Politics of Representation: CNN coverage of the attack on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman

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Introduction

Our ideas, thoughts and worldview are not simply constructed in isolation from the rest of the world. What we believe and think of as a truth or reality is influenced by the world around us. Family, school, society, education system, religion and culture, all have a significant role in the way we think, perceive and analyze events and phenomena.

How we perceive things and represent them is part of the process of production of meanings (Hall 1997). Language is an essential element of production of meaning. "Representation means using language to say something meaningful about or to

represent the world meaningfully to other people" (Hall 1997: 15). Representing the world meaningfully, doesn't mean it is the ultimate truth. Language is not the only tool for representation. It involves the use of signs and images as well (Hall 1997).

One of the subjects which the media is always interested in covering and commenting on is war and conflict. War and conflict are considered news worthy. Reports lined to life, death and extreme conflict tend to get public attention and influence the public view (Griffin 2010). Because CNN is a private news network, its income is mostly based on advertisements and how many viewers and subscribers it has (Kung 2000). It mostly, covers news which can increase its viewers and subscribers.

In 2013, Pilger (2014) filmed an interview with Charles Lewis, the American investigative journalist. He asked him, "What if the freest media in the world had seriously challenged George W Bush and investigated their claims, instead of channeling what turned out to be crude propaganda?" He replied that if we journalists had done our job "there is a very, very good chance we would have not gone to war in Iraq." The tension between Donald Trump's administration and Iran and Georg W. Bush and Iraq prior to Iraq invasion, look similar. On this occasion I would like to say, If the media represents the tension between U.S-Iran responsibly, there is no chance of U.S going to war with Iran. But if the media represents the tension from government perspective and rely on the official sources of information regarding the recent attack on oil tankers, the chance of US attacking US might increase.

The study seeks to analyze how the attack on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman is depicted and represented by CNN. I am interested to see how media representation can serve a government's particular strategy during conflict and tension. Also, it is interesting to see how the media tries to change public opinion in favor of the government propaganda against a specific country by presenting a particular event. The media has the power to change public opinion which is very important in democratic government and policy implementation. Therefore, governments try to control the circulation of information to have public support.

Textual Analysis: The study is conducted by analyzing the article "US releases video it claims shows Iran removing an unexploded mine from a Gulf tanker" which was published on 14 June 2019 by CNN. To analyze the text, I will employ categorization and framing techniques. Framing and categorization will help me to analyze how the text divides the actors into groups and the purpose of categorization. In textual analysis the study will also see the usage of language in giving a particular meaning to the event. "Language is one of the 'medias' through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture" (Hall and Nixon 2013: 1).

Visual Analysis: John Taylor's (1991) visual analysis method will be used to analyze the photos which are included in the selected article. It will help to understand and analyze why these particular photos are used and what the author is trying to convey and also it is useful to understand the interaction between visual and verbal modes in a multimodal text (Kress and Leeuwen 2006). To understand what meaning the article is conveying from the event, visual analysis is important beside the textual analysis. It is essential to understand the consistency and connection between the visual and text.

The essay starts with the contextual background of the attack on the oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman and a brief overview of CNN. The analysis section begins with textual analysis of the article, by looking at the usage of categorization and framing techniques. The next part elaborates on the visual analysis of a video and an image from the article. Lastly, the essay ends with a conclusion.

Contextual Background

On 13 June 2019 two oil tankers; the Norwegian Front Altair and the Japanese Kokuka Courageous were attacked in the Gulf of Oman near the Strait of Hormuz. The details about the attack are still not clear; allegedly they were attacked with flying objects or limpet mines. The crew members of the vessels jumped in the water and were rescued by Iranian and US military personnel. This incident happened while the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was visiting Iran as an intermediary between the Iran Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the U.S President Donald

Trump. The United State blamed Iran for the attacks but Iranian officials denied the accusation. Japan, whose tanker was attacked, asked for stronger evidence to prove Iran's culpability. However, it is not clear that Iran did it or not and there is no evidence which can prove that Iran did do it. But Donald Trump used the opportunity to put more pressure on Iran, and immediately blamed Iran for the attack and said in an interview with Fox News "Iran did do it, and you know they did it because you saw the boat".

Brief Overview- The Cable News Network (CNN)

CNN is an American private news channel. It was founded in 1989 by Robert Edward Turner who was a philanthropist. CNN was the first 24-hour cable news channel at that time. It has to maintain a source of income: mainly advertisement and subscription fees from cable operation companies (Kung 2000). The core principle of CNN was to establish "a role in the process for our viewers" (Peter 1992: 33). So the subjective view from CNN has to be questionable.

Article Analysis ([Video](#))

The article which I have chosen to analyze "US releases video it claims shows Iran removing unexploded mines from the Gulf tankers" is written by Barbara Starr, CNN Pentagon correspondent in Washington D.C, Devan Cole, a CNN Politics reporter in Washington D.C, Eliza Mackintosh, a CNN London based digital producer covering the Middle East, Africa and Europe and Michelle Kosinski, CNN senior diplomatic correspondent. Because all the authors of the article are CNN employees, in this study I am considering it as a CNN point of view. The article was published on 14 June 2019 in the CNN Politics website. I have chosen this article because it has been written immediately after the attack. The other reason why I chose this topic is because I am concerned about the U.S possible attack on Iran, even if there is only 10% chance of U.S attack on Iran, it is risky and worrying. The Middle East already

seems to be the deadliest place on earth. The U.S attack on Iran will most likely extend the chaos and conflict in the Middle East for decades.

Categorization

"Categorization helps to provide moral accounts of past actions and prepares the ground for future violence" (Leudar et al 2004: 244). In this article the authors categorize the protagonists into two categories: Iran as the attacker and the U.S as the hegemonic power who always defends victims, supports the weaks and implements international law. Considering U.S policy towards Iran since 1979, the overthrown of Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime by the Iran Islamic revolution (Offilier 2015), and in particular the U.S policy towards Iran since Donald Trump became president, categorization is a useful tool to analyze U.S policy. Categorization is used to provide moral accounts of US past actions and its preparation for a future possible attack against Iran. Iran's past aggressive behavior in the region is also used to justify the attack against Iran. Although there is no evidence released by other countries or found which can prove that Iran had attacked the tankers, the attack is still consistent with Iran's past behavior.

The main purpose of categorization in the text is to represent Iran as a country which violates international law and interferes in other countries in the region. The attack in the Gulf is presented by CNN as the recent evidence of Donald Trump's claims about Iran's bad behavior. "Categorization is always done to accomplish something other than just categorization" (Leudar et al 2004: 244). In addition, the purpose of categorization in this article is to justify US heavy economic sanctions on Iran and a possible attack by the U.S and its allies on Iran.

The text puts the protagonists into three groups; Iran as the villain, Norway and Japan whose tankers have been attacked, as victims and the United States as the hero. But mostly, the victims are also categorized on the U.S side. Therefore, in this study I will analyze two categories as follows:

1- **Iran: as the villain**

In the article, Iran is categorized as the evil enemy and global threat who attacks in a cowardly manner and then hides. We can see this representation in the title of the article, "US releases video it claims shows Iran removing unexploded mines from the Gulf tankers". The word "release" gives the impression to the reader that something bad has been done in hiding which is revealed by the US. Generally, it sounds as if the entire article is devoted to blaming Iran for the attack and convincing the readers that Iran is the perpetrator. The article quotes Donald Trump and Mike Pompeo to support the argument and justification of military action as an appropriate solution to Iran's attack. Furthermore, it indirectly quotes the U.S intelligence service which may sound a reliable source for the reader to believe the U.S claims.

2- United State: as the hero

The United States is presented as a hegemonic power in the text who always stands with the right side. Although none of the oil tankers belong to the United States, the U.S is presented to care about the rest of the world. The text depicts the attack, on U.S soil rather than the Japanese and Norwegian tankers. Norway and Japan are presented as victims but U.S allies. The text also categorizes the UK and the EU as U.S allies and supporters of U.S claims on Iran, even though, they have not investigated the attack by themselves, but they trust the U.S investigation. In addition, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Norway and even the UN Security Council are presented as U.S supporters and against Iran.

Framing

How the media frames everyday life occurrences and events has a huge impact on our perception towards them, especially in our day to day life in which everyone has a smartphone and is connected to the internet. The media has the power to convince us whether what happened was the truth or not. They cover the news and events which they want us to know and fits their editorial policy, so we don't know what they have excluded which can be more important than what they have included in their publications. Gitlin (1980) mentions in this regard "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation of selection, emphasis, and exclusion by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourse" (Gitlin 1980: 7). Another definition of

framing which is relevant to this study and will help to analyze the article is the definition of Entman:

> "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman 2001: 52).

Although, it is true that two oil tanker were attacked in the Gulf of Oman, but why did the U.S, without a pause blame Iran, and what is US interest to emphasize on blaming Iran, is not clear. The article quotes Donald Trump blaming Iran in a very strong and certain language, "Iran did do it, and you know they did it because you saw the boat". When you watch the video, you cannot see anything which might show that Iran did it, but the article makes no mention of the quality of the video and how reliable it can be. CNN is publishing the information which is released by the US government and relying on this evidence. In this case CNN is serving Donald Trump's administration propaganda against Iran and inflaming the conflict between these two countries. Most of the text is dedicated to proving that Iran did the attack, which is exactly what the U.S government wants the world to believe. When we see the selection of quotations in the article, we can also find how the selection is serving the U.S government propaganda machine. The U.S media often frame incidents in a way that reinforces patriotic messages and administrative position (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2008). In the article CNN has made use of U.S government sources and made little reference to how Iran or other countries reported about it. In comparison to the U.S government claims, CNN covered a very small portion from the Iran side, only the denial of the attack by Iran officials.

The analysis shows that the article is written with a parotitic mentality and is promoting military action over diplomacy. CNN is covering the negative stereotypes against Iran and its past aggressive action to support the framing of military action. Although, CNN is critical of the Donald Trump administration, the representation of the attack on oil tankers does not exist outside the framework of military action, nor does it delve into alternative approaches.

Visual analysis

The photos and video which are represented in the article, are also trying to prove Donald Trump's claims against Iran. "Photograph and the text in the media cannot be seen as innocent, transparent or true; they do not simply reflect reality, they help constitute it" (Taylor 1991: 36). I selected one photo and one video from the article to analyze. I cannot put the video here, but I have provided the link to the article where you can watch the video. I will put a screenshot of the video here for the analysis.

1- Video represented in the article

The video is blurred and black and white video which does not show anything about Iran removing an object from the hull of the Japanese tanker. The description above the video is trying to convince the reader that Iran has done it. The interaction between the video and the text makes the video meaningful. The description is constructing a particular meaning out of the video.

In the video, a smaller boat is shown coming up to the side of the Japanese-owned tanker. An individual stands up on the bow of the boat and can be seen removing an object from the tanker's hull. The US says that object is likely an unexploded mine.

2- Photo represented in the article

 "Images of war do seem to have an inherent attraction" (Griffin 2010: 9). The tanker on fire is represented to attract public attention. It also shows how serious a threat Iran is in the Middle East. This image is potentially reinforcing public support for military action on Iran. The images in combination with the text are convincing audiences to consider Iran as the attacker on the oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman.

An oil tanker is on fire in the sea of Oman, Thursday, June 13, 2019.

Conclusion

In this essay, I argued that CNN represented the attack on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman from the United States government perspective which escalates and flares the tension between Iran and the U.S. The representation also depicted Iran as the attacker on the oil tankers. Based on the analysis derived from the textual analysis, by using the tools of framing and categorization, It was asserted that the categorization has been used to justify heavy US sanctions which are affecting not just the Iranian government and its supreme leader, but also the entire nation. The text divided the actors into two categories: Iran as the villain and US as the hero. The frame analysis showed that CNN emphasized to prove the allegation on Iran and

included the quotes from Trump and Pompeo to support the allegation. The study showed that the source of information in this article totally relied on US government official sources. The representation in general is supporting a military action rather than a solution to alleviating the tension between Iran and the US by diplomacy.

In addition, the images and video which are also produced by the US government, are in alignment with the text to prove that the attack was committed by Iran. Although, by watching the video you cannot prove anything against Iran, but CNN has provided a description of the video which gives meaning to the video. The photo depicted a ship on fire. I argued that the photograph is used to get public attention and represented the seriousness of the conflict. The study also argued that fire is presented to create fear and intimidation, so public support the immediate military action against Iran.

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