

## **Studying the Prominence-based Situation in Iranian Television News from a Persuasion Perspective**

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**Abstract:** *This article is part of a much broader study of persuasive techniques in television news in Iran. As a very important part of IRIB news IRINN has been chosen for this study. If we assume that one of the most influential television news, the power of persuasion to influence the audience is very important. It seemed that choosing the highest hypothetical level of news and deconstructing it would shed light on all other levels including those lowest levels of news production and dissemination. In this study the method of qualitative content analysis is done, about fifty categories and sub-categories had been found. This paper focuses on a topic that is related to one of the disputed areas in Iran News. The prominence based news in Iran is one of the challenging areas in the population and in this article we tried to answer it from a persuasive point of view. Discovering the categories and sub-categories, regarding to prominence-based structure of the TV news showed that the TV of Iran don't tend to use the prominence-based structure for persuading audience.*

**Keywords:** *Persuasion, TV News, Prominence, Media, IRIB.*

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### **Introduction and Background**

Media have acquired an immense role in all social, cultural and even personal relationships of human beings. This role has bestowed upon them the title of the public opinions' leader. Every medium, based on its structural and environmental capacities as well as its short and long term objectives tries to leave the strongest impact on its audience. And the desire to leave such impacts on the part of all media results in an extensive competition among them. One of the most significant processes of impacting audiences is persuasion. Persuasion is an effort aimed at convincing the audience and is considered an independent sphere of knowledge in the science of communication and other related fields. It is because of the persuasion strategies and techniques that the media can reach the highest communication impact level (Lerbinger, 1972, 28).

News on the other hand makes up an outstanding portion of the media feed today. Thanks to their direct role in reflecting realities through edited information and reports, news bulletins have established a direct contact with the believability of the audiences. They are hence considered one of the yardsticks of trust and credibility for the media. There has also been a significant shift in recent decades in the way media proprietors view their audiences. (Bainbridge, 2009, 39). The more skillfully the media persuade their audiences the more successful they will become in impacting them and transferring information and messages. The basis of such a success lies in the skills of news writers, producers, reporters and last but not least news directors. If we consider radio and television as the most pervasive media and particularly television as an influential medium, we can claim that the strength and impact of television news has a significant role in the persuasion of their audience. It would be hard to expect the successful development of media messages in the absence of the news producers' persuasive skills. Likewise, failing to develop news persuasion strategies will damage the audience's trust as well as the media's credibility. Such a failure can in the long run abort programs of national development, public participation, and social learning and media objectives to put it in a nutshell. Communication development is an important principle in societies that have long term plans of reconstruction and depend on their media for the implementation of those programs. It still underlines much thinking about the nature and role of mass communication in development. For some, the process of persuasion has remained synonymous with the process of mass communication (Melkote, 1388, 112).

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We may not know the existence or the depths of the persuasive knowledge of the news producers and how well they can use it. Nevertheless, we can definitely depend on the many aspects of the persuasion knowledge to pave the way for those audiences who would want and need to believe our news.

It is common knowledge that media persuasion studies began from and diverged in two major directions; one direction owes its existence to efforts aimed at control the public opinions in the time of wars, and the second emerged as a result of propaganda. Propaganda itself, as a form of communication, is influenced by the technological devices for sending messages that are available in a given time. (Jawett & O'Donnell, 2012, 15). The First World War was a period of engagement for the entire world population; a period during which the entire media were used to impact the audiences and masses. According to Laswell, radio propaganda can create in masses a blend of hatred, hope and dynamism. The problem of maintaining moral is only in part a problem of propaganda, because propaganda is but one of the many devices which must be relied upon. Its scope is limited though important. (Laswell, 1971, 8). Much of the persuasion studies in the past used to be conducted within the realm of perspective assessment. Thanks to his works in mid-1930, Gordon Allport has undoubtedly been one of the pioneers in the field. With the outbreak of the Second World War, researchers focused extensively on the issue of persuasion. (Jawett & O'Donnell, 2012). The most influential of these researchers were Paul Lazarsfeld (1976) who represented the European positivist school and Theodore Adorno (1969) who came from the Frankfurt School and its Critical Theory.

Based on Laswell's theory, up until very recent years, media persuasion studies, as Rogers (1994) points out, relied heavily on the pattern of "who, what, in what channel, with what impact and how", and the element of "why" was always missing. (Jawett & O'Donnell, 2012). In fact, the argument of persuasion ushers brings us further closer to the borderline of media persuasion. Whereas Laswell's five W's focused more on the element of impact, this new dimension draws our attention to what causes that impact. Post World War II persuasion studies were followed up at Yale University where Carl L. Havland evaluated the variables of persuasion within the grand theory of learning and based on a stimuli-response framework. His studies ushered communication scientists into a comprehensive system of adaptation theories. All adaptation theories are based on the notion that humans are in constant need of adaptation. Once their cognition system loses its balance their perception and consequently their behavior shall change. McGuire's model of persuasion in 1968 drew upon the processes of attention, perception, output, sustainment and action. This model developed the learning theory by means of persuasion (Jawett, 1390).

The 1970s witnessed the inclination of many communication studies towards the issues of the behavior and influence of the media. The two issues, however, were not yet directly connected from a theoretical point of view. One of the first studies that discovered a connection belongs to Robert Zajonc (1980) who focused on "pleasant" and "familiar" stimuli. He found out that audiences feel more comfortable when they receive those pleasant and familiar stimuli. In our age of mass media and global exchange, the interface between individual attitudes and those of a larger social unit may be one of the most challenging questions facing attitude research. (Bohner & Wanke, 1390, 248). In 1986, Bandura introduced his observational learning theory. The theory seriously connects behavior and behavioral change to the people's modeling of what they observe. What Bandura's theory made of the media's role among the public became a pillar of persuasion studies. This new dimension of persuasion emphasized the role of the new information on the issue of learning. In other words, the observational learning takes place more effectively when the media display new behavior and thought patterns (Jawett, 1390).

Other researchers discovered that certain television programs lead to the formation of socially- acceptable behaviors and norms. Libert, Neil and Davidson (1973) argued that children adopted behaviors such as self-restraint and generosity through watching television. The pervasiveness of television violence and the medium's presentation of stereotypic and often degrading portrayals of gender roles, ethnic characteristics, and age-related characteristics challenge many of essential values of many parents. (Garbarino, 2009, 169). Austin and Fredrick (1972) also found out that socially-favorable behaviors such as cooperation and expression of internal feelings materialize by watching television. Bryant & Zillmann (2002) believe that radio and television programs play a key role in solving national and international problems such as family planning, women's rights, environment protection, AIDS prevention programs and various life style skills. Explorations of agenda-setting effects around the world have observed this mass communication phenomenon from a variety of perspectives. (Bryant & Zillmann, 2002, 6). This unique role of the media, according to Lowery and De Fleur (1988) is one of the most important factors of socialization.

## **News Persuasion in Iran**

Persuasion studies in Iran rely mainly on research carried out in other countries. News persuasion, meanwhile, has drawn little attention in here. The present study focuses particularly on the issue of news persuasion among the Iranian audiences. Taking advantage of persuasive skills in television news is a must for the state-run radio and television, IRIB<sup>1</sup>; a must that has barely been addressed. Persuasion is an effective function that can guarantee IRIB's credibility by creating social trust. In doing so it requires a management plan that draws upon persuasive strategies in news. This research studies news persuasion within such a framework.

## **Research Method**

The method of analysis is qualitative content analysis. "Content analysis is, of course, a technique that derives from the communication sciences. Today, however, it claims to be able to serve for systematic analysis in a wide range of range of scientific domains. Modern content analysis, moreover, no longer targets only the content of verbal material. Both formal aspects and latent meaning content can be objects of study. The basic idea of a qualitative content analysis, then, consist of maintaining the systematic nature of content analysis for the various stage of qualitative analysis. Without undertaking over-hasty qualifications". (Flick, 2010, 266, said from Philip Mayring)

## **Research Procedure**

The units of analysis are the news texts extracted selectively for the purpose of this study. The texts are interpreted subjectively based on a procedure that reduces the propositions at various levels. The interpretation process in qualitative content analysis, unlike in many other research methodologies, begins at the data stage. Such a constant contact with data enables us to surf throughout the analysis with more flexibility and explore possible answers to the research questions. That makes qualitative content analysis one of the best ways of media investigation. Sampling had its own intricacies in this study. News is a process that is being produced and broadcast professionally in Iran in the past four decades. It seemed that choosing the highest hypothetical level of news and deconstructing it would shed light on all other levels including those lowest levels of news production and dissemination. The data was extracted purposively from IRIB's News Network (IRINN). It includes the core of the news bulletins at 13:00 and 19:00 as the network's major news sections. The assumption is what we find out in the analysis of these sections can represent IRIB's television news in general. This framework provides about 40 pages of news texts on a daily basis. The 36 samples selected for deconstruction thus yield up to 1440 pages of written texts. The non-verbal behaviors of the newsreaders and related video features are also studies within the same data boundaries.

The theoretical foundations of the research were obtained through library research and the major data was video-recorded and then transcribed. The transcribed news was then considered as a consistent unit ready for analysis. It was read and when required compared with its video version. The unit of analysis was "news". The next stage involved the deductive extraction of categories and sub-categories. The qualitative content analysis gives room to every category even if it is not predictable. The categories and sub-categories were then coded and prepared to be tested against a number of units of analysis. The test involving the coding system carried out by codifying the selected texts, assessing the consistency of the coding process and spotting its weaknesses and strengths, correcting those suspicious similarities, and finalizing the codes and the coding rules. The test continued as long as the coding system accommodated the process. The nest stage included extracting results from the coded data. Data was then obtained from the codes and re-written. At this point, the categorization process was scrutinized to ensure its precision. The research results were then analyzed for preparing the final analysis. In the end, an ideal model and a series of recommended strategies were proposed. This study only reflects a fraction of the original research and thus ignores the categories and sub-categories as well as the strategies and the final model.

## **Results**

Based on the methodology, all the research data were explored and deconstructed as text and paved the ground for the extraction of categories and sub-categories. This categorization included the written as well as unwritten texts. The written texts are those read out and articulated by the anchors and the unwritten ones are the readers' non-verbal behavior and video features. The first group of the research data made up the categories and sub-categories that in turn amounted to about 40. Diagram 1 shows the research categories:

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<sup>1</sup>Islamic Republic of IRAN Broadcasting

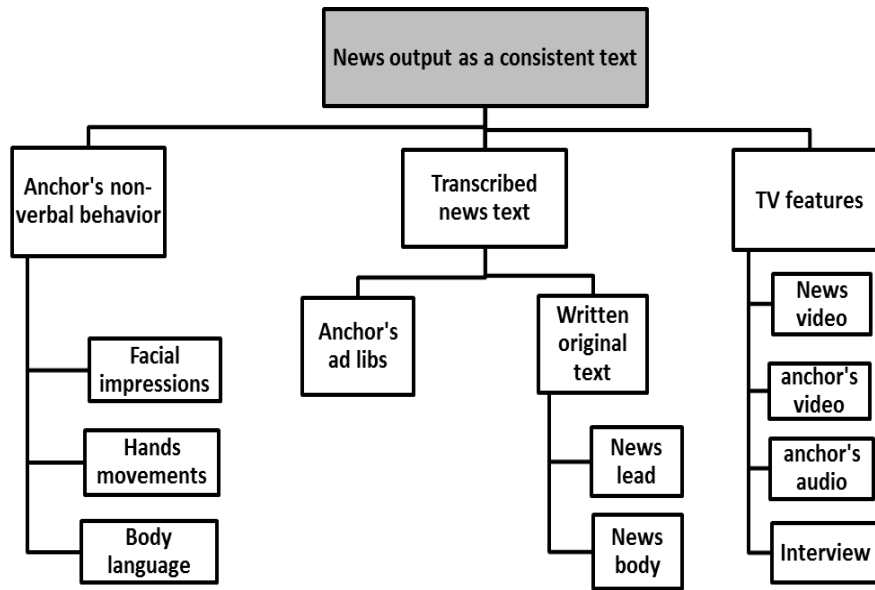


Figure (1): Research categories

### The Analysis of News Values

One of the most important domains that was assessed in this study were news values. News values have traditionally been considered as the most effective component of news. News is categorized and disseminated worldwide on the basis of such values. The legitimacy and credibility of news and news networks have always directly been related to the types and numbers of news values. Media experts in the past used to think of these values as a quality assessment yardstick. Today, however, news values are believed to be embedded in the news and can emerge in creatively different ways based on the environment in which they appear. In this sense, they depend on the news writers and copy editors' innovation and bravery. News values as such are considered a key element of persuasion. The more they appear in a piece of news the more credible that piece is expected to be. This study views news values within two frameworks: firstly, the seven famous news values namely impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, bizarreness, conflict and, currency; and secondly, whether or not there are less or more than 2 news values in a piece of news.

### Prominence Centrality in the News

One of the valuable findings of this research has been the controversial issue of prominence centrality in IRIB news. This issue has always been criticized as a traditional weakness of the Iranian news networks and bulletins. The results of this study, however, lead us to different conclusions. Prominence centrality in this research has been studied from 3 dimensions:

1. News values
2. News leads
3. News based on people's statements

Only one third of the news assessed in this research contains the news value of prominence. Prominence often refers to the presence of prominent personalities in news but it can also address prominent places and times. Prior to this research, the assumption was that IRIB news was overwhelmed by the value of prominence. The reason for this assumption was the increasing willingness of IRIB newsrooms to prioritize news of the high ranking politicians and statesmen. The results, nevertheless, showed that although prominence is a wide-spread news value at IRIB, it fails to overwhelm the news constancy and structure in a radical way. The second component i.e., lead confirms the finding on the value of prominence. Of all the leads studies, those based on quotation have been very rare. The frequent leads include simple single story leads, in-depth single story leads, multi-story leads, background leads and deductive leads respectively. The least frequent lead has been the quotation lead.

These findings contradict the general feeling that news in Iran is centered upon the words and comments of senior politicians. Another result that appears in line with the above-mentioned finding is the majority of the news broadcast from IRINN has been event-based as opposed to comment-based. In total, less than a third of the assessed news texts have been based on comments and/or statements. News that draws upon the value of prominence contains a higher frequency of statements. Having said that statements and prominence still make up a considerable portion of the news broadcast from IRINN (table 1).

**Table (1): Prominence news options out of 800 studied news**

The value of prominence	Quotation leads	Statement-based news items
260 from total of 800	20 from total of 800	220 from total of 800

## Conclusion

The present research contains several findings and conclusions in the area of media and news persuasion. Among the discovered weaknesses and strengths of the IRIB news structure, prominence centrality is of high significance. When news is shaped around events and keeps away from statements and personalities as far as it can it increases the possibility of its persuasion power. Among other things, this research reflects a meaningful decline in prominence centrality on the part of IRIB (Which includes IRINN of course) news writers, producers and managers. This is a significant asset for a developing television that views its persuasion power as a symbol of its revolutionary independence and influence.

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