



## An exploration of Iranian communication to multiple target audiences<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

State-controlled media use similar message techniques to target specific publics that counterparts in democratic societies use. We explore talking points (attributes) and themes (frames) through content analysis in state-produced propaganda directed at two different audiences. Domestic and internationally targeted propaganda ( $N=1491$ ) from Iran regarding the issue of regional security was reviewed. Results indicated Iran emphasized different attributes and frames based on audiences. Themes about enemy correlated, and relationships between officials and themes were explored.

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### 1. Introduction

Public relations, along with the government information-service equivalent called public affairs, play a pivotal role in democracies. Freedom of press creates a watchdog role for the media, with practitioners acting as mediators to grant journalists access to information and facilitate coverage in a transparent world driven by the 24-h news cycle. Yet, not all nations operate under such free and transparent edicts. Even today, there are many nations around the world with ministries of information that – to varying degrees in each country – watch over and govern their national press (Lynch, 2006). In these countries, public relations practitioners are reduced to propagandists and instructed to strategically shape messages, which undoubtedly are carried unfiltered and without question by state-controlled media.

Yet, even in these far corners of the world where information is controlled by the state, communicators use the same message techniques to target specific publics that practitioners in democratic societies use. In an effort to understand the varying issue attributes and framing techniques that a single propaganda-producing government uses to present an issue to varying publics, this study seeks to explore the differences between propaganda messages intended for domestic, internal audiences and those targeted to an external, international audience.

The purpose of this study is to compare the varying message attributes and frames regarding an issue used by a single country in their domestic and international audience propaganda. In doing so, this research will examine Iran's discussion of regional security. This nation and issue was specifically chosen because, anecdotally, some would characterize Iran's use of propaganda as "speaking with a 'forked tongue'", as state-released news and information is largely questioned in the

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western world. Using second-level agenda-setting and framing theory to quantify the various attributes (talking points) and frames (themes) of an issue, this study will reveal how a government-controlled, closed-media society communicates to the people within the country and an international, external audience. Through content analysis, this study hopes to shed light on modern propaganda to determine which messages are being communicated to each audience.

## 2. Theoretical perspective

### 2.1. Propaganda

In 1927, Harold Lasswell published his seminal book, *Propaganda Techniques in World War*, and this scholarship defined propaganda: “It refers solely to the control of opinion by significant symbols, or, to speak more concretely and less accurately, by stories, rumors, reports, pictures, and other forms of social communication” (Lasswell, 1927, p. 9). Lasswell identified four major objectives: mobilizing hatred towards the enemy, preservation of allies’ friendship, preservations of neutral party’s friendship, and demoralization of the enemy (Lasswell, 1927). Prior to public relations practice becoming a more professional field, propaganda was another form of message strategy; however, in the past 50 years the term has a negative connotation. Today, propaganda is considered state-controlled information to strategically (and often falsely) communicate to a target public in a persuasive manner.

Research on persuasion has identified seven propaganda devices: name calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon. These devices are commonly covered in both public relations and communication theory textbooks and provide a basis for understanding the methods of propaganda. Currently, an example of the name-calling device is defining enemies as “terrorists” and certain regimes as the “axis of evil” or referring to the United States as the “Great Satan” or “global arrogance.” Glittering generalities such as broadly referring to enemies as “evildoers” or saying “they hate our values” can achieve the effect of negatively portraying enemies, without providing specifics. Transfer is used to create associations between music and symbols with something else. For example, the flag, patriotism, freedom, and democracy are concepts that are linked with specific military action. Testimonial is a device by which the use of a respected or well-known individual advocates something to influence the masses. The plain folks technique is adopted by a speaker who wants his or her audience to consider them to be just “one of us.” Card stacking is a technique by which only partial or inaccurate facts may be used to portray either a best- or worst-case scenario, in order to elicit an emotional response from a mass audience. The bandwagon technique is one in which audience are manipulated to believe that many members of society are aligning themselves with a particular movement, program, or plan of action, in order to convince the audience members that they too should follow the crowd or be left out.

Last century, propaganda in a democracy was said to be meant to provoke group discussions and persuade the masses (Perry, 1942). To be effective, propaganda messages must be credible and truthful (Herz, 1949). If used correctly, propaganda can tie together a similar group of people so strongly that nothing can break them apart. In many cases, propaganda inspires patriotism and unconditional support toward the cause and government at hand (Perry, 1942). Yet, propaganda is not always used in a democracy. And, in some cases, it can be used to mislead people through a false representation of facts.

### 2.2. Attribute-agenda setting and framing

A single issue may have several, very different publics. In propaganda, this distinction between target publics is vital. To better understand the how a single issue is discussed to the various publics, this study uses an attribute agenda-setting and framing approach. As previous studies have set the precedent for operationalizing agenda-setting attributes as talking points (Sweetser & Brown, 2008), this study will continue such operationalizing techniques while adding the dimension of frame analysis through the consideration of message themes. By doing so, this study will be able to examine the talking points (attributes) and themes (frames) used to communicate the state’s stance on the issue to two very different publics: (1) the internal, domestic audience and (2) the external, international audience.

Attribute agenda setting, also called second-level agenda setting, is a derivative of the often-studied agenda-setting theory, which posits that the media does not tell us what to think, rather it tells us what to think about (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting theory has developed into a multi-layered theory, which includes study of the object, or issue (the first layer), and examination of attributes describing or delineating that issue object (the second layer). These attributes fill out the total picture and understanding of the issue among the public (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, 2000). Attributes have been studied as objects (i.e., sub-topics of an issue) and characteristics (i.e., personality attributes of a person like a political candidate), depending on the subject being studied (Golan & Wanta, 2001). Additionally, public relations research has operationalized message strategy talking points as attributes (Sweetser & Brown, 2008).

Looking at the attributes associated with communicating about a particular issue allows researchers to understand what pieces of the issue the communicator finds most important. Understanding attributes are important because it reveals not only what the communicator wants to draw attention to with regard to the issue, but also the attention that is drawn away from other attributes (McCombs & Estrada, 1997). Lee and Yoo (2004) found that exposure to contradictory attributes of a same issue (e.g., opposing arguments on an issue) raised the overall perception of that issue’s importance to the audience – regardless of the ways of presentation. As such, we know that the use of attributes – or talking points as they are also called

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