

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION AGAINST WAR: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF AGENDA-SETTING AND PROPAGANDA IN THE CONTEXT OF IRAN-US CONFLICT

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Abstract

Media has become one of the most influential institutions in shaping political perceptions, public attitudes, and ideological orientations during times of conflict and war. In the contemporary global communication environment, traditional and digital media play a decisive role in constructing narratives surrounding international conflicts, particularly in relation to the Iran-United States conflict. This conceptual article examines the mediating role of media in shaping anti-war public opinion through the theoretical lenses of Agenda-Setting Theory and the Propaganda Model. The study explores how media organizations prioritize issues, frame war-related narratives, and disseminate ideological messages that influence audience perceptions regarding military intervention, peace, and diplomacy. Furthermore, the article investigates the interaction between traditional news media, social media platforms, and state-sponsored propaganda mechanisms in the production of public discourse against war. The study argues that while mainstream media often reproduce elite political interests and strategic narratives, digital media platforms simultaneously provide opportunities for counter-hegemonic voices, anti-war activism, and alternative interpretations of geopolitical conflicts. The Iran-US conflict serves as a contemporary case for understanding how media framing, selective exposure, and information warfare affect public understanding of international tensions. The article concludes that media mediation significantly contributes to the construction of anti-war sentiments, although such mediation is frequently shaped by political, ideological, and economic influences. The study contributes to the broader field of mass communication by highlighting the importance of ethical journalism, media literacy, and responsible communication in conflict-sensitive environments.

1 INTRODUCTION

Media occupies a central position in modern democratic and political societies because it functions not only as a source of information but also as a powerful institution capable of influencing perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes. In the context of war and international conflict, media becomes even more significant because

citizens rely heavily on news organizations, digital platforms, and social communication networks to understand political realities. Public opinion regarding war is rarely formed through direct experience; rather, it is largely mediated through communication systems that interpret, frame, and disseminate information. Consequently, media serves as a mediator between political elites

and the public, shaping how conflicts are understood and evaluated.

The relationship between media and war has evolved significantly over the past century. Traditional media institutions such as newspapers, radio, and television once dominated war reporting by controlling the production and dissemination of information. However, the rise of digital communication technologies and social media platforms has transformed the information landscape, allowing citizens, activists, governments, and non-state actors to participate directly in the creation and circulation of war narratives. This transformation has increased the complexity of information warfare, propaganda dissemination, and public opinion formation.

The Iran–United States conflict represents one of the most prominent geopolitical tensions of the contemporary era. Historical disagreements between the two states intensified following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and continued through issues related to nuclear development, economic sanctions, regional military influence, and ideological rivalry. Media coverage of the Iran–US conflict has often reflected broader political interests and strategic narratives promoted by competing actors. American media frequently frames Iran as a security threat, while Iranian media portrays the United States as an imperialist power interfering in Middle Eastern affairs. These conflicting narratives significantly influence public perceptions within both domestic and international audiences.

In modern communication societies, media not only informs audiences about war but also constructs emotional and ideological meanings attached to conflict. Through agenda setting, media determines which issues deserve public attention, while propaganda mechanisms shape interpretations that support specific political objectives. During periods of heightened Iran–US tensions, media coverage often emphasizes themes such as nuclear threats, terrorism, military aggression, economic sanctions, or humanitarian concerns. Such emphasis directly affects public attitudes toward war, peace negotiations, and diplomatic solutions.

The purpose of this article is to conceptually examine how media mediates public opinion against war through agenda-setting and propaganda processes. The study specifically focuses on the Iran–US conflict to explore how traditional and digital media contribute to the formation of anti-war discourse. By analyzing media framing, propaganda strategies, and communication theories, the article seeks to understand the broader role of media in shaping public consciousness regarding international conflict.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between media and public opinion has long been a central concern in communication studies. Scholars have extensively examined how media institutions influence political attitudes, particularly during times of conflict and war. Walter Lippmann (1922) argued that individuals construct “pictures in their heads” based on mediated representations rather than direct experiences of reality. According to Lippmann, media acts as a primary source through which citizens understand political events and international affairs.

Agenda-Setting Theory emerged as one of the most influential perspectives explaining media influence on public priorities. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argued that media does not necessarily tell people what to think but rather what to think about. Through selective coverage and repeated emphasis, media organizations influence which issues become important within public consciousness. In the context of war, agenda setting determines whether audiences perceive military conflict as a national security necessity, humanitarian crisis, or diplomatic failure.

Research on war journalism demonstrates that media framing significantly shapes public support or opposition to military intervention. Entman (1993) explained that framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality while excluding others to promote specific interpretations. During wartime, governments and media institutions often frame conflicts using narratives of patriotism, security, morality, and nationalism. Such framing can

mobilize public support for military action or generate anti-war sentiment depending on how events are presented.

The Propaganda Model developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) provides another critical perspective on media behavior during political conflict. According to this model, mainstream media institutions frequently operate within political and economic structures that favor elite interests. Ownership patterns, advertising dependence, sourcing practices, and ideological pressures influence how news is produced and disseminated. As a result, media often reproduces dominant political narratives rather than presenting neutral or independent analysis.

Several scholars have examined media propaganda in relation to Middle Eastern conflicts. Kumar (2010) argued that Western media frequently employs stereotypes and selective framing when covering Muslim-majority countries, contributing to fear, hostility, and political polarization. Similarly, Said (1978) highlighted how Orientalist representations shape Western perceptions of the Middle East through biased cultural narratives.

The emergence of social media has significantly transformed the dynamics of war communication. Castells (2009) emphasized that digital networks enable decentralized communication and public participation in political discourse. Social media platforms such as X, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram have become important arenas for information warfare, political mobilization, and anti-war activism. Unlike traditional media, digital platforms allow citizens and independent journalists to challenge official narratives and circulate alternative viewpoints.

Studies on peace journalism further contribute to understanding media's role in shaping anti-war opinion. Galtung (1998) argued that traditional war journalism tends to focus on violence, elite actors, and military strategies, whereas peace journalism emphasizes dialogue, conflict resolution, and humanitarian consequences. Peace-oriented reporting can encourage audiences to support diplomatic solutions rather than military escalation.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory was introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972 during their study of the American presidential election. The theory argues that media influences public awareness by determining which issues receive prominence and repetition in news coverage. Although media may not directly dictate individual opinions, it strongly affects what audiences consider important.

3.2 Propaganda Model

The Propaganda Model proposed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky argues that mainstream media institutions are influenced by political and economic structures that shape news production. According to the model, media content passes through several "filters," including ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and dominant ideology.

3.3 MEDIA AND WAR NARRATIVES

Media narratives are essential in constructing public understanding of war because most citizens do not experience international conflicts directly. Journalists, editors, and political communicators shape reality through language, visuals, and symbolic representations.

3.4 TRADITIONAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION

Traditional media institutions such as television, newspapers, and radio continue to influence public opinion despite the growth of digital communication. Television news particularly remains powerful because visual imagery creates emotional impact and credibility.

3.5 SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL INFORMATION WARFARE

The rise of social media has transformed conflict communication by decentralizing information production. Unlike traditional media, digital platforms enable ordinary citizens, activists, journalists, and political actors to participate directly in public discourse.

3.6 MEDIA PROPAGANDA AND ANTI-WAR SENTIMENT

Propaganda is often associated with manipulation and ideological persuasion during political conflict. However, propaganda can function in multiple directions. While governments use propaganda to justify war, anti-war movements also employ persuasive communication to promote peace and diplomacy.

3.7 PEACE JOURNALISM AND ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

Peace journalism offers an alternative model for reporting conflict responsibly. Developed by Johan Galtung, peace journalism encourages journalists to focus on conflict resolution, dialogue, and human consequences rather than sensational violence and military competition.

4 DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that media plays a multifaceted role in shaping public opinion regarding war and peace. Through agenda setting, media institutions determine which issues dominate public attention, while propaganda mechanisms influence how those issues are interpreted.

5 CONCLUSION

Media serves as one of the most powerful mediating institutions in shaping public opinion regarding war and international conflict. Through agenda setting, framing, and propaganda processes, media influences how audiences perceive political tensions, military actions, and diplomatic alternatives.

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