IRAN’S SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGE AND ITS CONNECTION TO CONSPIRACY THEORIES

by

Robert C. Runnels

March 2015

Thesis Advisor: Fathali Moghaddam
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Although the Iranian Facebook message has only achieved modest inroads, its connection to conspiracy theories is troubling. As Daniel Jolley and Karen M. Douglas point out in their 2014 article, “The Social Consequences of Conspiracism,” conspiracy theories increase distrust in the government and inhibit future political involvement. Conspiracy theories and rumors can also be used in disinformation campaigns, and the 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders linked the spread of rumors to civil unrest. Rather than ceding a portion of the Internet to Iran’s messengers, this study recommends an American counter-messaging strategy and the use of technological advances to defeat Iran’s Internet censorship in order to give all Iranians unfettered access to Western media sources.
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ABSTRACT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our world is becoming more interconnected, and a principal force driving this change is the Internet. Messages can travel faster than ever to an ever-growing portion of the globe. The Internet also provides new opportunities for nation states, as well as for formerly disenfranchised smaller actors, to spread their messages worldwide. In much of the Western world, that message arrives uncensored. In other regions of the world, censorship and control of Internet access presents challenges, but none that have yet proven insurmountable.

One of the most important messaging tools associated with the Internet is social media. The Arab Spring provides us with one example of social media’s power to reshape our world. The use of the Internet and social media by terrorist organizations for worldwide radicalization, recruitment and the spread of propaganda reveals a darker side to the changes wrought by the information age.

Iranian media outlets are now using social media to share their government’s viewpoint with the rest of the world. The Iranian message is available in English, and it has been placed on social media sites throughout the Western world, including Facebook, the most popular social media site in the world.1

This thesis explored the strategy behind Iran’s English-language media campaigns on the Internet, particularly with regard to Iran’s use of social media, in order to determine its possible impact on American homeland security. The research for this thesis was built around a qualitative analysis of the Facebook pages for Iranian news websites that are popular in the United States. That analysis focused on the pages for PressTV and the Young Journalists Club (YJC). An analysis of the data showed that the best method to determine Iran’s messaging strategy would simply be to closely follow the statements made by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

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This study also found that rumors and conspiracy theories were a large part of the Iranian social media message and, particularly in the case of PressTV, there was a significant connection to Western websites that featured conspiracy theory content. The Iranian regime’s social media message has not been terribly effective, but it does possess some modest potential to do mischief by tapping into the conspiracy theory community or through the use of disinformation campaigns.

Psychological studies indicate that conspiracy theories increase distrust in the government and have a negative effect on a person’s likelihood to vote in the future. Conspiracy theories and rumors can also be used in disinformation campaigns that can tarnish a nation’s image worldwide. The former Soviet Union’s Operation INFEKTION was an example of a successful disinformation campaign that took advantage of the psychology behind rumor and conspiracy theories. Studies have also linked rumors, which are often used as a means to spread conspiracy theories, to civil unrest. The recent protests in Ferguson, Missouri, some of which were violent, took place in an environment fueled in part by rumors. It is the creation and manipulation of incendiary events such as these that could provide weapons for America’s enemies, foreign and domestic, to tear away at the fabric of our democracy.

The Iranian message is hampered by its own censorship efforts. American engagement on social media sites, with counter-messaging emphasizing the fact that Iranian citizens cannot freely access the same social media channels that they are using to put out their message to the West, would likely be effective. Counter-messaging could also be crafted to illuminate the way Iran deals with dissenting views in its own country. Finally, advances in technology could be leveraged to defeat Iran’s Internet censorship, and all Iranians would then have unfettered access to Western media sources.

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Internet rumors and conspiracy theories represent a danger to American democracy. Analysts can assist our leaders by identifying and tracking potentially damaging rumors and conspiracy theories. Based on those efforts, it should be possible to craft counter-messaging strategies. Some of these counter-messaging strategies might consist simply of efforts toward greater government transparency and toward recognizing the need to make facts and information available to the public. Government-led efforts to improve the American public’s critical thinking skills and to educate the public about the psychology of rumors and conspiracy theories might also be useful in reducing American vulnerability.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I will begin by expressing my gratitude to the faculty and administrative staff of the Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security program. Without their efforts, this thesis would not have been possible and would likely not be nearly as interesting to read. In particular, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Fathali Moghaddam. His uncanny ability to quickly reduce a mountain of complex data to a handful of broad and insightful themes will never cease to amaze me. I also would like to thank a co-worker, John Zambri, who recommended me for this program and assisted me during various stages of the program. I am also deeply indebted to my fellow classmates, whose contributions to this program made the educational journey entertaining as well as enlightening. From Day One, I felt simultaneously humbled and thrilled to be surrounded by such a distinguished group of professionals.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Jan, for dealing with the stress and the frustrations of this program. Her constant support and understanding throughout the process meant a great deal to me.
I. INTRODUCTION

That is the beginning of knowledge—the discovery of something we do not understand.

Frank Herbert, God Emperor of Dune

A. IN THE BEGINNING

Whether we like it or not, our world is becoming more interconnected. One of the major forces driving this change is the Internet. Messages can travel faster than ever to an ever-growing portion of the globe. The Internet also provides new opportunities for nation states, as well as for formerly disenfranchised smaller actors, to spread their messages worldwide. In much of the Western world, that message arrives uncensored. In other regions of the world, censorship and control of Internet access presents challenges, but none that have yet proven insurmountable.

One of the most important messaging tools associated with the Internet is social media. The “Arab Spring” provides us with one example of social media’s power to reshape our world. The use of the Internet and social media by terrorist organizations for worldwide radicalization, recruitment and the spread of propaganda reveals a darker side to the changes wrought by the information age. The Boston Marathon bombings provide a potent example of this dark side. Alleged bomber Dzhokar Tsarnaev told the authorities that he and his brother were inspired by and obtained logistical instructions for the Boston Marathon bombing attack from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s online magazine. A recent report provides several more examples:

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Five young American students were arrested in Pakistan for attempting to join a terrorist group—they started their journey on YouTube. Some American jihadists like Zachary Chesser were inspired to set up their own jihadist website. Others like Samir Khan and Emerson Begolly exhorted others online to carry out terrorist attacks. Still others have found sufficient inspiration on the Internet to plot or carry out terrorist attacks in the United States like Michael Finton, who plotted to blow up a federal building in Illinois, or Major Nidal Hasan who killed 13 of his fellow soldiers and wounded 31 others at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009. Jose Pimentel apparently radicalized himself on the Internet, urged others to carry out attacks, then migrated from encourager to would-be bomber, following instructions from al Qaeda’s Inspire magazine to build his explosive devices.4

The United States government has made efforts to deal with the threat presented by terrorist organizations’ media activities, including their activities on the Internet. Media arms for these organizations have been listed by the Treasury Department as Specially Designated Global Terrorist organizations.5 Examples of these organizations include Hezbollah’s al Manar television6 and Hamas’ Al-Aqsa Television.7 The State Department created the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications to challenge and counter al-Qaeda’s Internet messaging campaign.8 Legislative reform also challenged terrorist-recruiting efforts online. The Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012 allows for the dissemination of public diplomacy materials to the American audience.9 According to Congressmen Mac Thornberry (R-TX), one of the sponsors of the legislation, modernization became necessary to counter the influence of al Qaeda and


8 “Terrorist, Regime, and Western Media.”

other violent extremists amongst disaffected populations, and to undercut these extremists’ recruitment abilities. Thornberry asserted that updating Smith-Mundt would “bolster our strategic communications and public diplomacy capacity on all fronts and mediums—especially online.” Thornberry also illustrated the need for this change using a 2009 incident in which the Smith-Mundt Act had prevented a Minneapolis-based radio station from replaying a Voice of America (VOA) piece that was meant to counter terrorist propaganda, even though that community had been the target of al Shabaab recruitment efforts.

Terrorist groups are not the only actors using social media to target Americans. Iran, an international rival, is now using social media to share its government’s viewpoint with the rest of the world. The Iranian message is available in English, and it has been placed on social media sites throughout the Western world, including Facebook, the most popular social media site in the world. In fact, Facebook is the second most popular website in the world, only lagging behind the search engine giant Google.

This thesis was built around a qualitative analysis of the Facebook pages for Iranian news websites that are popular in the United States. That analysis focused on the pages for PressTV and the Young Journalists Club (YJC). PressTV was created by Islamic Republic Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). YJC’s English website’s “about” section is blank, but YJC’s Twitter page indicates that IRIB founded YJC in 2000. IRIB

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
controls both foreign and domestic Iranian broadcasts. It is state funded, and Iran’s Supreme Leader has the power to appoint or remove its director. According to Iran’s constitution, IRIB is supposed to “support the ideology and interests of the state.” This thesis also compares the Iranian social media message to statements made by Iranian leadership. By using this process, I hoped to glean some useful information about the Iranian messaging strategy, and the information might then prove useful for identifying areas of concern for the homeland security practitioner, as well as for crafting an American counter-message.

No evidence was found to indicate that the Iranian news websites were being used to radicalize or recruit Americans to commit acts of violence against their government. However, as the data was collected, a troubling pattern emerged. Conspiracy theories were a large part of the Iranian message. Research into conspiracy theories indicated that conspiracy theories might have a negative effect on democracies by increasing distrust in the government and reducing a person’s likelihood to vote in the future. Rumors, often used to spread conspiracy theories, have been associated with civil unrest. Rumors have also been used in the past by America’s enemies to spread disinformation. As a result, a large focus of this thesis shifted to an understanding of rumors and conspiracy theories and their potential impact on American security.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Information Age, Social Media and Intelligence

Social media’s impact on world affairs has been significant. For example, the use of the Internet and social media fueled a movement by the people in several Middle Eastern and North African countries to topple their governments.

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19 “Media Environment Guide: Iran.”
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
23 “New Study Quantifies Use.”
The global shift into the information age and the role of the Internet and social media has dramatically changed how the world communicates and shares information. A 2012 world Internet usage survey showed that 34.3 percent of the world’s population uses the Internet—an increase of 566.4 percent since 2000.24 In a one-year period between 2011 and 2012, the percentage of the world’s population using Facebook rose from 9.1 percent to 12.6 percent.25 The percentage of Americans using social media today is even higher. A Pew Research poll in 2012 showed that this was most profound among users aged 49 and younger. As of May 2013, among users in the 18-to-29 age group, 89 percent used social networking sites and, among the users in the 30-to-49 age group, 78 percent used social networking sites as of May 2013.26

Social media provides intelligence-gathering opportunities to the United States, its rivals and its enemies. America’s enemies and rivals will be able to use social media for direct access to an even larger portion of the American people. This should be of particular concern to homeland security professionals. For example, social media has already been used by al Qaeda to radicalize and inspire persons in the United States to commit terrorist acts in support of al Qaeda’s ideology.27 Nation states such as Iran have also turned to Facebook and other social media platforms to spread their messages in English to the Western world. Iranian examples include the Facebook pages for The YJC,28 PressTV29 and the Iranian Student’s News Agency.30 Perhaps the people of the United States are capable of discerning the subtleties of propaganda, making its censorship unnecessary. It is also quite possible that censorship of such messaging might

29 “Tehran, Iran - Media/News/Publishing.”
hurt America’s image more than it helps. However, it is also possible that the propaganda of rivals such as Iran, or al Qaeda, might find resonance in segments of our population.

2. **Iranian Media Activities on the Internet—A Historical Review since the Islamic Revolution**

The first Iranian Internet message was sent in 1993. In the Middle East and Near East regions, Iranian access to the Internet was only preceded by Israel. The growth rate of Internet users in Iran from 1993 to 2006 was amongst the fastest in the world. The Iranian regime embraced the Internet as a tool to enable advances in science and technology, as well as to improve governmental efficiency and to spread Iran’s revolutionary ideals. However, many Iranian citizens were also quick to embrace the freedom of the Internet to express their grievances and to talk about issues that they were not permitted to discuss in public. Not too surprisingly, the government has resorted to increased levels of censorship to put a damper on dissent, or as a conservative response to reformist ideas.

Iranian officials have affirmed their belief that the Western world is conducting a “soft war” campaign aimed at Iran. In 2010, Hojjatoleslam Ali Saidi, Iranian Supreme Leader’s representative in the Revolutionary Guards, attended a meeting on “confronting the soft war.” At the meeting, he stressed, “We see that at every election, the enemy uses this secular and liberal movement to reach its aims.”

An article on Iran and the soft war in the *International Journal of Communications* further illustrates Iran’s concerns:

The events of the Arab Spring instilled in many authorities the considerable fear that they could too easily lose control over the narratives

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32 Ibid.


35 Ibid.
of legitimacy that undergird their power. This threat to national power was already a part of central thinking in Iran. Their reaction to the Arab Spring was especially marked because of a long-held feeling that strategic communicators from outside the state’s borders were purposely reinforcing domestic discontent.36

After the conclusion of the 2009 Green Revolution, the Iranians placed the blame for the protests on the West and its soft-war efforts. Jailed protestors were forced to confess on Iranian-run media in an effort to convince the Iranian people that Iran was the victim.37

Iran has responded to the alleged soft-war efforts of the West by tightening control over Internet access38 and by building up its own cyber-war capabilities. Iran has mobilized a large numbers of its citizens to counter the pro-Western message in cyberspace, and they have created thousands of blogs and websites that push Iran’s world view and image. The Iranians have a virtual army on popular social media platforms such as Facebook. They post pro-Iranian messages, work to undermine pro-Western views, organize complaints to shut down social media pages they deem offensive, and, more chillingly, they report fellow Iranians who they believe are working against Iran or its brand of Islam to the Iranian cyber police, known by the acronym FATA.39 In 2012, Iran created a soft-war headquarters to counter the threats from the United States and Israel; Deputy Chief of Staff for Iran’s Armed Forces, BrigGen. Massoud Jazayeri, affirmed Iran’s commitment to soft-war strategies when he said, “We too must develop an organized means to address the fight with the enemy in this arena.”40

The public nature of Iran’s soft-war campaign presents intelligence collectors and analysts with an opportunity to gather useful information about an otherwise largely unknown foe.

3. Strategies for Analysis of Propaganda

Propaganda experienced a period of great expansion with the creation of mass media in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Mass media included print, radio and television. Harold Lasswell conducted scholarly analysis of propaganda early in his career as a political scientist, without taking a political position. Early on, he searched for an understanding of patterns in propaganda that “would reveal its strategies and ultimate effectiveness.” Open source intelligence analysis was built on Lasswell’s theory. Lasswell’s formula broke down an act of communication into five parts:

Who…

Says What…

In Which Channel…

To Whom…

With What Effect

Open source analysts using this model could attempt to learn the thoughts and intentions of foreign leaders by analyzing the content of their nation’s propaganda. Since propaganda has a purpose, its structure yields clues to its creators’ thought process. For example, during World War II, Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels revealed sufficient information in his messages to the German people about a new weapon for

42 Ibid., 105.
43 Anthony Olcott, Open Source Intelligence in a Networked World (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 177.
44 Ibid.
British analysts to accurately predict the type and nature of the weapon—in this case the V-1 flying bomb—as well as its expected deployment dates.45

However, since the information age and the rise of the Internet, the analyst’s job is more difficult because there is simply more available data to sift through. While it is true that mass media still exists and an analyst can still look there for clues to what leaders are saying, the analyst now has access to what other segments of society might be saying as well, without having to be actually present in distant locales. Furthermore, the Internet now makes it possible for the analyst to view content from persons who, in the past, would have had to resort to leaflets and posters.46 Joseph Nye, a proponent of soft power, made a similar observation about this global shift into the information age in an article titled “Cyber Power”:

Struggles among governments, corporations, and individuals are not new, but the low price of entry, anonymity, and asymmetries in vulnerability means that smaller actors have more capacity to exercise hard and soft power in cyberspace than in many more traditional domains of world politics.47

Olcott, in his work on open-source intelligence asserts that, in today’s social media age:

Media do not dictate to audiences, but rather groups now choose media to aggregate, reinforce one another, and form communities of shared interest. This nearly reverses the Lasswell formula—a group of people trying to achieve a certain effect cluster around a medium or media to find and build an audience that will share their interest and join in achieving the effect.”48

Olcott’s observation about the reversal of Lasswell’s formula can be illustrated through al Qaeda’s use of the Internet and social media. Individuals sympathetic to al Qaeda’s ideology coalesce around Internet forums and social media groups, which are formed and populated by persons with shared interests. Olcott’s work suggests that an

45 Alexander L. George, Propaganda Analysis (New York: Row, Peterson and Company) 1959, 23.
48 Olcott, Open Source Intelligence in a Networked World, 197.
analyst looking at a decentralized organization like al Qaeda might be better served to study the media around which the group’s decentralized elements gather to support, or reinforce one another.

4. **Rumors, Conspiracy Theories and Propaganda**

The way in which a message is introduced and then echoed in social media, sometimes reaching a crescendo, is often referred to as “going viral.” Psychology seems to play a role in this phenomenon. For example, recent studies have shown that messages that arouse strong emotions, whether positive or negative, are more likely to capture public attention and spread on the Internet.49 Robert Knapp headed an anti-rumor bureau in World War II, and his work on rumors as a weapon made similar observations.50 He observed that successful rumors were self-propelling, exploited the emotions and sentiments of a group, and could both express and form public opinion at the same time.51 Conspiracy theories are often spread by rumors. This suggests that social media analysts might find useful models in the study of rumors and conspiracy theories.

5. **World War II and the Psychology of Rumor**

During World War II, both the Axis and Allied governments were concerned about the spread of rumors in their countries.52 A carefully crafted rumor could become a powerful psychological weapon. For example, when a German invasion of England seemed imminent in the summer of 1940, a rumor was spread that the British military had a secret weapon that literally could set the sea ablaze and destroy the German invasion forces in a blazing inferno. The spread of the rumor was a success. A captured German pilot told his interrogators that the weapon was common knowledge amongst his

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51 Ibid.

squadron mates.\textsuperscript{53} The German High Command must have believed the rumors as well, since they conducted some unsuccessful experiments to protect their invasion fleet with flame-retardant asbestos. The British rumor had both demoralized and deceived their enemy.\textsuperscript{54}

In the absence of hard facts, a quite normal state of affairs under wartime censorship, rumors would be created and spread to fill the void of public information. Since those rumors could do a great deal of damage, as in the previous example, a study of rumor itself would be valuable. In 1944, Robert H. Knapp published an article detailing his study of rumor. The article was simply titled, “The Psychology of Rumor.”\textsuperscript{55}

During the war, Knapp was in charge of rumor control for the Massachusetts Committee of Public Safety, so he was intimately familiar with the subject matter. The popular publication \textit{Reader’s Digest} was used to collect information on rumors from its readers, and the results were analyzed by the Massachusetts Committee.\textsuperscript{56} The rumors were classified by the Committee as fitting one of three rumor categories: pipe-dreams (or wish rumor), bogies, or wedge-driving (or aggressive).\textsuperscript{57} The pipe-dream rumors expressed wishful thinking, such as “Lloyds of London and Wall Street are betting 10-to-1 that the war will be over by autumn.”\textsuperscript{58} The bogie rumors arose out of fear and anxiety, such as the rumor that “the entire Pacific Fleet was destroyed at Pearl Harbor.”\textsuperscript{59} The aggressive wedge-driving rumors were typically motivated by hatred, and were actually directed at Americans, by Americans, or directed against America’s allies. An example of this kind of rumor was the assertion that “Churchill blackmailed Roosevelt into provoking war with Japan.”\textsuperscript{60} One thousand and eighty-nine rumors from all over the United States were collected and analyzed by the Massachusetts Committee in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[53] Ibid.
\item[54] Ibid.
\item[56] Ibid.
\item[57] Ibid.
\item[58] Ibid.
\item[59] Ibid.
\item[60] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
Nearly two-thirds of the rumors were categorized as wedge-driving rumors. Approximately one quarter of the rumors were fear (or bogie) rumors. This is understandable in 1942, since the United States had just entered the war at the end of 1941 and the outcome of the conflict was not certain. For that reason, it is also not surprising that only about 2 percent of the rumors were pipe-dreams, created by wishful thinking.

Knapp postulated that the study of rumor could be used as an “index of morale” in which groups susceptible to a certain type of rumor could be identified. Additionally, Knapp asserted that the volume of circulation rumors has an inverse relationship with the availability of official information that is “trustworthy and satisfying.” Finally, Knapp saw rumors as indicative of “underlying hopes, fears and hostilities of the group.” For that reason, they are mirror reflections of the trend in morale. A rise in bogie rumors could be indicative of low morale and despondence, while a prevalence of wishful-thinking rumors might indicate a trend towards a foolhardy sense of security; an increase in wedge-driving rumors could be revealing of a “scapegoating mentality.”

6. Allport and Postman’s Basic Law of Rumor

In 1947, G.W. Allport and Leo Postman released their book *The Psychology of Rumor*. The book is still very heavily cited, and it builds on the foundation of work provided by Knapp and the wartime rumor clinics. The book’s key finding was that the incidence of rumor is proportional to the importance of, and level of ambiguity about, the topic to the engaged audience. This is referred to as the basic law of rumor. An

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 33–34.
illustrative example from the text dealt with rumors of excessive American losses that circulated in the United States after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Since the full extent of American losses was not circulated in early news reports, some Americans began to distrust the news sources. Furthermore, there was already distrust in the Roosevelt administration. The American peoples’ lives had been disrupted by their country’s sudden entrance into the war, and there was a great deal of fear prevalent. In this example, ambiguity was generated by distrust and fear, and the country’s involvement in a world war gave importance to the topic. It was no surprise that rumors of excessive American losses were generated. The rumors continued to persist, even after President Roosevelt addressed them in one of his fireside chats. A poll of college students showed that the president’s chat did create a drop (from 69 percent to 46 percent) in their belief in the rumors of excessive American losses, but if that result were extrapolated to the entire population, a large percentage of Americans kept believing the damaging rumors.

7. Rumor Psychology and the Iraq War

Knapp’s study has stood the test of time, as evidenced by a Naval Postgraduate School master’s thesis written by Stephanie R. Kelly, titled “Rumors in Iraq: a Guide to Winning Hearts and Minds.” In Kelly’s estimation, the study of rumors can provide actionable intelligence for the field commander. Kelly analyzed rumors collected from Iraqis in the period after the American invasion in 2003–2004, and published his findings in a publication created by an American open-source intelligence worker. The rumors were placed in a weekly feature titled, “What’s the Word on the Streets of Baghdad.” Knapp’s categorization of rumors as wishful thinking, bogeys, or wedge-driving was used in Kelly’s study. The data showed a high incidence of negative rumors in Iraq. Almost 70 percent of the rumors reflected hostility and fear. The rumor generation

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70 Ibid., 3–6.
71 Ibid., 5.
73 Ibid.
suggested that the Iraqi people were experiencing high levels of anxiety, uncertainty and hostility; these emotions influence their perception of the Coalition. Kelly’s findings indicate that the Iraqis were far more concerned about politics and governance, quality of life issues and the insurgency than they were about the pictures of prisoner abuse from Abu Ghraib. This ran counter to the negative feelings the same pictures produced in the United States, which became the focus of American communicators. Kelly’s findings also suggest that American efforts in Iraq would have been better served by giving the populace more detailed and reliable information about the future Iraqi government and politics. This kind of information could have prevented the formation of detrimental rumors that arose out of the desire for information.

8. Rosnow and Ongoing Research into Rumor Psychology

Ralph L. Rosnow has devoted a great deal of time and study to rumor psychology. In a 1991 article about rumor psychology, Rosnow stated that Allport and Postman’s major insights were still “as fresh as bread from the oven.” Rosnow has built on their work with further studies and data; he now postulates that four conditions affect the creation and circulation of rumors: general uncertainty, outcome-relevant involvement, personal anxiety and credulity.

Rosnow points out that his term “general uncertainty” seems be synonymous with Allport and Postman’s ambiguity, but Rosnow noted that, although most of the literature on rumor depends on uncertainty, an experiment that indicated that a rumor could still be spread in the absence of cognitive unclarity. He theorized the example of Paul McCartney’s rumored death in 1961, which circulated despite convincing evidence that the musician was alive. The rumor circulated because the audience considered the situation to be sufficiently vague and unclear, owing to the efforts of “underground”

74 Ibid.
75 Kelly, Rumors in Iraq: A Guide to Winning Hearts and Minds.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
channels that created and spread the rumor. 79 Keep this example in mind when this thesis later discusses the conspiracy theories contained in the message content transmitted in English by YJC and PressTV.

Outcome-relevant involvement is Rosnow’s substitute for the importance that was a key variable in Allport and Postman’s rumor transmission equation. 80 Rosnow cited some research or observations that tended to contradict importance as a key variable. For example, one wartime observation noted that, of three rumors of prime importance planted by the group, one rumor’s circulation was actually damaged by its importance. 81 Additionally, Canadian researcher Joseph Scanlon noted in a study of rumors circulated after a damaging windstorm that the subjects in his study were more likely to rate the rumors that they personally passed on as unimportant. 82 Although Rosnow sees high personal involvement as a factor in rumor creation and transmission, he also believes that there is “less critical examination when outcome-relevant information is low.” 83 For this reason, Rosnow analogizes spreading an inconsequential rumor to “firing a shot in the dark.” 84

Allport and Postman’s work would seem to already have addressed Rosnow’s variable of personal anxiety as a component of importance. They identified the need for some to rationalize and relieve their anxiety as a possible motive for rumor. An example of this can be found in the negative rumors that circulated after the Pearl Harbor attack. 85 Allport and Postman summed it up well by stating, “Why shouldn’t I feel panicky? Our fleet was wiped out a Pearl Harbor.” 86 Rosnow gave examples that indicated that rumors will persist unless uncertainties are dealt with, or until anxieties have subsided. 87

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
86 Ibid., 37.
87 Rosnow, “Inside Rumor: A Personal Journey.”
Rosnow also noted that data from studies of racial rioting in the 1960s, and among Asian emerges from Idi Amin’s Uganda and evidence that increased levels of fear, stress and uncertainty were more likely to create a surge of rumors.  

Rosnow explained that credulity was not dealt with by Allport and Postman’s basic law of rumor, though they did indicate that a rumor was likely to contain a “kernel of truth.” Essentially, Rosnow indicated that a person would be more likely to spread a rumor if the teller found it to be trustworthy. If a person were to circulate a rumor that was later proved to be false, whether it be a wish rumor or a dread rumor, then that person might face angry backlash or resentment. The rumormonger might also lose future credibility. A person might still pass dread rumors if that person were to have an ulterior or devious motive. Rosnow noted that trust in a rumor was in the eye of the beholder. A person’s judgment can be swayed by data and evidence, but it can also be influenced by stereotypes, prejudices and emotions. In times of uncertainty and fear, it might not take much hard data to convince a person to give credence to a rumor, especially one that contains that “kernel of truth.”

Rosnow likened the spreading of rumors to firing a gun; the gun represents the public and the rumors are bullets for loading the gun. Rosnow came up with some strategies for rumor control based on the gun metaphor. First, it might be wise to keep lines of communication open and to provide reliable and truthful information about subjects, or incidents, that are likely to be of importance, or sources of anxiety. In this way, there should be less ammunition available to load the gun. Also, improving the populace’s critical thinking skills and educating the public about the psychology of rumor

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88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
91 Rosnow, “Inside Rumor: A Personal Journey.”
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
itself might keep the people from “loading the gun” in the first place. Homeland security professionals should always be cognizant of this prevention strategy, because failure invites disaster. For example, in a 1968 study on civil disorders, “rumors significantly aggravated tensions and disorder in more than 65 percent of the disorders studied.” If prevention fails, and the gun goes off, Rosnow states that the strategy is to “keep the gun from going off repeatedly.” The rumors that are in circulation will give an indication of the source of “the people’s anxieties and uncertainties.” Armed with that information, it will then be possible to craft messaging and actions to dispense information that removes the uncertainties and to allay the anxieties. Rosnow added that, if the rumor gun goes off repeatedly, the strategy should be to minimize the damage that the volley of rumors can cause. Rosnow suggested that one way to do this might be to take legal action against the producers of the false rumor; this action would bring attention to the miscreants and to the false nature of their rumors.

9. Rumor and the Internet

The advent of the Internet allowed for further study into the psychology of rumor without the limitations inherent in the face-to-face laboratory environment. In the case of Internet content open to the public, the observer’s activity is unobtrusive and would likely stand up against challenges of ethical misconduct. The data is digitally preserved, facilitating easy access by the interested observer, while affording the observer a chance to analyze a social group and its communications in a natural setting. This makes it possible to unobtrusively observe group interaction in the communication of a rumor.

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97 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
Bordia and Rosnow conducted a content analysis of a public Internet discussion group focused on a rumor about Prodigy, a service owned by International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) and Sears, Roebuck and Company. At that time, Prodigy used phone lines to provide its service to personal computer users. The rumor that circulated on the forum was that Prodigy was using their access to personal computers to harvest information from their subscribers’ computer hard drives. Bordia and Rosnow analyzed the data from their study in an attempt to answer four research questions:

**RQ1:** Do the kinds of statements that people make while communicating a rumor and the incidence of these statements reflect the confluence of variables noted in recent rumor theory?

**RQ2:** Does the usage of the statements identified in RQ1 group or profile the participants in a meaningful way that is consistent with sociological theorizing?

**RQ3:** Do CMC (computer-mediated communications) groups exhibit the developmental pattern reported for FtF (face-to-face) groups?

**RQ4:** Does a CMC rumor discussion exhibit group development patterns?

The data suggested that the answer to RQ1 is “yes.” The prudent statements that began the discussion dropped off as anxiety increased. Based on Rosnow’s earlier research findings about rumor, this makes sense. The persons who started the rumor would have been concerned about the negative personal implications should the rumor prove to be false, so the calls for prudence included in their initial statements could be viewed as innocuous qualifiers. Once the anxiety levels were increased and the rumor

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106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

111 Bordia and Rosnow, “Rumor Rest Stops on the Information.”
gained momentum, the concern about backlash from participation in the rumor mongering was largely eliminated. Interrogatory statements were very high on day one, which coincided with the group’s search for information.\textsuperscript{112} Apprehensive statements, which indicated anxiety, peaked on day four. This also makes sense based on Rosnow’s earlier research that showed rumors will persist until anxiety is reduced.\textsuperscript{113}

The answer to RQ2 was also in the affirmative, and seemed to agree with sociological theorizing about rumor.\textsuperscript{114} The Internet discussion group’s messaging about the rumor showed a clustering of persons within the group. Those clusters included skeptical disbelievers—a positivistic group that took an analytical approach to validation of the rumor and sought out authentication and justification; apprehensive believers—who mixed anxious and apprehensive statements with belief statements; a cluster of anxious responders—a group that was predominantly anxious as a result of the rumor; a cluster of curious responders—who provided interrogatory responses; and, finally, the previously mentioned prudent initiators of the discussion.\textsuperscript{115}

The answers to RQ3 and RQ4 were also “yes.” The rumor discussion followed the four expected stages of group development. On day one, dependency statements were high, which corresponded with the initial stage of group development, in which a group explores and identifies acceptable behavior.\textsuperscript{116} On day two, counter-dependency statements peaked, which corresponds with the second stage of group development, when a group deals with conflict and competition.\textsuperscript{117} The third stage of group development is a period when group trust and structure builds, and it is accompanied by fight-and-flight statements.\textsuperscript{118} The number of flight statements was found to be low throughout the

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
This might reflect a difference between the online environment and face-to-face interaction. Unlike in the lab setting, a person only views an Internet page when the desire to do so arises, at which point there is no pressure to participate in a discussion that might be present in a group gathering in a physical space.

Pairing statements (agreement, friendship and unity) should rise in the third stage of group development; the study data showed that they peaked at 34.4 percent on the last day of the rumor discussion. As expected, the number of counter-pairing statements was highest on day two, corresponding to the second (conflict) stage of group development. Finally, work statements peaked on day four, which corresponded with the fourth stage of group development—the work stage. Once the group had dealt with issues of what constituted acceptable behavior and conflict, and built trust and a group structure, then work could begin.

An interesting conclusion that might be drawn from comparing Bordia and Rosnow’s study with a study of small physical groups (conducted by Wheelan, Davidson, and Tilin) is that the Internet significantly shortens the time necessary for group development—from months to mere days. If group-development time is shortened, then it seems likely that the speed of rumor transmission should also increase.

10. Conspiracy Theories

Rumors and conspiracy theories are closely tied. A conspiracy theory can be defined as “an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who have also managed to conceal their role.” Here we see the key difference between a rumor and a conspiracy theory: the role of a secretive cabal.

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119 Bordia and Rosnow, “Rumor Rest Stops on the Information Highway.”
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 Wheelan, Davidson, and Tilin, “Group Development Across Time Reality or Illusion?”
Rumors provide a mechanism by which a conspiracy theory spreads through a population. For example, there are various conspiracy theories on the Internet that attempt to identify the “real” culprits behind 9/11, but, in this author’s opinion, those theories are typically summed up and spread by the rumor that 9/11 was an inside job. Evidence of the damage caused by this rumor can be found in a 2006 Scripps News/Ohio University poll, in which 36 percent of the respondents at least suspected that the U.S. government played a role in 9/11.126

In modern America, conspiracy theories are alive and well. In a recent Rasmussen poll, 37 percent of adults believed that President John F. Kennedy’s assassination was a conspiratorial plot; 23 percent believed that President Barack Obama was not an American citizen; 24 percent believed that the American government knew in advance about the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but did nothing about it; 14 percent believed the moon landings were faked; and 8 percent still believed that the AIDS virus was created in a CIA laboratory.127 If you include the number of surveyed people who are undecided about these poll questions, then the numbers look even worse. Why do so many Americans believe in unproven, or worse yet, demonstrably false, conspiracy theories? We live in the information age, yet disinformation continues to thrive.

11. Some Conspiracy Theories are Conspiracy Fact

One reason conspiracy theories might get traction is because some past conspiracy theories turned out to be facts. For example, President Richard Nixon was involved in the Watergate cover-up, and, in 1953, the CIA actually overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammed Mossadegh. Additionally, the Public Health Service conducted a study about doctors of African-American syphilitic males but did not inform their patients of their actual medical condition and did not treat the patients with penicillin.


12. Hofstadter and the Paranoid Tendency

One of the earliest scholarly articles about conspiracy theories was written by Richard Hofstadter. In his 1964 article, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” Hofstadter determined the “paranoid tendency” came from irreconcilable opposing interests that were locked in battle over ethnic, religious or class conflicts. In such struggles, Hofstadter noted that the extremist right was unable to engage in compromise. The essence of Hofstadter’s article is that the extreme right took to the generation of conspiracy theories to explain social changes that challenged their status quo, just as millenarians had done in centuries past. In retrospect, Hofstadter’s exclusive focus on the extremist right might have been somewhat narrow. One interesting takeaway from Hofstadter’s writing is his portrayal of Alger Hiss as an alleged conspirator. More recent evidence would seem to prove that at least some of that paranoia was justified, since the CIA’s Venona files point quite convincingly to Alger Hiss as being a Soviet agent. This does not mean that all of the accusations of communist infiltration in America were correct, but it does provide us with another example of a conspiracy theory that would seem to have been proven true.

When Hofstadter’s work is compared to the previously mentioned studies on the psychology of rumor, the common thread seems to be a link between both rumor and conspiracy theory to anxiety. Rosnow, Allport and Postman all pointed to rumors as filling a need for some to rationalize and relieve their anxiety. Hofstadter’s “paranoid tendency” would also seem to be based on the need to rationalize and relieve anxiety.

129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
13. From the Perspective of Social Psychology

Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule put forth their more balanced look at conspiracy theories in their article “Conspiracy Theory: Causes and Cures.” Sunstein and Vermeule wrote that several factors are responsible for the creation and spread of conspiracy theories. These factors include crippled epistemologies, rumors and speculation, group polarization and selection effects.

Most people have little direct information on which they base their knowledge or beliefs. Therefore, their foundation for knowledge rests on others’ thoughts. Some persons are “crippled” by knowing very little, or by what they do know being incorrect. This is especially true of extremists. For a person suffering from an extremist crippled epistemology, a conspiracy theory might seem to be an entirely rational explanation for a stunning turn of events.

The role of rumors and speculation in the formation of conspiracy theories should come as no surprise to anyone who has studied the psychology of rumor and is familiar with the works of Knapp, Allport and Postman, and Rosnow. What Sunstein and Vermeule add here is the role of the “conspiracy entrepreneur,” who profits from the spread of the conspiracy theory. Some of these entrepreneurs might, in fact, be sincere in their motives, but Sunstein and Vermeule believe that others are motivated by monetary greed or by the achievement of a societal goal. This is something that will be revisited in an upcoming section in this chapter that analyzes conspiracy theories and PressTV.

Conspiracy cascades are mechanisms that act to push more persons to accept a conspiracy theory. If a person only has weak information to challenge the theory, or wants to go along with the crowd, or because the triggering event at the origin of the conspiracy theory is symbolic of an important issue of public concern, then that person

\[132\] Sunstein and Vermeule, “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures.”
\[133\] Ibid.
\[134\] Ibid.
\[135\] Ibid.
\[136\] Ibid.
might tend to accept the conspiracy theory. As more persons succumb to the theory for the same reasons, momentum increases and cascades take place, drawing more and more persons into accepting the conspiracy theory’s validity.137

Group polarization refers to the phenomenon that occurs when a group engages in discussion about an issue.138 After the discussion, the group will end up in a more extreme position that agrees with their previous tendencies. The factors that produce conspiracy cascades are mirrored in the process of group polarization.139

Finally, after cascades and group polarization grow and shape a group supporting a conspiracy theory, some persons who have doubts or lesser faith in the theory will leave the group. The group will then consist of persons who are more committed to the cause. Selection effects such as this can lead to fanaticism. Group members might segregate themselves from outsiders who challenge their theory, and their leaders might enforce that separation in an effort to maintain their hold on the reins of group power.140 According to Sunstein and Vermeule, the result can be a “paranoid cognition.”141 The group will not trust the motives and actions of those in larger society.

Conspiracy Theories go Mainstream?

Michael Barkun wrote that “the essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil.”142 Barkun’s approach to the matter echoes Hofstadter’s linkage of conspiracy beliefs to millenarianism. Barkun indicated that conspiracy theories have an allure because they reduce complex events to simple stories of good versus evil.143 Conspiracy beliefs are a form of stigmatized knowledge—knowledge that is unaccepted by the mainstream.144 However, Barkun indicates that stigmatized knowledge

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137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
143 Ibid., 182.
144 Ibid., 12.
is finding its way into the mainstream. When mainstream media makes references to “FEMA here, an allusion to microchips there,” this can create curiosity that can be satisfied immediately through Internet access to even more conspiracy material.

14. So What?

If it is true that there is widespread acceptance of conspiracy theories in the United States, why is it significant?

A recent psychological study showed that exposure to conspiracy theories has a damaging effect on democracies. The results showed that exposure to conspiracy theories tends to reduce a person’s likeliness to vote in the future, and were directly linked to increased feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty toward the government. How long can a democratic government be perceived as legitimate if voter participation drops and its constituents feel powerless or uncertain?

Another danger associated with conspiracy theories is the linkage of rumors to civil unrest. According to Allport and Postman, “no riot ever occurs without rumors to incite, accompany and intensify the violence.” Once again, this link between rumor and civil unrest was reinforced by the 1968 study on civil disorders. If rumors provide a mechanism by which a conspiracy theory spreads through a population, then it follows that a conspiracy theory could also be linked to civil unrest.

Conspiracy theories can also be used to radicalize an extremist group and can be a factor in that group’s turn to violence. Additionally, conspiracy theories can be used

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146 Ibid.
to demonize the group’s enemies and delegitimize the group’s critics,151 while also justifying violent action.152

Wedge-driving rumors and conspiracy theories might also be created by persons or organizations with the intent of doing harm. Operation INFEKTION is an example of this kind of rumor. In the 1980s, Soviet agents planted a rumor that AIDS had been created as a result of the Pentagon’s biological weapons research.153 This disinformation campaign had some success and outlasted the Soviet Union by decades. Derivations of the story were still circulating in Africa as late as 2004, when Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan biologist who won the Nobel peace prize, asserted that AIDS was created by “evil-minded scientists” to “wipe out the black race.”154 In the United States, a 2005 RAND study showed that almost 50 percent of African Americans believed the AIDS virus was manmade, and over 25 percent of them believed it was created in a government laboratory.155 One reason for the persistence of the AIDS conspiracy theory in the African American community is its link to another event that was confirmed as fact—the Public Health Service study of syphilis patients in the black community.156 In that study, appropriate treatment of the male black syphilis patients was not provided so that the effects of syphilis on the patients could be observed. The patients were never told that they had syphilis. Distrust and fear of the government arising from that outrageous event created fertile ground for the AIDS conspiracy theory to flourish in the African American community.

Most of the research on rumor and conspiracy theories discussed thus far was conducted by Western researchers. A large amount of that research, particularly the research about rumor psychology, was conducted in wartime; the researchers were

151 Ibid.
152 Ibid., 29.
154 Ibid.
155 Ibid.
therefore thinking about the international dimension. A similar approach would prove useful for a greater understanding of the role of conspiracy theories in the international arena.

15. **Conspiracy Theories in the Middle East and the Near East, Including Iran**

Americans do not have a monopoly on the creation and spread of conspiracy theories. They are also common in the Middle and Near East, including Iran. Sometimes the same conspiracy theories are circulated in both regions of the world. For example:

In a poll conducted in seven Muslim countries, 78 percent of respondents said that they do not believe the 9/11 attacks were carried out by Arabs. The most popular account in these countries is that 9/11 was the work of the U.S. or Israeli governments.\(^{157}\)

It is thought provoking to compare the results of this poll to the results cited earlier from a polling of Americans. In that poll, 24 percent of respondents believed that the U.S. government knew in advance about the 9/11 attacks and did nothing about it. Although the poll questions must have differed, it seems that, in the Middle East, over three times as many people opted for the conspiracy theory explanation.

As evidenced by the data collected for this thesis, conspiracy theories are also a common feature in Iranian discourse. Conspiracies involving the United States and Israel are quite common. Other authors have written about the Iranian predilection for conspiracy theories\(^ {158}\) and the seeming ubiquity of conspiracy theories throughout the Middle East.\(^ {159}\) A psychological study also noted that a “susceptibility to believe in conspiracy theories is more pronounced in Near Eastern countries (i.e., Turkey) than in Western countries (Germany, U.K./Ireland, U.S.).”\(^ {160}\) One study suggested that a link

\(^{157}\) Sunstein and Vermeule, “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures.”


\(^{159}\) Matthew Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

between the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the Middle East and child-rearing practices,\footnote{Marvin Zonis and Craig M. Joseph, “Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East,” Political Psychology, 1994, 443–59.} but, without further research, other factors seem to be more significant.

The origins of conspiracy theories in the Middle East will quite naturally have some similarities to their American counterparts. Based on the previously discussed body of literature on rumor and conspiracy theory, conspiracy theories can be seen as a form of communal sense-making about issues and events that contribute to public anxiety or uncertainty. The conspiracy theory narrative takes the real-world complexities surrounding those issues and events and reduces them to a simpler explanation that finds linkage between those issues and events and a secretive cabal of powerful actors working behind the scenes.

In the Middle East and Iran, conspiracy theories are often rooted in the history of the region. The actions of Western colonial powers, superpowers in the Cold War and in its aftermath, the creation of Israel, and the continued involvement of outside economic forces have all contributed to Middle Eastern beliefs that “their societies are penetrated culturally and sometimes physically by external powers and Western cultural symbols.”\footnote{Gray, Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World, 79.} In essence, the history of the region provides the “kernel of truth” described by Allport and Postman.\footnote{Allport and Postman, “The Psychology of Rumor.,” 39.} For example, during World War I, the British and French made secret plans to divide up parts of the Ottoman Empire. The Sykes-Picot agreement effectively divided the territories of present day Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon between Britain and France, with Russian approval.\footnote{“The Sykes-Picot Agreement,” BBC News, November 29, 2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/middle_east/2001/israel_and_the_palestinians/key_documents/1681362.stm.} The deal was rightly seen as a betrayal of promises made to the Sharif Hussein bin Ali and the Hashemite Arabs; it is a good example of an actual conspiracy in the region. Another actual Middle Eastern conspiracy took place in 1956, when Britain, France and Israel conspired to start
a war with Egypt, primarily to regain control over the Suez Canal after Egypt’s president, Nasser, had nationalized it.165

The Iranian experience is similar. The period during World War II and its immediate provides several examples. During the war, neutral Iran was occupied and split between Russia and Britain to protect the Iranian oil fields and to open a route for the Western Allies to supply the Russian war effort against the German invaders.166 The shah was accused of bias towards the Axis powers, and the invaders resultantly removed him from the throne, replacing him with his son.167 Following World War II, the Russians reneged on their plans to withdraw from Iran after the Axis powers were defeated; they attempted, unsuccessfully, to manipulate and support a communist takeover of the Iranian government.168 Finally, as the Cold War ramped up in 1954, Britain and the United States conspired and covertly orchestrated the overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh, the left-leaning leader of Iran, and reinstalled the shah to keep Iran out of the Soviet camp.169 In a region rich in actual conspiracies, it is not surprising that the people who live in that region would create conspiracy theories to explain other similar occurrences.

Of course, it is not only Western influences that have shaped the history of the Middle East. The colonial period was followed by a period of Arab nationalism. During that era, many Arab states featured centrally controlled economies and promised a brighter future for their people. However, the states largely failed to deliver their promises. The economies of Arab states that could not fall back on oil revenues struggled in comparison to the West. Additionally, the Arab allies failed to defeat Israel in wars in 1967 and 1973. These failures contribute to feelings of dissatisfaction and marginalization in the Arab world. A rise in conspiracy theories as a product of these failures should not be a surprise; according to Gray, conspiracy theories “reflect political

frustrations stemming from realities, and are not just symbols of them but discourses that seek to make sense of them and to explain them.”

The popularity of conspiracy theories likely was not reduced by the period of repression that followed the failure of Arab nationalism and then socialism. Mubarak’s Egypt and Assad’s Syria are examples of Arab states that used repression to maintain political control over their people. Their efforts seem to have met with failure again, evidenced by the Arab Spring and the subsequent overthrow of Mubarak’s government and the ongoing civil war in Syria. Events in Egypt following the ouster of Mubarak likely will not help reduce the Egyptian people’s political frustration both with their own government and with the American government’s actions. The American government supported the democracy movement in Egypt, but that support waned when the first election resulted in the installment of an Islamist government headed by Mohammed Morsi. Morsi promptly gave himself sweeping political powers, which led to another round of Egyptian protests against the government. In the end, Morsi was removed from power by what can be seen as a military coup led by Field Marshal Abdul Fatah al-Sisi. This was followed by the outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood and repression against its members. Sisi was eventually elected as the president of Egypt.

Conspiracy theories in the Middle East do not only come from the people; they are also spread by the state itself. An example of this can be found in a 2013 newspaper story in the Egyptian daily al-Ahram. Quoting a range of retired Egyptian security officials, the paper’s August 27 and 28 editions suggested that Egypt faced a treacherous fifth column—a group of businessmen, journalists and politicians in the service of Western intelligence agencies were plotting to weaken the country.

*Al-Ahram is owned by the state and is considered to be “Egypt’s newspaper of record.” There are several explanations for this kind of activity. The state might be*

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170 Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World*, 102.
171 Ibid., 118.
173 Ibid.
talking about a conspiracy theory because it believes there actually is a conspiracy against the state or society.\textsuperscript{174} The state might also use conspiracy theories to shift blame away from the state.\textsuperscript{175} A conspiracy theory might also serve as a symbol of the state—a “marketing message.”\textsuperscript{176} Finally, conspiracy theories might be used to “shape the public perception of what is fact or fiction, or to crowd-out alternative explanations that are less appealing to the state.”\textsuperscript{177} In these endeavors, the Middle Eastern state gets assistance from its “monopolization, control or influence over mass media, strong governing party structures and the direction of a charismatic or domineering leader.”\textsuperscript{178} In the news story cited previously, it seems possible that the conspiracy theory was an attempt by the Egyptian government to shift blame away from the state in the aftermath of turmoil that led to the ouster of Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. It might also have been an attempt to shape public perception—an explanation of the need for repressive measures by Sisi’s new government.

Iran and many Middle Eastern nations are authoritarian states. In an authoritarian state, the government controls, or heavily censors, the news media. Personal freedoms are limited and strong internal security forces protect the regime from dissent. Corruption is endemic among public officials. In this kind of society, why would the citizens believe what their leaders tell them or what they read in their newspapers? Distrust in political leaders and the media must contribute to high levels of uncertainty and anxiety. Based on the research of Allport, Postman, Rosnow, Knapp and others, an authoritarian state seems to be the perfect environment for the incubation and spread of rumors and conspiracy theories. Daniel Pipes, in his book \textit{The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy}, writes about how people who live in an authoritarian state might tend to project their way of looking at things onto other regions of the world.\textsuperscript{179} A citizen of Iran, therefore, might

\begin{itemize}
  \item[174] Gray, \textit{Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World}, 118.
  \item[175] Ibid.
  \item[176] Ibid.
  \item[177] Ibid., 119.
  \item[178] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
believe that the leaders and media in the United States operate in exactly the same fashion as they do in Iran. The concept of projection might be one possible explanation for the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the social media data collected for this thesis. It also might be one possible explanation for the connection between PressTV and American analysts, and contributors whose input often seems to include conspiracy theories.

Transnational actors also serve as a source of Middle Eastern conspiracy theories.\(^ {180}\) International news outlets, such as Al Jazeera, and leaders of extremist non-state groups, such as Osama bin Laden, are examples of such transnational actors.\(^ {181}\) Appealing to what the people in the region want to hear, transnational actors can use conspiracy theories for “legitimacy construction.”\(^ {182}\) Transnational actors can use conspiracy theories to challenge the state and can garner support across state boundaries. In this effort, they are greatly aided by the Internet and globalization—forces that can overcome a state control of mass media.\(^ {183}\) The wide circulation of the media products of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), provides an excellent example of how the Internet allows a transnational actor to overcome the state monopoly of mass media.\(^ {184}\) In fact, ISIS has been so successful in this endeavor that it has largely overtaken the similar efforts of another transnational extremist group, al Qaeda.\(^ {185}\)

In summary, conspiracy theories are prevalent in the Middle East and Iran. Factors that contribute to this phenomenon include historical marginalization and frustration, the effects of most of the region being controlled by authoritarian states, the

\(^{180}\) Gray, Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World, 167.

\(^{181}\) Ibid.

\(^{182}\) Ibid.


\(^{185}\) Ibid.
use of conspiracies as a tool for transnational actors, anxiety, uncertainty and perhaps even child-rearing practices.

C. THE RESEARCH QUESTION, RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The collection and subsequent analysis of this social media data was undertaken in an attempt to answer the following research questions:

- What is the strategy behind Iran’s English-language media campaigns on the Internet, particularly with regard to Iran’s use of social media?

- What is the significance of that strategy for American security?

Another important research question that arose during the data collection process (and that shaped a great deal of the content of this thesis) is:

- Why are conspiracy theories featured prominently in Iranian English-language Internet sites?

The thrust of this research is a qualitative analysis of Iranian English-language Internet sites, particularly with regard to social media.

Similarweb.com\(^{186}\) was used as the source of statistics for this comparison. The Similarweb.com statistics are presented in a user-friendly format and its statistical categories were useful as analytical tools for this study.

A 2013 article from the United States Institute of Peace’s “Iran Primer”\(^{187}\) was used to obtain a listing of prominent English-language Iranian news websites. Similarweb’s statistics for those websites were evaluated to find the three most popular of these sites in the United States: the Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA),\(^{188}\) the Young


Journalist’s Club (YJC) and PressTV. Since all three sites have social media components, particularly on Facebook, they were acceptable for this study.

A perusal of the data from Similarweb makes it possible to quickly identify some sharp differences between the top three sites. PressTV and ISNA get a small portion of their traffic from social media. In the case of PressTV, 9.56 percent of its August 2014 traffic came from social media, with just over 86 percent of that traffic coming from Facebook. ISNA got 4.11 percent of its traffic from social media, with 57.62 percent of that traffic coming from Facebook. YJC, however, only got .43 percent of its traffic from social media, with 44.3 percent of that traffic coming from Facebook. Based on this data, it seems that YJC’s efforts on social media are less effective than the efforts of its top competitors. Choosing these three sites provides some interesting balance; ISNA is a reformist site, while YJC and PressTV are more conservative. PressTV, ISNA and YJC all have Facebook pages, but the ISNA Facebook page only had two posts on its wall during the data-collection period of this thesis. PressTV has numerous pages on Facebook. This study will only look at the main PressTV Facebook page.

The top-referring sites to PressTV in August 2014 consists primarily of Western websites (see Figure 1, top left table). Some of these referring sites prominently feature conspiracy theory content, such as Rense.com, Davidicke.com and Whatreallyhappened.com.

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195 “Iranian Students’ News Agency - ISNA,” Facebook.
196 “YJC.ir,” Facebook.
197 “Presstv.com Traffic Statistics by SimilarWeb.”
The lists of top referring sites to YJC and ISNA are quite different, consisting mostly of other Iranian news websites. One possible conclusion to draw from this is that YJC and ISNA receive a larger percentage of their readers from the Iranian population, living in Iran and abroad, than PressTV does. If this is true, then another logical conclusion would be that PressTV has a greater capability of reaching a non-Iranian, Western audience.

The Similarweb category “also visited websites” is also illuminating. While YJC and ISNA viewers are also visiting other Iranian news sites, the PressTV listing (see Figure 2) shows that their viewers are often visiting sites that oppose, or challenge, Western views. Included in this list are the pro-Russian site Russia Today, the Hamas-affiliated site Qassam, and the Hezbollah-affiliated site Al Manar. An outlier of sorts is the One American News Network. That site’s content is conservative and libertarian. Its content is not as overtly anti-American as is the content from some of the other listed sites.

Facebook is currently the most popular and influential social media site in the world. Facebook provides a very useful timeline feature that provides a chronological history of each of its pages. For these reasons, Facebook was the primary source of content review for this thesis.

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204 “Facebook.com Site Overview.”
Because of the limited time available for completion of this thesis, only three months of content were reviewed for analysis. The time period chosen for review was from April 2014 to June 2014. Coding of the content for qualitative analysis was an inductive process. An initial review of the content of the Facebook pages was sufficient to begin identifying attributes (best thought of as “talking points”) and themes that were used to create codes for future analysis. The lack of content on the ISNA page meant there was not enough material for useful analysis. However, the PressTV and YJC Facebook pages were rich in content and provided suitable material for analysis.

My review of the content of the YJC Facebook page showed that the page features primarily visual content with short snippets of written content, often taking the form of political cartoons. I identified and tracked the sentiments contained in these social media posts, both positive and negative. I also identified and listed leaders and other figures that were featured in the posts, and tracked other significant visual and written elements in the posts. I determined and tracked the major theme of each post based on its sentiments and other content, and I identified and tracked evidence of significant propaganda techniques in each post. Additional elements, such as links to other websites or social media pages and the cartoonists who created some of the content, were also noted. Finally, I tracked the number of Facebook “likes” and “shares” for each post. “Likes” can be seen as a relative measure of positive receptivity to the content, as well as a relative indicator of how many times the post has been viewed. A “share” is representative of the content’s penetration through the Facebook audience. Since the number of Facebook “comments” on YJC posts was so low, I did not track them.

A review of the PressTV Facebook page showed that it features content that is more varied and in depth when compared to the content on the YJC page. The additional material in the sidebars and margins of the linked pages provided important material for analysis. The process of reviewing the video, audio and written content linked to each post was time-consuming, but important to obtain a more thorough understanding of the communication strategies used by PressTV. As with the content from the YJC page, I tracked negative and positive sentiments, as well as the leaders and other key figures that were featured in the posts. I also tracked other significant written or visual elements. I
noted elements of the posts that demonstrated the use of propaganda techniques. Since conspiracy theory content was often featured, I created a separate listing for tracking that content. I also identified and tracked analysts or contributors to the PressTV stories. As with YJC, I tracked the “likes” and “shares” for PressTV’s posts. I also tracked the number of “comments” that each post received. “Comments” can be considered as a relative measure of the engagement of PressTV’s audience. PressTV obviously has a much larger and more engaged audience in social media than YJC. The number of “likes,” “shares,” and “comments,” is significantly higher when compared to the numbers for YJC.

The next chapter contains a more detailed look at the YJC and PressTV Facebook pages, based on the three months of data collected for this thesis.
II. AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED IRANIAN SOCIAL MEDIA PAGES

A. AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE FACEBOOK PAGE FOR THE YOUNG JOURNALIST’S CLUB

The Facebook page for the Young Journalist’s Club (YJC) focuses almost exclusively on visual content with only a small amount of English-language text added. An exception to this comes in the form of links to the official page for Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Links to Khamenei.ir, or to the Supreme Leader’s Twitter page, occurred in 11 percent of the posts between April 2014 and June 2014. In May 2014, there were an exceptionally high number of these links—they occurred in 20 percent of the month’s content.

A full 43 percent of the posts for the study period consisted of cartoons. The cartoons are similar to U.S. political cartoons, but the cartoons posted on the YJC page tended to express negative sentiments toward Iran’s perceived enemies. The cartoons came from a variety of sources; about 13 percent of them had watermarks or other markings linking them to the FARS News Agency.

The United States and Israel are often singled out for abuse on the YJC page. The percentage of YJC posts that express negative sentiments towards the United States and Israel showed a stunning consistency during the study period (see Figure 3). The rise in negative posts about Saudi Arabia in June demonstrates the YJC content creators’ ability to adapt to changes on the ground; in this case, it was a likely reaction to ISIS’s blitzkrieg-like advance into Iraq, which eventually led to ISIS control of a large part of that country, including the city of Mosul.205 During the same time period, just over one-third of YJC’s Facebook posts expressed negative sentiments toward the terrorist invaders.

Figure 3. Chart created by the author showing percentage of posts containing negative sentiments for the months of April, May and June 2014.²⁰⁹

YJC posts also commonly featured, or alluded to, conspiracy theories. Twenty-four percent of the posts from the study period were linked to conspiracy theories. Interestingly, 58 percent of those conspiracy-theory posts were posted in June, during the ISIS invasion of Iraq.

![Image from YJC post](https://www.facebook.com/Iran.Club/photos/a.447736721935851.106215.442351522474371/708710139171840/?type=1&relevant_count=1)

Figure 4. Image from YJC post

The YJC posts did not appear to be reaching a wide audience, nor did they penetrate deeply into the Facebook community. The month of May was particularly poor for the YJC page, with only one post garnering more than 30 likes and no posts at all garnering more than single-digit numbers of shares. The month of April was the most successful month for the page. During the three-month study period, the top five YJC posts, both in terms of likes and shares, came in April.

The top post, using the measure of Facebook likes, was an image (see Figure 4) captioned, “the Last Encounter coming soon…” This picture garnered 80 likes and 28 shares.

This post fits well with the page’s often-expressed negative sentiments toward Israel. The picture suggests that, sometime in the near future, Iran will destroy Israel.

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211 Ibid.
The second and third most popular posts were tied with 71 likes each. One of these posts contained images of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and American President Obama (see Figure 5, right side) wearing red-and-white checkered keffiyehs and was captioned, “Real Leaders of Wahhabism.”\(^{212}\) The red-and-white keffiyehs and the reference to “Wahhabism” serve to link the two leaders to a sect of Islam that is connected to Saudi Arabia. Iranian propaganda also often links the Wahhabi movement to Sunni extremists. The real message behind this image was a conspiracy theory that claimed Israel and the United States were controlling the Wahhabi movement through the Saudi monarchy. The use of the keffiyeh also reminds the viewer of the Saudi involvement in the Wahhabi movement. This post was shared 32 times.

\(\text{Figure 5. Images from two YJC posts. Left side: Putin humor; Right side: Real Leaders of Wahhabism}^{213}\)

The other post that received 71 likes was a series of captioned photos (see Figure 5, left side) featuring Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister


Netanyahu. The humorous point of the post is that Putin lied to Netanyahu and provided Syria with advanced surface-to-air missiles, despite Netanyahu’s objections. This post also showed Russia working with Syria to defeat Israeli interests in the region. The post was shared only 12 times. The YJC Facebook page frequently shows Russia and Syria, and their respective leaders, in a positive light.

The fourth and fifth most popular posts on YJC each garnered 66 likes. One of these posts was a cartoon featuring what appears to be a European Union (EU) weapons inspector pointing at a small rocket embedded in the ground some distance away from an Israeli city. Meanwhile, a giant rocket, with a radioactive material symbol on it, has landed on a Palestinian city and caused great damage. Since the impact of this giant rocket is so obvious, the cartoonist gave the inspector black glasses and a white cane to show that the inspector is blind (see Figure 6, left side). This cartoon also illustrates a common theme appearing in media accounts of recent conflicts between Israel and its Palestinian neighbors and Gaza: the lack of proportionality in the Israeli response to aggressive acts coming out of Gaza or the Palestinian Territories. It was shared 46 times.

The second post with 66 likes and 26 shares contains a gallery of photos of Western and Arab leaders who oppose Syria’s President, Bashar al-Assad. These leaders all have a red “X” or a red “?” symbol over their pictures, indicating that they are no longer in their former leadership roles, or their future leadership roles are in question (see Figure 6, right side). Below the smaller pictures, there are larger images of a smiling Bashar al-Assad and a winking Russian President Putin. The caption, using poor English grammar, states, “They said, He will be gone in two weeks. They are all gone he still there and Putin.” The theme here is that Syria and its Russian ally are still standing, triumphant over the Western powers and their allies in the Middle East.

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Overall, the data from the Facebook page for YJC shows that the page had only a small impact on Facebook’s vast English-language audience. The number of likes and shares are modest, never exceeding double-digits. The use of images and cartoons with little text seems significant. It might indicate that the YJC’s staff suffers from a lack of English-language skills. It is also possible that the choice of images with only a small amount of text was considered sufficient to convey the necessary meaning of the message in an easily digestible format for the average Facebook user. The frequent use of humor might have been intentional to elicit an emotional response and encourage users to share the joke with their Facebook friends. Other than links to Ayatollah Khamenei’s website and Twitter account, YJC’s Facebook page very rarely directed the reader to other locations on the Internet where the reader might be exposed to additional messaging.

The links provided to Ayatollah Khamenei’s website and Twitter account are an indicator that the creators of YJC content were strongly supportive of the Supreme Leader and his allies in the Iranian political scene. The more moderate camp in Iran is currently represented by President Rouhani.²¹⁸

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Rouhani is in favor of the current round of nuclear negotiations with the West, and he seems to be attempting to improve relations between Iran and the United States and its allies. YJC does not seem supportive of Rouhani’s efforts. For example, a link from Khamenei.ir was posted that gave details from the Ayatollah’s statement from April 9, 2014, when he asserted that “no one has the right to trade nuclear achievements and no one will do this.” Another post featured an abusive ad hominem attack on the UK’s Catherine Ashton, who was a negotiator in the P5+1 talks. Yet another post featured a cartoon showing Uncle Sam speaking to a crowd and lecturing them about not building bombs, while he held a nuclear bomb in his jacket pocket. Finally, there was a cartoon showing the hand of the “Iranian nation” pushing back a negotiating table that the United States, UK, EU, and Israel’s representatives were trying to push over a red line. The red line was most likely intended as a humorous jab at President Obama’s supposed red line against Syrian chemical weapons use. Adding Israel—a nation that is not part of the P5+1 negotiation—into the cartoon fuels the conspiracy that Israel has some amount of control over the Western powers. Of course, YJC’s almost constant negative messaging against the United States and its allies certainly did not help any moderate Iranian efforts toward improving relations with those countries.

B. AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE FACEBOOK PAGE FOR PRESSTV

The Facebook pages for PressTV and YJC display some similarities in that they both treat the United States and Israel in a negative manner. The percentage of PressTV posts that expressed negative sentiments toward the United States and Israel showed


reasonable consistency during the study period (see Figure 7). However, the negative content was not as overtly evident on the PressTV page, nor was the percentage of negative posts as high as the YJC page’s. The number of monthly posts containing negative sentiments toward the United States was between 35 and 43 percent on the PressTV page but more than 50 percent (on average) on the YJC page. The number of monthly posts containing negative sentiment toward Israel fluctuated between 9 and 17 percent on the PressTV page, but fluctuated between 27 and 33 percent on the YJC page.
Figure 7. Chart created by the author showing percentage of posts containing negative sentiments for the months of April, May and June 2014.

As with YJC’s page, PressTV’s Facebook page demonstrated its creators’ abilities to adapt its message to changes on the ground, which resulted from the rapid advances by ISIS into Iraq, evidenced by June’s large increase in negative sentiments toward militants, ISIS, takfiris, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The use of the term takfiri when referring to militant groups such as ISIS is particularly significant. In Islam, to refer to another Muslim as takfir is to state that the Muslim is guilty of apostasy: an act of renouncing one’s Muslim faith. Salafist groups such as ISIS have taken it upon themselves to declare other Muslim groups as apostates—a practice that opposes the orthodox tradition that reserves such declarations to Muslim legal scholars, the ʻulema. Therefore, branding militants such as ISIS as takfiri Muslims has a powerful negative connotation. PressTV’s persistent use of the takfiri term when referring to ISIS might be seen as a good indication of a tightly coordinated messaging strategy. Repeating a key word or phrase is common in advertising, as well as in propaganda. In this case, the repetitive usage of the term takfiri also tells us something about the message’s target audience. An average American or other English-speaking citizen in the West is not likely to be familiar with the term takfiri, but an English-speaking Muslim is very likely to understand the term.

PressTV’s page had a much greater effect on the Facebook audience than YJC’s page does. As of October 2014, the PressTV Facebook page had garnered over 1.6 million likes, compared to only just over 5.6 thousand likes for the YJC Facebook page. During the study period, posts on PressTV’s Facebook page often received over 500 likes, and many times exceeded 1,000 likes. YJC’s posts for the same period never exceeded double digits. PressTV’s audience also seemed to be more engaged than YJC’s audience, demonstrated by PressTV’s posts often generating triple-digit numbers of comments. YJC readers rarely commented on YJC’s posts. PressTV also achieved greater penetration into the Facebook community, as evidenced by the number of shares its posts received. PressTV’s number of shares often reached triple digits, whereas not one YJC post during the study period exceeded double digits.

The PressTV page tried very hard to maintain the appearance of a standard news site. There were no cartoons. The Facebook posts were typically focused on the Middle East, although other areas of the world also received coverage. For example, during the study period, there were numerous articles about the recent crisis in Ukraine, as well as coverage of the violence in the Central African Republic. News that put the United States in a bad light, such as the May 2014 shooting rampage in Santa Barbara, California, was also covered. News coverage favorable to Russia and China was also featured. The PressTV content often illustrated Russian and Chinese ties with Iran and showed how these nations stood together in opposition to the United States and its European allies.

PressTV’s staff seemed savvier than YJC’s staff in their use of social media; they effectively utilized hashtags and utilized links to drive Facebook viewers to their website. YJC had a link to their website on their Facebook page, but not in their posts. YJC readers would more often be exposed to links or the website address for Ayatollah Khamenei’s website.

During the study period, PressTV Facebook posts used hashtags more often than YJC posts. Hashtags group posts that use the same tag and facilitate an Internet search for the tagged posts.

PressTV also used links on their Facebook posts to direct readers to their website, PressTV.ir. On that site, the audience was treated to a larger version of the article, along with links to additional news stories and photos. Frequently, there was video content to supplement the written article. The videos were very similar in style and appearance to most Western news programs—the stories typically are narrated by hosts, sometimes with guests in the studio or on a video feed. The studio contains official logos and news desks and the hosts speak in English. Video and photo images related to the story are also featured. There are also links to related stories, interviews and viewpoints, selected by PressTV’s staff. The related stories, interviews and viewpoints frequently seemed to demonstrate PressTV’s editorial slant.

For example, on June 13, 2014, the PressTV Facebook page contained a link to an article on PressTV.ir titled, “UN human rights chief alarmed by Iraq extrajudicial
The article dealt with concern over extrajudicial killings and summary executions of prisoners and civilians in Iraq by ISIS. The related stories, interviews and viewpoints linked on that page could be taken to indicate that PressTV’s staff believed that the United States and Zionists were also responsible for those crimes, or at least they might have wanted their viewers to see things that way. The related interviews on the page were titled, “US responsible for ISIL terror in Iraq” and “US responsible for crisis in Iraq.” The related viewpoint article was titled, “US silence on ISIL offensive dubious.” One of the related stories was titled “ISIL Takfiris, tools of Zionists.” This is an excellent example of framing the message to lead an audience to an interpretation desired by the message’s creator. Framing can have an impact on audience judgments and socially shared principles. It is not hard to imagine how reading this additional content might shape the reader’s opinion more to Iran’s liking.

The articles on the PressTV were also accompanied by the website’s current poll question. The poll question changes at least once a month. If you look at an article in one month and then look at the same article the next month, the poll questions will likely be different. The subject matter of the poll question and the answer choices are also excellent examples of message framing. For example, the poll question in October 2014 was, “What do you think is behind the Ebola hysteria?” The answer choices were:

- The U.S. is using the Ebola media hype and fear to boost its military presence in West Africa.
- American pharmaceutical companies are behind the hysteria while seeking to develop and sell anti-Ebola drugs.
- Items 1 and 2
- Because Ebola is a very dangerous disease that poses a serious threat to human race.

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The poll question answers provided framing to suggest that there was a conspiracy by the American government or American companies to capitalize on the Ebola outbreak’s hype and fear for imperialist or economic gains.

PressTV also used an interesting cadre of analysts and experts to deliver editorial content. That content was often rich in conspiracy theories; this topic will be further explored in a later chapter of this thesis.

One of the recurring shows on PressTV is titled “The Debate.” The show airs on the website each day at 1835 GMT and the PressTV Facebook page will often contain a short introduction to the content to be covered on the show that day. The Facebook post will include a series of questions to go along with that introduction. The questions are typically leading; they often seem structured to tell the reader how to think about certain issues. For example, on May 4, 2014, the PressTV Facebook page featured a post about violence against Muslims in India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the Central African Republic. This post was a lead for that night’s episode of “The Debate.” The post concluded with the following questions:

- Why isn’t the UN doing enough to counter persecution against Muslims in those countries?
- Who is responsible for the Muslim cleansing? The governments or the world body?
- Where are the rights advocates?
- Are there organized killings underway?
- Who are financing the perpetrators?

The framing in this series of questions was designed to lead the reader to the conclusion that the UN and various “rights advocates” had an agenda behind their lack of adequate response to the violence against Muslims. It also implied that there were other governments and financiers behind the violence. Furthermore, the questions indicated

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that the violence was not random, but was rather a “Muslim cleansing.” This is a particular nasty phrase, since it is easy for a reader to associate with the term “ethnic cleansing,” which was used to describe horrific acts of savagery in many recent conflicts, such as the Bosnian War or the Rwandan genocide. Mass media outlets reported heavily on the forced deportations, murders and rapes of civilians that were commonplace during that conflict. Mentally recalling those images makes it easier for a person to assign a higher risk for a similar reoccurrence. Psychologists refer to this mental shortcut as the availability heuristic. PressTV’s use of the term “Muslim cleansing” took advantage of that mental shortcut and gave their audience reason to believe that a worldwide “Muslim cleansing” effort was plausible. This also elicits strong negative emotions from the audience.

Playing on negative emotions is a useful technique for messaging, since it takes advantage of human psychological tendencies. Human beings will tend to give more weight to negative information about a person or organization than they would positive information. It is for this reason that negative campaign ads are prevalent during political campaigns. Negative events also produce disproportionate levels of public distrust. The previous example associated the UN and governments and rights activists with a weak response to very negative events, described powerfully as worldwide examples of “Muslim cleansing.” The PressTV post capitalized on the negativity bias; this post was one of the most popular PressTV Facebook posts during the study period, with 2,027 likes. The audience was heavily engaged as well, adding 666 comments to the post. In fact, other than posts in June related to the worldwide celebration of Ramadan or coverage of the soccer World Cup in Brazil, this was the top post for the study period. The coverage of the Ramadan festivities and the World Cup were outliers in this study, and not very useful when evaluating PressTV’s overall

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messaging strategy; therefore they were not included in the listing of the top five posts for the study period.

The second most popular post during the study period was similar in structure and subject matter to the top post. The post was a lead into “The Debate” and dealt with Christian militias attacking Muslims in the Central African Republic; it was accompanied by an image of an African male, armed with a knife, chasing another man. The questions at the end of the post were another fine demonstration of framing:

- Why aren’t foreign troops doing enough to stop the violence?
- Is what happened in Rwanda 20 years ago being (sic) repeated in the Central African Republic?
- Why the (sic) international community is not taking action against the ethnic cleansing of Muslims?

Once again, there was a reference to ethnic cleansing. The linkage to Rwanda was also an effective use of the availability heuristic, owing to the large amount of media coverage the Rwanda genocide received in 1994. The questions also implied a conspiracy: there was a conclusion that foreign troops and the international community were not doing enough or not taking action against the ethnic cleansing. This post received 1,643 likes, 641 comments and 1,144 shares.

A major problem with the PressTV framing of this debate is that it was one sided. There was no mention of the war crimes and violence committed by the predominantly Muslim Seleka minority that, in a coup supported by mercenaries from Chad and the Sudan, had previously taken over the government of the Central African Republic. France, the UN and the African Union intervened in an unsuccessful effort to stop the violence, but a ceasefire of sorts was achieved. It is easy to criticize their efforts; their


lack of success might be turned into a conspiracy through twisted logic, but it is hard to imagine how they could have achieved more in a country roiling with a religion-fueled cycle of violence, all set against a backdrop of poverty.

The third most popular post dealt with Ayatollah Khamenei’s take on geopolitics. Once again, this post was a lead for “The Debate.” Khamenei asserted that the United States had divided the world into three groups: an obedient group; a second group that does not obey, but should be tolerated; and a third disobedient group that does not obey the United States. According to Khamenei, the third group will not give in to, nor will it be blackmailed by, America. Khamenei noted that the first group includes dictatorial regimes, such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, for a time when it serves American interests. However, Khamenei added that the second group, which includes the European nations, has made the mistake of going along with the United States, but that the United States will stab them in the back at an opportune moment. Of course, Iran is in the disobedient group, standing against American interests. It is hard to disagree with some of Khamenei’s logic. The United States has supported dictatorial regimes when it suits American interests. However, Iran and other nations frequently do the same. Syria’s Assad and Libya’s Qaddafi immediately spring to mind. Linking the United States to dictatorial regimes, such as the regime of Saddam Hussein, connects the United States to something that is almost uniformly seen as negative, and that makes effective use, once again, of the negativity bias. Saddam’s Iraq is also a useful example, since it highlights a case in which an American friend ended up being overthrown by the United States. This example was used as a warning by Khamenei to America’s European allies, in an effort to create a wedge-driving conspiracy theory that America is waiting for an opportune moment to stab its European allies in the back. As with previous posts leading into “The Debate,” this post concluded with questions for the reader:

1. What do you think about the U.S. foreign policy?
2. Why does it support despotic regimes that are subservient to the US?

3. Ayatollah Khamenei says European countries have made a big strategic blunder by serving America which is against their national interests. What do you think about the US-EU ties?

Of course, with Khamenei’s statements leading up to the questions, the reader has already been told how to answer those questions. This post garnered 1,641 likes and 351 comments and it was shared 446 times.

The fourth most popular post for the study period amassed 1,576 likes and 177 comments. This post, which consisted only of a captioned photo, was shared an impressive 4,524 times (see Figure 8).

![Image of a cover photo from PressTV, April 27, 2014](https://www.facebook.com/PRESSTV/photos/a.352224441486016.72914.145097112198751/709375945770862/?type=1)

Figure 8. Image of a cover photo from PressTV, April 27, 2014

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The photo showed a woman clinging to a lone olive tree. The woman’s face is distraught and, in the background, there is a jeep with a soldier seated in the driver’s seat. The caption for the posted photo read, “An elderly Palestinian woman trying to save her last olive tree as Israeli soldiers continue to occupy her land.” This was posted as the cover photo for PressTV’s Facebook page on April 27, 2014. The use of such an emotional image was a powerfully persuasive tool. The image acts, through its visual presence, as evidence to back up the claim contained in the written caption.\(^{235}\) The elderly woman’s grief, coupled with the image of her desperately clinging to the tree, arouses feelings of pity and perhaps even rage against the soldiers who, as suggested by the text, are present to cut down the tree. Perhaps the viewer, who has been exposed to media reports about the region, understands that olive trees provide food and economic support for the Palestinian people. If so, then that exposure would make this image even more powerful. An emotional image such as this takes advantage of the reflexive nature of heuristic processing built into our brains over years of evolution.\(^{236}\) The visual evidence leads to mental shortcuts, or a snap judgment, rather than a careful analysis of the actual situation on the ground.\(^{237}\)

Many reports about the destruction of Palestinian olive trees attribute the damage to Israeli settlers and not the military. In fact, this photo seems to be from an event in 2005, rather than 2014 (see Figure 9).\(^{238}\)

\(^{236}\) Ibid.
\(^{237}\) Ibid.
In 2005, the report stated that the olive trees had been damaged by Israeli settlers, not by the Israeli military as suggested by PressTV’s use of the photo in 2014. The PressTV photo was also truncated; we can’t see the entire tree. From another Internet source, the damaged tree in its entirety can be seen (see Figure 10). The tree in that photo already appears to be missing most of its upper foliage and branches, which are piled near the tree, and are visible in both the truncated and the more complete photo.

239 Ibid.

From the additional photo evidence, the woman in the photo is not trying to save the tree, but rather is lamenting the damage done to the tree. If the damage were done by settlers in 2005, it is still disturbing and, if true, an event worthy of condemnation. However, PressTV’s use of a nine-year-old photo as evidence of an injustice by the Israeli army in 2014 is rather disingenuous. Nevertheless, the use of this emotional image seems to have had its desired effect. The image was shared a relatively large number of times, spreading through the Facebook community.

The fifth most popular post generated 1,574 likes, 304 comments, and was shared 585 times. The post referred to a statement by Ayatollah Khamenei about recent conflicts between Muslims. Khamenei indicated that the “arrogant powers” were fomenting the

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241 Ibid.

conflict to cover up their own problems and generate fears of Iran and Shia Muslims to protect Israel. The Supreme Leader went on to condemn the Boko Haram militants as “takfiri” for kidnapping school girls in Nigeria. Khamenei encouraged Muslim unity and added that the “enemies of Islam have been trying to suppress Islamic awakening, but that they will eventually fail to do so.” The “arrogant powers” were not named, but were likely the United States and its allies in the Middle East. Conspiracy theory was also a factor in this post. In this case, the conspiracy was that the Sunni-Shia divide and criticism of Islam was actually a diversion to protect Israel and cover up the difficulties faced by the “enemies of Islam.” There was no evidence presented to support the conspiracy. However, it might not have been necessary for Khamenei to present any evidence.

PressTV’s staff likely knows their audience and frames their messaging accordingly. Israel and the United States are the “out-group” for PressTV’s audience. The study data supported that assertion. Referring back to the graph in Figure 7, negative sentiments against the United States and Israel were quite prevalent in PressTV’s social media messaging. According to the Sigmund Freud’s displacement theory, a group leader can turn negative sentiments to a target outside the group. In this case, Israel and the “arrogant powers” were the convenient scapegoats used by Khamenei to deflect the in-group’s anger, which was generated by strife within the Islamic community.

Although this post did not seem to be a lead for “The Debate,” it concluded with similar leading questions:

- What do you think are the threats that the Muslim world is facing?
- Why do conspirers want to cause conflict among Muslims?
- Who will benefit from a divided Muslim community?
- How Muslims have been reacting to divisive attempts?

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243 Ibid.
244 Ibid.
245 Fathali M. Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists’ Point of View: What They Experience and Why They Come to Destroy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 16.
The questions reinforced the framing in the post, inferring that divisions in, and threats to, the Muslim community were the acts of “conspirers.”

PressTV’s Facebook page certainly seemed more effective than its YJC counterpart. The proof is in the statistics provided by Facebook. PressTV’s posts received a much larger number of likes, and this is a reflection of a much larger audience. PressTV’s audience was also more engaged, as evidenced by the large number of comments on their posts. The relatively large number of shares also indicates that PressTV’s message was penetrating deeper into the Facebook community.

PressTV’s content contained more than simple cartoons and short amounts of text; it contained complete news articles, videos and photo sets. The content was carefully structured to enhance its impact on its target audience. It took advantage of message framing and other techniques that reflect the value of understanding group and individual psychology when crafting a messaging strategy. PressTV also has a strong tie to conspiracy theories and to persons in the West who are spreading those theories. This will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter. PressTV effectively used links to drive readers to their more immersive website, which contained links to more content supportive of their narrative. PressTV has also been working on expanding its social media effort, with links to their Twitter and YouTube pages, as well as mobile Apps designed to reach an audience that is either on the go, or might only be able to access the Internet through smartphones and similar devices. Overall, when compared to YJC, PressTV seems to have a much better understanding of how to effectively use Facebook.

C. WHAT DO THE IRANIAN LEADERS SAY?

Recently, there has been talk in the Western media about a struggle in Iran over the nuclear negotiations with the West. In one camp are the moderates, led by the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Rouhani and Zarif seek to craft a deal that preserves the Iranian nuclear program, but gets crushing
sanctions lifted. Although it is possible that Rouhani and Zarif are merely hiding their real motives and views, the friction in Iran between the moderates and the hardliners would seem to indicate otherwise. In the other camp are the conservative hardliners, who support the stance taken by Rouhani’s predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The conservatives are concerned that the moderates will give away too much to get sanctions lifted and do not want to compromise with the West about Iran’s nuclear program. Khamenei seems to share their views, but early on he did provide some support for his negotiators’ mission, even if he did not view their chances of success with much optimism. The conservatives seem to possess the ultimate trump card, since the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, is in their camp; any deal made by Rouhani and Zarif would have to get his stamp of approval. The coverage from PressTV and YJC shows that they understand that reality.

The data collected for this study showed that YJC was largely supportive of Khamenei and the conservatives. During the three-month study period, not a single post mentioned Rouhani or Zarif, but Khamenei was linked to 30 posts, often accompanied by a link to his official website. The data for PressTV showed a more balanced approach, with only six Facebook posts linked to Khamenei and a total of five posts mentioning Zarif or Rouhani.

However, the number of times a leader is mentioned by a social media outlet is not the only measure of the leader’s support. Another useful method is to compare the leader’s statements to the actual content on the social media outlet’s page.


247 Ibid.

248 Ibid.


61
One key difference between the moderate camp led by Rouhani and the hardline camp led by Khamenei is their use of loaded language. Rouhani and Zarif are seeking a diplomatic agreement on the nuclear issue and they are careful to avoid harsh rhetoric that might shut down or hamper negotiations. Rouhani does not use strident or overly critical language when he refers to Iran’s relations with the United States,\(^{251}\) and he typically avoids the using words such as Zionist when he refers to Israel.\(^{252}\) On the other hand, Ayatollah Khamenei’s rhetoric is often severe and abrasive. For example, Khamenei made negative references to the Zionists in speeches he gave to government officials and ambassadors from Islamic countries,\(^{253}\) to his own people at the Khomeini Shrine\(^{254}\) and to students at the Iranian Imam Hussein University.\(^{255}\) When Khamenei refers to the United States and its allies, he often uses the insulting term “arrogant powers.” Examples of this can be found in Khamenei’s speeches given to the Iranian Assembly of Experts,\(^{256}\) government officials and ambassadors from Islamic countries\(^{257}\) and Imam Hussein University.\(^{258}\)

When reviewing the YJC’s posts during the study period, the YJC’s editorial slant appeared in line with Khamenei and the hardliners. The frequent quotes and posts from Khamenei’s own website made the linkage obvious. Furthermore, YJC often featured cartoons that used negative imagery and slogans in reference to America and its allies (especially Israel), and the leaders of those countries.


\(^{257}\) “Supreme Leader’s Speech in Meeting with Government Officials.”

\(^{258}\) “Supreme Leader’s Speech at Imam Hussein (a.s.) University.”
PressTV’s posts typically avoided similar abusive visual content. On the key issues, PressTV deferred to Khamenei’s views and the conservative camp. An example of this can be found in the posts during the study period that referred to Iran’s nuclear program. In April, PressTV posted a statement made by Khamenei in which he asserted that Iran’s nuclear development and research activities would not stop, and that Iran’s negotiators would have to resist the “bullying from the other [negotiating] party.”259 In the statement, Khamenei asserted that Iran’s nuclear research was for peaceful purposes.260 During the study period, only one Facebook post mentioned Zarif when dealing with the nuclear negotiations. Although that post indicated that Zarif believed an agreement would be reached, the focus of the post was more in line with Khamenei’s earlier statement and indicated that Iran would not acquiesce to Western demands, and that it would continue operations at its Arak heavy water plant.261 Once again, the Iranians stated that the Arak plant was in operation to provide radioisotopes to treat cancer patients, and not for nuclear weapons.262 Another piece of evidence pointing toward PressTV’s editorial slant was discussed in more detail previously—the links on PressTV’s Facebook page pointed readers to a more detailed version of the story on their website. Once on the PressTV website, the related stories, interviews and viewpoints were often critical of the United States and its allies. However, the best evidence for PressTV’s editorial slant came from its choice of analysts and contributors; they often used abusive language in their work. If PressTV sought to further the efforts of Rouhani’s moderate camp, that kind of content would likely have been reduced, suppressed or eliminated.

260 Ibid.
262 Ibid.
Iran’s government is a theocracy; it is designed to give the Supreme Leader the ultimate authority in most important policy matters.\textsuperscript{263} Because the Supreme Leader wields so much power, the Iranian government might be viewed as a dictatorship. In a dictatorship, there is more tolerance for criticism among the people than there is for criticism among the elite ruling class.\textsuperscript{264} The ruling class will therefore obediently conform to the leader’s stance on the key issues. This consistency in message makes it easier to control the masses. During negotiations, Rouhani might be able to set himself apart from Khamenei by avoiding certain topics and eschewing strident language, but he cannot, for example, use pro-American language. Similarly, media outlets, especially those that seem to be sanctioned by the Iranian government, will not take stances that are critical of their country’s leadership. Since the elite, both inside and outside Iran, have relatively open access to the Internet, they will also receive an ideological “boost” from the Iranian media campaign.

In the United States, there will likely also be a great deal of opposition to an agreement that relaxes the sanctions against Iran without a real brake placed on Iran’s nuclear program.\textsuperscript{265} When coupled with the Iranian situation discussed previously, it is hard to imagine there will be any meaningful change in the relations between Iran and the West.

The next chapter will explore the inclusion of conspiracy theories in selected Iranian social media pages.


\textsuperscript{265} “Saving the Nuclear Deal With Iran,” \textit{New York Times}.
III. CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN SELECTED IRANIAN SOCIAL MEDIA PAGES

A. INTRODUCTION

A theme that emerged from analyzing the PressTV and YJC Facebook pages was a tendency to give significant attention to conspiracy theories. Approximately 24 percent of the YJC posts and 32 percent of the PressTV posts during the study period contained, or were suggestive of, a conspiracy theory. To thoroughly understand this prevalence, a substantial portion of this thesis is devoted to its examination.

B. YJC.IR AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

In June 2014, nearly half of the posts on YJC’s Facebook page involved conspiracy theories. This represented a marked departure from the numbers for April and May, when conspiracy theory content accounted for only 12–16 percent of the posts. As discussed earlier, regional events in June were important to Iran, because of ISIS’s successful invasion of a large portion of Iraq. It seems logical that YJC’s staff felt compelled to explain this change of fortunes in the region and, as evidenced by the content of the posts, conspiracy theories were a large part of that explanation. A veritable smorgasbord of conspiracy theories was proposed in the June posts. The United States was the top villain in these conspiracies, but other regional actors were not disregarded; Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Kuwait, Qatar and Israel were also featured in the conspiracy theories. Some of the posts also hinted at media complicity in the conspiracy, including several posts portraying the World Cup coverage as a distraction from events in Iraq. Other conspiracy posts reminded readers of earlier popular conspiracy themes, such as the 9/11 attacks as an “inside job” and the ongoing role of the illuminati in conspiracies. These posts could be seen as attempts to establish resonance with an audience that already accepted early popular conspiracy theories. 266 Establishing common ground in

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this manner paves the way for future messages containing conspiracy theory content. It is also indicative of at least one segment of YJC’s target audience.

The prevalence of posts dealing with the ISIS invasion of Iraq is not surprising. The rise of ISIS was a big story worldwide, particularly in American media. However, why did YJC place so much emphasis on conspiracy theories? One possible explanation is that the conspiracy theories represent a form of sense-making by the YJC staff. ISIS’s success in the region has created a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty, and the conspiracy theories are a simple explanation meant to rationalize and relieve that tension. Such conspiracy theories always seem plausible and logical in the region, owing to a history of Western meddling and conspiracy in the Middle East. However, that explanation seems unlikely in messaging that is most probably targeted at English language readers in the West instead of an anxious Iranian public.

It is also possible that the YJC staff might actually believe that linking the United States and its regional allies to the rise of ISIS is a conspiracy fact and not merely a conspiracy theory. In that case, it makes sense to illuminate this “fact” the Western audience. YJC’s content often contains links to content from Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. In fact, the data collected in this study showed that Khamenei is the most frequently mentioned Iranian leader in YJC’s posts. Khamenei is often critical of the United States and Israel and blames those states for being behind trouble in the region.

For example, one YJC post in June (see Figure 11) included an image from a post on the Khamenei.ir Facebook page about recent violence in Iraq. The post was dated June 14, 2014, but referred to a 2013 statement by Khamenei. It was accompanied by an image and caption that summarized a longer statement with the words, “the only one who rejoices over these events in Iraq is the Zionist regime and its supporters.”

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Although the statement refers to events from the previous year, reposting it during the 2014 ISIS invasion of Iraq shows calculated linkage between ISIS and Israel. The Iranian regime might in fact believe in such a linkage; it is also possible that the regime is using Israel as a tool to shift blame away from the state. After all, it is more palatable to blame Israel and its supporters for the rise of ISIS than it is to place some blame on Iran for its support of the Maliki government and its disenfranchisement of the Sunni minority in Iraq. Since YJC supports the regime and Khamenei, it follows that their editorial slant would also favor the regime.

Another explanation might be that these conspiracy theories were created at the behest of the Iranian government and were meant to serve as wedge-driving rumors targeted at a Western audience. Just as with previously mentioned posts that contained already popular conspiracy narratives in the West, the effect of rumors about American conspiracies in Iraq will likely find some resonance in the United States and the West.

\[268 \text{ Ibid.}\]
Resonance will also likely be found for conspiracy theories that America’s involvement in Iraq is based on its thirst for oil, conspiracy theories involving the illuminati and conspiracies about an Israeli connection to American politics.

Evidence that the YJC staff understand this conspiracy theory resonance can be found in two posts on their Facebook page from May 2014. The posts contain a logo, as well as link information to the Conspiracy Club Facebook page, which contains a link to the Conspiracy Club website. The website is in English and the domain is registered in Colombia. Its focus is popular conspiracy theories; categories on the website include 9/11 conspiracies, as well as conspiracies about space aliens. There are also a number of articles on the website that link to websites that describe the U.S. government’s secretive plots against Americans and the world. Examples of these articles include a 2001 U.S. plan to invade seven countries, finishing with an invasion of Iran, and an article linking the United States to the AIDS virus that echoes the previously discussed Operation INFEKTION. The article about the AIDS virus adds a new conspiracy layer, crediting Dr. Robert Gallo as the inventor of AIDS (he was, in fact, one of the scientists who discovered and identified HIV). The fact that YJC is using content from the Conspiracy Club website indicates that YJC’s staff has some knowledge and familiarity with the Conspiracy Club website’s content and likely its audience.

Furthermore, it is not clear who is actually running the Conspiracy Club website. To complete the analysis of its linkage to YJC’s Facebook page, it would be necessary to identify these individuals.

YJC’s social media efforts on Facebook have not been effective at reaching a wide audience. As stated earlier, the data collected for this thesis showed that YJC’s posts on Facebook never received beyond double-digit likes and shares. The conspiracy theory content is troubling, since it has the potential to produce negative effects on the American body politic. However, YJC’s Facebook statistics suggest that the current effect of that content is likely negligible.

C. PRESSTV.COM AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

PressTV’s Facebook page contained a higher percentage of conspiracy related content, on average, when compared to YJC’s. Around 30 percent of the posts contained, or hinted at, conspiracy theories, with a peak of 39 percent in May. Approximately 24 percent of YJC’s posts featured conspiracy theory content, although that included a high of 58 percent during the month of June, when ISIS invaded Iraq.

However, unlike YJC, PressTV’s content was immersive. The posts contained more written content, rather than the simple cartoons favored by YJC. Since the PressTV Facebook posts often contained links to the PressTV website, readers who followed those links were exposed to even more conspiracy-related content. PressTV often featured poll questions, as well as leading questions for the daily show titled “The Debate.” During the period for this study, posts featuring conspiracy-related content were amongst the most popular PressTV posts. In fact, the only posts that were more popular were posts about the World Cup in Brazil or posts related to the worldwide Muslim community’s celebration of Ramadan. A more detailed look at some of these posts was included in the previous chapter.

One of the most significant differences between PressTV and YJC is PressTV’s use of analysts and contributors. Many of these analysts are Americans and the selection of American analysts is likely not accidental. Americans, and Iranian expatriates living in the West, are more likely to trust the words of an American, rather than from an Iranian. At first glance, some of these American analysts and contributors appear to have impressive
credentials. During the period of this study, Kevin Barrett and Dr. Paul Craig Roberts were the most frequent contributors mentioned in PressTV’s Facebook posts. An in-depth look at these men and their writings might help to understand their connection to PressTV.

Kevin Barrett has his own website, Truth Jihad, which contains links to his content on PressTV and Veterans Today, as well as a lot of material on 9/11 conspiracies. The Truth Jihad website receives not much more than 10,000 visitors a month, but Veterans Today and PressTV give Barrett greater audience reach. Users that visited the Truth Jihad site also visited sites such as PressTV.ir and PressTV’s Spanish language channel, Hispan.tv. Website analytics also show that Truth Jihad is similar to such websites as PressTV.ir, Hizbollah.tv and the conspiracy website, Whatreallyhappened.com (see Figure 12).

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279 Ibid.
280 Ibid.
Kevin Barrett is described as an “anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist” by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). Barrett is a frequent contributor to the Veterans Today website (see Figure 13). On Veterans Today, Barrett’s biography is more flattering:

Dr. Kevin Barrett, a Ph.D. Arabist-Islamologist, is one of America’s best-known critics of the War on Terror. Dr. Barrett has appeared many times on Fox, CNN, PBS and other broadcast outlets, and has inspired feature stories and op-eds in the New York Times, the Christian Science Monitor, the Chicago Tribune, and other leading publications. Dr. Barrett has taught at colleges and universities in San Francisco, Paris, and Wisconsin, where he ran for Congress in 2008. He currently works as a nonprofit organizer, author, and talk radio host.

Despite the seemingly innocuous website name, and a nod to dealing with actual veterans’ issues, the Veterans Today website often blames Israel and Jews for their roles in various conspiracies:

But start reading the posts, and you’ll find something else entirely: myriad claims that there was a conspiracy behind 9/11 (Israel orchestrated it, in cahoots with the American government), that the American government is a puppet (of Israel), that the Holocaust never happened or was greatly exaggerated (Jews made it up to manipulate non-Jews), and, most recently, that Julian Assange, the man behind Wikileaks, is a pawn (of Israel).

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A check of website analytics for Veterans Today shows that its top referring sites include several websites featuring conspiracy theory content, such as Rense.com (see Figure 14), Whatreallyhappened.com and Beforeitsnews.com. Rense.com and Whatreallyhappened.com were also top referrers to PressTV. One of the top destination sites for users leaving the Veterans Today website is PressTV.ir. Most of Veterans Today’s approximately million visitors a month comes from the United States and over 70 percent of Veterans Today’s social media traffic comes from Facebook.

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287 “Presstv.com Traffic Statistics.”
289 Ibid.
Barrett was recently among the invited guests for a 2014 conference in Iran. The New Horizon Conference is billed as an International Conference of Independent Thinkers and Film Makers. Saeed Jalili, a recent hardline candidate for President in Iran and close adviser to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, attended the conference. A personal adviser to the Supreme Leader, Mohsen Ghomi, opened the conference. Ghomi noted that the conference was “the biggest threat to Zionists,” and that “American officials are puppets of the Zionist lobby who are taking advantage of American ignorance.” Barrett was slated to take part in panels during the conference.


293 “Iran New Horizon Conference Draws U.S. Anti-Semites, Holocaust Deniers.”

294 Ibid.
including “Mossad’s Role in the 9/11 Coup d’Etat” and “The Mechanisms of Action of the Israeli Lobby and their Effects in Western Capitals.”

Kevin Barrett was linked to four of the posts from the data collected for this study. The first post came on April 13. In that post, relying on Barrett as a source, PressTV claimed that a group of rogue elements affiliated with former U.S. President George W. Bush were said to be planning new chemical attacks in Syria as part of a false flag operation to bring the U.S. military into the Syrian conflict. This post was picked up by another popular American conspiracist website, Alex Jones’ Infowars. This touches on the concept of the “conspiracy entrepreneur” mentioned by Sunstein and Vermeule. Alex Jones’ Infowars website currently receives just over 11 million visitors per month. The Infowars website is loaded with advertising and even has its own website store and merchandise. In 2013, it was estimated that Jones’ media empire was raking in over $10 million per year. The sharing of content by conspiracy websites must help those sites to expand their audience and increase the potential impact of their message as it reaches even more people. It also likely helps the bottom line for the persons behind those websites. It is reasonable to assume that PressTV benefits at the very least by the spread of their message to a wider audience; also an audience that tends to give some credence to conspiracy theories.

On May 6, Barrett’s analysis linked the crisis in the Ukraine to an American CIA sponsored coup attempt.

295 “Conference Itinerary.”
On May 10, Kevin Barrett penned an article for PressTV titled, “USA insulting world’s intelligence.” The article contains a heavy dose of conspiracy theories. Barrett asserts that the “Ukraine crisis has been a non-stop festival of American lies, each one more ridiculous than the last” and that “US-NATO lies are failing in Ukraine just as they failed in Syria, where President Assad is expected to win re-election on June 3rd and preside over an ever-more-united, ever-more-peaceful nation. The turning point in Syria was the failure of the al-Ghouta false flag in August, which the U.S. and its Zionist lobby unsuccessfully tried to blame on Assad. More recently, another false flag plot by Turkish leaders, who were scheming to attack their own country and blame it on Assad, was exposed.” The article finishes with a resonance building nod to the popular 9/11 conspiracies by stating that “if they can convince us that 19 debauched pseudo-Muslims led by a terminal kidney patient in a cave in Afghanistan could outwit the world’s most advanced air defense systems and blow up three buildings with two planes, they have good reason to think we are stupid enough to believe almost anything.”

On May 17, Barrett wrote another article for PressTV titled, “New study: We’re all ‘conspiracy theorists’ now.” This is a fascinating article. Barrett essentially claims that a psychological study indicated that 97 percent of the persons sampled in the study turned out to be 9/11 conspiracy theorists. A look at the psychological study shows that it was not that straight forward. During the study, 30 persons were asked to “construct a plausible story of the events of September 11th 2001, as a single coherent story or consisting of coherent or controversial fragments.” The participants were given cards containing narratives that they would use to form their story. These cards had...

302 Ibid.
303 Ibid.
304 Ibid.
307 Ibid.
been put together with input from 38 other persons. The 38 persons were asked to ‘tell us
which conspiracy theories they know of; and afterwards asked them to describe their
favorite theory in detail. Subsequently, we asked ‘which elements are part of most
conspiracy theories’ as an open question.’

A deck of 42 cards was created based on
input from these interviews, only 13 of which contained the canonical account of the 9/11
attack. The study participants were divided into two groups. The two groups all got the
13 canonical account cards, but one group was given 16 conspiracy cards and the other
group got all 42 cards. It is not surprising then that only 5 out of the 30 stories
constructed by the study participants were considered to match the official account of the
9/11 attacks. Barrett concluded his analysis by stating, “In short, the study found nothing
negative - and much that is positive - about ‘conspiracy theories’ and ‘conspiracy
thorists.’” However, the study did in fact note some negative aspects of conspiracy
theories which contradict Barrett’s statement:

However, we must not neglect the fact of the harmful potential these
theories bear. Considering them as an omnipresent and—in principle—
benign psychological phenomenon helps us to explore why some people
fall for extreme conspiratorial constructs of ideas which might lead to
oxenophobic or even racist arguments. It might also help us to understand
how agitators deliberately use conspiracy theories to transport hateful
ideology—wrapped up in a plausible plot that masks these foul intentions
(Byford and Billig, 2001; Wood and Finlay, 2008). The question should
not be: Why does one believe a racist conspiracy theory? Rather, we
should ask: Why does one believe a racist conspiracy theory?

The study data pertaining to Barrett indicates that he is indeed focused on
conspiracy theories and since PressTV features conspiracy content, Barrett is a natural fit.
Whether or not those conspiracy theories are conspiracy facts is something that I leave
open to the reader.

Dr. Paul Craig Roberts has an impressive resume. He is also a contributor to the
Veterans Today website. His PressTV biography gives testimony to his credentials:

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308 Ibid.
309 Barrett, “New Study: We’re All ‘Conspiracy Theorists’ Now.”
310 Raab et al., “Thirty Shades of Truth.”
Dr Paul Craig Roberts was Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Economic Policy and associate editor of the Wall Street Journal. He was columnist for Business Week, Scripps Howard News Service, and Creators Syndicate. He has had many university appointments. His Internet columns have attracted a worldwide following. His latest book, ‘The Failure of Laissez Faire Capitalism and Economic Dissolution of the West’ is now available.311

Paul Craig Roberts has a website that contains a great deal of content critical of American foreign and domestic policy.312 Roberts’ website averages around 500,000 visits a month.313 Top referrers to Roberts’ website come from such sites as the conspiracy-oriented Whatreallyhappened.com and Rense.com, as well as a website that contains an apology letter to Vladimir Putin and the Russian people for the behavior of Western governments.314

Roberts’ contributions to PressTV have some similarities to Barrett’s, in that they contain conspiracy theories, but their focus during the period of this study was focused on the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West. In an article from April 9, Roberts writes about a CIA plot to use the book Dr. Zhivago against the Soviet Union. In that article Roberts makes some interesting assertions:

Tell that to the National Stasi Agency and to Homeland Security and to the detainees in Guantanamo and the CIA’s torture prisons. In the U.S. individual privacy no longer exists. The NSA collects and stores every email, every credit card purchase, every telephone conversation, every Internet search, every use of social media of every citizen. Pasternak had far more privacy than any American has today. ... Today Russian citizens are more free to have private lives than are Americans, and the Russian press is more lively and more critical of government than the American press. As I wrote in one of my columns, when communist East Germany dissolved, the Stasi moved to Washington.

313 Ibid.
314 Ibid.
Roberts brought up some important controversial issues with his mentions of Guantanamo, CIA torture prisons and NSA intrusions on the privacy of American citizens. However, his point that the Russian press and citizens have more freedom than their American counterparts would seem to stretch credulity.

In an April 27 post, Roberts wrote, “The Obama regime, wallowing in hubris and arrogance, has recklessly escalated the Ukrainian crisis into a crisis with Russia.” He also added, “In other words, Washington’s demand is that Russia put Humpty Dumpty back together again and hand him over to Washington … The ignorant Western media and Washington’s European puppet states are supporting this unrealistic demand. Consequently, Russian leaders have lost all confidence in the word and intentions of the West, and this is how wars start…European politicians are putting their countries at great peril and for what gain? Are Europe’s politicians blackmailed, threatened, paid off with bags of money, or are they so accustomed to following Washington’s lead that they are unable to do anything else? How do Germany, the UK, and France benefit from being forced into a confrontation with Russia by Washington?...”

Roberts’ account of events in the Ukraine would seem to lack balance, placing no blame at all for the escalation of violence in the Ukraine on Russia. Instead, we have a suggestion that the United States is running European politics with secretive schemes involving bribery, blackmail or threats.

On June 10, Roberts wrote another article discussing World War II. The article is similar to the one from April 27, in that Roberts defends the Russian point of view about that war, and other issues, over the point of view of the United States and its European allies. Also, similar to the previous article, Roberts wrote “How is it possible that by now Europe doesn’t understand how Washington thinks? Those bags full of money must be very large. As I have reported several times, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security affairs told me years ago that Washington purchases European politicians with bags full of money. It remains to be seen if European ‘leaders’ are willing to sacrifice their peoples and their own reputations in order to be complicit in the war that


Washington is planning with Russia, a war that could mean the end of life on earth.”317 This kind of statement is difficult to refute, or prove, but as with the similar statement in the April 27 post, it would constitute what Robert Knapp would have classified as a wedge-driving rumor targeted at splitting the ties between the United States and its European allies.318

In a June 18 article, Roberts wrote, “Washington is demonizing Russia and Russia’s President with shameless lies and propaganda, thus preparing the populations of the U.S. and its client states for war with Russia.”319 He also wrote, “The destruction of seven countries in whole or in part by the West in the 21st century, with the support of ‘Western civilization’ and the Western media, comprises powerful evidence that the leadership of the Western world is devoid of moral conscience and human compassion. Now that Washington is armed with its false doctrine of ‘nuclear primacy,’ the outlook for humanity is very bleak.”320 Roberts also made a reference to a popular target of the conspiracy theorist, the military industrial complex, when he wrote, “It is possible to see these calls for more military spending as just the normal functioning of agents for the U.S. military/security complex. Having lost ‘the war on terror’ in Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington needs a replacement and has set about resurrecting the Cold War.”321

Roberts added to the list of possible conspirators when he wrote, “Since last autumn, the U.S. government has been lying through its teeth about Ukraine, blaming Russia for the consequences of Washington’s actions, and demonizing Putin. The presstitute media and the European capitals have seconded the lies and propaganda and repeat them endlessly. Consequently, the U.S. public’s attitude toward Russia moved sharply negative.”322 Not surprisingly, Roberts does not find any fault with Russia in the Ukrainian crisis. Roberts wrote, “So far the Russians (and the Chinese) have remained sensible. Lavrov, the

317 Ibid.
318 Knapp, “A Psychology of Rumor.”
320 Ibid.
321 Ibid.
322 Ibid.
Foreign Minister said: ‘At this stage, we want to give our partners a chance to calm down. We’ll see what happens next. If absolutely baseless accusations against Russia continue, it there are attempts to pressure us with economic leverage, then we may reevaluate the situation.’”

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Based on the data collected for this thesis, Roberts’ articles posted by PressTV are supportive of Russia and critical of America and its Western allies. Conspiracy theories and wedge-driving rumors are included in these articles.

It would seem logical that PressTV, as with any media outlet, would choose analysts and contributors supportive of their editorial views. Paul Craig Roberts and Kevin Barrett are critical of the United States and its allies, including Israel, but they are also supportive of some of America’s rivals: Russia and Syria. The data collected for this thesis shows that PressTV views things the same way. Barrett, and to a lesser extent, Roberts include conspiracy theories in their articles and this is also something they have in common with PressTV. Finally, it is significant that the articles and websites for analysts and contributors such as Roberts and Barrett are often connected to other popular English language conspiracy websites on the Internet. These connections virtually ensure higher volumes of Internet traffic and connections to PressTV’s English language content.

Without further evidence, it would not be possible to prove whether or not PressTV’s staff actually factors in connections to the conspiracy theory community on the Internet when they select their analysts and contributors. As indicated above, it might simply be that these analysts and contributors are in agreement with PressTV’s staff on the issues. The invitation of Barrett to the conference in Iran does provide a clue though. When influential Americans and other Western citizens appear at an Iranian conference with an agenda linked to the Iranian government’s narrative, it likely serves to bolster Iran’s regime in the minds of their own people, as well as in the minds of persons living outside of Iran. It is a form of endorsement for the regime’s policies.

323 Ibid.
IV. CONCLUSION

A. THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Today we live in the information age. The Internet has created a paradigm shift in the way people communicate throughout the world. Nation states and mass media outlets still hold a great deal of messaging power, but the Internet has altered the equation by allowing virtually anyone, or any group, to have largely unfettered access to any population on the globe. All that is necessary is Internet connectivity and a message. In some states, censorship and firewalls complicate matters, but the messenger and the curious listener or reader still always seem to find a way to connect. Social media provides a powerful messaging tool for global outreach.

Iranian media outlets have taken advantage of social media and are actively using the tool to put out their message. Since the research for this thesis was conducted in an effort to learn about the significance behind Iran’s message in the context of American security, this study focused only on the Iranian social media messages in English. Time constraints and a lack of foreign language skills also precluded any effort to analyze Iran’s social media messaging in other languages.

An analyst can’t truly know what is in the minds of the creators of Iran’s social media message, but an analyst can find clues about the Iranian mindset and messaging strategy contained within their posts. In this thesis, I used a qualitative analysis of Iranian social media posts in an effort to find those clues. Since I was the sole collector and coder of the data for qualitative analysis, it was inevitable that some amount of bias will have crept into the process.

B. THEMES IN THE IRANIAN MESSAGE

When viewing the collected data in its entirety, some broad themes emerge. First of all, the tone of the message is overwhelmingly negative. This should not be surprising to Americans who have watched election campaign commercials or tuned their televisions to the nightly news broadcast. The human mind gives more weight to negative information, so going negative is an effective messaging technique.
The predominant theme that was evident in the Iranian message was that they are critical of the current world order, a world order seen as being orchestrated by the United States and often influenced by the Zionists. According to Ayatollah Khamenei and the Iranian social media outlets, Iran is in the camp of nations that do not obey the United States and Iranian social media messaging supports the other members of that camp, including Russia, China, Venezuela, and Syria. Special attention was given to the plight of Palestinians against Israel. The Iranian message portrayed the world outside of Iran as violent, unstable, unjust, and in a state of chaos. The Iranian regime benefits from this message because it can claim to be protecting its people from the hostile world just outside its borders. The United States and its allies were seen as interfering with and bullying other countries through military moves, media propaganda, punishing economic sanctions, and conspiratorial acts hidden from public view. Iran was not the only target. Russia, Syria, Iraq, the Palestinians and even some groups of Americans were also portrayed as victims.

The Iranian message also attempted to convey that Muslims were under worldwide attack through destabilization efforts of Western media, or by “Muslim cleansing” in Myanmar, Central African Republic, Sri Lanka and India. Additionally, the message was that America and its allies, including Sunni Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia, were covertly supporting the violent efforts of “takfiri” Muslims in Syria, Nigeria and elsewhere. Khamenei’s message on this was that the “arrogant powers are fomenting conflict among Muslims in a bid to cover up their own problems…propagating Irano-phobia and Shia-phobia to protect Israel.”324 Of course, these themes are really no surprise to even the most casual observer of news from Iran. Iran’s messaging strategy is clearly shaped by its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. If an analyst wants to understand the overarching strategy driving Iran’s messaging to any segment of the outside world, he only really needs to study the speeches, writings, and statements issued by Khamenei. Since the Iranian regime is a theocracy and Khamenei is the ultimate authority in matters of policy, the statements from other key politicians and state-

controlled media outlets are going to follow Khamenei’s lead. Therefore, when studying Iranian social media, the analyst will probably find greater reward focusing less on what the Iranian media outlets say but rather on how they say it.

C. THE CRAFTING OF IRAN’S SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGE

From analysis of the Iranian social media content, it is possible to come to some conclusion about the structure and design of the Iranian social media message campaign:

- The purposes of the campaign are to legitimize the Iranian regime, be critical of the current world order and to foster alternative ways of thinking.

- The message creators are cognizant of world events and weave their message against that backdrop.

- YJC and PressTV both, of necessity, back the hardline stance of Khamenei’s regime. YJC’s staff seems to be in the more extreme camp, closer to Khamenei and the hardliners, as evidenced by their inclusion of often insulting images, incendiary rhetoric and frequent linking to content from Khamenei.ir. PressTV’s efforts were more subtle.

- The target audience of the campaign is varied. Since English is the language used in the social media content being analyzed, it is likely that the content is largely directed at Americans and others, including Iranians, living in the West. Further support for this can be found in PressTV’s inclusion of content provided by American analysts and contributors. Using social media for messaging would suggest that Iranian media outlets are targeting the younger demographic.

Perhaps this is a conscious choice since younger people are often seen as more accepting of new and alternative views. Support for the proposition that Iran’s social media message is targeted at the youth can be found in PressTV’s embrace of new media outlets. As youth are shifting away from Facebook to alternative sites like Tumblr and messaging applications like

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325 Jowett and O’Donnell, “How to Analyze Propaganda.”


WhatsApp, PressTV has established a presence on those sites as well. PressTV’s use of terms such as “takfiri,” and their focus on the Middle East, as well as on Muslim issues and celebrations, indicates that Muslims living in the West are another specific target audience. PressTV and YJC included posts that sought to encourage and identify with alternative thinkers. Those posts often contained conspiracy theories. Additional evidence of this was found in PressTV’s selection of analysts and contributors who have websites that contain, and further link to additional websites that contain, conspiracy theory content. PressTV’s social media posts also frequently contained links to their own website where readers would find polls, questions and related articles and viewpoints that suggested conspiracy theories.

- YJC and PressTV took very different approaches with their respective social media channels. YJC’s content consisted mostly of images and scant written content. YJC did not seem to make a concerted effort to drive social media users to the YJC website. PressTV’s approach was far more developed. Its content was rich in written word, as well as in visuals. The content was also interactive, including polls and questions (often leading questions) to engage the reader. PressTV’s posts frequently contained links to their website. Once a social media reader arrived at the PressTV website, they were treated to an immersive, multi-faceted media experience. The viewer could read, look at images, watch and listen to video reports and interact by participating in polls and leaving and reading comments. The website’s appearance was crafted to look very similar to other popular Western news outlets. PressTV was rewarded by a positive audience reaction. Compared to YJC, PressTV received a far greater number of likes, shares and comments on their Facebook posts. PressTV was clearly more effective than YJC in its social media efforts.

- Iranian social media outlets made good use of special techniques when communicating with their audience. For example, the use of language and imagery evoking strong emotions was likely calculated to enhance the effect of their messages. PressTV used visual symbols to enhance their image and credibility. Examples of this include the PressTV logo and the use of a newsroom setting and camera styles similar to those of their counterparts in the West. Both PressTV and YJC understood the current hot topics circulating in Western media and capitalized on those to establish resonance with their audience. The use of content critical of the American National Security Agency (NSA) at a time when Snowden’s

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revelations were damaging that institution’s reputation in the United States was an example of this tactic.

Both PressTV and YJC are heavily involved in using social media to get their message out to the West, but audience reaction shows that PressTV is more effective in their use of the medium.

D. RUMORS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Both YJC and PressTV’s social media posts contain conspiracy theory content. PressTV’s choice of analysts and contributors reflected a greater degree of commitment to that content and PressTV benefits from increased website traffic from conspiracy websites as a result. When Western analysts and contributors can be shown to agree with the Iranian regime, then the regime’s reputation and credibility is enhanced to some degree. The connection to conspiracy websites might simply be an effort to tap into an audience predisposed to Iran’s message that is critical of the current world order. However, there are other plausible explanations, such as the possibility that the Iranian regime and Iranian media see conspiracy theories as conspiracy facts and they have found a like-minded audience in the West. Another explanation might be that these conspiracy theories were created at the behest of the Iranian government and are meant to serve as wedge-driving rumors targeted at a Western audience. It is also possible that the regime might be using conspiracy theories to deflect criticism for poor conditions at home and in the region away from the Iranian government by placing the blame on the conspiracies of the West, and, of course, Israel.

E. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Iran’s social media message has only achieved modest inroads. Using Facebook likes, comments and shares as a metric, YJC has failed miserably, but PressTV has had moderate success. PressTV’s metrics have likely been enhanced by their connection to the Internet’s conspiracy theory community. However, website statistics indicate that PressTV is not much more successful than some of the conspiracy websites, such as

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Veterans Today\textsuperscript{330} and they have a long way to go to match up to leaders in that genre, such as Alex Jones’ Infowars.\textsuperscript{331} PressTV has even more ground to make up against its peers in the Western news world, such as CNN\textsuperscript{332} or BBC.\textsuperscript{333} The Iranian government exerts a great deal of control on Iranian media outlets and on the Internet in Iran. Censorship of the Internet is not prevalent in the United States. Iranian social media channels can reach our citizens at will, but censorship in Iran makes any messages going the other way difficult to get out. Of course, that censorship only serves to degrade their credibility in other regions of the world. The Iranian messaging campaign is also hamstrung by its need for adherence to the message of the regime’s leadership. Efforts to branch out to pull in groups who don’t agree or identify with that message must be challenging indeed. In fact, this might be the reason that the Iranian Student’s News Agency’s (ISNA) Facebook page was virtually bereft of any posts during the study period of this thesis. Since ISNA’s message is a moderate one, it is quite possible that the regime is censoring its Facebook page.

1. Recruitment and Radicalization

In the data evaluated for this thesis, there was no evidence found pointing towards any Iranian social media effort to recruit or radicalize Americans to commit violent acts against the United States government. However, there is a potential for Iranian intelligence operatives to use the interaction by Americans with Iranian social media messages as a guide for identifying possible candidates for recruitment to commit espionage against the United States.

2. Conspiracy Theories and Rumors

Branding a statement as conspiracy theory or an individual a conspiracy theorist is not necessarily a pejorative term. Some conspiracy theories turn out to be conspiracy fact.
or are at least found to contain a “kernel of truth.” And when people are anxious or are faced with uncertainty, conspiracies and rumors might be seen as a sort of coping mechanism. Nevertheless, conspiracy theories and rumors have the potential to do damage to a society. Psychological studies indicate that conspiracy theories increase distrust in the government and have a negative effect on a person’s likelihood to vote in the future. Conspiracy theories and rumors can also be used in disinformation campaigns that can tarnish the image of a nation worldwide. The former Soviet Union’s OPERATION INFEKTION was an example of a successful disinformation campaign that took advantage of the psychology of rumor and conspiracy theories. Studies have also linked rumors, which are often used as a means to spread conspiracy theories, to civil unrest. The recent protests in Ferguson, Missouri, some of which were violent, took place in an environment fueled in part by rumors. Long before the official account of the Michael Brown shooting was released, rumors that Brown had his hands up when he was shot were circulated and became part of the rallying cry of the protesters. Even when autopsy evidence and conflicting eyewitness reports emerged and challenged the veracity of the rumor, the original rumor persisted. It is the creation and manipulation of incendiary events such as this that could provide weapons for America’s enemies, foreign and domestic, to tear away at the fabric of our democracy. One positive aspect of conspiracy theories and rumors is that it is possible for an Internet analyst to follow and track their creation and spread in an effort to identify areas of weakness in government messaging, to get ahead of potentially damaging rumors and conspiracies, and to inform persons who will be crafting counter-messaging strategies.

3. Recommendations

The Iranian regime’s social media message has not been terribly effective, but it does possess some modest potential to do mischief by tapping into the conspiracy theory community or through the use of disinformation campaigns. The Iranian message is hampered by its own censorship efforts. Engagement on social media with counter-messaging emphasizing the fact that Iranian citizens can’t freely access the same social media channels that they are using to put out their message to the West would likely be effective. Counter-messaging could also be crafted pointing out how Iran deals with
dissenting views in its own country. Finally, advances in technology could be leveraged to defeat Iran’s censorship of the Internet and all Iranians would then have unfettered access to Western media sources. Perhaps the deployment of Google’s proposed low-orbit satellite network for Internet access might be one tool that could help Iranians navigate around the censors.  

Internet rumors and conspiracy theories represent a danger to the American democracy. Analysts can assist our leaders by identifying and tracking potentially damaging rumors and conspiracy theories. Based on those efforts, it should be possible to craft counter-messaging strategies. Some of these counter-messaging strategies might consist of nothing more than efforts at greater government transparency and recognizing the need to put out information and facts to fill the void that generates rumors and conspiracy theories in the first place. Also, using Rosnow’s analogy of the spreading of rumors being similar to firing a gun, improving the critical thinking skills of the American public and educating the public about the psychology of rumors and conspiracy theories might keep the public from “loading the gun” to begin with.  

F. OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH  

This thesis identified delved into some interesting cultural differences between Iran and the Western world, particularly when looking at conspiracy theories. Additional research should be focused on other cultural differences if Americans ever really want to understand how Iranians think. Perhaps through greater understanding we might be able to improve relations between our two countries.  

Further studies of Iranian social media messaging in languages other than English might provide some valuable insights into how Iran tailors their message to different world communities, but owing to the structure of Iran’s governmental system it might not provide much insight into Iran’s actual overarching message strategy that could not already be gleaned from the statements of Ayatollah Khamenei.  


335 Rosnow, “Inside Rumor: A Personal Journey.”
Studies of the social media efforts of other nations might also be conducted. Some significant understanding might be achieved through the comparison and contrasting of these studies.

The study of rumors and conspiracy theories and their effect on society deserves further exploration. Identifying individual rumors and conspiracy theories and tracking their creation, spread and effect on the social media community might be useful in that regard. Studies on the inclusion of rumors and conspiracy theories by media sources from nations other than Iran might also lead to valuable insights.
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