CORPORUS-ASSISTED CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CNN’s REPRESENTATION OF THE YEMEN WAR

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the representation of the Yemen war by CNN using corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis (CDA). It is based upon a corpus comprised of news reports published by the said media outlet between March 2015 and November 2018. Assisted by AntConc, a freeware designed to discover and examine patterns in language use in large collections of electronic texts, a combination of lexical frequency, collocation, and concordance analyses were conducted. It was found that CNN portrayed the Yemen war as a sectarian proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran since its commencement. This study argues that such kind of media representation simplified and obscured the war’s complex character which is rooted in the internal struggle for power and resources among competing domestic forces.

Keywords: Yemen, war, proxy conflict, media discourse, critical discourse analysis (CDA)
I. INTRODUCTION

The spread of the Arab Spring protests undermined the stability of autocratic regimes in the Middle East. In Yemen, after months of civil unrest, longtime President Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to transfer his power to his Vice President, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, following the deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Despite the laudable transition, Hadi faced a turbulent path in consolidating his power. Disillusioned by their continuous political exclusion, the Houthis, who launched a series of rebellions against Saleh, marched from their stronghold in Northern Yemen and seized control of Sana’a in 2014. In the following year, the Saudis spearheaded a military intervention to reinstall Hadi’s government. Since then, the political and economic situation in Yemen has deteriorated as the war progresses. This situation induced the United Nations’ Secretary-General to call the war as the world’s worst man-made humanitarian crisis (Nikbakht & McKenzie, 2018). With no end in sight and the efforts to establish dialogues for a political solution have floundered, the Yemenis would likely have to bear the consequences of this conflict in the following years.

Yemen has also been described by Amnesty International (n.d.) as the world’s “forgotten war.” Such a label implies that the war receives little worldwide attention as opposed to the Syrian civil war (Schoen, 2018). As the war’s death toll continues to accumulate at present, Yemen continues to attract limited international media coverage. The inadequate reporting is also aggravated by the risks faced by journalists on the ground due to the constant military offensives committed by warring factions (Baider & Porter, 2017). Given these limitations, an interesting topic of inquiry lies in how the Yemen war is represented in the media discourse, especially that the difficulties of covering it may lead to an assessment that does not fully capture the war’s complex character. Because of the autocratic nature of political regimes in Saudi Arabia and Iran, examining the representation of the war from their mass media might not be a unique option for research. Due to strict censorship rules in these countries, news reporting on various events may largely mirror how they are intended to be portrayed by their respective governments based on certain ideological positions.

To date, the news reports published about the Yemen war were mainly produced by media outlets of Western origin which possess extensive and constant coverage of newsworthy international events. Therefore, I aim to conduct exploratory research that will focus on the media discourse about the war produced by one of the largest global news sources: Cable News Network (CNN). This study is carried out to examine systematically chosen news reports published by CNN with the intent to answer the following questions: (1) how does the said US-based media outlet represent the Yemen war in its news reporting? and (2) what are the dominant discursive themes it employed to arrive at such representation? Due to CNN’s wide readership base, extensive global network, and use of the English language, it assumes a powerful role in shaping the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of its worldwide audience towards what many people call as the “forgotten war” in the region.

This study is structured as follows. The second section offers an overview of the dimensions and complexity of the Yemen war. The third
section provides a theoretical and analytical overview of media discourse and critical discourse analysis and outlines the methodology employed in this study. The fourth section presents and discusses the findings of this study. The concluding section discusses its limitations as well as the potential avenues for future research.

II. DIMENSIONS AND COMPLEXITY OF THE YEMEN WAR

The Yemen war which began in 2015 was triggered by the problematic leadership transition after the conclusion of Ali Abdullah Saleh’s three-decade rule. Although the involvement of a wide array of actors underscores the war’s complex character, the forces led by President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the Houthis are the two major factions fighting for legitimacy to constitute Yemen’s official government after Saleh’s resignation. The former is widely recognized to be in control of the legitimate government, while the latter, taking advantage of Hadi’s weaknesses, launched a series of protests in Sana’a that ultimately morphed into a war.

Contrary to the dominant narrative of the warring parties and the media, the underlying cause of the Yemen war was deeply entrenched in the country’s fragmented politics than a confrontation among regional rivals through their proxy agents. The rise of the Houthis, an influential politico-military force that emerged in Yemen’s political landscape with locally driven grievances, was critical in tracing the roots of the conflict. Their origins can be traced from a Zaidi revivalist organization, Believing Youth (BY), in the 1990s that was formed in response to the fundamentalist Sunni incursion in Zaidi communities in northern Yemen. One of its leaders was the charismatic Hussein al-Houthi who also occupied a seat in the parliament in Sana’a. Initially, Saleh deemed the BY as a counterbalancing force against the aforementioned incursion (Rieger, 2017). This relationship had changed after BY experienced a leadership schism, causing al-Houthi to lead a group that became widely known as the ‘Houthis’ (Brandt, 2017). At the turn of the new millennium, al-Houthi’s rhetoric conveyed a more political tone which enabled him to mobilize a growing number of supporters. Their grievances mainly include the political and material exclusion of the Zaidis, corruption in the central government, and Saleh’s close ties with the US during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Brandt, 2017; Rieger, 2017). In 2004, Saleh prevailed in neutralizing al-Houthi. However, his death provoked a series of military confrontations between the Houthis and government forces until 2010.

When the Arab Spring protests reached Yemen in 2011, the Houthis capitalized on the public disillusionment with Saleh’s regime. In the aftermath, Saleh agreed to transfer his power to Hadi following the deal brokered by GCC. The Houthis were virtually excluded in this process. They also contested its outcome, particularly the granting of immunity to Saleh. Under the said deal, a National Dialogue Committee (NDC) was convened to negotiate for a consensus and lay the groundwork for a new constitution. Although the Houthis participated in the dialogue, they were equally skeptical of its outcome. This was exhibited by their rejection of the proposed constitution
dividing Yemen into six federal states that could weaken their power base in the north.

The political crisis has reached a critical phase of internationalization when the Houthi seized Sana’a in 2014. Despite the ambiguity of their demands, their refusal to leave the capital exhibited their suspicion to another UN-brokered power-sharing deal unless a resolution that would protect their core interest in the north and guarantee their greater say in national affairs is achieved. In early 2015, they continued to subvert the power of the central government and preempted Hadi’s determination to implement the new federal constitution. This standoff prompted the Saudis to spearhead a military intervention in March 2015 aimed at restoring Hadi’s government and repelling the Houthis whom they painted as Iran’s proxies. Known as Operation Decisive Storm, such intervention did not only internationalize the ensuing civil war but also prompted the mainstream Western and Arab media to characterize it as a sectarian proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Darwich, 2018; “What US and UK media,” 2018).

As the Yemen war progressed, the prospects for peace have become especially difficult. The complexity of the war is the main obstacle for the commencement of a genuine peace process albeit the previous attempts of the warring parties. From a peaceful transition after Saleh’s regime, the situation in Yemen has quickly deteriorated which has brought catastrophic humanitarian consequences to one of the poorest nations in the Middle East. The involvement of foreign players and other powerful domestic forces, such as the Southern Transitional Council (STC) backed by the United Arab Emirates and the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) which occupy various portions of the Yemeni territory, continue to stall further attempts to negotiate a ceasefire and peaceful rebuilding.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

a. Media Discourse and Critical Discourse Analysis

Individuals normally seek information about their surroundings through the media. In contemporary societies, its role as a key source of information beyond one’s personal experience has expanded with the advent of modern technology. Due to this development, attending to the media has become a central human activity (Barr, 2000). As a result, it performs a crucial function as an instrument through which certain discourses are formed
and disseminated (Gauntlett, 2002; Macnamara, 2006)

With the media as a key source, the formation and dissemination of discourses are done through representations (Macnamara 2010). However, it is important to take into account that such representations presented by the media to the audience are a “construction of reality rather than a picture of reality” (Whitney et al., 2004, p. 402). This implies that these texts cannot be entirely construed as an objective account of events. As Fowler (1991, 4) cautions, “it is not a value-free representation of ‘facts’.” Furthermore, the texts produced by media outlets are constructed in accordance with particular ideologies and beliefs (Fairclough, 1995; Fowler, 1991). By emerging as the primary source of representations in contemporary societies, media outlets “become powerful ideological institutions” (Grossberg et al., 2006, p. 198). As a result, the power which these outlets exert over their audience rests primarily on their ability to access, influence, and shape certain discourses (Gauntlett, 2002).

Evaluating media texts is essential due to their preeminence as one of the most accurate, reliable, and credible sources of information. Due to this preeminence, discourses formed and disseminated by the media through representations may “normalise specific world-views and ideologies” (Fürsich, 2010, p. 115). This phenomenon could carry several repercussions. For example, media representations usually undergo “discursive simplification” (Jessop, 2002, p. 7) to narrate complex realities in a more or less simplistic and selective manner to the audience. As a result, the meanings enacted by the media on certain events may not only create representations but also misrepresentations. As O’Keeffe (O’Keeffe, 2012, p. 441) recommends, “it is important that we continually appraise the messages that we consume from our manufactured mass media.”

One way of inquiring into the media discourse is through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). As an analytical tool, CDA “primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts” (van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). It looks into, for example, institutional, political, and media discourses to expose linguistic strategies that may appear as "neutral," "normal," "acceptable," "common sense," or "natural" on the surface but may convey hidden ideological messages in shaping the representation of events and groups (Fairclough, 1989; Machin & Mayr, 2012; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2001). Derived from its character as a “dissident research” (van Dijk, 2015, p. 466), CDA seeks to unravel such ideological messages which are crucial in producing and sustaining existing power relations. The application of CDA enables this study to uncover the complex dimensions of the Yemen war that are normally excluded or obscured in the prevailing discourses propagated by the media.

One of the criticisms leveled against CDA is the tendency to analyze a limited number of texts that are purposively selected to suit the researcher’s agenda and ideological presuppositions (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

To address this criticism, I coupled CDA with corpus linguistics. This analytical technique
uses a large collection of electronic texts to discover linguistic patterns used in the construction of a discourse (Baker, 2006). It also enables the researcher to examine how certain topics were framed in various news reports over time (O’Keeffe, 2012). As a result, it strengthens the empirical groundings of data analysis (Mautner, 2009). Furthermore, I employed a transparent and systematic procedure of data collection by clearly disclosing the steps to generate, filter, and select the news reports from CNN. Through this procedure, concerns about representativeness and “cherry-picking” of data will be minimized.

**b. Data Collection**

The data for this study were collected from the online archives of CNN, a US-based media outlet. The basis for the selection was its relatively large share of the digital audience. Based on the report of ComScore Media Metrix®, an internet audience measurement service, CNN was ranked as the no. 1 global news brand in 2018 with a monthly average of 157 million unique visitors as opposed to BBC (2nd) and Yahoo! News (3rd) with 156 million 130 million unique visitors respectively (“CNN Digital Hits,” 2018).

I used LexisNexis Academic, an online database that contains a wide variety of worldwide media texts, to search and obtain the news reports that will be examined in this study. I used ‘Yemen’ as the search expression and, using the advanced option of the said database, I narrowed the search results to the news reports published on CNN. Accordingly, I set the time frame for the search between 15 March 2015 and 30 November 2018 to cover most of the duration of the Yemen war. The said starting date also concurs with the commencement of the Saudis' military intervention.

The next step was to screen the results generated by the database by manually tagging the news reports related to the Yemen war. Those with similar headlines and contents were filtered to avoid duplications in the corpus. The database allowed the user to download the tagged news reports into a single text file. I deleted the information in each news report that is irrelevant in the data analysis, such as the byline, section, city, date and time of publication, and only retained the headline and the body in the corpus. Overall, the corpus is comprised of 218 news reports with 8,077 word types and 142,370 word tokens.

**c. Data Analysis**

This study employs a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis (CDA), primarily utilizing a combination of lexical frequency, collocation, and concordance analyses. AntConc, a freeware designed to discover and examine patterns in language use in large collections of electronic texts, was used to assist in performing the data analytical procedures. After a careful reading and examination of all the news reports comprising the corpus, the initial step in the data analysis was to generate the most frequent words used in the corpus using the word list feature of AntConc. Developing a word list allows the researcher to discover and investigate interesting patterns and phenomena by analyzing the words that most regularly occur in the corpus (Baker, 2006). The function words which were
anticipated to top the list were excluded and only the non-function or lexical words were analyzed.

To examine the contextual usages of selected words in the word list, I performed collocation and concordance analyses. Collocation is a "phenomenon of certain words frequently occurring next to or near each other" (Baker, 2006, p. 96). It indicates that two words are consistently juxtaposed in the corpus rather than merely co-occurring by chance. The top collocates of the keywords of interest presented in this study were ordered by their raw frequencies, but their respective t-scores were also presented to illustrate their statistical associations. T-score expresses the confidence with which we can assert that there is a collocation between words in the corpus (Hunston, 2002; McEnery et al., 2006). A t-score of 2 or higher is normally regarded to be statistically significant (Hunston, 2002). For those words subjected to collocation analysis, I set the ‘window span’ in AntConc to 5L and 5R (i.e. collocates within the five words to the left of the keyword of interest, and five words to the right).

Along with the examination of collocations, a concordance analysis was also carried out. A concordance refers to “a list of all the occurrences of a particular search term in a corpus” (Baker, 2006, p. 71). Therefore, while generating a frequency list assists in determining the primary focus of the corpus under investigation, a concordance analysis allows for an in-depth examination of a word to ascertain its context-specific use (Baker, 2006). A sample of concordance lines from various news reports in the corpus was extracted and analyzed to elucidate interesting patterns in the representation of the Yemen war on CNN.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the top 20 lexical words in the corpus ordered by their raw frequencies. As previously discussed, a word list enables the researcher to discover the focus of the corpus under investigation. Furthermore, examining why specific words occur frequently “can help reveal the presence of discourses, especially those of hegemonic in nature” (Baker, 2006, p. 121).

It can be noticed that the most frequent words in the corpus are nouns derived from several state and non-state actors that play a role in the Yemen war, such as ‘Saudi’ (total frequency: 1505), ‘Houthi’ (724), ‘coalition’ (691), ‘Arabia’ (552), ‘US’ (526), ‘Houthis’ (521), ‘rebels’ (419), ‘military’ (406), ‘government’ (369), and ‘Iran’ (351). Also topping the list is the verb ‘led’ (507) which is a common collocate of both ‘Saudi’ and ‘coalition.’ These words were drawn from the compound noun ‘Saudi-led coalition’ referring to the coalition of selected Gulf and African states led by Saudi Arabia that conducts military operations against the Houthis in Yemen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>1857</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>war</td>
<td>445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Saudi</td>
<td>1505</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>rebels</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>said</td>
<td>1420</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>country</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Houthi</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>military</td>
<td>406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>coalition</td>
<td>691</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>us</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>government</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Arabia</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>killed</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Houthis</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>led</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>according</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>people</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>united</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a The keyword “us” collectivity refers to the pronoun (Freq. count: 49) and the acronym for the United states (Freq. count: 526)
The keyword “united” collectively refers to the verb (Freq. count: 3) and the noun, specifically from the United Arab Emirates (Freq. count: 58), United States (Freq. count: 137), United Kingdom (Freq. count: 9) and United Nations (Freq. count: 136).

a. Discursive theme 1: Proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran

To further investigate CNN’s representation of the Yemen war, I analyzed the collocates and concordance lines of the most frequently used proper nouns in the frequency list that are derived from specific state and non-state actors. Table 2 shows a comparative list of the top collocates of ‘Houthi*, ‘Saudi,’ ‘US,’ and ‘Iran.’ In AntConc, the use of the asterisk (*) wildcard widens the results of a specific search expression (e.g. searching for ‘Houthi*’ will generate results for both ‘Houthi’ and ‘Houthis’). Except for the ‘US,’ it is noticeable that ‘Houthi*, ‘Saudi,’ and ‘Iran’ contain a closely similar set of collocates which include the nouns ‘Yemen,’ ‘Saudi,’ ‘coalition,’ ‘Iran,’ ‘Houthi.’ These findings suggest that the Houthis, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are portrayed as the primary actors of the war since the words derived from their names habitually co-occur in the corpus.

Table 2. Most frequent lexical collocates of ‘Houthi*, ‘Saudi,’ ‘US,’ and ‘Iran’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entity</th>
<th>Collocates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Houthi</td>
<td>rebels, Yemen, Saudi, said, Iran, coalition, forces, backed, controlled, airstrikes, Houthi, Yemeni, led, Sanaa, Iranian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi</td>
<td>Arabia, coalition, led, Yemen, said, airstrikes, Saudi, military, Houthi, united, Iran, government, backed, support, agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>Saudi, said, military, Yemen, backed, led, support, government, officials, secretary, president, out, official, drove, CNN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Saudi, Yemen, Houthi, rebels, Houthis, backed, Arabia, Shiite, allied, said, war, Iran, coalition, led, government</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: all collocates obtain a t-score >2.

The verb collocates common to ‘Houthi*,’ ‘Saudi,’ and ‘Iran’ are also worth examining. Accordingly, two of these verbs, ‘said’ and ‘back’ are not derived from the names of the primary actors of the Yemen war as opposed to ‘led’ (i.e. “Saudi-led coalition”). Since this study deals with news reports, it is unsurprising to see the presence and frequent use of the reporting verb ‘said’ in the corpus. Alternatively, a significant result that warrants further scrutiny is the usage of the verb ‘backed’ (total frequency: 176). Its presence may indicate that this specific word was frequently used in the corpus to represent alliances and/or alignments among actors.

To substantiate this lead, I first carefully examined the contextual usage of ‘backed’ as a collocate of ‘Houthi*.’ It was found that the said verb was mainly used in the corpus to underscore Iran’s support to the Houthis, notwithstanding the ambiguous nature and extent of their alliance. Similarly, the verb ‘backed’ that co-occurs with ‘Iran’ had a similar contextual usage. For instance, the modifiers ‘Iran-backed’ (15.34% of the total frequency of ‘backed’), ‘Iranian-backed’ (21.02%), and the phrase ‘backed by Iran’ (11.36%) were invariably utilized to portray the Houthis (See Table 3).
I discovered that CNN frequently used a variety of expressions to represent the Yemen war as a proxy conflict between the two regional rivals in most concordance lines where ‘Iran’ is collocating with ‘Arabia.’ These expressions include ‘proxy battleground’ (12), ‘proxy war’ (19), ‘contest for regional superiority’ (1), ‘regional power play’ (1), ‘rivalry for regional dominance’ (1) ‘longstanding tensions’ (1) ‘strategic contest for influence’ (1), ‘regional conflict’ (1) and ‘conflict’ (1). The following examples display the contextual usage of some of the expressions in the corpus (emphasis added):

(1) In addition to counterterrorism issues, all sorts of geopolitical influences are at work in Yemen -- chief among them the regional power play between regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia (“U.S., British forces out in Yemen, raising terror fears,” 23 March 2015).

(2) Yemen is becoming the latest battleground in a contest for regional superiority between Saudi Arabia and Iran that goes back to the overthrow of the Shah during Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979 (“Yemen in freefall: How chaos could spiral into all-out regional war,” 30 March 2015).

On the other hand, the verb ‘backed’ that co-occurs with ‘Saudi’ is used to represent Saudi’s support to Hadi. Nevertheless, while expressions like ‘Saudi-backed’ (9.09%) and ‘backed by Saudi’ (5.11%) are attributed to either Hadi or his government, readers must exercise caution in interpreting that Saudi Arabia plays an indirect role in the Yemen War. As stated previously, its military operations against the Houthis, mainly carried out through airstrikes, commenced in March 2015. Since Saudi Arabia and Iran are consistently portrayed in the texts of CNN as the principal benefactors of the two opposing local actors of the war, I then focused my analysis on these two regional rivals in the Middle East. I carefully examined the concordance lines where ‘Iran’ and ‘Arabia’ are collocating in the corpus. This step would help reveal the discursive practices in occurrences where these nouns are proximately situated in the news reports. In AntConc, I favored the noun ‘Arabia,’ which is also a top collocate of ‘Iran,’ as the search expression to generate concordance lines. This is because ‘Saudi’ is also associated with the compound noun ‘Saudi-led coalition’ which may have a relatively different function in the corpus. For example, ‘Saudi’ happened to be a top collocate of ‘Houthi*,’ but not ‘Arabia’ (See Table 2), suggesting that the military clashes between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition were often reported in the news texts.

Table 3. Summary of occurrences where ‘backed’ was used to represent alliances and/or alignments among actors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usages of the verb ‘backed’ as collocates of ‘Houthi*’; ‘Iran’; ‘Saudi’</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Relative Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Iran-backed’</td>
<td>Houthis</td>
<td>15.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Iranian-backed’</td>
<td>Houthis</td>
<td>21.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘backed by Iran’</td>
<td>Houthis</td>
<td>11.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Saudi-backed’</td>
<td>Hadi’s government</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘backed by Saudi’</td>
<td>Hadi’s government</td>
<td>5.11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Summary of occurrences where ‘backed’ was used to represent alliances and/or alignments among actors
(3) Hopes for stability, not only in Yemen but in the Middle East in general, are fading as fears grow that Saudi Arabia and Iran are fighting a proxy war in Yemen for regional domination (“Three weeks of Saudi strikes in Yemen, no peace in sight,” 15 April 2015).

(4) Until now, Yemen has effectively been the Middle East’s second biggest proxy war (with Syria being the first), pitting Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries against Yemen’s Houthi minority and its Iranian backers (“US missiles just made the war in Yemen even more complicated,” 14 October 2016).

(5) The two documented attacks occurred in areas that are under the control of the Iran-backed Houthi rebels. The war-torn country has been the center of a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran since 2015 (“Saudiled coalition slams UN statement on Yemen as ‘biased’,” 28 December 2017).

(6) The Houthis, like Hezbollah, are Iranian-backed and a proxy for the regional Shia-Sunni and Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry for regional dominance of the Middle East (“Us decision to stop refueling Saudi jets attacking Yemen ‘means nothing’,” 12 November 2018).

Additionally, it is also important to highlight that CNN portrayed the Yemen war as a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran as soon as the war began in early 2015. This can be observed in Extracts 1, 2, 3, and 5. In Extract 4, CNN also situated the ongoing conflict in Yemen next to Syria’s destructive civil war by describing it as ‘the Middle East’s second biggest proxy war.’ In Extract 6, it can be observed that the author compared the Houthis with Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy in Lebanon.

Framing the Yemen war mainly as a conflict between proxies and their regional patrons, however, do not fittingly capture its overall dynamics. The recurrent use of representational strategy by CNN to portray the Houthis as ‘Iran-backed’ or ‘Iranian-backed’ rebels in its texts reduced their identity to mere pawns of the Iranian government. Their domestic grievances were the cause of their long history of armed struggle with the central government before the outbreak of the Yemen war in 2015. There is also a lack of compelling evidence to prove that Iran greatly commands the decision-making of the Houthis in contrast with its other regional proxies (Hitlermann & Alley, 2017; Juneau, 2016a). The Houthis were also able to exhibit their autonomous character during their 2014 takeover of Sana’a despite the reported dissuasion of Iran (Watkins et al., 2015). As Salisbury (2015, p. 12) argues, “at first sight, Yemen likely appears to be another country where Saudi-Iranian tensions further complicate existing homegrown rivalries. At root, the latter are local disputes, far more than they are a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.”

d. Discursive theme 2: Sectarian-driven alliance and conflict

Of another interest is the presence of the noun ‘Shiite’ in the list of the top collocates of ‘Iran’ (See Table 2). The Shiites refer to the adherents of Shia, one of the two major branches of Islam, which has a sizeable population in countries such as Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan (“Sunnis and Shia,” 2016). Its presence in the list could aid in ascertaining whether the alliance between the Houthis and Iran is portrayed in the texts of CNN from a predominantly sectarian standpoint. Such a tendency is plausible, especially that most of the Houthis preach Zaidism, a minority Shiite sect in Yemen, which is distinct from
Imamiyyah or “Twelver Islam” practiced in Iran (Riedel, 2017).

I searched for the concordance lines where ‘Shiite’ is collocating with ‘Iran’ to reveal and examine their contextual usages, especially the former. The results interestingly revealed two dominant uses of ‘Shiite.’ I then clustered these results based on their respective usage variations.

Table 4. Sample concordance lines where ‘Shiite’ and ‘Iran’ are collocating (a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Concordance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aden eventually became a headquarters for Hadi after Houthi rebels, who are Shiite and allied with Iran, ousted Hadi’s Sunni-led government from the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>contacting the leadership of brotherly countries,” the statement continued. The Shiite Houthis are allied with Iran, a majority Shiite nation. Saudi Arabia has</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>hinder the influx of weapons and ammunition. The Houthis, who are a Shiite minority, are backed by Iran, Saudi Arabia’s staunch rival on the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>powers in strikes against Houthi rebels and other groups. The Houthis, a Shiite minority, are backed by Iran, a staunch rival of Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>seriously and were not implemented on the ground.” The Houthis, who hail from northern Yemen, to be proxies for the Shiite government of Iran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>in al-Safraa in times of peace, HRW said. The Houthis are Shiite Muslims aligned with Iran who have long clashed with Yemen’s central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>membership. They are majority Sunni Muslim nations, and the Houthis rebels are Shiite Muslims allied with Iran. Having Yemen become an Iranian satellite country on</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 displays the concordance lines where ‘Shiite’ functions to represent the religious sect of the Houthis. There are also noticeable occurrences in which the Houthis were portrayed as a ‘minority’ vis-à-vis the predominantly Sunni population of Yemen and Saudi Arabia, as revealed in concordance lines 3, 4, and 5. Furthermore, the said representation of the Houthis as followers of Shia was often coupled with a variety of expressions depicting their relationship with Iran.

In a similar pattern, Table 5 shows that ‘Shiite’ was also used in the corpus to feature the Shiite-led government in Iran. For example, a closer look at the first five concordance lines reveals that CNN used identical expressions to represent the Houthis as ‘proxies for the Shiite government of Iran.’ While the portrayal of the Houthis as proxies merely reported the Saudis’ view, the Islamic sect of the Iranian government was equally highlighted in the texts. The last two concordance lines, although the word ‘proxies’ was omitted, correspondingly highlighted their alliance. Notwithstanding the usage variations, it is apparent that ‘Shiite’ was also used in CNN to portray the alliance between the Houthis and Iran from a sectarian standpoint.

Table 5. Sample concordance lines where ‘Shiite’ and ‘Iran’ are collocating (b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Concordance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>second-largest city, Aden. The Saudis consider the Houthis proxies for the Shiite government of Iran and fear another Shiite-dominated state in the region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>dubbed al-Hazm Storm, considers the Houthis to be proxies for the Shiite government of Iran and fear another Shiite-dominated state in the region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>largest city, Aden. The Sunni Saudis consider the Houthis proxies for the Shiite government of Iran and fear another Shiite-dominated state in the region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>the Houthis, who hail from northern Yemen, to be proxies for the Shiite government of Iran and fear another Shiite-dominated state in the region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>the Houthis, who hail from northern Yemen, to be proxies for the Shiite government of Iran. The Houthis, who follow a different strain of Shiite</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These findings reveal a discursive theme in the corpus that assimilates the Yemen war into a broader narrative of Sunni-Shia regional rivalry splitting Saudi Arabia and Iran. In conjunction with the proxy conflict discourse, the representation of the war in CNN also follows a simplistic script of dividing its primary actors along sectarian lines which can be discerned from the following extracts selected in the corpus (emphasis added):

(7) What do those countries have in common? They're all predominantly Sunni Muslim -- in contrast to the Houthi rebels, Shiite Muslims who have taken over Yemen's capital of Sanaa and on Wednesday captured parts of its second-largest city, Aden. The Saudis consider the Houthis proxies for the Shiite government of Iran and fear another Shiite-dominated state in the region ("Saudis consider the Houthis proxies for the Shiite government of Iran and fear another Shiite-dominated state in the region," 26 March 2015).

(8) The nations stepping into Yemen's civil war are predominantly Sunni Muslim, and they are working to rescue a government that has strong Sunni support. The Houthis are allied with majority Shiite Iran ("Saudis-led coalition strikes rebels in Yemen, inflaming tensions in region," 26 March 2015).

(9) The Houthis have responded by threatening a campaign of suicide bomb attacks inside Saudi Arabia. Iran, which has supported the Houthis as fellow Shia, described the Saudi offensive as a "dangerous move that would kill any chance at peaceful resolution of the crisis" ("Yemen in freefall: How chaos could spiral into all-out regional war," 30 March 2015).

(10) The Houthis, a Shiite minority, are backed by Iran, a staunch rival of Saudi Arabia ("Yemen 5-day ceasefire set for late Sunday," 25 July 2015).

(11) Yemen has become a proxy battleground for Saudi Arabia and Iran. Yemen's minority Houthis, who are Shiite, rebelled last year against the Sunni-led government of President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, which is backed by Saudi Arabia ("More than 40 killed in Yemen suicide attacks," 27 June 2016).

(12) Yemen has been wracked by warfare and has become a proxy battleground for Saudi Arabia and Iran. Yemen's minority Houthis, who are Shiite, rebelled against the Sunni-led government, backed by Saudi Arabia ("Yemen 5-day ceasefire set for late Sunday," 25 July 2015).

(13) Yemen's civil war began in early 2015 when Houthis -- a minority Shiite group from the north of the country -- drove out the US-backed government and took over the capital, Sanaa ("Saudi coalition spokesman denies war crimes in Yemen following report by Human Rights Watch," 3 September 2018).

Like the previous discursive theme identified in this study, splitting the primary actors mainly along sectarian lines could also lead to an inaccurate portrayal and assessment of the Yemen war. Although religion plays a pivotal role in the formation of the Houthis' identity, their political and material grievances were the war's key drivers (Kendall, 2017). At the height of the 2014 demonstrations in Sana'a, they were supported by many Yemenis who are neither Houthis nor Shiite but shared their dissatisfaction with Hadi's government.
The Houthis’ short-lived partnership with Saleh’s camp also demonstrated their pragmatic approach towards advancing their aims, more than strictly allying based on a shared religious identity. For example, the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen (2015) cited the latter’s pivotal role concerning the Houthis’ advances especially during the takeover of Sana’a. Equipped with extensive bureaucratic and military networks, Saleh allied with the Houthis to retaliate against those who were instrumental to his downfall, especially Hadi (Alakwaa, 2017; Cordesman, 2017; Juneau, 2016a; Panel of Experts on Yemen, 2015). In December 2017, he was assassinated by the Houthi fighters after he made a public announcement calling for a “new page” in his relationship with the Saudis (Browning, 2017).

A similar scenario likely governs the Houthis’ existing ties with Iran, instead of portraying their relationship from a predominantly sectarian standpoint. It is important to take into account that their sectarian difference is comparatively overwhelming given that most of the Houthis preach Zaidism, a minority Shiite sect in Yemen, which is distinct from Imamiyyah or “Twelver Islam” practiced in Iran (Riedel, 2017). The most notable distinction is the Zaidis’ rejection of Shia’s belief on imamic infallibility which makes their dogmatic positions extremely closer to the Sunnis (Alakwaa, 2017; Messick, 1993). More than their religious affinities, it is the common strategic interests of the Houthis and Iran that mainly facilitated their convergence (Bodetti, 2018; Hitlerrmann & Alley, 2017; Juneau, 2016a, 2016b). Both actors are opposed to a potential regional order dominated by Saudi Arabia and its Western and Arab allies. As a consequence, the Western-backed Saudi-led coalition’s military intervention in Yemen, under the pretext of containing Iranian influence, drew the Houthis closer to Iran’s patronage (Juneau, 2016a).

V. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study used two domains of linguistic analysis – critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics – to uncover the representation of the Yemen war by a Western media outlet. It examined the corpus data preliminarily built from the news texts of CNN about the war. The said media outlet was selected due to its largest share of the digital audience worldwide. The findings of this study revealed that CNN predominantly portrayed the Yemen war through the lens of a sectarian proxy conflict that has historically ignited instability in the Middle East. Despite the multi-dimensional character of the war, the discourse produced by the said media outlet about the war predominantly follows a simplistic narrative that ubiquitously reduced the Houthis’ status as Iran-backed Shiite proxies who are trying to topple Yemen’s Sunni-led government supported by Saudi Arabia and its allies.

Although I am optimistic about the potential contribution of this study considering the lack of prior researches conducted on the topic, it also holds certain limitations that mainly lie in its scope and timeframe. Since the corpus was comprised of news articles published within the first three years of the Yemen war, the findings and analysis offered here are contingent and contextualized on the events that transpired within the said timeframe.
However, since the Yemen war is still an ongoing phenomenon at the time when the data for this study was collected, any shift in the war’s trajectory and geopolitical alliances as it progresses could more or less bring modifications in the way CNN is framing the conflict which this study is unable to capture. These limitations could, therefore, be addressed in future researchers by expanding the scope of the data collection, dividing the compiled news articles into sub-corpora, and performing a keyword analysis to identify consistencies and changes in CNN’s representation of the Yemen war over time. Additionally, a large set of corpus data built on the news articles of various mainstream media outlets with sufficient coverage of the Yemen war can also be utilized for analysis. This endeavor, however, requires more resources and time to carry out a sophisticated data collection procedure. Nevertheless, employing this methodology can yield more generalizable findings on the media representation of the so-called “world’s forgotten war.” Overall, despite these limitations, this study offers a modest contribution to researchers interested in investigating how a pressing geopolitical event in the Middle East is portrayed by a mainstream media outlet that exerts extensive influence on the global audience.

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