



# IJMRRS

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**Theories of Mass Communication: Understanding Overlap and Relevancy  
to Human Behaviour**

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## *Introduction*

All organisms on this planet are inherently social in nature (Young, 2008). Humans are no different in this case. The survival of humanity, therefore, is based upon upholding the basic thread of society and community. Communication is key to this primal endeavour. Yet, the proliferation of the human population has caused inter-personal or micro-level communal communication to take a back seat, and give rise to the concept of ‘mass media’: utilising technological innovations to spread the message to a larger amount of people, and appeal to a larger community.

Since the advent of Gutenberg's printing press, communication has undergone a remarkable evolution. This progression has significantly accelerated the rate of information dissemination and minimized the time necessary for its comprehension. However, the lines of communication haven't always been clean. Using a tool so indispensable and widespread for political or economic advantage was inevitable, and mass communication was claimed as a central policy for governments, private institutions and economic institutions. This utilisation of mass media started having sociological, political and even economic ramifications almost instantaneously. Researchers in communication and sociology commenced their studies to analyse the patterns of these ramifications, which eventually led to the formulation of what is now known as the Theories of Mass Communication.

Through this paper, I aim to analyse five such theories and ideally link them together, since no major theory exists in a vacuum and cannot always be considered in a state of singularity. I aim to delve deeper into the overlap between the theories, and use these theories to analyse the working of the media in reporting matters of incredible importance, and vice versa.

## *Jamal Khashoggi and Differences in Reporting*

The tragic death of Jamal Khashoggi on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2018 shook the world. The journalist, a popular character for those following West Asian or Middle Eastern media in the 2010s but an obscure figure of the West and most of the East, had a long and tumultuous history with Saudi Arabia, especially with the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman al Saud (BBC News, 2021). His alleged assassination took place in the Saudi consular building in Istanbul. Under the Vienna Convention of Consular Relations, 1968, the consular premises (*Vienna Convention on Consular Relations*, 1963, Article 1 subclause j) has certain rules of inviolability which need

to be maintained in order to remain a legal consular building (ibid, Article 27 and 31). This, alongside the human rights aspect of the rising numbers of journalists killed or missing over the last decade, especially those originating from autocratic areas, should have dominated the narrative around Khashoggi's death. Although these technicalities, both of which start very interesting and possibly pioneering conversations around the livelihood of media and the global plexus of foreign relations, were mentioned in the debates, the reporting from the major sources of news and analysis focused on the Crown Prince's possible involvement.

Here, we will analyse the reporting on the issue by Al-Jazeera, CNN and Al-Arabiya. All three offer an incredibly different dialogue on the same issue, yet somehow manage to cumulatively deviate the topic from the harsh realities of press freedoms and human rights violations.

Al-Jazeera is the state-owned broadcasting institution of Qatar, under BeIN Media Group. CNN, at the time, was owned by AT&T and is currently owned by Warner Bros & Co., both owners having deeply American roots relating to historic American inventors such as Alexander Graham Bell. Al-Arabiya is owned by the 'son-in-law of the late King Fahd' (Al-Estiklal, 2022), and was allegedly released to counter the anti-Saudi narrative spread by the Qatari Al-Jazeera (ibid).

The main source for these published stories is incredibly important, since all three receive their information from governmental organisations associated with that of their owners. Therefore, there enters the aspect of ideology and propagating a particular ideology for a singular purpose. In the case of CNN, the article in question ("*Intelligence report on Jamal Khashoggi's murder released*") refers to a recently declassified document by the Biden administration about the case of Jamal Khashoggi and the American suspicions of foul play (Macaya et al, 2022). The document, prepared by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, officially propagates the American understanding of the situation, far removed from the then-President Donald Trump's understanding of the fact at hand.<sup>i</sup> The Al-Jazeera article on the same refers to the aforementioned report, while further goes on to explain American volte-face using previous Al-Jazeera articles or statements from the Qatari-sympathising Americans. The embedded link on the website in the statement 'it was reported in 2019 that Saudi Arabia gave Khashoggi's four children "million-dollar houses" and "monthly five-figure payments" as compensation for the killing of their father' (Roberts, 2021) takes you to another Al-Jazeera article, thus proving my analysis of the writing.

On this matter, Al-Arabiya published an article which not only vehemently denied the report and the allegations, but also referred to the death as a result of a ‘fistfight which broke out’ at the consular building, and also quoted the Saudi officials and lawyers on many occasions (Naar, 2021) Thus, there is a clear indication of the multifarious usages of the same sort of media while covering the same news story.

However, there are two overlooked aspects of coverage still left to talk about. In most photos used of Khashoggi by Western/Western-sympathising media, his attire is Western. That is, he is often shown to be wearing a suitcoat and a pair of trousers. However, the Saudi-raised man is shown to be wearing the stereotypical Saudi clothing in the articles published by Al-Arabiya, wearing a thobe, often pictured in an official Saudi government position he had previously held.

Finally, in the book ‘The Looming Tower’ by Lawrence Wright, the author analyses Khashoggi’s friendship with Osama bin Laden, and his subsequent enrolment in the Muslim Brotherhood, the precursor to the Al-Qaeda (Wright, 2006). Although the book was published in 2006, many smaller news websites picked the story up and sensationalised it after Khashoggi’s death. However, their writings were ignored, as many a tale of Khashoggi’s kindness and warmth were recounted on websites like Al-Jazeera.

### *Applying Theories of Mass Media*

This example sums up some of the most important theories of mass media, namely: Chomsky’s Propaganda Model, McCombs’ and Shaw’s Agenda Setting Theory, Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Spring Theory, and Mead’s Symbolic Interactionism Theory.

First, it is crucial to discuss the theory central to the case: the Propaganda Model. According to Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent*, the propaganda model follows five filters to morph raw news material into presentable media for transmission to the public. (Chomsky & Herman, 1998, pp. 61-62 of the 2002 edition). Here, the representation of the death by different websites is swayed by their ideology, inherently based upon the ownership of the media house. This exemplifies the first and fifth filters: ownership and ‘anti-communism’ or ideology to be propagated. Furthermore, the derogatory tone while referring to Saudi sources and leadership in most Western articles is an example of the fourth filter: ‘flak’. An extreme example of flak, in this case, is Khashoggi’s assassination due to words he wrote against the Saudi administration. Finally, the third filter, or “source”, is shown through all three mentioned

articles and their quoted sources, all of which are either from their government or fit their government's narrative.

Second, we evaluate the Agenda Setting Theory. The case of Jamal Khashoggi raised several important questions, but the constant and highly publicised debate over Saudi Arabia's involvement in the situation dominated the news. Questions over the validity of the trials held, President Trump's statements and the case at hand; the declassified report asking to hold a set of 23 Saudi Arabians responsible for extrajudicial killings; followed, after which the situation lost the attention of popular media and thus, the people. Therefore, the constant developments in the case; many often constructed at timed intervals by the Saudi Arabians themselves; were used to divert the attention of the public towards foreign relations, thus setting the agenda for the majority of the populace. Instead of focusing on clear violations of human rights and curbing press freedom, the media used their influence to propagate the foreign policy of all the countries involved in the case study: Qatar, the USA and Saudi Arabia.

Thirdly, we consider the Symbolic Interactionism theory. Symbolic interactionism theory theorises that the language, gestures and imagery used to describe a situation often create one's perception of the topic. Therefore, if the same symbols are used again, one immediately correlates the indoctrinated meaning to the matter at hand. Here, Mead adds that it is one's own interpretation of the offered symbols that matters, however these thought processes are built on personal experiences and societal communication (Griffin, 1991). In this case, the imagery of clothing and language choice of loathing against the Saudis essentially fall under this category. The thobe has been historically portrayed not only as a sign of Saudi loyalty but also as a sign of Saudi royalty. Thus, portraying Khashoggi in a thobe, gives the Saudi Arabian media the ability to connect him to the strong leadership and strengthen their arguments against the Western allegations of murder. Similarly, the Western formal clothing essentially removes Khashoggi from the classic idea of what a Saudi Arabian looks like, and allows the Western audience to dissociate the man from the state. This gives them a position where any allegation against the Saudi Arabians in this case would not be considered as an outsider meddling in internal matters but as an active and peace-loving state defending someone who they hold responsibility for.

Lastly, the Spiral of Silence theory is proven by the lack of conversation around Khashoggi's past terrorist affiliations. Although the argument of Khashoggi being an active terrorist sympathiser is far too weak, the absolute lack of major media houses focusing on it discourages

the smaller media houses and even individuals from continuing the topic, since they do not get the basic validation that someone else shares their opinion. This is also an example of agenda setting theory, where the major media houses are able to sway the minds of the people so radically that they end up essentially setting the agenda for the smaller media houses, forcing these smaller media houses to report what they have reported.

### *2022 FIFA World Cup as a Case Study*

To ideate these theories in a much clearer manner, we must also look at the case study of the Qatar World Cup. In December 2010, Qatar was granted the right to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, one of the largest sporting events that can be hosted by a country, amid controversy. Claims of corruption started immediately, since Qatar had less than adequate resources available to them for hosting the World Cup, and required massive structural investment in order to build stadiums and accommodations worthy of hosting such a well-renowned event. Furthermore, they beat out countries like the USA, Australia, South Korea, Japan etc., countries with far more facilities available. This discussion dominated the news sphere, especially after legends of the sport from different countries signed on to become the ambassadors of the Qatar bid. In November 2013, two important allegations of humanitarian concern were raised against the Qatari administration working on making the football possible: labour law violations as well as denying the LGBTQIA+ community any rights within their country. These allegations, raised by Amnesty International and British anti-discrimination leader Piara Powar, formed the narrative for the future of the event. Here, we will try to analyse the reporting, or the lack thereof, on these sensitive issues across two major countries, the UK and Qatar.<sup>ii</sup>

The British press, especially the reputable daily ‘The Guardian’ and the tabloid ‘The Daily Mail’, led the charge against the human rights violations, fuelled by the reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International proving a neo-slave system of worker treatment in Qatar. Furthermore, ‘The Guardian’ reported the Hummel jersey protest, a silent protest to protest the aforementioned problems in Qatar by releasing muted jerseys with a black color option, an option they call the ‘the colour of mourning’ (The Guardian, 2022).

However, BeIN Sports, owned by Qatari owner Nasser al-Khelaifi, had not published an article about the human rights violations until after the World Cup, and was itself muddled in a controversy regarding homophobia. A former player-turned-pundit said, on air with BeIN Sports, that ‘homosexuality is not compatible with Islam’ (Steinburg, 2021). These highly inflammatory statements, although rescinded later, should be a viable reason for a sacking.

BeIN Sports, heavily criticised by Premier League, had to reprimand and sanction Mohamed Aboutrika but he was and still is given air time in BeIN Sport's Premier League coverage (ibid). This step, with the anti-LGBTQIA+ narrative in the background, proves the position that BeIN takes in this matter.

Al-Jazeera, on the other hand, has published several articles about the allegations of both worker rights violations as well as the LGBTQIA+ community. However, their articles are either subtly or explicitly defensive of Qatari policies. For example, in the article '*Amnesty: Qatar World Cup stadium workers suffer abuse*', Al-Jazeera refers to the titular report far lesser than the previous and current statements made by the Qatari government denying the allegations (Al-Jazeera, 2016). This is well expected, since Al-Jazeera has been proven to be owned by those near to the administration and therefore, are the core propagators of the Qatari ideology. Al-Jazeera's reporting on the matter ranges from defensive to indifferent, stating the fact of these allegations in many cases with the background or any context. Thus, it not only misrepresents what the idea behind the allegation was, but also actively deviates the point from the allegations.

These allegations, and the Qatari reporting on it, are horrific, to say the least. Yet, the show must go on, and go on it would. All the major websites present news of World Cup squads, injuries, fixtures, probabilities and the age-old debate: 'Messi v. Ronaldo'.<sup>iii</sup> Herein lies one major theory of mass communication: Uses and Gratification theory. Griffin explains Katz's theory by explaining that the population consuming the media offered to them is in a position of power as they have a massive variety of options to choose from. Thus, the decision-making of the people, often ignored, is presumably based upon the pleasure they derive from each type of media offered to them (Griffin, 1991).

In this situation, Uses and Gratification Theory is related to the sporting aspect of the event. Sport is seen as an escape from the real, painful world. The idea of using a sport for power building is not uncommon, but people tend to ignore that since the miracle of sport; especially the nationalist ideologies ignited by the World Cup; supersedes all discussions of importance. This is because it gives the consumer of the information the most satisfaction. Furthermore, seeing the horrific situation adds a mental and emotional burden on those enjoying the build-up to the World Cup for the sport side of it, which one would rather not have. Thus, most consumers of mass media tend to steer clear from these articles and topics. Of course, there is no doubt that after the World Cup, the human rights situation of Qatar would be out of the



majority population's minds all across the world, since the use of the story is complete to a point of full gratification. Thus, we can also understand why media cycles move on from topics of grave importance over and over again through this theory.

Although this theory seems to be solely relevant, as previously mentioned, it cannot exist in a vacuum. The thought-process of the people is based upon the symbols provided to them as well as the ideology attached to said symbols, thus exemplifying all the four theories explained in the first case study. The confluence of the five theories is seen when we objectify and differentiate between the reporting from Qatari media and the reporting from British media. The justification for the Propaganda Model in all BeIN Sports and Al-Jazeera articles is fairly intuitive to understand. Al-Jazeera's reporting tries to set the agenda to the sport for their readers while using symbols of sport, thus relating to Agenda Setting and Symbolic Interactionism theories. BeIN Sports' lack of reporting is an interesting attempt at utilising the Spiral of Silence theory to protect Qatari officials from internal and international backlash. Their aim is to ignore the allegations, thus giving it no coverage and giving their readers no information about the same. Those raising these points within their readership would, in theory, see that there is a massive lack of representation and would drop the cause for fear of being publicly reprimanded. Essentially, they aim to use the Spiral of Silence theory at a micro level by avoiding the topic altogether.

### *Conclusion*

There are many examples of such in the history of mass communications, proving similar conclusions with similar arguments. Understanding mass media is quite a difficult task, especially considering the fact that the true nature of mass media is subjective and varies from person to person. But these scholarly theories, albeit better on paper, help us make generalisations and extrapolations from the genuinely vast data set of possibilities. Through this paper, we have not only understood five theories of mass media through case studies, but have also proved the overlap and linkage of all these five theories. Each one is pertinent to the existence and execution of the other, and so, cannot be considered in isolation.

To conclude, we can say that by the means of two major case studies, we have been able to imagine what mass media looks like, and what trends it follows from the production stage to the consumption stage of its existence.

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<sup>i</sup> To read full report, please refer to <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Assessment-Saudi-Gov-Role-in-JK-Death-20210226v2.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> I choose Qatar since the allegations made were against the state of Qatar, and their major media houses' reaction and reporting to and of these allegations would be an interesting case study. I choose the UK since their media, even the tabloids, are actively publishing articles on this topic and are also a huge footballing nation with one of the biggest European fanbase.

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<sup>iii</sup> For example, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2021/mar/15/the-fiver-messi-ronaldo-greatest-the-answer-is-obvious>