

Broadcast Media Framing of a Middle East Political Rift

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A random sample of transcripts of 393 broadcast news headlines about a political rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain were analyzed. Analysis included headlines from 11 broadcast networks in Malaysia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. The timeframe was June 5, 2017, the day the four Arab nations simultaneously cut off diplomatic relations with Qatar, until Oct. 23, 2018. Tone toward Qatar was 79.1% negative, 9.4% positive and 11.5% neutral. Headlines broadcast in the United Kingdom (85.7%) were the most frequently negative in tone; headlines broadcast in Malaysia were the least frequently negative in tone (66.0%). Overall tone toward Qatar shifted from being more frequently negative (82.1%) to more frequently neutral (17.2%) or positive (41.4%) after the midpoint of the timeframe. The most frequent topics were the demands the four Arab nations required to restore diplomatic relations with Qatar (14.0%), United States President Donald Trump criticizing Qatar (9.9%) and headlines about Qatar not being a democratic nation (8.4%).

Keywords: media framing, Middle East, political rift

INTRODUCTION

Four Arab nations (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain) immediately cut all diplomatic ties with Qatar on June 5, 2017, after their assessment that Qatar was supporting terrorist organizations. The resulting broadcast media coverage was the basis for the present study of broadcast media framing of this major Middle East diplomatic rift. Headlines from the first three days of the crisis were indicative of the range of tone and framing of the crisis. The *NBC News* headline stated, “We turn now to the diplomatic crisis erupting in the Middle East, five nations cutting ties with Qatar, accusing that country of supporting terror (Holt & Mitchell, 2017, June 6).” *Channel NewsAsia* offered, “Trump offers to help resolve Gulf crisis, UAE tightens squeeze on Qatar (2017, June 7).” *BBC News* reported, “Six Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, have cut diplomatic ties with Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism (2017, June 5).”

This political rift among Middle East nations presented an ideal opportunity to examine media framing theory from the perspective of international relations. The study relates to public relations and business because how Qatar was framed in the media may affect international diplomatic and business relations. Interestingly, it was four nations (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain) that initially cut ties with Qatar, but the news reports erroneously stated there were five and six nations involved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical underpinning for the present study was media framing. Scheufele (1999) explained the basic premise of media framing theory, which holds that news consumers' perceptions of a news topic or event are influenced by how the topic is framed in media coverage. Entman, one of the most prominent media framing scholars, summed up the impact of how news organizations frame stories.

"I do think it reasonable to suggest that when news clearly slants, those officials favored by the slant become more powerful, freer to do what they want without the anticipation that voters might punish them. And those who lose the framing contest become weaker, less free to do (or say) what they want (Entman, 2007, p. 170).

Jang and Frederick (2017) found that the nation of origin of four news agencies had an impact on media coverage of Korean-Japanese territorial disputes.

"...The fact that this study found differences in the way news agencies from different countries framed the issue would lead one to believe that the way the media frame an issue is influenced by the dominant political ideology and national interests in which journalists operate and by the influences of government propaganda or public diplomacy (Jang & Frederick, 2017, p. 226)."

Evans (2010) compared *New York Times* coverage of two Palestinian refugee camps that had been controlled by military occupation. Media framing of the two events, one in Lebanon and the other in the West Bank, was different, although both cases presented similar circumstances.

Martin (2016) found that *CNN* framed the overthrow of Morsi, the Egyptian president-elect, first as a crisis, then as a coup. *Al Jazeera* framed the same story as a national division and a crisis.

King and Zayani (2008), in a study comparing *Al Jazeera* English and the Arabic *Al Jazeera* television channels, found that the Arabic version (11.4%) was associated with terrorism at almost twice the rate of the English service (6.0%).

Drone strikes in Pakistan were framed positively in the *New York Times*, supporting United States government policy, while a newspaper in Pakistan, *News International*, framed the story more negatively, criticizing the governmental policy of Pakistan (Dar & Ali, 2015).

Park, Bier and Palanchar (2016) found that the *New Straits Times* and *China Daily* utilized different frames of the missing Malaysian Airlines flight 370, with the Chinese newspaper using frames of responsibility, human interest, economics, conflict and morality, in that order. The Malaysian newspaper framed the story in terms of responsibility, human interest, morality and economics.

King and King (2018) examined newspaper and news agency coverage of the rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. The study of 80 news sources in 34 nations found that headlines published in nations that were not aligned with Qatar politically were strongly negative (82.3%), while headlines published in nations aligned with Qatar were the least negative (50.0%).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS/HYPOTHESES

The review of literature informed the following hypotheses and research questions: H1: The tone of broadcast headlines about Qatar will be more negative than positive or neutral. H2: The topics/frames in broadcast headlines about Qatar will be more negative than positive/neutral. H3: Broadcast headlines about Qatar in western nations (United States, Canada, United Kingdom,) will more frequently display a negative tone toward Qatar than broadcast headlines about Qatar in the eastern nation (Malaysia). RQ1: What will be the most frequent topics/ frames in broadcast headlines about Qatar? RQ2: Will the frequency of broadcast headlines about Qatar vary by network? Q3: Will the frequency of broadcast headlines about Qatar vary by nation? RQ4: Will the frequency of broadcast headlines about Qatar vary by month? RQ5:

How will broadcast headline topics/frames about Qatar in western nations (UK, US/Canada) differ from broadcast headline topics/frames in the eastern nation (Malaysia)? RQ6: Will tone toward Qatar in broadcast headlines in the first half of the time period differ from tone toward Qatar in broadcast headlines in the second half of the time period? RQ7: Will topics/frames about Qatar in broadcast headlines in the first half of the time period differ from topics/frames about Qatar in broadcast headlines in the second half of the time period?

METHOD

The unit of analysis was any transcript of a broadcast headline about Qatar during the time period of the study, which was June 5, 2017 until Oct. 23, 2018. A total of 393 transcripts of broadcast headlines were yielded from Lexis/Nexis using the search term, “Qatar.” Broadcast headlines were published by 11 broadcast networks in Malaysia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. Statistical significance for chi-square analysis of the data, all nominal variables, was set at $<.05$.

Independent variables included the broadcast network on which the headline was broadcast, the nation in which the headline was broadcast, the region of the world (East or West) in which the headline was broadcast and the date of the broadcast. Dependent variables were the topic/frame of the broadcast headline and broadcast headline tone toward Qatar (positive, neutral or negative). Two coders achieved intercoder reliability of 100% on each variable except tone toward Qatar which reached 97.5% agreement.

A Representative Negative Headline Tone

The headline of *NPR’s All Things Considered* read, “Arab Countries Meet in Cairo to Discuss Sanctions Against Qatar (Seigel, 2017, July 5).”

A Representative Positive Headline Tone

“Chad and Qatar restore ties cut in wake of Arab states rift,” stated the headline from *Channel NewsAsia* (2018, Feb. 21).

A Representative Neutral Headline Tone

“Exclusive Report on Qatar Agreement,” read the *CNN* headline (Blitzer, Kayyem, Borger, Chalian, Bash, Sciutto, et al, 2017, July 10).

A limitation of the research was that only English language broadcast transcripts indexed by LexisNexis were analyzed. A broader analysis of broadcast transcripts in Arabic and other languages would provide more information.

RESULTS

H1: The Tone of Broadcast Headlines About Qatar Will Be More Negative Than Positive or Neutral.

**TABLE 1
TONE OF BROADCAST HEADLINES ABOUT QATAR**

Tone	Frequency	Percent
Negative	311	79.1
Positive	37	9.4
Neutral	45	11.5

n=393

As seen in Table 1, the overall tone toward Qatar was strongly negative, at 79.1 percent. If the standard of objectivity in journalism had been followed, expectations would have been that the majority of the stories

would be neutral. With 9.4 percent positive and 11.5 percent neutral, this standard was clearly not adhered to by the broadcast networks covering the crisis. The hypothesis was supported.

H2: The Topics/Frames in Broadcast Headlines About Qatar Will Be More Negative Than Positive/Neutral.

TABLE 2
TOPICS/FRAMES IN BROADCAST HEADLINES ABOUT QATAR

Frame	Frequency	Percent
4 Arab States rift Qatar not a democracy US/Trump relations with Qatar Qatar/Arab states relations (negative topics/frames)	281	71.5
Qatar response Crisis solving (positive topics/frames)	112	28.5

n=393

Table 2 displays a similar negative pattern in terms of the general positivity or negative nature of the topic/frame of the broadcast headline. The majority (71.5%) of the headlines were framed with a focus on the negative aspects such as the rift with the four Arab states and Qatar; Qatar not being a democracy; US/President Trump’s relations with Qatar, which were strongly negative, and Qatar/Arab states relations, also strongly negative. A much smaller percentage of broadcast headlines were framed along the positive aspects, such as crisis solving efforts and Qatar’s response to the crisis. These negative frames may have contributed to prolonging the crisis. The hypothesis was supported.

H3: Broadcast Headlines About Qatar in Western Nations (United States, Canada, United Kingdom,) Will More Frequently Display a Negative Tone Toward Qatar Than Broadcast Headlines About Qatar in the Eastern Nation (Malaysia).

TABLE 3
NATION BY TONE

Nation	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Malaysia	64 66.0%	8 8.2%	25 25.8%
UK	221 85.7%	26 10.5%	10 3.9%
US/Canada	26 68.4%	10 26.3%	2 5.3%

n= 393; $\chi^2= 49.2$; df= 4; $p < .001$

Table 3 shows the hypothesis was strongly supported. Broadcast headlines in western nations (the United Kingdom and the United States/Canada) were more frequently negative than broadcast headlines in the eastern nation (Malaysia). Broadcast headlines in Malaysia were also much more frequently positive than in the western nations.

**TABLE 4
NATION BY TONE (COLLAPSED)**

Nation	Negative	Neutral/Positive
Malaysia	64 66.0%	33 34.0%
UK	221 85.7%	37 14.3%
US/Canada	26 68.4%	12 31.6%

n= 393; $\chi^2= 19.5$; df= 2; p< .001

The tone variable was collapsed in Table 4 to control for low cell counts; the hypothesis was still supported at <.001.

RQ1: What Will Be the Most Frequent Topics/Frames in Broadcast Headlines About Qatar?

**TABLE 5
TOPICS/FRAMES BROADCAST HEADLINES ABOUT QATAR**

Topic	Frequency	Percent
4 Arab states rift	180	45.8
US/Trump relations with Qatar 4 Arab nations relations with Qatar	69	17.3
Qatar response	63	16.0
Crisis solving	49	12.5
Qatar not democratic	33	8.4

n= 393

The political rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain was the most common topic/frame; almost half of the broadcast headlines were focused on this negative topic/frame. In the meantime, broadcast headlines that centered on efforts to solve the crisis were much more infrequent. As expected in news coverage generally, broadcast networks seemed more interested in covering negative aspects of the crisis rather than efforts to solve the crisis, at a ratio of more than three to one.

RQ2: Will the Frequency of Broadcast Headlines About Qatar Vary by Network?

**TABLE 6
FREQUENCY OF BROADCAST HEADLINES BY NETWORK**

Network	Frequency	Percent
<i>BBC</i>	258	65.6
<i>CHNA (Channel News Asia)</i>	98	24.9
<i>NBC/CBS/CR/CGTV/CNN</i>	14	3.6
<i>NPR/CQ/FNS</i>	14	3.6
<i>Bloomberg</i>	9	2.3

n=393

As is evident in Table 6, headlines about Qatar were much more frequently broadcast by the *BBC* and *ChannelNews Asia*, far outweighing the frequency of broadcast headlines about Qatar from networks in the United States/Canada.

RQ3: *Will the Frequency of Broadcast Headlines About Qatar Vary by Nation?*

TABLE 7
FREQUENCY OF BROADCAST HEADLINES BY NATION

Nation	Frequency	Percent
UK	258	65.6
Malaysia	97	24.7
US/Canada	38	9.7

n= 393

As seen in Table 7, headlines about Qatar were much more frequently broadcast by networks in the UK and Malaysia than networks in the United States/Canada.

RQ4: *Will the Frequency of Headlines About Qatar Vary by Month?*

TABLE 8
FREQUENCY OF BROADCAST HEADLINES ABOUT QATAR BY MONTH

Month	Frequency	Percent
2017 June	203	51.7
2017 July	90	22.9
2017 Aug	49	12.5
2017 Sept	9	2.3
2017 Oct	8	2.0
2017 Nov	5	1.3
2017 Dec	3	0.8
2018 Jan	5	1.3
2018 Feb	1	0.3
2018 March	3	0.8
2018 April	2	0.5
2018 May	4	1.0
2018 June	1	0.3
2018 July	5	1.3
2018 Aug	1	0.3
2018 Sept	2	0.5
2018 Oct	2	0.5

n=393

Clearly, broadcast networks did not cover the rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain for a long period of time, although the conflict was not resolved and diplomatic relations were not restored until early 2021. Table 8 shows that more than half of the headlines in the study were broadcast in the first month of the crisis, in June 2017. Another 35.4 percent were broadcast in the second and third months, July and August of 2017. After that, the crisis virtually disappeared from the radar of the broadcast networks, even though it was a major political development affecting millions of people in the Middle East region. This points to the convention of news organizations to more frequently report

negative events rather than efforts to solve ongoing crises, especially those far from the nations in which the broadcast networks are headquartered.

RQ5: *How Will Broadcast Headline Topics/Frames About Qatar in Western Nations (UK, US/Canada) Differ from Broadcast Headline Topics/Frames in the Eastern Nation (Malaysia.)*

TABLE 9
TOPICS/FRAMES OF BROADCAST HEADLINES ABOUT QATAR BY NATION

Nation	4 Arab States rift Qatar not diplomatic US/Trump relations with Qatar Qatar/Arab states relations (negative topic/frame)	Qatar response Crisis solving (positive topic/frame)
Malaysia	49 50.5%	48 49.5%
UK	206 79.8%	52 20.2%
US/Canada	26 68.4%	12 31.6%

n= 393; $\chi^2= 30.0$; df= 2; $p< .001$

Just as the broadcast networks in the United Kingdom and the United States/Canada more frequently used negative tones in their headlines about Qatar than broadcast networks in Malaysia, the same pattern emerged regarding the topics/frames of the headlines. As seen in Table 9, headlines broadcast in Malaysia were balanced between negative and positive topics/frames, while headlines broadcast in the United Kingdom and the United States/Canada much more frequently focused on the negative topics/frames.

RQ6: *Will Tone Toward Qatar in Broadcast Headlines in the First Half of the Time Period Differ from Tone Toward Qatar in Broadcast Headlines in the Second Half of the Time Period?*

TABLE 10
TIME PERIOD BY TONE (COLLAPSED)

Time Period	Negative	Neutral/Positive
June 2017 – Nov 2017	299 82.1%	65 17.9%
Dec 2017 – Oct 2018	12 41.4%	17 58.6%

n= 393; $\chi^2= 27.0$; df= 1; $p< .001$

There was a strongly perceptible shift in tone from the first half of the time period of the study, June to November 2017 from negative (82.1%) to neutral/positive (58.6%) in the second half of the time period of the study, December 2017 to October 2018, as seen in Table 10. However, it should be noted that the frequency of headlines broadcast in the second half of the study were very small compared to the first half.

RQ7: *Will Topics/Frames About Qatar in Broadcast Headlines in the First Half of the Time Period Differ from Topics/Frames About Qatar in Broadcast Headlines in the Second Half of the Time Period?*

TABLE 11
TOPICS/FRAMES IN BROADCAST HEADLINES BY TIME PERIOD

Time Period	4 Arab States rift Qatar not diplomatic US/Trump relations with Qatar Qatar/Arab states relations (negative topic/frame)	Qatar response Crisis solving (positive topic/frame)
June 2017 – Nov 2017	268 73.6%	96 26.4%
Dec 2017 – Oct 2018	13 44.8%	16 55.2%

n= 393; $\chi^2= 10.9$; df= 1; $p< .01$

Table 11 displays a similar shift in terms of the general negativity or positivity of the topics/frames of the broadcast headlines with more frequent negative topics/frames in the first half of the study (73.6%) and more frequent positive topics/frames in the second half of the study. But again, the frequencies of headlines broadcast in the second half of the time period were small.

DISCUSSION

This study of 393 broadcast headlines about the political rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain has yielded many interesting findings. Business leaders and public relations professionals can gain insight from the research about how broadcast media framed the political rift, which could have an impact on international relations and business relations.

The tone of broadcast headlines about Qatar was strongly negative (79.1%) as predicted. In fact, tone was polarized with 9.4% positive and 11.5% neutral in tone toward Qatar. The journalistic convention of objectivity was generally not adhered to in this diplomatic rift. Broadcast headlines in Western nations (UK, US/Canada) were more frequently negative than in the Eastern nation (Malaysia). The topics/frames showed the same trend, with 71.5 percent of the broadcast headlines focused on the negative aspects. Overall, the negative frames/topics were more dominant than the positive frames/topics.

Almost two-thirds (258/65.6%) of the broadcast headlines were from the UK (all on BBC), while only 38/9.7% were from the US/Canada. The UK has a long history of involvement in the Gulf region, and Qatar has invested heavily in UK properties and businesses. The US has a major military installation in Qatar, and Qatar has also invested in properties in the US, so it is surprising there were so few broadcast stories about Qatar in the US. There were almost three times as many (97/24.7%) in Malaysia.

The story of the diplomatic rift between Qatar and its neighbors was not covered for a long period of time, despite the fact that the diplomatic relations were only resolved in recent months.

A total of 342/87.1% of the broadcast headlines appeared in June, July and August in 2017. Over the next 14 months, the story was almost non-existent. However, there was a shift from mostly negative tone in the first half of the time period to neutral/positive tone in the second half. The same trend was evident in the topics/frames of the broadcast headlines across the time period of the study. There was a shift from negative topics/frames (4 Arab States rift, Qatar not diplomatic, US/Trump relations with Qatar, Qatar/Arab states relations) appearing more frequently in the first half of the time period to positive topics/frames (Qatar response, Crisis solving) showing more frequently in the second half.

Broadcast headlines in Western nations more frequently framed the diplomatic rift using the negative focus than in the Eastern nation. Broadcast headlines in the UK (79.8%) and the US/Canada (68.4%) focused more frequently on the negative topics/frames (4 Arab States rift, Qatar not diplomatic, US/Trump relations with Qatar, Qatar/Arab states relations). Malaysia headlines were balanced with 49.5% focusing on the positive topics/frames (Qatar response, Crisis solving).

Future research might focus on other media such as online and social media as well as diplomatic rifts in other regions of the world. Comparing media systems, media ownership and control of the media in various nations may also prove useful.

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