

Critical discourse analysis of the content of popular Telegram channels and groups in the field of discussion and critique of social and political issues in Iran

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Abstract

Thanks for taking the time to review my handwriting. This article, as it is extracted from my master's thesis, cannot retell all the details of the research as it should, so I have to make a few points. It is natural that you do not see anything from the political and theological context of Iran here, because a wide range of analysis has been used in this research. The details that should have been mentioned are fully described in the analyzes, which are the bridge between description and explanation. Due to the large volume of content, it is not allowed to be presented in the number of pages, if necessary, I can send you some samples of analysis. As for the introductory sentences, I have to say that it is a ground for discussion, and CDA is the basis of my writing, and this cannot be concealed, but keep in mind that my analyzes are novel. Sufficient explanations are provided on how to introduce and select channels and groups. By focusing on the code and its set, the reader will understand where the analysis was headed and what results were drawn from it. Regarding the research method, I must say that the quality of the content has been measured with the help of its quantitative expression, as you know, the Fairclough method is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

1. Introduction

While no one still imagined that the social aspect of the Internet would one day become its main application, Internet social networks emerged. This issue has received so much attention among Internet users that it can be boldly said that social networks are one of the most effective services provided on the Internet. Social networks are a generation of databases that are in the spotlight of Internet users these days. These are types of online activities, and each brings together a group of Internet users with specific features. According to social thinker Alfred Schütz, "public opinion" is the esoteric conscience of a nation. Public opinion this anonymous power is often a political force not enshrined in any constitution (Motavali, 2005: 96). The most important tool for shaping public opinion is the media. The advent of the digital media age, especially cyberspace and social networks, has had a complex impact on public opinion. New media have formed a new type of interpersonal relationship that is interpreted as virtual communication. These virtual connections between people in the form of virtual forms such as social networks are based on public participation. With the increasing use of cyberspace by the public, we have witnessed the growth and influence of social networks in various political and social developments, the direction of public opinion and even the collapse of political and social systems based in different parts of the world (Ebrahimi far & Yagoubi far, 2014: 70).

Information and communication technologies have entered all social, Organizational and individual spaces in human societies have affected daily life, work and knowledge. The availability of these technologies is the occurrence of a "paradigm shift" in human individual and social life in which even ancient concepts can be identified with new epistemological geometry. According to Manuel Castells, new information technologies connect the corners of the world in global networks and create computer communications, thus affecting all

human material and spiritual processes (Castells, 1991: 48). In fact, in proportion to the benefit of societies from information and communication technologies and playing a role in communication and interaction between people and the exchange of information and society's access to this process, social change is accelerating and intensifying. It is not an exaggeration to say that there is a strong link between information and communication technologies and the formation of social life (Gripenberg, 2005: 2). Although new technology is defined in terms of technical and instrumental aspects, the social sciences look at this phenomenon in terms of its contexts, practices, effects, and outcomes. Dennis Mc Queel (2003) argues that we don't need to be a technological determinist to believe that the form of technology that involves a device can have a profound effect on the content and perception of what communications and its possible effects. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media as "a set of Internet-based tools based on the ideology and technology of Web2 that allow users to generate and share content." (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 68).

From the population of about 84 million people in Iran in 2021, there are about 59 million Internet users, which is a very serious potential for the development of cyberspace. According to official statistics, there are about 33 million users in Iranian social networks in 2020. The growth of Iranian users compared to the same period last year is about 2.5 percent, but the Internet speed in Iran is still lower than other countries (Bakhshipour, 2020). According to unofficial statistics, the number of active Iranian users in Telegram is estimated at 50 million; this means that more than 10% of Telegram users are Iranian, and considering that it is filtered in the country, this share is significant. In 2020, due to the corona crisis in the country, people had a strange tendency to social networks and therefore have multiplied their activities in these spaces. According to published reports, more than 80% of online purchases are from social networks, especially Telegram and Instagram (Ghanbari, 2021).

2. Theoretical Framework

Discourses are not just about things that can be said or thought about, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social connections. Foucault points out that his reliance on discourse as independent of language and thought does not mean that we can do nothing about its domination. Discourses are actions that systematically shape issues. Discourses don't talk about topics and don't identify them, they are the builders of the topics, and in the process of this construction they hide their intervention (Tajik, 1998: 15). Based on this, it can be said that discourse analysis is a part of qualitative research methods that is used to discover the meaning used in the text or speech and is used in various fields such as politics and media. Critical discourse analysis is a hybrid methodology that is mostly used by social researchers. In this method, quantitative and qualitative analysis is used to examine relationships based on critical theory. CDA is the application of critical theory to content analysis (Agiro, 2009). Given its critical roots in the critical language tradition, the CDA seeks to apply traditional language description methods to critical activities (Jones, 2007). Defining CDA analysis, David Crystal (1992) states: "It is an approach to language analysis that aims to reveal the hidden relations of power and ideological processes in linguistics." (Aghagolzadeh, 2016: 11).

Norman Fairclough considers critical analysis to be a method used to examine social and cultural change, among other methods, and is a reference used in the struggle against exploitation and domination (Yarmohammadi, 2014: 105). In fact, Fairclough considers the CDA to be the development of an analytical framework (theory and method) for the study of language in relation to power and ideology (Rahimi & Amalsaleh, 2018: 118). The CDA approach is a formative process of discourse analysis in linguistic studies that has theoretically and methodologically elevated discourse analysis from the level of descriptive texts to the level of explanation, and in terms of scope of research, its range have improved from the level of the individual's position to society, history and ideology (Aghagolzadeh & Ghiasian, 2017: 18).

Critical linguistics and the CDA are interested in analyzing the overt or covert structural relationships of their dominance, racial discrimination, power, control, and expression in language. In other words, the goal of the CDA is to understand social inequalities, as used in language, and this continuous application contributes to its formation, consolidation and legitimacy. Accordingly, most critical discourse analysis endorse Habermas's claim that "language is a means of domination and social force organized to legitimize power relations." (ibid:

36). Fairclough calls his approach a critical study of language, with the first goal, which is more theoretical, “helping to correct the widespread lack of attention to language in producing, maintaining, and changing the social relations of power,” and the second, which is more practical goal, “It raises awareness of how language plays a role in dominating some over others”. This concept includes several implicit concepts: 1. Language is a part of society and is not outside it, 2. Language is a social process, and 3. Language is a conditional social process (it is conditional on other non-linguistic sections of society) (ibid: 37).

The CDA is a methodological content analysis used by social researchers to examine the thematic repetition of critical theory issues (Fairclough, 2003). The CDA is primarily concerned with analyzing ambiguous as well as explicit structural relationships such as domination, discrimination, power, and control. Texts are a very important resource for CDA. Because they can have a causal effect on people’s actions (beliefs, views, etc.), social relations and the material world and even change them. On the one hand, the processes of text production and their interpretation are formed through the nature of social action, and on the other hand, the production process shapes the text, and the interpretive process affects the signs and keywords in the text (Hill, 2009). The CDA is a three-dimensional framework that examines text, social action, and discourse (Leitch & Davenport: 2005).

Context

Discourse Social action

Figure 2-1- Triple levels of analysis in CDA (Hill, 2009)

Critical theory examines societies and evaluates how societies have treated minorities and groups that have traditionally been oppressed and silenced, this theory examines the negative effects of power in society and how to reduce these effects (Arnowitz & Giroux, 1991). Finally, the CDA sees language as a form of social action. The role of discourse in the production and reproduction of social reality, in the imposition and interpretation of social relations and identities, as well as the impact on social cohesion and change is also considered important (Koosha & Shams, 2005).

3. Methodology

Discourse in the telegram is critically analyzed as a mode of social action to identify individual ideologies and social policies that are themselves semantic constructs and produce, reproduce, and change unequal relationships (Bhatia, 2006). Using the theoretical and methodological method of critical discourse analysis (CDA), we go from the level of text description to the level of its explanation. This method is used to analyze the studied texts from the individual level to the macro level of society. We use this method to develop history and ideology (Aghagolzadeh, 2007). Relying on the theoretical framework of the article, we intend to determine the broad role of language in the production of content in the group and channels under study to show the extent to which this content is effective in maintaining or changing the social relations of power. This research and the method used in it will also help to increase awareness of how one group dominates the other group using the role of language and content produced. To this end, we refer to the codes we have reached through the analysis of raw content to show the explicit relationships between discourse actions, social actions and social structures (Sheyholislami, 2019), social problems and political issues (Van Dijk, 1998), and the relationship between language and power (Wodak, 2002: 6).

3. 1. Statistical community and how to collect data

Within discourse analysis, the basic unit of analysis is the text. Texts, as the product of linguistic practices, have a hidden understanding of our meaning of the world. The text can be used as an intermediary window to understand the relationship between discourse and the social world (Zhou and Qin, 2020). Therefore, it is required to mine the texts to decode the discourses. To this end, scholars mostly explore narratives or storylines in various texts, such as books, news, press reports, official documents, speeches, as well as policymakers’ interviews (Walton and Boon, 2014; Zhou and Qin, 2020; Isoaho and Karhunmaa, 2019). In this study, in consultation with people (theoretically saturated) who have been members of Telegram channels and chat groups for more than a year, 4 channels and one Telegram group were selected that have criteria

such as number of members, popularity and reputation. The link to access the information of the group and the channels along with their names will be placed in this research to be available online. The present study includes all the online data of the mentioned group and telegram channels from April 25, 2021, to June 24, 2021.

3. 2. Method of analysis

Using the theoretical foundations of research and focusing on the topics of interest in the CDA method, as well as using accurate content analysis, we separate the implicit meanings from the explicit meaning of the content and finally discover the purpose of the content produced. We identify the content as important in every way (place, time, author and content provider). In this research, each code identifies a specific aspect of the content, different content with different ways of expression may intend to show and induce a specific concept in the mind of the audience, so the researcher pursues different contents that pursues a common goal. Each code is marked with an English letter and the value used is also specified (we start with uppercase letters, assign the letters with the highest number of repetitions in alphabetical order to finish the letters of the alphabet, for the remaining codes do this process We continue with lowercase letters of the alphabet until the codes are finished). The reason for this is to use the percentage used by each set of code to finally discover the goals of the content produced by the channel and the thoughts of the group members. All raw content, analytic and code are entered into MAXQDA 2020 software for categorization.

3. 3. Explaining the concepts used in the analysis

We briefly explain the set of codes and the reason for their classification (each set of codes contains codes that prove a concept in accordance with the title of its specific set. The tables of each set contain separate codes and the amount of its use):

New report from state media: This collection includes 18 codes with a total frequency of 392 repetitions. The reason for the formation of this collection and conceptualization in this style is the existence of focus and emphasis of the studied materials on the issues that the current government intends to promote and disseminate with the media under its control. Items such as confirming the principle of the system, separating the government into two principled and reformist parties, the existence of internal and external enemies of the system and the nation, normalizing the conditions of society, justifying the macro-policies of the system, etc. There are cases that are part of the government's media policy that channels and people reproduce in cyberspace with new expressions.

Collection and number	Code
New report from state media (392)	The importance of having people like Zarif / real reform in the national interest
	Confirmation of the principle of the system
	Existence of behind-the-scenes groups opposed to the system and national interest
	The importance of Barjam
	Apparently opposed to the system, but in fact aligned with the system
	Rational justification of the existing problems of the country
	Inducing Negative Feelings About Western (US) Politics
	Existence of freedom of expression in Iranian society
	International community opposition to Iranian rule
	Justification the policy of the regime's military presence in the region
	Separation of governance policy from international policy
	Demonstrate China's power / justify any relationship with China
	Justify social policy in the style of government
	Deviation of the Islamic Revolution from its basic and correct principles
	Demonstrating the power of Iranian sovereignty policy
	Existence of freedoms such as the freedom of hijab in society
	Justification of political relations with Russia

Collection and number	Code
	The impact of the people's vote on the future of the country

Gaining trust: In this collection, which includes 5 codes with a total frequency of 317 repetitions, an attempt has been made to cover the content of the channels and conversations of the people present in the group, which is only to align with the community, arouse the audience's emotions and encourage them to the whole content. The importance of this issue is such that the largest volume of content studied in this research is related to this set of code.

Collection and number	Code	Symbol	Number
Gaining trust (317)	Stimulating the audience's emotions to gain their trust in the channel	A	164
	Alignment with people	D	70
	Giving scientific content to the content	F	54
	Pure disappointment with the existing government	S	19
	Populist slogans	a	10

Creating an unrealistic mindset about people's abilities: This collection, which consists of 10 codes with 228 repetitions, tries to include points that are exaggeratedly presented to the audience in the channels and are formed and reproduced in their minds. Determining the impact of irrational, unscientific and delusional categories on the daily discourse of society that leads people to a fictitious future. The sub-codes of this collection all with different expression styles, regardless of the conditions of society, intend to instill unrealistic beliefs in the minds of the audience.

Collection and number	Code
Creating an unrealistic mindset about people's abilities (228)	Exaggerating the power of the individual / ignoring
	Gaining awareness through virtual networks
	Inducing the mentality that consciousness is pervasive
	Belief in the revolutionary power of the individual
	Considering sovereignty a religious government
	Existence of cultural problem of Iranian people
	Hoping for change in the years to come
	Existence of religion problem in society
	Apparent differences in the political system to gain
	The power of popular demands in compelling the g

Destruction of logical and useful agency: This collection, which includes 11 codes and 155 repetitions, is dedicated to the content of channels and comments from members of the group that have no scientific basis and only accept and reproduce the content based on the trust they have already gained. A set of non-specialist discourses that lead the audience to emptiness and despair. The content that these codes refer to uses seemingly scientific principles to prove incorrect categories so that the audience is unaware of the main problems of society and the roots of its formation. All the codes in this collection ultimately pursue the goal of keeping people away from positive action at the community level to improve the situation.

Collection and number	Code
Destruction of logical and useful agency (155)	Improper use of correct principles to induce incorrect meaning
	Deviation of the audience's mind from the main problems of the soc
	Spreading despair and indifference in society

Collection and number	Code
	Inducing a negative mentality about the nature of the revolution
	Passivity of agency versus structure
	International policy support for the Iranian revolution
	Sovereignty is part of international politics
	Fear of separatism / desire to maintain territorial integrity
	Destroying other communities to justify the current situation
	The uselessness of cyberspace and discourse in it
	Foreign political support is needed to bring about change within the

Verbal inconsistency: This set of code, which is specific to the group and consists of one code has the lowest repetition. Of course, the number of repetitions of this code is not included in the scoring and in the percentage used for the final conclusion. Repeating it 15 times shows only the mental anxiety of about half of the subjects, so that they offer very contradictory opinions on political and social issues.

Collection and number	Code	Symbol	Number
Verbal inconsistency (15)	Verbal inconsistency	U	15

After content analysis, the above tables are extracted from the software for conclusion and modeling in the final chapter. After coding and compiling them, it should be noted that the content that the code refers to various expressions that seek to induce a common meaning. So, the quantity of each code is not just a quantitative repetition of a particular subject and fixed words, but also an indication of the value used for a particular concept.

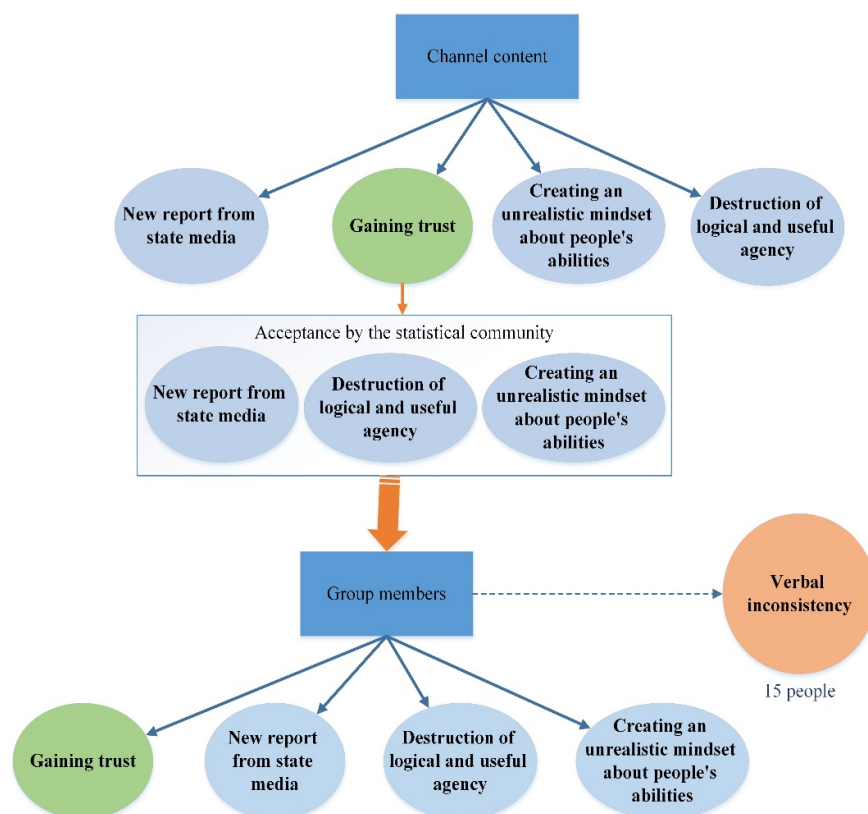
4. Findings

Each set of codes represents a specific thought and purpose. After analyzing and assigning different codes to the analysis, by calculating the repetition percentage of each set of code in channels and group, it is determined in which direction the content is focused. Since the content is reviewed daily in the channels and each person in the group is analyzed and coded separately, we have assigned a score of 5 (maximum) to 2 (minimum) for the number of codes in each set. Channels ultimately contain 4 sets of codes, so the set with the most code per day receives the number 5, and then the numbers 4, 3, and 2 are assigned to the other sets. After completing scoring in channels and group, each set of codes, by dividing this number by the total score of the channel or group (the sum of the scores of that code on all days or among all people), earns a specific point. Therefore, the percentage of impact of each set is determined so that conclusions and modeling can be done based on it.

According to the coding of the analyses as well as the percentage method described, we come to a series of results that we refer to using table and model:

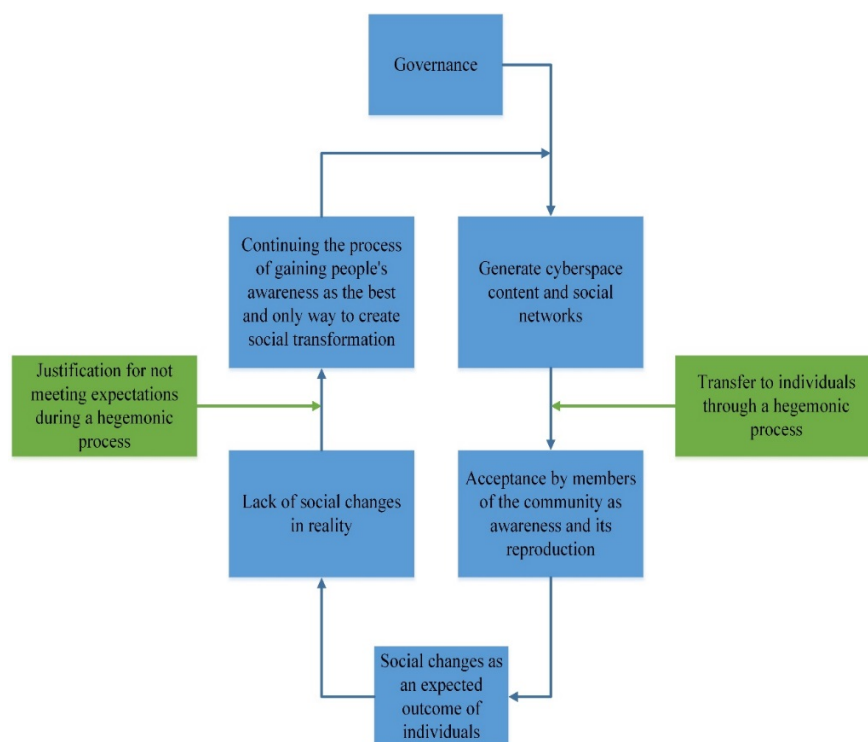
Collection of codes	New report from state media
channels	
Iranian Society of Social Pathology (t.me/iranianspa)	15%
Social issues of Iran (t.me/v_social_problems_of_iran)	25%
Sociology (t.me/iransociology)	14%
Diplomacy (t.me/bestdiplomacy)	45%
Summarizing the results of the channels and show their impact on people	Summarizing the results of the channels and sh
Total content of channels	25%
Amount of impact on group members	32%

We find that the inductive content of the channels has been influential among the audience and has led them in the direction they intended. The members of the studied group in this research, who represent the whole society, consider their thoughts as a perception of science and awareness and strongly criticize the content of the channels, while their thoughts are the same as the content of the channels with a new expression (“Verbal inconsistency” is clearly shown here).



5. Discussion and conclusion

According to the research findings, it can be acknowledged that contrary to popular belief, virtual (civic) activity has not caused the formation of consciousness and thinking, rather has formed a “conscious illusion” that rides in a hegemonic style on the minds of society. It can be said that people do not interpret the implicit meanings as they think, but the meanings are presented in different layers based on the purpose of the content producer. The most important reason for the formation of this delusional belief is the existence of a vacuum of trust that has been created among the people for years towards the official media of the country, which is under the direct control of the government. By creating a sense of trust (maximum channel focus) along with instilling a sense of importance to people and their discourse, people are increasingly attracted to social media. Finally, in the stage of providing solutions and using the acquired knowledge, the audience is directed to modify the existing structure. The greatest emphasis on content (After the code “Stimulating the audience’s emotions to gain their trust in the channel”) is the use of the code “The importance of having people like Zarif / real reform in the national interest” which leads people to reform existing structures.



- The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.
- The data collected from individuals have been published in such a way that their identities are not identifiable and their consent has been obtained before collection
- In this research, I tried to convey my beliefs about the community to others by presenting available facts. Beliefs such as media hegemony of sovereignty

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