

Representation of International Views on the 2009 Iranian Election: A Study of *BBC World News and Al Jazeera English*

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comparative analysis on the news reporting style of *BBC World News (BBCWN)* and *Al Jazeera English (AJE)*. *BBCWN* was selected to represent the mainstream Western group of global media traffic, and *AJE* was selected to represent the contra-flow group of global news media. The global event of the 2009 Iranian presidential election was chosen as a case study. The conceptual framework of this study was based on the global media thesis of flow and counter-flow in 24-hour news channels. The central question of the thesis investigates how international views were reflected in the *BBCWN* and *AJE* coverage. The news reporting of the 2009 presidential election by both networks were subjected to the qualitative method of discourse analysis. The study found that the *BBCWN*'s coverage represented more voices from the US and the UK and tended to highlight the tension between Iran and the West more. In contrast, *AJE*'s coverage tended to play down the Iran vs the West confrontation. The network sometimes took a more anti-Western stance by highlighting the view from Russia that suggests the role of Western powers in orchestrating the postelection protests.

Keywords: Global news, critical discourse analysis, *BBC*, *Al Jazeera*, Iran

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's global news systems are much more complex and have overlapping flows and counter-flows. Although channels with global reach are still major Western players, there is competition from new entrants in the satellite news market, especially from the Middle East and West Asia, most notably the Qatar-based 24-hour news channel, *Al Jazeera English (AJE)*. Even though these global news channels share the same broadcasting platform and target almost the same strata of English-speaking worldwide audiences, their structures of global media are deeply diversified (Bruggemann and Forberg, 2009). *CNN International (CNNI)* is perceived to hold a US editorial position while *France 24* and *AJE* claim to provide alternative perspectives to *CNNI*.

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The coverage of *BBC World News (BBCWN)* and *Al Jazeera English (AJE)* of the 2009 Iranian presidential election is the focus point of this paper. *BBCWN* was selected to represent the dominant group of global media traffic due to its global reach, and *AJE* was selected to represent the contra-flow group. The global event of the 2009 Iranian presidential election was chosen as the case study as it symbolizes a distinct yet important event in the political Islam world. The Iran presidential election on 12 June 2009 was a global event which garnered massive media attention all over the world. For international news networks, this tenth presidential election was deemed a very important event. The election witnessed a contest between Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a controversial figure in the West, mainly due to his calls for Israel's demise, his unyieldingness over Iran's nuclear issue and his persistent anti-Western rhetoric; and Mir Hossein Mousavi, a former Iranian Prime Minister who is described by many Western media as a leader that would be able to lead Iran towards improved relations with the West and better personal freedom (Khalaf and Khalaj, 2009).

This article mainly investigates how the international views were represented in the *BBCWN* and *AJE* coverage during the 12 June election. Based on the conception of flow and counter-flow in 24-hour global news channels, this study attempts to explain the similarities and differences of *BBCWN* and *AJE* coverage and to what extent the global news coverage of both networks functions as a platform of struggle, with "differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance" (Wodak, 2001: 11).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Global Media Flow

The privatisation and deregulation of the television industry in the 1980s, together with the emergence of satellite technology, has changed the landscape of global television. With increased numbers of cross-border media and rapid changes in the technology of media and communication, the discourse on media globalisation has shifted into two broad paradigms: the first argues that the framework of global media still imposes a global capitalist ideology and Western culture (Herman and McChesney, 1997; Artz, 2003; Chalaby, 2006; Selznik, 2008); and the second sees globalisation as an agent of chaos that marks the end of dominant cultures and hegemonic norms (Jameson, 1984; Baudrillard, 1994; McNair, 2006) and contributes to cultural diversity, political democratisation and social fluidity (Appadurai, 1990; Pieterse, 1994; Straubhaar, 2006; Cottle and Rai, 2008).

Studies carried out to map the complexity of today's satellite channels supported the idea of diversity and complexity of global media flows and undermine the "one-flow" argument of the cultural imperialism thesis. However, the findings also showed an unbalanced stream of cultural products from Western countries to the developing world. Daya Kishan Thussu (2007a:10) divided the global media flow into two categories: dominant flows of media traffic from United States, Britain and European countries and contra-flows from non-Western regions such as India, Korea, China and Middle East countries. Thussu (2007a:21) argued that even though the two-way flow

of cultural media products between the two groups are not proportionate, evidence showed that the flow of global media is not just “one way from the West” to the rest of the world. 24-hour news channels such as China’s *CCTV-9* and Qatar’s *Al Jazeera* are examples of important players in the transnational media networks that come from the contra-flow group.

Michael Brüggemann and Hagen Schulz-Forberg (2009) proposed four ideal types of transnational media – national media with a transnational mission, international media, pan-regional media and global media. While national media, international media and pan-regional media address specific world regions or groups of countries, global media target broad transnational audiences. *CNNI*, *BBCWN*, *France 24*, and *AJE* fall into this category.

Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg (2009:700) however, pointed out that global media do not necessarily imply that their audiences are truly global, rather that, the audience are “not territorially bound but defined by certain interests”. One of the factors why global news media are not so “global” is the choice of language, which is mainly English. This means that regions where its population do not speak the language will not have an audience for global English news media. This also dismisses the global role of transnational news media due to its target audiences of “elite” English-speaking people (Reese, 2004: 242). Albert Moran (2009: 75-76), however, noted that there are huge numbers of potential global English-speaking audiences which are unmatched by any other major world languages such as Chinese, French, and Spanish. This includes not only native English-speaking audiences, but also audiences who speak English as a second language and these numbers keep increasing. Moran notes that there are approximately more than two billion people who speak English as either a first or a second language. Thussu (2007b) further explained that innovation in communication technologies means the diffusion of news is no longer confined to elite audiences. The proliferation of satellite technology which brings 24/7 news coverage across regions, together with the growth in Internet usage around the world, means ordinary citizens can now, not only get to watch the global news channel, but access the background content and archive materials of the world’s international news at any time (Thussu, 2007b: 157).

There are now more than 100 transnational news channels that reach global, regional and national markets around the world (Rai and Cottle, 2007) and the number keeps increasing. The 24/7 satellite news channels reveal dynamic and rapidly expanding flows both within and across regions, particularly in regional and national markets. These channels are owned by a range of different international and local commercial entities. The complexity and heterogeneity of the transnational news landscape again challenges the ideas about Western media dominance and “opens up a more complex and dynamic field of regional and transnational media organisation than traditionally conceived” (Rai and Cottle, 2007: 60). Ingrid Volkmer (2003: 15) called this complex global sphere a dialectical space, “a new space of opposing and contradicting supra- and sub-national polarised worldviews”.

At the global level, however, most of the channels with a “global” reach are major

Western players (Rai and Cottle, 2007: 58). This again does not diminish the ideas of supremacy of major Western corporations in media markets around the globe. The only non-Western global news channel that probably has the potential to reach English-speaking audiences across regions similar to *CNNI* and *BBCWN* is *AJE*. *AJE* has been able to make its presence felt and break the monopoly of Anglo-American global news networks, mostly due to the reputation carried by its pan-Arab parent channel (Taylor, 2003:101-102).

2.2 Television News as a Construction of Reality

The media sociologists and culturists approach their study from a micro perspective which is based on the understanding that news is a construction of reality. Constructivist scholars note that news workers typify events and construct reality rather than describe it. This reality is socially and situationally arranged and viewers are usually presented with events that the audience is already aware of based on a taken-for-granted view of the world (Tuchman, 1976; Lester, 1980; Matheson, 2005).

As a major source of news in today's globalised world, television is regarded as a powerful medium in constructing those realities. Unlike other media of news delivery, the television is able to present directly to the audience, oral and visual signs that are saturated with meanings, resemble closely reality and replete with taken-for-granted and common sense representations (Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Hartley, 1992; Montgomery, 2007). Since global television networks are targeting mass audiences, newsmakers are presenting events based on their interpretation of "common sense" and these mediated portrayals could be ideological. The portrayals could support the views of the ruling classes in a society and, in turn, contribute to reproducing the ideology of the dominant class (Hall, 1980; Fairclough, 2001; Matheson, 2005). This "common sense" portrayal by the media was used as the basis of Said's (1997) argument about negative images of Islam in the Western news media. He argued that the Western media's portrayal of Islam could be traced back to at least the end of the eighteenth century in which Islam was "dominated by a radically simplified type of thinking that may still be called Orientalism" (1997: 4). These stereotypical discourses on Islam as a medieval and dangerous religion continue and such images are perpetuated by prominent sectors of Western countries, particularly the US, that include the policymaking apparatus and Islamic experts who hold the power to propagate those particular images of Islam. Said (1997: 52) pointed out that, in the US, and generally in Britain and European countries, images of Islam as hostile and threatening have become part of the culture, as well as a component of contemporary history. In his analysis of the American media coverage of the 1979 Iranian revolution which led to the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran, he found the image of Islam and Iran presented as militant, dangerous, anti-American and "disturbingly neurotic" (1997: 84).

However, critics argued that Said's thesis of Orientalism "falls into the very trap of essentialising that he charges the Orientalists" (Khalil, 2004: 332). By dividing

the world into West and East, Occident and Orient and “us” versus “them”, Said was making a generalisation about the Western world as a fixed entity and regarded Westerners as essentially inclined to view Islam negatively. His argument in *Covering Islam* seemed to imply that no Western media (with some reservations of the European media) can give coverage of Islam without misrepresenting and stereotyping. Atif Khalil (2004: 335) argued that the alternative of Orientalist discourse is hybridity, with the possibility of a genuine dialogue, and the “dissolution of fixed and reified categories such as ‘Occident’ and ‘Orient’”.

The globalisation of the news media and increase in the flow of regional and national cultures could witness the emergence of hybridity in the form of discourse and counter-discourse on Islam. The rise of the 24-hour news media, for example, has globalised the journalism profession, in which global journalists nowadays are required to provide content to transnational media corporations for a global market. This means that global journalists have to be more aware of the diversity of cultures which cannot be easily neutralised (Fürsich, 2002: 66).

In addition, Schudson (1989: 277) argued that the culturalist approach of looking at the news construction of reality as ideological and hegemonic is too simple and “makes human beliefs and attitudes a more unified, intentional and functional system than they are”. He pointed out that the “frequency factor” of daily news production makes it difficult to connect with the argument of structural control in news content. Matheson (2005: 19) further argued that even though the critical arguments about ideological effects provide a good insight into the study of news representation, the analysis is at risk of becoming too restrictive by spending “too much time hunting for ideological structures and missing some of the complexity of the news text”.

3. METHODOLOGY

The comparative analysis of the 2009 Iranian election coverage looks at how international views were reflected in the *BBCWN* and *AJE* reporting. The tool used for the analysis was the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. CDA is generally concerned with how language represents social practice and creates meaning in social processes (Chouliaraki, 2000: 297). CDA goes beyond a “descriptive” analysis of linguistics characteristics by looking into the obscure as well as visible structural relationships of power, ideology and beyond (Carvalho, 2008: 162) through the creation and circulation of knowledge, opinions and ideas.

There were a total of 97 news packages, 62 from *BBCWN* and 35 from *AJE*, broadcasted between 13 June 2009 and 30 November 2011. Although *BBCWN* broadcasted more news items than *AJE* during the same period, both networks devoted approximately the same time duration for the news packages (*BBCWN* 128 minutes and *AJE* 117 minutes) in their coverage of the post-election events.

The analysis of the transcribed textual features or voice-over commentary of the news packages were based on two levels of analysis: micro level analysis and macro level analysis.

Micro Level Analysis

The micro level analysis which analyses the internal relations of a text (Fairclough, 2003: 36) looks into the lexical features and sentence construction of texts. Lexical analysis explains the usage of words that may “convey the imprint of society and value judgment” (Richardson, 2007: 47). This includes the way people are named in the news script and the manner in which social actors are referred to. The analysis of sentence construction is based on the analysis of transitivity. Transitivity explains the relationship between participants in a news report including the role they play and how actions that appear in a text are represented (Richardson, 2007: 54). Analysis of transitivity investigates the process and participants in the sentence, the agency of the sentence, the usage of nominalisations, how sentences are connected, as well as the usage of active/passive voice and negative/positive sentences (Fairclough, 2001: 101-110).

Macro Level Analysis

The macro level analysis which looks at the external relations of a text is based on the concept of “intertextuality” which refers to the idea that texts cannot be viewed or studied in isolation and must be understood in relation to other texts (Richardson, 2007: 100). Intertextuality “stresses the historicity of texts and how they always constitute additions to existing chains of speech communication” (Fairclough, 1992: 84). John Richardson (2007) noted that in news reporting, intertextuality among others, constitutes reproducing the opinions of others such as reproducing a speech or a quotation from a source involved in the reported events mostly through direct quotation and indirect quotation. The way journalists quote their sources is important at this level of analysis because “the further away from direct quotation that reported speech moves, the greater the interpretative influence of the reporter, hence the greater the potential for distortion and representation” (Richardson, 2007: 106). The analysis of text intertextuality also relates to the assumptions or presuppositions in news reporting. Presupposition is an “implicit claim embedded within the explicit meaning of a text or utterance” (Richardson, 2007: 63). Presuppositions may have an ideological function in which the evocation of specific texts or textual series frames the reader’s textual experience and background knowledge (Fairclough, 2001: 127).

The analyses of direct and indirect quotations in this paper were drawn from Leon Barkho’s (2007) conception of four layers of hard news discourse. Barkho (2007:12) stated that the transformation of materials by reporters into news discourse is carried out in four major ways: (1) quoting, (2) paraphrasing, (3) background and (4) comment. The analyses of this paper specifically looked at the level of quoting and paraphrasing.

4. FINDINGS

The *BBCWN* and *AJE* coverage of international reactions towards the Iranian election showed a great degree of divergence. The *BBCWN* reporting displayed a heavy emphasis on the Iran vs the West theme and relied heavily on quoting and

paraphrasing comments or opinions particularly from the US and the UK. In contrast, the *AJE* coverage appeared to refrain from supporting the West's viewpoint and tended to avoid broaching the Iran vs the West theme.

This disparity was reflected in the qualitative analysis of the representation of direct and indirect international speeches by both networks (Tables 1 and 2). On *BBCWN*, the US and the UK voices took up 96.1% of direct speech (221 seconds) and 53.9% of indirect speech. The rest came from the United Nations (UN) and European nations.

In contrast, *AJE* ran 87 seconds (33.5%) of direct speech from the US and 16.7% of indirect quotations, with no direct or indirect speech from the UK. The rest of *AJE*'s international sources came from leaders of European countries and NGOs which accounted for 66.5% of direct quotations and 83.3% of indirect quotations.

Table 1. Direct speeches from international sources

	<i>BBCWN</i>			<i>AJE</i>		
	n	seconds	%	n	seconds	%
US	10	128	55.7	4	87	33.5
UK	5	93	40.4	–	–	–
United Nations	1	9	3.9	–	–	–
European countries				1	21	8
Middle East countries	–	–				
Foreign NGOs	–	–		5	152	58.5
Total	16	230	100	10	260	100

Table 2. Indirect speeches from international sources

	<i>BBCWN</i>		<i>AJE</i>	
	N	%	n	%
US	1	7.7	1	16.7
UK	6	46.2	–	
United Nations	2	15.3	–	
European countries	3	23.1	3	50
Middle East countries	–	–	–	–
NGOs	1	7.7	2	33.3
Total	13	100	6	100

BBCWN's reporting of the postelection events revealed that the network's discourse patterns were closer to the official viewpoints of "Western governments". The closing sentence of the *BBCWN* report after the election result was announced, as shown in Figure 1 (Kelly, 2009), explicitly mentioned the "Western governments" disapproval of Ahmadinejad's victory. It is important to note that the sentence, "there is no doubt a more reformist president would have been favoured by Western governments", was not attributed to any sources, which suggests the reporter's support of the Western countries' viewpoint regarding the election result.

Shot no.	Image shot	Voice-over
1		The Americans and the EU have said they will respect
2		The Iranian people's decision, but
3		a more reformist president would have been favoured by Western governments.

Figure 1. *BBCWN* reporting– 13 June 2009

Comments from Western leaders and the UN in response to the election result and postelection protests were strongly represented in the *BBCWN* coverage. A report on 15 June, for example, provided a direct quotation from Britain's Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, expressing his "serious doubt... about the election counting process" and hinting that the result may have been rigged (Hawley, 2009a).

Responses from US President, Barack Obama were also closely followed by the *BBCWN* coverage. A report on 16 June (Kroeger, 2009b) for example, described President Obama's reaction as "a note of concern". On 24 June (Kroeger, 2009a),

Barack Obama was described as making “his strongest statement yet” towards Iran.

Reactions from UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon were also featured prominently in the *BBCWN* election coverage. In a direct quotation from a 15 June report (Hawley, 2009a), the UN Secretary-General questioned whether the will of the people was “reflected and respected in the most transparent and fair and objective manner”. A report on 23 June, again provided quotations from Ban Ki Moon saying that, “the international community is now uniting to condemn” the use of force by the Iranian authorities and “urging an immediate stop to the arrests, threats and the use of force” (North, 2009a).

Russia’s positive reaction towards Ahmadinejad’s re-election, however, was given the cynical treatment by *BBCWN*. In a 16 June report, *BBCWN* portrayed Russia’s congratulatory message to Ahmadinejad as “the public seal of approval from one of his closest allies” (Wingfield-Hayes, 2009).

The tension between Iran and the West was one narrative that dominated *BBCWN*’s postelection coverage. The representations of Ahmadinejad in the *BBCWN* news were framed mainly around the topic of clashes between Iran and the West. In transcripts [1] and [2] below, Ahmadinejad’s quotations were framed using lexical terms such as “angry”, “bitter” and “attack”, emphasising *BBCWN*’s propensity towards highlighting the clashes between him and the Western countries.

- [1] He (Ahmadinejad) in turn has deflected his anger out of Iran and pointed the blame towards the United States (North, 2009b).
- [2] Britain and other European countries sent ambassadors but no messages of congratulations. That provoked a bitter riposte by Mr Ahmadinejad. “Nobody in Iran is waiting for your congratulations...” (Leyne, 2009b).

The tendency to play out the Iran vs the West narrative in framing Ahmadinejad’s quotations was clearly evident in the *BBCWN* coverage of a repartee between Ahmadinejad and Obama in a 27 June report (Williamson, 2009). As shown in Figure 2, the report opened with a cynical metaphor: Ahmadinejad was described as “winning over Iran’s senior judiciary”, with him in a “prosecutor’s chair” and Obama “in the dock”. It was then followed by Ahmadinejad’s direct quotation “attacking” US President Barack Obama. Ahmadinejad’s “attack” was framed by *BBCWN* in the context of him asking for an apology from the US. It was then followed by Obama’s words responding that he did not “take Mr Ahmadinejad’s statements seriously”.

Shot no.	Image shot	Voice-over
1		When you are winning over Iran’s senior judiciary,

Continued from previous page

2



it helps to put someone on trial. In the prosecutor's chair today, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and

3



in the dock, his American counterpart, Barack Obama.

4



“We are surprised at Mr Obama, didn't he say he wanted change. Why did he interfere? They have revealed their intentions before the Iranian nation. Before the world, their mask has been removed.”

5



What is needed to restore confidence, says Iran,

6



is an apology.

7



“I don't take Mr Ahmadinejad's statements seriously about apologies. Particularly given the fact that the United States has been going out of its way not to interfere with the election process in Iran.”

Figure 2. BBCWN reporting – 27 June 2009

The *BBCWN*'s representation of direct quotations from the Iranian government spokespersons also appeared to be blaming the US or Britain for the postelection protests. As shown in transcripts [3] and [4] below, the usage of negative reporting verbs with assertive illocutionary force such as “accuse” and “blame” gave the impression that the Iranian government was on the defensive.

- [3] At the Foreign Ministry briefing, the government spokesman accused the United States and Britain of being behind the unrest that followed them. “Spreading anarchy and vandalism by Western powers and also Western media...” (Mynott, 2009).
- [4] The authorities here are blaming foreigners for whipping up trouble. The Iranian Foreign Minister singled out Britain. “We are really sorry to see...” (Bowen, 2009c).

The topic of Britain and BBC being major targets of the Iranian government was also prominently featured in the *BBCWN* postelection reports. A report by Jeremy Bowen (2009b) on 23 June, pointed out Britain had “the most hated nation status in Tehran”. It described demonstrations outside the British embassy as “an attempt to blame foreigners”. Quoting an Iranian “hardline newspaper”, *BBCWN* described how BBC had been regarded as “the centre of psychological warfare, orchestrating events on the street”.

The crisis between Britain and Iran was further elaborated in a report on 24 June (Hawley, 2009b). As shown in transcript [5], the report pointed out that Britain was referred to as “little Satan” by the Iranian government. It was followed by direct quotations from Barack Obama described in a reporting clause as, “from the leader of the country, hardliners like to call the big Satan”. It is interesting to see the juxtaposition of the “little Satan” and “big Satan” labeling. This linked Iranian attitude towards Britain and the US and at the same time, showed how the viewpoint of US on Iran anchored *BBCWN*'s portrayal of the Iran vs the West conflict.

- [5] After Iran expelled two British diplomats, the UK, often referred to here as the little Satan, has responded in kind. From the leader of the country, hardliners like to call the big Satan, the strongest criticism so far, “The United States and the international community have been appalled and outraged...”

It is pertinent to note that *BBCWN*'s reporting of themselves and Britain, the network's home country, contained fewer adjectives and carried a more calm and detached tone of reporting. As shown in transcripts [6] – [9], a neutral reporting verb, “say”, was often used to represent the responses from Britain regarding “accusations” from Iranian authorities.

- [6] In London, the Prime Minister laid out his response, “It is therefore with regret that I should inform that the House that Iran yesterday took the unjustified step of expelling two British diplomats” (Bowen, 2009b).
- [7] Meddling, stirring up trouble, inflaming the protests. Iran authorities say

the British and the BBC are stoking the fire behind recent troubles
in the protestors' heads (North, 2009c).

- [8] The Iranian authorities say this isn't home-grown rage. Britain and the BBC are among those blamed for inflaming the situation (Bowen, 2009a).
[9] After high-level diplomatic contact last night, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said that some of those arrested would be freed (Sergeant, 2009).

In contrast with the *BBCWN* coverage, *AJE*'s reports seemed to avoid making any reference to the Iran vs the West confrontation. Apart from one indirect quotation from Khamenei during the Friday prayer sermon condemning the West for interfering in Iran's affairs (Johnston, 2009c), *AJE* appeared to refrain from framing statements from Iranian government spokespersons in the context of attacks on the West. As shown in transcript [10], the reporting clause before the direct quotations of Iran's foreign minister simply mentioned him blaming "outside forces", and did not specifically explain the war of words between Western countries and the Iranian government.

- [10] Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki blames outside forces for what's happening. "A more serious and fundamental analysis.. I think foreign embassies need to pay due attention to such points and issues ... so that they can have the right image, the right picture" (Moshiri, 2009).

An *AJE* report on 5 August (Johnston, 2009a) covering Ahmadinejad's swearing-in ceremony included a direct quotation of him "attacking" the West which refused to congratulate him winning the election. Yet, unlike *BBCWN* which employed the reporting words "bitter riposte" to frame similar quotations (Leyne, 2009a), *AJE* downplayed his "attacks" with a reporting clause, "had this message for foreign governments", as shown in transcript [11].

- [11] Ahmadinejad had this message for foreign governments refusing to congratulate him. These include the US, Germany, France, Britain and Italy. "You have heard that some of them have said that they recognise the elections and the president, but they are not going to congratulate the president. What does this mean? They do not respect the votes of the nation. We are against this attitude and we are resisting".

Analyses also found that *AJE* adopted a rather "anti-Western" interpretation about how the outside world viewed the result of the election. In a direct quotation, *The Independent* correspondent Robert Fisk, as shown in transcript [12](Smith, 2009), clearly set the tone of the *AJE* editorial coverage, explaining that the Iranian people did not want the Western world to tell Iran what to do.

- [12] ...I think, before they start imagining that suddenly the Islamic Republic is now being contested by the people. The people I think are quite happy to have an Islamic Republic. They don't want the Shah back; they don't want to be run by Westerners, they don't want us telling them what to do.

Besides playing down the Iran vs the West confrontation or the discourse about Iran blaming the West, the network highlighted the possibility of a Western-backed *coup d'état* in Iran and how the US may have orchestrated the postelection protests. A report on 18 June (Turner, 2009) argued that the US might have played a role in controlling messages on the social networking sites in Iran. The reporter was referring to “the US State Department has admitted it asked Twitter to delay maintenance on its website so the conversations on Iran could continue”. The report included a direct quotation from the editor of the New York City-based newspaper, *The Independent*, Arun Gupta, claiming that “the US has been trying to topple the Iranian government for years, and Washington could be using anti-Ahmadinejad sentiment for its own political purpose”. A report on 2 August (Barker, 2009), again insinuated the Western-backed coup argument by highlighting the view from Moscow that “fear of the protests are part of the Western-backed coup to topple an unfriendly regime.”

The *AJE* postelection coverage hardly reflected the viewpoints of the US and the UK. There were only three direct quotations from the US: two from President Barack Obama and one from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. However, only one of those three quotations represented the US government’s views regarding the election result (Johnston, 2009b). The other two quotations were related to the role of the Internet during the election (Santamaria, 2009a and 2009b; Turner, 2009).

On 17 June, *AJE* did report on international reactions towards the disputed Iranian election (Johnston, 2009b). These reports, however, presented a more diverse range of opinions. The US was described as a nation that “has been careful not to appear to be interfering in Iranian affairs”. It was followed by a direct speech from Obama that expressed his concern about the suppression of peaceful dissent. There were indirect quotations from the French President Nicolas Sarkozy which described the result “a fraud”. Negative views from the US, Germany and France, however, were balanced by a positive reaction from Russia which the report said as “congratulated Ahmadinejad on his win”.

AJE also provided regional viewpoints regarding the election. A report on 20 June (Abdel-Hamid, 2009) critically depicted the reaction of Iraqi citizens who were not happy with Iran’s involvement in Iraq’s politics. The report pointed out that Sunnis, Shiites and Christians in Iraq “are watching with a degree of satisfaction” the political crisis unfolding in Iran. The report explained that “many Iraqis still believe that the root cause of the turmoil and internal conflict in their country is Iran” and prefer Ahmadinejad to be out of power. Iran was also described as “very unpopular among Iraqis” and “no Iraqi leader wants to be seen too close to Tehran”.

AJE’s coverage on 24 and 25 July (Ibragimova, 2009a and 2009b) illustrated the international response over the election and the postelection protests. The report highlighted an initiative named “the global day of action” organised by human rights groups which called for an end to the Iranian government “crackdown” on protestors. However, at the same time, the report provided a counterargument which proposed that an international attempt to intervene in Iranian political affairs would not work. Direct quotations from *Iranian Daily* editor, Ghanbar Naderi, in transcript [13] and

political analyst, Kian Mokhtari in transcript [14] pointed out the unwanted foreign interference in Iranian affairs and emphasised that the international community should not tell the Iranian people what to do.

[13] “These organisations are trying to interfere in Iran’s internal affairs. The election is the concern of the Iranian voters. Just as we haven’t interfered in the European parliamentary election or the American presidential race, we do expect that they should do the same thing with regard to our matters” (Ibragimova, 2009b).

[14] “People who live overseas lived within a Christian or Judaism culture... a few hundred thousand people overseas, cannot impose their will on twenty million people in Iran” (Ibragimova, 2009a).

The thematic structure in the coverage of postelection trials in Iran further reflected the differences in the *BBCWN* and *AJE* reporting. While the Iran vs the West theme loomed large over the *BBCWN* coverage of the trials, *AJE* provided a more insider point of view.

The element of proximity to UK played an important part in the *BBCWN* themes of reporting on the postelection trials. Proximity is one of the factors that influence news selection. In this case, cultural proximity is regarded as a significant predictor of the BBC reporting – “a function of both the social-historical connection” between Britain and Iran, as well as in factors such as “language, religious beliefs, education, mother country-colony status, political ideology, or government interest” (Swain, 2003). This was reflected through the emphasis given on the trial of Hossein Rassam, an Iranian employee of the British embassy in Iran who was arrested after the election. A *BBCWN* report on 8 August (Leyne, 2009d) for example, opened its coverage with Rassam appearing in an Iranian court. The report pointed out that Rassam was charged with “spying”, followed by a background story that the Iranian authorities accused “foreign governments particularly Britain of stirring up the trouble” and “working with the BBC” to stage the postelection protests. The report concludes with indirect quotations from the opposition that described the trial as “show trials”.

The *BBCWN* report on 29 October (Trott, 2009) again placed the Iran vs the West theme at its core. The report opened with developments of the Hossein Rassam trial with Rassam described as “apparently admitting his mistakes and asking for clemency”. The story then reiterated the point that Rassam had been put on trial because of accusations by the Iranian authorities that the postelection protests “were part of a well-organised plot by the British government”. The report then featured direct quotations from the British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, responding to the news that Hossein Rassam had been sentenced to jail. It was followed by indirect quotations from the British Ambassador which described the sentence as “not only unacceptable, but also an attack against the entire diplomatic community in Iran”.

The *BBCWN* coverage on 25 August (Leyne, 2009c) did not provide any news of Rassam’s trial but the report still maintained the theme of Iran vs the West by

again reiterating that those on trial were “accused of stirring up the postelection demonstrations and conspiring with foreign powers”. The report also argued that the trial served as “a wider indictment” against the reformists who were described as trying to “change and liberalise the Islamic Republic” during the rule of former President Khatami.

In contrast to *BBCWN* which placed the trial of a British employee, Hossein Rassam, at the highest “thematic” position in its reporting, there was no mention of him in *AJE*’s postelection trial reports. The opening sentence of the *AJE* report on 1 August (Bazely, 2009), “Facing trial in Iran’s revolutionary court”, showed *AJE*’s attempts to stand back and be more “neutral” in its reporting. In contrast with *BBCWN* which persistently used the verb “accused” as its reporting verb and clearly identified the Iranian government as the accuser, *AJE* used a more non-evaluative reporting verb, “charged”, in describing those indicted in the trial. There was no mention of conspiring with foreign powers as part of the accusation thrown at those on trial. These people were simply reported as being charged “with rioting and conspiring to topple the government.”

Next, in the topical order of presentation, the background of the trials was provided. At this point, the angle of coverage leaned more towards the opposition group’s viewpoint. The report highlighted four influential figures that were put on trial—namely, Mohamad Ali Abtahi, Mohsen Aminzadeh, Abdollah Ramenzanzadeh and Behzad Navabi. Using direct quotations of Iranian analyst, Majid Tafreshi, these people were described as “the leaders of the revolution” and “icons of the Islamic revolution”. He also described the trials as “a sad story” in which “the public have lost their trust in this show trial”. By using assertive illocutionary verbs such as “denounces” and “rejects” in its reporting clauses, transcripts [15] – [17] indicate how the reporter interposed his report with evaluative comments that resembled closer to the opposition’s viewpoint and interpretation of events.

[15] They denounced the official results that declared President Ahmadinejad the winner.

[16] Reformist websites have denounced the trial saying the defendants have had no access to lawyers.

[17] They have also rejected the reported confessions of some senior figures.

An *AJE* report on 17 November (Ronaghi, 2009) opened with the coverage of French citizen, Clotilde Reiss who was released on bail, giving the story a thematic importance. The report then gave significant coverage of the trial of Saeed Leylaz, the former editor of a Iranian daily business newspaper and a supporter of Mir Hossein Mousavi. While *BBCWN* only briefly mentioned him in its postelection trial coverage, *AJE* gave a more in-depth and sympathetic portrayal of Leylaz. The report highlighted his contribution as an editor of a daily business newspaper in Iran. Leylaz was described as a journalist “with a sharp, accurate point of view in economic issues”. In direct quotations of his former colleagues, Leylaz was presented as “a perfectionist who never lets his political views cloud his judgement”.

5. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The *BBCWN* and *AJE* coverage of the international reactions to the 2009 Iran election showed a substantial degree of divergence. *BBCWN* relied heavily on quoting and paraphrasing comments and opinions from the US and the UK. Its reporting was also mainly emphasizing the Iran vs the West argument. Ahmadinejad's speeches and the quotations of Iranian government spokespersons, for example, were framed mainly around them attacking the West. The Iran vs the West theme also figured prominently in the *BBCWN* coverage of the postelection trials. The *BBCWN* reports reasoned that those who were put on trial had been accused of conspiring with foreign governments, particularly Britain with the help of the BBC. In contrast, *AJE* only mentioned that those who were put on trial were charged with conspiring to topple the government.

Although *AJE*'s postelection coverage did note the critical responses of the US and European countries, it balanced them with a neutral framing of Russia's congratulatory message of Ahmadinejad's victory. *AJE*'s reports also avoided making any reference to the Iran vs the West confrontation or framing any quotations from the perspective of Iran blaming the West.

In examining closely the differences in the content and coverage angle of both *BBCWN* and *AJE*, this study found that the competitiveness of global news media contributed to the diversity of ideas and pluralism of viewpoints rather than a homogeneity of coverage. As a newcomer in the global news scene, *AJE* adopted a differentiation strategy as its organisational objective, which was to fill in the global newsgathering "void" left by the more established Western media such as *CNN* and *BBCWN*. As stated in *AJE*'s corporate profile, the network's aim is "to provide independent, impartial news for an international audience and to offer a voice to a diversity of perspectives from under-reported regions" and "to balance the information flow between the South and the North" (*Al Jazeera English*, 2010). This is based on the philosophy of representing the "voice for the voiceless" (Seib, 2012: 1). This differentiation strategy also includes representing alternative viewpoints other than that of Western networks such as *CNN* and *BBCWN*. This notion of giving a different take on global events means *AJE* needs to ensure it does not appear similar to Western news channels and adopt a less pro-Western stance in its news presentation. This could explain the absence of the West vs Iran narrative in its reporting which is part of the *AJE*'s overall editorial strategy so as to not appear pro-Western.

In contrast to *AJE*, this study contended that the BBC has a clear idea of their target audience. By and large, BBC is a British institution. Regulated by a Charter, BBC is mostly protected from political interference. There is a collective understanding in British political culture that BBC should operate as an independent institution (Curran, 1998:188). Yet, since it is funded through license fees and taxpayers' money, BBC is ultimately accountable to British viewers. Although BBC is seen by its global audiences as a formidable international broadcaster in news production along with *CNN*, its most important audience is in the UK. This is because BBC needs to justify its public funding and compete against domestic commercial channels such as ITV and Sky News. Failure to deliver means its license fees may be destroyed. Although

BBCWN, which is the main focus of this article, operates commercially, it has depended mostly on the resources of its domestic newsgathering network such as *BBC News 24* (Press Gazette, 2008; Horrocks, 2007). This study therefore argues that as a result, the content of *BBCWN* is largely produced with the British domestic audience in mind before being “shared” with *BBCWN* and broadcast to world audiences. This may explain why *BBCWN*’s coverage represented more voices from the US and the UK and tended to highlight the tension between Iran and the West more, which is deemed as very important for British viewers.

These findings, in some manner, are in line with previous research findings which showed differences in the reporting styles between *AJE* and other mainstream news channels such as BBC. A study by Leon Barkho (2007: 24) on the online English news portals of *BBC*, *CNN* and *AJE* during the Israeli incursion into the Gaza Strip in June 2006 found that *BBC* and *CNN* represented Israeli actions as rational through the use of “presumptuous words, phrases and grammatical structures”, while the Palestinians were viewed as irrational. *AJE*, in contrast, mainly furnished the Palestinian side of the conflict by “citing Palestinian eyewitnesses and officials, and providing context in the form of background and comments” (Barkho, 2007: 21). Similarly, a comparative analysis of the coverage of *CNNI* and *AJE* by De Graaf (2008:75) of the Jewish settlers’ withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in August 2005 also showed that reporting by *AJE* contained “counter-ideological elements *vis-à-vis* the reporting by *CNN International*”. The study found that both network stations had in-group (positive) – out-group (negative) polarisation characteristics. In *AJE*’s coverage, the in-group were the Palestinians and the out-group were the Israelis and vice versa for *CNNI*.

These differences of reporting support to some extent the typology of media flows that considers the *AJE* network as one of the several transnational “contra-flows” (Thussu, 2007a). The differences of reporting that emerged in the analysis support the view of *AJE* as the “alternative” global news channel. *AJE* provided contra-flow content with a certain degree of interaction with BBC as the dominant media organisation with a more Western perspective.

In putting the context of the textual analysis into a larger perspective, the question that remains is whether the differences in the reporting of the 2009 Iran election meant that global audiences were served with information that was simply used to “further their pre-existing opinions and attitudes” (El-Nawawy and Powers, 2010). As argued by Kai Hafez (2007: 34-35), today’s broadcasters often mostly target particular segments of society, relying on cultural mores as well as political and historical myths in contextualising international events. This has resulted in what Powers and El-Nawawy (2009) call the “balkanisation of the global news”, whereby broadcasters target audiences with similar ideological and political views. This also mirrors Huntington’s (1996) clash of civilisation theory which posits both “Western” and “Islamic” media offer “us-versus-them” narratives that allow for continued binary and simplistic framing (Powers and El-Nawawy, 2009). The findings of this study, however, do not support the notion of the “Balkanisation” of news reporting, leading to a “clash of civilisation” style of coverage. Although the coverage of *BBCWN* showed more

propensities towards the viewpoints of US and the UK and included some instances of generalisation over the appearance of the reformist and conservative supporters, it nevertheless did provide some informed insights into the election, without pandering to stereotypes or religious prejudices regarding the Iranian society.

The findings of this study further support the argument that the global news media industry, where non-Western and Western players compete side-by-side in 24-hour news markets, creates an environment for multiplicity of ideas and plurality of news reporting (Thussu, 2007a). The competing interpretation and plurality of coverage not only challenges the discourse on the Westernisation of the global media (Rai and Cottle, 2007; Thussu, 2007a) but also contests the conventional concepts of the homogenous “public” sphere (Volkmer, 2007). Instead of having only Western broadcasters such as *CNN* and *BBCWN*, dominate the international news flow while the rest of the transnational broadcasters follow their agenda, non-Western broadcasters such as *AJE* manage to diffuse the dominant discourse with a different take on international events.

Many interpretations could be offered to explain the *modus operandi* of *BBCWN* and *AJE* based on the textual analysis of the 2009 Iranian election. As Fürsich (2009) pointed out, “media texts present a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding” and “necessitate interpretation in their own right”.

This study, however, recognises that textual analyses alone are not sufficient to explain the similarities and differences in the coverage of *BBCWN* and *AJE* during the Iran election. Even critical discourse analysis (CDA) scholars mostly agree that since news reporting is “the outcome of specific professional practices and techniques, which could be and can be quite different with quite different results” (Fairclough, 1995: 204), the full meaning of news discourses will never be “fully tapped by deploying the rules of linguistic analysis” (Blommaert, 2005: 235). Richardson and Barkho (2009) suggested that a better way to examine news texts is to supplement textual analyses “with ethnographic interpretation” in order to arrive at “a more nuanced understanding of media discourse processes”. Future research could look into the production of global news reporting to understand better the discursive production of international event reporting as well as the extent of effect of journalistic norms, market forces and influences of politics and culture on the coverage of global news networks.

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