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Media Analysis

Manufacturing Neutrality: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Media Coverage of the 2026 Strait of Hormuz Crisis

1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework

While mainstream news organisations ostensibly operate to deliver objective, transparent, and independent reporting to the public, this essay demonstrates that such claims of total neutrality are frequently misleading. The projection of absolute objectivity by the media serves a distinct ideological purpose; not only does it legitimise institutional reporting, it also protects vital state interests, and subtly shapes public opinion. To achieve this consensus, news networks employ standard journalistic formulas in their coverage which are designed to mask inherent biases. This strategy exerts a profound psychological effect on the targeted audience; not only does it suggest that the media stands independent from the political events it reports, it also creates the impression that the press is a detached, neutral observer to its readers. In critical discourse studies, this linguistic cultivation of intimacy is known as synthetic personalisation, where institutional media seeks to establish a close, personal relationship with a mass audience in order to lower their critical defences against perceived ideological bias (Van Dijk, 1998; Fairclough, 2001).

In order to reveal these hidden dynamics, scholars make use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Pioneered by linguists such as Norman Fairclough, CDA is an interdisciplinary approach that treats discourse as an influential form of social practice (Fairclough, 1995). Rather than analysing words as isolated units, CDA explores the direct relationships between language use, institutional dominance, and social hierarchies. Researchers utilise this methodology because it moves beyond mere description to expose how systemic power, inequality, and political biases are structurally reproduced and normalised through everyday texts (Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). By

examining the internal mechanics of a news source, CDA systematically deconstructs grammar, vocabulary, and clause arrangements to reveal the true underlying ideologies hidden beneath a layer of factual reporting (Fairclough, 2010).

Applying CDA to media texts allows language analysts to look past the surface of what appears to be an innocent window into international conflict. By carefully engineering the grammar of headlines and lead paragraphs, media outlets subtly guide public perception to ensure official foreign policy goes unchallenged while maintaining an appearance of balanced journalism. A clear example of this grammatical manipulation appears in the global coverage of the 2026 maritime standoff in the Strait of Hormuz. Because this narrow chokepoint handles roughly a fifth of the world's petroleum transit, the physical blockade of the waterway has sparked an equally intense war of words across international news media.

When international conflicts erupt, intense pressure is placed on mainstream media outlets to align with national interests, inevitably leading to a systematic distortion of grammatical agency. In critical linguistics, this concept refers to how a text structurally assigns accountability—specifically examining whether social actors are 'activated' as the dynamic initiators of an action or 'passivated' to subvert responsibility (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Borrowing the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework developed by Michael Halliday (1985)—a model of grammar that examines how language choices are shaped by social contexts—this paper evaluates how international news outlets have framed the Strait of Hormuz crisis. It unpacks the ways in which choices in clause structure, voice, and noun phrasing work beneath the surface to manipulate public consent for state actions (Herman & Chomsky, 1888). Ultimately, this analysis argues that mainstream Western reporting systematically alters its grammar through strategic nominalisation, passive transitivity shifts, and biased lexical choices. In doing so, these outlets construct a narrative wherein Western military interventions are framed as an unavoidable humanitarian duty, Allied accountability is erased, and deep-seated economic motives are obscured from public view.

2. Lexicalisation and Ideological Squaring

Mainstream media outlets frequently protect political agendas behind a mask of objective reporting, achieving this primarily through selective lexicalisation. In Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), lexicalisation refers to the processes by which an author's vocabulary choices encode specific ideological positions, values, and moral judgements into text (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Within this analytical framework, word choice is therefore rarely neutral; instead, news agencies subtly assign moral hierarchies to specific actors and actions.

When reporting on complex geopolitical flashpoints like the 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis, this selective naming typically relies on the mechanism of "ideological squaring". First conceptualised by Teun van Dijk (1998), the ideological square is a socio-cognitive framework explaining how discourse is manipulated to manage public impression. The strategy operates across four distinct quadrants: it emphasises positive properties of the In-Group (the West and its allies) and negative properties of the Out-Group (Iran or regional factions), while systematically downplaying In-Group flaws and Out-Group virtues (Van Dijk, 1998). Through this dualistic strategy, media discourse minimises or normalises Western military missteps using euphemistic framing, while hyper-focusing on and exaggerating the adversarial traits of regional opponents.

This discursive pattern becomes remarkably distinct when examining how contrasting networks describe the restriction of maritime shipping within the strait. When regional factions intercept commercial vessels, mainstream Western broadcasts overwhelmingly deploy highly charged, criminalising terminology (Dataset 1). Conversely, when Western coalitions deploy naval fleets to execute counter-blockades or launch airstrikes against coastal infrastructure, the vocabulary shifts abruptly toward sanitised phrasing rooted in international law and ethical responsibility (Dataset 2):

Dataset 1 (Out-Group Actions): "hijacking", "maritime piracy", "unprovoked aggression", "international blackmail"

Dataset 2 (In-Group Actions): “ensuring freedom of navigation”, “defensive policing actions”, “stabilising operations”

These lexical choices do far more than merely describe physical events. The terms in Dataset 1 carry immediate legal and moral condemnation, structurally positioning regional actors as lawless disruptors of global stability. Meanwhile, the military interventions detailed in Dataset 2 are reframed around notions of preservation of order, and systemic duty. Framing state-sanctioned violence as a legal, "stabilising" mechanism strips Western military intervention of its political aggression. The language appears entirely objective—given the inherent difficulty of opposing "freedom"—yet this vocabulary serves a profound political purpose. By packaging narrow state interests as global altruism, it pre-empts public dissent and validates the deployment of military force to secure Western trade routes.

3. Syntactic Transitivity and the Erasure of Agency

Beyond the strategic selection of individual lexical items, the structural arrangement of clauses—specifically the system of transitivity—plays a critical role in concealing geopolitical motives behind a veneer of objective fact. Within the framework of Hallidayan linguistics, transitivity dictates how a text allocates the roles of "Agent" (the entity initiating an action) and the "Affected" (the entity experiencing its consequences) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). By systematically manipulating these clause structures, institutional journalists can amplify or entirely erase accountability for state-sanctioned military actions.

When reporting on the severe economic and civilian casualties resulting from Allied airstrikes on port cities such as Bandar Abbas, mainstream media outlets consistently pivot away from active sentence structures, favouring passive voice constructions and strategic nominalisation. For instance, a typical mainstream headline might read: *“Port facilities destroyed and supply chains disrupted amid escalating tensions in the Gulf.”* Linguistically, this transitivity shift functions to

obscure In-Group agency by achieving two major erasures. The passive verb phrase “were destroyed” omits the explicit Agent entirely, leaving the military forces who deployed the ordnance grammatically absent from the event. Furthermore, the noun phrase “escalating tensions” converts a deliberate, calculated military action into an abstract, natural state of affairs. Rather than appearing as the direct consequence of state foreign policy, this nominalisation reframes physical destruction as an unavoidable, weather-like phenomenon.

Conversely, when the discourse shifts to detail the actions of the designated political adversary, the media structure reverses to favour active, transitive constructions that deliberately amplify Out-Group agency. A prominent example is found in headlines such as: *“Iran recklessly launched armed drones, crippling global energy markets.”* Here, the regional adversary is foregrounded in the subject position as an active, malicious Agent (“Iran”). Coupled with a highly transitive, dynamic verb (“launched”), the adversary is forced to assume direct, unmitigated accountability for the resulting global crisis. Alternating between active structures for adversaries and passive, nominalised structures for Western allies constructs a clean moral image for the state, successfully shielding its geopolitical agendas from domestic public scrutiny.

4. The Ecological "Superspreader" Metaphor and Strategic Omission

The protective, consensus-manufacturing function of institutional media language is equally evident in the framing of non-military crises. A prominent example is the media reporting on the backlog of over 1,500 commercial vessels idling outside the Strait of Hormuz due to intense naval blockades. Recent coverage by ABC News has increasingly borrowed specialised scientific and public health terminology, warning that these stalled cargo ships represent a potential “marine bioinvasion super-spreader event” caused by aggressive biofouling on ship hulls (Jacobo, 2026).

From a critical discourse perspective, co-opting the epidemiological term “superspreader”—a word heavily weighted with collective trauma and social anxiety from the pandemic era—functions as a

strategic narrative device. This medicalised metaphor fundamentally shifts the emotional register of the text, actively translating a deliberate political act into a seemingly natural and biological crisis. By framing an environmental threat as an autonomous, viral biological emergency, the ecological fallout is detached from its geopolitical catalysts, thereby erasing historical and military accountability. Consequently, the pending ecological disaster is normalised as an independent biological hazard rather than exposed as a direct, foreseeable consequence of a state-sanctioned naval blockade.

Furthermore, this hyper-focus on sensationalised biological threats operates as a form of tactical text silence or ideological omission (Huckin, 2002). By dedicating disproportionate broadcast real estate to the scientific threat of invasive barnacles, the media effectively crowds out critical investigations into the structural mechanics of the war. Mainstream coverage systematically ignores the rapid acceleration of cross-border financial systems like mBridge, de-dollarisation initiatives accelerated by the conflict, and the extensive corporate windfalls accumulated by Western defence contractors and alternative energy suppliers during the blockade. The language of environmental science is thus weaponised to project a facade of objective, humanitarian concern, shielding the foundational economic drivers of the conflict from public scrutiny.

5. Conclusion

Critical Discourse Analysis demonstrates that language is never a passive, transparent medium for neutral transmission. In the context of the 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis, mainstream news coverage operates as a sophisticated ideological filter. What appears on the surface to be a straightforward, objective chronicle of a maritime standoff is, under closer linguistic deconstruction, a highly managed text structured to legitimise specific Western political and economic architectures.

Through selective lexicalisation, mainstream networks establish rigid moral hierarchies that validate Allied military interventions while criminalising regional counter-measures. Simultaneously, calculated shifts in syntactic transitivity and nominalisation erase institutional accountability, transforming destructive airstrikes into agentless, abstract phenomena. Finally, by co-opting medicalised environmental metaphors and omitting structural economic drivers, the media ensures that public attention remains fixed on immediate, sensationalised biosecurity threats rather than the systemic realities of global resource dominance. Uncovering these hidden grammatical mechanisms demonstrates that vocabulary and syntax are not merely tools for conveying information; they are primary instruments of geopolitical power used to shape public consciousness and manufacture consent for war.

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