Mediated Public Diplomacy and the Contest Over International Agenda-Building in the Gulf Diplomatic Crisis

Osama Albishri[1*] · Xiaomeng Lan[2] · Spiro Kiousis[3]

[1]Ph.D. Student, University of Florida; King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

[2]Assistant Professor of Public Relations, BNU-HKBU United International College

[3]Professor of Public Relations, University of Florida

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the theories of mediated public diplomacy, intermedia agenda-building, and homophily, this study aims to compare the effectiveness of the public diplomacy efforts made by the Saudi and Qatari governments during the Gulf diplomatic crisis. The study examines the respective international agenda-building influence of the state-sponsored media from the two competing Gulf states on the regional and international media's coverage of the crisis. Results show that, compared to Saudi-sponsored *Al Arabiya,* Qatari-sponsored *Al Jazeera* was more effective in shaping the agendas of the regional and international media. Whereas *Al Arabiya* has a weak first-level agenda-building influence and a moderate-to-strong influence at the second and the third levels, *Al Jazeera* demonstrates a strong agenda-building influence on the foreign media outlets at all of the three levels. We also analyze the impact of political proximity and the language of the media content (English or Arabic) on the agenda-building relationships. Still, the results suggest that, compared to *Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera* was more successful in shaping the agendas of the regional and international news media—no matter where they are based in the allied or the opposing countries. Also, we observe a higher level of consistency between Arabic- and English-language content in *Al Jazeera*.

Key words: mediated public diplomacy, agenda-building, state-sponsored media, homophily, the Gulf crisis

Corresponding author: [1]oalbishri@ufl.edu, [2]maggiexmlan@uic.edu.hk, [3]skiousis@jou.ufl.edu

Introduction

Back in 2017, the Gulf States had experienced one of the worst diplomatic crises to hit the region in many decades as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt decided to cut diplomatic ties with Qatar over accusations of sponsoring terrorism and attempting to destabilize the region through its media outlets (Milton-Edwards, 2017). This decision was immediately followed by a war of words between the two sides through diplomatic and non-diplomatic channels. The dispute further deepened as Saudi Arabia and its allies issued a threatening 13-point ultimatum to Qatar for ending the blockade that included closing *Al Jazeera*, removing Turkish troops from Qatar's soil, ending contact with groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and cutting ties with Iran (Wintour, 2017). Qatar rejected those demands, without surprise, and condemned them as a threat to its national sovereignty (Lynch, 2017).

Following this escalation, there was notable hostility and extensive coverage by local media in both countries. The Qatari government-sponsored news outlet *Al Jazeera* alone published over 1,800 news stories about the crisis in the first year. In addition, both sides are said to engage in a "public diplomacy war" through the use of state-sponsored international news channels and international campaigns that had cost millions of dollars (Dorsey, 2017). Given the significant political and economic impact the conflict has had on the Gulf region as well as the sheer amount of media attention it has received, this study focuses on the mediated public diplomacy efforts by the governments of the two sides directed to foreign media and their audiences with the purpose to win the "battle for hearts and minds" (Gilboa, 2006). Based on the theories of (mediated) public diplomacy, (intermedia) agenda-building, and homophily, in particular, the study aims to understand how state-sponsored media were leveraged by Saudi and Qatari governments to promote the salience of preferred reference frames and interpretations regarding the diplomatic crisis among regional and international news media. Notably, the two state-sponsored media networks of interest in this study, *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya*, are using Arabic as well as English content to engage audiences both within and outside the region. This study thus also attempts to examine whether the Arabic-language versus English-language news content made a difference in terms of their agenda-building ability among the regional media outlets and those from outside of the region.

Besides, the patterns of alignment of the media agendas from and about the Arab region cannot be understood well without a recognition of the political, ideological, and cultural factors that have annotated the relations among the key players in the region and the countries that have interests in the region. Through the lens of the homophily thesis, which has been applied to public diplomacy to give special attention to the cultural and political proximity between countries and to the possible implications of such proximity on the effectiveness of international agenda-building as well as other forms of international communication endeavors (Sheafer, Shenhav, Takens, & van Atteveldt, 2014; Zhang et al., 2017), it may be argued that the agenda-building relationships are at least partly driven by the political stance the countries

of origin of the media have taken. Except for historical reasons, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt have formed an alliance based on their anti-Iranian stance (Tok, 2021). While also a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Qatar's relationship with the Saudi-led bloc had soured dramatically due to its Iran-friendly stance, strong relationships with popular Islamist movements in the region (particularly with the Muslim Brotherhood), and close economic and political ties with Turkey (Tok, 2021). Therefore, we apply the homophily thesis to the case of Saudi and Qatari mediated public diplomacy efforts during the Gulf diplomatic crisis.

This study thus advances the understanding of mediated public diplomacy by observing the agenda-building influence of the state-sponsored media based in two competing Gulf states. Specifically, this involves the examination of the intermedia agenda-building role the state-sponsored media may have played during a diplomatic crisis. Another value of the study lies in its focus on the Arab context. While the investigation of the global intermedia agenda dynamics has been limited in both scope and volume to a number of mainstream media outlets that are predominantly Western-based, the possibility that sources from the Arab region can also dictate the salience of news objects, attributes, and association networks within the media agendas is in need of more empirical attention.

Literature Review

Mediated Public Diplomacy

Traditionally, public diplomacy is understood as the governmental attempts to build and maintain positive relationships with foreign citizens for the purpose of securing support for its own foreign policy interests (Golan, Arceneaux, & Soule, 2018). Typical public diplomacy tactics include education and cultural exchanges and language education programs (Golan, 2013).

More recently, the concept is expanded to include government use of news media to promote their soft power and gain support for foreign policies among the global public (Golan et al., 2018; Golan, Manor, & Arceneaux, 2019). Entman (2008) refers to this newer practice of public diplomacy as "mediated public diplomacy," which highlights the role of media along the communication paths linking a government to foreign elites, media, and the public. Mediated public diplomacy is then defined as the organized attempts by the government "to exert as much control as possible over the framing" of policy in foreign media (Entman, 2008, p. 89). This definition recognizes the strategic nature of mediated public diplomacy, as framing has been conceptualized as a process involving purposeful "selection and salience" (Entman, 1993). By selecting and calling attention to particular aspects of the reality described, framing is meant to shape the perspective from which the audience of the message perceives the reality.

Golan et al. (2019) provide a more updated definition of mediated public diplomacy to take into consideration of a variety of mediated channels, including social media, state-sponsored

media, and advertising. The following definition is offered: "Mediated public diplomacy refers to the organized attempts by governments to influence foreign public opinion via mediated channels including paid, earned, owned and shared media for the purpose of gaining support for its foreign policy objectives" (p. 1670).

Evaluating Mediated Public Diplomacy

In view of the centrality of media in public diplomacy, the evaluation of mediated public diplomacy has often been approached through the evaluation of the influence on media content. Sheafer and Gabay (2009a) argue that mediated public diplomacy always involves a contest between national actors in the international arena. As favorable media coverage is a prerequisite for achieving a public diplomacy goal to create a favorable image among foreign publics, the competition to gain access to the media and to affect media content has become critical (Sheafer et al., 2014). Sheafer and Gabay (2009a) call this a contest of international agenda and frame building, arguing that such contest in international media is the first step of a mediated public diplomacy process.

The theories of agenda-building and framing provide necessary structures for studying the (often contested) efforts by national actors in securing access to and influence over the international media. Agenda-building involves the process by which strategic communication efforts are made by a social actor or an institution to influence the agendas of the news media, the public, and/or the policymakers, with a focus on the salience formation around certain objects and attributes in the agendas (Schweickart, Neil, Kim, & Kiousis, 2016). Scholars have agreed that the agenda-building effects can be observed at three levels. Where the first level of agenda-building is concerned with the transfer of the salience of objects (e.g., issues, political candidates, organizations, foreign nations, and events) between agendas, the second level of agenda-building is concerned with the salience of certain attributes or aspects of those objects (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1993). The third level of agenda-building deals with the patterns of co-occurrence of the objects or attributes in agendas, as it hypothesizes that when certain objects and/or attributes occur together within an agenda, the likelihood of those objects and attributes being jointly seen as prominent increases (Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2012; Schweickart et al., 2016).

Media frame building, on the other hand, concerns the process "that influence the creation or changes of frames applied by journalists" (Scheufele, 1999, p. 115), with a focus on the strategic construction of the frames of reference—the themes or arguments that can be considered by audiences when they discuss an issue or event (Hallahan, 1999). McCombs (1997) links framing to attribute/second-level agenda-setting, arguing that framing is "the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed" (p. 37). Conceptualizing mediated public diplomacy as the efforts to control over framing, Entman (2008) develops a model to help explain whether and why frame contestation develops in the U.S. media coverage of foreign policy. The so-called "cascading network activation model" suggests that the diffusion of

frames tends to run in a top-down fashion, with the president and members of the administration at the top of the hierarchy (who have the greatest power to initiate the framing building process), followed by the elites, media, and then, the public.

Intermedia Agenda Building

Intermedia agenda-building research is specifically concerned with how such salience transfers between different media agendas (Atwater, Fico, & Pizante, 1987; Denham, 2010; Ragas & Kiousis, 2010; Saffer, 2013). While mass media often build an agenda for themselves, evidence has shown that the newsworthiness of international events and issues may also result from intermedia agenda-building (Denham, 2010; Golan, 2006). Empirical research in intermedia agenda-building has further lent evidence for the role of media in government-to-citizen engagement. In the mediated public diplomacy context, for example, those media who have adopted the government's agendas and frames can help spread activation and acceptance of at least part of the agendas and frames within the interrelated network among foreign publics and international media (Entman, 2008). A growing number of empirical studies have found that the influence of public diplomacy and political public relations can be played out through the process of intermedia agenda-building (Golan & Viatchaninova, 2014; Sheafer & Gabay, 2009b; Zhang et al., 2017). Still, more research needs to be done on media public diplomacy from the perspective of the intermedia agenda dynamics.

State-Sponsored Media and Mediated Public Diplomacy

More recently, scholars have paid increased attention to the role of the state-sponsored media in helping advance a government's or a country's favourable agendas in international media and public opinion in foreign societies. Calling *Al Jazeera* "a highly potent public diplomacy tool" for the Qatari government, Samuel-Azran (2013) analyzed the Arabic and English content in Qatar-funded *Al Jazeera's* website about Saudi Arabia against a backdrop of long-standing irritation between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The study found that the tone of the Arabic content in *Al Jazeera* was highly consistent with the Qatari government's interests —an increased number of articles critical of Saudi Arabia were published during the conflicts than pre-and post-conflict periods. In comparison, the English content did not demonstrate a significant variation in tone of coverage of Saudi Arabia across the periods studied.

Fahmy and Al Emad (2011), too, studied the strategic use of two languages by *Al Jazeera* to target different audiences from the Arab world and the western countries. The study compared the coverage on the conflict between the U.S. and Al Qaeda from *Al Jazeera's* English- and Arabic-language websites during March 2004. Results showed that the conflict-related articles were published more as lead stories and top stories in the English website than in the Arabic website. However, the study failed to find a significant difference between the two websites in terms of the preferred perspective cited (the U.S. and its allies

versus Al Qaeda) or the tone of coverage.

Cheng, Golan, and Kiousis (2016) examined the effects of the Chinese government's public diplomacy efforts in terms of the effectiveness of state-sponsored media in shaping foreign media agendas. The Chinese state-sponsored media's agenda-building influence was found at the first and second levels. Zhang et al. (2017), too, looked at the role of Chinese state-sponsored media in shaping global media's coverage on Hong Kong protests in 2014. The authors argued that state-sponsored media represent an important type of actor in the mediated public diplomacy process due to the direct or indirect dictation of their editorial policies by the government. The study found empirical evidence for the transmission of agenda from the Chinese state-sponsored media to foreign media, especially to those that were from countries with better government relationship history and a higher level of social system homophily with China.

These studies provide important insights into how state-sponsored media can be used as a public diplomacy tool by governments to inform and influence foreign publics and to increase the understanding of and support for their policy preferences. The current study proposes to extend and develop the knowledge base regarding how effective the state-sponsored media were when used as a public diplomacy tool to communicate and shape the salience of certain objects in news coverage for regional and international media. Besides, as state-sponsored media have increasingly used more than one language to engage and reach out to a diverse audience and acquire a wider international influence (Fahmy & Al Emad, 2011), we assume a dissimilar influence on foreign news agendas when the media use different languages. A bilateral model of mediated public diplomacy was thus proposed within which the agenda-building effects of Saudi and Qatari state-sponsored media on regional and international media were examined. Therefore, the following hypotheses were put forward:

H1: The salience of (a) objects (stakeholders and issues), (b) attributes (stakeholder attributes and issue frames), and (c) co-occurrence network of objects in the Saudi state-sponsored news media's (*Al Arabiya's*) Arabic-language content positively correlated to their salience in the Arabic-language news media in the Arab region.

H2: The salience of (a) objects, (b) attributes, and (c) co-occurrence networks of objects in the Qatari state-sponsored news media's (*Al Jazeera's*) Arabic-language content positively correlated to their salience in the Arabic-language news media in the Arab region.

H3: The salience of (a) objects, (b) attributes, and (c) co-occurrence networks of objects in *Al Arabiya's* English-language content positively correlated to their salience in the English-language international news media.

H4: The salience of (a) objects, (b) attributes, and (c) co-occurrence networks of objects in *Al Jazeera's* English-language content positively correlated to their salience in the English-language international news media.

Homophily in Mediated Public Diplomacy

Further, we were interested in the likely differences in the agenda-building influences on Saudi- and Qatar-allied outlets and media from the neutral parties, respectively. Public diplomacy researchers have explored the patterns of frame diffusion or salience transfer in the global arena using the concept of congruence and the similar concept *homophily*, which refers to the proximity on the political, cultural, and other dimensions between two countries or societies (Sheafer et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2017).

Entman's (2008) cascading network activation model holds that cultural congruence is one of the most important factors that predict frame diffusion. In the mediated public diplomacy context, the degree of cultural congruence between countries may also be a factor determining the success of the mediated public diplomacy efforts. As predicted by Entman (2008), the likely outcomes include the frames being included, treated equally, ignored, or attacked by the media in the target country.

Based on the homophily thesis that "similarity breeds attraction," Sheafer et al.'s (2014) "homophily model" highlights the role of value and political proximity in determining the effectiveness of mediated public diplomacy. Specifically, the study tests the homophily hypotheses in the context of the mediated public diplomacy contest between Israeli and Palestinian governments over promoting preferred framing about two events in foreign media: Israel's disengagement from Gaza and the general elections in Palestine. The study reveals a complex picture of the dynamic competition over time. For instance, while the British media showed more alignment with the Palestinian position compared to the U.S. media, both the U.K. and U.S. media demonstrated the same level of support toward the Israeli position most of the time, due to the higher levels of homophily.

Zhang et al. (2017) look at the role of Chinese state-sponsored media in shaping global media's agenda on Hong Kong protests in 2014. The study found empirical evidence for the transmission of salience from the Chinese state-sponsored media agenda to foreign media agendas, especially to those that were from countries with better government relationship history and a higher level of social system homophily with China. Given this evidence, we explored the following research questions:

RQ1: Were there any differences in the agenda-building influence between the two-state-sponsored media on the content of the news media from regional alliances, rivalries, and neutral states?

RQ2: Were there any differences between the Arabic and English content of the two-state-sponsored media based on the first, second, and third levels of agenda-building?

Method

This study employed a quantitative content analysis method to test the hypothesized three levels of agenda-building relationships. Specifically, the study examined the effectiveness of using *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* as mediated public diplomacy tools by Saudi and Qatari governments, respectively, and their influence on regional and international news coverage of the rift between Qatar and the Saudi Arabia-led quartet.

Sample

Sample data for this study covered one year starting from the first day of the conflict, which was June 5, 2017. The one-year time frame encompassed the majority of the communications by the two sides and the international community over the dispute. Although the conflict between the two sides has been partly resolved at Al Ula Summit, ahead of President Joe Biden arrival to the White House, there is a growing concern over the fragility of the reconciliation among the Gulf countries as the underlying sources of conflict, namely ideological and foreign policy differences, remains unaddressed (Yousef et al., 2021).

Media content concerning the event was obtained from five sources: 1) the two state-sponsored media outlets, *Al Arabiya* (from Saudi Arabia) and *Al Jazeera* (Qatar); 2) major media outlets from regional Saudi-allied states, namely, *Al Bayan* (UAE), *Al Ayam* (Bahrain), and *Al Ahram* (Egypt), who were explicitly supportive of Saudi Arabia in the dispute; 3) major media outlets from regional states who voiced their support of Qatar, namely, *Daily Sabah* (Turkey) and *Iran Daily* (Iran); 4) media outlets from two regional countries who refrained from picking sides, namely, *Al Qabas* (Kuwait) and *Oman Daily* (Oman), and finally; 5) international media outlets—*The New York Times* (U.S.) and *The Guardian* (UK). Both the U.S. and U.K. attempted to play a mediation role in the dispute given the many interests both countries have in the region. The regional and international media outlets were selected based on their popularity in their countries and the availability of the data in their news websites or databases. For the purpose of comparison, both English and Arabic content were obtained from *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera*.

A total of 2,439 articles about the dispute were retrieved from two databases (LexisNexis and NewsBank), the websites of the media outlets of interest, as well as Google Advanced Search, using the following keywords: "Gulf crisis" OR "Qatar blockade" OR "Qatar boycott" OR "boycotting Qatar" OR "Blockading Qatar" OR "Gulf dispute" OR "Qatar Crisis." Due to the large population size, media content was systematically sampled to include 57.89% (N = 1,1412) of the overall media data population. Different sampling techniques were used based on the number of articles originally obtained from each media outlet. For those with small population size (less than 150 articles), all the articles were included in the analysis. For those with medium population size (150-300 articles), a random sample of 30 to 60 percent was drawn from each media outlet. For those with large population size (more than 300 articles), the study used a constructed sampling approach by picking a random day from

the first week of the crisis and then taking an eight-day interval until the last week of the timeframe. Sampling details are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the sampling methods and sample sizes

Country	News Outlet	Language	Number of Articles Collected	Sampling Strategy	Number of Articles Analyzed
Saudi Arabia	Al Arabiya	English	319	Random Sample	101
	Al Arabiya	Arabic	132	Constructed Week	132
Qatar	Al Jazeera	English	583	Constructed Week & Random Sample	153
	Al Jazeera	Arabic	229	Constructed Week	229
UAE	Al Bayan	Arabic	133	Constructed Week	133
Bahrain	Al Ayam	Arabic	229	Random Sample	129
Egypt	Al Ahram	Arabic	91	Entire Sample	91
Kuwait	Al Qabas	Arabic	382	Random Sample	103
Oman	Oman Daily	Arabic	33	Entire Sample	33
Turkey	Daily Sabah	English	94	Entire Sample	94
Iran	Iran Daily	English	112	Entire Sample	112
U.S.	New York Times	English	57	Entire Sample	57
U.K.	The Guardian	English	45	Entire sample	45
TOTAL			2,439		1,412

Measures

In order to estimate the transmission of salience from the Saudi and Qatari government media to the regional and international media agendas, three measures were employed, gauging the salience of objects (first-level agenda-building), attributes (second-level agenda-building), and co-occurrence patterns (third-level agenda-building).

Object Salience

A total of 13 stakeholders and nine issues related to the Gulf diplomatic crisis were selected for the content analysis. The issues and stakeholders were determined based on an initial reading of a small portion (10%) of the sample news stories. The stakeholders were Saudi leaders/officials, Qatari leaders/officials, news media from Saudi Arabia, news media from Qatar, Other Gulf countries/leaders/officials, Iran as country/leaders/officials, Turkey as country/leaders/officials, Yemen as country/leaders/officials, the U.S. as country/leaders/officials, Islamic groups/party (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas), companies and business, NGOs and international organizations (e.g., the United Nations, FIFA), and "other."

The issues were the 13 demands given to Qatar, military operations and actions, links to terrorist groups or individuals, economic consequences, restrictions on access to places of worship, restrictions of transportation, human rights issues, the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, and others. Each stakeholder or issue was coded as present (1) or absent (0). Salience was determined by aggregating the frequencies of the presence of each of the stakeholders or issues in the same agenda (the agenda of each media outlet).

Attribute Salience

Nine issue frames and 13 stakeholder attributes were developed for the analysis, based on the initial reading of the small portion of the sample and on a short list of the so-called generic frames identified in previous studies and have represented general aspects and features of an issue or event (Baran & Davis, 2015; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). In the current study, the issue frames were: conflict, definition of problem, consequences, human interest, morality, redefining alliances or adversaries, reconciliation or cooperation, threat to state sovereignty, and other. The stakeholder attributes were: attributing responsibility, complying with international law, violating international law, attacking the opponent, counterattacking the opponent, supporting peace/reconciliation/cooperation, sabotaging peace/reconciliation/ cooperation, supporting terrorism, countering terrorism, supporting social movements/ revolutions/social change, undermining social movements/revolutions/social change, providing information, and other. Each stakeholder attribute or issue frame was coded as present (1) or absent (0). Salience was determined by an aggregate measure of the presence of each of the stakeholder attributes or issue frames in the same agenda (the agenda of each media outlet).

Co-occurrence Pattern Salience

While salience at the first and second levels was determined by an aggregate measure of the presence of the objects and attributes on agendas, salience at the third level was detected through the co-occurrence of objects on agendas. Salience was determined by frequencies of co-occurrence of each pair of stakeholders or issues in the same news story.

Intercoder Reliability

The Arabic content was coded by two of the authors, one of whom is fluent in Arabic and English. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Recommended by methodologists, *k*-alpha coefficients of .70 or greater were considered as sufficiently reliable for accepting content analysis findings (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). In all, 10% of the English content was used in coder training and calculating Krippendorff's alpha. Intercoder reliability ranged between 0.72 and 0.85 after a few rounds of coding, specifically, .849 for the stakeholders, .745 for the issues, .721 for the stakeholder attributes, and .718 for the issues frames.

Data Analysis

The first and second-level agenda-building relationships between the state-sponsored media and other regional and international media outlets were analyzed using Spearman's rank correlation test. Spearman's rank correlation has been used widely in previous agenda-setting and agenda-building studies to measure the strength of association between two rankings of items on the agendas (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver & Elliott, 1985; Zhang et al., 2017). Statistically significant correlations are considered evidence for the existence of an agenda-building relationship.

For the third-level agenda-building relationships, Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) correlation tests were run in R (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). Matrices in which each row and column represented measurement items were created, calculating the frequencies of co-occurrence in each new article (Guo et al., 2012; Kiousis et al., 2015; Lan, Tarasevich, Proverbs, Myslik, & Kiousis, 2020; Neil et al., 2016). Statistically significant QAP correlation between matrices of state-sponsored media and the other news outlets would suggest an existence of a third-level agenda-building relationship.

Results

First-Level Agenda-Building

Examining the stakeholders emphasized in *Al Arabiya's* and *Al Jazeera's* coverage of the Gulf crisis shows that businesses were the most prominent stakeholders in *Al Arabiya's* Arabic content (20%). On the contrary, they were the least emphasized stakeholders in the news network's English content (3%). The United States was the most salient stakeholder in *Al Arabiya's* English content (36%), followed by Saudi leaders/officials and Qatari leaders/officials. As to *Al Jazeera*, Qatari leaders/officials (37%), the United States (28%), and NGO/International Organization (25%) were the most frequently mentioned stakeholders in the news network's Arabic content, while Qatari media (55%), Qatari leaders/officials (49%), and Iran (47%) were the most emphasized stakeholders in the English content. The Spearman's correlation of stakeholder agendas shows a significant correlation between *Al Jazeera's* Arabic and English content ($r = .748$, $p < .01$). The correlation of *Al Arabiya's* prioritization of stakeholders between its Arabic and English content was not significant.

Moving to the issue agendas, the Arabic content in *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* showed similar ordering of their most frequently mentioned issues: relations to terrorism (50%; 28%), economic outcomes (30%; 28%), and restrictions on transportation (14%; 28%). In the English coverage, relations to terrorism was also the most salient issue in *Al Arabiya* (66%) and *Al Jazeera* (61%), followed by the list of demands (28% and 29%, respectively). The third emphasized issue in *Al Jazeera's* English content was military action (9%), whereas, in *Al Jazeera's* English articles, it was restrictions on transportations (26%). Similar to stakeholders, the correlation between the Arabic and English content with regard to the list of issues was statistically significant in the case of *Al Jazeera* only ($r = .826$, $p < .05$). The

correlation of *Al Arabiya's* prioritization of issues between its Arabic and English content was not significant.

Table 2 presents the correlations of stakeholder and issue salience (a.k.a., indicators of the first-level agenda-building relationship) between *Al Arabiya's* and *Al Jazeera's* agendas and each of the foreign media agendas. The hypotheses predicted that the salience of objects in *Al Arabiya's* (**H1-a**) and *Al Jazeera's* (**H2-a**) Arabic-language content would positively influence the salience of objects in other Arabic-language news media in the Arab region. The hypotheses were supported in three out of five pairs of stakeholder agendas in the case of *Al Arabiya* (average correlation = .628), compared to four out of five pairs of stakeholder agendas in the case of *Al Jazeera* (average correlation = .777). With regards to the transfer of the issue salience, *Al Arabiya's* agenda was only correlated with Al Bayan from UAE ($r =$ .711, $p < .05$), while *Al Jazeera* was correlated with Al Bayan ($r = .727$, $p < .05$), *Al Ayam* from Bahrain ($r = .898$, $p < .001$), and Al Qabas from Kuwait ($r = .867$, $p < .001$). Overall, the hypothesized *Al Arabiya's* (**H1-a**) and *Al Jazeera's* (**H2-a**) first-level Agenda-Building influence on other news outlets in the Arab region was partially supported. In cases where *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* were both found to be significantly correlated with the same news media, the Fisher *r*-to-z transformation was used to calculate the differences between the two correlation coefficients to see if one was significantly different from the other. As shown in Table 2, there was no evidence for such differences.

Results from comparing the first-level agenda-building influence of *Al Arabiya's* (**H3-a**) and *Al Jazeera's* (**H4-a**) English-language content on the selected English-language international news media content were also summarized in Table 2. There was no significant correlations found between *Al Arabiya* agenda and the international media agendas with regard to the stakeholder salience, whereas *Al Jazeera* coverage was found to have significant correlations with *Daily Sabah* from Turkey ($r = .823$, $p < .01$), *Iran Daily* ($r = .902$, $p < .001$), and *The Guardian* from U.K. ($r = .708$, $p < .05$). When it comes to issue salience, both *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* had significant correlations with international media outlets in all of the four possible pairs of issue agendas.

RQ1 asked whether there were differences in the agenda-building influence between the two-state-sponsored media (*Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera*) on the news media from regional alliances, rivalries, and neutral states. To answer the question, the frequencies of stakeholders and issues in the regional news media were aggregated based on the country's political stance on the Gulf diplomatic crisis. This resulted in three categories of regional news media: News outlets from countries endorsing Saudi Arabia's stance (i.e., *Al Bayan* from UAE, *Al Ayam* from Bahrain, and *Al Ahram* from Egypt); news outlets from countries endorsing Qatar's stance (i.e., *Daily Sabah* from Turkey, and *Iran Daily* from Iran); news outlets from neutral states (i.e., *Al Qabas* from Kuwait, and *Oman Daily* from Oman). The news agendas of the three types of regional media were respectively correlated with *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* using Spearman's rank-order correlations. The results showed that *Al Arabiya* had significant correlations of stakeholder agendas with media from neutral states and of issue agendas with news outlets from rival states. *Al Jazeera*, on the other side, was successful in shaping both

stakeholder and issue agendas of all the types of regional media, no matter whether they were from Qatar's alliances, rivalries, or neutral states.

Table 2. Summary of first level agenda-building linkages among state-sponsored media, regional and international media using Spearman's rank order correlation

	Media Outlets	Al Arabiya		Al Jazeera		Fisher r-to-z	
		Stakeholders	Issues	Stakeholders	Issues	Stakeholders	Issues
Across Arabic News Media	Al Bayan		.711*		.727*		-0.06
	Al Ayam	.665*		.846***	.898**	-0.98	
	Al Ahram	.521		.618*			
	Al Qabas	.699*		.785**	.867***	-0.43	
	Oman Daily			.858***			
Across International Media	Daily Sabah	.970***		.823**	.886**		1.19
	Iran Daily	.878**		.902***	.976***		-1.45
	New York Times	.952***			.857**		.99
	The Guardian	.952***		.708*	.810*		1.26
Based on Political Stance	Endorsing Saudi Arabia			.699*	.831*		
	Endorsing Qatar	.922**		.881***	.934***		-0.15
	Neutral	.601*		.827***	.861**	-1.08	
Within (A.R. vs. EN) and between Main Sources	Al Jazeera AR	.670*	.826*	.748**	.826*		
	Al Arabiya EN				.881**		

Note: $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$

Second-Level of Agenda-Building

The second-level Agenda-Building hypotheses predicted that the salience of stakeholders' and issues' attributes would transfer from *Al Arabiya* (**H1-b**) and *Al Jazeera* (**H2-b**) to other Arabic-language regional news outlets. This transfer of salience was observed in five out five pairs of stakeholder attribute agendas for *Al Arabiya*, with an average correlation of .568, and it was also evident in five out of five pairs of stakeholder attribute agendas for *Al Jazeera*, with an average correlation of .538. Similarly, the transfer of the salience of the issue frames from *Al Arabiya* to other Arabic-language news media content was evident in five out of five pairs of issue agendas, with an average correlation of .644. *Al Jazeera*, too, achieved five out of five significant correlations with Arabic-language regional media, with an average correlation of .648. Thus, both **H1-b** and **H2-b** were supported.

H3-b and **H4-b** predicted a transfer of attribute salience from *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* to English-language international news media. As shown in Table 3, both *Al Arabiya's* and *Al Jazeera's* attribute agendas had significant correlations with those of the international media. However, the Fisher *r*-to-z comparison of issues coefficients suggested that *Al Jazeera* was

significantly more successful in shaping the salience of certain issue frames of the Turkish news media (Daily Sabah). Therefore, both **H3-b** and **H4-b** were supported.

Based on the respective political stances on the diplomatic crisis, the results did not show any differences between *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* in terms of their second-level agenda-building influence on the news media from regional alliances, rivalries, and neutral states. Unlike their differing in terms of first-level agenda-building influence, *Al Arabiya's* second-level agenda-building influence was consistent between its Arabic- and English-language content. The correlation between the two types of content was significant (r = .480, p < .001 for stakeholder attribute agendas; r = .421, p < .001 for issue frame agendas). The consistency between the Arabic- and English-language content of *Al Jazeera* was noticeably even higher, with a correlation of .589 (p < .001) between content for stakeholder attribute agendas and .566 (p < .001) for issue frame agendas.

Table 3. Summary of second level agenda-building linkages among state-sponsored media, regional and international media using Spearman's rank order correlation

	Media Outlets	Al Arabiya		Al Jazeera		Fisher r-to-z	
		Stakeholders	Issues	Stakeholders	Issues	Stakeholders	Issues
Across Arabic News Media	Al Bayan	.677***	.703***	.546***	.612***	1.84	0.95
	Al Ayam	.644***	.628***	.577***	.615***	0.94	0.12
	Al Ahram	.579***	.600***	.456***	.680***	1.48	-0.8
	Al Qabas	.503***	.707***	.576***	.761***	-0.9	-0.69
	Oman Daily	.439***	.580***	.533***	.573***	-1.08	-0.06
Across International Media	Daily Sabah	.639***	.434***	.609***	.671***	0.43	-2.04*
	Iran Daily	.589***	.405***	.682***	.571***	-1.37	-1.29
	New York Times	.595***	.503***	.502***	.531***	1.17	-0.22
	The Guardian	.592***	.564***	.589***	.566***	0.04	-0.02
Based on Political Stance	Endorsing Saudi Arabia	.687***	.746***	.597***	.749***	1.35	-0.04
	Endorsing Qatar	.651***	.439***	.678***	.652***	-0.42	-1.81
	Neutral	.518***	.721***	.598***	.752***	-1.02	-0.4
Within (A.R. vs. EN) and between Main Sources	Al Jazeera AR	.547***	.722***	.598***	.617***	-	-
	Al Arabiya EN	.480***	.421***	.526***	.533***	-	-

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Third-Level Agenda-Building

The third-level Agenda-Building hypotheses proposed that the salience of stakeholders' and issues' co-occurrence network would transfer from *Al Arabiya* (**H1-c**) and *Al Jazeera*

(**H2-c**) to other Arabic-language regional news outlets. As shown in Table 4, the transfer of stakeholders' network of co-occurrence was supported in five out five pairs of network correlations for both *Al Arabiya* (average *QAP* = .621) and *Al Jazeera* (average *QAP* = .774). With regards to the transfer of issues co-occurrence network, *Al Arabiya* had significant correlations with all the other Arabic news outlets with an average QAP of .672, while *Al Jazeera's* network of issues was correlated with a similar network in four out five Arabic news outlets (average QAP = .645). In sum, **H1-c** was fully supported, whereas **H2-c** was partly supported.

Across international news media, **H3-c** and **H4-c** predicted a transfer of objects' co-occurrence network salience from *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* to English-language international news media. The networks of co-occurrences of stakeholders of Al Jazeera's and Al Arabiya English content were significantly correlated with the stakeholders' network of all international news outlets (*Al Arabiya's* average *QAP* = .603; *Al Jazeera's* average *QAP* = .775). Issues' co-occurrence networks of *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* were also significantly correlated with all the four international news media (*Al Arabiya's* average *QAP* = .826; *Al Jazeera's* average *QAP* = .888). Overall, **H3-c** and **H3-c** were both supported. Finally, the comparison between Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera's transfer of objects co-occurrences on the basis of political stance toward the Gulf crisis by the hosting nations of news sources, the results suggest that there are no differences between the two state-sponsored networks as all the co-occurrences correlations were significant for both stakeholders and issues (Table 4).

RQ2 asked whether there are any differences between the Arabic and English content of the two state-sponsored media based on the first, second, and third levels of agenda-building. While the answer for the first and second levels was mentioned above. The comparison of the third level agendas between the Arabic and English content by *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* shows that, on stakeholder co-occurrences networks, there was a significant correlation in the case of *Al Arabiya* (*QAP* = .623, *p* < .05) and *Al Jazeera* (*QAP* = .791, *p* < .001). The correlation of issues' co-occurrences network between the Arabic and English was only significant for *Al Jazeera* (Table 4).

To further explore the agenda-building linkages in the current data across state-sponsored media, a comparison was conducted to compare the Arabic content by *Al Jazeera* to the Arabic news coverage by *Al Arabiya*. The results show that the two media sources had moderate to strong correlations in their first, second and third levels of agenda-building, suggesting that their Arabic coverage of the crisis had (to some extent) emphasized similar issues and stakeholders as well as how those objects were defined or framed. Correlating the English content of the two state-sponsored media revealed that *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya* had different agendas when it came to stakeholders' saliency (*r* = .531, *p* > .05) while having a markedly similar emphasis on particular issues (*r* = .881, *p* < .001). On the second and third levels of agenda-building, the two English sources show moderate to strong correlations of their agenda (Table 3 & 4).

Table 4. Summary of third level agenda-building linkages among state-sponsored media, regional and international media using quadratic assignment procedure

Media Outlets		Al Arabiya		Al Jazeera	
		Stakeholders	Issues	Stakeholders	Issues
Across Arabic News Media	Al Bayan	.609**	.728**	.637**	.582*
	Al Ayam	.705**	.556*	.761***	
	Al Ahram	.644**	.647*	.718**	.726**
	Al Qabas	.627**	.674**	.860***	.757**
	Oman Daily	.520*	.755***	.894***	.515*
Across International Media	Daily Sabah	.628**	.758***	.816***	.893***
	Iran Daily	.609**	.830***	.933***	.932***
	New York Times	.539*	.851***	.606**	.877**
	The Guardian	.637**	.865***	.744**	.850**
Based on Political Stance	Endorsing Saudi Arabia	.702**	.691*	.754**	.584*
	Endorsing Qatar	.644**	.837***	.921***	.956***
	Neutral	.625**	.744***	.914***	.702**
Within (AR vs. EN) and between Main Sources	Al Jazeera AR	.673**	.567*	.791****	.715**
	Al Arabiya EN	.623*		.695**	.819***

Note: $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$

Discussion

This study explored the role of "state-sponsored media" as a public diplomacy tool with regard to their agenda-building influence on Middle Eastern and international news media. Using a content analysis that examined the respective relationship of Qatari and Saudi state-sponsored media networks' coverage of the diplomatic conflict between the two countries with multiple regional and international news media content, we found that the Qatari network, *Al Jazeera*, did a better job in shaping foreign media agendas compared to its regional competitor: *Al Arabiya*. Producing news content in both Arabic and English-language versions, *Al Jazeera* has become a substantial source of leverage for the Qatari government to influence regional and international media. This bilateral agenda-building impact was evident at all three levels of the agenda-building relationship.

To a considerable degree, the news agendas of the mainstream media outlets from Turkey and Iran (who were seen as backing the Qatari side in the diplomatic conflict), UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt (who were Saudi Arabia's allies), and Kuwait and Oman (who took on a neutral stance on the conflict within the timeframe of the study)—reflected the priorities ascribed to certain stakeholders and issues in the rift, certain attributes of the stakeholders and frames

of the issues, and certain networks of associations of these elements by *Al Jazeera*. The agenda-building influence of the Qatar-based news network was also observed in the coverage by *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, which themselves have long been an important agenda-setter and -builder for the public opinion and global media (Golan, 2006; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004).

In comparison, while *Al Arabiya's* agenda-building relationship was frequently found at the second level (attributes of stakeholders and frames of issues) and third level (co-occurrence patterns), this influence was not consistent across different foreign media outlets at the first level (stakeholders and issues). Specifically, media agendas of only one out of three regional allies of Saudi Arabia selected for this study (Bahrain) demonstrated alignment in terms of the stakeholder salience, while another one ally-based (UAE) media aligned its agenda with *Al Arabiya* regarding the issue salience. One neutral state-based (Kuwait) media outlet showed stakeholder agenda convergence. Surprisingly, media outlets of the two countries from Saudi's opposing side (Turkey and Iran) were found consistent with Saudi *Al Arabiya* in the amount of importance attached to certain issues in their respective coverage of the conflict. This issue salience embedded in the Saudi source was also adopted by the two international outlets (*The New York Times* and *The Guardian*). These results suggest that *Al Arabiya's* English-language content may be more effective in shaping foreign media agendas, as the news articles collected from the Turkish and Irani news outlets as well as the two international news were in English.

In fact, we did observe a lower level of correlations between *Al Arabiya's* English-language content and Arabic-language content across the three levels of agendas compared to Qatari *Al Jazeera*. On the other hand, it may be implied that *Al Jazeera* was more effective in shaping regional and international news agendas due to the consistent content between the English- and Arabic-language versions, especially when it came to a conflict situation when groundbreaking news and comments were strategically balanced with Qatari interests.

It is important to note that the unique impact of *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* on regional and international media is not so clear cut. Although *Al Jazeera* had evidently more and higher correlations with other regional and international news media, its agenda also significantly correlated with *Al Arabiya* across the three levels of agenda building for their Arabic content. As for the English content, the two state-sponsored media had emphasized different stakeholders in their news coverage of the Gulf crisis. A possible explanation for this might be that both networks (at least based on their Arabic news content) agreed on the basis of issues and the important stakeholders related to this conflict and presented both sides of the arguments in their coverage of the Gulf crisis. However, validating this assumption requires additional analysis to check if *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* offered a balanced coverage that presented the perspectives of both sides of the conflict, which is beyond the scope of this study.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several important implications to the theory and practice of mediated public diplomacy. First, previous agenda-building literature has examined the intermedia agenda-building effect based on political, cultural, and economic proximity (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009b; Zhang et al., 2017). This study examined the Saudi and Qatari governments' mediated public diplomacy effort through their state-sponsored news networks and explored the agenda-building relationship based on regional boundaries, language, and political proximity manifested in the states' political stance toward the crisis, thus, extending the application of such theoretical framework to a non-Western context.

Second, when investigating mediated public diplomacy efforts during the time of crisis, the political stance of the country hosting the news source could be used as a moderator to explain the strength of the agenda-building effect. For example, it was noticeable that news sources from countries endorsing Qatar during the crisis had shown convergent news reporting with *Al Jazeera* across the three levels of agenda-building. Even in the case where both *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* had significant issues' frames correlation with the Turkish news outlets, *Daily Sabah*, the magnitude of the correlations was significantly higher in favor of *Al Jazeera*. This might not be surprising given the fact that Turkey offered military and economic support to Qatar during the crisis by sending Turkish troops to Qatar and establishing a Turkish military base there as well sending food and goods that Qatar used to import from Saudi Arabia and other neighboring countries. Overall, this suggests that the relative political and economic proximity with Qatar during the crisis has contributed to stronger agenda transfer from the Qatari state-sponsored media to mainstream media in its allied countries. Such conclusion is consistent with previous studies that investigated the role of social system homophily in influencing the strength of international agenda and frame building effect among foreign media (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009a; Sheafer et al., 2014).

Finally, the comparative nature of this empirical investigation offers insights into not only the role of state-sponsored media as mediated public diplomacy tool for Saudi Arabia and Qatar, but also into which media source had a substantial source of leverage to influence regional and international media and what might have contributed to such influence. As the results indicated, the Qatari-backed network, *Al Jazeera*, was more successful in passing its agenda to foreign media across the three levels of agenda compared to its regional competitor, *Al Arabiya*. From a strategic communication perspective, influencing what issues or stakeholders get the most attention by target sources (first level), how those and stakeholders are being characterized or framed by those sources (second level), and how they linked particular issues and stakeholders together (third level) would be an ideal goal for political public relations practitioners (Khalitova, Myslik, Turska-Kawa, Tarasevich, & Kiousis, 2020; Myslik et al., 2019).

Besides the political and economic proximity, the lack of consistency between the Arabic and English news coverage of *Al Arabiya* compared to *Al Jazeera* could explain the differences between the two networks in their agenda-building power. While adopting

different agendas by the state-sponsored/controlled media is generally acceptable when producing news to diverse audiences using different languages, the findings of the current study might not be a successful approach during the time of crisis. In the case of *Al Jazeera*, there were significant correlations between its Arabic and English content across the levels of agendas, and this may have contributed to their success in passing on their agendas to regional and international news media.

Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of this study is that it did not compare the agendas of the governments their political messages regarding the diplomatic crisis and compare that to the news coverage by their respective news network. Future studies could address this issue by comparing the Gulf governments' messages to the news coverage of *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* to explore their level of convergence. Another important limitation of the current study is that it only looks for one media source from each country, and the comparison was based on correlational analysis. Further studies needed to include more news outlets from within and outside the Middle East. Furthermore, a time-lag analysis would be an ideal approach to use in future studies to establish causality between the agenda builder and receivers.

The most important limitation lies in the fact that *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* were mostly correlated with one another across the different sets of comparisons we ran. This has limited us from drawing a solid conclusion regarding the agenda building influence despite the different volume and magnitude of the correlations between these two networks with other regional and international media. Further study is needed to establish such evidence based on time-lag or time-series analyses to see if there were meaningful differences between the two networks in their coverage of the Gulf crisis.

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▌ **Osama Albishri**

Osama Albishri is currently a Ph.D. student in International Communication at University of Florida. He is also a faculty member at King Abdul Aziz University in Saudi Arabia. His primary research interests include political communication, public diplomacy, social network analysis, and computational content analysis. Osama has focused his research on issues that are mostly related to the Middle East. His dissertation work is investigating 40 years of contextualizing Iran in the U.S. elections and its influence on the U.S. policies toward Iran from agenda-building and agenda-setting perspectives.

▌ **Xiaomeng Lan**

Xiaomeng Lan, PhD., is an assistant professor of public relations in the Division of Humanities & Social Sciences at BNU-HKBU United International College. Her research interests include the role and effect of public relations in the public sphere, media relations, organizational identity, and technology-mediated engagement. Her work has appeared in refereed journals, including Journal of Public Relations Research, Chinese Journal of Communication, Journal of Public Interest Communications, Public Relations Journal, and Communication Research Reports.

▌ **Spiro Kiousis**

Spiro Kiousis, Ph.D., APR, is Interim-Dean/Executive Associate Dean for the College of Journalism and Communications and is a professor of public relations. His current research interests include political public relations, political communication, and digital communication. His interdisciplinary research explores the interplay among political public relations efforts, news media content, and public opinion in traditional and interactive mass mediated contexts. Throughout his academic career, he has produced over 170 refereed journal articles, book chapters, books, and conference papers/presentations.