The Western Media and Iran's Presidential Election 2009: The visual framing of a green revolution

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Abstract

This study is a quantitative analysis of photos on the websites of *The New York Times, Times,* and *The Economist* to understand the visual framing of Iran's 2009 controversial presidential election. News photos were categorized into different framing types to answer four research questions, which sought to understand the visual framing of the presidential candidates and their supporters, the protests, and the Iranian feminism. The study found that the runner-up candidate, Mousavi, received more visual coverage compared to the incumbent reelected president, Ahmadinejad. The protests were framed as violent, uncontrollable, and revolutionary in nature, and as enjoying mass support across different segments of the Iranian society, while young and middle-aged urban Iranian women were dominantly portrayed as the symbol of Iranian feminism seeking a Western-style democracy in Iran.

Keywords: visual framing, Iranian presidential election, Iranian feminism

The Western Media and Iran's Presidential Election 2009: The visual framing of a green revolution

It was the most important event in the history of Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The opposition had launched countrywide protests after the runner-up candidate and former Prime Minister, Mir Hossein Mousavi, called the June 12, 2009 presidential election stolen. Officially, Mousavi had lost the election to incumbent President, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, but he had sought reelection, and threatened to stage what his campaign architects propagated as a "green revolution" if his demand was not accepted (Hossein-zadeh, 2009; Dreyfuss, 2009).

The Western media had heralded the event as a 'revolution', 'counter-revolution', 'Twitter revolution', and a 'green tsunami' (Keller, 2010; Schectman, 2009). Iconic news photographs of violent protesters, containing visuals of fire and blood, mixed up with the opposition's symbolic green color, were splashed up on the Western media as the metaphor for the harbinger of a change, which could transform the theologian state of Iran into a West-like democracy and free market economy (Roberts, 2009; Meyssan, 2009). Analogies were drawn between the 2004-05 Orange Revolution, which had been catalyzed with the help of mobile technologies in the Ukraine, and the post election protests in Iran, as the Iranians displayed an unprecedented reliance on mobile phones and social media to organize and locate protests and to reach out to their compatriots, the international

community, and the mainstream media worldwide, by sending out amateur updates, photos, and videos (Keating, 2009; Aroon, 2009).

The dominant iconography across the mainstream Western media remained images of the Iranian women of different age groups and social strata pouring into the streets to force Ahmadinejad to step down. Such iconic images were likened to the ones portraying the struggle of Iranian women against Reza Shah 30 years ago. Observers, however, were quick in pointing out the construction of the image of Iranian feminism by the Western media through the zooming in on two extremes - either over focusing on young, elegant, and often beautiful urban and modern Iranian women symbolizing the mass desire for West-like democracy, or middle aged and veiled women alluding to state repression and social injustice (Basu, 2009; Callahan, 2009; Peterson, 2009).

The event was covered so intensively by the US media that even Americans were following the post election developments in Iran as closely as their own country's economic crisis, as demonstrated by research from the Pew Research Centre (2009) showing that 70% of Americans knew that the Iranian government had put curbs on the access of foreign media (Jurkowitz, 2009).

However, the Iranian government was not alone in accusing the Western media of giving up impartiality by branding the protests as a revolution and over-reporting violence, but a number of observers had also challenged the selective approach with which the Western media highlighted certain aspects of the Iranian post election developments, and downplayed certain other (Cohen, 2009; Dahl & Hafezi, 2009; Hamedani, 2009; Lugar, 2009; Peterson, 2009; Puelings, 2009; Richhiardi, 2009; Tapper, 2009).

While Mousavi was portrayed as the Obama of Iran symbolizing change, a true pacifist, and a revolutionary, Ahmadinejad was depicted by the Western media as a murderer, hitlarian figure, and a dictator, who posed a threat to both the Iranians and the outside world (see Roberts, 2009; Hossein-zadeh, 2009).

The controversy that surrounded the 2009 presidential election, the 10th of its kind, and the 25th election held in Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, had never been witnessed in Iran in the last three decades, and had, and still have, far-reaching implications for Middle Eastern politics (Hossein-zadeh, 2009; Roberts, 2009; Puelings, 2009; Hamedani, 2009; Richhiardi, 2009). As pointed out earlier, not only the election, but also the Western media's coverage of it generated a considerable debate over the way the images of the Iranian presidential candidates and their supporters, and that of Iranian women were constructed.

Therefore, this study blended the aspects of mass communication, feminist studies, and political research to analyze the visual framing of the Iranian presidential election 2009 on the websites of three leading Western media organizations – *The New York Times, Times,* and *The Economist.* Previous studies on the Western media's framing of important political events related to Iran, and the overall depiction of the image of the Iranian state have mostly dealt with textual content analyses (e.g., Dorman & Omeed, 1979; Dorman & Farhang, 1987; Scott, 2000; Abedin, 2004). Websites of the mainstream media organization were seldom analyzed in the previous studies, particularly for the news photographs. This study has tried to address this gape between the textual and visual framing research. Through quantitative content analysis, I collected the news photographs and captions from the three websites and categorized them into different and exclusive frame types in order to understand the handling of three visual domains: The visual depiction of the presidential candidates and their supporters; the visual framing of protests; and the construction of the image of Iranian feminism.

Historically, press photos have been used both by the media and different organs of the states for propaganda purposes and gathering mass support in the time of war and crises (Nikolaev, 2009; Schwalbe, 2006; Fahmy, 2004; Griffin & Lee, 1995). Previous studies suggest that news photos are politically powerful, and that is why most often dissemination of sensitive visuals face restrictions either at the hands of governments or the management of the media organizations in the wake of self-censorship or outside pressures (Fahmy, 2010; Griffin, 2010). Through iconic images, the media frame public perception and cultivate public imaginations about people, events, and issues thus contributing to the framing of the 'collective memory' of a nation regarding an event, issue, state, individual, or group of people (Moeller, 2009; Schwalbe, 2006). And, the reverse is also possible, when media blackout of certain visual and textual information leads to the 'collective amnesia' of a nation regarding an issue or event (Choi, 2009). Iconic photographs and videos, both amateur and professional, did play a major role in the depiction of the Iranian elections and the post election developments globally. A comprehensive analysis was necessary to understanding how the Western mainstream print media visually framed this important event and its major actors.

Media Framing and the Image of other Nations

Framing refers to the way the media present an event or an issue by highlighting or ignoring certain aspects of it through the use of images and words. The electronic media use still and running images, and words and verbal commentaries to frame an issue. The process of framing also involves the selection and packaging of news images and stories on the pages or websites and the spaces allotted to them. Television and radio can highlight or downplay a news event by either airing it during the prime time for a relatively longer duration or the other way round (McCombs & Shah, 1972; Messaris & Abraham, 2001; Perlmutter & Wagner, 2004; Pfau, Haigh, Gettle, Donnelly, Scott, Warren & Wittenberg 2004).

A frame is "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events,"(Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). Generally, framing refers to the way the media select, organize, emphasize, present, and ignore certain aspects of an event or issue (Gitlin, 1980). Previously, studies found that an important part of the framing process involved either the complete exclusion of an event from the media coverage or certain aspects of it (Gitlin, 1980; Entman, 1993; Schwalbe, 2006).

News photos play a pivotal role in the framing process as the media define, explain, and comment on these images in the form of captions and headlines. However, "images are often evaluated primarily in relation to a certain policy, rather than in relation to the truth," (Nikolaev, 2009, p. 110). According to Perlmutter (1998), it is important to understand how media images are defined and explained in relation to the policy of a state in which a media organization functions.

Through the framing process, the media construct the image of societies, nations, and their leaders for their consumers. But most often, the strategic, socio-economic, and political interests of the countries in which the media operate are kept in mind when the images of other nations or their leaders are constructed (McNelly & Izcaray, 1986; Kieh, 1990; Cho & Lacy, 2000; Zelizer & Allen, 2002).

"An image can be defined as a conceptual picture in the mind of a person, about a person, thing or a country and it may be a product of some specific political, social, or religious background or circumstances," (Saleem, 2007, p. 136).

Previously, studies found that the US media have framed the images of other nations and their leaders based on the US relationship with that particular country, and that such images went through

constant changes whenever the US policy was changed towards that nation (Saleem, 2007). Mann (1999) observed the striking changes in the image of China and its leadership as portrayed by the US media since the 1950s. The image of China in the US media back in the 1950s and the 1960s was that of "little blue ants and automatons", which evolved into "the virtuous (entertaining, cute) Chinese" later in 1970s during the Nixon administration. It then transformed into the "China goes capitalist" frame in the 1980s, and converted into the "repressive China" image in the1990s (Mann, 1999, p. 102). Yu and Riffe (1989) analyzed the coverage of the Chinese leaders, Chiang and Mao, in the US news magazines – *Time, Newsweek,* and *U.S. News and World Report* – between 1949 and 1976 and found identical transformations in the images of the Chinese leaders and the US foreign policy towards China in the corresponding periods.

Such foreign policy priorities can also be witnessed in the US media coverage of conflicts in which the US government was involved. The US media visually framed the Persian Gulf War in 1992 and the Iraq War in 2003 from the American perspective by emphasizing the victory and heroism of the American soldiers instead of their losses and failures. Through visual images, the US media highlighted the US-facilitated freedom for the Iraqis rather than the US-caused destruction in that country. Similarly, the US media ignored or downplayed the images of the injured and dead Iraqi civilians, mostly hit by the US bombing, and often labeled those who resisted the US occupation as terrorists and extremists (Fahmy, 2004; Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Schwalbe, 2006). Likewise, public anger and demonstrations against the Persian Gulf War in Japan, Spain and North Africa did not get deserving coverage in the US media, which rather focused on the support the US was getting from the United Nations or friendly countries, who were in favor of the controversial war (Schiller, 1992). Likewise, Nikolaev (2009) found a similar trend in the Western print media's coverage of the Kosovo War 1998-99 when there were little differences between the official policy on the war and that of the media coverage of it.

The Western Media and Iran

As demonstrated above as well as here, a number of studies have found that Western media tend to mimic the foreign policy of their governments during war and political crises by safeguarding the so-called 'national interests' at the cost of journalistic professionalism (Nikolaev, 2009; Schwalbe, 2006; Fahmy, 2004; Hammond & Herman, 2000; Chomsky, 1999; Young & Jesser, 1997; Kellner, 1992; Dorman & Farhang, 1987). Likewise, a number of research studies have shown that the US media framed foreign nations and their leaders from the point of view of the US relations with that particular nation or leader (McNelly & Izcaray, 1986; Cho & Lacy, 2000; Zelizer & Allen, 2002; Saleem, 2007).

Similarly, the coverage of Iran in the Western media, particularly that of the US media, should be seen in the context of post World War II politics, when an elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddegh, who had tried to nationalize the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), was overthrown in a coup on August 19, 1953. Masterminded by the intelligence agencies of the US and the UK, the coup had ushered in a totalitarian regime under Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi, which reigned until February 1979, when the Shah himself was overthrown by the Iranian revolution (Kinzer, 2003). Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, bilateral relations between Iran and the US have functioned in an environment of suspicion, lack of trust, and bellicosity. Until the November 2013 historic nuclear deal between Iran and the world powers (Gearan & Warrick, 2013), the Iranian clerics had alleging that the US is after their overthrow, while the US had seen Iran hindering its Middle East policy (Sariolghalam, 2003).

Consequently, a selective image of Iran was being framed and promoted by the US media that was not real, and that was formed by the amalgamation of news, entertainment, advertisement, and public relations within the paradigm of the US foreign policy and corporate interests (Roushanzamir, 2004). Interestingly, Dorman and Farhang (1987) analyzed the mainstream US media, *The New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor*, *News Week*, and *Time* from 1951 to 1978 and from 1953 to 1978 respectively and found that the coverage of Iran was predominantly based on stereotypes and lacked journalistic ethics of impartiality. The study showed that for a quarter of a century the US print media had framed Iran through the selection of words and images in a way that was in line with the US foreign policy for the Middle East (Dorman & Farhang, 1987).

Some scholars (Dorman & Omeed, 1979; Dorman & Farhang, 1987) have argued that the US media had given favorable coverage to the Shah, a dictator, who had done many favors to the American oil companies by enabling them to dominate the Iranian oil market and subsequently curtail the influence of Britain over the Iranian oil resources. The Islamic Revolution in Iran was, in fact, a devastating moment for the American 'imperial' presence in the Middle East, as it deprived the US of a sustained oil supply from a relatively stable Middle Eastern state at a time when the nearby Arab states were either suffering from internal strife or a stand-off with Israel (Rahmani, 2007).

The massive anti-Shah protests were then downplayed by the Western media and were rather termed the products of an alliance of communist and religious fanatics bent upon destabilizing a liberal and people-friendly Shah. The Western media, in fact, made very few efforts to investigate and report the impacts of the Shah's so-called economic and social reforms on ordinary Iranians, the reasons behind the boiling anti-Shah sentiments, and the mass desire for a change that could emancipate the Iranians socially, politically, and economically (Dorman & Omeed, 1979).

Over the years, the US government and the US print media have been considerably responsible for forming public opinion about Iran from an American perspective, both at home and abroad. As examples, the US media often supported the US government's view point while covering a number of important events related to Iran, including the hostage crisis of 1979-1981, the TWA hijacking of 1985, the Irangate controversy of 1986-1987, and the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991 (Larson, 1986; Brown & Vincent, 1995; Roushanzamir, 2004). Scott (2000) analyzed the coverage of the hostage crisis in the mainstream US print media –*People Magazine*, *Time*, *The New York Times, The New Republic* – and found that Iranians were depicted as "devilish savages" while the media coverage contained the elements of the "classic American captivity narrative," and a "contestation between civilization and savagery," (pp. 177 & 179).

Historically, reports about Iran in the Western media have mostly obfuscated the real picture (Dorman & Farhang, 1978). This trend was also visible in the Western media's reporting of the landslide victory of the conservatives in the seventh election for the Majlis (Parliament) held on February 20, 2004. Then the Western media coverage mostly revolved around the decision of the Council of Guardians – a 12-member body appointed directly by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei -- to disqualify a month before the elections 3,533 of the 8,144 prospective candidates (Abedin, 2004). The Western media's magnifying glass primarily hovered over the transparency of the election process while ignoring other important topics such as the wishes and demands of the voters as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the political parties contesting the elections. Abedin (2004) also observed that the reformists were well-aware, in advance, of an unavoidable defeat following their whitewash in the elections for the municipal council a year ago, mainly caused by the failure of the reformist President Mohammad Khatami to deliver on his promises of more civil rights and greater transparency and accountability in the affairs of the government.

Likewise, the Western media's somewhat religious portrayal of the 2009 presidential election resembled a clash between the forces of good and the forces of evil – Mousavi being the good guy and Ahmadinejad being the bad - ignoring the fact that both the candidates were the most popular among the pool of four presidential candidates, had attracted a large number of supporters and had debated their policies on the Iranian media live (Hamedani, 2009). The way the opposition protests were shown and framed in the mainstream western media in the wake of the 2009 presidential election reminded one of a unified block of opposition parties united under one leader, Mousavi, to overthrow Ahmadinejad and reform the Iranian political system (Puelings, 2009). Though the media coverage of the protests had highlighted the loopholes in the Iranian political system, Puelings (2009) argued that they had failed to paint a real picture of the multi-colored opposition, which was divided on almost every important issue of domestic and foreign policy, followed different political ideologies, and had different approaches to reforming the Iranian system. In his January 29, 2002, State of the Union address, former US President, George W. Bush, used the term "axis of evil" to describe Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. He accused the three states of helping terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction. The Bush administration's foreign policy priorities resonated in the coverage of Iran in the mainstream newspapers in the US until the last days of the second term of President Bush and no one was sure whether the media was educating the American public on Iran or were simply misleading them to another Iraq war-like crisis through the creation of yet another enemy image (Ricchiardi, 2008).

In fact, when the western media was vibrating with the prospects of a new revolution in Iran supposedly being launched by a new generation of young men and women in 2009, little coverage was given to the country's recent demographic, where society had become highly urbanized and the main priority of the larger segment of the population was to get good jobs and increase their incomes rather than to be shot down on the streets while protesting against the regime (Richhiardi, 2009). Similarly, the Western media portrayed a selective image of Iranian feminism during the post-election protests in 2009. The conspicuous images of the young and mostly attractive Iranian women brimming with "sartorial and somatic signs" alluding to a mass desire for a Western-style democracy was in fact a misrepresentation of Iranian feminism (Peterson, 2009). Moallem (2005) had touched upon the same issue and observed that the Iranian women were the victims of the "forced unveiling" and "forced veiling" by their own government – referring to 1936, when the pro-West Reza Shah banned veil, and to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which brought with it a new Islamic dress code for women that is still be enforced by the state through different measures. During both of these times, the Iranian women have shown resistance, and their struggle for their rights should not be mistaken as a wish from these women for a western-style secular democracy (Moallem, 2005). Roushanzamir (2004) explained how the US print media constructed and promoted a "commodified version and vision of Iran by using consistent and iconic images of Iranian women," (p.9) while analyzing both texts and images in editorial and feature stories between 1995 and 1998.

Gaps in Previous Research on Iran

The existing literature on the image of Iran or the framing of Iran-related events in the Western media have explored the subject via the analyses of textual framing by the print media, and in some cases framing through television news (e.g., Dorman & Farhang, 1978; Dorman & Omeed, 1979; Brown & Vincent, 1995; Scott, 2000; Abedin, 2004; Ricchiardi, 2008; Hamedani, 2009; Puelings, 2009). In some instances, photos and news articles were analyzed to understand the framing Iranian image in the Western media, but the focus was mainly on the use of language that explained the

photos (e.g., Roushanzamir, 2004). However, no study has so far dealt with the visual framing of the Iranian 2009 presidential election in a comprehensive way, which could encompass different visual framing aspects of this important event. This research has tried to plug in some of the gaps, which are visible in the previous studies. Photos on the websites of the mainstream print media have not been addressed by researchers despite the fact that the recent rise in the use of Internet and mobile technologies has made the print media available beyond geographical boundaries on websites, which are visually more dynamic than a piece of paper. This paper has built upon research methodologies from a number of previous studies (e.g., Nikolaev, 2009; Schwalbe, 2006; Fahmy, 2004; Griffin & Lee, 1995), which analyzed the media images of wars and conflicts through various visual framing categories while looking into the websites of the three leading Western media organizations – *The New York Times*, *Time*, and *The Economist.*

Research Questions
        Through inductive reasoning, the study asked four research questions, which addressed the issues of the visual framing of the Iranian presidential candidates and their supporters, the nature of the protests, and the Iranian feminism.
RQ-1: How much visual coverage did *The New York Times*, *Time*, and *The Economist* give to the leading candidates of Iran's June 2009 presidential election, Ahmadinejad and Mousavi, and their supporters?
        The RQ-1 was asked to understand which one of the presidential candidates was preferentially treated in the photographic coverage. The issue of favoritism had generated a considerable debate during and after the election as many observers believed that the Western media's pre and post election euphoria about Mousavi's chances of occupying the Iranian presidency or his capacity to spearhead a revolution was not in sync with some pre-election polls conducted, in fact, by some western organizations foretelling that Ahmadinejad would win the election with a considerable margin (Gibson, 2009; Dickey, 2009; Bahari, 2009; Zadeh, 2009). For instance, a survey conducted by the Washington-based Terror Free Tomorrow (2009) a month ahead of the election had found that 34% of Iranians, who were surveyed, wanted to vote for Ahmadinejad, while only 14% of them favored Mousavi. Only 2% said they would vote for Mehdi Karroubi and Mohsen Rezai, the remaining two presidential aspirants. Throughout the presidential elections and weeks later, the dominant iconography in the Western media remained the images of women leading or increasingly participating in anti-election demonstrations. Peterson (2009) noted that during the coverage of the post presidential election protests, the Western media splashed the photographs of the young and often beautiful Iranian women, dressed in modern outfits, thus creating the impression as such that the majority of the Iranian women wanted Western-style liberal democracy. The way the Iranian feminism was framed by the Western media, needed to be understood. The second question addressed this issue:
RQ-2: How did the *New York Times, Time*, and *The Economist* visually frame the Iranian feminism during the June 2009 Iranian presidential election?
        Violence was yet another hallmark of the post Iranian presidential election protests (Fathi, 2009). The immediate reason that sparked violence, apart from the disputed election results, was the iconic images and death video of Neda Agha-Soltan, a 27-year-old philosophy student at Tehran University, who was killed by a stray bullet allegedly fired by Iranian security forces, near the site of an anti-government protest on June 20, 2009. The bloodstained images of Neda had mixed with the opposition's symbolic green color and had set the tone for violent protests. Iconographic photos of

violence were on the forefront of the visual coverage of the event in the media. The next research questions takes up this important aspect of the Iranian election:

RQ-3: How much visual coverage did *The New York Times, Time,* and *The Economist* give to the violence and the opposition's green color, fire, and blood while covering the protests?

Adopting a comparative approach was vital to understanding the similarities and difference in the visual coverage's of the three website, therefore, the following question was asked:

RQ-4: What are the similarities and differences in the visual framing by the *New York Times, Time*, and the *Economist* with regard to the coverage of the Iranian presidential election of June 2009?

Hypotheses

H-1: *The New York Times, Time*, and *The Economist* will have given more favorable visual coverage to opposition leader, Mousavi, and his supporters than the reelected president, Ahmadinejad, and his supporters in order to justify that the later was an unpopular leader while the former was popular.

H-2: *The New York Times, Times*, and *The Economist* will have given more visual coverage to pro-reforms, liberal and young Iranian females representing opposition to Ahmadinejad in order to support the dominant view point in the West that the new generation of Iranian women wanted Western-style democracy.

H-3: *The New York Times, Time*, and *The Economist* will have given more visual coverage to violence during the protests and the opposition's green color, blood, and fire in order to portray the event as a violent green revolution.

H-4: There will be some differences in the amount of the visual coverage *The New York Times*, *Time*, and *The Economist* gave to the Iranian presidential elections 2009, but all the three media outlets will give more visual coverage to Mousavi and his supporters, as well as to young Iranian females, in order show a stronger opposition enjoying the support of both men and women.

Research Method

This paper has built on the research methods previously used by a number of scholars for the content analysis of the news photos of war (e.g., Griffin & Lee, 1995; Fahmy, 2004; Schwalbe, 2006; Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Silcock, 2008). These methods involved the development of visual framing categories, which enabled these studies to understand the frequency and percentages of different visual frames in the photographic coverage of the same event in the media. Moreover, such visual framing categories were able to quantitatively measure the coverage of an event and point out which aspects of the same event were highlighted, downplayed, or ignored through news photographs by the media. I also developed various mutually exclusive visual framing categories for analyzing the news photographs in order to answer my research questions, and test the hypotheses.

I adopted a quantitative content analysis method in order to analyze the photos, and the captions they carried, related to the Iranian presidential election 2009, on the websites of *The New York Times* (http://global.nytimes.com/), *Time* magazine (http://www.time.com/time/) and *The Economist* (http://www.economist.com/).

The three news organizations have created online versions of their respective publications quite early by Internet standards and these websites are also accessible via mobile technologies worldwide. Samples were taken from the websites as the online versions of both the magazines and the daily are consumed by more people and in geographically more diverse regions of the world than their print versions. *The New York Times* is a leading English language daily in the US. The newspaper has won

104 Pulitzer Prizes, the most by any news outlet (Pérez-Peña, 2009), while its website received over 30 million unique visitors every month (Adams, 2011). *Time* is an English language US magazine read by 20 million domestic and 25 million international audiences. Recently, the circulation of the printed weekly saw a steep decline, but its website had met with considerable success, which attracted 48.7 million unique visitors every month during the last quarter of 2010 (Wikipedia, 2011). The website of *The Economist* attracted 5.93 million unique visitors in April 2011 and over 29.82 million page views (The Economist Group, 2011). The continuous publication of *The Economist* started in September 1834 from London and is considered a leading weekly in the UK with a constantly growing readership abroad.

I searched the three websites for photos related to Iranian presidential election and the post election developments from June 12, the day of the presidential election, till the end of June 2009, when major anti-election protests had already taken place in different parts of Iran. This was a highly tense period when the country was constantly making headlines in the global media. I collected a total of 102 photos (N=102) from the three websites and put them into the following different framing categories.

Visual Frames

I analyzed the photos in a way that could give a better understanding of the amount of coverage given to the two candidates - Ahmadinejad and Mousavi - and their supporters, the visual depiction of the Iranian protests, and Iranian feminism. In the first step, all the photos were coded for 10 main variables, which were designed to understand who or what was in the frame of the photo. The 10 frames were:

- Ahmadinejad alone;
- Ahmadinejad with his supporters;
- Ahmadinejad's supporters;
- Ahmadinejad's photos carried by his supporters;
- Mousavi with his supporters;
- Mousavi's supporters;
- Mousavi's photos carried by his supporters;
- Ahmadinejad and Mousavi;
- Ahmadinejad's photos with supporters of Mousavi referring to the former as an evil; and
- Other –the category containing the photos, which did not belong to the above nine framing categories.

In the second step, I developed two other exclusive categories of framing in order to understand the frequency and percentages of the visual coverage given to violence and the opposition's symbolic green color. The first framing category was called the "Color Theme" and the second, the "Portrayal of the Opposition's Protests". The "Color Theme" category contained four sub-frames and was aimed at understanding the iconic and symbolic colors and things in the photos. These four categories were:

- Fire;
- Blood;
- Green Color; and
- Mix of Fire, Blood and Green Color.

The Fire sub-category included all the photos, which showed the fire. For instance burning of tires by protestors and flames engulfing buildings, vehicles, and other properties. The Blood sub-frame

consisted of all the photos in which blood was visible. For example, this category included all the photos of injured or dead protestors or the photos of the victims who got killed or were injured during the protests. The Green Color included photos in which the opposition's symbolic color green was visible. There were some photos, which contained a combination of blood, green color and fire. Such photos were put into the category of the Mix of Fire, Blood and Green Color. The second frame category, "Portrayal of the opposition's protests" contained three sub-categories:

- Violent protestors;
- State power/security forces; and
- Protestors and security forces.

All the sample photos were also coded for feminism. There were eight sub-categories or sub-frames in the feminism category. These frames were based on the apparent ages of the women shown in the photos and the way they were dressed up. For instance whether the females in the photos were young and wearing modern or Western dresses or the traditional Iranian outfits or whether they were middle-aged or old or simply invisible while being clad in veils. The eight sub-frames were:

- Young Iranian women looking modern/progressive;
- Young Iranian women looking conservative;
- Middle-aged/old Iranian women looking modern/progressive;
- Middle-aged/old Iranian women looking conservative;
- Iranian women of different age groups looking modern/progressive;
- Iranian women of different age groups looking conservative;
- Veiled women/invisible faces; and
- Mix of women

Results

   When the data was analyzed for the first research question (RQ-1), the results showed that overall *Time* had given more visual coverage to the Iranian election (63.73%) compared to *The New York Times* (24.51%), and *The Economist* (11.76%). Further break-up of the photographic coverage showed that the three websites had given more visual coverage to Mousavi and his supporters than Ahmadinejad and his supporters as 70% of the total visual coverage on the three websites, related to Iran, was focused on the anti-election protests, which included the supporters of Mousavi 45.10%, the photos of Mousavi displayed by his supporters 11.76%, Mousavi with supporters 9.80%, and Mousavi's supporters carrying the photos of Ahmadinejad calling him an evil, a dictator, a hitlerian figure, and a murderer 2.9% (see Table 1). On the other hand, only one-fourth of the visual coverage, related to Iran, consisted of the photos of Ahmadinejad and his supporters, which included Ahmadinejad alone 2.9%; Ahmadinejad with supporters 5.9%; Ahmadinejad's supporters 2%; and Ahmadinejad's picture carried by his supporters 5.9%.   Two percent of the photos showed Ahmadinejad and Mousavi together, while 11.8% of the photos went to the "Other" category. The three websites were individually also analyzed for the above framing categories:

Time: Majority of the photos (63.07%) in *Time* belonged to the opposition leader, Mousavi, and his supporters. Almost half (49.23%) of the photos in *Time* were of Mousavi's supporters, 7.69% of the photos showed Mousavi's photos carried by his supporters, and 6.15% displayed Mousavi with his supporters. On the other hand, only 18% of the images in *Time* showed Ahmadinejad or his supporters, which included 1.65% of the photos showing Ahmadinejad alone, 6.15% Ahmadenijad

with his supporters, 3.15% Ahmadinejad's supporters, and 7.69% Ahmadinejad's photos carried by his supporters.

The Economist: The Economist had also given more visual coverage to the opposition protests than the reelection of Ahmadinejad or his supporters as 41.67% of the images belonged to Mousavi's supporters and 8.33% each to Mousavi with supporters, Mousavi's photos carried by his supporters, Ahmadinejad alone, and Ahmadinejad and Mousavi together. One-fourth of the photos in *The Economist* belonged to the "Other" category.

The New York Times: Eighty percent of Iran-related photos in *The New York Times* belonged to the opposition leader, Mousavi, and his supporters, which included 36% showing Mousavi's supporters, 24% depicting Mousavi's photos carried by his supporters, and 20% presenting Mousavi with supporters. On the other hand, only 8% of the photos showed Ahmadinejad alone, and 4% each Ahmadinejad with supporters and Ahmadinejad's photos carried by his supporters. Thus, the data analysis confirmed the first hypothesis (H-1), which had stated that all the three newspapers would have given more visual coverage to Mousavi and his supporters than Ahmadinejad and his supporters in order to show that the former was more popular than the later. The data was also analyzed to answer the third research question (RQ-3), which sought to understand the amount of pictorial coverage given to violence and the opposition's symbolic green color. As mentioned previously, two separate framing categories were formed to answer the RQ-3 by analyzing the "Color Scheme" and the "Portrayal of the Opposition's Protests" in the photos.

Color Scheme

More than half (58.9%) of the photos published by *The New York Times*, *The Economist* and *Time*, related to Iran, were in the category of the color scheme of which 43.1% displayed the Iranian opposition's symbolic green color, 3.9% blood, 5.9% fire, and 3.9% the mix of green color, blood, and fire (see Table 2). The data in this category was also analyzed for each website separately. The results were as follow:

Time: More than half (50.8%) photos on the website of *Times* were in the category of the color scheme, which included the opposition's green color 30.8%, blood 6.2%, fire 7.7%, and the mix of green color, blood, and fire 6.2%.

The Economist: Similarly, 50% photos in *The Economist* were related to the color scheme category, included the opposition's green color 41.7%, and fire 8.3%.

The New York Times: Seventy-six percent photos published by *The New York Times* were in the color scheme category and all of them showed the opposition's green color.

Portrayal of the Opposition's Protests

Overall, the three websites had given 36.3% of their total Iran-related photographic coverage to the portrayal of the opposition's protests, the bulk of which included the picture of violent protestors 30.4%, protestors and the security forces in the same frame 3.9%, and the power of the state 2% - which included photos showing Iranian police and other law enforcement agencies (see Table 3). Individual coverage for this category by each website was as follow:

Time: Almost one-fourth of the Iran-related photos on the website of *Time* showed the opposition's protests, which included violent protestors 16%, protestors and security forces 3.1%, and protestors and security forces in the same frame 4.6%.

The Economist: Almost one-third of the Iran-related photos on the website of *The Economist* were devoted to the coverage of the opposition's protests, which included violent protestors 25%, and protestors and security forces 8.3%.

The New York Times: Sixty-eight percent of the Iran-related photos on the website of *The New York Times* showed the opposition's protests and all of them were showing violent protestors. This set of data has confirmed the third hypothesis (H-3), which stated that a considerable amount of the overall coverage of the three websites would have been devoted to showing different forms of violence during the post election protests and the opposition's green color to portray and frame the event as a violent green revolution.

Feminism

In order to answer the second research question (RQ-2), which sought to understand the visual framing of the Iranian feminism, I analyzed photos on the three websites for different categories of the Iranian women. A considerable amount (39.2%) of the Iran-related total pictorial coverage by *The New York Times*, *The Economist* and *Time* showed the Iranian women. Sixty percent of such photos belonged to the category of the young Iranian women looking modern/progressive, followed by 12.5% showing Iranian women of different age groups looking modern/progressive, and 10.2% displaying middle aged/old Iranian women looking modern/progressive. So, the bulk of the visual coverage showed either young or modern looking Iranian women, or Iranian women of different age groups looking modern and demanding Western-style democracy. The remaining photos in this category included 2.5% showing young Iranian women looking conservative, 7.5% middle aged/old Iranian women looking conservative, and 2.5% each showing Iranian women of different age groups looking conservative, veiled women, and mix of women (see Table 4). I also analyzed each of the websites individually for the visual framing of the Iranian feminism.

Time and Iranian feminism: The *Time* had given 36.9% of its total Iran-related visual coverage to the Iranian women of which more than half (54.17%) showed young Iranian women looking modern, 8.33% to middle aged/old Iranian women looking modern, and 12.50% to Iranian women of different age groups looking modern. On the other hand, only 4.17% of the photos went each to the categories of young Iranian women looking conservative, Iranian women of different age groups looking conservative, and veiled women, while 12.50% of the photos showed middle aged/old Iranian women looking conservative.

The Economist and Iranian feminism: Only 8.3% of the total visual coverage of *The Economist* given to the Iranian presidential election showed Iranian women, and was in the category of middle aged/old Iranian women looking modern/progressive.

The New York Times and Iranian feminism: Sixty percent of the total visual coverage given to Iranian election by *The New York Times* showed various categories of Iranian women of which 73.33% picture were that of young Iranian women looking modern/progressive, 6.67% depicted middle aged/old Iranian women looking modern, 13.33% displayed Iranian women of different age groups looking modern, and went into the mix of women category. The analysis of this particular set of data confirmed the second hypothesis (H-2), which stated that the three websites will have given more visual coverage to pro-reforms, liberal and young Iranian females representing opposition to Ahmadinejad in order to support the dominant view point in the West that the new generation of Iranian women wanted Western-style democracy.

Discussion

As outlined previously, the websites *The New York Times, Time,* and *The Economist* gave considerably more visual coverage to the opposition leader and losing candidate, Mousavi, and his supporters than the incumbent reelected president, Ahmadinejad, and his voters. Data showed that Mousavi was seldom shown alone by the three websites, while on several occasions Ahmadinejad was either shown alone or in the company of only a few people, sometimes with his official security guards. This type of coverage supported the idea that Mousavi was more popular and closer to the people than Ahmadinejad. A good number of the photos of protests were loaded with the images of fire, blood, and the opposition's green color thus giving the impression as if a green revolution was taking place in Iran, where blood stained protestors, mostly young men and women, were taking on the security forces. This visual trend also supported the idea that the Iranians were ready to die for the somewhat larger than life Mousavi, who symbolized reforms.

However, in order to make a better sense out of these photos, one needs to conduct a separate qualitative study in order to understand the iconography and symbolism in these photos. Though it was not the scope of this research, nonetheless, this paper underlines the importance of other methods in understanding the visual coverage of the Iranian presidential election 2009. For instance, one such method could be the role of camera angle and shot selection in the depiction of the images of the presidential candidates and their supporters as well as the participants of the protests. It was observed during the data analysis that the photos of Ahmadinejad were mostly accompanied by stories and captions, which were highly critical of him. In such cases, mere a quantitative analysis is not enough to understand the visual framing of the image of a political leader.

Studies can also be conducted on the production and selection side of the news photographs in order to understand why these organizations chose to show what they showed and what made them package a story in way than the other.

Apart from Mousavi, the three websites had almost ignored the two other Iranian presidential candidates, who had also contested the election, lost it, and protested against the results. Therefore, the visual coverage gave the impression as if there was only one opposition leader in Iran and a two-party political system, and ignored the diversity in the Iranian opposition parties and their strategies in dealing with the post election crisis. Overall, the visual coverage presented the developments in Iran in bits and pieces, seldom making a complete sense out of the situation and forcing the readers to ask questions, which the three media organizations should have rather asked in the first place. There were no photos, which could confirm, support, or supplement the claims that the presidential election was rigged. While there were photos of Ahmadinejad, which alluded to his stand-off with the West on a number of occasions and his controversial statements during his first term about the holocaust, Israel, and the role of US in the Middle East, there were no images which could highlight the history of Mousavi's politics when he was the prime minister of Iran between 1981 and 1989. The news images and related stories were packaged in a way, which were highly critical of Ahamdinejad and supportive of Mousavi. This packaging aspect of the news stories related to Iran on the website is yet another potential subject for future research.

The dominant trend in photo coverage of the three websites was the unilateral and similar level of support for the opposition, and hence offered less diversity in reporting. The visual coverage was overall homogeneous across the three websites. These websites had also given more visual coverage to the young and middle-aged Iranian women looking modern compared to the conservative looking Iranian women. Almost all the photos of the modern looking young Iranian women had been taken while they were protesting in favor of Mousavi and for reforms in the Iranian society. There were

certain recurrent aesthetic aspects in the visual coverage of the Iranian women, which could only be understood through qualitative research studies. For example, iconographies of beauty and martyrdom across most of the visual coverage of Iranian feminism need to be understood from cultural and historical point of views as well. The visual framing of the Iranian feminism leaves one with the impression as if there are only two types of women in Iran: The progressive ones, who want more liberal rights and reforms and want to get rid of the old social values and the conservative ones, who are well under the control of the Iranian men and are exploited and who need to be freed as well. The Iranian woman is framed as either the victim of a cruel social system or on the forefront of the pro-reform struggle. Apparently, these two images of the Iranian women may be polls apart, but still both of them converge at a single point: The need for more reforms in the Iranian society to liberate the Iranian women. But, in order to understand the nature of the visual framing of the Iranian feminism in a broader context, one needs to investigate the subject qualitatively as well.

The body language of both the presidential candidates in the news photos could also be described and analyzed qualitatively. For example, whether a candidate was shown smiling, serious, angry, frustrated, communicative, as a family man, a good and reliable leader, a hero etc. Such visual studies, which investigated the framing of the body language and overall image of political leaders, have already been conducted during election campaigns across the world. This study also did not look into the visual iconology and iconography, which are very important in understanding the framing of political leaders and political movements. For instance, the photos showing Ahmadinejad as Hitler or Dracula also need to be analyzed for political iconography.

The sample can also be extended to multiple media forums, while cross media analyses can also be held: For instance the visual framing of the Iranian elections on televisions, newspapers, magazines, and websites is a research-worthy topic and can help in understanding the visual similarities and differences across different media.

Nonetheless, this study was the first of its kind to look into different visual aspects of the 2009 presidential election, the most important political event in the history of Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, in a systematic way by incorporating the framing of the presidential candidates, opposition protests, and Iranian feminism. This study is timely as well, as it looks into the role of the websites of leading media organizations at a time when the Internet is emerging as a dominant source of information across the developed world, and as well as in the urban centers of the Middle East, as sweeping political changes are being witnessed in Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and some other Arab and African nations.

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Tables

Table 1
 The frequencies and percentages of the visual coverage given to the two presidential candidates and their supporters on the websites of The New York Times, Time, & The Economist.

Picture showing

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Ahmedinejad Alone	3	2.9	3.3	3.3
	Ahmedinejad with supporters	6	5.9	6.5	9.8
	Ahmedinejad's supporters	2	2.0	2.2	12.0
	Ahmedinejad's picture (s) carried by his supporters	6	5.9	6.5	18.5
	Mousavi with supporters	10	9.8	10.9	29.3
	Mousavi's supporters	46	45.1	50.0	79.3
	Mousavi's picture(s) carried by his supporters	12	11.8	13.0	92.4
	Ahmadinejad and Mousavi	2	2.0	2.2	94.6
	Ahmadinejad's pictures with protestors showing him as dictator, hitlerian figure or a murderer	3	2.9	3.3	97.8
	Other	2	2.0	2.2	100.0
	Total	92	90.2	100.0	
Missing	System	10	9.8		
Total		102	100.0		

Table 2
The frequencies and percentages of the visual coverage of Fire, Blood, Green Color, & Mix of Fire, Blood/ Green Color on the websites of The New York Times, Time, & The Economist.

Picture showing

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Fire	6	5.9	10.3	10.3
	Blood	4	3.9	6.9	17.2
	Green Color	44	43.1	75.9	93.1
	mix of fire/blood/green	4	3.9	6.9	100.0
	Total	58	56.9	100.0	
Missing	System	44	43.1		
Total		102	100.0		

Table 3

The frequencies and percentages of the visual coverage given to different forms of violence on the websites of The New York Times, Time, & The Economist.

Use of force both by the state and the protestors					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	violent protestors	31	30.4	83.8	83.8
	Security forces/State power	2	2.0	5.4	89.2
	protestors and security forces	4	3.9	10.8	100.0
	Total	37	36.3	100.0	
Missing	System	65	63.7		
Total		102	100.0		

Table 4

The frequencies and percentages of visual coverage given to different categories of Iranian women on the websites of The New York Times, Time, & The Economist.

The portrayal of Iran's women					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	young modren/progressive Iranian women	24	23.5	60.0	60.0
	young conservative Iranian women	1	1.0	2.5	62.5
	middle aged/old Iranian modren/progressive women	4	3.9	10.0	72.5
	middle aged/old Iranian conservative women	3	2.9	7.5	80.0
	modren women of all ages	5	4.9	12.5	92.5
	conservative women of all ages	1	1.0	2.5	95.0
	Vieled women/invisible	1	1.0	2.5	97.5
	Mix of women	1	1.0	2.5	100.0
	Total	40	39.2	100.0	
Missing	System	62	60.8		
Total		102	100.0		