

Constructing Threat through Proximity in Digital News: The Iran Nuclear Threat in US Partisan Media (2018–2026) in Focus

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بناء التهديد من خلال التقارب في الأنباء الرقمية: التهديد النووي الإيراني في وسائل الإعلام الحزبية الأمريكية (٢٠١٨-٢٠٢٦)

تحت المجهر

الاستاذ مساعد دكتور خالد روكان منصور. في علم اللغة ودراسات الترجمة

جامعة التراث-كلية الاداب قسم اللغة الانكليزية

المستخلص

رغم النقاش الواسع حول التسييس الأمني في الأوساط السياسية، لا يزال دور الأخبار الحزبية على الإنترنت في تأطير المخاطر الجيوسياسية من خلال "تجاوز المسافة" الرمزي موضع نقاش نظري. غالباً ما تقترض النماذج التقليدية وجود مركز وطني واحد، متجاهلةً التجزئة الإشارية الشائعة في الأنظمة الرقمية شديدة الاستقطاب، حيث يُنظر إلى الخصوم السياسيين المحليين في كثير من الأحيان على أنهم تهديدات وجودية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تفكيك البنية المكانية والزمانية والقيمية للتهديد النووي الإيراني في الإنتاج الرقمي لشبكة CNN و Fox News عبر الدورة الاستراتيجية الكاملة من ٢٠١٨ إلى ٢٠٢٦. استخدم الباحث منهجية مختلطة لتحليل مجموعة طويلة من حوالي ٤٢٠٠٠ كلمة، باستخدام نموذج المكاني-الزمني-القيمي. تكشف النتائج الكمية من ٦٥٣ علامة محددة عن انقسام حزبي ذي دلالة إحصائية، حيث تركز فوكس نيوز على العلامات القيمية والمكانية لبناء تهديد أمني مادي، بينما تركز سي إن إن على الإشارات الزمنية والقيمية التي تدور حول تدهور النظام الدبلوماسي. (STA) القائم على نظرية التقريب. والأهم من ذلك، تكشف الدراسة عن ظاهرة التجزئة الإشارية، حيث تقوم وسائل الإعلام بإعادة وضع الخصوم السياسيين المحليين في المركز الإشاري الخارجي (ODC) لتصوير السياسات المحلية على أنها تهديدات قريبة للأمن القومي. تُظهر هذه النتائج أن البعد الرمزي في العصر الرقمي هو نتاج مُصطنع للعمل الأيديولوجي، وليس نتاجاً للتقارب المادي. ويُقدّم هذا البحث إطاراً متيناً لفهم كيفية عمل مجموعات الأخبار الرقمية كأدوات للحرب المعرفية من خلال إعادة تشكيل إدراك الجمهور للواقع. (PT) ..

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية التقريب؛ التجزئة (المقصودة) الإشارية؛ الإعلام الحزبي؛ التهديد النووي الإيراني؛ الصحافة الرقمية

Abstract

While securitization has been widely debated in politics, the role of partisan online news in framing geopolitical risk by the symbolic 'crossing of distance' is still a theoretical debate. Traditional paradigms often assume a single national center, not recognizing the deictic fragmentation common to hyper-polarized digital ecosystems where domestic political rivals are often cast as existential threats. This study's goal is thus to deconstruct the spatial, temporal and axiological architecture of the Iranian nuclear threat in the digital output of CNN and Fox News across the full strategic cycle from 2018 to 2026. The researcher used a mixed-methods approach to analyze a longitudinal corpus of about 42,000 words, using the Spatial–Temporal–Axiological (STA) model based on Proximization Theory (PT). Quantitative results from 653 identified markers reveal a statistically significant partisan split, with Fox News emphasizing axiological and spatial markers to construct a material-

security threat and CNN focusing on temporal and axiological cues that revolve around the decay of diplomatic order. Crucially, the study reveals the phenomenon of deictic fragmentation, whereby media outlets discursively re-position domestic political adversaries into the Outside Deictic Center (ODC) to portray domestic policies as proximal national security threats. These results show that in the digital age, symbolic distance is a constructed product of ideological work, not material proximity. This research provides a robust framework for understanding how digital news ensembles operate as engines of cognitive warfare by rearranging the audience's perception of reality. **Keywords:** Proximization Theory; Deictic Fragmentation; Partisan Media; Iran Nuclear Threat; Digital Journalism

1.Introduction

The tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has long argued that language is not a neutral medium, but a social practice that constructs power, ideology, and the perception of geopolitical risk (e.g., Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993; Halliday, 1978). Based on this framework, Proximization Theory (PT) as defined by Cap (2013) provides a particular cognitive-pragmatic perspective to analyze the discursive construction of distant entities, events or threats as if they are immediate threats to a particular group. This is achieved by bringing these external entities into the group's immediate perspective, the deictic center or Discoursal Center (DC). Proximization makes remote possibilities appear as urgent crises that require defensive or preventive actions. It does this by working through three interconnected dimensions: spatial, temporal and axiological (the STA model). In the current digital news environment this process has been facilitated by multimodal combinations of headlines, images and text reaching audiences at unprecedented speed. Recently, the framework of Cap (2013) has been used to model general public security views (Hu, 2024), or to assess the axiological construction of non-political hazards, such as the exposure to cancerogenic agents (Khalil & Al-Zubaidi, 2022). However, the conceptualization of the STA model in terms of partisan digital journalism is still limited. Threat construction through discourse is a cornerstone of legitimizing foreign policy. The Iranian nuclear program has been a central fixture of American security discourse since 2002. Previous studies have shown how traditional news media have systematically securitized Iran's nuclear activities through representational and argumentative strategies. However, there is a significant unresolved theoretical tension. The canonical STA model (Cap, 2013) was constructed for monologic political oratory in which a unified state actor constructs a foreign "Other" as a threat to a national "Self." The hyper-polarized digital ecosystem may fragment this binary logic. The problem motivating this study is the limited application of the canonical STA model to digital partisan fragmentation, specifically in explaining how modern media environments fragment the national deictic center to frame domestic opposition as a proximal geopolitical risk. In a polarized media landscape, the "threat" is no longer exclusively a foreign entity (Iran) but often includes a domestic political rival whose policies are relocated into the Outside Deictic Center (ODC) to be framed as an existential danger to the nation. The literature has grown substantially, but a number of research gaps still remain and this study aims to fill some of these. First, there is a substantial theoretical gap in the structural limits of the binary Inside–Outside Deictic Center (IDC–ODC) logic of Proximization Theory (PT). Although the canonical STA model was developed for unified state actors, its ability to account for the deictic fragmentation typical of US partisan digital news, where domestic political rivals are routinely pushed to the periphery (ODC), has not been thoroughly tested. Additionally, there is a significant temporal gap, as most of the existing research on American media representations of Iran was gathered before the critical 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This leaves the most strategic seven-year window, encompassing the "Maximum Pressure" era and post-2021 recalibrations, almost entirely uncharted from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective. Finally, there is a methodological gap rooted in the fact that traditional content analysis remains insufficient for capturing the complex "fear topology" of digital journalism. Addressing this requires a specialized mixed-protocol approach that integrates STA-annotation with multimodal coding to fully deconstruct the symbolic distance-crossing performed by digital news ensembles. To address these gaps, the present study deconstructs the spatial, temporal, and axiological architecture of the Iranian nuclear threat within the digital outputs of CNN and Fox News between 2018 and 2024. This research proposes that the axiological axis is the most diagnostic indicator of partisan asymmetry, acting as the primary site where media outlets reorganize the audience's cognitive map to prioritize ideological alignment over physical threat assessment. Consequently, this study formulates the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the frequencies and percentages of spatial, temporal, and axiological proximization markers used by CNN Digital and Fox News Digital to construct the Iranian nuclear threat between 2018 and 2024?

- RQ2. How do these outlets construct the threat through the specific dimensions of the STA model?
- RQ3. How do the patterns of proximization differ between CNN and Fox News in terms of the deictic centers they seek to protect and the "Others" they vilify?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Discourse Space Theory and the Cognitive Mechanics of PT

The theoretical evolution of threat construction has moved from a sole linguistic representation into a more strongly geometric modelling of the "Discourse Space". The key to this shift is the work of Cap (2013), whose Proximization Theory (PT) provides a cognitive-pragmatic account of the changing of symbolic distance for political legitimation. Unlike traditional rhetoric, PT suggests that the speaker organizes the cognitive map of the audience by positioning entities in a tridimensional space. The Spatial axis is the main material basis, showing the physical movement of a peripheral danger (the Outside Deictic Center, or ODC) towards the audience's secure home (the Inside Deictic Center, or IDC). But the effectiveness of the spatial dimension is often dependent on Temporal proximization, which turns distant possibilities into imminent "sprint-like" emergencies (Zhang et al., 2025). Crucially, Cap (2009) argues that when material or spatial premises for war are weak, the Axiological axis becomes the primary site for "redressing" legitimization. This dimension does not rely on physical distance but on a collision of core values, where the ODC is portrayed as a moral "Other" whose existence threatens the ideological foundations of the IDC. As established by Priadi (2025), axiological intensification functions as a strategic cue that moves discourse from a mere description of risk to a prescriptive mandate for defensive action. Furthermore, the conceptual "antithesis triggers" identified by Cap (2009) suggest that audiences are more likely to support aggressive policies when the ODC is framed as the inherent opposite of the values they hold as "TRUE" and "RIGHT".

3. Multimodal "Fear Topology" in Digital Journalism

The swift migration of threat narratives into digital spaces has altered the "deictic labor" required to maintain the public in a state of urgency. As van Leeuwen (2012) and Machín (2016) point out, conventional analysis of language in text form is insufficient for understanding the digital news environment, which is characterized by multimodal ensembles of image and text. Digital journalism exploits the affordances of layout, algorithmically curated headlines, and visual metaphors to reduce symbolic distance at a velocity unavailable to traditional media. This digital acceleration creates what Hatzir et al. (2021) call a "fear topology," a heightened and ubiquitous sense of perceived risk that audiences find difficult to navigate. Within this topology, the "threat" is no longer a localized event, but an omnipresent, proximalized object in the user's newsfeed. It is shown in empirical studies of Apatska (2025) and Fang and Dong (2026) that this digital space is characterized by extreme multimodal polarization. Fox News may emphasize visual depictions of physical threats (e.g., missiles), whereas CNN may rely on multimodal contradictions to construct policy-driven risks. This indicates that 21st-century proximization is as much a visual and algorithmic operation as it is a linguistic one.

4. Versatility and Domain Expansion of the STA Model

The STA model, although conceived for geopolitical oratory, has proven very versatile across various risk-based domains. This is exemplified by Khalil and Al-Zubaidi (2022), who use the axiological dimension in scientific discourse to demonstrate how the carcinogen risk is constructed through framing medical facts as a conflict between human values and "external" chemical threats. This demonstrates that proximization is a universal cognitive mechanism for justifying preventive action, whether the threat is a nuclear warhead or a medical condition. Similarly, Liu and Cheng (2023) have applied the STA model to the study of environmental discourse, showing the construction of abstract ecological problems as concrete physical threats to national health for the justification of legislative support. Liu et al. (2023) show that this sense of value conflict is further intensified by the incorporation of metaphorical keywords, e.g., "container" or "crime" metaphors. These cross-domain cases demonstrate how the STA architecture is a robust tool for mapping any narrative that involves the symbolic "crossing" of distance between a perceived danger and an audience's home territory.

5. Partisan Securitization: The Iran-JCPOA Context

The construction of the Iranian nuclear program as an existential threat has been a fixture of U.S. security discourse for over two decades. However, the securitization of Iran is not a static process; it is a contested narrative that is shaped by what Dieudonné (2024) refers to as "functional actors" within the political system. As Amin (2019) and Nawaz and Munir (2023) show, although there is a general agreement that Iran is a threat, the framing of that threat varies widely across administrative cycles.

In the “Maximum Pressure” period after the 2018 JCPOA withdrawal, official texts like the National Defense Strategy (NDS) depended significantly on spatial proximization to emphasize the physical imminence of “rogue regimes”. However, in the partisan media sphere this spatial focus is often subordinate to the axiological vilification of the “Other”. More recent scholarship by Ahmad et al. (2025) and Suhaili et al. (2024) suggests that these narratives have been further “trail-marked” by social media and digital partisan news, shaping public perceptions of the Iranian people and their government based on domestic ideological alignments. Nevertheless, a significant temporal gap remains, as much of the existing research on the Iranian nuclear frame was synthesized before the 2018 withdrawal, leaving the 2018–2024 strategic cycle under-examined from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective. The most relevant theoretical tension that Proximization Theory is currently facing is the possible collapse of the “canonical” deictic center. Cap (2013) considers a baseline model in which one national “Inside” (IDC) defends itself against a foreign “Outside” (ODC). However, in hyper-polarized environments the deictic center is no longer a single geographical location; it is the origin of what a particular group holds as “TRUE” and “RIGHT”. According to Osmankadić (2018), in complex socio-political realities, the deictic center can shift, and it results in a complete reorganization of the discourse space. This study investigates the tension through the examination of “Deictic Fragmentation”. We hypothesize that partisan media not only bring foreign enemies closer, but also displace domestic political opponents to the ODC using the STA architecture. For example, partisan news organizations portray the “incompetence” or “unilateral policy” of a domestic administration as an existential threat, turning internal political actors into peripheral threats. This enhancement of the theory indicates that proximization is a device not only of international securitization, but also of domestic ideological management and delegitimization of domestic opposition. This is the first study that combines STA-annotation and multimodal coding to map longitudinally how “Iran” was reconstructed as a proximalized object during this early strategic cycle, thus overcoming the “structural inability” of the canonical model to account for modern partisan realities.

6. Method

6.1 Corpus of the Study

This research is a mixed-method study combining quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis to unpack the “fear topology” and symbolic distance-crossing in contemporary digital journalism. Data collection for this investigation was carried out using a systematic purposive sampling method. The corpus is concentrated on digital news outputs by CNN and Fox News, the choice of which is justified by the fact that they are among the media with the highest audience coverage and are already established as ideological representatives of the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. The sample period covers the full strategic cycle, 2018–2026. This period is divided into three distinct administrative and geopolitical phases: Phase I: Withdrawal and “Maximum Pressure” (2018–2020): Focuses on the U.S. exit from the JCPOA and the subsequent economic and military escalations under the Trump administration. Phase II: Recalibration and Regional Conflict (2021–2024): Examines diplomatic efforts to “salvage” the agreement and the impact of regional assaults on nuclear sites during the Biden administration. Phase III: “Operation Epic Fury” and the Versailles Treaty (2025–2026): Captures the 2026 naval blockade and the eventual transition toward a new diplomatic framework under a second Trump administration cycle. The selection process was governed by strict inclusion rules, where articles were only included if they provided direct reporting or analytical coverage of a presidential speech or major policy announcement regarding the JCPOA. Furthermore, to maintain a rigorous focus on the agencies’ primary journalistic and editorial voices, opinion pieces from outside contributors were intentionally excluded from the final corpus. The final corpus consists of eight articles totaling approximately 42,000 words.

6.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is Proximization Theory (PT), a cognitive-pragmatic model (Cap, 2013) that analyzes how discourse constructs external entities as immediate threats through the symbolic “crossing” of distance. Central to this framework is the Spatial–Temporal–Axiological (STA) model, which positions an “Other” or Outside Deictic Center (ODC) as encroaching upon the territory and values of the “Self” or Inside Deictic Center (IDC). While the canonical PT model was originally developed for unified state actors in monologic oratory, this study utilizes a refined application of PT to account for deictic fragmentation within hyper-polarized digital ecosystems. Under this refinement, the IDC is not treated as a static geographical location but as an ideological origin of what a group deems “TRUE” and “RIGHT” (Chilton, 2004; Cap, 2017). Consequently, proximization in partisan media involves the discursive relocation of not only foreign entities

(Iran) but also domestic political rivals into the ODC, framing their policies as proximal risks to national security. This study employs the tri-dimensional STA architecture to deconstruct the 2018–2026 strategic cycle of the Iran nuclear threat:

1. The Spatial Axis: Analyzes the physical or metaphorical movement of ODC threats—ranging from missiles reaching the "U.S. homeland" to nuclear programs "escaping the box"—toward the IDC.
2. The Temporal Axis: Examines how "sprint-like" metaphors and administrative deadlines (e.g., "closing windows") transform remote possibilities into imminent crises.
3. The Axiological Axis: Identifies the moral binarization (e.g., "America First" vs. "mullahs" or "International Order" vs. "unilateralism") that serves as the primary site of partisan polarization.

The axiological axis functions as the diagnostic indicator of partisan asymmetry in this study. It demonstrates how media outlets assignment moral blame (e.g., "Washington's incompetence" vs. "insidious infiltration") to reorganize the audience's cognitive map, prioritizing ideological alignment over objective physical threat assessment to legitimize specific policy responses. By moving beyond monologic state oratory to the rapid environment of digital news ensembles, this framework deconstructs how "fear topologies" are engineered through the discursive compression of symbolic distance.

6.3 Procedure

The researcher designed this investigation as a mixed-method study, combining quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis, in order to map the evolving "fear topology" of digital journalism. The dataset was built through a systematic purposive sampling approach. The focus was on the digital output of two news outlets: CNN and Fox News, which are seen as well-established ideological proxies of the Democratic and Republican parties. The researcher expanded the sampling window to include the entire strategic cycle from 2018 to 2026, which the researcher divided into three chronological phases: the 2018–2020 withdrawal and "Maximum Pressure" period, the 2021–2024 period of diplomatic recalibration and regional escalation, and the 2025–2026 final escalation and subsequent "Versailles" breakthrough. The researcher did the keywords search on official news domains using the keywords, "JCPOA", "Iran nuclear deal", "Trump Iran sanctions", "Biden Iran nuclear policy", "Versailles MOU". The researcher filtered the dataset to include only items that involved direct reporting, policy analysis, or full-text diplomatic transcripts, and ruled out outside opinion pieces, in order to capture the most prominent journalistic and editorial voices of the organizations. After data collection, the researcher cleaned the text by deleting all parenthetical analytical coding marks and produced a final longitudinal corpus of approximately 42,000 words. The researcher coded the collected data according to a tri-stage protocol aimed at identifying patterns of proximization and deictic fragmentation. In the first stage, the researcher conducted a quantitative content analysis through the systematic analysis of each article and transcript to find proximization markers related to the spatial, temporal and axiological dimensions of the STA model. The researcher computed frequencies and percentage distributions for each news outlet to evaluate their respective discursive priorities. To ensure the scientific validity of the coding process and to minimize researcher bias, the researcher implemented an inter-rater reliability protocol whereby a second independent coder, trained in Proximization Theory, annotated a representative 20% of the expanded corpus. Next, the researcher calculated a Cohen's Kappa score to ensure a high level of agreement and scientific validity before proceeding with the statistical analysis. Partisan divergence was assessed for its importance with a Chi-square test of independence. In the second stage of the analysis the researcher conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of representative news ensembles and selected textual excerpts. The researcher also investigated the employment of particular lexical items, grammatical constructs and metaphors such as the "sprint" to a bomb and the "steel wall" blockade to reduce symbolic distance and construct the Iranian nuclear program as an imminent threat. The researcher paid particular attention to "antithesis triggers" and how moral binarization transformed descriptions of risk into ethical imperatives to act. In the final phase, the researcher performed a comparative mapping exercise to synthesize the findings and engage with the phenomenon of deictic fragmentation. The researcher systematically compared CNN and Fox News' use of the STA architecture to move domestic political rivals to the Outside Deictic Center (ODC), framing internal policy decisions as national security risks. In this multi-vocal analysis, the researcher deconstructed how partisan digital news constructed ideological "echo chambers" by discursively reducing the distance between the audience and perceived geopolitical threats.

6.4-Results

To answer the first research question regarding the frequencies and percentages of proximization markers, the researcher conducted a quantitative content analysis of the corpus using the Spatial–Temporal–Axiological (STA) model (See Table 1). Table 1 *Distribution of Proximization Markers in Digital News*

Proximization Dimension	Fox News (f / %)	CNN (f / %)
Spatial Proximization	108 / 34.5%	82 / 24.1%
Temporal Proximization	78 / 24.9%	136 / 40.0%
Axiological Proximization	127 / 40.6%	122 / 35.9%
Total Markers	313 / 100%	340 / 100%

Table data drawn from Source.

A systematic annotation of the corpus resulted in a total of 653 proximization markers. The quantitative findings show that while axiological proximization is a major means of threat construction for both outlets, their minor strategies are determined by their particular rhetorical objectives. Fox News had a clear preference for axiological markers (40.6%) to frame Iran and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in terms of a moral and ideological conflict. This was coupled with a high occurrence of spatial proximization (34.5%) in which the outlet regularly highlighted the physical reach of Iranian technology, e.g. missiles capable of hitting the “U.S. homeland”. This spatial focus was heightened in the 2026 cycle, in the naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, characterized as a “steel wall.” In contrast, CNN News exhibited a dominant reliance on temporal proximization (40.0%). Its discourse centered on the diplomatic “final stretch,” the “closing window” for negotiations, and specific administrative deadlines, such as the 2022 salvaging efforts and the 2026 “8 p.m. ET deadline”. While CNN also utilized axiological markers (35.9%), these were frequently directed toward the “serious mistake” and “Washington’s incompetence” associated with unilateral U.S. policy decisions. To evaluate the statistical significance of the partisan divergence in threat construction, a Chi-square test of independence was run. The results of the statistical analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Chi-square Analysis of Proximization Markers in Digital News

Statistical Measure	Value
Chi-square (X^2)	18.293
Degrees of Freedom (df)	2
Asymptotic Significance (p-value)	.0001*
Cramer’s V (Effect Size)	0.167
Total Valid Cases (N)	653

*Significance level $p < .05$

Results indicated a statistically significant difference in discursive priorities between the two news outlets ($\chi^2=18.293, df=2, p<.05$). This finding suggests that the differences between CNN and Fox News in how they proximize the Iranian nuclear threat are not the result of random variation, but are systematically driven by the outlets’ ideological and rhetorical goals. As for the first research question, the findings reveal that although both outlets cover the same material events, their discursive priorities are determined by different ideological and rhetorical purposes. The strongest diagnostic indicator of partisan asymmetry is axiological proximization, the main site where media outlets reconfigure the cognitive map of the audience to prioritize ideological alignment over the assessment of physical threat. To answer the second research question (RQ2) regarding how CNN Digital and Fox News Digital construct the Iranian nuclear threat through the specific dimensions of the Spatial–Temporal–Axiological (STA) model, a qualitative analysis of the corpus was conducted. The researcher found

that Fox News constructs the threat as a direct physical and moral encroachment upon the "America First" deictic center. The analysis of Spatial Proximity demonstrated that Fox News focuses on the physical reach of the Outside Deictic Center (ODC). Early reports suggested missiles that could carry a weapon "to targets in Europe or the U.S. homeland". By the 2026 cycle, this spatial threat had moved into the maritime domain, where the U.S. naval blockade was framed as a "steel wall" to contain an ODC that had been "choked to death" by sanctions. The results showed that, with respect to Temporal Proximity, the outlet draws on "sprint-like" metaphors to reframe remote possibilities as pressing crises. The 2015 deal's sunset provisions were described as a countdown in which Iran could "just sprint to a nuclear bomb." The urgency of the situation came to a fever pitch in 2026, when President Trump declared a "8 p.m. ET deadline" to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, with an apocalyptic warning that "a whole civilization will die tonight" if a deal was not reached. Axiological Proximity's findings indicated that Fox News is based on an extreme moral binarization of the ODC as a "outright enemy" ruled by "mullahs who run the country with an iron fist." The researcher pointed out that Fox News had even sent domestic rivals to the ODC, claiming "Team Biden let Iran infiltrate the nuclear deal," positioning Democratic policy as a proximal threat to national survival. In contrast, the researcher found that CNN frames the threat as a failure of International Order and diplomatic norms. Regarding Spatial Proximity, the findings indicated that CNN's spatial discourse emphasizes regional and institutional instability rather than direct physical encroachment on the U.S. homeland. The 2018 withdrawal "isolated [Trump] further from the world and strained longstanding US alliances," the researcher said, adding that the withdrawal "allowed the markers describing the nuclear program to escape from that box." The 2026 blockade was presented as a 'theater of risk' that endangered the global energy commons. Regarding Temporal Proximity, the results showed that CNN's temporal markers are mostly diplomatic and administrative. The language is of "critical" sessions, the "very final stretch" of talks, and the "closing window" to salvage the deal. The urgency is not that of a "sprint" to a bomb, but of a "decisive moment" when diplomacy may break down. Finally, in relation to Axiological Proximity, the data analysis indicated that CNN constructs an axiological threat on the failure of U.S. policy norms. The 2018 exit was called a "serious mistake" and a sign of "Washington's incompetence". The researcher found that CNN's axiological markers frequently highlighted the "unilateral" and "deeply flawed" nature of the Trump administration's behavior, depicting the U.S. as a "international outlier" that had broken its promises. The researcher concluded that the two outlets utilize the STA architecture to create divergent cognitive maps for their audiences. Fox News anchors the threat in a material-security IDC, where the primary danger is the physical and moral aggression of the "Other". Conversely, CNN anchors the threat in a normative-diplomatic IDC, where the primary danger is the erosion of international cooperation and the failure of domestic policy. This qualitative divergence explains why the same geopolitical events—such as the 2026 "Versailles" breakthrough—are framed by one outlet as a "diplomatic breakthrough" and by the other as a potential "strategic failure". To answer the third research question (RQ3) regarding the patterns of deictic fragmentation and the differing "Others" vilified by each outlet, the researcher conducted a comparative discourse analysis across the 2018–2026 strategic cycle. The differences are synthesized in the table below:

Table 3 Comparative Patterns of Proximity and Deictic Fragmentation (2018–2026)

Pattern Component	Fox News Digital Pattern	CNN Digital Pattern
Inside Deictic Center (IDC)	Material Security: The "America First" homeland and military strength.	Normative Order: The international community, alliances, and diplomatic norms.
Primary Vilified	The "Mullahs": An ideological enemy whose "aggressive behavior" is unchangeable.	The "Isolator": A domestic administration whose "unilateralism" endangers global stability.
Domestic Othering	"Infiltrators": Frames rivals as "willing dupes" of foreign influence.	"Outliers": Frames rivals as "incompetent" actors who renege on commitments.
2026 Frame	Military Victory: Achieving peace through "maximum leverage" and "epic fury".	Strategic Risk: A "theater of risk" that undermines long-term credibility.

The researcher found that while both outlets acknowledge the material risk of a nuclear Iran, they fundamentally reorganize the "Discourse Space" to protect divergent Inside Deictic Centers (IDC) and castigate domestic political rivals as proximal threats. The researcher identified that Fox News consistently anchors its discourse in an IDC defined by material-security and "America First" exceptionalism.

- Foreign ODC: The Iranian regime is vilified through extreme moral binarization as an "outright enemy" ruled by "mullahs who rule the country with an iron fist". This ODC is portrayed as having an unchangeable "hatred of America and Israel".
- Domestic Deictic Fragmentation: The researcher found that Fox News routinely relocates Democratic rivals into the Outside Deictic Center (ODC). In 2023, the outlet claimed that "Team Biden let Iran infiltrate the nuclear deal" and characterized administrative officials as "willing dupes" of a foreign influence campaign. By framing domestic policy as being "orchestrated by the Islamic Republic", Fox News transforms internal political actors into a proximal geopolitical risk.
- 2026 Crisis Resolution: During the 2026 blockade, Fox News framed the military campaign as a "victory for the United States", celebrating the transition to a "Golden Age of the Middle East" once the ODC had been neutralized through "Operation Epic Fury".

Conversely, the researcher found that CNN Digital anchors its discourse in a normative-diplomatic IDC centered on international law and collective security.

- Foreign ODC: While Iran is viewed as a danger, the threat is proximized as a relational breakdown of compliance. The researcher noted that the nuclear program is described as having "escaped from that box" primarily due to American policy shifts.
- Domestic Deictic Fragmentation: CNN's proximization strategy frequently targets the Trump administration as a primary ODC threat. The researcher identified patterns where Trump's "unilateral" and "deeply flawed" decisions were framed as "serious mistakes" that "isolated him further from the world". By portraying the U.S. as an "international outlier", CNN proximized the risk of American "incompetence" as equal to the risk of Iranian nuclear acceleration.
- 2026 Crisis Resolution: The researcher observed that CNN's analysis of the 2026 "Versailles" breakthrough was characterized by skepticism, framing the U.S. role as that of a "predatory hegemon" and warning that the naval blockade created a "theater of risk" that could lead to a "strategic failure".

The findings demonstrate that the axiological axis serves as the diagnostic indicator of this asymmetry. By assigning moral value and blame—rather than just reporting material facts—the researcher concludes that partisan digital news engineered ideological "echo chambers". These platforms reorganize the audience's cognitive representation to ensure that domestic political opposition is perceived as a threat as proximal and dangerous as the foreign nuclear program itself. Generally, the findings showed that the two outlets utilize the STA architecture to create mutually exclusive realities for their audiences.

6.5- Discussion

This study has two main aims. The first is to quantify the distribution of proximization markers in partisan digital news to identify the main vectors of threat construction. Quantitative results showed a stark partisan divergence. Fox News Digital relied most heavily on the axiological (40.6%) and the spatial (34.5%) dimensions. CNN Digital's most heavily used cues were temporal (40.0%) and axiological (35.9%). The results stand in sharp contrast with previous studies of official institutional discourse such as El-Zouka (2019) who found spatial proximization as the overwhelmingly dominant dimension (74%) in the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy. The results suggest that this transition from spatial primacy in state oratory to axiological primacy in digital media reflects a significant variation in rhetorical goals: while the material scope of Iran's regimes is prioritized in official government documents, partisan news outlets employ moral intensification to reconfigure the audience's cognitive map. The finding supports Priadi's (2025) contention that axiological cues are the main vector in high-stakes discourse where moral frames are used to mobilize public affect rather than merely describe physical risk.

The qualitative analysis of the enlarged corpus of 2018–2026 showed that the two outlets used the STA model to construct the Iranian nuclear threat through mutually exclusive cognitive frameworks. The researcher found that the Fox News anchor's discourse was rooted in a binary of "Binary-Security" based on the idea of "America First" exceptionalism. This construct used spatial markers to denote the physical extent of the Outside Deictic Center (ODC). It spoke of missiles that could reach the "U.S. homeland" and "targets in Europe". This physical immediacy was amplified by temporal "sprint" metaphors, which characterized the deal's sunset provisions as

a countdown in which the ODC could “just sprint towards a nuclear bomb”. The construction culminated in the 2026 strategic cycle with the U.S. naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz being dubbed a “steel wall” and President Trump issuing a deadline and the apocalyptic warning, “a whole civilization will die tonight”. The threat was materialized as an actual and existential invasion of the country’s physical security and moral foundations for the Fox News audience.

Instead, the researcher discovered that the construct employed by CNN Digital was “Normative-Relational,” wherein the primary threat was the disruption of international cooperation and diplomatic norms. CNN’s spatial proximization focused on regional and institutional instability, with the nuclear program “having escaped from that box”, primarily as a result of the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 that “further isolated [Trump] from the world”. The temporally proximate framing on CNN focused on the urgency of the negotiation process itself, highlighting the “very final stretch” and the “decisive moment” when diplomacy might fail, while Fox News emphasized a physical “sprint.” During the 2026 resolution phase, Fox News hailed a “major diplomatic breakthrough” and a “victory,” while CNN contributors labeled the same event a “theater of risk” and a potential “strategic failure” that undermined long-term U.S. credibility. These divergent constructs reveal how digital news ensembles do more than report, but perform “deictic labor,” engendering a ubiquitous sense of risk tailored to the audience’s ideological priors, the researcher concludes.

The most important theoretical contribution of this investigation is the identification and mapping of deictic fragmentation in three administrative cycles. This phenomenon means the discursive re-location of domestic political opponents into the ODC, the reframing of domestic policy decisions as proximal national security threats. The researcher found that Fox News regularly engaged in this domestic “Othering,” claiming that “Team Biden let Iran infiltrate the nuclear deal” and describing administration officials as “willing dupes” of a foreign influence campaign. Fox News portrayed domestic policy as “orchestrated by the Islamic Republic,” reducing internal political actors to a peripheral threat, as dangerous as the foreign nuclear program itself. On the other hand, the researcher found that CNN identified the Trump administration’s “unilateral” and “deeply flawed” decisions as the main risk, arguing that such actions breached “US commitments” and turned the nation into a “international outlier”. This result is in direct opposition to the “canonical” monologic structure of Proximization Theory as presented by Cap (2013), which presupposes a unique national “Self”. Instead, the results lend support to the claims of Osmankadić (2018) that the deictic center in hyper-polarized environments is not a fixed geographical location but an ideological origin that moves to vilify domestic opposition.

The study also demonstrates that the axiological axis is the most diagnostic indicator of the partisan asymmetry of modern journalism. Yet both outlets employed “propriety-” markers to attribute moral blame to their respective “Others” even when reporting on the same material events, such as the 2018 JCPOA withdrawal, the 2024 regional escalations, and the 2026 Versailles breakthrough. The deictic anchor for Fox News was the “America First” ideology, and the central axiological collisions were Iran’s “hatred of America” and Democratic “infiltration.” For CNN, the emphasis on “multilateralism” led the U.S. to “break with allies,” and administrative “incompetence” became the primary moral threats. Chilton (2004) suggests that the deictic center is the origin of what a group considers “TRUE” and “RIGHT”. The researcher concludes that digital news outlets are engaged in axiological proximization to construct “echo chambers” that emphasize ideological alignment instead of objective physical threat assessment, and are thus creating a permanent “state of emergency” in the public space.

Policy and practical implications: These findings offer actionable insights into the mechanics of “cognitive warfare.” As Urolovna (2026) suggested, the manipulation of deictic distance is a primary mechanism for executive and mediated coercion. The study suggests that government stakeholders should develop “discursive resilience” protocols to counter the impact of partisan proximization on national foreign policy consensus. In particular, communication strategies should explicitly address the axiological “antithesis triggers” identified in this study, by considering the moral frames of geopolitical issues, and not just the material facts. This is important because axiological frames are far less susceptible to geopolitical shifts than are spatial frames; thus, when a domestic or foreign ‘Other’ has been framed as a moral threat, this framing may continue to act as a barrier to diplomacy even after the material conditions have changed.

The results suggest that multimodal digital news ensembles create deictic labor and ideological framing at a tempo unavailable to traditional media. To combat the “fear topology” identified by Hatzir et al. (2021), industry stakeholders should develop safeguards that identify and mitigate excessive proximization of abstract geopolitical risks. By analyzing the 2018–2026 strategic cycle, this paper shows that the strategic construction

of threat is essentially an axiological operation that reconfiguration the reality of the audience, demonstrating that in the digital age, the distance between the audience and a perceived danger is the result of ideological labor, not physical proximity.

Conclusion

The longitudinal study of the Iranian nuclear threat, 2018-2026, redefines the role of partisan media in shaping geopolitical reality. This study demonstrates that the creation of international risk is a complex axiological operation that manipulates symbolic distances for domestic ideological purposes, not a neutral assessment of material threat. The quantitative results show a strong partisan divide. Fox News used axiological and spatial markers to frame an existential threat to the “America First” center. CNN used temporal and axiological markers to emphasize the erosion of international order. The main contribution of this research is the mapping of deictic fragmentation where partisan media move domestic political rivals to the Outside Deictic Center (ODC). By presenting internal policy decisions as immediate national security threats, the media reframes domestic dissent as threats comparable to foreign nuclear programs. The 2026 strategic cycle is a key case study of “de-proximization” and of the high flexibility of axiological frames. With the policy change in Versailles, the discourse moved from apocalyptic warnings to the celebration of a “Golden Age”. The researcher admits some limitations that may affect the generalization of the findings. One such limitation could be sample size. The other one can be using only one framework for the data analysis. Moreover, the attention drawn by the overt linguistic signals identified by the STA model may lead to the neglect of subtle types of ideological management, such as implicatures and presuppositions. Future research should examine the ways in which audiences infer meaning from partisan news comments using a socio-cognitive discourse-analytic design that is embedded in Relevance Theory. Furthermore, scholars should investigate “counter-proximization” via cross-linguistic analysis, charting how foreign state media proximize U.S. policy as a looming threat. Finally, collostructional analysis should be employed to quantitatively track whether some axiological triggers exhibit stable statistical attraction to some partisan constructions across different administrative cycles.

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