

Management of Public Opinion in Iranian Newspapers, *Mardom Salari* and *Siyasat-E-Ruz*, Regarding the Parliamentary Election Campaigns for the 9th Islamic Consultative Assembly

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ABSTRACT

The following study has been conducted on the field of press and mass media in Iran, employing methods including content analysis, theoretical framework of agenda setting, news gatekeeping and democracy. In the present research, the editorial content of two newspapers, *Mardom Salari* and *Siyasat-e-Ruz*, have been studied. As two representatives of social and political parties in Iran during the election days, they played an important role in enlightening the public opinion and encouraging people to participate in the elections and casting their ballots in order to vote for the most competent candidates. Unlike survey and other methods, the researcher here has not directly analyzed the individuals. However, all the messages and ideas produced by them have been processed by statistical software, SPSS and LISREL, employing descriptive method of content analysis, and also the 10 key questions of the study have been handled by inferential and descriptive statistics. The results of hypothesis test show that messages published on editorials of the two newspapers, both with 95 percent probability, had equal influence on enlightening public opinion and encouraging people toward political participation.

KEYWORDS: elections, content analysis, mass media, news gatekeeping, agenda setting

INTRODUCTION

Generally, parliament in every country is thought to be the symbol of national willpower, reflective of different ideas and desires in the society, social changes, and nomination of the most capable and suitably competent people to serve at the country's political and administrative system. The historical revolution of every kind of parliament indicates a transition from autocracy to democracy which brings about public power and control, respecting personal opinions, and moving away from totalitarianism toward national governance based on law. According to article 6 of the Iranian constitution, the country's affairs must be run in consideration of popular elections. In other words, the government shall work under the national determination, and elections are in fact held to demonstrate collective expression and public opinion. As an essential section of mass media in every country, newspapers try to select from the available material in line with their viewpoints and publish the highlighted topics to influence the ideology, mindset and even votes of the audience.

Observing the aftermath of presidential elections on June 2009, many experts among politicians and media community predicted that national motivation in Iranian people to participate would be fading, particularly in large and advanced cities. Moreover, a few of the Iranian news media and press groups fail to carry out their solemn responsibility of enlightening the public opinion, guiding people to make wise decisions based on proper analysis, and encouraging them to participate in the elections and casting their ballots in order to vote for the most competent candidates without bias; all of which fall under the fourth priority of a religious democracy. The Iranian mass media and news press are basically obliged to take an unbiased approach and spread enlightening information to improve the public choice.

Consequently, the main question can be formulated as below:

Is it true that editorial articles of the two active Iranian newspapers, *Mardom Salari* and *Siyasat-e-Ruz*, as representatives of social and political parties in the country during the election days, have been equally effective on enlightening the public opinion and encouraging political participation in people?

Previous studies have shown that Iranian people are not indifferent toward political issues and are fairly sensitive as a matter of fact. Therefore, conducting a research on the 9th parliamentary elections is very significant for several reasons:

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1. Being the first election held right after the incidents of June 2009, it was deemed by a number of politicians as having a possible negative effect on public motivation to vote in major cities.
2. The issue of resignation or non-engagement of a few political parties in the elections, which calls for a necessary research to be done on how such behavior can influence the final result of elections.

The most important objectives of the present research are:

- A. Draw an analytic comparison between the editorial content of Iranian newspapers, *Mardom Salari and Siyasat-e-Ruz*, as two representatives of movements and political parties in Iran during the initial days before the 9th parliamentary election.
- B. Draw an analytic comparison on the policy of agenda setting and news gatekeeping applied by editors of the above mentioned newspapers.

Taking the research main question into account, there is one major hypothesis proposed to measure the problem and find an answer: "It seems that the material published in editorials of the two newspapers regarding the 9th parliamentary election is similar about: news substance, editorial orientation, subject matter, sources and references".

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Content analysis is a research method in social sciences employed to objectively describe the textual material in communications (Dadgaran, 1995, p. 163). In his book *Content Analysis in Communications Research*, Bernard Berelson believes that social changes can be understood by using a method in which political attitudes through the contents of mass media, its dynamic nature, momentum and direction are identified (Sarukhani, 2004, p. 285-291). Harold Lawson's sociological model in communication studies is consisted of five questions: who is the speaker? What does he speak of? Through what medium does he speak? To whom does he speak? And how effective does he speak? Content analysis has been employed in all the study works focused on "what does he speak of?" Theoretical framework in the present research is based on Kurt Lewin and David Manning White's concept of media gatekeeping. They believe that the amount of informative news passing through communication channels depends on how journalists and editors function as gatekeepers.

There are numerous theories in the field of mass media and communication among which the following can be mentioned: Collin Blackmoor and James Combs' theory of "Magic Bullet" or "Hypodermic Needle", Paul Lazarsfeld and Berelson's theory of "Limited Effects of Media", Gerbner's theory of "Cultivation", Marshal McLuhan's theory of "Media Determinism", Noelle-Neuman's theory of "Spiral of Silence", McGuire's theory of favorable and unfavorable media, Lippman's theory of "Agenda Setting", Kurt Lewin's theory of "Media Gatekeeping", Tichenor's theory of "Knowledge Gap", Habermas' theory of "Communicative Action".

Given the above, two of the essential theories proposed in the field of communication and media were chosen as the basic framework for this research:

1. The theory of media gatekeeping
2. The theory of agenda setting

1. The theory of media gatekeeping:

As one the most famous theories in journalism, media gatekeeping was first instituted by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1947, and the term was introduced by David Manning White into the field of communication in 1950. Many experts believe the process of news selection takes place in the flow of information broadcast from sources to audience and readership through several channels (Alavi Borujerdi 2002, p. 63).

2. The theory of agenda setting:

In 1922, Lippman first conducted a research on agenda setting and believed that mass media create the most fundamental connection between an event occurred in the real world and the images conjured in our minds. News agenda setting is a technique through which mass media can influence public opinion (Sorien and Tankard, 1992, p. 326). Research done on elections and political campaigns point out that media community, editors in particular, play an important role in prioritizing, highlighting, and ultimately molding up social facts into people's minds through news updates about elections.

Extensive studies on elections show that the leading theories proposed so far are:

1. The theory of "State Overload"
2. Habermas' theory of "Legitimacy Crisis"
3. The role model of "opinion leadership in political campaigns"
4. The concept of democracy
5. The theory of participatory democracy
6. The theory of democratic elitism

Among the six theories mentioned above, **democracy** best qualifies as a suitable standpoint to analyze the media and Iranians' attitude toward elections. The central concept of democracy does not simply concern the public opinion, the number of involving voters or the winning candidates, but it all concerns participation. Moreover, the questions

and the hypothesis of the present research have been affected by the media and communication theories of agenda setting and gatekeeping on the one hand, and the concept of democracy on elections for designing and analyzing, on the other hand.

Based on the objectives listed earlier, the method employed here falls under applied research and takes the descriptive-documentary approach. The collected data is processed as an instrument to facilitate the content analysis. The purpose of researcher in running a descriptive study is to objectively investigate the characteristics of a certain subject or situation in an organized and unbiased manner. In other words, effort has been made by the researcher to report whatsoever has actually happened without exercising his personal judgment or intentional manipulation, in order to reach a completely objective conclusion (Khalili and Daneshvari, 1999, p. 64). The number of editorial articles, the total print area, sources and references, news substance, subject matters, and the general orientation of the editorials appeared in the studied newspapers, have altogether been considered as the unit of analysis.

Two Iranian newspapers, one supporting the conservative alliance and the other supporting the reformist alliance, were selected. A period of one month before the actual election day was assigned to observe a specific time span. At the next stage, 50 sample editorial articles published in the newspapers (from January 30 to February 29, 2012) were collected and then divided into two groups of “related to election” and “unrelated to election”, containing 41 and 9 articles respectively.

Unlike survey and other methods, the researcher here has not directly analyzed the individuals. However, all the messages and ideas produced by them have been processed through descriptive content analysis, which also included tools like ruler and sheets to record the editorial materials. Structural equations were created and processed by relevant statistical software such as SPSS and LISREL. Finally, the hypothesis and the key questions of the research were evaluated through descriptive statistics (average index, frequency and percentage frequency, one-column and two-column tables and histograms) as well as inferential statistics (Calmograph-Smirnoff test, T test, Kaiser Meyer Olkin test (KMO), Bartlett’s test, Freedman’s test).

Conceptual model of the research

The variables studied here are elections and newspaper editorials of *Mardom Salari* and *Siyasat-e-Ruz*, both of which will be compared to one another qualitatively and quantitatively on account of their published messages. As seen in figure 1, N represents the number of news articles, out of which a few are selected based on the viewpoint and approach of the editors, and then they go through the process of agenda setting to influence readership and public opinion. N2 stands for the most highlighted news exposed to the audience.

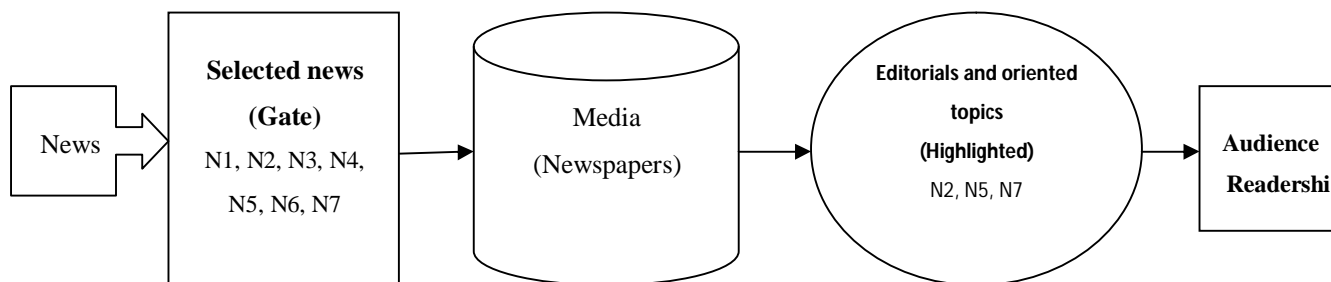


Figure 1: Hybrid model of news agenda and gatekeeping

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Having reviewed its subject matter and assessed its level of compatibility with the operational concepts, several university professors of sociology and communication sciences approved of the research. In addition, Kaiser Meyer Olkin test and Bartlett’s test were used to determine the validity of measurement indicators by factor analysis, results of which have been illustrated in figure 2.

Kaiser Meyer Olkin test	KMO=0.82
Bartlett’s test	B.T=21.35
Degrees of freedom	d.f=8
Significant level	Sig.=0.000

Figure 2: Kaiser Meyer Olkin test and Bartlett’s test

The results obtained from Kaiser Meyer Olkin (KMO) for this research is 0.82. Hence, there is no need to eliminate any of the items, which in fact proves the adequacy if the samples for factor analysis. And finally, scoring at least %95 certainly in Bartlett’s test signifies the validity of the research.

In this section, all the collected data and information will be analyzed through statistical measures such as mean, frequency, and percentage frequency and also through graphical representations such as one-column and two column tables and histograms.

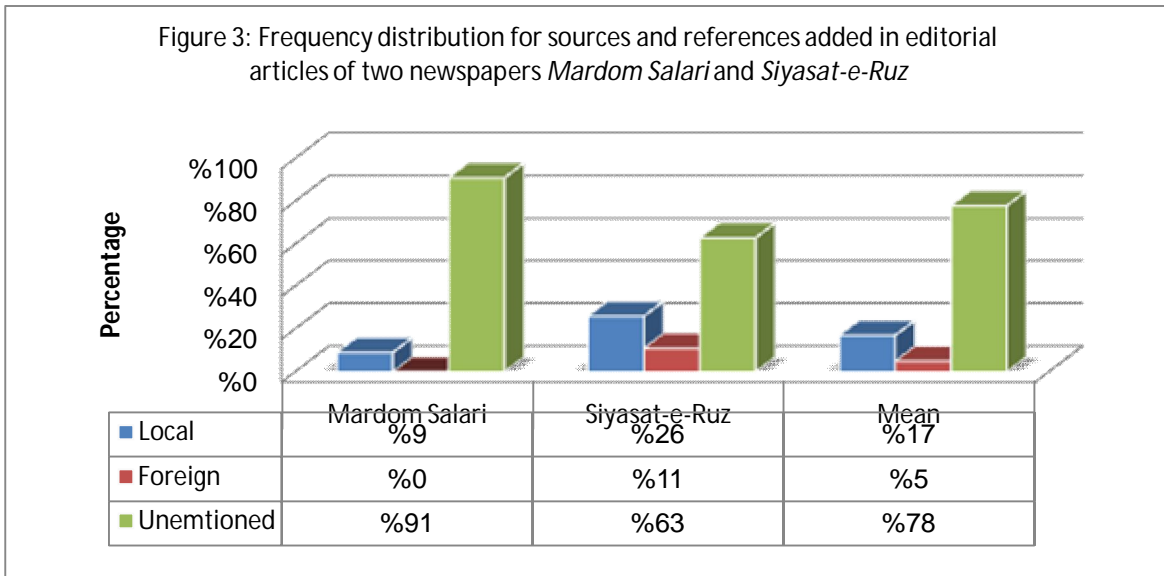


Figure 3 shows that over the last month before the actual parliamentary election, sources and references of 7 editorial articles (17 percent on average) published in the two Iranian newspapers were local, 2 editorials were foreign (5 percent) and no source or reference was mentioned for 32 editorials (78 percent).

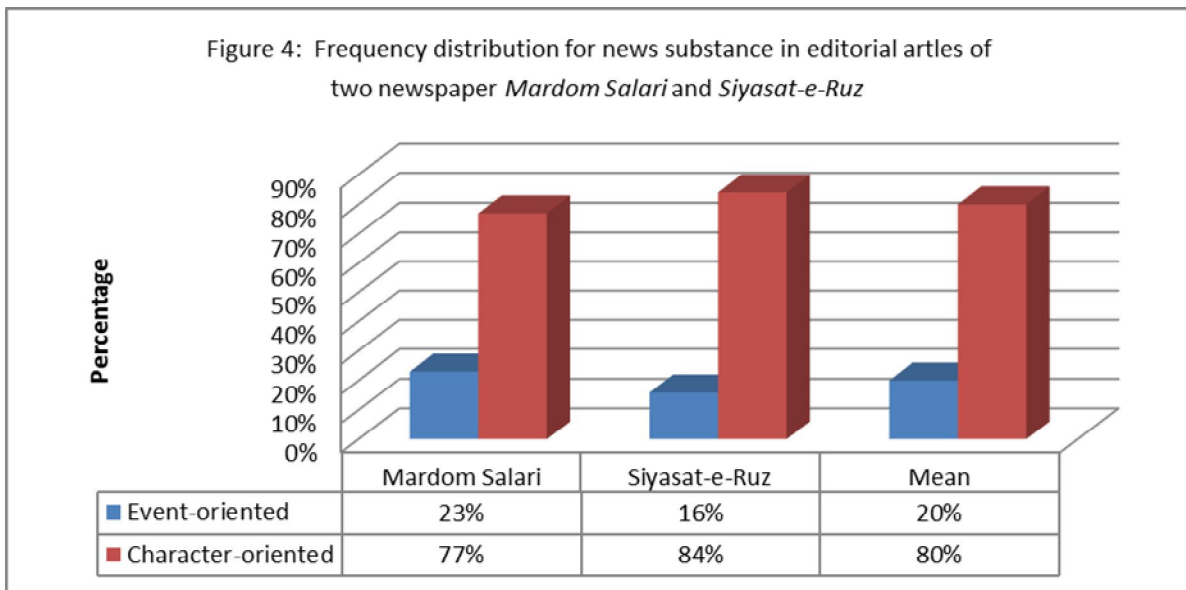


Figure 4 shows that over the last month before the actual parliamentary election, the substance news of 8 editorial articles (20 percent on average) published in the two Iranian newspapers were event-oriented, while 33 editorials were character-oriented (80 percent).

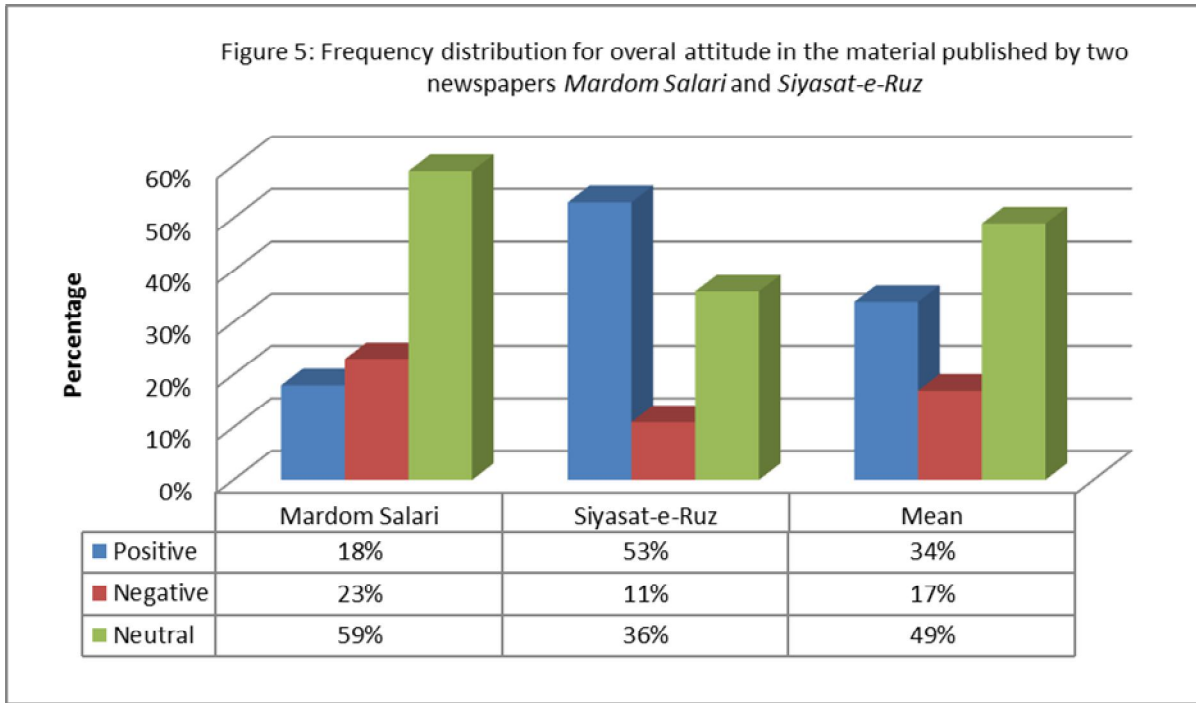
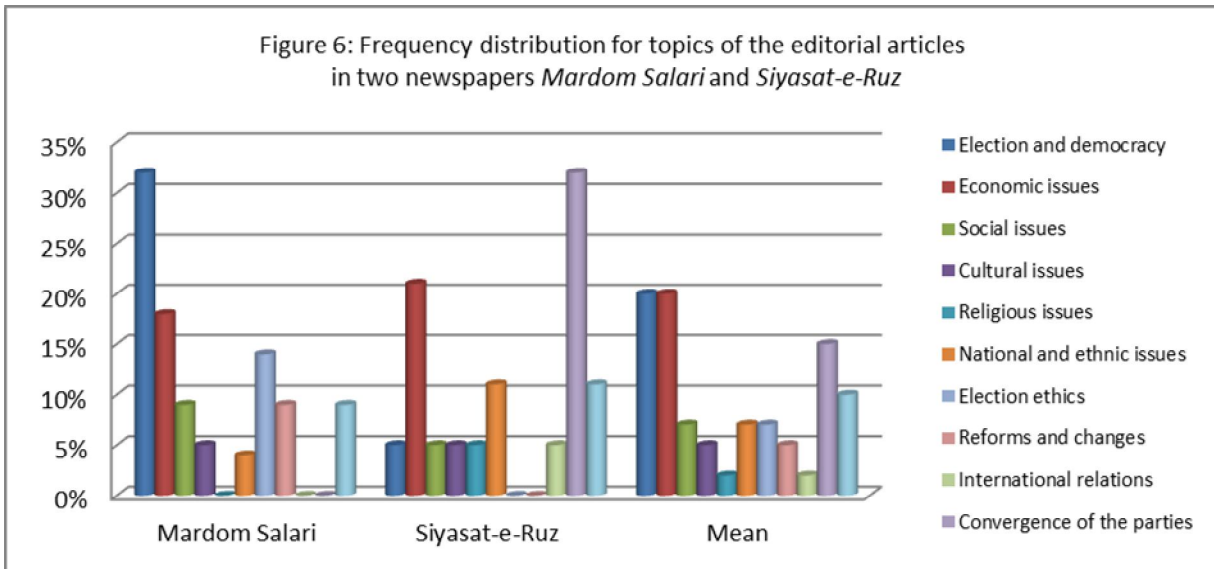


Figure 5 shows that over the last month before the actual parliamentary election, the overall attitude of 14 editorial articles published in the two Iranian newspapers were positive (14 percent on average), 7 editorials were negative (17 percent), and 20 editorials were neutral (49 percent).



The mean column in figure 6 shows that democracy, free elections, economic issues and government criticism were the most frequent topics taking up 20 percent of the editorials published in the two Iranian newspapers, while only 2 percent of the material was dedicated to religious issues and international relations. Topics revolving around convergence of political parties ranked the second with 15 percent coverage.

Hypothesis Testing and Research Questions

Step one: Measuring the level of normality in the data distribution using Calmograph-Smirnoff test

The hypotheses are evaluated by parametric or non-parametric tests. In order to achieve this, Calmograph-Smirnoff test is first employed to measure the statistical distribution of data. Therefore, the null and alternative hypotheses are as below:

For all the values belonging to the range → $H_0: F(x) = Fe(x)$

For at least one value belonging to the range $\rightarrow H_1: F(x) \neq Fe(x)$

Figure 7: Results of the Calmograph-Smirnoff test

Parameters of Normal distribution	Mean	13.456
	Standard deviation	1.45
The maximum difference	Absolute value	0.012
	Positive	0.127
	Negative	-0.127
Statistic of Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS)		0.51
Estimated significance level		0.97

In figure 7, the results of Calmograph-Smirnoff test are shown to evaluate the level of homogeneity in the distribution of variables. Considering the obtained significance level and the statistic of KS, the Hypothesis H_0 is not rejected. In other words, it can be stated that distribution of the variables follows the normal distribution at 99 percent confidence level.

Step two: Evaluating the hypothesis using T test

Since the variables take a normal distribution, the parametric T test can be used to evaluate and analyze the ten key questions as well as the major hypotheses of the research. The population mean was measured at the error level of 0.05. Degree of freedom in statistic of T is represented as n-1. The sample mean and standard error are measured by the following equations:

$$S_{\bar{x}} = \frac{s}{\sqrt{n}}$$

$$t = \frac{X - \mu_0}{S_{\bar{x}}}$$

Testing hypothesis: “It seems that the material published in editorials of the two newspapers regarding the 9th parliamentary election is similar about: news substance, editorial orientation, subject matter, sources and references.”

$$H_0 : \mu_1 = \mu_2$$

$$H_1 : \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$$

Figure 8: results of testing hypothesis

Indicators	T	Degree of freedom	Significance level	Mean difference	The mean difference at the level of 95 percent	
					Low limit	High limit
Qualitatively equal	5.259	7	.000	1.287643	.75871	1.81657

Figure 8 shows that H_0 is rejected with 85 percent probability and H_1 is proved; because the significance level (0.000) is lower than 0.05. Hence, the hypothesis of the research is valid too.

Step Three: Evaluating the questions of the research: The results obtained in figure 9 shows that all the means are equal to each other except for the indicator of sources and references.

Figure 9: results of T test regarding the questions of the research

Indicators	Significance level	Degree of freedom	T	Mean difference	The mean difference at the level of 95 percent	
					Low limit	High limit
Qualitatively equal	5.259	7	.000	1.287643	.75871	1.81657
Both consistent in the orientation	-4.516	7	.001	-1.118214	-1.65312	-.58331
Both consistent in the sources and references	8.628	7	.61	2.087500	1.55498	2.62002
Both consistent in the news substance	-4.837	7	.004	-1.007500	-1.45751	-.55749
Both consistent in the subject matter	-4.992	7	.007	-1.011786	-1.44965	-.57392

Comparing the mean values using Freedman’s test

In order to determine which of the research components stands at a higher rating and which stands lower, Freedman’s test is used. The two hypotheses are as follow:

H_0 : All the components are identical to each other

H_1 : At least two of the components are not identical

Figure 10: results of Freedman's variance test	
Components	Average ratings
Election messages regarding the sources and references	4.23
Election messages regarding the political orientation	3.87
Election messages regarding the news substance	3.01
Election messages regarding the subject matters	2.65

According to the obtained results shown in figure 10, the highest rating among the components goes to the sources and references and the rest fall below that. The subject matters gets the lowest rating. Therefore, hypothesis H₁ is proved in Freedman's test, which means "At least two of the components are not identical".

Conclusion

Based on inferential statistics, figure 8 shows that H₁ is proved with 95 percent probability; because the significance level obtained from hypothesis two (0.000) is lower than the significance level of T test (0.05). Hence, the material published in editorials of the two newspapers regarding the 9th parliamentary election is similar about: news substance, editorial orientation, subject matter, sources and references

Based on descriptive statistics, figure 3 indicated that *Mardom Salari* had 20 editorials (91 percent) versus *Siyasat-e-Ruz* which had 12 editorials (63 percent) with unmentioned sources. Figure 4 showed that *Mardom Salari* and *Siyasat-e-Ruz* were both character-oriented in the published material, with 77 and 84 percent respectively. Figure 5 showed that 59 percent of the material published in *Mardom Salari* had a negative overall attitude toward the 9th parliamentary election, while 53 percent of the material published in *Siyasat-e-Ruz* had a positive overall attitude. Frequency distribution regarding the time of publication indicated that 23 percent of the material in *Mardom Salari* and 21 percent of the material in *Siyasat-e-Ruz* were published on Mondays. Figure 6 showed that 32 percent of the material published in *Mardom Salari* covered the topic of democracy and free elections, while 32 percent of the similar material published in *Siyasat-e-Ruz* covered the topic of convergence in political parties.

Having reviewed the final results, several findings can be summarized as below:

1. Regarding the sources and references, *Mardom Salari* published more material originated from personal opinions of the editor and other columnists in order to express the whole newspaper's viewpoint. In contrast, *Siyasat-e-Ruz* brought in more from foreigner's opinions.
2. Regarding the news substance, although both newspapers were more character-oriented rather than event-oriented, *Siyasat-e-Ruz* enjoyed more from adding powerful titles of natural and legal entities.
3. Regarding political orientations, although professional ethics in the press and media community required both newspapers to adopt an unbiased position in enlightening the public opinion, *Siyasat-e-Ruz* had a positive attitude toward the 9th parliamentary elections, while *Mardom Salari* had a neutral attitude.
4. Regarding the subject matters, *Mardom Salari* showed a concern about the fairness in parliamentary elections and how democratic it would be held, while *Siyasat-e-Ruz* paid more attention to the necessity of convergence and solidarity with the reformist alliance, mainly due to the conflicts between conservative alliance and their different fractions.

Suggestions

Considering the findings, there are several constructive solutions suggested in brief:

1. Newspaper owners who support no certain political party should better avoid any kind of positive or negative attitudes toward the elections, so that the goal of fairness and content validity would be achieved. Instead, they could take a neutral standpoint and try to reflect the true expectations and opinions of people to inform the authorities and officials in charge of running the election.
2. National media and press community should better cut down on editorials from local writers and publish more election-related material from foreign sources with unmentioned references in order to enlighten the public opinion.
3. Mass media and newspapers should better address the public concerns and issues rather than focus on interests of specific parties or individuals, so that more people would be attracted to mass media and trust its messages.
4. Mass media and newspapers should better cooperate in devising an unbiased strategy and set of goals, by the help of *Khaneye Matbuat* (Iranian House of Media) and the Commission Article 10 of the political Parties in the parliament. So that the public opinion would more effectively be enlightened about the social and political future of the entire nation.

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