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Does Al Jazeera make a difference? The framing of the Iranian election 2009 by Al Jazeera Arabic and CNN International

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Abstract: The election in Iran 2009 caused a serious crisis in Iranian society. The news media around the world reported about alleged manipulation, election fraud and other irregularities. “Where is my vote?” became the rallying cry of Iran’s opposition. This paper presents a cross-national comparative media analysis of news reporting on the Iranian election and the subsequent national and international reactions. It focuses on how a controversial political event was covered by two of the world’s leading television news broadcasters: Al Jazeera Arabic and CNN International, with a particular focus on Al Jazeera. Two theoretical frameworks were adopted: a contra-flow approach – Al Jazeera as an alternative source of news – as well as its role with respect to democratization. Two flagship news programs were analyzed over a six-week period in summer 2009. With quantitative framing analysis as the central methodology (using statistical factor analysis), we focused on the content of 66 television news stories.

Keywords: Iran election, political news, news frames, Arab and Western media, contra-flow

The Iranian election 2009 and its aftermath

In Iranian politics, reformist movements such as those sparked by Rafsanjani and Khatami have often faced resistance (Topa, 2009). In 2005, Iran entered a new phase with President Ahmadinejad, who has fostered conservative political developments and hindered democratic efforts (Topa, 2009). In the most recent presidential election, on June 12, 2009, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won a second four-year term with a landslide victory of 63% of all votes cast (Al Jazeera English, 2009, June 13; Sohrabi-Haghighat & Mansouri, 2010, p. 28).

Not only his political opponents Mousavi and Karoubi but also large parts of the Iranian public were sceptical about the legitimacy of the election; reports of unavailable ballots and closed polling stations were filed and the news media reported globally on rallies in the streets, demonstrations, and calls for a new election. “Where is my vote?” became the rallying cry of the opposition in Iran. Al

Jazeera English characterized the situation as “the biggest unrest since the 1979 revolution” (Al Jazeera English, 2009, June 14).

Parts of the Iranian establishment and the Iranian revolutionary guard initiated military-backed counter-movements to repress the demonstrations and enforce media censorship. The killing of Neda Agha Soltan, a protesting Iranian woman, on June 20, 2009, became a mediatized symbol for the struggle of the Iranian people.

In the course of the events a number of positions merged together. People gathering in the streets to protest the outcome of the election were joined by citizens opposing the system as a whole and expressing a general political dissatisfaction with life in Iran (Perthes, 2009a). The protest became known as the Green Movement – green being the color of Mousavi’s election campaign, but in the post-election period, “green became the color for all opposition and reformist groups” (Sohrabi-Haghighat & Mansouri, 2010, p. 28).

Because of the highly controversial nature of the Iranian election, we were interested in how the events and controversy were covered in the news. A number of sensitive issues, e.g., Iran’s controversial nuclear program and its geopolitical location in the Middle East between Iraq and Afghanistan ensured the elections a high global news value. Therefore, we chose to examine television newscasts covering the election and its aftermath of two international news channels – Al Jazeera Arabic and CNN International.

The comparison of a Western and an Arabic news channel seemed especially appropriate, since both broadcasters play an important if at times controversial role in the international media landscape; both have likewise drawn worldwide attention through their live reporting of crises in geopolitical hotspots, and both are likewise widely viewed and regarded as highly trustworthy among their respective audiences (Powers & Gilboa, 2009, p. 56, Pew Research, 2011). Additionally, each is essential to an in-depth discussion about potential effects and influence of the news media. In the 1990s, it was CNN’s news coverage that was commonly said to be able to influence policy-making (the “CNN Effect”, Gilboa, 2005): twenty-four-hour live reports and comprehensive news coverage of crises such as the 1991 Gulf War, Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo created public pressure on government policy makers to address the crises and to react (Nisbet et al., 2004, p. 16). After 9/11 it was Al Jazeera that was held to be in part responsible for the global anti-American mood: after airing several speeches of Osama bin Laden and his sympathizers, the channel was said to have influenced Muslim public opinion and raised the level of negative sentiment against the U.S. (the “Al Jazeera Effect”, Nisbet et al., 2004, p. 12). The perceived power to determine foreign policy that has been attributed to each is one explanation for the relevance of examining their news coverage – in particular, the Iranian election 2009.

Theoretical background: Same agenda, different views

CNN International and Al Jazeera Arabic are twenty-four-hour news channels reporting from all over the world for a global audience; both present news programming on a continuous, real-time basis. CNN International, launched originally in 1985 as a spin-off from Ted Turner's CNN and initially targeting American business travelers, is a commercial news organization with its main offices in Atlanta, Georgia (USA); international news reporting was increased in the 1990s and efforts were made to reposition the broadcaster as an internationally oriented news provider (Zimmer, 1996, p. 167). Al Jazeera was initiated in 1996 by the Qatari emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani with the intention of establishing a news organization similar to Western players such as CNN and BBC World Service, but with a clear focus on issues directly related to the Arab World (Powers & Gilboa, 2009, p. 55). Since that time, the Arab broadcaster has continued to challenge the hitherto predominant Western international agenda with first-hand news information and images directly out of the Arab world. Al Jazeera Arabic, along with its international English service, is today one of the most important sources of news for people all over the world (Powers & Gilboa, 2009; Johnson & Fahmy, 2009, p. 24).¹

In addition to their respective broad reach and credibility, CNN International and Al Jazeera Arabic have both faced accusations of ideological bias with respect to news content: Al Jazeera for presumably anti-American and anti-Israeli bias and CNN International as pro-American. After the airing of videotaped recordings by Bin Laden, Al Jazeera was branded a mouthpiece for al-Qaida (Hafez, 2005a, p. 8; Wessler & Adolphsen, 2008, p. 439; Kraidy, 2009). Despite proclamations of independence, CNN International has been perceived by some to show a pro-American bias in its news commentary, an aspect which allegedly crystallized during news coverage of 9/11 and the Iraq wars (Hafez, 2005a, 2009; Seib, 2005). It will become clear that both news providers are competing economically and ideologically for an international news market. Inasmuch as both broadcasters are packaging news for international audiences, they often are covering the same issues and agenda. However, the difference is that each is framing its presentation according to its "own home-grown narrative" (Hafez, 2009, p. 2). That means that they do not only provide "just the facts' about public affairs" (Gross & Brewer, 2007, p. 122), they also provide certain ideas for understanding and interpreting the issue. Ultimately, differences in media frames may alter viewers' beliefs about reality (Pan, 2009).

It has already been documented that Al Jazeera and CNN International frame their news coverage differently despite similar agendas, examples including their mutual coverage of 9/11, the 2001 Afghanistan war, and Iraq 2003 (Wessler & Adolphsen, 2008; Hafez, 2005a; Seib, 2005). Thus we ask:

¹ According to a survey conducted by Gallup, 2002, 42.7 percent of the Egyptians, 67.3 percent of the Jordanians, 58.6 percent of Kuwaitis, 45.8 percent of Moroccans, and even 64.1 percent of the Saudi Arabians ranked Al Jazeera as one of their three most important sources of news (Powers & Gilboa, 2009, p. 56).

RQ1: How were the Iranian presidential election and its consequences framed by Al Jazeera Arabic and CNN International?

A second theoretical framework derived from Al Jazeera's described role as a "contra-flow provider" (Thussu, 2007, 2008; Sakr, 2007; Wessler & Adolphsen, 2008; Boyd-Barrett, 2009). The international news market was for a long time exclusively shaped by a Western interpretational framework. The development of non-Western media like the Qatar-based Al Jazeera has broken up the dominance of Western media and thus the dominant "Western viewpoint" on events in the world. Therefore, in its role as an alternative, non-Western source of news, Al Jazeera has consequently been labeled a "contra-flow provider".

Contra-flow is defined as an information flow originating in non-Western countries (Thussu, 2008) and bringing third world countries' perspectives into the broader international arena (Padovani, 2008). Al Jazeera is thereby regarded as a prime example, since transnational Arab news networks are an "effective (...) tool of information [and serve to inform] the world about Arab views on regional conflicts, whether in Palestine, Iraq [or even Iran]" (Hafez, 2005a). Their news coverage, particularly that of the "war on terror," elevated Al Jazeera to the level of being an international broadcaster, whose logo appeared on television screens around the world. The Arabic news broadcaster thus became a provider of news to Western audiences – a reversal of the typical direction of global information flows from the West to the developing world or from the northern to the southern hemisphere (Thussu, 2007, 2008; Sakr, 2007; Boyd-Barrett, 2009; Kraidy, 2009). In 2008, a study by Media Tenor cited Al Jazeera as the most quoted medium in international news and branded the Arabic channel "Agenda Setter 2008" (Media Tenor, 2008). Wessler and Adolphsen (2008) also collected evidence that Al Jazeera functions as a provider of alternative news. Their study dealt with the Iraq War 2003 and shows that Arabic news channels can "serve as vehicles for counter perspectives" (p. 453) by commenting on current affairs or providing further information. In addition, these channels had access to news footage and images that other media had not. Arab networks, in particular Al Jazeera, are thus capable of counterbalancing the global information flow by challenging the Western hegemony of large news agencies like Reuters, Associated Press, Agence France Press and international television services such as CNN and BBC (Hafez, 2005a, p. 12; Thussu, 2007, 2008; Sakr, 2007; Boyd-Barrett, 2009).

The availability of alternative information sources appear to be important for any society struggling against an autocratic regime. When national media is restricted, the role of foreign media becomes considerable; however, the Western media are faced with the reproach that they offer only a one-sided view of political events in the Arab world. Offering alternative sources of news and interpretation – a key aspect of the contra-flow argument – is a step towards a more democratic media landscape and thus a deliberative choice of news and viewpoints for national and international audiences (Norris & Inglehart, 2009). In this sense, "contra" is not to

be understood here as synonymous with “against” or “in opposition to,” but rather “amendatory” or “alternative.” When talking about Al Jazeera as a contra-flow provider, we recognize it as a news broadcaster that amends or complements Western coverage with its own content (news provider) and alternative information (news source). With respect to the issue of information contra-flow, Al Jazeera is therefore relevant as an alternative *news source* as well as being a *news provider*. So, we additionally ask:

RQ2: To what extent does Al Jazeera provide alternative information as compared to Western media like CNN International?

To better understand and be able to interpret the answers to these two research questions a further theoretical aspect needs to be considered. Having already noted that Al Jazeera claims to represent the Arab and Muslim perspective to a global public, it is also important to note the *internal role* that the network plays within the Arabic and Muslim public sphere (Powers & Gilboa, 2009, p. 53).

Without meaning to impute to this a simplistic interdependency, we do know that the mass media are capable of constructing reality – they raise the issues on our agenda and provide the framework for their interpretation (Schulz, 2008). With respect to reporting on the Iranian presidential election 2009, this means that the calls for reform and protests of the Iranian people are being carried via international news providers such as Al Jazeera out to the entire world and thus in part into political systems in which democratic structures are weak or even non-existent. As, for example, Hafez (2005a) indicates, there are many in the Arab world that are unhappy with their present form of government, yet have little experience with democracy. Media networks such as Al Jazeera thus take on an important role “in shaping public opinion on matters related to democratic reform” (ibid., p. 6).

However, the question of whether Arabic media networks are capable of encouraging democratic developments, although heavily debated, remains unresolved. In the opinion of many observers, Al Jazeera plays a proactive role for Arab democracy: “Since most Arab countries have not yet established functioning democracies [and] relevant institutions, such as political parties and a parliamentary opposition, are still rudimentary (...) Arab satellite broadcasting seems able to mediate between the state and society” (Hafez, 2005a, p. 1). Proponents of this role acclaim Al Jazeera for its controversial style of debate and its open criticism of Arabic administrations; in their eyes, the presentation of opposition discourses is to be celebrated as a breakthrough for the culture of political affairs in the Arab world (Powers & Gilboa, 2009, p. 58; Wessler & Adolphsen, 2008, p. 439; Miles, 2005, p. 8; Hafez, 2005b, p. 109; El Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003). Others view the broadcaster and its mission more critically. They fault, for example, the “politainment”-style of Al Jazeera (Hafez, 2005a) and the uncritical attitude towards its own initiator and financier – the Qatari Sheik (Richter, 2011). Such critics claim that Al Jazeera reports about grievances in Arab

countries without mentioning those in Qatar (ibid.). Powers & Gilboa (2009) also discuss its alleged uncritical reporting on the genocide in Sudan or the bombing in Israel during the second Intifada, “perhaps because Muslims are carrying it out” (p. 66). The discourse concerning its role in democratizing the Arab world remains ambiguous.

In existing democratic transformation theories (primarily originating in the field of political science, Ristock & Frech, 2011), discussions of the role of mass media remain subordinate or even non-existent (Thomaß, 2001, p. 39). Reference is made in part only to the significance of the “small media,” e.g., the underground press in the GDR, which however, were not (and are not) capable of large-scale mobilization of the populace (Hafez, 2005a, p. 3). Compared to access to the Internet and newspapers, television is widely accessible in the Arabic countries, but little theoretical or empirical knowledge is presently available on the role of satellite television. Based on an initial analysis of the role Al Jazeera played in the protest movements during the Arab Spring, 2011, it would appear that Al Jazeera took on an important articulative and communicative function by transmitting to other Arab countries news and information – but above all images – of the protests and uprisings (Ristock & Frech, 2011, Richter, 2011). “Al Jazeera shared this revolution [of the Tunisian uprising] around the region live and in real time, breaking the spell that had stopped millions of ordinary people from rising up and claiming their legitimate rights” (Miles, 2011).

To provide an empirical basis for evaluating the role Al Jazeera can occupy in the spheres of regional and global communication, a quantitative content analysis of the Iranian election reporting was conducted.

Method

A framing analysis methodology was deemed most appropriate for a comparative analysis of how Iranian election issues were presented in differing media as well as differing political and cultural environments. An advantage of frame analysis in comparative research is the possibility to reveal latent argumentation structures, thus allowing a more detailed analysis of the news material. According to Gamson & Modigliani, a frame is “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (1987, in Pan, 2009). Similarly, and often quoted, Robert Entman (1993) pointed out that “framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (p. 52). Hence, an understanding of the media frame can reveal how issues and personal opinion are shaped by the news.

There are three major approaches which can be used to identify relevant frames: inductive-qualitative, deductive-quantitative, and inductive-quantitative (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Dahinden, 2006, p. 202; Matthes & Kohring, 2008). The

inductive-qualitative method “involves analyzing a news story with an open view to attempt to reveal the array of possible frames” (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 94). This approach allows for identification of previously unknown frames that might be present in the material. Nevertheless, this puts pressure on the researcher who must then decide what information structures are to be regarded as a frame and what not; this subjective reliance on the decisions of the researcher can make replication of the study difficult (Dahinden, 2006, p. 203); the method is also labor-intensive and often based on small samples (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 94).

The *deductive-quantitative* approach “involves predefining frames as content analytic variables to verify the extent to which these frames occur in the news” (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 94). The choice of frames, which are derived from the research literature and/or theoretical considerations, depends upon the chosen research question.

Thus a number of different frame typologies exist for the analysis of political news, e.g., episodic, thematic frames (Iyengar, 1991); strategy, responsibility frames (Esser & D’Angelo, 2003, p. 635); or conflict frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The deductive-quantitative approach is easily replicated and can cope with large samples (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95). Its major disadvantage is that frames not defined a priori cannot be analyzed (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95) and new frames cannot be generated (Matthes, 2007).

We chose a mixed method approach, *inductive-quantitative*, which combines elements from the first two: frame elements are initially identified in the material (inductive approach); this is followed by deductive quantitative research. In accordance with Matthes & Kohring (2008), a frame is understood to be a specific pattern in a media outlet that is composed of several elements; these elements are previously defined components of possible frames (p. 263), e.g., a certain tenor or a specific news topic. Instead of coding the whole frame, we split it into its separate elements, which are later coded in a content analysis. The single elements are then finally statistically sorted into groups in order to ascertain the underlying dimensions. We described these dimensions as a frame.

As an example: One group of news items about the Iranian presidential election predominantly reported on accusations of election fraud by Ahmadinejad (variable: main topic, value: election fraud). In the majority of cases, the tone of these news items is negative and reproachful (variable: evaluation, value: negative) and the political opposition is cited (variable actors, value: opposition). If a certain number of news items show this combination of values, a frame can be identified, in this case e.g., Opposition frame.

Conceived this way, frames are neither identified beforehand nor coded with a single variable. Instead, the variables as single frame elements are grouped together afterwards (Matthes & Kohring, 2008, p. 264; Dahinden, 2006, p. 206). Compared to the mere inductive and deductive quantitative methods of frame identification, this approach has two main advantages (Matthes, 2007): first, it

reduces the probability of individual selection bias using a pure inductive method, and second, it increases the empirical validity, since new, previously unknown frames can be identified.

Study design

At the beginning of our analysis, a series of items were needed, which later could be statistically combined into frames. First, an operationally defined understanding of a frame was necessary. We used Entman's (1993) widely accepted definition in which he argues that every frame promotes "a particular problem," "a causal interpretation," "a moral evaluation," and/or "a treatment recommendation" (p. 52). If these elements are understood as variables, each of them can be operationalized by several categories. In order to identify relevant and important frame-elements, we began by conducting an explorative screening of German, American and Arabic online journals.² We also interviewed an expert in the field of Iranian politics in order to refine our variables; with this expert's help and the results of our qualitative pre-analysis a basis for valid results was established.

Table 1 lists the frame elements as defined by Entman (1993) and the corresponding variables in our case study. The frame dimension *problem definition* is regarded as the general subject of the newscasts. The pre-analysis revealed five important subjects that shaped the news coverage immediately after the Iranian election: 1. the discussion about the re-election of Ahmadinejad, 2. the national demonstrations, 3. the subsequent military and political repressions of the opposition and demonstrators, 4. the subsequent censorship of national and international mass media, and 5. the discussions about the disregard for human rights.

We operationalized the frame dimension *causal attribution* with variables measuring the given reasons and responsibilities for the subject, thus measuring such variables as election fraud and the public's desire for political participation. Furthermore, we included the most frequent national and international reactions as they promote a *moral evaluation*, resulting in a list of 18 items. Finally, we tackled the operationalization of the *treatment recommendation* as a given solution or a recommended development.

Additionally, the category of *actor* was added, as we were especially interested in how the political opponents Ahmadinejad and Mousavi were represented. Thus, the actors that were of particular interest were divided into: *individuals* (e.g., Iranian individuals such as Ahmadinejad, Mousavi, Rafsanjani, and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Western individuals such as Barack Obama), *groups* (e.g., Iranian public, international public, public partisans of Ahmadinejad, supporters of Mousavi), and *institutions* (e.g., the Iranian political opposition, the new

² We used Al-Ahram (daily Egyptian newspaper, <http://www.ahram.org.eg/>), Al-Akhbar (daily Egyptian newspaper, <http://www.akhbarelyom.org.eg/>), ARD.de (German public broadcaster, <http://www.ard.de/>), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (German daily newspaper, <http://www.faz.net/s/homepage.html>), New York Times (US daily newspaper, <http://www.nytimes.com/>).

government in Iran, the German government, the American government, and human rights organizations).

Table 1: Frame Elements as Variables

Frame element	Variables
<i>Problem definition</i> as the main subject (S)	S: Ahmadinejad's win at election polls S: Mousavi's loss at election polls S: national demonstrations / opposition protest S: censorship of national & international mass media S: military and political repression of opposition and demonstrators S: disregard of human rights
<i>Causal attribution</i> as reasons and responsibilities (R)	R: mistrust in Ahmadinejad and his policy R: election fraud R: right of political participation R: fight for freedom of opinion / press R: desire for political change / reform R: mistrust of Mousavi R: accusations against Mousavi of working with the West or Western media R: stemming opposing reactions / assurance of political power R: Western nations at fault
<i>Moral evaluation</i> as the tone of coverage and national (N) and international reactions (IN)	N: outrage about 'the stolen votes' N: rejection of Ahmadinejad's policy N: scepticism about legitimacy of election N: rejection of Mousavi's policy N: general political dissatisfaction N: disappointment about Ahmadinejad's victory N: theory of a political complot N: support for Ahmadinejad N: support for Mousavi IN: rejection of Ahmadinejad's policy IN: scepticism about legitimacy of election IN: rejection of Mousavi's policy IN: disappointment about Ahmadinejad's victory IN: fear of strong Iran with respect to its nuclear weapons efforts IN: fear of expansion of the Shiite principle IN: theory of a political complot IN: support for Ahmadinejad IN: support for Mousavi
<i>Treatment recommendation</i> as offered solutions (S)	S: new election S: re-count S: fair and objective verification S: political coup S: new dialog between parties S: weakening of political/religious establishment S: end of military repressions S: intervention by human rights groups S: intervention by European or American agencies S: acceptance of election results

To break down the news structures of Al Jazeera Arabic and CNN International, a factor analysis was carried out for each of their newscasts. Particular attention was paid to the data scale, since the intended factor analysis required metric or a dichotomous scale. Therefore, yes/no (1/0) categories were used to measure the occurrence of each single item.³

Material

A cross-national comparative content analysis of the flagship television news programs on Al Jazeera Arabic and CNN International was conducted. In times of war and political campaigns, in particular, prime time newscasts draw the large audiences and receive tremendous public attention. Thus, we chose to analyze the prime-time 8 p.m. (CET) evening news of Al Jazeera (program title: *Al Jazeera News*) and the 8 a.m. (CET) news of CNN International (*CNN Today*), both of which provide a thirty-minute summary of all of the day's news in compact form – in all, 35 hours of material.

Reliability and Validity

The coding was completed by two researchers. The Arab news broadcasts of Al Jazeera were coded by a researcher proficient in both Arabic and English. It was deemed important that one of the members of the research team not only be proficient in Arabic but also someone who had grown up in the Arabic culture. This cultural background not only ensured a better understanding of the news itself but also of the cultural context in which the reports were produced. Most international studies are conducted by teams representing only one culture or nation; their research interests thus are often restricted to their own cultural background and socialization (Wirth & Kolb, 2004, p. 89).

Careful attention was also given to the correct translation of the categories to ensure a common understanding throughout the coding procedure. An external researcher fluent in Arabic, and English as well, was asked to double-check the correct translation and wording of the codebook. A pre-test using a subsample of five English-language television news stories which varied in their subject matter was also carried out. Intercoder reliability was established at .81 (using Holsti's formula); the lowest intercoder reliability value was .70, the highest .92. There were high levels of agreement in the formal categories (up to 1.00) and lesser agreement in the evaluation categories.

Within the factor analysis we used principle component analysis with a varimax rotation as the extraction method to ensure that all the frames (i.e. factors) were independent of each other and did not correlate (eigenvalues > 1). It was also

³ Different authors have taken different approaches to the application of dichotomous variables in factor analysis (cf. Muthen, 1978; Kubinger, 2003), but it nevertheless has been proposed and also utilized as a method for generating frames (cf. Dahinden, 2006, p. 206).

determined that a frame should consist of at least three variables, with a correlation between single variables of greater than 0.5. The highest values within a single frame would establish the most important variable; this variable was decisive for the frame name because it was the strongest variable for that factor.

Results

A total of 66 news segments referring only to the Iranian presidential election and its consequences were analyzed: 37 produced and aired by CNN International (CNNI) and 29 by Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA), for a total of 112 minutes of news coverage (60 minutes by AJA and 52 by CNNI). Although the Arabic channel devoted somewhat more coverage to the election, the difference was not statistically significant (t-test: $p > .05$).⁴

Quantitative analysis of the individual frame elements

To gain an initial impression of how often the variables occur, the frame analysis was preceded by a frequency analysis. The aim was to find out which elements occurred within the four frame dimensions, thus providing an initial comparison of the two news broadcasters.

The analysis of elements in the frame dimension *problem definition* revealed that the main topics for both news programs were *the poll win of Ahmadinejad* ($n_{AJA} = 18$ [62%], $n_{CNNI} = 27$ [73%]) and the succeeding *opposition protests against the election* ($n_{AJA} = 15$ [52%], $n_{CNNI} = 24$ [65%]), thus no difference between broadcasters was found. Regarding the dimension *treatment recommendation* and proposed solutions AJA and CNNI were also in agreement: the situation in Iran should be brought under control by the Iranian parties by entering into *a new dialogue* ($n_{AJA} = 14$ [38%], $n_{CNNI} = 8$ [28%]) and there should be a *termination of military repressions* ($n_{AJA} = 11$ [30%], $n_{CNNI} = 16$ [55%]). In both news broadcasts the conflict was viewed as an internal affair of state. Interestingly, a possible American or European intrusion was mentioned by neither as a plausible option, which gives rise to speculation: e.g., the German news magazine “Der Spiegel” reported (June 14, 2009) that Ahmadinejad’s victory had apparently caught a number of Western countries by surprise; they had not anticipated a majority for Ahmadinejad, and thus initial reactions to the election outcome came late (Schmitz, 2009). Another interpretation that circulated was that the reluctance shown by Obama (and the EU) was an expression of an American policy change for the region, one that was to be influenced more by rapprochement rather than conflict (Wernicke, 2009; FoxNews.com, 2009). Certainly Iran’s geopolitically

⁴ The authors decided to test the variables for significance. The reason is that significance tests not only indicate whether the results are truly representative, but also indicate whether they were found systematically. Thus a statistically significant result has a stronger informative value (Westermann, 2000, p. 337).

sensitive position must be considered; in this respect security issues (keyword nuclear conflict) as well as economic questions must have played a role. Iran was still, after all, the country with the second largest oil and gas reserves worldwide and thus an important economic power in the region as well as for Europe and the USA; thus a cautious response was called for (Perthes, 2009b).

The first significant differences between the two broadcasters were found in the frame dimensions *causal attribution* and *moral evaluation*. The American broadcaster tended more strongly to view the aftermath of the Iranian election in a global context. Typical news captions included “global day of action against the repression in Iran (July 7, 2009), “international memorial for the victims in Iran” (July 7, 2009), and “global remembering of Neda Agha Soltan” (July 30, 2009) – events that Al Jazeera did not focus on. On Al Jazeera the outcome of the election was embedded in a greater general discussion about political participation and change. CNNI’s reporting of the election aftermath most strongly emphasized the *mistrust in Ahmadinejad’s politics* ($n_{CNNI} = 23$ [62%]) and the *assumption of election fraud* ($n_{CNNI} = 16$ [43%]), whereas AJA stressed the *assurance of political power* ($n_{AJA}=11$ [38%]) and the *desire for political change* ($n_{AJA}=10$ [35%]). These are thus the first indications that the Arabic broadcaster focuses more on the general political dissatisfaction among the Iranian people vs. CNNI’s attention given to the election itself and violations of Western perceptions of ‘democratic norms’.

Different frames, different messages

In the broadcasts by CNN International we detected five different frames, and in those by Al Jazeera Arabic four, which explains 40% (CNNI) and 56% (AJA) of the variance in framing for each broadcaster. CNNI and AJA news coverage thus share a similar level of differentiation; both select multiple topical foci and present varying perspectives within one news segment.

Frames in the coverage of CNN International. Analyzing the news structure of CNNI’s election coverage of the Iranian election and its aftermath, we found five frames (see table 2):

1. Hope
2. Support for Mousavi
3. Support for Ahmadinejad
4. Criticism of Ahmadinejad for disregarding human rights
5. Mousavi accused of working with the West

Table 2: Matrix of rotated component analysis – CNN International

Frame elements	Components				
	1	2	3	4	5
Desire for political change/reform	0.905				
Re-count	0.848				
Fair and objective verification	0.733				
N: rejection of Mousavi's policy	0.673				
N: disappointment about the victory	0.697				
New election		0.823			
N: general political dissatisfaction		0.808			
N: support for Mousavi		0.523			
N: support for Ahmadinejad			0.860		
Acceptance of election results			0.858		
Stemming opposing reactions			0.827		
Intervention by human rights groups				0.883	
IN: rejection of Ahmadinejad's policy				0.830	
Disregard of human rights				0.647	
End of military repressions				0.575	
Mousavi accused of working with the West					0.799
Western nations at fault					0.733
Mistrust in Mousavi					0.617

Note. Extraction method: principle component analysis with a varimax rotation
 N = 37, $r > .5$; single frame must consist of at least three variables.

1. *Hope.* This frame is the most important frame of the news broadcast as it explains roughly 10% of the variance and thus was relevant for every 4th report (given that a frame can occur only once in a news item). The hope frame deals with the *disappointment* expressed by some members of the Iranian public after the announcement of Ahmadinejad's victory. The frame thus captures the demand for *fair and objective verification* and a possible *re-count* of the ballots. The frame showed that the *desire for political change* in Iran is the most important item. Interestingly, the variable *rejection of Mousavi* appears to contradict other variables in the frame. It was Mousavi, after all, who opposed Ahmadinejad in the election and promised to introduce reform and change. This possibly reflects a sentiment that Mousavi, too, was not seen as an appropriate leader.

2. *Support for Mousavi.* The second frame can be seen as one possible consequence of the disappointment felt by some Iranian groups. The frame consists of the items *national support for Mousavi*, which strongly correlates with *general political dissatisfaction* ($r = 0.4$, $p < .05$) and the demand for a *new election* ($r = 0.6$, $p < .01$). The analysis of the actors shows that Mousavi's supporters could not only be identified within the Iranian population but also

within the political and religious establishment. On July 7, 2009, CNNI reported on the support of unnamed members of the new government and the Islamic cleric; the former president Rafsanjani is also presented as a supporter (news on July 5, 6, 17, 2009).

3. *Support for Ahmadinejad.* In addition to their reporting on political dissatisfaction, CNNI also reported on political and even religious support for Ahmadinejad. The American newscast also focused on the people behind Ahmadinejad providing *support* and legitimacy. This frame gives preference to the solution of *acceptance of the election results*, which was also supported by the Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the political partisans of Ahmadinejad.

When comparing the actors in frame 2 and 3, it becomes obvious that the political and religious establishment in Iran was presented as divided. In both frames it was coded as an “active actor”⁵ – one group supporting the political opposition such as Rafsanjani, and the other preferring the new government with its head Ahmadinejad (e.g., Khamenei). This result is interesting, as it shows a split political establishment.

4. *Criticism of Ahmadinejad for disregard of human rights.* The fourth frame refers to the military and political repressions to which the opposition was exposed. The frame refers to international discussion about implications for human rights and the demand for an *end to military repressions*. The frame variables show that *disregard of human rights* goes along with *international rejection of Ahmadinejad’s policy* ($r = 0.4, p < .05$).

This frame is also interesting for other reasons: anecdotal accounts from people in Europe or the USA having family or friends in Iran are highlighted. Correspondents interviewed a journalist who was arrested in Iran (newscast July 2, 2009), for example, as well as family members who spoke about the arrest or even the death of other family members (July 11 and 26, 2009) in Iran. Here CNNI is placing the events in Iran within another, more global context of reference. The events in Iran are recounted from the perspective of those living in the West – CNNI’s sphere of influence.

5. *Mousavi accused of working with the West.* The last frame deals with the possibility that Mousavi, as Ahmadinejad’s main opponent, would also not be an appropriate political leader. CNN reported on *mistrust* and reasonable doubts about the appropriateness of Mousavi. The structural analysis of the protagonists reveals that this contention was most notably spread by the new government and especially Ahmadinejad. That in itself is not something unusual; election battles often bring out bitter rivalries among the candidates (Schulz, 1997, p. 186). The interesting aspect here is that our investigation focused on the *post-election* coverage, rather than the usual investigation of coverage before and during an

⁵ Within a specific news report spokesmen as well as initiators of a discussion were coded as active actors.

election. Our analysis reveals the ongoing candidate rivalry following the election. It indicates the problems with political legitimacy that Ahmadinejad was facing. In this frame there are two other interesting variables, namely *Western nations at fault* and *Mousavi accused of working with the West*. The latter variable refers to accusations that Mousavi was cooperating with the Western nations and Western media. Here one can construe an anti-Western sentiment arising out of the Iranian regime. *Western nations at fault* refers to the assignment of joint responsibility for the situation in Iran to Western nations, thus expressing once more an anti-Western sentiment of the government.

Frames in the coverage of Al Jazeera Arabic

In the Al Jazeera Arabic news coverage we were able to identify 4 independent frames (vs. 5 for CNNI), which together account for 56% of the variance.

Table 3 depicts the variables which correlate and therefore belong together. The frames are:

1. Pro-Mousavi and anti-Ahmadinejad
2. Hope
3. International reactions
4. Mistrust in Mousavi

As it can be seen, Al Jazeera Arabic's main news topics are quite comparable to those of the Western broadcasters, although the frames are more diverse internally. A closer look, however, will reveal differences.

1. Pro-Mousavi and anti-Ahmadinejad. This frame has a high significance because it explains nearly 1/3 of the reports; the declared variance affects 27%; thus it is the most important frame with respect to description of the news coverage. This frame reveals a news structure in which *support* for Mousavi clearly goes along with a *rejection* of Ahmadinejad as the actual elected political leader. It consists of variables in which skepticism about the election outcome (e.g., such variables as *outrage about 'stolen votes'*, *possible election fraud*) coalesces with general dissatisfaction and calls for political reform (*desire for change*). Where CNNI's coverage included reporting on support for Mousavi as well as for Ahmadinejad, in the AJA frames support for Ahmadinejad is inadequately made clear; AJA appears to take a more critical position.

2. Hope. In AJA's coverage, there was also a hope frame identified. Here it deals with a marked *desire to change policy* ($r = 0.5, p < .01$) and can be linked with a more general *political dissatisfaction* of Iranian groups. Unlike CNNI, the variables *fight for freedom of opinion* and *right of political participation* play a major role here and are directly linked with the *wish for political change* ($r = 0.6, p < .05$). Al Jazeera thus looks at the outcome of the election in the context of a more general discussion of political freedom, with a stronger focus on the mood of

the Iranian people.

Table 3: Matrix of rotated component analysis – Al Jazeera Arabic

Frame elements	Components			
	1	2	3	4
N: support for Mousavi	0.951			
N: theory about a political complot	0.892			
N: rejection of Ahmadinejad's policy	0.880			
Mousavi's loss at the election poll	0.875			
Mistrust in Ahmadinejad	0.795			
N: disappointment about the victory	0.661			
Election fraud	0.626			
New election	0.613			
Desire for political change/reform	0.577	0.787		
Fight for freedom of opinion/press		0.832		
N: political dissatisfaction		0.697		
N: outrage about 'stolen votes'	0.575	0.650		
Right of political participation		0.636		
Disregard for human rights		0.588		
National demonstrations		0.585		
Military repressions		0.580		
N: skepticism about legitimacy of election		0.523		
End of military repressions		0.522		
IN: rejection of Ahmadinejad's policy			0.874	
Intervention by human rights groups			0.829	
IN: skepticism about legitimacy of election campaign			0.689	
Acceptance of election poll results			-0.687	
Mistrust in Mousavi				0.893
IN: support for Mousavi				0.871
N: rejection of Mousavi's policy				0.825
N: support for Ahmadinejad				0.681
Mousavi accused of working with the West				0.622

Note. Extraction method: principle component analysis with a varimax rotation
 $N = 29$, $r > 0.5$; single frame must consist of at least three variables.

3. International reaction. This frame characterizes international reactions and a possible discussion about *intervention by human rights groups*. Al Jazeera reported on *international skepticism* about Ahmadinejad's election victory and *international rejection* of how he deals with opposition groups. On July 7, 2009, it even reported on Iranian groups asking for Western help to sort out the Iranian situation.

4. Mistrust in Mousavi. The last frame corresponds with the last frame of the American broadcaster. Both frames address the mistrust in Mousavi and his possible cooperation with Western nations. This can be seen by taking a closer look

at the exemplary newscast of July 20, 2009, on AJA in which Khamenei warned the Iranian elite against working together with “anti-Iranian” nations.

Finally, the following commonalities and differences can be seen:

1. For both broadcasters, coverage of the people’s desires for reform and transfer of political power play an important role. The *hope* frame and thus the desire for reform is prominent in the news coverage of both broadcasters; however, a substantial difference becomes apparent: the American broadcaster’s coverage is more focused on election results (variables, e.g., *re-count, fair and objective verification*), whereas with AJA the election outcome becomes the point of departure for a fundamental discussion of general political dissatisfaction (e.g., *right of political participation, fight for freedom of opinion/press*). This important difference is clearly visible in the broadcasters’ *hope* frames. Along with the desire for political change – the most important value – the second-most important value in the *hope* frame of the American news service directly relates to the election outcome and calls for a re-count, as compared to the two most prominent values in the AJA *hope* frame: the desire for change and the fight for freedom.
2. Therefore, it can be concluded that AJA focuses more on the mood or sentiment of the people in Iran. Thus, AJA keeps the tendency to first look closely at Arab and Islamic issues and then to consider international questions (see its self-perceived role in, e.g., Powers & Gilboa, 2009, p. 67). The American news service makes greater reference to Western viewpoints, including comments from people in the USA or Europe having family members in Iran, reports about Western journalists imprisoned in Iran, criticism of election results, and violations of human rights.
3. Comparing the results for both broadcasters, the Arabic broadcaster appears to be more critical of Ahmadinejad’s government than CNNI. While CNNI gave voice to supporters as well as opponents of both Mousavi and Ahmadinejad (*support for Mousavi, support for Ahmadinejad*), AJA offered fewer voices of support for Ahmadinejad.

Discussion, prospects and limitations

The Iranian election figured prominently in international news as its outcome had the potential to impact regional as well as international developments. On one side, within Iran, groups had already congregated before the election in June 2009 to express their willingness for and openness toward political change. On the other side, relations between Ahmadinejad and the West were already tense because of Iran’s nuclear program and publically expressed skepticism regarding Western influences and connections. Thus for the USA, as well as the EU and Arab states, the outcome was important for future political and economic relationships. An analysis of the prime-time news programs of two of the most important

international news broadcasters (in this context, at the very least) – the Western CNN International and the Arabic broadcaster Al Jazeera Arabic – was of special interest, particularly because of Al Jazeera’s potential role as a provider of alternative information to Western news media (media contra-flow) and the controversy regarding its potential impact on democratization and liberalization.

A framing analysis methodology was chosen as the most suitable approach as it enabled a more in-depth look into the news coverage – not only the topics posed and participant actors but also more subtle structures of the coverage. An inductive-quantitative frame approach was selected as the most appropriate design, as it allowed for a more open-ended approach than searching for media frames that are defined a priori.

In answer to our *first research question*, we were able to show that Al Jazeera Arabic as well as CNN International selected various topical foci and presented differing perspectives even within a single newscast. Even when the Arabic news channel seemed more critical of the re-elected government, it focused on different political opinions and presented different political positions. Therefore, Al Jazeera thus fulfilled its own mission as a news broadcaster including criticism of existing governments in the Middle East region - in this specific case of the Iranian regime. It emphasized political issues that were hitherto (before its launch) excluded from public debate in the Arab World (cf. Hafez, 2005a, p. 15).

Comparing the results of the frame analysis it became clear that both broadcasters addressed the irregularities associated with the election outcome. CNN International’s focus was on alleged election violations and the question of a fair and objective outcome; Al Jazeera, on the other hand, attempted to position the election outcome within the context of a more general political discussion about dissatisfaction and political change. The *hope* frame was found in the coverage of both broadcasters, but differed in the variables that were emphasized; the openness of Iranian groups to new political and social developments was clearly more evident on Al Jazeera.

This last result was especially interesting with respect to our *second research question* concerning the contra-flow idea. Al Jazeera is widely viewed as an international news service that offers an alternative source of information and ideas. It has been argued that the broadcaster is capable of upending the dominant Western viewpoint present in coverage of global events. Summarizing our results with respect to the contra-flow concept, our analysis revealed a stronger engagement on the part of Al Jazeera with the Iranian people, whereas CNNI’s framing of the election aftermath took more of a Western view and focused more on election fraud, disregard of human rights, and those in the West affected by the outcome. This underlines the specific role of Al Jazeera compared to other international news channels – covering the same issues but in a different framing.

Thus, we conclude that Al Jazeera is regarded as a reliable source of news for many people in the Arabic speaking world and is received by more than 50 million people, all over the world (Doetzer, 2009). Its audience relies on the broadcasting network and many viewers perceive it as their most trusted source of news. Hafez (2005a) argues that the “media could be effective in providing information on democratic developments elsewhere and in the Arab world” (p. 6) and goes on to infer that networks such as Al Jazeera could be “the information hub for a spill-over effect triggering similar protests throughout Arab countries” (p. 10). Even if the media’s reporting is not enough to create such a spill-over effect, the role they can assume is an important one. It is our conclusion that the news coverage of the Iranian election examined in our analysis demonstrates that Al Jazeera is fulfilling its role as an alternative news provider when it comes to discussions of democracy.

Finally, it should be noted that our analysis was limited to 66 newscasts, making it difficult to statistically support or reject the contra-flow proposition. The actual time spent in both news programs on coverage of the Iranian election seemed limited – only 12% of the total news coverage (by duration) was devoted to the election aftermath. One explanation could be that the media censorship imposed by Ahmadinejad aggravated or even disrupted the work of international journalists (Sohrabi-Haghighat & Mansouri, 2010, p. 28), who are highly dependent on alternative news sources. Based on our observations, a further explanation could be that much of this information was reported during special broadcasts (e.g., the daily Iran desk on CNNI and “Behind the News” or “Under the Microscope” on Al Jazeera) and then subsequently omitted from the main newscasts. For future research, we suggest a closer look at political and cultural commentaries and special reports, in which political opinions are more strongly expressed and commented on. Such formats might yield more detailed information with respect to the question of contra-flow and democratization.

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