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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Representation of the 2023 Elections of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament) and the Assembly of Experts for Leadership in Iran on the BBC Persian Website: A Semantic Model

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

The study aimed to analyze how BBC Persian, a prominent Persian-language international media outlet, represented the 2023 Iranian parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections. It sought to identify the underlying semantic structures and discursive strategies in BBC Persian's coverage, moving beyond surface-level reporting to propose a semantic model for interpreting the network's media behavior and ideological positioning.

Method:

This is a qualitative study employing thematic analysis. The researchers collected 24 highly detailed news reports from the BBC Persian website, published between the start of candidate registration and one week after election day. The thematic analysis followed a three-stage coding process:

- Open coding to extract initial conceptual codes;
- Axial coding to organize and merge these codes into broader organizational themes;
- Selective coding to identify overarching, abstract themes that formed the basis of the semantic model.

Theoretical rigor and validity were ensured through repeated cross-checking, theoretical sensitivity, peer review, and detailed descriptive modeling. Reliability was confirmed using a test–retest method, in which three reports were recoded after ten days, yielding over 70% agreement between sessions.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on a rich theoretical background:

- Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972): employed to analyze how BBC Persian selectively emphasized certain issues, opinions, and experts.
- Representation Theory (Stuart Hall, 1991): used to interpret how BBC Persian shaped meaning through word choices, visuals, and structure.
- Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974): applied to understand how the media marginalizes certain views and normalizes dissent.
- Edward Said's Orientalism: adopted as a broader epistemic framework suggesting that Western media often construct Eastern societies as irrational, authoritarian, and culturally inferior.

Findings:

1. Agenda-Setting and Framing Bias

BBC Persian's coverage systematically emphasized negative themes concerning the Iranian elections, including phrases such as:

- "engineered elections,"
- "non-competitive process,"
- "lack of public trust,"
- "staged elections."

Frequent repetition, expert interviews, and emotional language served to frame the elections as illegitimate and the regime as authoritarian. The outlet did not offer a balanced representation by including supporters or internal governmental narratives, thereby reinforcing a narrow frame.

2. Dominance of Representational Techniques

Consistent with Hall's theory, BBC Persian employed strategic language and imagery:

- Words such as "rigged," "symbolic," "meaningless," "security-heavy," and "minority rule" painted a picture of a hollow democratic process.
- Headlines included emotionally and ideologically loaded phrases such as:
- "Iran's Parliament lacks power," or
- "Disqualified Reformists accuse regime of manipulation."

The images used in reports often depicted empty polling stations, public protests, and controversial figures, reinforcing the perception of mass disillusionment.

3. Orientalist Tropes

The semantic model proposed by the authors reveals that BBC Persian's discourse is heavily influenced by Orientalist binaries: the East as irrational and authoritarian versus the West as rational and democratic. Elections in Iran were framed as performative and incompatible with democratic norms, which aligns with Edward Said's argument that the West constructs the East as "the Other."

4. Spiral of Silence in Media Influence

BBC Persian shaped a communicative environment in which support for participation in the elections was portrayed as irrational or complicit. Instead, non-participation and civil disobedience were framed as the morally and intellectually superior stance. The study found that this framing contributed to:

- delegitimizing political participation;
- amplifying dissenting voices while silencing pro-election or neutral narratives;
- normalizing civil disobedience and protest as the logical next steps.

5. Emergence of Four Major Semantic Themes

The final conceptual model was structured around four macro themes:

a. Delegitimization of the Regime:

BBC Persian presented the elections as a test of legitimacy following the 2022 protests. It emphasized high-profile disqualifications (e.g., Hassan Rouhani), electoral engineering, and elite defections (e.g., Rafsanjani's family and Reformists). The narrative suggested that regime legitimacy had irreversibly declined.

b. People's Estrangement from the System:

Low voter turnout was framed not merely as political apathy but as active defiance. BBC reports frequently cited polls and protests to support the idea of a "silent boycott." The outlet characterized the electorate as disillusioned, especially in major cities such as Tehran, with statements suggesting urban voter turnout below 30%.

c. Electoral Engineering and Elite Purging:

The disqualification of prominent figures and the lack of genuine political competition were presented as evidence of "regime hardening" and "elite purification." The semantic emphasis was on the conversion of elections into a ritual for internal regime consolidation rather than democratic renewal.

d. Dysfunctional Parliament and Corrupt Politicians:

BBC Persian portrayed the Iranian parliament as ineffective and dominated by loyalists. Stories highlighted allegations of corruption, military influence, and a lack of responsiveness to public grievances.

Conclusions:

The authors conclude that BBC Persian's coverage was not merely informative but ideologically charged, aiming to undermine electoral legitimacy and promote systemic skepticism. The semantic model identified in the study showed how discursive strategies such as selection, repetition, emotional framing, and selective sourcing contributed to constructing an image of "staged elections in an illegitimate regime."

The final conceptual model outlined a multilayered narrative strategy aimed at:

- discrediting the electoral process;
- reducing political participation;
- promoting civil resistance;
- reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes of the Iranian state.

Data Availability Statement
Data available on request from the authors.
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