

Media Representation of Social Movements: A Case Study of Canadian Coverage
of Iran

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Abstract

Media Representation of Social Movements: A Case Study of Canadian Coverage of Iran

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This thesis examines how three major Canadian news organizations—CBC News, CTV News, and Global News—reported on Iran’s anti-hijab movement following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022. While the movement’s global significance has been widely acknowledged, scholarly attention to how Canadian media narrate and interpret events in Iran remains limited. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the journalistic strategies and constraints shaping coverage of a complex international issue within a highly restricted media environment.

The research employs a dual qualitative methodology. First, a content analysis of fifteen news articles published between September 2022 and May 2024 identifies key themes, dominant frames, and source dynamics across the three outlets. Second, eleven semi-structured interviews with journalists provide insight into the challenges of reporting without direct access, including reliance on digital verification, diaspora networks, and newsroom pressures.

Together, these methods show how Canadian journalists negotiate issues of accuracy, representation, and responsibility when covering transnational human rights movements. Findings reveal structural constraints such as limited resources, lack of correspondents on the ground, and difficulties verifying information under state censorship. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of Canadian international journalism and underscores the need for greater institutional support and more sustained, context-rich reporting on restricted environments like Iran.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Context: Mahsa Amini, Iran's Anti-Hijab Movement, and Global Resonance

In September 2022, Iran witnessed one of the most significant social uprisings in its contemporary history following the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman who died while in the custody of Iran's morality police. She had been arrested for allegedly violating the country's compulsory hijab law—a regulation that requires women to cover their hair in public. Her death ignited widespread protests across Iran, led largely by women and young people, under the slogan “*Woman, Life, Freedom*” (CBC News, 2022d; Global News, 2022c; CTV News, 2022a).

The anti-hijab protests quickly evolved beyond opposition to the dress code, becoming a broader challenge to state control, gender discrimination, and systemic repression. The movement's decentralized nature, led by citizens rather than political organizations, reflected a generational shift in Iran's political and cultural consciousness. As demonstrations spread to dozens of cities, the Iranian government imposed harsh crackdowns, restricted internet access, and suppressed independent media (CBC News, 2022d; Global News, 2022c; CTV News, 2022a).

Despite these restrictions, the movement resonated globally. Protests took place in cities around the world, including in major Canadian urban centres such as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. The slogan “*Woman, Life, Freedom*” was adopted internationally as a symbol of women's rights and resistance against authoritarianism (Global News, 2022). For global audiences, including those in Canada, understanding what was happening in Iran depended largely on media coverage. However, with foreign journalists barred from entering Iran and domestic reporters under threat of

imprisonment, much of the information available to international outlets came from social media, citizen journalism, and second-hand reports. For example, many of the photographs used in CBC News articles covering protests inside Iran were sourced from international agencies such as AFP and Getty Images, rather than produced by journalists on the ground.

This combination of restricted access and reliance on user-generated content made Iran's anti-hijab movement not only a major international story but also a test case for journalism in the digital age—a moment where global reporting, ethics, verification, and storytelling intersected in complex ways.

1.2 Rationale: Why Canadian Coverage Matters

In this context, Canadian media coverage of the movement offers a valuable lens for exploring how journalists navigate international stories in restricted environments. Major Canadian outlets such as CBC News, CTV News, and Global News each reported extensively on Mahsa Amini's death and the ensuing protests (see Table 4; CBC News, 2022; Global News, 2022; CTV News, 2022). Yet, as I reviewed these stories, I observed recurring issues: factual inaccuracies, overreliance on Western wire services, and a lack of cultural or political nuance in the framing of Iran's protests. Many reports focused on the dramatic and visual aspects of the demonstrations but offered limited insight into the deeper social dynamics that sustained them.

These patterns suggest structural challenges in Canadian journalism when covering complex international issues from afar. Although scholarship has examined Western media bias and the structural pressures shaping international reporting (Hanitzsch, 2019; Curran, 2011; Artz, 2022),

comparatively little research has focused on how Canadian journalists navigate such constraints when reporting on contemporary protest movements in Iran. This study seeks to address that gap.

One might hypothesize that such structural challenges include language barriers, limited regional expertise about Iran, and an increasing dependence on social media for sourcing and verification, as opposed to on-the-ground reporting that involves direct observation, first-hand audio-visual documentation, in-person interviews, and opportunities to seek accountability from officials. Even when coverage is accurate, the absence of local context can lead to narratives that flatten or generalize lived realities—especially in societies with distinct cultural and historical layers like Iran (Mir-Hosseini, 2007; Chan-Malik, 2011; Semati et al., 2021). This gap between reporting and contextual understanding became particularly tangible to me during my internship at CBC Montreal in early 2023. In the newsroom, a reporter asked whether anyone could translate or verify Persian-language videos circulating online. That moment crystallized a crucial question for me as both a journalist and a researcher: What happens when a newsroom lacks linguistic or cultural expertise to verify and contextualize an important global story?

This experience highlighted a larger professional issue. Canadian journalists are frequently tasked with reporting on global events with minimal resources or preparation (Curran, 2011; Society of Professional Journalists, n.d.). When international access is denied—as in Iran—the reliance on second-hand sources and digital content becomes both inevitable and risky. Inaccuracies, mistranslations, and oversimplifications can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or distort complex movements. For a multicultural country like Canada, this is more than an editorial concern—it is an ethical one. The diversity of Canada’s population means that global stories often

intersect with local communities whose lives and identities are directly connected to those events. Thus, responsible and informed international reporting is essential not only for accuracy but also for inclusion and representation.

By examining how selected Canadian journalists covered Iran's anti-hijab movement, this research aims to contribute to broader discussions about how local and international journalism intersect, how journalists work within structural constraints, and what can be done to improve coverage when access to the field is limited.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

This thesis investigates the practices, challenges, and strategies of selected Canadian journalists covering Iran's anti-hijab movement between September 2022 and May 2024. It focuses on how CBC News, CTV News, and Global News approached reporting on Iran's anti-hijab movement under restricted conditions, as well as what their coverage and lived experiences reveal about the broader state of international journalism in Canada.

The study is guided by three key research questions:

RQ1: How did CBC News, CTV News, and Global News report on Iran's anti-hijab movement?

RQ2: What challenges did Canadian journalists face in verifying, contextualizing, and presenting information from restricted environments such as Iran?

RQ3: What strategies or workarounds did they employ to ensure accuracy and depth despite the absence of direct access?

The objectives of the study are to:

- Analyze the narratives and journalistic patterns in selected Canadian coverage of the Iran protests between September 2022 and May 2024.
- Identify any institutional and professional challenges that shaped how selected journalists worked on restricted international stories.
- Contribute to the academic understanding of journalism ethics and practice in the age of digital verification and limited field access.
- Offer practical insights and recommendations to strengthen Canadian journalism's approach to complex international stories.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into six chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the research topic by situating Iran's anti-hijab movement within its broader global and Canadian media context. It outlines the study's rationale, significance, research objectives, and guiding questions.

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant scholarly literature across three interconnected areas: (1) the historical evolution and socio-political context of protest movements in Iran, (2) the role of social media in shaping contemporary conflicts and transnational mobilization, and (3) journalistic norms, practices, and constraints involved in reporting on restricted or hard-to-access environments.

Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodological approach, detailing the qualitative framework employed. It outlines the semi-structured interview process, sampling strategy, and data analysis procedures, as well as the content analysis of 15 news articles published between September 2022 and May 2024.

Chapter 4 presents the study's findings. It synthesizes insights from both the thematic analysis of interview data and the content analysis of Canadian media coverage, highlighting key patterns in journalistic practice, narrative framing, and the practical challenges encountered when covering Iran's anti-hijab movement.

Chapter 5 offers a critical discussion of the findings. It integrates interview and content analysis results, explores the place of Canadian media within the global information ecosystem on Iran, considers the implications for reporting transnational social movements, and reflects on the intersections between local journalistic practice and international socio-political issues.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the central insights, outlining the study's contributions to journalism scholarship, and discussing implications for Canadian news practice. It also identifies limitations and proposes directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Understanding how socio-political movements are represented in news media requires engagement with multiple bodies of scholarship. International news coverage does not occur in isolation; it is mediated by political contexts, technological infrastructures, and journalistic norms that evolve over time (Curran, 2011; Hanitzsch, 2019; Artz, 2022). The death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 and the subsequent anti-hijab protests in Iran (Lords Library, 2023; Council on Foreign Relations, 2023) provide a crucial contemporary case through which these dynamics can be examined. The movement itself emerged from a much longer history of contentious politics in Iran, the widespread use of digital platforms as tools of political communication, and the structural challenges that Western journalists face when reporting on restricted societies. For Canadian media—geographically distant yet linked through diaspora communities, foreign policy debates, and human rights discourse—representing this movement requires navigating issues of access, verification, framing, and narrative translation.

This chapter reviews three overlapping topics relevant to this study:

- (1) the evolution of protest movements in Iran,
- (2) the role of social media and digital platforms in modern conflicts, and
- (3) journalistic practices in covering restricted socio-political environments.

Rather than listing studies, the review synthesizes debates, identifies convergences and tensions in the literature, and highlights how existing research can inform an analysis of Canadian media coverage of the anti-hijab movement. The chapter concludes by identifying gaps in the scholarship,

particularly around the Canadian context, thereby establishing the conceptual and empirical rationale for the current study.

2.1 Evolution of Protest Movements in Iran

2.1.1 Historical Trajectories and Shifting Objectives

Academic literature on Iranian protest movements highlights that contentious politics are neither episodic nor isolated, but part of an evolving political culture shaped by ideological, economic, and generational dynamics. Ghasseminejad, Ben Taleblu, and Katz (2020) argue that since 2017, Iranian demonstrations have increasingly shifted from reformist demands toward anti-system slogans that challenge the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic itself. Their analysis identifies three indicators of this shift—slogans, demographics, and organizational structures—which together signal a move from calls for policy adjustments to demands for structural change.

This divergence is significant in contextualizing the 2022 protests. While earlier uprisings such as the 1999 student demonstrations and the 2009 Green Movement primarily sought political reforms within the electoral system (Kurzman 2012), the protests following Amini's death lacked a singular electoral trigger and instead reflected broader frustrations over bodily autonomy, economic conditions, and state violence. This continuity-and-rupture dynamic is a recurring theme in the literature.

Kurzman (2012), writing on the Iranian Green Movement in comparative perspective, underscores how protest repertoires circulate transnationally. He notes that activists across the Middle East have quietly drawn on each other's tactics, even when ideological or religious differences exist.

Although the Green Movement preceded the 2022 crisis by more than a decade, Kurzman’s work illustrates how digital modes of mobilization, visual protest styles, and ideological narratives travel across borders—a point that becomes increasingly relevant once social media enters the picture.

2.1.2 Gendered Resistance and the Centrality of Women

A distinctive contribution of the recent literature is its emphasis on the role of women and the politics of embodiment. Bayat (2023) situates the 2022 uprisings within a broader trajectory of Iranian women’s resistance, noting that the body—particularly the gendered body—has long served as a site of ideological contestation between the state and citizens. The mandatory hijab, in this framing, becomes not merely a religious symbol but a political instrument that regulates visibility, mobility, and civic agency.

This gendered dimension differentiates the 2022 protests from many earlier movements. Whereas the Green Movement foregrounded electoral grievances, the anti-hijab movement foregrounded bodily autonomy as a political demand. In Bayat’s analysis, the protests involved diverse actors—youth, minorities, and working-class communities—yet the visibility of women disrupted longstanding assumptions about who leads revolutions in Iran.

2.1.3 Implications for International Reporting

The literature on the evolution of Iranian protests (Ghasseminejad, Ben Taleblu, and Katz, 2020) provides two conceptual insights relevant to media representation:

1. Protests in Iran are historically layered, meaning journalists must contextualize events within decades of prior contention;
2. Gendered leadership makes the anti-hijab movement visually and symbolically legible to foreign audiences, especially in Western contexts that frame women's rights as universal values.

These insights matter for Canadian journalism because they shape how news organizations interpret and translate foreign events for domestic audiences. Western media often gravitate toward visually resonant symbols—burning headscarves, unveiled women, crowds chanting in the streets (CBC News, 2022; Global News, 2022; CTV News, 2022) —which align with Bayat's (2023) discussion of embodiment and Kurzman's (2012) notion of transnational protest imagery. Therefore, understanding the historical arc of Iranian protests provides the analytical foundation for later examining how some Canadian outlets constructed narratives around Iran's anti-hijab movement.

2.2 Social Media and Information Flows in Modern Conflicts

2.2.1 Theoretical Shifts in Digital Conflict Studies

Parallel to changes in protest dynamics, a growing body of scholarship explores how digital media reshape information flows during periods of conflict. Zeitzoff (2017) conceptualizes social media as a complex ecosystem where information dissemination, emotional engagement, and political persuasion interact. His framework identifies three mechanisms—mobilization, framing, and internationalization—that explain how platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram translate localized grievances into global narratives. As he argues, social media “change the way information is produced, disseminated, and consumed during conflict,” enabling actors to bypass

traditional gatekeepers and directly influence both domestic and international audiences (Zeitsoff, 2017, p. 1971).

This theoretical shift is crucial for interpreting Iran’s anti-hijab movement. As traditional journalistic access to Iran remains heavily restricted, foreign audiences encounter the conflict primarily through digital intermediaries—posts, videos, hashtags, and online testimonies. Zeitsoff’s framework helps explain how these digital artifacts operate not only as documentation but as political interventions that shape the emotional tone of international reporting. Graphic images of violence, personal narratives of loss, and viral slogans such as “*Woman, Life, Freedom*” circulate rapidly across platforms, generating affective responses—anger, solidarity, outrage—that are often reproduced in headlines, story framing, and visual selection by international news outlets.

2.2.2 Citizen Journalism and Credibility Debates

A parallel stream of research examines the tension between professional journalism and citizen-generated content. Ali and Fahmy (2013), analyzing uprisings in Iran, Egypt, and Libya, argue that although social media democratizes reporting, traditional media organizations still perform gatekeeping functions that sustain existing power structures. Their findings suggest that citizen journalism expands visibility, but institutional media retain control over legitimacy—an insight directly relevant to how Canadian journalists incorporate social media footage into reporting.

Reuter and Szakonyi (2015) offer a complementary perspective by examining the ability of social media to raise political awareness in authoritarian settings. Studying the 2011 Russian elections, they conclude that digital networks increase informational reach but do not automatically translate

into offline political change. For Iran, this indicates that while platforms may help circumvent censorship, they cannot eliminate structural repression—context that Canadian journalists must consider when assessing the limits of digital activism.

2.2.3 Digital Access and the Politics of Surveillance

While early scholarship celebrated social media as emancipatory, more recent studies emphasize surveillance, censorship, and state control. Farivar (2011), writing in the early 2010s, highlights the uneven political effects of internet access across different societies, noting that platforms facilitate activism but also enable monitoring. Iran provides a clear example of this paradox: digital media enable the circulation of protest videos, yet the state responds with internet shutdowns, platform filtering, and cyber surveillance.

For foreign journalism, this introduces verification challenges. Videos uploaded during blackouts lack metadata; testimonies circulate without corroboration; and digital silence may either reflect repression or infrastructural collapse. One example of this verification challenge appears in CBC News' reporting on internet disruptions during the protests (CBC News, 2022). The article relied heavily on digital rights organizations and secondary sources while acknowledging the difficulty of independently confirming developments inside Iran. This reliance on remote verification illustrates how restricted digital access complicates journalistic efforts to construct authoritative accounts of unfolding events. These complications are not merely technical but epistemological: they can alter how journalists construct “truth” under authoritarian constraints.

2.2.4 Implications for Foreign Reporting

Taken together, the above literature on social media in modern conflicts reveals four key dynamics that shape how global news organizations—including Canadian outlets—cover Iranian protests: Digital platforms often internationalize local grievances, increasing foreign media attention (Zeitsoff, 2017); Citizen footage of protests can complicate verification, leading to ethical tensions around credibility (Ali & Fahmy, 2013); Authoritarian censorship shapes information flows, introducing epistemic uncertainty (Farivar, 2011); Digital visibility does not guarantee political transformation (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015).

These points help explain why Canadian journalism around the anti-hijab movement frequently included disclaimers such as “CBC has not independently verified this footage” and why diaspora voices became essential interpretive intermediaries. The term “diaspora” refers to populations dispersed from their country of origin who maintain social, cultural, and political ties across borders (Brubaker, 2005). In this context, diaspora mediation refers to the role of these communities in interpreting, translating, and contextualizing events in Iran for journalists working at a distance. In short, social media not only reshape how conflicts unfold but also how they are witnessed and narrated across borders.

2.4 Journalistic Practices in Covering Restricted Socio-Political Issues

2.4.1 Structural Constraints and Authoritarian Contexts

Journalistic reporting from authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts presents distinct methodological and ethical challenges. Scholars consistently note that traditional norms of foreign correspondence—field access, firsthand interviews, and independent verification—are difficult or

impossible under conditions of censorship, surveillance, and restricted visas (Hanitzsch, 2019; Curran, 2011; Reporters Without Borders [RSF], 2023).

Research on digital conflict environments further suggests that state control and monitoring reshape both access to information and the risks faced by reporters and sources (Farivar, 2011; Zeitzoff, 2017). Iran exemplifies such constraints: independent foreign media presence is limited, site access requires state approval, and correspondents often rely on intermediaries for basic information (RSF, 2023; Lords Library, 2023).

This environment creates what some scholars describe as “distance reporting” observation (Ali & Fahmy, 2013; Bruns & Highfield, 2012; Hermida, 2010), in which journalists reconstruct events using fragments from digital platforms, diaspora testimonies, and institutional statements rather than direct observation. The resulting narratives are mediated through several filters—editorial standards, platform affordances, ideological framings—that complicate simplistic assumptions about neutrality or objectivity. For Canadian journalists, whose ability to enter Iran is limited, such distance reporting can become not only a stylistic feature but a structural necessity.

2.4.2 Sourcing Practices and Indexing Theory

Within this context, sourcing becomes a central analytical concern. Semati, Cassidy, and Khanjani (2021), in their study of American media coverage of the Iran nuclear deal, draw on media sociology and indexing theory to demonstrate how journalists disproportionately rely on official institutional actors—government agencies, diplomats, policy experts—when covering Iranian affairs. Their findings build on Bennett’s (1990) indexing hypothesis, which argues that media

coverage tends to “index” the range of debate presented by political elites rather than independently constructing that debate.

Applied to the anti-hijab protests, this literature suggests that Canadian media coverage may privilege institutional voices—such as Canadian government officials, NGOs, or international human rights organizations—over grassroots Iranian perspectives (Semati et al., 2021; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). While such sourcing is often driven by verification constraints, it also shapes the narrative terrain by emphasizing diplomatic frames (e.g., sanctions, human rights resolutions) rather than lived experiences. Indexing theory thus provides a conceptual framework for examining whose voices and interpretations define the Canadian journalistic narrative on Iran.

2.4.3 Representation, Orientalism, and Media Stereotypes

Another line of scholarship examines how Western media represent Iran through cultural, religious, and racialized frames. Chan-Malik’s (2011) analysis of U.S. coverage of the 1979 Iranian Women’s Movement demonstrates how American news narratives relied on Orientalist constructions that portrayed Iranian Muslim women as oppressed subjects lacking agency. This framing simultaneously exoticized and homogenized Iranian womanhood, situating Iranian feminism within a Western moral hierarchy.

While Chan-Malik focuses on an earlier historical moment, her findings remain instructive for contemporary coverage of the anti-hijab movement. Western media often gravitate toward narratives that align with liberal feminist values—individual autonomy, secularism, bodily freedom—while sidelining local complexities, religious pluralisms, or internal debates within

Iranian society. This dynamic raises critical questions about how Canadian journalists translate Iranian feminist struggles into culturally legible frames for domestic audiences.

2.4.4 Digital Narratives and Embodied Protest

Recent scholarship further expands the discussion by considering how Iranian voices themselves construct media narratives. Naficy (2021) theorizes the concept of “internet cinema,” in which digital videos and mobile recordings create embodied forms of protest that circumvent state censorship. These visual forms do not merely document events; they perform dissent through bodily exposure, risk-taking, and aesthetic symbolism. Similarly, Ashwarya (2023) emphasizes how women-led protests in Iran deploy digital media to circulate stories of resistance that challenge the state’s control over representation.

These perspectives help contextualize why visual content—particularly videos of unveiled women confronting security forces—became central to international coverage after Mahsa Amini’s death (CBC News, 2022; Global News, 2022). For Western journalists, such imagery served dual functions: it offered verifiable evidence of state violence and provided emotionally compelling material that resonated with audiences. Yet visual resonance does not guarantee narrative accuracy; digital videos require interpretive scaffolding that often depends on diaspora actors, Western experts, or institutional sources.

2.4.5 Ethics, Verification, and Transparency

Ethical scholarship on journalism highlights the tension between speed and accuracy in digital reporting. When journalists cannot access the field directly, they face decisions about whether to

publish unverified content, how to frame disclaimers, and how to communicate uncertainty to audiences (Semati et al., 2021; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). The literature suggests that transparency—openly acknowledging verification limits—has become an important professional norm in coverage of conflicts where misinformation and state censorship are prevalent (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d.; Hanitzsch, 2019).

In Iran’s case, internet shutdowns, surveillance, and source risk heighten the stakes of verification. Publishing certain testimonies may endanger sources, while withholding them may obscure violence. Scholars note that journalists increasingly balance these trade-offs by triangulating citizen media with reports from international NGOs, UN bodies, or academic experts (Zeitsoff, 2017; Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). However, this epistemic structure also privileges certain institutions as “truth brokers,” reinforcing asymmetries of voice and authority.

2.5 Synthesis and Identified Gaps

Across these domains—protest dynamics, digital media, and journalistic practice—the above literature provides a foundation for analyzing how the anti-hijab movement is represented internationally. Several key themes emerge:

1. Iranian protests follow a historical trajectory in which grievances have expanded from reformist demands to systemic critiques (Ghasseminejad et al., 2020; Bayat, 2023; Kurzman, 2012).
2. Women occupy a central symbolic and practical role in current movements, challenging both domestic power structures and Western stereotypes (Bayat, 2023; Chan-Malik, 2011; Ashwarya, 2023).

3. Digital platforms internationalize local struggles, yet remain embedded in structures of surveillance, misinformation, and epistemic uncertainty (Zeitsoff, 2017; Farivar, 2011; Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015).
4. Foreign journalists face structural barriers to field reporting, leading to reliance on mediated sources and institutional indexing (Semati et al., 2021; Hanitzsch, 2019).
5. Western media frames Iran through cultural and ideological filters, which can marginalize local complexities even when coverage is sympathetic (Chan-Malik, 2011; Semati et al., 2021; Naficy, 2021).

Despite these contributions, several gaps remain that justify the present study:

(a) *Lack of Canadian-focused scholarship*

The vast majority of media analyses of Iranian politics focus on U.S., British, or transnational outlets. There is limited research examining how Canadian media report on Iran, despite Canada's large Iranian diaspora, active foreign policy debates, and multicultural media landscape.

(b) *Limited attention to journalistic experience*

Existing studies analyze texts rather than the experiences or professional practices of journalists. Little is known about how reporters themselves navigate verification challenges, editorial expectations, diaspora pressures, or personal safety concerns when covering Iran from abroad.

(c) *Under-examination of digital verification practices*

While scholars discuss digital media broadly, few investigate how verification disclaimers, sourcing transparency, and editorial strategies shape narratives in Canadian media outlets on Iran.

(d) *Insufficient integration of diaspora perspectives*

Diaspora actors are central interpreters of Iranian politics for Western media, yet the literature rarely explores how diasporic expertise, activism, or emotion mediate international reporting. This gap is particularly relevant in the Canadian context, which is home to a sizable Iranian diaspora—over 280,000 people according to the 2021 Census—concentrated in major urban centres such as Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (Statistics Canada, 2021). These communities have become especially visible during moments of political unrest in Iran, engaging in protests, advocacy, and media discourse, and thus acting as key intermediaries between events in Iran and their representation in Canadian public life.

These gaps provide the analytical and empirical rationale for the current study, which examines both journalistic outputs (news texts) and journalistic experiences (interviews) to produce a more holistic understanding of selected Canadian coverage.

2.6 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter underscores that reporting on Iran’s anti-hijab movement sits at the intersection of contentious politics, digital mediation, and journalistic constraint. Iranian protests are historically layered, gendered, and visually resonant; digital platforms simultaneously enable visibility and expand state repression; and foreign journalists navigate a complex ecosystem of restricted access, mediated sourcing, verification challenges, and cultural translation.

However, the literature also reveals critical gaps—particularly regarding the Canadian context, journalistic labour, and diaspora mediation—that require further investigation. By focusing on

CBC News, CTV News, and Global News, and combining content analysis with interviews, the present study addresses these gaps and contributes new empirical insights into how Canadian journalism represents socio-political movements unfolding in restricted environments. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approaches, sample selection, and analytical procedures used to examine how Canadian journalists reported on Iran's anti-hijab movement between September 2022 and May 2024.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Methodological Rationale and Research Design

This research employed a qualitative case study design to investigate how Canadian journalists reported on Iran’s anti-hijab movement and how they navigated the informational constraints posed by Iran’s restrictive media environment. A qualitative approach is suitable for research questions that seek to explore meaning, experience, and professional judgment rather than measure frequencies or test causal relationships (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The goal of this thesis is not to quantify media outputs, but to better understand how journalists worked, why certain reporting practices emerged, and what constraints shaped coverage. These aims align with qualitative inquiry, which prioritizes depth, context, and interpretation (Priest, 2010).

Case study designs are especially useful for examining contemporary phenomena within real-world contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred (Yin, 2018). In this study, the “case” consists of selected Canadian media coverage of the anti-hijab movement between September 2022 and May 2024, bounded by three national outlets—CBC News, CTV News, and Global News. This design allows for the integration of multiple data sources, enabling a richer understanding of journalistic practices than any single method could provide (Priest, 2010). Two complementary methods—semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman, 2013) and qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012)—were selected based on their suitability for the study’s three research questions:

RQ1: How did CBC News, CTV News, and Global News report on Iran’s anti-hijab movement?

RQ2: What challenges did Canadian journalists face in verifying, contextualizing, and presenting information from restricted environments such as Iran?

RQ3: What strategies or workarounds did they employ to ensure accuracy and depth despite the absence of direct access?

RQ1 requires examining published journalism; therefore, qualitative content analysis was used to identify patterns in framing, sourcing, and representation within media texts (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). RQ2 and RQ3 concern professional experience, institutional norms, and decision-making processes, which could be better explored through qualitative interviewing (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; Seidman, 2013). Semi-structured interviews balance consistency across respondents with flexibility for follow-up questioning, making them well-suited to eliciting journalists' reflections on verification practices, editorial constraints, and ethical decision-making.

Using two methods enabled analytical triangulation, which strengthens qualitative research by allowing interpretations to be cross-checked across data types (Flick, 2018). This study combines qualitative content analysis (QCA) of news articles with reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of interview data. While QCA focuses on identifying recurring patterns in media content—such as framing, sourcing, and representation—RTA allows for the exploration of meaning-making and lived experience in journalists' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Interviews therefore offered insight into how journalists described their reporting practices, while content analysis examined how those practices materialized in published work. This approach is consistent with interpretive media research that seeks to link production processes with textual outcomes (Priest, 2010).

3.2 Research Design Overview

The focus of this qualitative case study was how CBC News, CTV News, and Global News reported on Iran's anti-hijab movement following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022. For contextual background on the protests and their political significance, see Lords Library (2023) and Bayat (2023), which provide overviews of the movement's origins and broader implications. Qualitative research was deemed particularly well-suited to the topic, as it allows for the examination of complex social phenomena and the capture of lived experiences, perspectives, and decision-making processes of individuals working within specific institutional contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Priest, 2010). Because reporting on Iran involves limited diplomatic access, verification barriers, and evolving socio-political conditions, a qualitative design allowed for a nuanced understanding of how selected Canadian journalists navigated these constraints.

The methodological foundation of this study draws on Priest's *Doing Media Research* (2010), which highlights the interpretive and reflexive nature of qualitative media inquiry, and Kvale and Brinkmann's *InterViews* (2009), which conceptualizes the qualitative interview as a process of co-constructing meaning between interviewer and participant. Their work emphasizes that the aim of qualitative interviews is "to understand the world from the subjects' point of view" and to explore how individuals interpret the phenomena they encounter (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 28). These principles guided the study's design, interview approach, and analytical framework.

Two complementary forms of data were collected:

(1) Eleven semi-structured interviews with journalists who reported on the anti-hijab movement, and

(2) a qualitative content analysis of fifteen news articles published between September 2022 and May 2024.

Together, these data sources increased the data triangulation to help offer a deeper, contextualized understanding of selected Canadian media coverage of the movement.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) argue, semi-structured interviews allow for depth and flexibility, enabling the researcher to explore participants' experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews. This format was particularly appropriate for this project, which sought to uncover journalists' reflections on reporting challenges, verification strategies, institutional pressures, and ethical considerations.

Eleven journalists across CBC, CTV, and Global News participated in interviews. All included participants had authored or contributed to media coverage of Iran's anti-hijab protests between September 2022 and May 2024, thereby ensuring their familiarity with the topic and potential to offer insight on the study's RQs. Most interviews lasted between 30–60 minutes, were conducted over the phone or online, and were audio-recorded with permission. Three participants provided shorter interviews of approximately five minutes, citing limited recollection of their reporting or minimal involvement in the story. Although brief, these interviews contributed to understanding newsroom dynamics, assignment structures, and varying levels of journalist engagement.

Interview topics were guided by literature on qualitative interviewing (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman 2013) and included:

- Motivations for covering the protests
- Challenges in obtaining and verifying information
- Reliance on digital sources, including social media
- Communication with editors and institutional constraints
- Reflections on accuracy, representation, and ethical responsibility

Participants were provided with information about the study's aims and gave informed consent before participating. While the initial target was fifteen journalists, recruitment proved more challenging than anticipated. Approximately fifty journalists were contacted, but many declined due to time constraints, perceived lack of expertise, or minimal involvement in the story. Nevertheless, eleven completed interviews provided sufficient richness and thematic saturation for analysis (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

Table 1 provides an overview of the journalists interviewed for this study, including their professional roles, platforms, and interview duration.

Table 1. Overview of Interview Participants

Participant ID	Professional Role	Primary Platform(s)	Years of Experience	Interview Length
P1	Journalist / Editor	Television, Digital	10+ years	60 minutes
P2	Reporter	Radio, Digital	5–10 years	45 minutes
P3	Journalist	Television	5–10 years	30 minutes
P4	Reporter	Digital	3–5 years	25 minutes
P5	Journalist	Radio	10+ years	50 minutes
P6	Producer/ Journalist	Television, Radio	10+ years	15 minutes
P7	Journalist	Digital	3–5 years	20 minutes
P8	Reporter	Television	5–10 years	40 minutes
P9	Journalist	Radio, Digital	10+ years	10 minutes
P10	Reporter	Television	5–10 years	35 minutes
P11	Journalist	Digital	3–5 years	5 minutes

Note: All participants were Canadian journalists who covered Iran’s anti-hijab movement between September 2022 and May 2024. Identifying details, including organizational affiliation, have been anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

Table 2. Semi-Structured Interview Questions and Research Question

Alignment

Interview Focus Area	Sample Interview Questions	Research Question Alignment
Professional Role and Involvement	How were you involved in covering Iran’s anti-hijab movement? What was your role in the newsroom during this period?	Contextualizes participants’ positionality and level of engagement (RQ2).
Newsgathering Under Restriction	What challenges did you face in accessing information from inside Iran? How did you overcome these challenges?	Examines constraints and adaptive reporting practices in restricted environments (RQ2).
Verification and Source Evaluation	How did you verify videos, images, or claims emerging from social media? What sources did you trust most?	Investigates verification strategies and epistemic decision-making (RQ2).

Editorial Processes and Constraints	How did editors influence story selection, framing, or length? Were there stories you wanted to tell but could not?	Analyzes institutional and organizational influences on coverage (RQ2).
Ethical Considerations and Safety	How did concerns about surveillance, source safety, or misinformation shape your reporting choices?	Explores ethical judgment and professional responsibility (RQ3).
Emotional and Psychological Impact	How did covering this movement affect you personally or emotionally?	Addresses emotional labour and affective dimensions of conflict reporting (RQ3).
Representation and Cultural Context	How did you navigate cultural, linguistic, or political complexity when explaining events in Iran to Canadian audiences?	Examines representational ethics and cross-cultural mediation (RQ3).
Diaspora Engagement	What role did Iranian diaspora communities play in your reporting?	Investigates diaspora mediation in transnational journalism (RQ3).
Reflections on Coverage	Looking back, what do you think Canadian media did well or poorly in covering the movement?	Supports evaluative reflection across both reporting practice and representation (RQ2 & RQ3).

Note: Questions were asked flexibly and adapted to participants' roles and experiences in keeping with semi-structured interview methodology.

3.4 Sampling Strategy and Recruitment Challenges

Purposive sampling (Patton 1990, 2015) was used to identify journalists with firsthand involvement in covering the anti-hijab movement. Participants were selected based on bylines, reporting history, and affiliation with CBC, CTV, or Global News during the study period. This method is suited to exploratory research requiring information-rich cases.

Recruitment was conducted primarily via email invitations. Despite targeted outreach, response rates were low—an issue common in studies involving working journalists with demanding schedules. Some potential participants cited time constraints, whereas others felt they lacked sufficient knowledge or sustained involvement to contribute meaningfully. Many explained that their coverage relied heavily on wire services, newsroom editors, or verified international sources.

To address recruitment barriers, follow-up emails were sent and outreach was expanded, resulting in contact with approximately fifty journalists. Ultimately, eleven interviews were completed. Although lower than the initial target, this number met the threshold for thematic saturation identified by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006), who argue that saturation often occurs within the first twelve interviews.

3.4.1 Content Analysis

A qualitative content analysis (QCA) was conducted on fifteen news articles published by CBC, CTV, and Global News between September 2022 and May 2024. Following Priest (2010), QCA was used to identify patterns in framing, sourcing, and representational strategies in journalists' published work. Articles were selected to correspond to participating interviewees or to key moments in the anti-hijab movement that received coverage. The analysis focused on how Canadian journalists framed the protests, sourced information, represented Iranian women, and navigated uncertainties—especially when relying on digital platforms and second-hand reporting.

While thematic patterns were identified, this process differs from reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which was applied separately to the interview data. Rather than generating interpretive themes, the content analysis focused on identifying recurring frames and narrative patterns within the published articles.

While fifteen news articles is a small data sample, the goal of this step was not to provide a comprehensive content analysis but to better contextualize the overall topic and the interview data. This dual dataset enabled comparison between journalists' self-described practices and their published outputs.

3.5 Coding Framework and Analytic Approach

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) guidelines, which emphasize deep familiarization with the data, systematic coding, iterative theme development, and reflexive interpretation. Both interview transcripts and news articles were coded using a hybrid approach

that combined deductive codes (derived from research questions and relevant literature) and inductive codes that emerged directly from the data (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Key analytic categories included:

- Framing of protests: terminology, narrative structure, emphasis on violence or agency
- Information sourcing: reliance on social media, wire services, experts, diaspora voices
- Verification strategies: cross-checking, use of disclaimers, acknowledgment of uncertainty
- Contextualization: references to Iranian history, gender politics, or geopolitical tensions, representation of women and agency

An Excel-based model was used for coding to allow systematic comparison across interviews and articles. Coding reliability was reinforced through repeated reviews of selected transcripts after a two-week interval, following recommendations by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014). Data saturation was monitored continuously throughout the analytic process (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study obtained ethics approval from Concordia University's Research Ethics Unit with certificate #0000973512. Ethical considerations were guided by Priest (2010) and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits, and provided informed consent before participation (see Appendix 2). Because reporting on Iran involves sensitive political contexts, precautions were taken to protect participants' privacy and minimize potential professional repercussions. Journalists were

given the option to be identified by name or remain anonymous. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored, and pseudonyms were used where requested. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty.

3.7 Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study has limitations. The sample size, while sufficient for thematic saturation, remains limited to eleven journalists from three major Canadian outlets and fifteen articles. Findings therefore cannot be generalized to all Canadian media coverage of Iran's anti-hijab movement. Furthermore, some participants had only partial involvement in the coverage, which may have constrained the depth of their reflections.

Access to archival materials also posed challenges; older news stories and online reports were sometimes difficult to retrieve due to paywalls or website restructuring. Additionally, because the study focused on English-language coverage, it did not capture French-language reporting in Quebec or other regional outlets. Despite these constraints, the study provides valuable insights into how Canadian journalists report on international movements under restrictive conditions, contributing both to scholarly understanding and to professional practice in international journalism.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Thematic Content Analysis Findings

4.1.1 Overview

This section presents the findings from the thematic analysis of fifteen news articles published by CBC News, CTV News, and Global News between September 2022 and May 2024. Each article was authored by a different journalist reporting on the aftermath of Mahsa Amini's death and the nationwide protests that emerged in response. The sample was intentionally designed to ensure representation across Canada's three major national broadcasters and to capture the distinctive editorial and narrative approaches used to cover events unfolding in a highly restricted media environment. The sample is limited, so care is taken to ensure the results are not overgeneralized to wider media approaches, and instead the results should be viewed as helping to understand the lived experiences of the journalists interviewed for the study.

The analysis sought to identify recurring themes, framing devices, and journalistic patterns in the representation of the protests, the portrayal of Iranian women, and the geopolitical and ethical complexities of reporting on Iran. The findings draw on established understandings of how Western media typically represent non-Western political struggles (Hanitzsch, 2019; Semati, Cassidy & Khanjani, 2021) and examine how these conventions manifested in Canadian reporting.

Thematic coding revealed four major themes:

- Framing of Mahsa Amini's Death and its Symbolism
- Representation of Iranian Women and Resistance
- Canada's Connection and the Diaspora Perspective

- Challenges of Reporting and Information Verification

Together, these themes demonstrate how selected Canadian journalists attempted to balance immediacy with accuracy in their journalism production, likely due to navigating constraints related to distance, limited access to on-the-ground sources, and the pressures of covering a rapidly developing international crisis for a Canadian audience (a hypothesis explored in the interviews). Table 3 provides an overview of the fifteen news articles included in the content analysis, detailing their publication outlet and year.

Table 3. News Articles Analyzed in the Content Analysis (N = 15)

No.	Article Title	Outlet	Year
1	Ottawa condemns death of Mahsa Amini and state crackdown on protests in Iran	CBC News	2022
2	Death of Iranian woman while in police custody sparks protests in Toronto	Global News	2022
3	Iran protests: Demonstrations erupt once again after government crackdown	Global News	2023
4	Nika Shahkarami: How a slain 16-year-old became a figurehead of the Iran protests	Global News	2022
5	Thousands rally in support of Iranian protests and the late Mahsa Amini in Vancouver	Global News	2022

6	1 month after Mahsa Amini's death in Iran, what has Canada done so far?	Global News	2022
7	Can Iran's protesters prevail against the regime?	CBC News	2022
8	In Iran, anti-regime resolve persists as security forces intensify bid to crush movement	CBC News	2023
9	Protests in Iran aren't about the hijab. They're about policing women's bodies	CBC News	2022
10	Internet disruptions in Iran amid widespread protests over Mahsa Amini's death	CBC News	2022
11	Tens of thousands protest in freedom rally for Iran near Toronto	CTV News	2022
12	Iranian international students rally at University of Calgary against Islamic regime	CTV News	2022
13	Iran execution: Man publicly hanged from crane amid protests	CTV News	2022
14	Thousands gather in Vancouver amid ongoing protests over Mahsa Amini's death in Iran	CTV News	2022
15	Human chain held along Halifax waterfront in support of Iranian protests	CTV News	2022

4.1.2 Framing of Mahsa Amini's Death and its Symbolism

Across the news articles from all three outlets, Mahsa Amini's death was framed as both a deeply personal tragedy and a pivotal moment in Iran's contemporary political history. Articles commonly employed ignition metaphors, describing her death as having "sparked," "ignited," or "triggered" nationwide protests (CBC News, 2022a; Global News, 2022a; CTV News, 2022c). This linguistic pattern emphasized the emotional intensity of the event and underscored its perceived catalytic role in mobilizing public dissent, mirroring narrative strategies observed in earlier coverage of Iranian protest cycles and the Arab Spring (Kurzman, 2012; Ghasseminejad, Ben Taleblu & Katz, 2020). For example, CBC News coverage frequently employed ignition metaphors that portrayed Amini's death as a moment that "sparked" or "ignited" a broader generational uprising, reinforcing a symbolic narrative rather than examining the institutional mechanisms of morality policing or the historical evolution of hijab enforcement (CBC News, 2022a; Kurzman, 2012; Mir-Hosseini, 2007). One article wrote that her death "sparked widespread anti-government protests across Iran," positioning the event as a catalytic rupture rather than as the outcome of a long-standing system of gender governance (CBC News, 2022a).

Across outlets, Amini was also consistently portrayed as an innocent victim of institutional violence, transforming her image into a broader symbol of resistance. For example, in the article titled 'Ottawa condemns death of Mahsa Amini and state crackdown on protests in Iran' (CBC News, 2022a), the author writes that Amini's death was "a direct result of the systemic and continued harassment and repression of women by Iran," quoting Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly. While the quote originates from a Canadian official, its placement early in the article reinforces a moral framing in which Amini's death symbolizes state violence against women. This

aligns with documented patterns in Western crisis reporting, where individual female figures often become emblematic of systemic injustice (Chan-Malik, 2011).

While this emotional framing rendered the conflict legible to Canadian audiences, it also produced notable limitations. Many articles privileged dramatic imagery—such as women burning hijabs, cutting hair, or chanting protest slogans—over sustained explanations of Iran’s legal, political, and social structures (Global News, 2022b; CBC News, 2022c). A clear example can be found in Global News’ coverage of solidarity protests in Toronto, which highlights demonstrators “cutting their hair in solidarity” and chanting “Women, Life, Freedom,” foregrounding symbolic protest acts rather than providing detailed discussion of the legal architecture of Iran’s morality-policing system (Global News, 2022b). This reflects a tendency toward event-centered framing, where a singular incident comes to represent a broader and more complex socio-political struggle (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Although effective in capturing attention, such framing risks oversimplifying a movement rooted in decades of ideological, economic, and gendered tensions (Bayat, 2023; Ashwarya, 2023).

Whether the authors of these news articles felt professional constraints related to distance or limited access to on-the-ground sources is explored more directly in the interview findings. However, the textual patterns themselves raise important questions about how structural limitations may have shaped narrative emphasis. The consistent reliance on official statements, wire-service imagery, and diaspora demonstrations in Canada suggests that journalists may have been operating within a constrained evidentiary environment, where verifiable information from inside Iran was difficult to obtain. As a result, coverage often gravitated toward highly visible

symbolic acts—such as hair cutting and slogan chanting—that were both visually compelling and easily circulated on international news wires.

This pattern may indicate an adaptive professional strategy: when direct access to institutional actors inside Iran or independent field reporting is restricted, journalists may privilege emotionally resonant imagery and official diplomatic reactions because they are accessible, attributable, and verifiable. At the same time, this adaptation narrows explanatory depth, leaving systemic legal, historical, and ideological contexts less fully explored.

Overall, the symbolic portrayal of Mahsa Amini functioned as both a moral anchor and a narrative entry point in Canadian coverage. Emotional storytelling made the protests intelligible and urgent for Canadian audiences. Yet the limited engagement with the post-1979 legal history of compulsory hijab, the institutional role of the morality police, and the broader constitutional framework of the Islamic Republic meant that the movement was more often represented through visible acts of resistance than through sustained structural analysis.

This selective contextualization reveals the narrative trade-offs inherent in reporting on restricted environments from afar. Symbolism provided accessibility; structural depth required access that was often unavailable. In compressing a decades-long struggle over law, religion, and state authority into a catalytic moment of tragedy, coverage rendered the protests morally legible while simultaneously simplifying their institutional complexity.

4.1.3 Representation of Iranian Women and Resistance

A second prominent theme across the fifteen articles was the portrayal of Iranian women as central agents of resistance. Women were consistently positioned as the public face of the uprising, a framing that resonates with scholarship on gendered resistance in Iran (Bayat & Hodges, 2022; Saper, 2019). Articles relied heavily on symbolic acts—removing hijabs, cutting hair, and chanting “Woman, Life, Freedom”—as narrative shorthand for autonomy and defiance (CBC News, 2022d; Global News, 2022c; CTV News, 2022a).

Canadian outlets, particularly CBC and CTV, frequently interpreted these gestures through Western feminist frameworks, framing the protests as a struggle for universal gender equality (CBC News, 2022c; CTV News, 2022d). This can be seen in the CBC Opinion article ‘Protests in Iran aren’t about the hijab’. They’re about policing women’s bodies (CBC News, 2022c), which argues that “an item of clothing does not determine the measure of freedom. It requires a much deeper lens, one beyond the hijab.” While the piece attempts to complicate reductive readings, it nonetheless frames the movement primarily through the lens of bodily autonomy and gender rights, positioning the protests within a broadly liberal feminist discourse. This interpretive framing may generate solidarity and humanize protesters for Canadian audiences; however, it also risks flattening the diversity of Iranian women’s experiences and political motivations.

Factors such as class, geography, ethnicity, and political ideology received limited sustained attention in the articles analyzed. While some reports briefly identified Mahsa Amini as Kurdish, few elaborated on how ethnic marginalization, regional inequality, or socio-economic disparities shaped the protests’ emergence and trajectory. The predominance of official statements, diaspora

commentary, and event-centered reporting—rather than extended on-the-ground testimonies from diverse participants inside Iran—may help explain this narrower sociological framing.

This pattern aligns with scholarship on foreign correspondence conducted under access constraints, which suggests that when journalists rely primarily on externally verifiable or intermediary sources, coverage often foregrounds highly visible symbols while backgrounding complex internal heterogeneity (Reporters Without Borders, 2023; Hanitzsch, 2019).

Another recurring pattern was the reliance on diaspora voices to interpret events inside Iran. Iranian-Canadian activists, scholars, and community members were frequently cited as intermediaries providing cultural and political context (Global News, 2022d; CBC News, 2023a). This is evident in Global News' coverage of Toronto demonstrations, where an organizer is quoted as saying, "We are trying to be their voices," positioning diaspora activists as translators of events occurring within Iran (Global News, 2022b). Similarly, later CBC reporting quoted dissident voices discussing whether "the West is not ready for regime change in Iran," situating analysis within exiled political discourse rather than perspectives emerging directly from inside the country (CBC News, 2023a). This reliance reflects broader challenges journalists face when reporting on countries with restricted media access (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). While diaspora perspectives enriched coverage by offering immediacy and cultural familiarity, their mediation also introduced interpretive distance from lived realities inside Iran.

Despite these limitations, the portrayal of Iranian women was overwhelmingly agency-focused. Journalists largely avoided overt orientalist tropes and framed women as courageous political

actors rather than passive victims. Women were depicted as organizers, demonstrators, and moral leaders of a broader movement, reflecting shifts toward more ethically conscious global journalism practices (Hanitzsch, 2019; Abbas & Chikwari, 2023). In this sense, the coverage marked a departure from earlier Western narratives that often-rendered women in Muslim-majority societies primarily as oppressed subjects, instead emphasizing political agency and collective mobilization.

4.1.4 Canada's Connection and the Diaspora Perspective

A defining feature of selected Canadian coverage was the effort to localize the Iranian protests by connecting them to domestic political contexts and diaspora communities. This aligns with research suggesting that international news becomes more salient when framed through emotional, cultural, or geographic proximity (Curran, 2011; Artz, 2022). Articles frequently foregrounded solidarity rallies and interviews with Iranian-Canadian activists. For example, CTV News's coverage of demonstrations in Vancouver quoted an organizer stating, "We are trying to be their voices," positioning diaspora actors as intermediaries between events in Iran and Canadian audiences (CTV News, 2022). The article relied primarily on local protest participants as interpretive sources rather than individuals located inside Iran.

Across the sample, solidarity demonstrations in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, and Halifax were framed as expressions of shared democratic and human rights values. Articles described rallies as calls for "freedom" and "women's rights," often situating them within Canada's broader identity as a defender of liberal democratic principles. Through this localization strategy, diaspora communities were positioned as both witnesses and moral translators of events unfolding abroad (Ekwo, 2011).

Importantly, diaspora voices were a recurring sourcing pattern. Of the fifteen articles analyzed, eight articles included at least one Iranian-Canadian activist, scholar, or community member as a quoted source. None featured direct quotations from individuals currently inside Iran. This imbalance reflects the structural realities of reporting on a restricted environment but also demonstrates how interpretive authority often shifted toward transnational intermediaries.

This approach produced a dual narrative. On one level, it positioned Canada as globally engaged and ethically responsive. On another, it reframed the Iranian movement through Western constructs of feminism and liberal democracy, echoing critiques of cultural translation in Western media coverage of Middle Eastern women's movements (Chan-Malik, 2011; Semati et al., 2021). The prominence of diaspora voices also reflected structural constraints. In the absence of direct access to Iran, diaspora actors assumed a central role in shaping narratives, illustrating what scholars describe as transnational mediation shaped by distance, memory, and political positioning (Bayat, 2023; Naficy, 2021).

4.1.5 Challenges of Reporting and Information Verification

Across the sample, journalists explicitly acknowledged in their produced journalism the challenges of reporting from a restricted environment. Articles frequently noted the absence of correspondents in Iran and the difficulty of independently confirming protest footage or casualty figures (CBC News, 2022e; CTV News, 2022c). Disclaimers such as "CBC News has not independently verified these videos" appeared repeatedly, particularly in stories relying on social media footage circulated during internet shutdowns (CBC News, 2022e).

One article, for example, stated that videos appearing to show confrontations between protesters and security forces “could not be independently verified due to restrictions on foreign media access,” directly acknowledging epistemic limits. Another report referenced Iran’s internet disruptions and surveillance environment, noting that communications blackouts made real-time confirmation difficult (CTV News, 2022c). These disclosures align with scholarship on authoritarian information control and constrained media environments (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015; Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

In response to these limitations, journalists relied in their sampled articles on citizen-generated videos, NGO reporting, and international wire services. For instance, coverage referenced reports from human rights organizations documenting arrests and executions, while also embedding social media footage attributed to protest participants. This pattern reflects what scholars describe as networked or remote witnessing in contemporary crisis reporting (Bruns & Highfield, 2012; Hermida, 2010; Naficy, 2021).

Several articles addressed these constraints reflexively. Phrases such as “has not independently verified” and explanations of editorial caution functioned as transparency markers, signaling awareness of verification challenges. Such disclosures align with evolving norms in digital journalism ethics, where audiences expect clarity regarding sourcing limitations and uncertainty (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d.; Priest, 2009).

4.1.6 Summary and Interpretation

The thematic analysis of fifteen articles from CBC News, CTV News, and Global News reveals that Canadian coverage of Iran’s anti-hijab protests combined human-centered storytelling, diaspora localization, and explicit acknowledgment of information constraints. Mahsa Amini was framed as both an individual victim and a global symbol of resistance, providing a powerful narrative entry point while limiting deeper structural analysis.

Coverage read as shaped by the realities of remote reporting: fragmented digital evidence, diaspora mediation, and institutional reliance on secondary sources. This produced narratives that were empathetic yet mediated, immediate yet distant, and globally resonant yet culturally translated. While gaps remained—particularly regarding political context and internal diversity—the analyzed journalist production did demonstrate ethical awareness, reflexive transparency, and sensitivity in navigating a restricted reporting environment.

4.2 Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews

The second phase of this study consisted of semi-structured interviews with Canadian journalists who reported on the death of Mahsa Amini and the subsequent anti-hijab protests between September 2022 and May 2024. A total of eleven interviews were conducted with reporters, producers, and editors from CBC, CTV, and Global News. The interviews lasted between five and sixty minutes; most ranged from thirty to forty-five minutes, while three were shorter due to participants’ limited involvement or recall.

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow flexibility, depth, and responsiveness to participants' experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman, 2013). All interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), ensuring both inductive insight and conceptual alignment with literature on journalism in restricted environments. The purpose of the interviews was to examine how Canadian journalists navigated ethical tensions, professional constraints, and practical barriers when covering Iran remotely — a context shaped by censorship, surveillance, and limited field access (Reporters Without Borders, 2023; Farivar, 2011).

Six themes emerged (see Table 4):

- Distance and access barriers,
- Reliance on digital verification and citizen media,
- Ethical responsibility and emotional engagement,
- Institutional constraints and editorial framing,
- Representation and cultural sensitivity,
- Evolving definitions of global-local journalism.

Table 4. Overview of Interview Themes and Analytical Focus

Theme	Description	Key Analytical Focus (RQ Alignment)
Theme 1: Distance and Access Barriers	Journalists' inability to report from within Iran due to physical, financial, temporal, and safety constraints.	Explores how lack of on-the-ground access shapes reporting practices and limits journalistic authority (RQ2).
Theme 2: Reliance on Digital Verification and Citizen Media	Use of wire services, social media content, and verification infrastructures to compensate for physical distance.	Examines verification strategies and epistemic hierarchies in restricted reporting environments (RQ2).
Theme 3: Ethical Responsibility and Emotional Engagement	Journalists' ethical decision-making, emotional proximity, and reflexive awareness when covering violence and repression.	Addresses how journalists negotiate professional norms, personal identity, and ethical responsibility (RQ3).
Theme 4: Institutional Constraints and Editorial Framing	Structural newsroom pressures, assignment practices, and editorial priorities shaping coverage.	Analyzes institutional influences on story framing, visibility, and continuity (RQ2).
Theme 5: Representation and Cultural Sensitivity	Concerns about Western-centric narratives, cultural misrepresentation, and translation.	Investigates representational ethics and cross-cultural

		meaning-making in international journalism (RQ3).
Theme 6: Evolving Definitions of Global–Local Journalism	Blurred boundaries between foreign and local reporting through diaspora communities and digital circulation.	Explores how journalists reconceptualize foreign news through a Canadian and diasporic lens (RQ3).

Note: Themes were developed through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and reflect recurring patterns across participants with varying levels of involvement in coverage.

4.2.1 Distance and Access Barriers

A dominant theme across the interviews was the structural distance between Canadian journalists and events unfolding inside Iran. This theme emerged early and organically in the interviews. When participants were asked to describe their experience covering the protests, many immediately began by noting their physical absence from the scene, often stating variations of “I wasn’t there” or “We didn’t have someone on the ground.” In this sense, distance was not introduced solely through targeted questioning about constraints; rather, it surfaced spontaneously as a defining condition of their reporting practice.

Participants consistently emphasized that the absence of on-the-ground access fundamentally shaped how the story was reported, verified, and contextualized. This distance was not framed as a professional choice, but as an unavoidable structural condition of contemporary foreign reporting under political, financial, and temporal constraints. Several journalists described a strong

awareness of what was missing from their coverage due to their physical absence. As one participant noted:

“I was not in Tehran or elsewhere... you want to be on the ground.” (Participant 3)

Another echoed this limitation more explicitly:

“We’re not physically there... you are relying on secondary information.” (Participant 6)

These statements reflect a shared professional norm that values firsthand observation as the ideal mode of reporting, even as journalists acknowledged that such access was impossible in the Iranian context. The absence of correspondents on the ground heightened reliance on mediated sources and reinforced a sense of informational distance from unfolding events.

Financial and institutional realities further constrained access. Several participants described covering the protests not because of subject expertise, but due to availability within understaffed newsrooms. One journalist explained:

“It’s not always realistic for budgetary reasons.” (Participant 9)

Others emphasized the provisional nature of their involvement:

“I was just filling in.” (Participant 4)

“I didn’t know much.” (Participant 5)

These comments reveal how foreign crisis coverage can be shaped by newsroom logistics rather than sustained specialization. Journalists assigned to the Iran protests frequently relied on existing templates, prior coverage, or wire stories to compensate for limited background knowledge — a dynamic that directly affected the depth and continuity of reporting. However, this pattern was not

uniform. One participant had prior experience covering Iran-related issues and was selected in part due to that background. After initially being assigned the story, this journalist expressed personal interest and subsequently pitched additional related coverage. This exception suggests that while newsroom mobilization around the protests was largely assignment-driven, individual initiative could emerge once the story was underway.

Overall, journalists assigned to the Iran protests frequently relied on existing templates, prior coverage, or wire stories to compensate for limited background knowledge — a dynamic that directly affected the depth and continuity of reporting.

Despite these frustrations, participants overwhelmingly framed remote reporting as preferable to silence. One journalist articulated this tension succinctly:

“I’d rather be doing the story under these limitations than not doing the story at all.” (Participant 2)

When asked why, several participants explained that refusing to report due to limited access would effectively render the protests invisible to Canadian audiences. Even partial or imperfect coverage, they argued, ensured that the movement was acknowledged and that ongoing violence was not ignored. As one participant reflected, failing to report would amount to *“forgetting that these people exist,”* whereas publishing what could be responsibly verified maintained public awareness of the crisis.

In this sense, journalists described their decision to continue reporting as grounded in professional responsibility rather than convenience. They acknowledged the constraints of distance — limited verification, reliance on mediated sources, and lack of firsthand observation — but framed engagement as consistent with journalism’s core obligation to inform the public. The ethical tension, therefore, was not between right and wrong reporting, but between incomplete reporting and silence. For many participants, silence was the less defensible option.

Concerns about access were also shaped by ethical considerations surrounding source safety. Journalists emphasized that limited access was not only the result of censorship or logistics, but also of deliberate restraint aimed at minimizing harm. As one participant asked:

“How do you cover this story safely... and not place people in further danger?” (Participant 8)

Under such conditions, distance functioned simultaneously as a constraint and as a protective measure — limiting narrative depth while reducing potential risk to vulnerable sources. Finally, some participants pointed to a temporal mismatch between news cycles and the feasibility of physical deployment. One journalist noted:

“By the time I would get to work... those protests wouldn’t be happening.” (Participant 11)

This observation highlights how the speed of protest movements, combined with institutional lag, renders traditional foreign correspondence increasingly impractical. As a result, journalists are compelled to construct narratives in real time from afar, relying on fragmented and rapidly changing information.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that distance and access barriers were not peripheral challenges but central conditions shaping Canadian coverage of Iran’s anti-hijab movement. Physical absence, financial constraints, ethical considerations, and temporal pressures collectively defined the parameters within which interviewed journalists operated. This theme directly addresses RQ2, revealing how restricted access complicated verification and contextualization, and sets the foundation for understanding the adaptive strategies discussed in subsequent themes (RQ3).

4.2.2 Reliance on Digital Verification and Citizen Media

In the absence of direct access to Iran, interviewed journalists described an extensive reliance on digital material and citizen-generated content as the primary means of documenting events. Participants emphasized that social media platforms, messaging apps, and user-generated videos became indispensable tools for monitoring protests, police violence, and public dissent. However, this reliance was accompanied by deep skepticism and a layered verification process.

Interviewed journalists consistently described a hierarchy of trust when assessing information. Rather than treating raw social media content as authoritative, participants emphasized prioritizing material that had already passed through other institutional filters. As one journalist explained, they made use of other news organizations as verification stand-ins or short cuts:

“Reuters, Associated Press, CNN, BBC... news organizations that we trust.” (Participant 1)

Another participant described social media as a starting point rather than a final source:

“One of the ways is to monitor social media — women in Iran posting about their experiences — but that’s just a starting point. You’re looking to see if others are reporting the same thing, whether it’s being corroborated somewhere else.” (Participant 7)

These statements illustrate how journalists used social media primarily as an alert system, while relying on established wire services or other organizations to provide verification and legitimacy. Several participants acknowledged that they often depended on Reuters or AP to verify user-generated footage, effectively outsourcing verification due to time constraints and lack of language expertise. One participant noted:

“Reuters will have user-generated content that they have verified themselves.” (Participant 6)

Another described this reliance as a form of professional relief:

“We were lucky... there was a lot from the wires... we trusted that footage.” (Participant 10)

This reliance can be interpreted as an adaptive professional strategy rather than a purely positive or negative practice. In contexts where direct reporting is impossible, international wire services function as intermediary verification infrastructures that allow journalists to circulate information while maintaining a degree of credibility. At the same time, this dependency concentrates epistemic authority in a small number of global news agencies, potentially narrowing the range of independently verified sources available to reporters. As such, participants’ accounts suggest that reliance on wire services represents a pragmatic compromise between the professional norm of independent verification and the structural limitations of reporting on closed or highly restricted environments.

Language emerged as a significant barrier in the verification process. Journalists repeatedly expressed concern about confirming the meaning of chants, captions, and interviews in Persian or Kurdish. One participant stated:

“I want to make sure that the language... is actually reflecting what I’m saying.” (Participant 4)

To mitigate this challenge, journalists described cross-verification strategies that involved comparing multiple videos, identifying recurring landmarks, and observing repetition across sources. As one journalist explained:

“You’re seeing the same building... a different perspective.” (Participant 9)

Others relied on informal internal networks, seeking help from multilingual colleagues under deadline pressure:

“CBC does have a network of people who speak different languages... but it has to happen quickly.” (Participant 2)

Despite these strategies, participants expressed ongoing discomfort with using social media as primary evidence. Many described it as inherently unreliable unless mediated by institutional processes. One journalist stated:

“Social media isn’t always what it seems to be.” (Participant 11)

Another emphasized transparency as an ethical safeguard:

“We would be really honest and say this is an unverified video.” (Participant 5)

Together, these accounts demonstrate how digital verification functioned as both a workaround and a vulnerability. While citizen media expanded visibility, it also intensified ethical and methodological anxieties, reshaping journalistic authority under conditions of restricted access. These verification challenges also help explain several patterns identified in the content analysis above, including the reliance on wire-service footage, the frequent use of disclaimers about unverified videos, and the emphasis on highly visible protest imagery that could be more easily authenticated across multiple sources.

4.2.3 Ethical Responsibility and Emotional Engagement

Participants described covering Iran’s anti-hijab movement as emotionally taxing and ethically complex. Many emphasized that while journalistic norms can require or argue for detachment, the content of the story — particularly violence against women — made emotional neutrality difficult to sustain. Some journalists described professional detachment as a coping mechanism necessitated by workload and pace. One participant noted:

“I do a story almost every single day... it’s hard to follow up.” (Participant 8)

Others articulated a form of emotional proximity that did not translate into activism. As one journalist explained:

“I can’t be an activist anymore... my journalism speaks to the truth.” (Participant 3)

In the interview, this participant was reflecting on the tension between personal sympathy for the protesters and the professional obligation to maintain journalistic independence. They explained

that while they felt deeply affected by the stories of Iranian women resisting compulsory hijab laws, their role was not to advocate directly for the movement but to report events accurately and responsibly. For this journalist, producing truthful and verified reporting was itself understood as a meaningful contribution to public awareness, without crossing the professional boundary into activism. Several participants also demonstrated reflexive awareness of their own cultural limitations and blind spots. For example, one journalist stated:

“I have blind spots... I don’t necessarily even know what they are.” (Participant 6)

This reflexivity was closely tied to ethical concerns about protecting vulnerable sources. Interviewed journalists expressed anxiety about the long-term consequences of visibility for interviewees and their families. As one participant asked:

“People might feel empowered to speak... but what happens later?” (Participant 1)

Gender also shaped emotional engagement. Some participants identified personally with the story without framing their work as advocacy. One journalist reflected:

“What I do in my personal life affects my work... I think about it afterwards.” (Participant 9)

Another stated more explicitly:

“I’m a woman, I’m Muslim... I used to be an activist.” (Participant 4)

These reflections illustrate how journalists navigated ethical responsibility not only toward audiences and sources, but toward their own identities. Emotional engagement became something

to manage rather than eliminate — a tension that underscores the moral labor of reporting on gendered violence from afar.

4.2.4 Institutional Constraints and Editorial Framing

Institutional dynamics strongly shaped how interviewed journalists approached the Iran protests. Many participants described being assigned to the story due to availability rather than expertise. One journalist explained:

“Not because I have an expertise... but because we didn’t have enough people.” (Participant 10)

Another noted the absence of sustained beats:

“I don’t really have a beat... every day you’re covering a new story.” (Participant 5)

This assignment structure helps contextualize several of the patterns identified in the content analysis, including reliance on wire services, emphasis on highly visible protest symbols, and the use of diaspora sources to provide context. When journalists are required to cover complex international events without prior specialization or extensive preparation time, reporting may rely more heavily on readily available information sources and established narrative frames.

Participants frequently described this dynamic as part of the routine realities of contemporary newsroom production, where speed and staffing constraints shape editorial decisions. Nevertheless, editorial direction itself was often minimal and broad. One participant described assignments as vague:

“Let’s do the latest update out of Iran... as broad as that.” (Participant 2)

Participants also highlighted structural hierarchies in foreign coverage, including the centralization of international reporting in overseas bureaus:

“London (office) does everywhere but the U.S.” (Participant 7)

Audience interest was frequently cited as a factor influencing editorial decisions. One journalist stated:

“There’s not the same appetite as there is for European stories.” (Participant 6)

As a result, follow-up coverage was often limited. Interviewed journalists expressed frustration at the pace of news cycles and the difficulty of returning to complex international stories. One participant reflected:

“Sometimes we fail at coming back to a story.” (Participant 11)

Another asked:

“There’s a lot of attention at the beginning when something dramatic happens. But after a few weeks the news cycle moves on. And you start wondering, what happens when the media’s eyes are no longer on the story?” (Participant 8)

These constraints reveal how institutional priorities, rather than journalistic intent, often determined the depth and longevity of international coverage on the case study — reinforcing the limitations identified in RQ2.

4.2.5 Representation and Cultural Sensitivity

Participants demonstrated strong awareness of the risks associated with Western-centric framing when covering Iran's anti-hijab protests. The interviews often discussed the challenge of interpreting events occurring within a political, religious, and cultural system that many Canadian journalists acknowledged they only partially understood. It was common for journalists to reflect on the limits of their cultural knowledge and to question how their own perspectives might influence the framing of the story. This reflexive awareness could be interpreted as an attempt to avoid reproducing simplified narratives about Iranian society or portraying the protests solely through Western liberal frameworks.

Several journalists explicitly acknowledged their cultural positioning. One noted:

"I'm from a Western culture... religion isn't as big historically." (Participant 3)

Uncertainty about cultural accuracy was common, particularly when journalists were translating political symbols, slogans, or social dynamics for Canadian audiences. One journalist asked:

"Am I aware of the full cultural context?" (Participant 6)

Despite these concerns, interviewed journalists described deliberate efforts to resist simplification and emphasize the complexity of Iranian society and politics. This discussion often touched on the importance of recognizing regional, ethnic, and political diversity within Iran rather than presenting the protests as a uniform national movement. One participant highlighted the importance of ethnic context:

"She (Mahsa Amini) was Kurdish... that dimension of her matters." (Participant 9)

This observation also connects to the content analysis findings above. While some of the analyzed articles acknowledged Amini's Kurdish identity, this dimension was often mentioned briefly rather than explored in depth. As discussed in Section 4.1, the coverage tended to foreground symbolic protest actions and gender politics, while the ethnic and regional dynamics that shaped the protests received comparatively limited attention.

Diaspora voices were also raised in the interviews as playing a central role in representation. Interviewed journalists frequently described relying on Iranian-Canadians to help localize events and provide cultural interpretation. This often took the form of interviews with Iranian-Canadian activists, scholars, and community members who could explain the significance of protest symbols, slogans, and political demands for Canadian audiences. One participant commented on making use of:

"Iranian family members here in Montreal." (Participant 4)

Such sourcing practices reflected both practical and structural realities. In the absence of direct access to sources inside Iran, diaspora communities often served as accessible intermediaries who could provide language translation, cultural context, and emotional insight into events unfolding abroad. However, interviewed journalists explained that language mediation remained a persistent concern. Several participants noted the difficulty of verifying chants, interviews, or captions circulating online when they did not speak Persian or Kurdish fluently. To mitigate this challenge, journalists described seeking help from colleagues, translators, or members of diaspora communities when interpreting audio or written material. As one journalist explained:

“I want to make sure the sound up is reflecting what I’m saying.” (Participant 1)

These findings reveal a careful balancing act between representation, translation, and ethical restraint, highlighting the fragility of cultural accuracy in remote reporting. It was particularly striking how several journalists described their role as one of cautious interpretation rather than authoritative explanation, emphasizing the need to acknowledge uncertainty when translating complex cultural and political realities for Canadian audiences.

4.2.6 Evolving Definitions of Global–Local Journalism

Finally, participants reflected on how covering Iran’s anti-hijab movement blurred traditional distinctions between foreign and domestic journalism. Rather than viewing the story as purely international news, many journalists described it as relevant to Canadian audiences because of the presence of large Iranian diaspora communities and the political resonance of the protests within Canada. In this sense, the protests were often framed not simply as events occurring abroad, but as issues that intersected with Canadian social and political life.

For several participants, this meant consciously adapting their reporting to emphasize local relevance. Journalists described attempting to situate events in Iran within Canadian contexts, highlighting diaspora reactions, solidarity protests, and the political responses of Canadian officials. One journalist summarized this approach by noting that coverage often required reframing the story through a Canadian lens in order to make it meaningful for domestic audiences. Diaspora communities were therefore described as both narrative bridges and practical sources of interpretation. Journalists frequently relied on Iranian-Canadian activists, scholars, and community

members to help explain the political significance of the protests and to contextualize events unfolding in Iran. As one participant explained:

“You really have to lean into the Persian... community in Canada.” (Participant 7)

Through these interactions, diaspora voices helped translate the protests into terms that Canadian audiences could understand, while also providing journalists with cultural and political context that might otherwise have been difficult to access. In this way, diaspora communities functioned as intermediaries between events occurring in Iran and the narratives constructed within Canadian media.

At the same time, several journalists expressed discomfort with their own positional authority when reporting on a movement unfolding in a country where they were not physically present. One participant questioned the legitimacy of their role by asking:

“Why am I doing it? These protests are happening in Iran and I sign off with my location; Montreal?” (Participant 5)

This comment reflects a broader tension identified in the interviews: while journalists felt a professional responsibility to report on the protests, they were also aware of the distance between themselves and the events they were covering. Some participants suggested that reporters based closer to the region might possess greater expertise or contextual understanding. As one journalist remarked:

“Margaret Evans would probably do a better job.” (Participant 10)

Digital media further complicated these boundaries between local and global reporting. Several participants observed that social media allowed information to circulate rapidly across borders, making the protests simultaneously local to Iran and globally visible. One participant reflected on the circular nature of contemporary news flows:

“It doesn’t just air in the West... it’s circular.” (Participant 11)

In this environment, journalists described international reporting as increasingly networked rather than geographically defined. Stories emerging in one part of the world quickly became embedded in transnational media ecosystems involving diaspora communities, social media users, and global news organizations.

Together, these reflections suggest that global journalism is no longer defined solely by geographic proximity, but by the relationships, networks, and audiences that shape how stories are produced and consumed. For the journalists interviewed in this study, covering Iran’s anti-hijab movement often meant navigating a hybrid form of reporting that combined elements of foreign correspondence with domestic community reporting.

1. Margaret Evans is a senior international correspondent for CBC News, known for her extensive reporting from the Middle East, including coverage of Iran, Afghanistan, and other conflict zones.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter returns explicitly to the case study of Iran’s anti-hijab movement following the death of Mahsa Amini and situates the findings within both the current sociopolitical context in Iran and the scholarly debates outlined in the literature review. By integrating the content analysis and interview findings, the chapter explains not only how selected Canadian media covered the movement, but why coverage took the forms it did, and what this reveals about contemporary journalism under conditions of restriction, distance, and transnational mediation.

5.1 Re-centering the Case Study: Iran’s Anti-Hijab Movement in Context

The anti-hijab movement that erupted in Iran in September 2022 represented one of the most sustained and symbolically powerful challenges to the Islamic Republic since 1979. Sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini in the custody of Iran’s morality police, the protests rapidly evolved into a broader movement contesting gendered state violence, authoritarian governance, and generational inequality (Bayat, 2023). As discussed in the literature review, scholars have emphasized that this movement cannot be understood solely as a women’s rights struggle but must be situated within longer histories of feminist resistance, Kurdish marginalization, and post-revolutionary state control (Mir-Hosseini, 2007; Bayat & Hodges, 2022).

The findings of this study show that selected Canadian media clearly recognized the protest movement as a major international event and consistently framed it through themes of repression, courage, and human rights. However, the depth and complexity emphasized in the academic literature were only partially reflected in news coverage. This gap underscores a central tension

identified in journalism scholarship: the challenge of translating complex, locally embedded struggles into accessible narratives for distant audiences (Chan-Malik, 2011; Kurzman, 2012).

By returning to the Iranian case itself, the findings demonstrate that limitations in coverage were not rooted in journalistic disinterest or ideological bias, but rather in structural conditions of reporting on a closed and highly surveilled state—conditions that shaped both what could be known and what could be published.

5.2 Integrating Content Analysis and Interviews: Explaining Narrative Patterns

The content analysis revealed that Canadian news articles relied heavily on recurring frames: state violence, symbolic resistance (particularly the act of removing the hijab), and the moral clarity of the protestors' demands. These patterns closely align with scholarship documenting Western media's tendency to foreground human rights violations when covering Iran and the Middle East (Semati et al., 2021; Chan-Malik, 2011).

However, the interviews clarify why these frames dominated. Journalists repeatedly described working with fragmented information ecosystems, limited access to primary sources, and intense time pressures. In line with Zeitzoff's (2017) findings on digital conflict reporting, journalists acted as remote interpreters, assembling narratives from social media videos, encrypted messages, wire services, and diaspora testimony. The reliance on what interviewees termed "parachuted expertise" reflects Hermida's (2010) and Bruns and Highfield's (2012) arguments that journalists increasingly curate knowledge rather than generate it firsthand.

Journalists interviewed in this study reflected these dynamics by describing their work as assembling stories from fragmented sources rather than producing firsthand reporting. Participants repeatedly discussed relying on wire services, verified user-generated content, and diaspora voices to interpret events unfolding inside Iran. These constraints help explain the narrative patterns identified in the content analysis, particularly the emphasis on symbolic acts of resistance and diaspora perspectives, which were more accessible to reporters working at a distance. In this sense, the interviews help clarify why themes such as symbolic resistance and localized diaspora framing (see Sections 4.1.3 and 4.1.4) emerged so prominently in the analyzed articles.

This integration of findings addresses a core concern raised in the literature review: whether narrative simplification reflects ideological framing or structural necessity. The evidence here supports the latter. While journalists were aware of the historical, ethnic, and feminist dimensions emphasized by scholars, they often lacked the institutional space to incorporate them meaningfully into daily reporting.

5.3 Emotion, Ethics, and the Human Cost of Reporting Iran

A key contribution of this study lies in foregrounding the emotional and ethical dimensions of covering Iran's protests. The content analysis showed restrained references to trauma and risk, whereas interviews revealed extensive behind-the-scenes emotional labour. Journalists described receiving graphic footage, managing fear for sources inside Iran, and making constant ethical judgments about verification and publication.

These findings directly echo journalism scholarship on trauma and moral injury (Dworznic-Hoak, 2006) and extend it into the context of transnational digital reporting. The emotional burden described by participants reinforces Bayat's (2023) argument that contemporary protest movements are mediated not only through images and narratives, but also through affective transmission across borders.

The ethical tensions—particularly around source protection, digital surveillance, and the risks faced by individuals appearing in protest footage—also align with Reuter and Szakonyi's (2015) research on authoritarian information environments. While these concerns were largely invisible in published articles, they fundamentally shaped reporting practices as described in Theme 3: Ethical Responsibility and Emotional Engagement and Theme 2: Reliance on Digital Verification and Citizen Media. Together, these findings reveal a disconnect between the emotional and ethical labour performed by journalists and the comparatively restrained tone that appears in the final published coverage.

5.4 Canadian Journalism within Global and Diasporic Media Systems

Positioning Canadian coverage within the global media ecosystem highlights Canada's hybrid role as both follower and translator of international narratives. As identified in the literature, Canadian outlets lack sustained foreign bureaus in Iran and therefore depend heavily on international wire services (Artz, 2022). This structural dependency was confirmed by interviewees and explains the similarity between Canadian coverage and broader Western narratives.

At the same time, the findings show that the selected Canadian journalism introduced distinctive emphases through diaspora mediation. Coverage frequently foregrounded Iranian-Canadian protests, community grief, and political advocacy (see, for example, Global News, 2022) reflecting what Curran (2011) describes as the localization of global events. This pattern aligns with Ekwo's (2011) work on diaspora influence in transnational storytelling, where distance simultaneously enables access and introduces representational tensions.

While diaspora voices enriched coverage, interviewed journalists acknowledged the risk of overrepresentation and partial perspectives—an issue extensively debated in the literature on Middle Eastern media representation (Chan-Malik, 2011). Thus, the interviewees, and perhaps wider Canadian journalism, operated within overlapping global, national, and diasporic frameworks, each shaping narrative boundaries. In this context, responsible and informed international reporting becomes essential not only for factual accuracy but also for ensuring that distant struggles are represented in ways that are inclusive, culturally aware, and attentive to the communities most affected.

5.5 Implications for Journalism Practice and Theory

This case study reinforces several theoretical insights from the literature review. First, it confirms that foreign reporting is increasingly conducted without physical proximity, supporting arguments about the transformation of journalism into a digitally mediated, networked practice (Bruns & Highfield, 2012). Second, it demonstrates how structural newsroom constraints—time, expertise, format—continue to shape narrative outcomes, as outlined by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014). Importantly, the study extends existing scholarship by showing how these dynamics play out in

the specific context of Iran, where surveillance, repression, and diaspora mediation intensify ethical and emotional pressures. The results also add new elements worthy of reflection, most importantly the central role of diaspora communities as interpretive intermediaries and the largely invisible emotional and ethical labour undertaken by journalists reporting from a distance. The Iranian case thus functions not only as an example, but as a stress test for contemporary journalism's capacity to cover restricted environments responsibly. The Iranian case thus functions not only as an example, but as a stress test for contemporary journalism's capacity to cover restricted environments responsibly.

5.6 Recommendations for Journalistic Coverage of Restricted Movements

Drawing from the findings and the literature, this study concludes with three recommendations for journalists covering movements like Iran's anti-hijab protests:

- 1. Invest in Contextual Literacy:** News organizations should allocate resources for background expertise on regions under coverage, including historical, feminist, and sociopolitical training, to reduce reliance on reductive frames.
- 2. Strengthen Ethical and Digital Safety Protocols:** Journalists require institutional support in digital verification, encryption practices, and trauma-informed reporting when engaging with sources in authoritarian contexts.

3. Diversify Transnational Voices: While diaspora perspectives are essential, journalists should actively seek a plurality of voices and clearly contextualize positionality to avoid narrative over-concentration.

5.7 Future Needs

By returning to the Iranian case study, linking findings directly to the literature, and integrating content and interview analyses, this chapter demonstrates that Canadian coverage of Iran's anti-hijab movement was shaped less by ideological bias than by structural and ethical constraints inherent in transnational reporting. The study highlights both the limitations and the possibilities of contemporary journalism—and underscores the need for systemic support if media are to adequately cover complex struggles unfolding beyond their borders.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis examined how Canadian media covered the death of Mahsa Amini and the ensuing anti-hijab movement in Iran, offering a multilayered analysis that brought together journalistic practices, content patterns, and the broader socio-political conditions under which reporting took place. By integrating insights from a content analysis of selected Canadian news articles with interview data from journalists directly involved in reporting these events, the study provides a better understanding of the opportunities, constraints, and responsibilities shaping Canadian media's engagement with transnational human rights issues.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Canadian journalists navigated a deeply complex information environment—one defined by restricted access, state surveillance, digital repression, and fragmented verification pathways. Despite these challenges, the coverage generally displayed a commitment to contextualizing events, amplifying human stories, and situating Iran's protests within broader debates about gender rights, state violence, and global solidarity. The content analysis revealed consistent patterns across outlets: a human-centered focus, strong reliance on diaspora and advocacy organizations for ground-level information, and efforts to frame the movement within themes of resistance, state repression, and international reaction. Yet these patterns also highlighted certain gaps, particularly limited structural analysis of long-term socio-political dynamics in Iran and relatively modest engagement with the diversity of voices within the Iranian diaspora.

The interviews illuminated why these patterns emerged. Journalists described the logistical and ethical challenges of reporting on a country with severely restricted press freedoms, emphasizing

the difficulties of verifying information, protecting sources, and balancing urgency with accuracy. They also expressed a sense of responsibility to maintain public attention on events that risked fading from the news cycle, especially given Canada's significant Iranian diaspora and the global visibility of Mahsa Amini's death. Their reflections underscored the ways in which institutional constraints—limited resources, editorial priorities, and the pressures of daily news production—shaped the depth and direction of coverage.

By bringing these insights together, this thesis contributes to broader scholarly conversations about transnational media, information inequality, and journalism under conditions of restriction. It demonstrates that coverage of international movements is not solely shaped by geopolitical distance or editorial choices, but also by the interplay of global digital infrastructures, diasporic networks, and journalistic norms. In the case of Iran's anti-hijab movement, Canadian media played a meaningful role in sustaining global attention, even while navigating the limitations imposed by distance and restricted access.

The study also advances our understanding of how local journalism intersects with international issues. For journalists working in Canada—especially in multicultural urban contexts—international stories are often local stories. The Iranian protests resonated deeply with communities in cities like Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver, shaping how these stories were framed and why they received sustained attention. This reinforces an important conceptual point: global events reverberate unevenly across diasporic landscapes, and journalists must continuously negotiate the relationship between local relevance and global significance.

The findings carry several implications for journalistic practice. They highlight the need for sustained training and institutional support in covering restricted environments, especially as digital repression becomes more widespread globally. They also suggest opportunities to diversify sourcing practices, deepen contextual analysis, and collaborate more effectively with experts and community voices. As transnational social movements continue to emerge and evolve, the capacity to report responsibly, ethically, and rigorously across borders becomes increasingly essential.

Finally, this research invites further study. Future work could expand the temporal scope, compare Canadian media with other Western or Global South outlets, or examine audience reception within diaspora communities. As global protest movements continue to gain visibility through digital platforms, understanding how national media systems interpret, reframe, or mediate these mobilizations will remain vital. It is important to also note the limitations of this work in only collecting a limited number of news articles and interviews for analysis. The results should therefore not be overgeneralized to wider Canadian media or other topics and be interpreted with caution as to how their specifics relate to other issues. Nevertheless, they do provide a clear case study for future reflection and advancement.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that the selected Canadian media coverage of the Mahsa Amini movement serves as an important case study of journalism at the intersection of digital repression, diasporic engagement, and global solidarity. It underscores both the possibilities and the limitations of reporting on international human rights issues from afar. At a broader level, the study affirms the essential role of journalism in bearing witness to injustice, amplifying marginalized voices, and shaping public understanding of struggles for freedom across borders.

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Appendix 1

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Media Representation of Social Movements: A Case Study of Canadian Coverage of Iran

Researcher: Aatefeh Padidar

Researcher's Contact Information: 438-508-9799

aatefeh.padidar@mail.concordia.ca

Faculty Supervisor: David Secko

Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: david.secko@concordia.ca

Source of funding for the study: -

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate. If there is anything you do not understand or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to explore the challenges faced by journalists in covering the anti-hijab movement in Iran, especially in situations where access to the field is restricted. The study will focus on understanding the use of secondary sources, social media, and other reporting strategies in covering sensitive political events in an environment where journalists face significant barriers.

B. PROCEDURES

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview. During this interview, you will be asked about your experiences, challenges, and reflections on covering the anti-hijab movement in Iran. The interview will last approximately

30–60 minutes and will be conducted at a time and place convenient for you (e.g., via phone, audio call apps).

In total, participating in this study will take approximately 1–1.5 hours.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

This research is not intended to benefit you personally. Potential benefits include contributing to a broader understanding of the challenges faced by journalists reporting on politically sensitive issues, especially in restricted environments.

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. However, discussing sensitive topics may cause some emotional discomfort. If you feel uncomfortable at any point, you are free to stop the interview or withdraw without consequences.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will gather the following information as part of this research: Interview responses, which will be audio-recorded and transcribed.

We will not allow anyone outside the research team to access the information. The data collected will be coded to ensure your identity is kept confidential. Your real name will not be linked to your responses, however, you can choose the level of disclosure of your identity in the final report and any publications resulting from this research.

We intend to publish the results of the research. Please indicate below whether you accept to be identified in the publications:

I accept that my name and the information I provide appear in publications of the results of the research. However, my real name will not be linked to any responses.

Please do not publish my name as part of the results of the research.

We will destroy the information five years after the end of the study.

E. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

Participation in this research is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate or stop participating at any time without facing any consequences. You can also ask for the information you provided to be excluded from the study, and this request will be respected if it is made up to one month after your individual interview.

There are no compensatory incentives for participating in this research.

F. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME _____ (please _____ print)

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page I. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 2425 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

Appendix 2

Draft Email

Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Research Study on Challenges in Reporting on Iran's Anti-Hijab Movement

Dear [Name],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Aatefeh Padidar, and I am currently conducting research for my master's thesis at Concordia University. Additionally, I work as a journalist at CBC Montreal. My study focuses on the challenges faced by journalists in covering Iran's anti-hijab movement, specifically between September 2022 and May 2024.

I am reaching out to invite you to participate in an interview as part of this research. You were specifically chosen for this study because of your experience and involvement in reporting on this important movement. I will also be interviewing other journalists from CBC News, CTV News, and Global News who have similarly covered these events.

The goal of my study is to better understand the difficulties journalists face when reporting on politically sensitive issues, especially when access to the field is limited and there is a heavy reliance on secondary sources and social media. Your unique perspective on these challenges would provide invaluable insight into the evolving practices of journalism in such restricted environments.

What Participation Involves:

A semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30–60 minutes, conducted at a time that is convenient for you.

The interview will focus on your experiences, challenges, and reflections on covering the anti-hijab movement, especially the use of secondary sources and social media.

The interview will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes, but all identifying information will be kept confidential. Your name will only be disclosed if you explicitly choose it to be revealed.

Confidentiality and Voluntary Participation:

Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without any consequences.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please feel free to contact me. I would be happy to provide additional details and arrange an interview at your convenience.

Thank you for considering this invitation. I look forward to the possibility of speaking with you and learning from your experiences.

Best regards,

Aatefeh Padidar

Appendix 3

Instruments:

Interview Guide

Project Title:

Media Representation of Social Movements: A Case Study of Canadian Coverage of Iran's Anti-Hijab Movement

Purpose

of Interview:

To explore journalists' experiences and practices in reporting on Iran's anti-Hijab movement, including the challenges faced, reporting strategies used, and editorial decisions made.

Estimated Duration:

Approximately 30–60 minutes.

Format:

Semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. Follow-up questions may be asked based on participant responses.

Introduction to Participants:

Participants will be thanked for their time, reminded of the voluntary nature of the interview, and informed they may skip any questions they do not wish to answer.

Questions:

Background and Reporting Context

1. Can you describe your role during the time you reported on Iran's anti-Hijab movement?
2. How did you first become involved in covering this story?

Reporting Challenges and Strategies

3. What were the main challenges you encountered in reporting on this movement?
4. How did you verify information from Iran given the restrictions on journalists?
5. What sources or networks did you rely on for your coverage?

Journalistic Practices and Decision-Making

6. What editorial decisions shaped how your outlet covered the anti-Hijab movement?
7. Were there any internal discussions about framing, language, or positioning of this story?
8. How did you address concerns about accuracy, bias, or reporter safety in your coverage?

Reflections

9. Overall, how do you think Canadian media approaches covering international movements like this one?
10. Reflecting back, would you approach the coverage differently today?

Conclusion

11. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences covering the anti-Hijab movement?