

“Silly and Superficial”: Headline Tone in Press TV and Voice of America Coverage of the U.S. Withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

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On May 8, 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump announced the United States would withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. President Trump had campaigned on removing the U.S. from the nuclear agreement, but the announcement still caught Iran and other parties to the JCPOA by surprise. This research analyzed three days of JCPOA-related news headlines from two international broadcasters: Press TV, headquartered in Tehran, and Voice of America, located in Washington, D.C. The majority of headlines published by both news organizations exhibited negative tone. Considering that reading a headline often substitutes for reading an entire news report, examining the headlines these international broadcasters used to present this event to their global audiences is a worthwhile pursuit.

Keywords: Iran, United States, nuclear, headline, tone

Introduction

U.S. President Donald Trump announced on May 8, 2018, the United States would withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran (Landler, 2018). Known informally as the Iran nuclear deal, Iran had reached an agreement in July 2015 with a group of nations including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, China, and Russia to “significantly limit Tehran’s nuclear ability for more than a decade in return for lifting international oil and financial sanctions” (Gordon and Sanger, 2015). Former President Barack Obama was able to get the agreement through Congress “without the support of a single member of the [Republican] party” (Steinhauer, 2015). Less than three years later, however, President Trump announced he was fulfilling a campaign promise to dissolve the agreement and re-impose sanctions against Iran (Landler, 2018).

Rationale

The announcement received news media coverage around the world. The United States’ international broadcasting service, Voice of America, produced reports for its global audience and published updates on its website. Likewise, Press TV, Iran’s international news network, reported on the breaking news story and published updates on its website. By writing their own news headlines or

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choosing to publish ones written by other news organizations, each global broadcasting service used headlines to frame the issue and establish the tone of news reports for their respective audiences. This analysis examines news headline tone in the reports published by Voice of America and Press TV regarding the United States' announced withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Headlines were classified as exhibiting negative, positive, or neutral tone.

Literature Review

Iran's Nuclear Program

U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower delivered his "Atoms for Peace" speech before the U.N. General Assembly in December 1953 (Rowberry, 2013). Through this program, the United States committed to provide "research reactors, fuel and scientific training to developing countries wanting civilian nuclear programs" (Rowberry, 2013). Recipient states promised to use the technology and training "for peaceful, civilian purposes" (Rowberry, 2013). Iran was a participant in the initiative and started its nuclear program in 1957. After a decade of development, the United States helped Iran establish a nuclear research reactor and gave Iran the uranium to fuel it (Rowberry, 2013).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 severed diplomatic ties between the United States and Iran, and it ended nuclear cooperation between the countries (Masterson, 2020). Through the 1990s and early 2000s, Iran's nuclear program continued development, and in April 2006, Iran announced it had enriched uranium for the first time (Masterson, 2020). Two months later, the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany (known as the P5+1, referring to the U.N. Security Council's five permanent members plus Germany) proposed an incentives package to convince Iran to stop its enrichment program (Masterson, 2020). Iran rejected the restrictions on its enrichment activities, and in December 2006, the United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on Iran (Masterson, 2020). During the next several years, Iran continued expanding its nuclear program and the U.N. continued passing additional sanctions against the country.

A new era began in 2012 when the P5+1 and Iran initiated a series of negotiations to reach an agreement that would address U.N., U.S., and European Union security concerns while allowing Iran to continue its nuclear program without sanctions (Masterson, 2020). Three years later, on July 14, 2015, the P5+1 and Iran finalized the JCPOA agreement ("The Joint," 2018). The United Nations Security Council endorsed it on July 20, it was formally adopted on October 18, and the JCPOA was officially implemented on January 16, 2016 ("The Joint," 2018). Iran agreed to maintain restrictions on its nuclear activities and allow program monitoring and compliance verification by the International Atomic Energy Agency (Laub and Robinson, 2020). In exchange, the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union suspended or repealed sanctions against Iran (Laub and Robinson, 2020).

During his 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, Republican nominee Donald Trump promised to withdraw from the JCPOA if elected. He won election in November that year, and on October 13, 2017, President Trump announced he would not recertify the Iran nuclear deal (“Key moments,” 2020). He followed through on that commitment when he announced on May 8, 2018, that the U.S. would withdraw from the JCPOA (“Key moments,” 2020). Iran accused the United States of breaking its promises and criticized Europe for bowing to U.S. unilateralism (Laub and Robinson, 2020). Iran announced it would no longer honor its commitments “as long as the other parties to the JCPOA were in breach of theirs” (Laub and Robinson, 2020).

Journalistic Tone

News media headlines can serve both an agenda-setting and framing function. Sheaffer (2007) noted that recent analyses of the mass media’s agenda-setting function have focused more on the news media’s role in telling audiences how to think about news events rather than simply which events to think about. Entman (2007) observed that the way information is framed can lead an audience to a particular conclusion and affect the audience’s perception of how important a certain idea may be. Headlines attract the most visual attention from first-time page viewers (Leckner, 2012, p. 169). Additionally, they create a shortcut that provides a brief synopsis of the news report’s contents (Andrew, 2007, p. 28). However, reading headlines to obtain “a quick and loose news update” invites risk of misinterpretation, and a headline alone may not accurately reflect the accompanying report’s full contents (Ifantidou, 2009, p. 702). Still, headlines provide an opportunity to explore how people perceive issues of public importance and how readers’ attitudes about those issues may be influenced (Nisar and Bleich, 2020, p. 6). Because readers often do not examine full news reports and choose instead to scan headlines (Dor, 2003, p. 718), it is important to consider headline tone in journalistic reports about international events. Therefore, this paper asks the following:

RQ: How many headlines from Press TV and Voice of America exhibit negative, positive, and neutral tone regarding President Trump’s announcement to withdraw the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran?

Methodology

This study is a descriptive content analysis of 75 news headlines appearing on the Press TV and Voice of America websites after President Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. The time frame for these reports is Tuesday, May 8, through Thursday, May 10, which represents news coverage from the day of the announcement plus two additional 24-hour news cycles. Press TV was chosen for examination because it is based in Tehran and its stated mission is to provide perspectives that are “often neglected” in the Western-dominated global media system (“About PressTV,” 2017). As the international English-language

service of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Press TV coverage is presumed to reflect the views of Iran's leadership (Behravesht, 2013). Voice of America was chosen for examination because it is the United States' largest international broadcaster ("Mission and Values," n.d.). Its stated mission is to "present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively" while maintaining editorial independence as part of the U.S. Agency for Global Media ("Mission and Values," n.d.). Press TV and Voice of America also were chosen because they are government-supported information organizations located in their respective national capitals, Tehran and Washington, D.C. Finally, each broadcaster produces content for a global audience in English, which is the author's native language.

To identify news reports specific to the United States' withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, the author searched for the terms "Iran" and "nuclear" on the Voice of America website and for the term "nuclear" on the Press TV website. The initial search was conducted on February 3, 2019, and data was collected for news reports published between Monday, May 7, 2018, and Monday, May 14, 2018. Relevant news reports were downloaded via web browser and saved to the author's computer to ensure continued access to the material. Web links to each report were revisited later to ensure continued availability on each news organization's respective website.

The author examined headline tone based on evaluative criteria used in previous similar research (Cain and Drumheller, 2019; Cain and Drumheller, 2014). Examples of positive tone include headlines expressing a favorable position toward the United States' withdrawal, referencing support for maintaining relationships with Iran, or using words such as "welcomes" or "cooperating." A headline exhibiting negative tone would include words such as "misguided" or "foolish" or highlight potential negative consequences associated with the decision. A statement of fact would represent neutral tone.

Analysis

Press TV

There was an eight-and-a-half-hour time difference between Washington, D.C., and Tehran on May 8, 2018, when President Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, so it was Tuesday evening in Iran when Press TV began reporting on the decision. In the first several hours after the announcement, Press TV featured nine related news reports on its website. Five headlines, approximately 56 percent, were classified as negative in tone.

"Nuclear non-proliferation regime is at stake, Macron says" (2018)

"Israel puts army on alert in Golan Heights as Trump quits from JCPOA" (2018)

"Trump's decision to quit Iran nuclear deal is 'misguided,' Obama says" (2018)

"Trump trying to satisfy Israel by reneging on Iran deal: Scholar" (2018)

“UK foreign secretary regrets Trump’s decision on Iran” (2018)

The headline focusing on French President Emmanuel Macron’s concerns about the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA exhibits negative tone because it implies an unwelcome disruption in the global nuclear non-proliferation status quo. Reference to Israel placing its army on alert suggests fear of negative regional political consequences as a result of President Trump’s announcement. Finally, three of these headlines include words with negative connotations: “misguided,” “renegeing,” and “regrets.” Only one headline from the May 8 group exhibited positive tone.

“Riyadh ‘supports and welcomes’ Trump’s JCPOA move: Saudi Foreign Ministry” (2018)

On the surface, the language presents Saudi Arabia’s response to the news in a positive light. In a strict sense, this classifies the headline into the positive tone group. However, this headline also includes an underlying tone that could be classified as negative. Iran and Saudi Arabia are “bitter rivals” that compete against each other for regional dominance (Marcus, 2019). Explicitly acknowledging that a geopolitical competitor is praising the re-imposition of sanctions against Iran provides an implicitly-negative cue to the reader. Finally, three headlines, approximately 33 percent, were classified as neutral in tone.

“Trump announces ‘withdrawal’ from Iran nuclear deal” (2018)

“President Rouhani says Iran will stay in JCPOA” (2018)

“Reactions to Trump’s JCPOA withdrawal from inside the US” (2018)

These three headlines made basic statements of fact and did not include overt negative or positive connotations.

Press TV published 26 headlines related to the JCPOA on Wednesday, May 9, 2018. Eighteen of them, approximately 69 percent, were classified as exhibiting negative tone. They can be grouped into two general categories: negative economic consequences and negative political consequences. Fourteen of these focused on the political consequences of President Trump’s decision.

“Major EU-US divisions over JCPOA” (2018)

“France’s Macron says Trump made a mistake by leaving JCPOA” (2018)

“Leader: Trump’s speech against Iran ‘silly and superficial’” (2018)

“Abandoning Iran nuclear deal Trump’s ‘most foolish decision yet’: Rice” (2018)

“Iran vows to boost defense program despite US threats” (2018)

“US flag up in flames inside Iranian parliament after Trump nixes nuclear deal” (2018)

“Iranian protesters burn American flags outside former US embassy in Tehran” (2018)

“US following Israeli diktats over Iran nuclear deal: Commentator” (2018)

“Iran officials slam US withdrawal from JCPOA” (Naderi, 2018)

“Italy fears consequences of US withdrawal from JCPOA” (Civili, 2018)

“Trump’s decision could end the very empire he’s trying to protect: Scholar” (2018)

“UN Sec. Gen. expresses ‘concern’ about US withdrawal from Iran deal” (2018)

“With Iran deal withdrawal, US officially becomes ‘a rogue nation’” (2018)

“Iran press, people react after Trump pulls US out of nuclear deal” (2018)

Some of these headlines indicate negative tone by featuring the words “mistake,” “silly,” “foolish,” “threats,” “slam,” and “rogue.” Others, such as those describing incidents where the U.S. flag was burned in protest, indicate negative intent. Collectively, these headlines focus on the concerns, fears, and suspicions expressed in the first two days after President Trump’s announcement. It must also be noted that variations of the infinitive phrase “to pull out” or the word “quit” regarding the decision to leave the JCPOA have been classified as negative, whereas use of the word “withdrawal” is considered neutral. To “pull out” of something has an attached negative connotation that variations of the term “withdraw” do not. The remaining four headlines featuring negative tone included language signaling grim economic repercussions as a result of the U.S. withdrawal.

“Defiance expected to Trump’s Iran oil sales curbs” (2018)

“Oil hits new highs after Trump quits Iran deal” (2018)

“Boeing, Airbus licenses to sell jets to Iran to be revoked: US Treasury” (2018)

“Iran sanctions to cost Boeing, Airbus \$39bn” (2018)

The first two headlines listed above suggest the decision will negatively impact the global oil market. The last two headlines specifically reference negative consequences for Boeing, Airbus, and Iran. In September 2016, the United States removed final regulatory hurdles and allowed the two aircraft manufacturers to sell planes directly to Iran (Erdbrink and Clark, 2016). After the announced withdrawal from the JCPOA, however, the U.S. Treasury Department announced the U.S.

“would no longer allow the export of commercial passenger aircraft, parts and services to Iran after a 90-day period” (Lawder, 2018).

Seven headlines, or 27 percent, were positive in tone. All of them focused on other international actors who expressed support for Iran, for the JCPOA, or for companies that desired to continue working with Iran.

“EU, Russia, China rally behind Iran after Trump’s move” (2018)

“Boris Jonson: Britain has ‘no intention of walking away’ from the Iran nuclear deal” (2018)

“Britain vows to stand by Iran deal despite US withdrawal” (Taylor, 2018)

“EU pledges commitment to Iran nuclear deal, regrets Trump decision” (2018)

“France, EU back Iran deal despite Trump’s pullout” (Mazaheri, 2018a)

“Germany vows to protect EU firms against Iran bans” (2018)

“Iran implementing commitments under JCPOA: UN watchdog” (2018)

Only one Press TV headline from May 9 was classified as neutral in tone, and it concerned a factual statement about a decision made in Iran’s Parliament.

“Iran MPs table motion on response to Trump decision” (2018)

Though Press TV published fewer headlines about the JCPOA on Thursday, May 10, 2018, tone in 10 of the 13 headlines was negative. That is approximately 77 percent.

“US turning its back on allies by quitting Iran deal: EU’s Juncker” (2018)

“US pullout from Iran nuclear deal; part of a larger strategy: Analyst” (2018)

“US withdrawal from Iran deal violates UN resolution: Russian FM” (2018)

“Lawbreaking, breach of promises habitual for US govt.: Iran” (2018)

“The US road to hell is littered with broken treaties: American writer” (2018)

“Trump made ‘serious mistake’ by leaving Iran nuclear deal: Carter” (2018)

“Trump deserves impeachment for Iran deal withdrawal: Waters” (2018)

“Rouhani urges efforts against US ‘unilateralism’ in phone call with Erdogan” (2018)

“OPEC in no hurry to offset possible loss from Iran’s oil flow after US sanctions: Sources” (2018)

"Saudi Arabia to build nuclear bomb if Iran does so: FM" (2018)

Individually, several of these headlines accuse the United States of abandoning its allies, breaking its promises, and violating its international agreements. Concerns about how the United States' decision would affect global oil markets are referenced again, and the specter of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East is openly considered. Collectively, these headlines provide readers with a clear indication that President Trump's decision was a poor one.

Only one headline exhibited positive tone, and it indicated Russia's willingness to continue working with Iran on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action without U.S. involvement.

"Iran, Russia to continue cooperating on JCPOA even after US exit from deal: Moscow" (2018)

Finally, two of the day's headlines, approximately 15 percent, exhibited neutral tone.

"Debate: Future of Iran nuclear deal" (2018)

"Iranian President Rouhani, French President Macron talk on future of JCPOA" (Mazaheri, 2018b)

Voice of America

Voice of America published nine headlines on May 8, 2018, the day President Trump announced the United States would leave the JCPOA and reinstate sanctions against Iran. Six of them, approximately 67%, were classified as exhibiting negative tone.

"VOA Asia – Trump pulls U.S. out of Iran nuclear deal as North Korea summit looms" (2018)

"Iran Faces Banking Turmoil After US Nuclear Deal Exit" (2018)

"New US Ambassador to Berlin Warns German Businesses to Leave Iran" (2018)

"Mnuchin: US Revoking Boeing, Airbus Licenses to Sell Jets to Iran" (2018)

"AP FACT CHECK: Trump vs. Truth on the Iran Nuclear Deal" (2018)

"Trump's Iran Deal Decision Revives Bitter Hill Debate" (Gypson, 2018)

Words and phrases such as "pulls U.S. out," "turmoil," "revoking," "Trump vs. Truth," and "bitter" have negative connotations and exhibit darker tone. Voice of America published no headlines categorized as featuring positive tone on May 8, but the remaining three published that day, approximately 33 percent, used straightforward descriptive terms to indicate each report's content, striking a neutral tone.

“VOA60 World PM - Trump Withdraws US From Iran Nuclear Deal” (2018)

“Mideast Facing Week of Milestone Events” (2018)

“Families Wonder How Iran Decision Will Impact US Detainees” (2018)

Voice of America published 14 headlines related to the JCPOA on May 9, 2018, about half as many Press TV published that same day. Nine headlines, or 64 percent, were categorized as having negative tone.

“Pulling Out of the Iran Nuclear Agreement” (2018)

“Iran Deal Exit Complicates But Shouldn’t Derail Korea Talks” (Padden, 2018)

“Europe Pledges to Defend Interests in Wake of US Pull-out From Iran Nuclear Deal” (Ridgwell, 2018a)

“Europe Vows to Defend Its Interests in Iran” (Ridgwell, 2018b)

“Trump: ‘Very Severe Consequences’ if Iran Starts Nuclear Weapons Program” (2018)

“OPEC Source: Saudi Arabia Will Not Act Alone to Fill Any Iran Oil Shortfall” (2018)

“US to Press Europe to Reduce Iran Investments” (Aryan and Lipin, 2018)

“US Withdraws from Iran Nuclear Deal; Allies Say It’s Not Dead Yet” (Herman, 2018)

“Iran Deal Signatories Still Committed After US Exit” (Bredemeier, 2018a)

Several of these headlines portend potential adverse international consequences, particularly for the relationship between the United States and Europe. Nuclear negotiations with North Korea and global oil supplies are also specifically referenced as areas of concern. Regarding positive-toned headlines, 29 percent of Voice of America’s Iran-related headlines published on May 9 were included in that category.

“Energy Stocks Jump on Wall Street After US Quits Iran Deal” (2018)

“Son Sees Hope for Missing American in US-Iran Deal Exit” (Lipin and Yazdian, 2018)

“Gulf Allies Applaud Trump Decision to Scrap Iran Nuclear Deal” (Yeranian, 2018)

“Israel Welcomes Trump’s ‘Bold’ Decision to Leave Iran Deal” (Berger, 2018)

Though positive on their surface, two of these headlines exhibit underlying tone that could be classified as negative. Statements regarding praise from Gulf allies and Israel for the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA acknowledge regional tensions. Israel and Iran are regional rivals that recently took opposing sides in Syria's proxy war (Marcus, 2018). The subtexts of these two headlines take a dim view of Iran and its regional intentions. Finally, only one published headline exhibited neutral tone.

"Trump Withdraws US from Iran Nuclear Deal" (Gallo, 2018)

Voice of America published four news headlines related to the JCPOA announcement on Thursday, May 10, 2018. Three of them, or 75 percent, featured negative tone.

"US Looks for Allied Support to Pressure Iran" (Bredemeier, 2018b)

"Turkey, US Could Head for Collision Over Iran Nuclear Deal" (Jones, 2018)

"Iranian Currency Slumps on Black Market After US Quits Iran Deal" (Lipin and Bahraminejad, 2018)

The first two suggest potentially negative political consequences, while the third suggests a possible economic consequence concerning Iran's currency. The only other headline VOA published regarding the JCPOA exhibited positive tone.

"Trump Says Iran Will Agree to Negotiate on Nuclear Deal" (Hoke, 2018)

This headline implies Iran will accept President Trump's decision and will return to the negotiating table for a new agreement.

Discussion

On May 8, 2018, both Press TV and VOA published nine reports concerning President Trump's announcement that the United States would leave the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. The numbers were the same despite Voice of America having more than eight additional hours of publication opportunities on that date because of the time difference between the United States and Iran. On May 9, Press TV published almost twice as many reports as did VOA, 26 to 14, respectively. That imbalance was evident again on May 10, when Press TV published 13 reports to VOA's four, more than three times as many. This suggests Press TV, which is based in the country most negatively affected by the U.S. withdrawal, perceived a greater obligation to provide continuing coverage of this event to its audience than did Voice of America. The number of news reports published in the days beyond the scope of this research provides anecdotal support for this idea. Between May 11 and May 13, Press TV published an additional 24

news reports concerning the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. During the same time frame, Voice of America published eight.

Regarding headline tone, it should be noted that some headlines that seem similar in content were classified as either negative or positive depending upon which news organization published them. For example, headlines indicating European support for the JCPOA or Iran were classified as having positive tone if published by Press TV because they implied support for the broadcaster's home country. Similar headlines published by Voice of America, however, were classified as having negative tone because they implied an oppositional stance to the new U.S. position. The concept of tone being analyzed not only by the specific words of the headline, but also by the news organization's location or the audience's cultural and political perspectives, deserves further consideration.

Conclusion

This descriptive content analysis is inherently inductive and stops short of making theoretical suggestions. However, by analyzing three days of headlines published by these international broadcasters, the results provide promise for constructing hypotheses that could be explored in future studies. One potential hypothesis could focus on the possibility that the majority of headlines published during the first few days of a breaking international news story may exhibit negative tone simply because the status quo has changed. A second potential hypothesis could suggest that a larger percentage of headlines may exhibit negative tone when published by news organizations located in a country that is significantly impacted by whatever international change has occurred. A third potential hypothesis could concern the type of tone present in headlines published by news organizations that represent the point of view held by their country's political authority, whether the event in question could be interpreted as negatively or positively affecting that country.

This analysis has limitations. Only two international broadcasters, Press TV and Voice of America, were included in this research. Examining headlines published by other international broadcasters may provide results that change the percentages of headlines exhibiting negative, positive, or neutral tone. Examining headlines published by news organizations located in Iran's regional political rivals, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, would likely yield different results. This research does not address whether the full published reports on each news organization's website adhere to the tone suggested by their respective headlines. Finally, the content analyzed in this research was published in English, meaning the information was intended for a global English-speaking audience. Examination of content produced for non-English-speaking audiences may yield different results.

Studying headlines published by international news organizations opens a window into how the global media system operates. Such exploration provides insight into the ways these organizations choose to inform their global audiences, and it offers clues about how information providers potentially influence audience

reactions through headline choices. This line of inquiry also creates an opportunity to examine how published headlines reflect each organization's stated mission. Finally, studying news headlines can offer hints as to the tone an organization's future coverage of a particular international issue might take. Recognizing these aspects of headline construction and publication could shape global media consumers' understanding of how news media organizations use headlines to depict important international events.

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