Title

Righteous or Rebellious? Narratives of the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis in British and Qatari Media

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Abstract

Media representations of international conflicts are instrumental in determining how we imagine, evaluate, and discuss conflicts. The Qatar diplomatic crisis, an ongoing international diplomatic conflict between Qatar and a Saudi Arabia-led coalition of nations, has received extensive global media coverage. This study compares British and Qatari media discourse of this crisis, by examining ten news articles from the BBC and Al Jazeera English (AJE) for bias in language based on the respective national contexts. Evidence of agenda-setting, priming, nationalization of discourse, and public diplomacy was revealed in articles from both outlets. AJE, due to its relative political proximity to the conflict, ascribes the diplomatic crisis much more significance than does the BBC. Both outlets also differ in their evaluations of allegations of terrorist-financing against Qatar and the legitimacy of the blockade. These results indicate that media outlets which claim to be impartial are nonetheless influenced by national contexts when reporting on international conflicts. This study is the first to apply previously-established media effects theories and discourse analysis approaches to media representations of the ongoing Qatar crisis and furthers our understanding of power dynamics in narratives of global conflicts.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Qatar diplomatic crisis; media representations; agenda setting; public diplomacy; diplomatic conflicts.

Introduction

An entire nation can be dramatically transformed in the course of a single day. On June 5, 2017, Qatar experienced such a transformation, when it went from being a small Gulf nation known primarily for its wealth to being in the international media spotlight at the centre of a diplomatic conflict. Known popularly as the ‘Qatar diplomatic crisis’, this conflict has yet to be resolved, despite its serious economic and political ramifications.

The diplomatic conflict began when a coalition of countries, led by Saudi Arabia and including Egypt, Bahrain, and the UAE (among others), announced that they were severing diplomatic ties with Qatar. Other countries followed suit, reducing or altogether eliminating their respective diplomatic relationships. This Saudi-led coalition took actions such as closing off land and sea borders, restricting access to airspace for Qatar airways, imposing trade restrictions, and expelling Qatari nationals. The blockade imposed by the coalition threatened to cause a food shortage, since Qatar is heavily dependent on imports for food security (Wintour 2017: online). A food crisis was avoided due to the aid sent to Qatar by Iran, and later Turkey, in the form of airplanes full of food (Clarke 2017: online). It also caused a significant decline in the Qatari stock market, but the nation’s economy has since largely recovered from economic ramifications (The Business Times 2018: online). Air travel, especially through Qatar Airways, was also seriously affected immediately after the blockade was imposed, with most flights out of Doha having to be rerouted (Alkhalisi 2017: online).

These severe diplomatic sanctions imposed on Qatar emerged not out of an abrupt change in policy, but as a result of years of political tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The conflict erupted as an escalation in a long-drawn-out proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Chubin and Tripp 2014). Both these nations have vied for influence over the Persian Gulf region, with Saudi Arabia leading the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Iran competing as a political threat. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Qatar maintains friendly diplomatic relations with Iran, resulting in a tension between Saudi Arabia and Qatar by extension (Okruhlik 2003). Notably, Iran came out in support (both political and material) of Qatar when the Saudi-led blockade was imposed.

Furthermore, Qatar has recently been branded ‘the new Saudi Arabia’ (Khatib 2013) due to its increasing international and cultural influence (for instance, gaining rights to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup) and its relatively progressive foreign and domestic policies. The construction and legitimisation of a Qatari national identity has also garnered the nation significant cultural and political capital (Eggeling 2017). During the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011, Qatar changed its image from a diplomatic mediator to a supporter of political transitions in the Arab world (Ulrichsen 2014), while Saudi Arabia was seen as a more regressive state leading a ‘counter-revolution’ (Kamraya 2012). Qatar gained significant political capital during the Arab Spring, and would thus be perceived as a threat by Saudi Arabia.

Therefore, this diplomatic conflict comes in the wake of Qatar’s increasing international influence and Saudi Arabia’s proxy conflict with Qatar and Iran. However, the

immediate justification provided for such severe sanctions was Qatar's alleged support for 'extremism', and especially 'Iranian-backed extremism', references to groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah (Kerr and Al Omran 2017: online). Qatar's policies regarding these groups have come under much scrutiny (Roberts 2014), and some scholars have attempted to validate the Saudi-led coalition's claims that Qatar engages in 'terrorist financing' (Naheem 2017). Allegations of backing extremists have been vigorously and repeatedly denied by the Qatari government (Reuters 2017: online), but they have nonetheless harmed Qatar's international image and provided justification for the diplomatic blockade. Donald Trump, President of the United States, exacerbated matters when he accused Qatar of being 'a funder of terrorism', providing fuel for the anti-Qatar fire (Smith, Siddiqui & Beaumont 2017).

Diplomatic conflicts are serious concerns. The Qatar crisis demonstrates that a diplomatic conflict can have just as severe ramifications for international security and political economy as a military conflict (Ulrichsen 2017). It is unsurprising, then, that media discourse gave the Qatar crisis a significant spotlight, especially in its early days. News outlets practically everywhere covered the conflict as it unfolded, with special emphasis on what Western powers, and particularly Donald Trump and his then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, had to say about it. However, in this case, Al Jazeera could provide a different perspective, not least as an influential non-Western media outlet, but also because it was placed near the centre of the diplomatic conflict when the Saudi-led coalition included its dissolution in its list of demands to Qatar (Sanchez 2017: online).

Thus, as a news outlet not only based in and funded by Qatar, but as a target of the coalition's demands, Al Jazeera was in uncomfortable political proximity to the conflict, a fact that could manifest in its media discourse. On the other hand, British news outlets such as the BBC were quite removed from the conflict, and would perhaps not share Al Jazeera's sense of urgency in their media representations of the blockade. They would, however, be interested in Qatar's alleged links to terrorism, given that Britain (and the US) have been engaged in an expensive War on Terror. Thus, an examination of the discourse put forth by each news outlet based on their respective national and political contexts would yield meaningful insights.

The current study therefore studies media discourse surrounding the 2017-18 Qatar diplomatic crisis in two different national contexts, British and Qatari. This study utilises a Critical Discourse Analysis approach to reveal bias in media content in the respective national contexts. Evidence of agenda-setting and priming, nationalised discourse, and public diplomacy in media content surrounding the discourse is revealed, thus contributing to an understanding of media representations of a major diplomatic conflict.

Media Representations of International Conflicts: An Overview

Discourse Analysis

Media representations are instrumental in determining how we perceive, evaluate, and discuss an issue (Lacey 1998). The most critical aspect of media representations, and one that

can reinforce societal power dynamics, is the difference in language used to describe the same idea based on differing implicit biases (Mayr 2008). Particularly in cases of disasters and conflicts, contrasting media representations can present drastically different images of the same issue and thus shape public opinion (Orgad 2012). Examining these representations yields valuable insights into social hierarchies, prejudices, and structural inequalities (Van Dijk 2002), and is achieved through discourse analysis. This approach allows scholars to study ‘the linguistic structure of [media narratives], and [their] cognitive, cultural, social, and psychological functions’ (Johnstone 2004). Therefore, studying media representations through discourse analysis can further our understanding of socio-political structures and their reinforcement through differing narratives.

The study of media discourse surrounding military and diplomatic conflicts is an increasingly important application of discourse analysis (Hansen 2013). The militarisation of media language (Chilton 1987) in times of military conflict is particularly important because of the well-documented ability of news media to shape public opinion, which in turn has at least some influence on foreign policy (Powlick and Katz 1998; McCombs 2014). Examining media representations of conflicts can help scholars identify patterns in language used by media that perpetuate societal structures of inequality, including those that influence public opinion through what Van Dijk describes as ‘manipulation’ (Van Dijk 2006). Several studies have analysed discourse surrounding specific military conflicts to highlight these patterns (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Graham, Keenan & Dowd 2004).

Conceptual Frameworks

Three broad conceptual frameworks allow scholars to describe evidences of bias in media representations. First, valuable insights can be gained from the application of previously established media effects theories to a discourse analysis of a military conflict. Iyengar and Simon (1993) highlighted implicit biases in conflict discourse during the 1990-91 Gulf War in terms of the three components of the media effects model. These three components are agenda-setting, priming, and framing, and each of these have been the subject of extensive theorisation (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007; Weaver 2007; Roskos-Ewoldsen D R, Roskos-Ewoldsen B & Carpentier 2002; Pan and Kosicki 1993). Agenda-setting and priming, in particular, describe ways in which media representations can influence how global audiences perceive and evaluate political issues during a conflict.

Agenda-setting, as defined in a seminal paper by McCombs and Shaw (1972), is the ability of media to determine how much importance its audience places on any given matter. News outlets indicate the relative importance of an issue to the public by devoting greater proportions of news cycles to that issue (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan 2002). Agenda-setting is closely associated with priming, the two media effects together serving to ‘structure and change audience cognition’ (Willnat 1997). While agenda-setting dictates how much importance audiences attribute to an issue, priming theory suggests that ‘media agenda affects the criteria people use to evaluate’ political actors or issues (Sheafer 2006). In the context of media discourse of a diplomatic conflict, priming an audience with a media agenda may influence how they view the conflict. Further evaluations of the media effects model

have suggested that agenda-setting and priming share common theoretical foundations, and priming may be a temporal extension of agenda-setting (Iyengar and Kinder 1987); therefore, the two serve closely-related purposes. Examining media representations for evidence of agenda-setting and priming is crucial for revealing underlying biases and patterns in discourse.

National contexts can also significantly shape media representations of international conflicts. Theoretical scholarship in discourse studies has recognised that context significantly influences discourse (Van Dijk 2008), and that discourse can be vital to the construction of a national identity (De Cillia, Reisigl & Wodak 1999). These national identities are even more salient in times of international conflicts, and solidify power dynamics between conflicting actors (Fairclough 1989). The investigation of authorship of news media (Coulthard 2014) is crucial in discovering themes of such nationalised discourse. In a military or diplomatic conflict, this discourse not only helps construct a national identity, but also an opposing ‘other’ that fuels cross-cultural misrepresentations in media (Caldas-Coulthard 2003).

Influences of national contexts on media representations have been extensively studied, particularly for conflicts in the Middle East. Some studies examine discourse presented by Al Jazeera, the international news outlet headquartered in Qatar, and find evidence for the construction of an Arab (and particularly Qatari) national identity in its reporting (Samuel-Azran 2013; Samuel-Azran et al. 2016). Other scholars, such as Wang, have investigated discourse surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in British media, revealing the ‘power dimensions and ideological positions embedded in dominant [British] media discourses’ (C. Wang 2017). Studies like Wang’s demonstrate the effectiveness of discourse analysis in highlighting discursive strategies in conflict media that propagate a nation’s accepted ideologies in order to strengthen its national identity.

Media representations of conflicts also demonstrate a growing emphasis on public diplomacy, defined as ‘an international actor’s attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public’ (Cull 2009). Engaging in public diplomacy in an age when news media can influence public opinion is valuable for leaders engaged in international conflicts, in order to justify their actions and garner support. Domestic political punishments or ‘audience costs’ are believed to be somewhat influential in encouraging political leaders to commit to or back out of a conflict (Levy et al. 2015), although the potency of these costs in shaping foreign policy has been questioned (Brown and Marcum 2011; Kurizaki 2007). Regardless, setting agendas for media discourse about a conflict can help leaders avoid significant audience costs altogether, and this agenda-setting may be revealed through discourse analysis (McKee 2018). The strong correlation between ‘salience of foreign affairs in the media’ and ‘salience of foreign affairs for the public’, identified through critical analyses of media content, corroborates the link between public diplomacy, agenda-setting, and media discourse (Soroka 2003).

Furthermore, public diplomacy can moderate a political actor’s international image, particularly when terrorism or international conflicts are involved (Yarchi et al. 2013).

Previous research has focused on public diplomacy in the Middle East (Seib 2013), particularly as a means to reshape the region's image through Al Jazeera. These studies critically analyse Al Jazeera's messaging for evidence of public diplomacy and agenda-setting (Powers and Gilboa 2007). They find that Al Jazeera is often perceived as a mouthpiece for the Qatari government, but that its media discourse can convince its audiences to view Qatar, and more broadly the Arab world, in a more favourable light (Abdul-Nabi 2017). Thus, Al Jazeera has been shown to be an effective tool for public diplomacy in the past, especially concerning conflicts in the Middle East.

Analysing Discourse in Middle Eastern Conflicts

The Middle East has been examined extensively in studies of media representations of conflicts, given the number of military and diplomatic conflicts that have occurred in the region in the past few decades. Building on previous scholarship, these studies have found evidence of both nationalised discourse and public diplomacy in media discourse of several parties involved in these conflicts. The Iraq War, for instance, has been the focus of a number of discourse analyses (Morley and Bayley 2011). Scholars of discourse have highlighted the legitimisation of the war in Western media content (Van Dijk 2005), pointing to the practice of public diplomacy through media during this war. Other studies have investigated media discourse surrounding protests to the Iraq War (Luther and Miller 2005) as well as debates over continuation of the war (Rashidi and Souzandehfar 2010), finding that discourse on either side of the debate was framed by the respective partisan ideologies.

Media representations of the Arab Spring revolutions in the Middle East have also been examined, especially for nationalised political discourse in Arab media. Some of these studies examined explicit political messaging and its representation in news media (Al-Sowaidi, Banda & Mansour 2017), while others focused on social media discourse during these revolutions (Ullmann 2017). These studies find patterns such as the use of nationalised language to 'reproduce social power abuse, dominance, and inequality' (Maalej 2012) by Arab politicians, and a role of Westernised national discourse about civil-political rights in the Arab Spring uprisings (Teti 2012). Similar narratives of power and social threats are also found in media discourse regarding Syrian refugees (Abid, Manan & Rahman 2017). Therefore, evidence for nationalised discourse and public diplomacy were revealed through studies of media representations during both the Iraq War and the Arab Spring revolutions.

Comparative discourse analysis reveals in even starker contrast the nationalisation of media content. In comparing discourse between coalition countries and Arab nations during the Iraq War, Dimitrova and Connolly-Ahern (2007) found that the 'tale of war' about the same conflict was found to be constructed differently in US and British media than it was in Egyptian and Qatari media. This highlights the importance of critically analysing authorship and agenda-setting and their roles in perpetuating nationally-accepted political ideologies. Similarly, media representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been examined quite often through comparative discourse analysis (Kandil 2009). Most of these studies compare media discourse between Arab and Western news reports, with Al Jazeera often serving as the representative Arab media outlet. Other Middle Eastern conflicts that have been the focus

of comparative discourse studies include Arab Spring revolutions such as the Libyan uprising (Al Nahed 2015) and the disputed 2009 Iranian presidential election (Kasmani 2013). These studies reveal that media content around these conflicts utilise quite different discursive strategies depending on the national context of the news outlet (Barkho 2008).

The salience of national identity in media discourse surrounding international conflicts, particularly across British, Arab, and American contexts, has been of particular interest to scholars. In such investigations, Al Jazeera has been seen as both a tool for public diplomacy and the construction of national identity, but also as a conciliation between apparently opposing Western and Arab political ideologies in times of conflict (El-Nawawy and Powers 2008). Leon Barkho, especially, has done significant work in comparing British, Arab, and American media using a comparative discourse analysis approach (Barkho 2007, 2010) finding that there is a distinct ‘power asymmetry’ that is ingrained in Western media’s reporting of the Middle East (Barkho and Richardson 2010). Therefore, the substantial amount of scholarship that has focused on comparing media representations of conflicts in the Middle East highlights themes of public diplomacy and national identities in media content surrounding these conflicts.

The ongoing Qatar diplomatic crisis is quite comparable to previously-studied conflicts in many ways: it is a significant international diplomatic conflict, it is playing out largely in the Middle East, and it is being covered by media in both Arab nations and the West. However, perhaps due to its ongoing nature and the relatively little time that has passed since it began, no discourse analysis studies comparing media representations of the Qatar crisis have been published yet. This study attempts to fill that gap in scholarship by examining media representations of the Qatar diplomatic crisis through a Critical Discourse Analysis approach, comparing the media discourse across national contexts of the Middle East and the West.

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (abbreviated CDA) is an ever-growing sub-discipline of discourse studies that concerns itself with ‘relations of power and inequality in language’ (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000). Pioneered by scholars of discourse including Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, and Ruth Wodak (Billig 2003), CDA is considered to be not a single method or tool, but a ‘way of doing discourse analysis from a critical perspective’ (Baker et al. 2008). A fundamental guiding principle of CDA is ‘making visible the interconnectedness of things’, especially in relation to social and political dynamics that manifest in discourse (Wodak and Meyer 2009). Making these connections visible requires a multidisciplinary approach that accounts for cognitive processing of messaging, structures of discourse, and socio-political hierarchies (Van Dijk 2015). Such an approach lends itself to a critical analysis of many forms of media, including speeches (J. Wang 2010), television media (Lorenzo-Dus 2009), and newspapers (Richardson 2006). With increasing emphasis on web-

based journalism among mainstream news outlets, critical discourse analyses have been extended to online news articles as well (Munro 2018).

Selection of News Outlets

The current study utilised this CDA approach to compare media discourse between British and Qatari contexts. The BBC (or the British Broadcasting Corporation) was selected as the outlet representing British media. The BBC is charged by the Royal Charter and Agreement to ‘reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom’s nations and regions’ and to ‘reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world’ (BBC, ‘Public Purposes’: online). With such a charge, the BBC is clearly intended to be the highest media authority on representing the UK in national and international news, and thus the most appropriate outlet to be examined in a study of nationalised media discourse.

In addition, the BBC publicly declares that it is ‘independent, impartial and honest’ (BBC, ‘Values’: online), a claim that is somewhat corroborated by its funding mechanism. In order to avoid political biases stemming from sources of funding, the BBC is funded by a TV license fee that is charged to every consumer of live TV programmes or BBC programmes in the UK. This funding mechanism arguably allows the BBC ‘to be an independent, universal broadcaster, committed to serving everyone’ (Heath 2014: online), and thus provide media representations that are relatively unbiased. Given the BBC’s authority in shaping British media discourse and its apparent commitment to impartiality, it makes for a suitable candidate for a CDA study examining nationalised discourse and agenda-setting.

The Qatari media outlet selected as an Arab counterpart to the BBC was Al Jazeera English (AJE). AJE is a subsidiary of the Al Jazeera Media Network, self-proclaimed as the ‘first independent news channel in the Arab world’, and serves a global audience through its English-language reporting (Al Jazeera, ‘About Us’: online). Much like the BBC, AJE emphasises its independence and impartiality, publicly committing to present ‘diverse points of view and opinions without bias and partiality’ (Al Jazeera 2014: online). Unlike the BBC’s West-to-East reporting, to some scholars, Al Jazeera’s reporting represents an inversion of the Orientalist flow of information and Western ethnocentric news content on issues outside the West (Miles 2010). Al Jazeera’s ability to transmit news from a non-Western perspective, thus countering a centuries-old tradition in news media, makes it quite an interesting comparison for a study of media representations.

Notably, while the BBC is funded through a license fee, Al Jazeera is state-funded, having been founded through a \$137 million allocation by the Emir of Qatar in 1996 (Zednick 2002), and thus has been criticised for implicit bias, allegedly serving as a ‘political tool for the Qatari government’ (Flanagan 2017: online). Al Jazeera itself denies allegations of bias, claiming to operate by its renowned Code of Ethics. Regardless of bias, the very fact that AJE is funded by the Qatari state makes it an appropriate representative for Qatari media, and its espoused values of independence and impartiality make it a better comparison with the BBC than the Qatar News Agency, which is more directly funded and operated by the Ministry of Information of the Qatari government.

The comparison of British and Qatari media particularly was motivated by two factors. First, while Qatar is obviously heavily involved in the conflict, the UK is almost entirely removed from it. Beyond a nominal mediating role by the British foreign secretary (Peck 2017: online), Britain has played no part in the conflict and has no significant stakes in the blockade. On the contrary, the US is acting as a chief mediator for the conflict along with Kuwait (The Associated Press 2017: online), and thus is much more involved. The difference in investment between Qatar and Britain would thus make for a much more interesting comparison than one between Qatar and the US. Second, this combination allows for the comparison of Western (British) and non-Western (Qatari) representations of the conflict. Contrasting Indian and Qatari media representations (or any other similar combination) would not allow for such insights. Therefore, comparing media representations across the British and Qatari national contexts offers the juxtaposition between two states with different degrees of involvement in the conflict, and also between a Western and non-Western state, and is thus the most meaningful approach.

Selection and Analysis of News Articles

News articles about the 2017-18 diplomatic crisis in Qatar were selected from the online archives of the BBC and AJE. A search was run in February 2018 on both platforms using the key phrase 'Qatar crisis', and the initial results were filtered to include only articles classified as 'News'. Articles within these results written about five key developments or issues in the conflict were selected: the initial severance of diplomatic ties with Qatar on June 5, 2017; projections of the local and global economic impact of the conflict; the targeting of Al Jazeera by the Saudi-led coalition; the presentation, and subsequent denouncement, of the list of demands set by the coalition; and the UAE's prohibition of social media expressions of sympathy for Qatar. News articles published about each development immediately after it occurred were chosen for analysis, and retrospective analyses or op-eds were not included. Whenever possible, corresponding BBC and AJE articles on the same issue were selected.

These articles were examined using a number of key theoretical frameworks of critical discourse analysis and the media effects theory. Evidence of agenda-setting and priming within the phrasing used in the articles was investigated. The content of the reports from each news outlet was analysed for bias stemming from their respective national contexts, as well as any instances of national politics and identity shaping discourse. Finally, due to the difference in relative political proximity of the BBC and AJE from the diplomatic conflict, their media content was surveyed for evidence of public diplomacy through implied narratives being broadcast to their respective audiences.

Results and Discussion

Five pairs of articles were identified for analysis from the online archives of the BBC (BBC 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Atkinson 2017; Ponniah 2017) and Al Jazeera English or AJE (Al Jazeera 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2017e). Each pair of articles centred around one key event, and comprised of corresponding BBC and AJE news reports for comparison across national contexts. Critical discourse analysis of these ten articles revealed evidence of

agenda-setting and priming, public diplomacy, and nationalised discourse within the media content, manifesting in different ways in British and Qatari national contexts.

Agenda-Setting

A comparison of the BBC's and AJE's media discourse about the Qatar crisis reveals distinct dissimilarities in agenda-setting functions. This means of agenda-setting is visible in reporting of the Qatar crisis by the difference in number of articles published by each media outlet about the Qatar crisis. The initial search for the key phrase 'Qatar crisis' yielded 1121 results on AJE's online archive, but only 65 results on the BBC's online archive. While neither set of results was exclusively about the 2017-18 Qatar crisis (due to the loose parameters of the initial search), the difference in number of articles is too significant to be entirely accidental. With less than 65 articles published about the 2017-18 Qatar crisis since it began, the BBC has placed relatively low importance on this conflict in its discourse, indicating to its readers that it is a matter that should not concern them too much. On the other hand, with over a thousand articles published about the crisis on its website, AJE is increasing the salience and importance of the issue among its readers.

Phrasing used in the BBC and AJE coverage of the Qatar crisis also points to different priorities in both outlets' agendas for their readers. The BBC repeatedly describes Qatar as a minor nation, using phrases such as '...tiny peninsula of oil-rich Qatar' (BBC 2017b: online) and claiming that this '...tiny nation on the north-east coast of the Arabian Peninsula is trying to punch above its weight' (BBC 2017c: online). Use of such descriptors for Qatar reminds the BBC's readers of the relative physical and geopolitical insignificance of this nation, and consequently implies that the Qatar crisis itself is a fairly insignificant conflict. As the conflict develops, the BBC reports on Qatar's economic recovery from the blockade and the targeting of Al Jazeera by the blockading states, but describes the nation in similar terms as before:

...the small but wealthy country has so far avoided economic collapse... (BBC 2017c: online)

... [Al Jazeera has] put the tiny Gulf state on the international map. (Ponniah 2017: online)

With such phrasing, the BBC reinforces its previous images of Qatar as 'tiny', wealthy, but relatively uninteresting. In doing so, it sets Qatar low on its agenda, indicating to its readers that this conflict should be fairly unimportant to them.

Al Jazeera's representations of the conflict are quite the contrary. AJE reports on the diplomatic blockade with grim undertones, by highlighting the seriousness of the potential ramifications of the conflict in its articles. An article about the economic impact of the conflict states this explicitly, saying that 'If this dispute goes on for a while, the ramifications could be huge' (Al Jazeera 2017b: online). At the same time, AJE emphasises that the

economic and political consequences of the conflict are not going to harm just Qatar, but have significant impact on the political economy of the entire region:

Blocking air and land routes in and out of Qatar could cost Gulf economies billions of dollars. (Al Jazeera 2017b: online)

...the Gulf diplomatic crisis and the crackdown on Al Jazeera are having repercussions throughout the region, including in Jerusalem. (Al Jazeera 2017c: online)

The highlighting of the global impact of the crisis serves to make it more important and relevant to AJE's global audiences. Thus, unlike the BBC, AJE sets the crisis high on its readers' agendas and ascribes it great significance, a fact that is unsurprising due to Al Jazeera's own involvement (and thus investment) in the conflict.

Priming

Media representations of the crisis in the BBC and AJE indicate a priming function in addition to the agenda-setting one. Articles from either news outlet attempt to tell readers how they should think about the Qatar crisis, answering implied questions such as 'is this conflict necessary or justified?' and 'is Qatar a belligerent state in need of admonishment, or is it an unjustly persecuted underdog?' In this case, one standard for evaluation that both media outlets use to prime their readers are the Saudi-led coalition's allegations that Qatar supports terrorism or extremism. The War on Terror has made terrorism a global standard for evaluating a political actor. Accusations of supporting terrorism have become a sure-fire way of destroying a nation's global image and diplomatic capital. Because the GCC coalition has an agreement to help eliminate terrorism, alleged terror-financing by Qatar would cause it to lose any moral high ground and thus justify the conflict. By priming their audiences to believe (or not believe) that Qatar backs extremists, news articles can determine how these audiences feel about the blockade imposed on Qatar.

Supposedly 'minor' punctuation and phrasing choices can be instrumental in creating such priming effects in readers, and this is evident in the BBC and AJE's media coverage of the conflict. Both the BBC and AJE quote the Qatari government as strongly denying accusations of terror-financing. However, when discussing allegations against Qatar of supporting terrorism, Al Jazeera always uses quotation marks that cast aspersions on these claims:

...accusing it of supporting 'extremism'... (Al Jazeera 2017e: online)

...alleged support of 'extremism'... (Al Jazeera 2017c: online)

The simple use of quotation words around the word 'extremism' make the Saudi-led coalition's accusations look dubious and questionable in AJE's articles. The BBC, while still relaying the Qatari government's denial of these accusations, uses phrases associated with

extremism without any quotation marks, and this minor stylistic choice makes all the difference:

...Qatar needed to end its support of terrorist groups... (BBC 2017a: online)

...because of its [...] support of extremist groups. (BBC 2017b: online)

...Qatar's ties to Islamist groups... (BBC 2017b: online)

Without quotation marks, the statement of Qatar's ties to extremist groups is validated as unquestionable fact rather than a contested accusation. In this way, the BBC's representation of the conflict increases the perceived legitimacy of the allegations against Qatar in its readers' eyes, while AJE's reporting attempts to challenge those allegations.

Just as the Saudi-led coalition's justification for the conflict is supported by priming readers with claims of terrorism, Qatar's defense is corroborated using a narrative of sovereignty and independence as a priming tool. Media representations in both the BBC and AJE address the apparent attack on Qatar's sovereignty caused by the diplomatic blockade, but in quite different ways. Right from the beginning, AJE emphasises the Qatari government's claim that this crisis is unjust:

'The aim is clear, and it is to impose guardianship on the state. This by itself is a violation of its [Qatar's] sovereignty as a state', [Qatar's foreign ministry] added. (Al Jazeera 2017a: online)

AJE's coverage repeats Qatar's claim that the blockade and the list of demands presented to the nation 'amounted to a request that Qatar give up its sovereignty' (Al Jazeera 2017d: online) several times. In this way, AJE primes its readers to believe that the blockade was a means for Saudi Arabia to meddle in Qatar's internal politics, thus making them evaluate Qatar more positively than the coalition in the conflict.

The BBC's media representation of the conflict inverts AJE's priming, and suggest that Saudi Arabia and its coalition are noble advocates for the anti-terror campaign. It reports that '...Saudi Arabia says it will still allow Qataris to take part in the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca' (BBC 2017b: online). Reporting of this fact bolsters Saudi Arabia's image as a noble nation that wants to set Qatar straight without hindering Qatari citizens' religious practice. (AJE makes no mention of this in its articles, perhaps due to the contradiction with its painting of the coalition as unjust persecutors.) Furthermore, officials quoted in the BBC directly counter Qatar's narrative that the blockade is an attempt to take away its sovereignty:

'The government of Qatar is in denial,' [UAE Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash] told AFP news agency. 'It is trying to describe this as an issue about the independence of its foreign policy, and it is not.' (BBC 2017a: online)

But Anwar Gargash added that the countries were not seeking to overthrow the Qatari leadership... (BBC 2017c: online)

The BBC thus primes its readers to believe that the conflict is justified, that Qatar's alleged links to terrorism necessitate a diplomatic blockade, and that there are no ulterior motives behind the crisis. Stylistic choices and editorial decisions about which quotes make it into the article are instrumental in shaping the effects of media representations on readers, and therefore the BBC and AJE use the same standards (those of terrorism and sovereignty) but achieve very different priming effects.

Nationalisation of Discourse

Given the different national contexts of the BBC and AJE, it is unsurprising that their media representations of the Qatar conflict are significantly nationalised. They both produce articles about the crisis that align with the popular and state-sanctioned ideas of their respective nations. AJE's articles often humanise Qataris and vilify the blockading nations in its representations of the conflict. Qatari officials, such as Sheikh Saif bin Ahmed al Thani (Al Jazeera 2017d: online), are often quoted in AJE articles, and their quotes provide legitimacy and personalisation to the Qatari government's defense against the blockade. Unlike the BBC, AJE also quotes 'regular' Qatari individuals, such as a supermarket customer who was quoted as saying:

I think it's better to stock up on things my family and I need rather than being left out. (Al Jazeera 2017b: online)

Quotes such as these serve not only to humanise the Qataris, but present Qatar's ideologies in a way that counters the coalition's demonisation of the nation. Media coverage of a regular Qatari who is worried about the impact of the crisis on their family bolsters Qatar's claims of unjust persecution. In this way, AJE creates an image of the Qatari people as collateral victims of an unjust siege, in line with Qatar's national narrative.

The BBC, functioning in a British national context, presents a contradictory, Orientalist view of the conflict. Its report that 'Qatar now finds itself isolated and vulnerable' (Ponniah 2017: online), coming quite soon after the blockade began, hints at the idea that Qatar is a nation that has bitten off more than it can chew. This is stated even more explicitly later in the same report:

[Al Jazeera] is the showpiece of the oil- and gas-rich nation's efforts to turn its financial largesse into outsized global influence and visibility.

The use of the phrase 'outsized global influence' sells the narrative that Qatar is a power-hungry state, attempting to trade in its wealth for celebrity. The BBC supplements this narrative with the suggestion that Qatar is causing another 'spat' in the Middle East, as it has done before (Ponniah 2017: online). This idea is rooted in Orientalist narratives, presenting the Middle East as a region of quarrelling, greedy nations, juxtaposed with grand and 'civilised' Western powers. Such narratives have been popularised in British media and foreign policy discourse by centuries of imperialism, and that the BBC is still perpetuating them is evidence for the nationalisation of its media content.

Reports of the economic impact of the crisis offer further evidence of the nationalisation of media representations. AJE articles suggest that ‘with an estimated \$335bn of assets in its sovereign wealth fund, Qatar looks able to avoid an economic crisis’ (Al Jazeera 2017b: online). This phrasing highlights Qatar’s wealth as vast enough to withstand the blockade, which is undoubtedly the narrative that Qatar would want to project to the world. In comparison, the BBC’s economic report (Atkinson 2017: online) is significantly more pessimistic:

And it is Qatar’s flag carrier that risks being the biggest loser. Its flights to places like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Cairo will stop. That is dozens of flights a day.’

...we’re already seeing business deals begin to crumble...’

The report from the BBC suggests that Qatar is struggling economically, much more than it is willing to let on. This directly contradicts AJE’s representation of Qatar as a resilient underdog, and both outlets thus present quite different versions of the same story due to nationalisation of discourse.

The BBC would not expect a ‘tiny nation on the north-east coast of the Arabian Peninsula’ to endure severe trade restrictions without significant economic decline. Western powers such as the UK often make the ethnocentric assumption that their nations alone have the financial capabilities to survive such a blockade, and the BBC’s discourse is nationalised to perpetuate that idea. On the other hand, AJE’s discourse is nationalised to convey Qatar’s steadfast resistance to the blockade to the world. Thus, the two outlets create contrasting images of Qatar, founded in their respective national contexts, with AJE propagating ideas favouring the Qatari state and the BBC perpetuating Orientalist ideas that are popular in British foreign policy discourse.

Public Diplomacy

News media not only popularises state-sanctioned narratives, but is also an effective tool for public diplomacy during conflicts. This is made clear through media representations of the Qatar crisis in the BBC and AJE. Because Al Jazeera was targeted in the list of demands presented to Qatar by the Saudi-led coalition, its narrative is much more invested, and it paints the coalition as opposed to freedom of speech. The BBC, quite removed from the conflict, has no such stakes, and thus is much more lenient to the coalition. This contrast is evidenced by comparing reports of the UAE’s decision to punish its citizens for expressing sympathy towards Qatar on social media:

The United Arab Emirates has banned people from publishing expressions of sympathy towards Qatar and will punish offenders with a jail term of up to 15 years... (Al Jazeera 2017c: online)

The United Arab Emirates has warned that anyone expressing sympathy for Qatar could face up to 15 years in prison... (BBC 2017a: online)

There is a clear difference in tone between the two statements, even though they describe the same development in the conflict. The first quote, from an AJE article, uses the phrases ‘banned’ and ‘*will* punish offenders’, thus creating quite a damning representation of the UAE. The second, from a BBC article, instead uses the phrases ‘warned’ and ‘*could* face up to 15 years’, which is a much more relaxed retelling of the same fact. AJE’s version is much more urgent, precisely because AJE needs to convince its readers to condemn the coalition as anti-free-speech; its continued existence depends on the withdrawal of the list of demands. The BBC, being much less invested in the crisis than AJE, does not need to engage in such urgent public diplomacy.

Articles written specifically about the targeting of Al Jazeera in the conflict further underline AJE’s practicing of public diplomacy through its discourse. Perhaps somewhat ostentatiously, Al Jazeera calls itself a ‘media watchdog’ (Al Jazeera 2017c: online) and reminds its readers that it is being targeted right in the headline of its article. In a subtler attempt to influence international opinion about its targeting, AJE uses quotes and statistics from Reporters Without Borders to damn Saudi Arabia as anti-free-speech in the same article:

Reporters Without Borders condemned Arab countries for targeting the Al Jazeera Media Network ... The media rights group slammed Saudi Arabia.

This violation of the freedom to inform compounds the country’s already very bad record on free speech and media freedom.

Saudi Arabia is ranked 168th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Border’s 2017 World Press Freedom Index.

All of these statements serve to legitimise Al Jazeera’s claim that it is being unfairly attacked by forces that would seek to stifle its impartial voice, employing quotes and statistics from an independent authority that international readers may trust. Thus, using its representations of the conflict, Al Jazeera attempts to influence its global audience through public diplomacy and garner support for itself.

This study finds significant evidence for agenda-setting, priming, nationalisation of discourse, and public diplomacy in media representations of the Qatar crisis. The BBC and AJE are found to differ in their biases based on their political and national contexts, and their media representations of the conflict reflect their respective biases.

Conclusion

Media representations of conflicts can yield significant insights about political power dynamics and implicit biases. The current study aimed to examine these biases across national contexts in the case of the Qatar diplomatic crisis using a Critical Discourse Analysis

approach. It was shown that the BBC and Al Jazeera, representing British and Qatari media respectively, both show individual biases in their media discourse. AJE, by virtue of its political proximity to the conflict, places the crisis much higher on its readers' agenda than does the BBC. Similarly, AJE is much more invested than the BBC in convincing its readers that the blockading coalition is an unjust and anti-free-speech force.

Functioning within a British context, the BBC perpetuates ideas about the conflict that are rooted in Orientalist narratives, and does nothing to disprove or validate accusations of terror-financing levelled against Qatar. On the other hand, AJE repeatedly denies such claims, and its discourse suggests that Qatar is an unfairly targeted underdog. These findings are in line with theoretical frameworks offered by previous scholarship in discourse studies. Further analysis of the Qatar crisis, especially retrospective studies that employ a CDA approach, can help glean even more insights into media biases across different national contexts.

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