

# A Study of Differences in Media Coverage of News Reports-An Example of Iranian Players' Refusal to Sing the National Anthem During the 2022 World Cup

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**Abstract.** The news of Iranian players refusing to sing the national anthem for the 2022 World Cup has attracted widespread attention. As its background, Iran's domestic protests have once again become the focus of media. There are obvious differences in the reports of different media on this news and its background. In order to clarify the differences in the news reports of different media and the reasons behind them, this article selects three media: RT, Al Jazeera and BBC, as examples, using the method of critical discourse analysis to analyze their news texts from multiple angles such as coverage framework, reporting perspectives, word choice, and reporting content. Finally, it turns out that RT is more inclined to support the Iranian authorities' downplaying of the protest conflict, while the BBC is more inclined to emphasize the seriousness of the protest and conflict and criticize the Iranian authorities. Meanwhile, Al Jazeera presents the protests and conflict but avoids excessive emphasis on them and avoids excessive criticism of the Iranian authorities. With further analysis, this article finds out the reasons behind these differences lie on different national interests and ideological factors.

**Keywords:** Critical discourse analysis (CDA); international news coverage; 2022 world cup.

## 1. Introduction

The news of Iranian players refusing to sing the national anthem during the 2022 World Cup has drawn widespread attention from the media worldwide. The background of the incident is the months-long protests that erupted within the country over the arrest and subsequent death of Iranian woman Ameneh on September 16, who was taken into custody by the moral police for not wearing a hijab in accordance with regulations.

Different media outlets from different countries reported on the same news with significant differences in their coverage. These differences ultimately manifest in the extent to which news reports extend from the player's protest to criticize Iran's domestic situation. For instance, Russia Today mostly keeps silent and neutral on Iran's internal situation and confines the news event within the framework of sports news. On the other hand, Al Jazeera links the player's protest to the domestic protest movement in Iran, but its criticism of the event is mild and restrained. Meanwhile, the BBC is more vehement in criticizing Iran's domestic situation and voices its support for the domestic protest movement according to its consistent news framework.

International news media are often influenced by various factors, such as ideology and international relations, which often result in different angles and linguistic styles in their coverage of the same news event. This article will select three media outlets, Russia Today, Al Jazeera, and the BBC, for comparative analysis, using their official website's text or video news for content and text analysis.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the specific differences among the three media in the reporting process of the Iranian players' refusal to sing the national anthem, and the reasons for these differences. Furthermore, this study hopes to find out the influencing factors behind international news texts in terms of international relations and ideology through the analysis of this news case, so as to finally realize the research on international news texts or international political texts, analyze the international relations and dominant ideology behind it.

## 2. Theoretical Basis

In analyzing the content, this article will mainly draw on the approach of critical discourse analysis, which emphasizes using language to reveal and deconstruct social phenomena such as power, ideology, and domination. It emphasizes the relationship among discourse, ideology, and power, where discourse is an important tool for expressing ideology, while ideology is a significant means of establishing, maintaining, or changing power relations. Ideology, for critical discourse analysis (CDA), is seen as an important aspect of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations. For CDA, language is not powerful on its own. It gains power by the use powerful people make of it. Although existing research primarily uses this analysis method for the analysis of domestic political and news texts, it is equally applicable to the analysis of political and news texts in international relations [1].

However, analyzing discourse in international politics and news texts differs significantly from analyzing similar texts domestically. This is the part that this research aims to innovate and develop. The background of domestic politics is the sovereignty of a single entity, where the state has authority internally, meaning that power is primarily monopolized within a country. Therefore, its exercise of power mainly reflects in areas such as political governance and social control, where it exerts a profound influence on political and news discourse domestically through ideological factors. The background of international politics, on the other hand, is the lack of the highest authority in international anarchy, where power is dispersed among sovereign states in a non-monopolistic form. As a result, the primary exercise of power for states lies in conflicts, competition, and cooperation in international affairs. In this process, international political and news discourse are still subject to the influence of ideological factors, while national interests play a more decisive role.

## 3. Text Analysis

### 3.1. Differences in Coverage Framework

The incident of Iranian players refusing to sing the national anthem in the World Cup is both a continuation of Iran's domestic political events and a political issue that occurred during a sporting event. Thus, the reporting of this news includes both political and sports news frames. However, the three reports differ in how they choose to frame the news.

Although all three reports used the Iranian players' refusal to sing the national anthem as the headline, RT chose to emphasize the sports event itself, with a subheading that read, "The Islamic country's team lost 6-2 in its opener [2]." The article only used about half of its words to describe the news event of the Iranian players' refusal, while the other part introduced the football match between Iran and the UK.

In contrast, the BBC leaned more towards reporting this news as a political issue, with a detailed supplement and introduction to the protests in Iran in the body [3]. It also paid attention to the political implications and background of the players and fans in the sporting event.

Al Jazeera also analyzed the political implications and background of the news event. However, it included the protest behavior of other Iranian sports teams and the UK team in its reporting, maintaining a delicate balance between sports and political news [4].

### 3.2. Differences in Reporting Perspectives

There were some differences in the reporting of Iranian players and fans who protested on the field by the three media outlets. The primary difference in the coverage of the Iranian player who refused to sing the national anthem was whether to quote the player in the first person directly. RT used the third person to report the player's statement to present an objective perspective: "Iranian star Alireza Jahanbakhsh said that his team would collectively decide whether or not to sing the anthem." On the contrary, Al Jazeera, quoted the player directly in the first person, "They should know that we are with them and we support them and we sympathise with them regarding the conditions." In terms of

the content, the former tended to emphasize the news event itself and did not provide new information, while the latter emphasized how the player viewed his behavior, which to some extent blurred the players' protest stance and position, while the latter strengthened this attitude.

Although the BBC did not directly quote the player's statement like Al Jazeera, it focused on another group in the stadium who expressed support for domestic protests through banners and other means. The BBC gave a detailed description of this group, "Some fans shouted and jeered during the anthem, and others held up signs saying 'Woman, Life, Freedom'." In addition to third-person descriptions, the BBC quoted some of the protesters' statements and used three photos of Iranian fans holding signs supporting domestic protests. Al Jazeera also mentioned the protesting fan group, "They wore T-shirts saying, 'Women, life, freedom,' which is the popular chant of the movement that has arisen since Amini's death." However, RT did not mention the fans' protest actions.

The differences in coverage by the three media outlets on this issue clearly reflected their respective grasp of the sports and political aspects of this news. RT's coverage framed the issue primarily as a sports news story, so the specific protest stance of the players and the fans' protest activities were, to some extent, excluded from the reporting. On the other hand, the BBC saw this news as a political story, with a high focus on the political views and positions of both the players and the fans in their reporting. In comparison, Al Jazeera attempted to strike a balance between the framework of sports news and political news. Although it explained the political stance of the fans and players, it did not give further coverage.

### 3.3. Differences in Word Choice

Russian Today (RT) used the phrase "Iran players silent for the anthem" in the headline and the more ambiguous "decided not to sing" in the body to downplay the players' protest. On the other hand, Al Jazeera and the BBC used more direct language, such as "refuse to sing the national anthem" and "decline to sing," to indicate the players' protest.

These differences in word choice can also be seen in their descriptions of the protests in Iran. While all three outlets used the term "protest" in their reporting, RT also used the more neutral term "demonstration," while Al Jazeera and the BBC used the more provocative "anti-government" to describe the protests.

Regarding the description of the Iranian authorities, RT used "police" to describe the authorities directly, while Al Jazeera and the BBC preferred to emphasize the concept of "moral police," a special judicial product under Iran's political and religious system. One of the direct demands of the protests in Iran is to abolish moral police, so the emphasis and ambiguity of this concept directly reflect different media outlets' attitudes toward the Iranian government.

### 3.4. Differences in Reporting Content

Although the three media outlets differ in their presentation of the news event itself, they also have significant differences in their reports and explanations of the protests taking place within Iran. The first major difference is in the coverage of the cause of the entire protest movement, namely the death of Amini. Russia Today adopts the official Iranian narrative that Amini did not die as a result of violence during his imprisonment, but rather from the disease she had before her arrest. This explanation is viewed by protesters as an attempt by Iranian officials to avoid responsibility. Russia Today's adoption of the Iranian narrative shows their support for the government, while Al Jazeera and the BBC report that Amini died during her detention without including the official Iranian explanation as part of the background.

In addition to the reporting of Amini's cause of death, the core difference is how the three media outlets describe the protests taking place within Iran, particularly the casualties. Although Russia Today mentions the existence of protests within Iran, they do not mention the casualties that occurred during the process. Al Jazeera, on the other hand, notes that "hundreds of people have died in the violence," while the BBC cites a human rights organization as saying that "more than 400 protesters have been killed and 16,800 others arrested." The use of data is an intuitive representation of the

intensity of protests within Iran. Russia Today's evasion of casualty numbers indicates their reluctance to portray the protests as too violent, while Al Jazeera and the BBC do the opposite. However, Al Jazeera's description of deaths using "people" instead of "protesters" objectively presents the existence of violence in the protests and does not completely blame the government. In contrast, the BBC emphasizes that "protesters" rather than "people" died in the violence, and emphasizes that a large number of protesters were arrested, which more directly emphasizes the government's use of violence during the process.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that British players also protested before the match. While Al Jazeera reported the refusal of Iranian players to sing the national anthem and briefly mentioned the British team players taking a knee to express their opposition to racism and other issues, the purpose of the report was clearly to make the reporting more balanced and objective. The BBC did not include the British players' protest in their reporting on the Iranian players' refusal to sing the national anthem, but they provided a more thorough report on the British players' protest in other articles. Regarding the balance of news reports, for the match between Iran and England, it is more neutral and objective to pay equal attention to and report on the pre-match protests of the two teams than only targeting one of the teams. Al Jazeera included both protests in the same report, although they did not give equal space to both sides. Although the BBC also used another article to report on the protests of British players, thereby maintaining the balance and neutrality of the media itself, as far as its report is concerned, temporarily ignoring the protests of British players allows it to focus more on The Iranian players' protests were analyzed and reported, thereby avoiding the introduction of British players' protests that weakened the significance of Iran's aid protests.

Russia Today did not mention the British players' protest at all, even though doing so could have made the report more balanced. If such political elements are not helpful in keeping the news within the framework of sports reporting, it is better to exclude them.

### **3.5. Summary**

In conclusion, in terms of the language used in news reports, RT (Russia Today) tends to use relatively mild vocabulary, while Al Jazeera and the BBC use stronger language to express the nature of the protests and conflicts. In terms of the news framework, RT tends to limit the news event to the category of sports news, while the BBC mainly reports it as political news, and Al Jazeera tries to seek a balance between sports news and political news. In terms of the content of the news, RT tries to downplay the players' protest and ignore the protests of the fans on-site, while also downplaying the domestic protest situation in Iran and quoting the Iranian officials' explanation of the events. The BBC, on the other hand, emphasizes the players' protest and devotes more space to describing the protests of the fans on-site, and in reporting on the domestic protest situation in Iran, focuses more on the government's use of violence against protesters. Al Jazeera reports on both the players' and fans' protest activities while using objective and balanced expressions when discussing the domestic protest situation in Iran, and does not entirely blame the government for violence and casualties. Based on the above dimensions of comparison, RT tends to support the Iranian authorities in downplaying the protest conflict in their reporting stance, the BBC tends to emphasize the seriousness of the protests and conflicts and criticize the Iranian authorities, and Al Jazeera presents the protest conflict without excessive emphasis while avoiding excessive criticism of the Iranian authorities.

## **4. Analysis of the Causes of Variability in News Coverage**

### **4.1. Geopolitics and Traditional Strategic Relationships**

The different reporting tendencies of the three media outlets are rooted in complex national interests and ideological reasons. In terms of national interests, on the one hand, they need to consider the bilateral relations between various countries and Iran, as well as their own diplomatic and national strategic considerations. In terms of ideology, they need to consider each country's stance on issues

such as human rights and sovereignty. Moreover, they need to consider the relationship between each country and Islamic fundamentalism in the context of the news event itself.

Russia and Iran have maintained friendly cooperation for a long time, especially when facing the pressure of Western sanctions led by the United States, the strategic nature of this bilateral cooperation is particularly prominent. In the context of the US viewing Russia as a competitor, Russia believes that its living space and strategic security are threatened by NATO led by the US, and Iran has also faced long-term hostility and sanctions from the US. In the face of common pressure, bilateral cooperation has a realistic basis [5]. Especially since the outbreak of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Russia has faced severe sanctions from Western countries, and its diplomatic space has been compressed. In this context, consolidating its bilateral relations with Iran is crucial. Therefore, with the desire to maintain or even strengthen friendly relations with Iran, on behalf of Russia's official, RT used a coverage framework and words that were beneficial to the Iranian authorities as much as possible when reporting on Iran's internal affairs.

The relationship between Qatar and Iran is not as estranged as other Sunni countries. During the Qatar diplomatic crisis, Iran provided Qatar with open airspace and other aid, giving it some diplomatic space when facing isolation from other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Maintaining a partnership with Iran will provide Qatar with a more secure international environment [6]. On the other hand, as the United States' national security strategy shifts from counterterrorism to great power competition, its strategic focus in geopolitics is also shifting from the Middle East to Europe and the Indo-Pacific region. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and reduction of military presence in Iraq and Syria have caused concerns among traditional US allies in the Middle East. As a traditional US ally in the region, Qatar also needs to seek stable diplomatic relations with regional powers to address this insecurity. Therefore, and in the context of the easing of international relations in the Middle East, it is necessary for Qatar to continue to maintain relations with Iran. Therefore, the official al-Jazeera TV station's criticism of issues involving Iran's internal affairs is relatively moderate and restrained.

The UK and the US are traditional allies under the NATO framework, and they also have the so-called "special relationship" based on historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors. The two countries have profound and extensive cooperation in diplomacy and security. Both countries hold the same tough stance on the Iran issue [7]. A series of events, including attacks on the UK embassy in Iran, the downgrade of diplomatic relations, and the detention of a UK cruise ship in the Strait of Hormuz, are exacerbating the uncertainties in their relationship. Therefore, the BBC, which is aligned with the national interests of the United Kingdom, is more critical in its reports on Iran's internal affairs.

#### **4.2. The Export of State Ideology**

In terms of ideology, the relationship between human rights and sovereignty needs to be examined first. The two frameworks of human rights above sovereignty and sovereignty above human rights are formed by the new interventionism under the Western-dominated liberal international order and its response [8]. Liberalism, as an ideology, becomes the theoretical support for new interventionism. As an important member of the liberal international order, the UK's foreign policy is also stamped with this ideological mark. Russia has long been attacked by Western new interventionism on domestic political issues, and its ideological choice emphasizes national sovereignty and opposes foreign intervention. Qatar itself also faces potential challenges from new interventionism to some extent, although its human rights issues are not expected to attract foreign intervention at present. As a conservative Arab monarchy, Qatar does not expect to see new interventionism rampant in the international community.

Another perspective to consider in terms of ideological factors is a religious belief. The recent protests in Iran have a profound clash between traditional religious values and modern human rights. How countries deal with Islamism affects their stance towards the protests in Iran.

As a typical Christian country, the UK has significant differences in religious beliefs compared to Islamism, and there is no large Muslim population in the country. However, with the refugee crisis

and the impact of terrorism on the UK, society's vigilance towards Islamism is increasing. As a developed country with strong human rights values, the UK also has a skeptical attitude towards Islamic law [9].

Although Russia is generally an Orthodox civilization, there is a Muslim population within the Russian Federation, such as in the Caucasus region, including Chechnya. At the same time, Russia is facing threats from Western countries, especially NATO, and is actively seeking to establish good relations with Islamic countries. These considerations make its attitude towards Islamism somewhat reserved, even though it is not an Islamic country itself, but based on national interests [10].

As a country that follows Islam, Qatar also has a law that forces women to wear headscarves. The original intention of Al Jazeera was to voice the Islamic world and represent the Islamic world in the international public opinion arena, so it is reserved and defends Islamic content in terms of ideology [11].

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, this study compares three media reports on Iranian players refusing to sing the national anthem. After analyzing the texts, it was found that RT is more inclined to support the Iranian authorities' downplaying of the protest conflict, while the BBC is more inclined to emphasize the seriousness of the protest and conflict and criticize the Iranian authorities. Meanwhile, Al Jazeera presents the protests and conflict but avoids excessive emphasis on them and avoids excessive criticism of the Iranian authorities. These significant differences are mainly influenced by national interests and ideological factors. After analyzing the text and the influencing factors behind it, this study has come to a clear conclusion about the differences in the news reports of the three media and the reasons behind them. While analyzing the differences in text content, this study concluded that coverage framework, reporting perspective, word choice and content are used differently by the three media. In the analysis of the factors affecting the text, the more significant reasons are mainly found in the aspects of international relations and ideology. These results help to interpret the international relations factors and ideological factors behind them through the text differences in the process of analyzing international news texts. However, because this study is limited to one piece of news and three media outlets, there are relatively few samples and cases for analysis, and it is difficult to draw broader and general conclusions. In future research, more cases and texts will be used, and certain quantitative analysis methods will be introduced to draw more general conclusions.

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