

Media Dependency and Public Skepticism in Authoritarian States: Discursive Trends in Disseminating Information about COVID-19 in Iran

Alireza Azeri Matin* 

Faculty of Arts & Science, International University of Malaya-Wales (IUMW), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
E-mail: azeri_matin@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Being one of the first and hardest hit countries by the coronavirus, Iran still continues to preserve its place among nations with the highest rates of infection and COVID-19 related deaths. While on the surface, such worrying status evinces the failure of the authorities in handling the crisis, at deeper levels, it points to the fundamentalist nature of the government and political system of the country. In this view, the current devastating condition in Iran is a clear indication of the all-out influence of the Islamic regime's ideologies on officials' decision-making and their political agendas throughout the pandemic. Accordingly, the state-run mainstream media, as the most preeminent institution of power, have been incessantly engaged in disseminating a series of ideology-laden information around the issues concerning the coronavirus, and in line with the developing political discourses during pandemic. Far from being based on factual accounts or scientific facts, these disseminated messages inevitably grew into a source of disinformation, ultimately resulting in overall public confusion and skepticism. Through examining the data gathered from some of the most prominent online news agencies run by the government, this study identifies five major discursive trends through which the mainstream media propagated ambiguous and manipulative information about COVID-19. These findings are then explained in the light of media system dependency theory, leading to the argument that within autocratic nation-states, public reliance on media during a national/global crisis brings about new opportunities for state exploitation, and further distressing consequences for the people.

Keywords: COVID-19, Iranian mainstream media, ideology, media system dependency

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***Corresponding Author:** Alireza Azeri Matin
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1740-5293>
E-mail: azeri_matin@yahoo.com



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1. INTRODUCTION

On 19 February 2020, the Ministry of Health in Iran announced the death of two patients with COVID-19 symptoms in the city of Qom. Only a few days later, Iran became a country, apart from China, with the highest number of coronavirus infections in the world (Barnes-Dacey et al., 2020). In fact, within a month and by the 20th of March, the official reports indicated a sharp increase in the spread of the disease with more than 19,644 cases of infection and 1,433 fatalities. Subsequently, in less than a year these numbers reached to 1.9 million infections and 63,000 deaths, while at the present time such figures exceed 6.1 million and 130,000, respectively (worldometers.info). Yet, according to some of the independent analysts as well as frontliners and eyewitnesses in the field, the actual numbers are indeed 3-5 times more than what is officially reported, suggesting the government's statistical cover-up (Fazeli, 2020b; Tajdin & Adamou, 2020). Simply by looking at these alarming figures as well as the lack of transparency in reporting them, what first and foremost becomes obvious is the government's apparent failure in handling the pandemic.

At a deeper level, however, the government's inability to curb the spread of the disease and decelerate the mortality rate, not to mention the economic downturn and social disorders, can be traced to the fundamentalist and authoritarian nature of Iran's political system (Parsa, 2020). This is not surprising, since the Islamic regime is already known as a political entity that has persistently used its religious and ideological fundamentalism to guide its rule over the nation and its international diplomacy throughout the past four decades or so (Ehteshami, 2017; Tajmazi-nani, 2018). Central to such ideological dominance, while operating within anti-West and Revolutionary doctrine, is the state-run national media (Talebian & Talebian, 2019). Accordingly, during the pandemic, the national media have been actively engaged in disseminating a series of ideology-laden information about the coronavirus, in tandem with the developing political discourses and in support of the ruling clerics.

This is indeed paradoxical, since the national media, from a normative perspective, are considered to work for the nation; they primarily exist to benefit people by providing them with useful and critical contents, especially at times of crises. Therefore, it is reasonable to think of national media as the main government-public communication channel which is traditionally considered to be the most effective means for informing and mobilizing the

public against time to reduce the impact of a calamity. Yet within undemocratic nation-states such as Iran, this does not seem to be the case; these institutions of power are merely employed to solidify the state's legitimacy and justify or disguise its oppressions, giving precedence to elites' interests over the well-being of the people (Blout, 2023).

In this way, the disseminated messages by the Iranian mainstream media during the pandemic, rather than presenting factual accounts, scientific facts, or unbiased analyses, reflected the state's ideological principles and political ambitions. Therefore, the gradual accumulation of this ambiguous and manipulative information has inevitably led to overall public confusion and skepticism. In regard to such a disquietingly negative climate in Iran, Alimardani and Elswah (2020) have highlighted issues such as "lack of public trust in officials, religiously charged narratives by unofficial fringe figures and political manipulation of the discourse," as factors shaping the public attitude towards government. Similarly, other authors have pointed to the hindrances in awareness brought about by purveyors of politics and religiosity which have resulted in public cynicism (Blandenier et al., 2020). Moreover, a number of researchers have variously shown the public distrust in the healthcare system and other government sectors responsible for the fight against the pandemic (Larson, 2020; Vardanjani et al., 2020).

2. PURPOSE AND METHOD

The purpose of this study is to identify and look into some of the discursive trends in the Iranian mainstream media's dissemination of ambiguous and manipulative information about COVID-19 and the social/political issues around it. Using critical analysis, it chronologically examines a number of main news reports which appeared on some of the government's most prominent online news agencies in various junctures of the pandemic, reflecting on the Islamic regime's politics/ideologies behind such accounts. Lastly, the study's findings are further explicated in light of Media System Dependency (MSD) theory, providing some insights on how Iranians' reliance on the mainstream as well as alternative media during the pandemic has led to overall public confusion and skepticism.

Unlike most contemporary theories of society that follow the predictive science, the critical theory embraces the moral philosophy, since it is chiefly concerned with "evaluating the freedom, justice, and happiness of societies" (Ingram & Simon-Ingram, 1992, p. xx). Derived from this paradigm is the critical analysis that, according to the

framework proposed by Nixon et al. (2017), may consist of seven steps: (1) naming the specific aspect of practice being analysed, (2) identifying the intended purposes of this aspect of practice, (3) uncovering the assumptions that support these intended purposes, (4) identifying who benefits, (5) identifying who is disadvantaged, (6) linking these specific ideas to society-level patterns, and (7) conceiving of alternatives that mitigate actual or potential harms.

As noted by these authors, being theoretically critical does not necessarily mean being negative. Rather, it suggests thinking deeply and carefully about the (un)intended consequences of the actions taken in a society. Nonetheless, the application of these steps in each of the subsections of Section 3, though not in a distinctly outlined manner, proceeds as follows: (1) pinpointing the spread of specific information about COVID-19 by the government, (2) identifying the government's intention in spreading such information, (3) revealing the possible reasons behind such action, (4) considering the interests sought by any faction of the government, (5) considering the harming consequences of such actions on the people, (6) reflecting on how the government's interests fit into its ideological position, and in regard to (7) the Conclusion section, discussing an overall courses of action that the government could or should take in preventing or minimizing harm to the Iranian people.

The evidence for this study, however, was gathered from a number of the online news agencies that are run or funded by the government (Table 1). Given that these news agencies function strictly within the Islamic Republic's media and mass communication guidelines, they are obliged to preserve the interests of the state, and therefore, their news reflects the state-run mainstream media's. This means that the selection and representation of the news across the state-controlled media outlets, regardless of their size, type, or nature, from subsidiary online news agencies to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), essentially follow the same protocols, as they are set to convey the same message in a more or less similar fashion (Khiabany, 2010). Therefore, deciding on a particular source of news over another, or the number of them, did not seem to have a bearing on critical analysis in terms of reinforcing the foundation of this study's claims, so long as they function under the state's control.

Table 1. Online news agencies and their affiliations to the government

Online news agency	Affiliation
Islamic Republic News Agency	The official news agency of the Islamic Republic of Iran (www.irna.ir)
IRIB News Agency	The online platform of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) (www.iribnews.ir)
Ensaf News	Ranked 4th by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and partially funded by the government (www.ensafnews.com)
Mizan Online News Agency	Associated with Iranian judiciary (www.mizanonline.ir)
Mashregh News	Non-governmental news website, but linked to the Iranian security and intelligence organizations (www.mashreghnews.ir)
Fars News	The second most visited pro-government online news agency, directly supported by the president himself (www.farsnews.ir)
Iranian Students' News Agency	Funded by the government as well as the academic center for education, culture and research (www.isna.ir)
Tabnak	The most visited domestic news site that supports the conservatives, and prominently covering the news of this political faction (www.tabnak.ir)
Kayhan (online)	The most conservative Iranian newspaper published in Tehran, with its editor (Hossein Shariatmadari) being an official representative of the supreme leader (www.kayhan.ir)
Basij News	Established and operated by Basij, an auxiliary to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (www.basijnews.ir)

3. DISCURSIVE TRENDS IN DIFFUSION OF INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

3.1. Politics of the Initial Trivialization of the Crisis

On 7 February 2020, Tabnak Professional News Site published an article titled: "Corona virus and unreasonable panic in society," in which the author lamented "Dear compatriots, unfortunately the world's lobbyists of power [the West] are in an outright war with China, and this is evident in the unreasonable panic that they have created... the symptoms of infection by Corona are not more serious than the simple colds... we still do not have a single positive case in Iran" (Tabnak, 2020). The next day, on 8 February 2020, only two days prior to the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution that is celebrated yearly since

1979, Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) published two end-to-end news articles with the headlines “No case of coronavirus has been seen in Qom” (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2020a) and “By attending the demonstration, the nation will show the greatness of the Islamic Republic to the world” (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2020b). As a matter of fact, just a few days before the publication of these bulletins, a number of healthcare personnel had reported the hospitalization of several patients with COVID-19 symptoms in Qom (the holy city near Tehran), two of which were by then announced dead (Kursun & Ahmed, 2020). The reports of the arrival of the coronavirus and the seriousness of its quick spread across the country, however, were largely suppressed by the authorities for at least three days before they unhurriedly began to admit these reports (Alavi, 2020).

Flagrantly, the plan to withhold news about the spread of the virus in Iran was contrived by the state for a number of reasons: Firstly, the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, which each year draws large crowds to the streets, is of paramount importance for the ruling clerics in Iran since this ceremonial event is considered to be a form of public endorsement for the regime’s legitimacy (Intini, 2015). Hence, it is reasonable that the authorities would stifle the healthcare providers’ warnings about the outbreak of the virus at any cost, for fear of deterring the masses from attending the demonstration. Secondly, in a similar manner, this cover-up was designed to avoid affecting turnout at parliamentary elections, which were also a few days away, precisely because the arrival of fewer people at the polls would be translated as less popularity of the Islamic regime (Wintour, 2020). Thirdly, the holy city of Qom, where the coronavirus initially emerged in Iran, is home to some of the most prominent Shiite religious sites that draw thousands of pilgrims from around the world (Badshah et al., 2020). Thus, the city’s lockdown would bring about a downturn in worshipping activities and thereof the clerics’ revenues (Nhamo et al., 2020), not to mention people’s loss of faith in the sacredness of the city, which was widely held by believers to be protected by the divinity (Wood, 2020). The authorities’ precarious decision-makings about not considering any precautionary measures in Qom, therefore, provide a glimpse into the regime’s economic ambitions and religious orientation, as well as its disregard for the life-threatening risks that such decisions might bring about.

Taking everything into account, the authorities’ initial trivialization of the coronavirus clearly illustrated the state’s absolute control over dissemination of information

and mainstream news politics in Iran. More importantly, this incident took place at a critical point in time when expediting the diffusion of accurate and transparent information could substantially reduce the devastating effects of the pandemic. In this way, what motivated the state to take such drastic measures and cover up the presence of coronavirus infections in Qom also highlights a major theme in revolutionary doctrine, reflecting the ruling clerics’ views on the unequal elite-masses power relations. Indeed, since the inception of the Islamic Republic, the interests of powerful groups have been given precedence over those with less power, quite the opposite to what was promised to the people of Iran by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic in 1979 (Gholizadeh & Hook, 2012).

3.2. Untimely Politicking for Iran’s Superiority

On 15 April 2020, IRIB News agency published an article headlined “The high accuracy of the Corona detector” (IRIB News, 2020). Attached with a video clip showing the official ceremony, this article was about a counterfeit device named *Mostaan 110* being unveiled by a number of high-ranking generals headed by the Commander-in-Chief of the Islamic Republic Revolutionary Guard (IRRG) Hossein Salami, who claimed that their researchers’ state-of-the-art invention can detect the coronavirus remotely within a 100 meters radius in less than five seconds. As part of his speech in this video clip, Salami asserted that IRRG’s so-called ‘technological feat’ was a “hard punch at the mouths of the Islamic Republic’s enemies,” a catchphrase oft-repeated by Iranian officials and their sympathisers, indicating a confrontational move punishing the West. The sudden appearance of this unverifiable device, however, echoed loudly throughout the national media outlets, especially at a time when the whole world was in a search for ways of detection, prevention, or curing the illness caused by the deadly virus. Simultaneously, Iranian Students’ News Agency reflected on this event under the title: “Major General Salami: *Mostaan 110* was invented by the Basijis” (Iranian Students’ News Agency, 2020). Of course, to specifically include the word ‘Basijis’ in the title and giving them credit for their invention was already an indication of politicizing the case, as Basijis are paramilitary individuals who serve as an auxiliary force engaged in enforcing state control over society (Golkar, 2015). This cheap-looking device, however, was very soon debunked by several domestic and international scientific groups, most notably the Physics Society of Iran which called *Mostaan 110* “an unbelievable claim, as far as science fiction

is concerned” (Sinaiee, 2020).

Another instance which exemplifies the state’s political campaigning during the pandemic was reflected in various national press outlets, such as the article published on 20 February 2020 by IRNA. The title of this article was a quote from the Deputy Minister of Health, saying “Iran is ready to provide help for the United States in order to control Corona” (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2020c), which is clearly an absurd and sarcastic statement politically organised in line with the Islamic regime’s other pretentious gestures of superiority over the West. The article then continued: “The US healthcare system is incapable of controlling the coronavirus,” suggesting that Iran is in a better position than the US in regard to handling the pandemic.

What both of these articles show is the Islamic Republic’s obvious determination to demonstrate Iran’s upper hand in science and technology over the West, sending a message to its so-called ‘enemies’ about the state’s self-sufficiency and its independence from major powers. Furthermore, hastily publicizing an unrealistic achievement, and only days later deceptively representing the US as destitute for Iran’s help, right at the time when Iranians were desperate for international aid, was not only hypocritical but also once again provided strong evidence of the state’s complete conviction to the Revolutionary principles.

3.3. Promoting a Sacred Formula for Curing COVID-19

As soon as the World Health Organization announced that Iran was one of the largest coronavirus epicentres in the world, any further hesitance by the authorities to admit the critical situation of the pandemic in Iran became too obvious to keep under wraps. As the officials’ further suppression of information on the seriousness of the pandemic seemed to be outrageously perilous, a number of so-called ‘Shiite medicine experts’ sprang up and claimed to possess a sacred formula for preventing or curing COVID-19 (Arab-Zozani & Ghoddoosi-Nejad, 2021). Under the auspices of the Supreme Leader, who has always been a strong advocate of Islamic medicine (Khamene’i, 2023), various outlets of the national media started to back up these dubious and unscientific prescriptions. These ranged from encouraging people to purchase and consume a mysterious concoction named after ‘Imam Kazem’ to wearing ‘Prophet’s perfume,’ an unknown scented liquid attributed to some other religious personage (Alijani, 2020). Despite the menaces of these alleged remedies, they were welcomed by the state media, and in several instances their advertisers were given space on national TV to hype their

products, not to mention the Ministry of Health’s lenient approach in evaluating the safety of such bogus mixtures. On 19 October 2020, for instance, Basij News published an article with a heading that read: “Do not miss taking Imam Kazim Medicine” (Basij News, 2020). In it, the author quoted Akram Fallah, an expert in traditional medicine who argued that the collection of the narratives of the prophet and his descendants contain about 6,000 pieces of medical advice that we can use today for treating Corona virus infection. Here, Fallah claimed that she had already treated seven patients who were severely infected by the virus.

Along with these incidents, there had also been some attempts by the Parliament to form the ‘Islamic Iranian Medical Organization’ and ‘Complementary Medical Organization,’ with more than 3,000 consultation offices for prescribing the so-called “Islamic Iranian Medicine,” which immensely worried the scientific and medical associations in Iran (BBC News, 2021). The absurdity of such biased forbearance towards both the purveyors and advocates of Islamic medicine becomes more noticeable if one takes a look at the complexity of the bureaucratic structure involved in approval of the scientifically approved national and international medicines manufactured by some of the most well-established pharmaceutical companies (Abdoli, 2020). In this way, both locally made medicines and imported ones are required to undergo systematic scrutiny by policy and law makers as well as several institutions such as the Ministry of Health and Medical Education before being able to hit the market.

Such prejudiced acts are exemplified in an article published on 29 November 2020 by Ensaf News titled “The official position of the Ministry of Health on Imam Kazem medicine” (Ensaf News, 2020). This news article was published after massive controversies which rose up over the trustworthiness of the claims made by promoters of such religiously charged fake medicines, as their increasing number evidently resulted in expanding the rate of the spread of the virus and even more losses of life. As such, Ensaf News carefully took a middle stance and neither disapproved nor dismissed the usefulness of these manifestly ineffective and even hazardous products. In so doing, the article began by reminding the readers about the Supreme Leader’s supportive views on traditional and Islamic medicines, before trying to explain that although there had been no approval from the Ministry of Health for Imam Kazem medicine, there was no solid evidence to prove its ineffectiveness. In response to this, for example, a video of a member of the clerical community was shown

on television and then was circulated in social media going room to room in a hospital rubbing the same bottle of the Prophet's perfume around the patients' faces while mumbling some Quranic verses. A few days later there were also some reports that the very same people who were given such treatments died from COVID-19, discrediting the claims made by their state-backed inventors (Fazeli, 2020a).

3.4. Western Vaccine: A Plot to Annihilate the Islamic Republic

On 8 January 2021, in a live televised speech, the Supreme Leader famously banned the import of the Western vaccines, especially those made by the US and UK, explaining that he had no trust in the West or their vaccines whatsoever (Rodziewicz, 2021). Expressing his lack of confidence in the West, and regarding their vaccine offerings as a plot to annihilate the Islamic Republic, he called himself the custodian of the Iranian people and hence responsible for their well-being. He further tried to ground his decree to ban the import of Western vaccines on the idea that if those vaccines were effective, there should not be so many COVID-19 casualties in the western countries, and that if their vaccines really worked, they should be unwilling to offer them to us.

Following Khamenei's controversial pronouncement, which caused massive criticism equally from inside the country as well as overseas, as usual the Iranian press began to back up his decision to ban the import of the Western countries' vaccines. In this regard, on 14 January 2021, Fars News reflected on the controversies and uploaded a news report with the heading: "The scientific reasons for banning the American and British vaccines" (Fars News, 2021). Quoting Payam Tabarsi, an infectious disease specialist who appeared as a guest doctor on national TV on a number of occasions, this report went on at great length about the numerous drawbacks of COVID-19 vaccines such as Pfizer and Moderna. Casting doubt on the safety of these vaccines, he maintained that in the production of their vaccines, Westerners do not take any responsibility whatsoever.

Similarly, and following the rising disputes about this contentious topic, on 19 January 2021, Mizan Online News Agency published an article with a headline that asked "Why are some quarters still insisting to import American and British Corona vaccines?" (Mizan Online News Agency, 2021). This article was in response to a number of Iranian health experts and medical practitioners who dared to express their worries over the rapidly

increasing rate of COVID-19 cases in the country and the authorities' apparent failure to deal with the pandemic (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Trying to justify Khamenei's reasons for such decisions, the article went on to praise his sense of responsibility for the nation, defending his shrewdness in detecting and nullifying the enemies' sinister scheme to get rid of Muslims.

Elsewhere in the Mizan online news article there was an emphasis on the growing number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in Europe and America, as a way of substantiating Khamenei's reasons for suspecting the effectiveness of the Western vaccines. As such, the authors of the article deliberately chose not to mention the alarming situation in Iran, right at the moment when the clock was ticking for the authorities to avert a humanitarian catastrophe in the country. By the same token, and among other matters, the article overlooked the promising prospects of the high efficacy of the Western vaccines, missing the point that if such shots were developed with the sole purpose of slaying Muslims, then, obviously they would not be extensively used among non-Muslim populations (Khan et al., 2020). Nonetheless, along with the government's mismanagement in various areas, Khamenei's reckless fatwa to ban Western vaccines cost hundreds of thousands of lives. This could have been easily prevented by moving away from dogmatic views on Iran-West relations, and instead prioritizing the democratic and humanistic values involved in decision-makings at such high levels.

The forbidding of some of the most reliable and safe vaccines available in the world, therefore, brought to view just another case where the people of Iran were stripped of their lawful rights, as the Islamic regime once again proved that Revolutionary ideologies tip the balance against public health and human rights. Of equal importance, however, were the ways in which the national media, rather than being at the service of the people, tried to give their support to the ideological opinions of religious figures, facilitating the path for the fourth wave of the pandemic, which hit the nation in an unprecedented way.

3.5. The Fourth Wave: The Beginning of the Blame Game and Prevarication

In early April 2021, Iran entered the fourth wave of COVID-19, shortly after millions of people took their Nowruz (Persian New Year) holiday trips. In spite of the predictability of a nationwide coronavirus spread during the thirteen-day Nowruz holiday, however, the government did not come up with any practical extra measures or emergency plans beforehand to avert the crisis and

curb the resurgence of COVID-19 cases and deaths. Instead, the officials' efforts in this regard were limited only to the issuance of a series of exhortations and warnings in television or press, or at best, randomly summoning traffic offenders without stopping them from continuing their journey. Unsurprisingly, just a few days after Nowruz when the fourth wave became evident, various political figures accountable for this colossal fiasco began getting into the blame game, or deliberately giving misleading and ambiguous explanations.

An example of this sort of scapegoating and prevarication appeared in a news story published in Mashregh News on 11 April 2021, headlined "The reaction of the press to the president's strange statements about the fourth wave of Corona" (Mashregh News, 2021). This article lashed into president Rouhani, who was the head of the National Coronavirus Combat Taskforce (NCCT), for pointing his finger at the Alpha (UK) variant of COVID-19, instead of taking responsibility for the fourth wave. The article argued that if the Alpha variant was the cause of the fourth wave, then as NCCT's head Rouhani was still at fault for allowing international flights during Nowruz to and from the countries known for being hot spots for this transmissible strain. The article went on to further criticize Rouhani for his earlier statements when he alternatively tried to blame the public for discounting health protocols such as unrestricted travelling as well as attending large gatherings and other social activities. Although the very same criticism was levelled at Rouhani by many other news agencies, *Kayhan* (the most conservative Iranian newspaper) used a more audacious tone in its online analytic news report titled "Government: In the new peak of Corona everyone is at blame, except us!" (Kayhan, 2021). Here, *Kayhan* called Rouhani a self-centred person who does not care about other people's lives but takes good care of his own: "He lifted the travel ban for the people, but he did not even agree to go to the parliament," and "he opened the schools but did not show up in the designated school to ring the bell to officially announce the beginning of the school year."

By closely looking into these articles alone, what becomes apparent is the turbulent and quarrelsome political climate in which various representatives from different administrations and interest groups confronted each other to whitewash themselves and weasel out of their responsibilities in regard to the rise of the fourth wave. Leaning on their positions of power and by using populist rhetoric, each party's involvement in this exchange of discourse was merely an effort to put the blame on their political rivals,

or even the public itself, and to present their administration or interest group as faultless and scrupulous. The only exception here was the Supreme Leader and his close associates, who are considered to be untouchable elites. Obviously, reflecting on the tensions between various government divisions did not seem to reduce people's growing struggles, nor it instigated any effort to identify and bring to justice the individuals/groups responsible for the fourth wave of the pandemic. However, it marked just another juncture in which the Islamic regime proved its reluctance to pay attention to people's needs, while pursuing a ruthless agenda for maintaining the status quo to stay in power (Pollack, 2020).

4. MEDIA SYSTEM DEPENDENCY THEORY

MSD theory emerged to reformulate the question addressed by effects theory, by asking: "Under what societal and individual conditions do/don't media have substantial effects?" (Ball-Rokeach, 2015, p. 369). The theory's main premise is that the implications of a media system in the context of everydayness have effects at micro, meso, and macro levels, respectively impacting individuals, groups, and social systems, in the face of a threat or at times of uncertainty (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Proposed for the first time by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur in 1976, the theory suggests that people are likely to be influenced by media messages when they have little other experience or knowledge that enables them to verify or evaluate them. In other words, the extent to which audiences rely on a specific medium is a key variable in understanding why, when, and how media messages influence these individuals' beliefs, feelings, or behaviors (Littlejohn et al., 2016). Without a doubt, the observations of Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur have led to identifying some of the factors for the level of such dependency. One of these factors is how important a specific medium is to a person, group, or society for obtaining needed information. In this way, the more important these individuals or groups regard a medium for satisfying their needs, the more likely they are to depend on it, and be influenced by its messages. Another factor is the degree of social instability, which is more applicable for times of crisis such as national disaster, wars, political upheavals, and so on. In this sense, as the social instability increases, the more dependency of people on media for receiving information is predicted.

The 'media system' component of MSD theory, however, is best understood "as an information system whose powers vis-à-vis effects rest on the scarcity or exclusivity

of their information resources” (Ball-Rokeach, 2015, p. 369). Yet, as Ball-Rokeach pointed out, people might adapt or respond differently to the same social media environment. Furthermore, Jung (2017) explained that MSD is often misunderstood as an all-powerful media concept or the passive audience theory, simply for what the word ‘dependency’ might wrongly imply. Indeed, as he further put, the term refers to the possibility of an individual-media relationship that is “shaped by the degree of importance and helpfulness of resources one party possesses for the other party” (Jung, 2017, page 4). In addition, one’s needs are not always strictly personal but may be shaped by the culture or by various social conditions (Baran & Davis, 2020). In advancing MSD theory, and from a macroscopic societal perspective, Ball-Rokeach (1985) hypothesised that as people’s dependency on media grows more and more, institutions of media have no choice but to reorganise themselves to adapt to the upsurge of these dependencies. Accordingly, this is thought to result in the overall higher impact of media, therefore solidifying the central role of the media in the society.

5. DISCUSSION

This article began with making a case for the evident failure of the Iranian government in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. It was then argued that disseminating a series of ambiguous and manipulative information about the coronavirus by the state-run national media has compounded the gravity of the pandemic and its devastating consequences across the nation. That is to say, the operations of the ideologically driven mainstream news media in Iran during the pandemic, rather than being mobilized for addressing the crisis and helping the Iranian people, were optimised for furthering the state’s exploitative efforts. In line with this idea, a number of news stories, which throughout the pandemic appeared in some of the most prominent news agencies of the government, were critically analysed to exemplify the developing trends in diffusion of information about COVID-19, and to reveal their supporting ideologies. In this way, these analyses illustrated how the national media as a powerful means for government-public communication was deployed, not with the intention to address the needs of the people, but to take advantage of the developing narratives of COVID-19 to consolidate the state’s domineering ideological position.

This is in fact typical among authoritarian countries where the mainstream media, just like other social insti-

tutions, constitute an imperative component of the ideological state apparatus, supplementing the functions of repressive forces within the boundaries of the nation-state (Althusser, 2006; Stier, 2015). The state’s strong hold on media in this way is also explained by the contemporary propaganda theory which maintains that “public discourse is shaped and limited by powerful elites to serve their own ends” (Baran & Davis, 2020, p. 94). Moving further along these lines of thought, Semetko (2007) differentiated democratic countries from non-democratic ones and observed that the media-politics relationship in these countries varies depending on (1) how much media outlets are government funded, (2) the degree to which the media’s content and reporting are free of government control, and finally (3) how much the parties, interest groups, and political participants have access to the media. In this way, just by looking at the media-politics relationship in Iran within Semetko’s framework, one could imagine the degree of authoritarianism governing the country’s political system: Institutions of media are owned or largely financed by the government while their contents are subject to maximum control and heavy censorship, not to mention the ruling clerics’ exclusive power to influence the production and transmission of the messages (Mazrooei et al., 2019; Rahimi, 2015).

Having said this, besides identifying and analysing the discursive trends in broadcasting manipulative information within national media, this study also aimed to explicate the emergence and implications of these trends in the light of MSD theory. Looking at the interrelationships between the state, media, and public through this theory’s prism, then, was thought to provide some insights into Iranians’ dependency on media, as a way to understand the current public confusion and skepticism in the country.

Following this view, and to put it in perspective, it can be said that the long-term public dependency on mainstream media in Iran has been challenged by the emergence of new forms of media such as Internet and satellite TV since the early 1990s (Khiabani, 2015). This has evidently given a chance to the people of Iran to free themselves from the dominance of the national media, and to access an abundance of unrestricted media contents (Matin, 2023). Yet during the coronavirus pandemic there seemed to be a shift in this pattern, as the public moved towards national media and mainstream news, exactly because of their contents’ tangibility for the people as well as their relevancy and applicability to the immediate contexts. That is to say, the contents of these state-run media

outlets were apparently closer to people's real-life circumstances and their emergent needs for information, including updates on standard operation procedures and other instructions and guidelines issued by the government. The brief reconciliation between the people of Iran and the national media during the pandemic, however, turned out to be completely in accord with one of the main premises of MSD theory, which holds that there is an increase in people's dependence on media during social instability.

Unexpectedly though, the availability of new forms of cross-border media (mainly satellite TV and Internet) in Iran, and the growing influx of their unfettered contents, not only seemed to be incapable of counterbalancing the bias of the national media's messages during the pandemic, but also they appeared to exacerbate the challenges of the public in accessing trustworthy knowledge. There seem to be two main reasons for this: Firstly, the diffused information through new forms of transnational media (also referred to as alternative media) are in general inconsistent with those in the national media (Talebian & Talebian, 2018). The national-alternative dichotomy in media, therefore, seems to affect people in Iran, since these audiences are likely to oscillate between these oppositional news sources in search for reliable information, only to end up with a greater degree of uncertainty and confusion (Taghipour et al., 2023). This is in particular the case for those uncritical audiences with inadequate media literacy who become somehow intellectually paralysed when facing information overload or *infoxication* (de Bruin et al., 2021). Secondly, even though in general Iranians are highly suspicious of the accuracy and trustworthiness of the national media's reportage, they still tend to adhere to them simply because these have been the sole channels for people to obtain relevant and applicable information during the pandemic. Likewise, despite the pervasive use of social media in Iran, these digital communication platforms did not seem to be as constructive throughout the pandemic as they were during the Green Movement, a major historical uprising of Iranian dissidents in 2009 which shortly after sparked the Arab Spring in the Middle East (Tofangsazi, 2020). In other words, while social media were undoubtedly the catalyst for social mobilisation that successfully led to some of the recent years' most significant political changes in the region and around the world, their role in Iran and during the pandemic was arguably problematic.

What is more debatable, however, is that although Net-based communication channels are commonly known as powerful and beneficial means for crisis management, at

least, this did not seem to be the case for Iran. In support of this argument, the results of several studies and reports have shown the counterproductivity of social media and other similar data sharing digital networks during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Jafarinejad et al., 2021; Soltaninejad, 2020; Yoosefi et al., 2022). In fact, these accounts have pointed to a wide range of mis-/mal-/disinformation within these digital platforms (Sadati & Bagheri Lankarani, 2021), with the exception of a few that are associated with some well-known and reliable healthcare providers and medical professionals. Therefore, one could argue that although the emergence of satellite TV and the Internet has significantly improved the democratization process in Iran and many other countries around the world, especially during the past two decades or so (Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Tusa, 2013), they have evidently not been so helpful in taking pressure off people in their fight against COVID-19. Consequently, it can be said that while satellite TV and the Internet continues to attract the majority of Iranians who seek quality entertainment and unaltered news, it was the national media that during the pandemic turned out to be the main source of coronavirus related information for many people in Iran (Banakar et al., 2021). The resulting paradox of this is that despite people's increasing distrust towards the national media throughout the past few decades, during the pandemic they tended to deliberately ignore such doubts and at least follow the mainstream media's politically arranged news about COVID-19. By the same token, alternative media in Iran did not seem to live up to the normative and emancipatory expectations that are associated with these so-called counter-hegemonic forms of media.

Nevertheless, what all these insights point to is the significance of the interplay of social, political, and cultural contexts as well as spatial/temporal scope in understanding a particular communication phenomenon, especially if MSD theory is to be used as an analytical tool for research. The importance of context is also demonstrated by Loveless (2008), who studied media dependency in democratizing countries, and within the uses and gratifications framework. The focus of his study was on information-seeking behavior within "societies in states of crisis or instability" (Loveless, 2008, p. 162). Loveless (2008, p. 162) was primarily concerned with how citizens in countries undergoing a democratic transition sought information and assumed that there would be a "positive correlation between information-seeking and levels of media use". His findings suggested that the instability in countries which are in their embryonic stage of the

democratization process, and are undergoing a political shift, motivated people to seek more information through the media. Despite trusting the media's great capacity for providing information "to understand political transition," he cautioned that any interpretation in this regard should take into consideration the "historically and culturally differentiated media space" (Loveless, 2008, p. 178).

These findings point to the fact that understanding citizens' media dependency during national (or global) crises requires exclusive attention to "institutional and cultural variations" within each country, and in regard to specific local circumstances (Loveless, 2008, p. 178). This is, in particular, germane to any discussion of media dependency in Iran. On the one hand, the political system and social institutions of the country are driven by the state's unyielding ideological disposition, hindering the progression of the increasingly globalized and media saturated Iranian society. And on the other hand, the masses' increasing discontentment and disconnection with the government have given rise to an idiosyncratic form of the nation-state with its own distinctive cultural and political conditions (Golkar, 2020).

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

While numerous studies in the past have addressed media dependency in democratic countries, there have only been limited efforts to link such theoretical perspectives to the social problems and complications facing the public within undemocratic contexts, particularly during a time of crisis (Khalifa & Khalifa, 2020). In response to this, the present study examined the national media's function in Iran, and Iranians' dependency on delivery of information through the state-controlled institutions of media. Here, the primary goal was to draw attention to the struggles of the Iranian people who were, more than ever, undergoing a great deal of hardship and despair, caused by a range of imprudent, unsympathetic, and outrageous actions/decisions made by the authorities during the pandemic. In so doing, the study's main focus was on the Islamic regime's ideological principles, considering them as the underlying basis for giving rise to the possibilities of new ways of exploitation. Under these circumstances, the interdependencies between officials, media, and society increase, and apparently the impacts of those interactions also become more noticeable.

Thus, this study recommends a robust and equitable collaboration and supervision at different levels and across various forms of media as key requirements for ensuring

accuracy and avoiding distortion of data. Furthermore, as also noted by other authors (Arab-Zozani & Ghoddoosi-Nejad, 2021), the authorities in Iran should minimize bureaucracy and formalities for scientifically proven aids and methods, instead of relaxing such procedures for unscientific solutions and recommendations. Although it seems to be far-fetched, the government must feel the urgency to put people first and focus on providing reliable and consistent real-time data, instead of politicizing the crisis or seeking to project an unrealistically positive, popular, or powerful image of the Islamic Republic merely for meeting some political objective (Hen-Tov, 2006).

One more lesson to be learnt from the Iranian government's mishandling of the pandemic is that simply announcing some instruction or advice, and then expecting people to follow them, is doomed to fail. This means that while these regulations should be in place and communicated with the public effectively and early enough, the enforcement of such rules and guidelines as well as citizens' compliance with them should be monitored and confirmed on a regular basis. Lastly, giving precedence to religious or ideological beliefs over scientific measures, on the one hand, and abandoning responsibilities, making wrong decisions, and disregarding human rights and democratic values on the other hand, are all among the factors that have contributed to the deepening of the magnitude of the coronavirus pandemic in Iran. Thus, any improvement regarding public health, especially during national crises, seems to be possible only by taking the necessary steps to immobilize the ideological state apparatus which merely operates to keep the elites in power, albeit at the expense of the lives and well-being of its people.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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