		The Wall Street Journal	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Manipulative frame	12	19.7	2	8.0
Political frame	0	0.0	5	20.0
Attribution of responsibility frame	24	39.3	0	0.0
Dispute frame	2	3.3	0	0.0
Conflict frame	1	1.6	14	56.0
Security & defence frame	6	9.8	0	0.0
External regulation and reputation frame	4	6.6	0	0.0
Morality frame	3	4.9	1	4.0
Legal Process frame	2	3.3	0	0.0
Economic frame	2	3.3	2	8.0
Medical frame	2	3.3	0	0.0
Motivational frame	3	4.9	1	4.0
TOTAL	61	100	25	100

The *political frame* examines political implications and positions on an issue, including explicit statements about its impact on a political party. The *external regulation and reputation frame* explores external relations with other countries, policies, and trade agreements. The *security and defence frame* focuses on safeguarding individuals, groups, or nations from potential threats. (Boydston et al., 2013). The *morality frame* deals with issues related to morality and social norms (Neuman et al., 1992). The *conflict frame* highlights disagreements and conflicts between individuals, groups, or institutions. The *economic consequences frame* portrays potential economic impacts on individuals, groups, institutions, or regions. The *attribution of responsibility frame* attributes responsibility for the cause or solution of an issue to a government or specific individuals/groups (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The *manipulative frame* reshapes perceptions by introducing diverse viewpoints or diverting attention for strategic purposes. The *motivational frame* aims to rally public support

and emphasize national unity in conflict situations. The *dispute frame* highlights conflicting perspectives and emphasizes contentious points in a conflict, shaping audience attitudes (Thankachan & Thomas, 2021). In the newspaper framing of Amini, the *medical frame* emphasizes the healthcare aspect of news stories, shaping narratives around medical issues and their impact on individuals and communities. The *legal process frame* focuses on legal aspects and procedures, considering jurisdiction, legal authority, and actions taken (Blankenship, 2011).

The *Tehran Times* predominantly used the attribution of responsibility frame (39.3%) and the manipulative frame (19.7%). It expressed a strong tendency to attribute internal conflicts and protests to external factors, especially the influence of the United States, highlighting the perceived double standards of foreign powers. Employing news stories with provocative headlines like "Palestinian child is killed; Where is the West's uproar?" and "15-year-old girl killed by US troops," the newspaper claimed that the



U.S. engages in acts of violence while simultaneously presenting Iran as innocent and attributing blame to other countries. Further, the *Tehran Times* adopted only one news story with the *conflict frame* to criticize the demonstrators. The news story captured pro-government protestors in Tehran condemning the desecration of Islamic sanctities and violations of Islamic laws by anti-government protestors, marching from the University of Tehran to Enghelab Square (Tehran Times, 2022a), criticizing anti-government protestors as violators of Islamic laws and sanctities. Compared to *conflict frame*, the *security and defence frame* (9.8%) is used more in *Tehran Times* to emphasize threats from other countries and safeguarding actions, the *external regulation and reputation frame* encompassed news stories on the sanctions imposed on Iran by Western nations and emphasized meetings with U.N. officials, where Iran urged these nations to cease their interference in Iran's internal conflicts, specifically regarding Amini's death.

In contrast, *The Wall Street Journal* predominantly employed the *conflict frame*, which was used in 56 percent of its coverage, emphasizing widespread unrest in Iran. This frame highlighted challenges faced by ethnic minorities, such as the Kurdish community, and regions like Khuzestan and Sistan-Baluchestan, illustrating how Iran suppresses these areas through violence and negligence. The political frame is also significant, comprising 20% of its stories, and portraying political instability in Iran as a product of the Islamic ideology of the government. The *WSJ* critiqued Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's handling of the protests, emphasizing his perceived double standards. According to the *WSJ*, Khamenei publicly expressed support for Mahsa Amini and assured the public that her case would be handled appropriately but his actions were focused on suppressing the protest sparked by her death.

The *economic frame*, used in 8% of its stories, highlighted the significant impact of a 50% inflation rate and a depreciating currency on Iran's middle class, which constitutes 60% of the population. This frame underscored widespread economic challenges, despite a robust educational system, and reported on student protests at Allameh Tabatabai University in Tehran against poverty, corruption, and tyranny. Additionally, the *WSJ* employed the morality and

motivational frames (4% each) to further criticize the government's actions, highlighting unethical practices by Iran's government and portraying Iranian citizens as victims of their government's alleged oppressive policies. The *WSJ* also employed the *attribution of responsibility frame* to depict Iran as responsible for the protests occurring within the country.

Valence

The research findings in Table 3 depict the tone employed by the *Tehran Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* in representing Mahsa Amini, Iranian protests, and the Iranian Government in their coverage.

Table 2. Valence of the news stories

	Tehran Times		The Wall Street Journal	
Valence of the news stories related to Mahsa Amini				
Valence	No. of news stories Frequency	%	No. of news stories Frequency	%
Positive	14	23.0	11	44.0
Neutral	28	45.9	13	52.0
Amini not discussed	19	31.1	1	4.0
Valence of the news stories related to Iran's Government				
Valence	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Positive	55	90.2	0	0
Negative	0	0	22	88.0
Neutral	3	4.9	3	12.0
Govt not discussed	3	4.9	0	0
Valence of the news stories related to the Iranian protests				
Valence	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Positive	0	0	11	44.0
Negative	60	98.4	0	0
Neutral	1	1.6	13	52.0
Protest not discussed	0	0	1	4.0

Table 2 indicates that *Tehran Times* strongly opposed the Iranian protests, attributing them to deliberate instigation by rival countries for political gains. Ninety eight percent of the stories are negatively valenced with the remaining story carrying a neutral tone. Ninety percent of the news stories in the *Tehran Times* conveyed a *positive* valence towards the Iranian government while reporting negatively about foreign countries critical of the Iranian government. It is notable that the sentiment toward Amini in the *Tehran Times* is predominantly neutral (53.3%), with a significant portion of the coverage also reflecting positive news stories and without any criticizing stories. *Tehran Times*, while taking a critical view of the protests, is rooted in its strategic alignment with the government's broader narrative. By voicing support for Amini as an individual, the publication attempts to distance itself from any potential public backlash, as Amini's case resonated deeply within Iranian society and beyond. At the same time, by condemning the protests, particularly as they became more violent, the *Tehran Times* maintains its loyalty to the government. In several stories featured in *Tehran Times*, Mahsa Amini is noticeably absent from the reporting (31%). This suggests a deliberate editorial decision by the newspaper

not to focus on Amini's role or involvement in those specific instances.

We observed a progression in the *Tehran Times*'s narrative concerning the protests. The *Tehran Times* initially portrayed protests as a mournful response to Amini's death. This narrative swiftly shifted, framing the demonstrations as violent riots defying Iranian law. Ultimately, the newspaper claimed protesters were tools in a U.S.-led propaganda campaign, dehumanizing them by withholding the label "Iranian."

The *WSJ* expressed support for the Iranian protests while strongly criticizing the Iranian government, which is the exact opposite of *Tehran Times*' stance. However, the sentiment toward Amini is neutral in both newspapers. *WSJ* portrayed Iranian protestors as victims. The statement, "The triangle of women, technology and poverty is the fuel behind the demonstrations," (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2022c1) underscores the protestors' vulnerability, painting them as victims struggling with poverty and a lack of resources. Additionally, the description of Iran's government as "increasingly corrupt and authoritarian", entwined with religious references, portrays the protestors as victims of an oppressive regime (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2022c2). The external imposition of sanctions by Canada,

characterized as a direct response to “Iran’s heavy-handed response to the protests,” (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2022d) amplifies the narrative of the protestors as victims of state aggression.

Additionally, *The Wall Street Journal* portrayed the protests because of prolonged political suppression by the Iranian government, which has curtailed the freedom of its citizens.

Table 3. Sources of the news stories

Tehran Times			The Wall Street Journal		
Category	Frequency	%	Category	Frequency	%
Iranian Sources	65	53.3	U.S. Sources	9	10.6
Non-Iranian Leaders	17	13.9	Non-US Sources	47	55.3
Anonymous Sources	29	23.8	Anonymous Sources	12	14.1
Other Organizations	11	9.0	Other organizations	17	20
Total	122	100	Total	85	100

In the quantitative breakdown of sources, the *Tehran Times* predominantly relies on statements from Iranian government officials and military figures, with an emphasis on the Foreign Ministry spokesperson, the Iranian President, and leaders like Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. A noteworthy aspect is the substantial use of anonymous sources, both from within the government and other affiliated organizations supporting the government, potentially indicating a controlled narrative.

On the other hand, *The Wall Street Journal* presents a more diverse range of sources giving less emphasis to U.S. sources. Human rights organizations such as Hengaw and Amnesty International are cited, contributing to a global perspective. The *WSJ* incorporates statements from Iranian officials, Iranian citizens, activists, and local witnesses, enhancing the diversity of viewpoints. International institutions like the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund, for example, are referenced in *WSJ* stories, providing a broader context. While anonymous sources are present in *WSJ* coverage, they are not as prevalent as in *Tehran Times*.

In the context of the news media and conflicts, the concept of source attribution encapsulates how conflicting parties strategically attribute information to sources within their own or opposing camps to either defend their actions or assign blame to the other. The *Tehran Times*, for example, adopts a defense-blame game strategy by sourcing pro-government Iranian officials to deflect criticism. Conversely, *The Wall Street Journal* employs a "critique-oriented stance" towards Iran, often reporting information from diverse sources such as organisations, victims and other U.S. and non-U.S. personnel to scrutinize Iranian actions and policies. However, Table 2 reveals that *The Wall Street Journal* employs a predominantly negative valence in its coverage of Iran. Hence, it can be surmised that despite using diverse sources, the overall message conveyed by the *WSJ* remains distinctly subjective as these sources did not provide multi-perspective coverage, resulting in skewed information dissemination. The figure shows the relationship between sources and disseminated information.

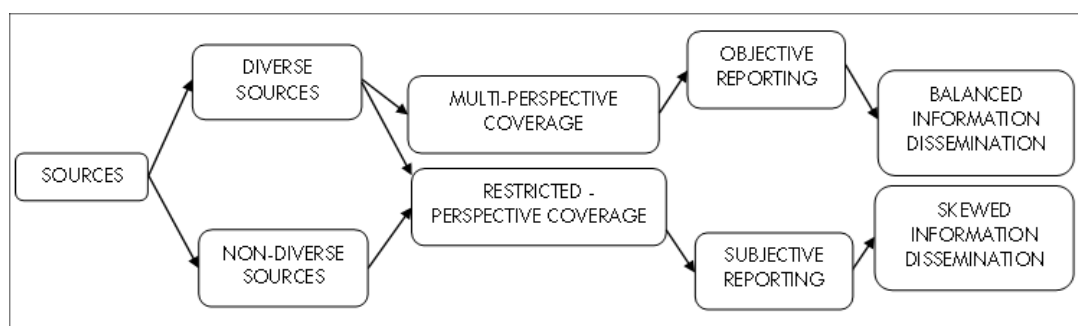


Figure 1: Complex relationship between sources and disseminated information



Rhetorical Devices

The Oxford dictionary (2024) defines "rhetoric" as speech or writing that is intended to influence people, but some forms of persuasive communication are not completely honest or sincere. Rhetorical devices, including language choices meant to influence the audience, are employed in news stories. This study identified seven techniques used in the *Tehran Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* in their reports. They are metaphors, exemplars, catch-phrases, depictions, roots, allusion (Zhou, 2017), and repetition (Al-Mukharriq, 1993). In the realm of framing scholarship, an exploration of rhetorical devices offers a nuanced analysis of the presence or absence of specific keywords, stock phrases, and thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments within news discourses (Entman, 1993). The evaluation of rhetorical devices in this study through qualitative analysis complements the quantitative data presented previously.

Metaphor is defined as a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (Merriam-Webster, 2024). According to Gamson and Lasch (1983), metaphors have two parts - the principal subject that the metaphor is intended to illuminate and the associated subject that the metaphor invokes to enhance readers' understanding. Exemplars are real events used to frame the principal subject and can be either dynamic or single-valued. Catch-phrases are summary statements about the principal subject. Depictions characterize principal subjects in a particular fashion. Roots involve how news stories analyze the causal dynamics underlying an issue (Gamson and Lasch (1983). In this study, the concept of allusion, as described by Lennon (2008), can be characterized as a form of text-based indirection. It refers to instances where the reader interprets implicit meaning intended by the writer, and this is indicated by prominent elements within the text. In Western rhetoric, as Johnstone (1987) notes, "repetition" is considered an optional stylistic device, typically used sparingly to embellish an already well-structured speech or essay (Johnstone , 1991).

Metaphors

In critiquing the U.S. stance on Iranian women's freedom, the *Tehran Times* used the metaphor "crocodile tears" to highlight what it saw as the U.S.'s fake emotions (*Tehran Times*, 2022b). This phrase suggested that America's expressed sympathy was insincere, like a hypocrite's feigned grief. The criticism stemmed from accusations of law enforcement violence against American women. The *Tehran Times* pointed out that 50 American women are killed by police each year, with 250 women shot by police from 2015 to 2020 (*Tehran Times*, 2022c).

Additionally, the *Tehran Times* employed a metaphor in its statement, "They [Americans] are looking for Iran of the Pahlavi era, which obeyed their orders and was a milk cow to them." (*Tehran Times*, 2022d). This statement conveyed a historical perspective. The metaphorical reference to the "Iran of the Pahlavi era" symbolizes a time when Iran complied with American demands, depicting it metaphorically as "a milk cow." This imagery underscores the perception of the *Tehran Times* about the U.S.'s intentions, portraying it as seeking a compliant Iran, highlighting historical ties when Iran provided economic benefits to the United States. Furthermore, the headline "West gives artificial respiration to rioters" (*Tehran Times*, 2022e) metaphorically suggests that the West is providing life support to rioters, indicating external support and encouragement for disruptive activities.

On the other hand, the absence of metaphors in the WSJ content indicates a different rhetorical approach. Instead of relying on figurative language, the WSJ presented its perspective in a more straightforward manner.

Exemplars

In a *Tehran Times* article titled "A Syria Recipe for Iran," (*Tehran Times*, 2022f) the metaphorical phrase utilized paints a vivid and suspicious portrayal of the ongoing unrest in Iran. The metaphor "A Syria Recipe for Iran" suggests a deliberate attempt by foreign powers and Western media to sow chaos in Iran, drawing parallels to situations in Syria and Libya.

The headline of *Tehran Times*'s news story, "U.S. shut down internet when Congress faced unrest: Iran FM," (*Tehran Times*, 2022g) implies international hypocrisy, emphasizing how alleged actions taken by the U.S.



government for security reasons aren't scrutinized as closely as similar actions by other nations, including Iran. The *Tehran Times* reported the statement of Amir Abdollahian's, Iran's Foreign Minister, emphasizing international hypocrisy, pointing to the alleged action of an internet shut down by the U.S. government during the Trump-inspired insurrection. However, it is crucial to emphasize that the assertion made by *Tehran Times* regarding the U.S. internet shutdown is inaccurate. The principal subject here is the questionable response of the U.S., while the associated subject contextualizes the situation when, as reported by *Tehran Times*, the U.S. shut down of the internet during its own unrest, contrasting it with Iran's actions. No exemplars were found in *The Wall Street Journal*.

Catch-phrases

In the realm of political rhetoric, certain phrases encapsulate complex sentiments and powerfully convey ideologies. One such phrase used by the *Tehran Times* follows: "They left no stone unturned," illuminates the exhaustive efforts of American and European political leaders to advance consistent criticism of Iran (*Tehran Times*, 2022h). Additionally, the phrase "Foe's hypocrisy – U.S." is used to describe the U.S. as a deceitful adversary (*Tehran Times*, 2022i). Further, the Iranian paper employed the headline "One lie against Iran every two minutes!" (*Tehran Times*, 2022j) to specifically target news media outlets like the BBC Persian service, Iran International, Voice of America, Radio Farda, and Manoto, which have been critical of Iran, particularly regarding Amini's death. The newspaper asserted that these outlets consistently disseminate false information about Iran, underscoring the alleged swift and unceasing stream of deceptive content. In contrast, the phrase "One nation, one flag" communicates a message of unity through its simplicity and the reiterated use of the word "one" (*Tehran Times*, 2022k). This phrase encapsulates the idea of a harmonious and united Iran under a single flag.

The Wall Street Journal employed the phrase "an unpopular vestige of the 1979 revolution" to depict the morality police in Iran, casting them in a negative light (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2022e).

Depiction

The portrayals in the *Tehran Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* underscored a distinct contrast in their narrative emphasis. The *Tehran Times* employed phrases such as "Vandalism" (*Tehran Times*, 2022l), "Rowdy rioters," (*Tehran Times*, 2022m), etc., depicting a perspective of violent Iranian protestors. Meanwhile, terms like "War criminals" (*Tehran Times*, 2022n) were utilized to characterize Western officials. The term "imperialist interventions" highlighted Iran's stance against what it perceives as Western intrusion during the protests. The phrase "anti-revolutionary elements" singled out the U.S., emphasizing the *Tehran Times*'s view of foreign interference in Iranian internal affairs. Additionally, the Iranian newspaper's depictions cast Iran as a resilient nation, describing it as "strong," "independent," and "advanced," (*Tehran Times*, 2022o), while labelling other nations (for example, U.S., U.K., Germany, Israel, France, Iraq, Saudi Arabia etc.) as "foreign ill-wishers" (*Tehran Times*, 2022p1), "arrogant global powers" (*Tehran Times*, 2022p2), and as engaging in "imperialist interventions" (*Tehran Times*, 2022p3) etc. These descriptions underscore the *Tehran Times*'s efforts to fortify Iranian national identity amidst external pressures, painting a picture of resistance against perceived adversaries.

On the other hand, *The Wall Street Journal*'s depictions focused on the internal policies and actions of the Iranian government. Terms like "Ultraconservative Islamic clerics" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2022f), the "strict Islamic dress code", and "theocratic rules" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2022g) highlighted the Iranian government's imposition of religious guidelines in governance. Phrases such as "brutal crackdown" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2022h) and "usual brutality" underline the perceived harshness of the Iranian government's response to dissent. The term "the clerical oligarchs" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2022i) emphasizes a concentration of power within a select group.

Roots

According to the *Tehran Times*, the roots of the Iranian conflict in primarily revolve around perceived external interference. Phrases like "violent acts fuelled by Western mainstream media" reveal the newspaper's belief that external media influences created the violence

(*Tehran Times*, 2022q1). From the perspective of the *Tehran Times*, the statement alleging the "direct involvement of the American and British governments" (*Tehran Times*, 2022q2) in the unrest stressed the active role by these foreign entities in deliberately fomenting conflict in Iran. The term "foreign-backed riots" (*Tehran Times*, 2022q3) underscored *Tehran Times*'s position that the unrest is not spontaneous but orchestrated by external support. Moreover, the specific claim that the "Americans were behind the operation of Kurdish groups" alleges U.S. manipulation in regional disturbances (*Tehran Times*, 2022q4).

Contrastingly, *The Wall Street Journal*'s depiction of the conflict focused on internal dynamics within Iran. The headline, "Iran Student Protests Challenge Leadership" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2022j) highlighted internal dissent, particularly among students, indicating a dissatisfaction with the current regime. The *WSJ* portrayed the triangle of women, technology, and poverty as a combustible mix, fuelling demonstrations and emphasizing socioeconomic challenges as root causes of the unrest. Unlike the *Tehran Times*'s perspective, *The Wall Street Journal*'s focuses much more on internal factors and domestic issues contributing to the conflict.

Allusion

The deliberate use of allusion as a rhetorical device becomes apparent in the *Tehran Times*. For instance, in the headline "Serial Killer of Women Cries for Iranian Women," the *Tehran Times* uses an allusion to portray violence in the U.S. against American women, while questioning the sincerity of the U.S.'s concern for Iranian women (*Tehran Times*, 2022r1). According to the *Iranian newspaper*, the U.S. has a record of considerable violence against women but sheds false tears for Iranian women. Similarly, another news story titled "Palestinian Child is Killed; Where is the West's Uproar?" deploys allusion to question the Western world's silence following the death of a Palestinian child, implying a sharp contrast with the West's outcry over similar incidents during the Iranian protests (*Tehran Times*, 2022r2). Through these allusions, the *Tehran Times* highlighted what it perceives as a double standard in Western reactions, emphasizing

inconsistencies in responses to comparable incidents involving other nations.

The graphic image of Zainab Essam Majed al-Khazali coupled with the title "You should not talk about her," represents a compelling visual portrayal of her death (*Tehran Times*, 2022r3).



Figure 2. Zainab Essam Majed al-Khazali

The *Tehran Times* asserted that this 15-year-old Iraqi girl met her death due to US gunfire during military drills. The use of this image indirectly conveys a powerful message, highlighting the perceived bias of Western media by emphasizing their silence about events critical of the U.S., while concurrently focusing on incidents within Iran, such as the death of Amini.

The inclusion of American citizens, notably Siamak Namazi, his father Baquer Namazi, Emad Shargi, and Morad Tahbaz, imprisoned in Iran adds a layer of complexity to the portrayal of Iran by *The Wall Street Journal* (2022l). Specifically, Siamak Namazi, an Iranian American, and the head of strategic planning at Crescent Petroleum Co., was imprisoned in Tehran's Evin prison in 2015, and was accused of collaborating with the U.S. government after the nuclear deal between the U.S. and Iran was signed. Baquer Namazi, Siamak Namazi's father, also a U.S. citizen, was imprisoned in 2016. Emad Shargi, an American businessman, was arrested in 2018, and Morad Tahbaz, a British American conservationist, was jailed in January 2018 in Iran. By highlighting these instances, the *WSJ* reinforces the portrayal of Iran as a place where even foreign citizens encounter imprisonment and restricted freedoms, contributing to the overall narrative of Iran as a repressive and dangerous. However, it is noteworthy that only one news story employed



this specific form of allusion in the *WSJ*'s coverage.

Repetition

Both the *Tehran Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* employed repetition as a prominent rhetorical strategy in their coverage. In the *Tehran Times*, specific sentences were recurrently featured across multiple news stories. For instance, Iranian President Raisi's empathetic statement to the family of Amini was reiterated in six different stories (Published in the *Tehran Times* on 21/09/2022, 29/09/2022, 02/10/2022, 03/10/2022, 08/10/2022, 12/10/2022) emphasizing his personal involvement and concern about her death. Additionally, a report from the Forensic Medicine, an unspecified organisation mentioned by the *Tehran Times*, stating that there was no damage to Amini's vital organs was cited in four separate articles (Published in *Tehran Times* on 08/10/2022, p:1, 08/10/2022, p:2, 09/10/2022, 10/10/2022).

Further, the repetitive use of phrases referring to Amini's death, such as "tragic/unfortunate death" (21/09/2022, 24/09/2022, 29/09/2022, 02/10/2022, 03/10/2022, 08/10/2022, 12/10/2022, 15/10/2022, 16/10/2022) and "fainted in police custody," (04/10/22, 8/10/22, 10/10/2022, 12/10/2022, 16/10/2022) in the *Tehran Times* portrayed the Iranian government as empathetic, aligning its sorrow with that of Iranian citizens, while simultaneously deflecting the direct responsibility of the police in Amini's death.

In *The Wall Street Journal*'s coverage of Iran, key phrases like the "strict Islamic dress code" and the "ultra conservative Islamic Government" are strategically repeated, creating a pervasive image of Iran's government as authoritarian and rigid (20/09/2022, 21/09/2022, 22/09/2022, 26/09/2022) By emphasizing these terms, the *WSJ* reinforces the notion of Iran's political environment as controlling and limiting, thereby potentially influencing readers' perspectives on the nation's governance. Furthermore, phrases such as the "strict Islamic dress code" (21/09/2022, 22/09/2022, 23/09/2022, 27/09/2022, 30/09/2022, 1,2/09/2022, 03/10/2022) and the "restriction on women" are reiterated, highlighting the severe constraints imposed upon women in Iranian society. Through this repetition, the *WSJ*

emphasizes the societal barriers faced by women, emphasizing the challenges and limitations they encounter due to cultural and religious norms.

The sentence, "Teachers, farmers, and middle-class professionals (*The Wall Street Journal*. 2022k) have taken to the streets to decry the state of the country's economy," is used three times in different news stories (20/09/2022, 22/09/2022, 26/09/2022) and serves a dual purpose. First, it highlights that diverse sections of society are dissatisfied with the Iranian government, emphasizing widespread discontent. Second, the repetition of this sentence across stories underscores the unity among various social strata, collectively expressing their dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

The study shows that geo-political tensions significantly influence news narratives on conflicts, often resulting in biased coverage that exacerbates rivalries between countries. Framing analysis and an evaluation of valence assist in identifying the predominant perspectives, both supportive and opposing, within a news story. The use of rhetorical devices is crucial for understanding how geopolitical rivalries influence news reporting. These devices play a significant role in uncovering how competing narratives and national interests mould news media content.

Further, this study underscores the complex and often non-proportional relationship between source selection and news objectivity. It highlights how the choice of sources profoundly influences the depth and balance of news coverage. The balanced inclusion of both supporting and opposing perspectives is crucial, determining whether diverse sources lead to objective or subjective reporting.

While our study does not directly measure the impact of news stories on audiences, the framing and source attribution strategies observed suggest that these news media practices have the potential to shape public perceptions and understandings of international conflicts. The scarcity of peace frames and limited emphasis on peace journalism within these portrayals underscores a critical deficiency in current journalistic practices. This deficiency highlights the urgent need for a revision of journalistic ethics and standards. The



skewed reporting observed in our study also emphasizes the importance of enhancing media literacy among readers. News consumers need to be equipped with the skills to critically analyze news content, discern biased reporting, and identify underlying narratives.

Additionally, this study highlights the importance of conflict studies in the news media landscape, emphasizing the need for journalists to employ diverse storytelling techniques for a comprehensive and unbiased perspective on conflicts, contributing to a more informed society.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are publicly available on the websites of Tehran Times (www.tehrantimes.com) and The Wall Street Journal (www.wsj.com). Researchers accessed the dataset (e-papers) by visiting the respective websites.

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