

The Relationship between Online News Media Coverage and Country's International Reputation: The Case of UAE Medical Diplomacy

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This essay aims to discuss how media coverage on particular issues done by online news agency affects entity's reputation before international audience in given set agenda. With the rising concern on soft power of attractiveness, countries started to realize that their reputation before international community is a valuable asset and a source of its competitive advantage (Passow, et al., 2005, p. 309). Building reputation means that they communicate the message they want to send regarding their image toward the communicants so the latter's perception or preference about the former can be influenced accordingly. News media, in this case, can be considered to be one of the most effective platforms for any country as a communicator. It is because that public's indirect experiences with a country, namely foreigners, are often based on the information they obtain from media (Jain & Winner, 2013, p. 111). State-media relationship in this context can be either states using their own media-related resources to communicate with international community or (independent) media reporting whatever states are doing for their readership. The only basic difference that can happen between them only on the perspective regarding what kind of "message" that is intended to be delivered.

Using the case of online news media coverage on United Arab Emirates (UAE) medical diplomacy amidst COVID-19 pandemic, the following discussion will be intended toward the latter form of state-media relationship. It focuses on online news because online media is now the rising source of news, particularly for younger people (18-44 years-old) around the world (Newman, et al., 2017, p. 10). From July until October 2020, UAE through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MOFAIC) has sent medical supplies toward neighboring countries, Latin America and Caribbean, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Eurasian countries (MOFAIC UAE, 2020). There are two reasons behind the case selection. First, countries usually utilize aid as a mean for achieving international prestige. It is when donors offer aid to gain reputation and respect or to reflect certain identity in the international community (Robledo, 2015, p. 9). Second, we should put UAE medical diplomacy within given international context at this time. It is when UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres criticized the total lack of international coordination in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic (Lederer, 2020). At the same time, UN encourage media around the world to increase their coverage of developmental issues in vulnerable countries through innovative media initiatives (UN News, 2006). In other words, UAE medical diplomacy has something to do in fulfilling those two agendas.

Through qualitative content analysis on online news outlets with relatively wider international audience, this essay brings two arguments. First is that media coverage of the UAE medical diplomacy reflects broader effort for international media in setting the agenda regarding the importance of international cooperation in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of Middle East's politics, it also helps pertinent actors to alter public and their focus on strained UAE-Iran relationship into humanitarian cause. Second, international media help UAE raise their status as one of prominent Global South countries who initiate international cooperation among Southern countries to tackle further impact of the pandemic.

Global South Media Coverage

The following section will present brief content analysis of online news media coverage of UAE medical aid around the world. This essay will exclude state-owned UAE media as they must have been under radar of UAE Government. However, as we will see later, there is a case where UAE Government's interaction with international media is relatively strong than usual—yet not in terms of being the interviewee.

Domestically speaking, there are at least two most prominent news agencies with relatively wider international audience headquartered in Dubai: *Al Arabiya* and *Gulf News*. Both of them are private-owned media. Despite reporting similar news on UAE Government sending medical aid abroad, their focus on recipients differ depending on language used. For example, *Al Arabiya* chose to report UAE's aid for Italy in Arabic while reporting similar aid venture in Syria in English (Al Arabiya, 2020; Al Arabiya, 2020). While the news about UAE aid to Italy stressed on the implication toward UAE-Italy cooperative will to tackle the pandemic, the narrative of the other news is linked to the broader context of UAE-Syria relations—with additional emphasis on the development of their bilateral development. News coverage from *Gulf News* indirectly indicate the similar thing. As it is English-based media in Dubai, they also covered UAE medical aid to countries with relative proximity—e.g.: Chile, Iraq, and Turkmenistan (Nasrallah, 2020; Nasrallah, 2020; Nasrallah, 2020). Those coverages do not only cover details about the aid but also give broader context of the quality of UAE bilateral relations with those recipients. Such a pattern imply that those media try to introduce international readership, who use English to consume the news, with brief introduction about the political dimension of Middle East as well as UAE foreign policy. Meanwhile, domestic and regional readership, who regularly use Arabic, are presented with a rather straight, detailed facts about the aid itself, implying sort of government's public accountability toward domestic and recipients' citizens.

Moving to non-UAE Middle Eastern media, such a pattern is hardly found. On the one hand, *Al Jazeera* focuses the coverage of UAE medical aid toward Palestine on its co-sponsorship with

Israel. Such a coverage can be consistently found in both English and Arabic versions (Al Jazeera, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020). On the other hand, coverage on UAE medical aid to African countries (Sierra Leone, Niger, and Mali) by *Arab News*(2020), an English-based agency, only details about the aid itself without contextualizing it with broader political circumstances. The reason for this deviance might be due to the ownership of the media affected by current Middle East affairs. Al Jazeera is a news agency owned by Qatari Government who has ongoing diplomatic crisis against UAE and its ally, Saudi Arabia, the home of *Arab News*. Not to mention that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the *de facto* leader of Saudi Arabian Government, has tried to totally impose his influence on domestic media (Diwan, 2018). Therefore, it is no surprise that the media coverage of UAE medical diplomacy worldwide from *Al Jazeera* comes up with opposite tone with *Arab News*.

In Latin America, one prominent media to cover the news of UAE medical aid is *Forbes Colombia*, an American-origin business magazine who opened its branch in Bogota. Written in Spanish, the news only covers the details of the aid, such as the list of the medical logistics along with its total value. It also cited the gratitude statement from Jaime Amín, Colombian ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, who has been in charge of supervising the shipment of cargo at the Abu Dhabi airport(Forbes Colombia, 2020). Gratitude narratives are also emphasized in many news reported by African media. It is because most of African media get their news from *APO Group*, a media firm based in Switzerland and Senegal who specialize in African and Middle East News (APO Group, 2020). However, they also have their own online news platform, *Africa Newsroom*, who also reported UAE medical aid in African countries (e.g.: Burkina Faso) with similar courtesy (APO Group, 2020). The difference is that they use a disclaimer statement such as “[The news is] distributed by APO Group on behalf of United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation.” Compared with other African media, it seems that APO Group gained sort of privileged news distribution of coverage on UAE medical aid from MOFAIC itself. It infers sort of state influence from UAE toward foreign media.

Indian media also contributes toward the coverage of UAE medical aid in South Asia. *The Economic Times*, media branch of *The India Times*, reported the detail of medical logistics sent to India with prospect of reciprocation from India sending medical staffs to help the same cause in UAE (The Economic Times, 2020). Indonesian online media *Republika.co.id* even went further with their report. Using Indonesian language, they did not only detailed the medical logistics UAE sent along with the recipients in Europe, Middle East, South Asia, and China but also highlighted the milestone of UAE medical diplomacy during the whole pandemic as well as humanitarian motive behind it (Madani, 2020). *CNN Indonesia*(2020) also reported the issue by adding specific information about UAE aid for Indonesia in Indonesian language.

Global North Media Coverage

Some Western or Global North media also reported UAE medical diplomacy. However, compared with Global South media venture, Global North coverage on this issue are relatively low. Despite, they are giant media such as *Associated Press (AP)*, *Agencia EFE*, *CNN*, *BBC*, and *France24*. News from *AP* comes in English video format (without narrative from news anchor) that can be accessed in *YouTube*. Nevertheless, there is a written information in the video capturing not only the detailed shipping of medical supplies from UAE for Bosnia but also current situation in Bosnia during the pandemic (AP, 2020). The video even highlight statement from Bosnian Foreign Minister Bisera Turkovic regarding her gratitude for the aid (AP, 2020). Similar style of media coverage is also used by *Agencia EFE*, a Spanish international news agency. However, the event of the news happened to be in Bogota, Colombia and was delivered in Spanish (Agencia EFE, 2020). Despite, both news of *AP* and *Agencia EFE* are only plain details without further explication on broader geopolitical context around the event.

Meanwhile, *CNN* and *France24* (through *Agence France-Presse* or *AFP* for the latter) make a unique coverage on UAE medical diplomacy. They chose to report UAE medical aid for Iran. Both rapportage did not only cover the detail of the aid to be delivered by UAE authority to Iranian soil but also linked the event of UAE giving medical aid toward Iran with geopolitical tension between two countries in almost every issue (Anderson, 2020; AFP, 2020). While *CNN* news edition comes up with short video version, *France24* report comes up in English online article supplied by *AFP*, French news hub. Similar style of media coverage is also presented by *BBC*. This British news platform chose to look UAE giving medical aid for Iran as the result of the anomaly of COVID-19 pandemic that disrupt current Middle East politics (Gardner, 2020). Given international context at that time is an ever-intensive proxy armed conflict between Yemeni Government, supported by all Gulf Arab states, against Iran-aligned Houthi rebels.

Analytical Comparison on Agenda-Setting and “Agenda-Alteration”

From two previous sections, we can see that there is a different pattern among international news media in reporting UAE medical diplomacy. They are split into Global South and Global North media coverage. Coverage on UAE medical diplomacy shows several functions of agenda-setting agency from Global South Media. First, they clearly define UAE’s short-term foreign policy during COVID-19 pandemic. Those international media become channel for UAE Government to promote their foreign policy vision that promotes collective humanitarian action among international community to tackle the pandemic. It can also be linked to the fact that UAE is the global hub for humanitarian emergency and preparedness with the presence of International Humanitarian City (IHC) headquartered in Dubai. This hub hosts several UN agencies and non-governmental organizations whose preoccupation revolve around humanitarian missions. It can be inferred that

international media have an important role in setting and promoting UAE humanitarian agenda worldwide.

Second, Global South media covering UAE medical diplomacy also have a role in “promoting” UAE as the role model for engaging in international cooperation among Global South countries to address the problem of collective action during the pandemic. As a member of United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) who have hosted the annual Global South-South Development Expo (GSSD Expo) in 2016, UAE have been defining themselves as part of the Southern coalition in promoting a typically-Global South development agenda. COVID-19, the lack of international coordination in tackling the pandemic, and international media setting agenda for collective humanitarian cooperation aforementioned found its correlation and momentum in UAE foreign policy—and in other Southern countries like China, India, and Cuba. Despite the fact that such as South-South cooperation (SSC) is mostly bilateral with limited common framework applicable for multilateral level, UAE medical diplomacy with the help from international media for its international exposure can temporarily fill the void of international cooperation during the pandemic season.

Third, the agency of international media covering news on UAE medical diplomacy worldwide can also be seen as an “agenda-alteration.” It is still agenda-setting but with specific purpose to change previous public agenda with a new emerging one. This kind of agency can be found mostly in aforementioned Global North news media when they covered UAE medical aid to Iran. What makes them and their news content “agenda-altering” is because of its transitive tone, a reporting style that tries to impose new issue focus but still link it with attributed background that happened to be the previous agenda. In this context, many Global North media, particularly Western, reported UAE medical aid to Iran as a transition from adversary geopolitical competition in the Middle East to a normalized affair as the core public discourse. News agencies with such an explicit tone are aforementioned BBC news and an online article from *Bloomberg* saying that the pandemic disrupted UAE-Iran relations for better (Shahla & Motevalli, 2020). Henceforth, “agenda-alteration” here should be seen as a transformative agency from media that can represent a little piece of “peace journalism.”

Conclusion

This essay has discussed the relationship between international online news media coverage on UAE medical diplomacy and UAE’s international reputation before international community during COVID-19 pandemic. This essay has articulated the way international media coverage use their differing agencies in both setting and altering global agenda in favor of UAE’s foreign policy and its diplomatic venture linked with humanitarian cause. In sense of soft power as country’s attractiveness, international media through their news coverage have helped UAE to build its

international reputation not only as a leading country in humanitarian action but also to assert its status as part of Global South coalition that commit to contribute toward international development agenda, particularly global health governance, in emerging time like currently.

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