A new voice? The place of emerging powers in the phenomenon of "international public opinion"

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War a number of studies about the concept and dynamics of "international public opinion" have gained momentum. Although from different perspectives, they characterize this phenomenon as a voice that transcends national boundaries, addresses issues of global relevance and has a political impact on the international landscape. Our paper raises the question of what place the emerging powers occupy within this phenomenon according to specialized literature and a body of newspaper articles. As a result, we can see that studies about international opinion have not granted any explicit place to the issue of the emerging powers, but do allow for meaningful conceptual thinking in this regard. Using these reflections as a theoretical lens, analysis of the newspaper articles shows the importance of a community among the BRICS countries as a discursive construction linked to the concept of international opinion.
1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to make some initial explorations into the relationship between “emerging powers” and “international public opinion”. The first of these concepts refers to the growing gravitation of some economies in the contemporary world. The second concerns the notion that countries, individuals and other players can share opinions in the international sphere and that these opinions may be politically significant. Given that both concepts are elastic and subject to different interpretations, the relationship between the two is particularly problematic. Rather than proposing solutions to these problems, this paper aims to identify some issues and insights that may give rise to future research.

To this end we propose two stages: the first one is a review of some studies on international public opinion published in recent years (section 2) and an exploration of their conceptual links with the notion of emerging powers (section 3). Once this theoretical exercise is done, we move to the second stage, taking a set of newspaper articles and analyzing their contents (section 4) in light of the conceptual elements mentioned previously.

2. Studies on international public opinion

The notion of public opinion in the international sphere is not new. Authors such as Kant and Bentham gave it a fundamental role as a force for peace (Kant, 1795/2005; Bentham, 1843/1991). Furthermore, various references to this concept show its hold in the western political discourse throughout the nineteenth century (Jaeger, 2010).

The expectations placed on the concept of international public opinion reached their peak after the First World War, when it was presented as a sort of an “antidote” destined to avoid another such conflagration. The failure of the Second World War in this regard did not blot this concept out of the political discourse, but did mark the beginning of a strong distrust toward its meaning, legitimacy and effectiveness. Also, the ideological divide that characterized the Cold War contributed to keeping it in the background. In fact, in the 60’s this expression began to “have the smell of mothballs”, (Hill, 1996, p. 115). However, this did not prevent the theme from becoming a focus of analysis for academic research during that period (Davison, 1952, 1973; Wight, 1977; Merle, 1978) or about that period (Goldman, 1993).
However, it was during the years immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall that a renewed interest in the issue was recorded. The end of the Cold War and postulates such as the emergence of a “new world order” or the “end of history” gave a strong boost to the discussions surrounding the possibility and features of a public opinion of international scope. In this context, the Gulf crisis was an event that some authors used to test the relevance of international public opinion in the incipient “post-Cold War” scenario (e.g. Hinckley, 1993; Wilcox et al., 1993).

In addition to analyzing the impact of international opinion on historical events, some papers show a more general concern to investigate (and build) the meaning of this expression. Two researchers published an article entitled “Towards a notion of world opinion” (Rusciano & Fiske Rusciano, 1990), postulating that the concept of world public opinion is used in the media with a clear meaning. Thus, these authors proposed a certain definition of the phenomenon using the discourse from newspapers selected from several different countries. In collaboration with other researchers, they continued publishing papers on the subject for over twenty years, with no substantial modifications in their approach (Rusciano et al., 1998; Rusciano, 2001, 2006; Rusciano & Hill, 2004). Furthermore, an academic milestone in the process we are describing was the lecture called “World opinion and the empire of circumstance” delivered by Christopher Hill (1996), where he explored different meanings associated with this expression and defended its relevance for all the paradigms that govern the study of international relations.

In the decade 2000-2010 new efforts arose to understand and study the concept of international public opinion. Several of these efforts can be grouped around foreign policy and the image of the alleged “only superpower standing”, especially after the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers and the decisions leading to military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq (Goot 2004; Bobrow, 2005; Rusciano, 2006). The discussions on an intervention in Iraq, and in particular the massive protests against this intervention in different cities around the world, became the case par excellence for reflection on the relevance of the role of world opinion. Furthermore, in the middle of the decade a book was published aiming to place the phenomenon of international public opinion in broad historical perspective (Stearns, 2005), tracing it from the late seventeenth century up to the present and identifying it as a social force that brings together expression of outrage coming from very distant places in the world in relation to certain issues.

Towards the end of the decade (2008, 2010) Jaeger presented a particular proposal seeking to set aside the empirical claims about the existence of an inter-subjective social force that could be called international public opinion. Instead he prefers to analyze it as a “concept-in-use” incorporated into the international political discourse that allows conceiving “post-sovereign forms of governance” (Jaeger, 2008, p. 589).
In all the papers and publications mentioned thus far, international public opinion is seen as a theoretical concept with problematic characteristics. Its relevance is acknowledged as an issue open to debate, and the methodological possibilities of studying it are quite incipient. Nevertheless, it is important to mention a field where such problems have not become a source of concern. This is the line of research that understands international public opinion as a simple aggregate of individual opinions, perceptible through surveys with samples distributed in different countries. The use of these tools as a way to assess public opinion domestically became frequent in the 1930’s. It was in the 1970’s when there was a rise in the efforts to apply these techniques in the international sphere (Stearns, 2005, p. 5), leading to the formation of what we could identify as a secondary field of research still developing until today.

A study of the papers mentioned above reveals the absence of a definition of international public opinion that is capable of drawing consensus among the researchers. Each of these papers proposes its own operational definition of the phenomenon, without articulation with other proposals in order to form an accumulative tradition. Nonetheless, a review of the bibliography allows us to observe there are analytical categories that offer organization to the discussion among the diverse positions: the subject (who is the protagonist or bearer of international opinion), the contents (what this opinion says), power (what this opinion does—or can do) and process (how it is formed and/or how it works). The authors also coincide in pointing out the relevance of international public opinion as relevant force of the contemporary world, a force based on attitudes shared beyond national boundaries.

3. Emerging powers and international opinion

3.1 Gravitations and transformations

The growing importance of the “emerging powers” in the international arena is associated with a series of transformations in diverse spheres and at several levels. The call for proposals we are responding to with this paper, expresses these changes in the following terms:

The increasing gravitation of emerging economies is changing the landscape of international politics. This has implications for the possibilities of a new global order where emerging powers have begun to engage in the construction of new norms, governance institutions, development agendas and citizenship practices. Likewise, the context of regionalism and regionalization processes is also being transformed with the global projection of emerging powers. China, India, Brazil, Russia and South Africa are increasingly acquiring pivotal roles in the articulation of regional and global dynamics. At the same
time, traditional powers became more focused on pressing domestic and regional challenges due to the financial and economic crisis that started in 2008. These changes and reconfigurations constitute a new terrain of innovation, collaboration and dispute of an increasingly wider scope of policies, economic interests, identities and sources of legitimization of the international order. (International Studies Association, 2014)

The purpose of the following papers is to broadly explore the idea of international public opinion taking into account the emergence of these new powers. With this goal in mind, we will go over the proposals made by the authors mentioned in the first section.

3.2 The emerging powers as an “imagined community”

Rusciano and Fiske Rusciano (1990) postulate that world opinion consists of “moral judgments of observers which actors must heed in the international arena, or risk isolation as a nation” (p. 27). Furthermore, they present a notion of world opinion, as used in the media discourse, containing a series of components: a moral component, a pragmatic component, the power of world opinion, the nation’s image or reputation, the world considered as a unit and the threat of international isolation.

The idea that the international actors should take this multifaceted phenomenon into account implies of course a strong belief in the existence and relevance of a community at the international level. In this regard, Rusciano (1997) turns to the idea of “imagined community”, a community that takes shape through the diffusion of certain “maps” via the media:

Drawing a map by means of various forms of descriptive discourse involves creating what Benedict Anderson (1995) calls an “imagined community”. Once boundaries are sketched out and disseminated through media, imagined communities are transformed into entities, such as nations, with recognized boundaries that have profound effects on individuals’ lives. (p. 172)

For Rusciano, a “short analytical leap” is enough to take this thesis to a more recent stage in media development, a stage characterized by the globalization of communications:

This analysis can be used to argue that the same processes that operated to transform imagined communities into nations in the early stages of print capitalism operate to transform an imagined community of nations into a loosely defined global community, bound by shared conceptions of world opinion. (p. 173)
However, the author recognizes that it would be naive to assume that the globalization of the media and an invocation of world opinion “will loosen the grip of the nation-state on individuals’ imaginations”. In the same way that “nationalism has often lacked the power to erase tribal loyalties” accepting the presence of a world opinion does not mean rejecting the importance of national political communities (p. 189). But just as the author proposes avoiding an overestimation of world opinion, he also thinks we should avoid rating it as a simple discursive weapon of dominant nations:

> If world opinion is to have any use as an organizing principle in world affairs, is must make the transition from an idea that has power because it is dominant or, in this case, embraced by a dominant bloc of nations, to an idea that is dominant because it has power, in this case the power to explain the dominant discourse in different regional and historical venues.

Thus, the importance of an “imagined community”, built through discourse and global in scope, enables the concept of world opinion as an analytical tool. In this framework, the reflections and postulates regarding the “emerging powers” imply some kind of mapping where discursive configurations of community in the international scenario are built. Rusciano does not do this kind of mapping nor does he differentiate the emerging powers when he speaks of international opinion. Rather, it is the idea of opinion what he presents as a species of “emerging power” within the discourse, emphasizing its influence on the behavior of international actors.

### 3.3 Emerging countries and emerging people

For Hill (1996), beyond the exact words used to describe public opinion, the fact is that the different references to this phenomenon reveal an underlying concept, that we could express as the “force of attitudes and expressed opinions beyond the confines of a single state” (p. 115). According to this author it is not possible to understand international relations without in some way taking this phenomenon into account.

Naturally, when dealing with such a broad idea, the characteristics and relevance of this “force” may be interpreted in various ways, depending on the theoretical approach orienting us. However it is present as part of the circumstances in which we live and the position of this author is that “circumstances, rather than hope and abstraction, have the final say in shaping our lives, praxis and experience” (p. 112). Consequently,
from this perspective, the idea of world opinion contains both conventional/communitarian as well as transformationalist/cosmopolitan notions of the international community.

According to this author, the confusion generated by different arguments regarding world opinion may be partially resolved by distinguishing between two meanings of this expression. One is the collective opinion of nations, expressed by governments, and the other is the opinion of people beyond their national identities.

The emerging powers and their dynamics in relation to international public opinion may be susceptible to analysis from both perspectives. From the point of view of the nations, the formation of the so-called “BRICS” is obvious as a relatively institutionalized framework for interstate coordination: a group of governments meets regularly and emits joint opinions. Whether it is within their own structures, in other words the summits held among these nations, or in other instances such as the United Nations Security Council, the voice of this group as a block can be “heard”.

On the other hand, an outstanding feature of this set of nations is their large population, which sums up to around three billion people. For Hill (1996) the individuals can also be seen as subjects of opinion at the international level and this dimension of the phenomenon should be studied focusing on five types of leaders: religious leaders, moral secular leaders, private enterprise, mass media and pressure groups. The historian Peter Stearns (2005) identifies world opinion with the capacity to “react to developments (real or imagined) in distant parts of the globe with some sense of impassioned outrage and a belief that there are or should be some common standards for humanity” (p. 7). The phenomenon implies – according to Stearns– “a measurable degree of public passion about developments outside parochial boundaries” (p. 8).

The “emerging powers” –a notion widely dependent on economic criteria– can be imagined as a set of nations and markets. However identifying shared opinions among their citizens and/or social leaders, in order to understand the emergence of these nations in the international concert, is a path that is still unexplored.

4. The BRICS opinion according to the media: references made during the Durban Summit

4.1 An exploratory analysis

As previously mentioned, media are a key arena in the formation of “imagined communities” through the operation of discourse and, therefore, the notion of international public opinion depends on them in a great
measure. For this reason, we have decided to complement the theoretical reflections of the previous section with an analysis of contents published by media.

For this purpose, we have selected one newspaper from each of the BRICS countries: La Folha de S. Paulo (Brazil), The Moscow Times (Russia), The Times of India (India), China Daily (China) and Mail & Guardian (South Africa). On the other hand, one milestone in the historical development of this bloc was chosen: its most recent summit, which took place in Durban (South Africa) on March 26 and 27, 2013. Using the search engines that these newspapers provide in their websites, we have identified from their archives the articles published during the summit, the previous week and the following one.

As a result, a diverse set of journalism pieces about this summit was generated. Given the specific interest of our research, which is centered in the concept and dynamics of international public opinion, we have focus on the articles that make explicit references to social or political topics in their headings and/or lead paragraphs, in contrast with notably economic articles, which were excluded. Thus, a body of 12 texts took shape and a content analysis was applied to it.

The analysis is of course exploratory. The objective is to gain some preliminary insights into some key issues to help shape future research. We will identify direct and indirect references to the topic of international public opinion in these texts about BRICS, using as a lens the theoretical elements presented in the previous section.

4.2 Key aspects in discursive community building

The existence and non-existence of community features among the BRICS countries constitute a recurrent topic in media discourse. For example, whereas some considered that the Durban summit “has sent positive signals of solidarity, partnership and win-win cooperation (China Daily, 03/28/2013a), others noticed in the same summit that “the inherent tensions between the BRICS complicates the task of getting anything practical done.” (The Times of India, 04/01/2013)

In the debate about community bonds between these countries, a number of factors come into play. Among these factors, an outstanding discussion theme is the matter of a common position towards the “domination” of “developed countries” or “the West”. According to one of the newspapers, “the underlying motivation within the BRICS is to assert their own collective interests, hard though they are to define, and do so against established Western ones” (The Times of India, 03/28/2013). Another paper states, as a
challenge for member countries, that they should demonstrate “BRICS can effectively serve as a global counterweight to the Western project of domination”. (China Daily, 03/28/2013c)

A second factor of wide importance in the discursive field we are studying is the idea of “future” as a relevant theme when addressing the sense of belonging to the bloc. As it is generally acknowledged, since Goldman Sachs spoke of “BRIC” for the first time, projections about the similar destiny of certain countries constituted a fundamental pillar in its argumentation. In fact, one of the newspaper articles cited Jim O’ Neil, the creator of the acronym, saying: “What emerging markets have in common –in addition to their distrust of the West- is their bright future...” (The Times of India, 03/28/2013)

A third key aspect that can be noticed in media discourse is the “spill over” from economics into other arenas, especially politics. The size of these five economies is, without doubt, the central criterion that defines them as “emergent powers” and, considering this, it is not strange that the topic of economic cooperation appears as a fundamental axis when convergences and divergences among these countries are analyzed. In concern to the Durban summit, for example, the topic with the most media repercussions was clearly the joint creation of a bank. However, the emergence of other areas of cooperation –especially politics– also had a relevant place.

Some phrases used by the media can illustrate this phenomenon. According to a Chinese newspaper, for example, the flow from economy to other areas is the result of an ongoing process: “Since its first summit in 2009, the group’s influence has gone beyond the economic sphere” (China Daily, 03/28/2013a). A paper from Russia says this country wants the BRICS “to broaden its role and get more involved in geopolitics” (The Moscow Times, 03/24/2013). A South African newspaper, in turn, says that the group is “becoming an increasingly influential political power. Four of the five countries that abstained on a United Nations vote authorizing military strikes to enforce the no-fly zone in Libya were BRICS members...” (Mail & Guardian, 03/28/2013). The economist who coined the BRICS acronym, on the other hand, was asked whether it ever occurred to him that these countries would have “such an impact on world politics”, to which he answered: “No of course not!” (The Times of India, 03/28/2013). The same text argues that “the BRICS has turned into a political project long ago –after all, if market size and growth rates were all that mattered, the BRIC grouping would have invited Indonesia and not South Africa in late 2010” (The Times of India, 03/28/2013). Moreover, it states that the emergence of BRICS as a “center of gravity” will “trigger several tsunamis that may change the course of the world financial system, and hence the global order – economic, political and cultural” (The Times of India, 03/28/2013)
Along with politics playing a role of growing relevance in the construction of an “imagined community” within the discourse of leaders and media, references can also be found to cultural topics, which happen to be particularly interesting when considering this group of countries is spread in different continents of the globe. A high level South African official is quoted by a Chinese paper concerning cultural exchange between these countries: “The good thing about culture is that you don’t need to be similar, but still you can be united, and this is what we call in South Africa ‘united in diversity’”. “Cultural exchange can be the ‘glue’ connecting all the members in this bloc”. (China Daily, 03/28/2013b)

Clearly, whatever the position assumed by each paper, leader or commentator concerning the subject, the mere presence of the BRICS acronym and regular reports about the summits, joint statements and decisions, help in the discursive construction of a community. On the other hand, the development of a theoretical and discursive element cannot be separated from the construction of a “reality”. Media refer to this fact when they make statements such as the following: “although the BRICS began as an ‘intellectual construct’ it has allowed economic and political actors to reframe and redirect their strategies…” (Mail & Guardian, 03/26/2013).

4.3 Countries and people as players in international opinion

When mentioning that “there are still some differences among the countries” concerning a project (The Moscow Times, 03/24/2013), when arguing that “Beijing should work with its BRICS partners to deepen” the group’s cooperation (China Daily, 03/28/2013c), when reporting that “four of the five countries that abstained on a United Nations vote” where BRICS countries (Mail & Guardian, 03/28/2013), direct references are being made to states as opinion protagonists. Governments take and express positions, and such positions can be the result of processes of coordination and consensus.

But when we widen the scope of our lens to the complex sociological fabric of the international scene, opening in this way the possibility of people being subjects of world opinion, new analytical challenges rise. ¿What does a commentator mean, for example, with the following sentence? “Now the game has begun to change. The BRICS countries represent 43 percent of the world’s population” (The Times of India, 04/01/2013). ¿Is he only referring to a great concentration of people capable of production and consumption? ¿Or does it have anything to do with the roles, rights and duties traditionally associated to the concept of citizenship?

Answers to such questions, of course, can be searched in the same discursive contexts where statements like the one we mentioned appear. This sort of tracking and content analysis can show us that –in media
discourse- citizens of BRICS, considered independently from their respective states, do appear clearly associated to international phenomena. In an opinion column related to the BRICS summit in Durban, it is requested that the Chinese leaders “take appropriate measures” for the “satisfaction of African people” (China Daily, 03/28/2013c). Another article in the same paper quotes a South African authority saying that “contacts and connections are already there, but we need to push this kind of people-to-people relations to a higher level” (China Daily, 03/28/2013b). References to cultural and artistic subjects are particularly interesting: “In visual arts, projects were chosen that have potential to attract public, such as the Portuguese Art Exhibition and BRICS collective show, with works from contemporary artists from Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa” (Folha de S. Paulo, 03/27/2013a).

A topic that received particular attention during the Durban Summit was the bloc’s posture towards the armed conflict in Syria. This issue allows us to illustrate the complex relationships between countries and people as subjects of international opinion. On one hand, the president of Syria called on the five governments, as reported by a South African newspaper during the summit: “I call on the BRICS leaders to work together to immediately stop de violence in Syria in order to guarantee the success of a political solution” (Mail & Guardian, 03/27/2013). In this context, the notion of “people” played an important role: “I express to you the Syrian people’s desire to work with the BRICS countries as a just force that seeks to bring peace...” (Mail & Guardian, 03/27/2013). On the other hand, media present the official stances of governments in reports such as the following: Moscow and Beijing are against the fall of Assad and vetoed three UN resolutions against the Syrian regime, whereas the other three members did not show support to any of the sides” (Folha de S. Paulo, 03/27/2013b).

The idea of “impassioned outrage” presented by Stearns (2005) as a key factor to understand world opinion is a theme that gained great relevance when media reported about the relationship between the summit and the Syrian situation. According to one of the newspapers, a director of Human Rights Watch considered that it was “time for BRICS to stop sitting on the fence over Syria’s atrocities” (The Moscow Times, 03/25/2013). The protests of activists were not only presented as a phenomenon spread around the planet, but also as a specific action of citizens of countries belonging to this bloc of emerging powers: “Human rights activists from Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are appealing to their leaders to use their influence to press Syria to allow unimpeded humanitarian access to UN agencies” (The Moscow Times, 03/25/2013). The following sentence, on the other hand, gives us a clue about how the links between civil society, states and international organizations are presented: “Rights groups have frequently called on the UN Security Council to refer the situations in Syria to the International Criminal Court, and Amnesty said BRICS countries must do all within their power to ensure that happens ‘to ensure accountability for international crimes committed by all sides in the conflict’” (Mail & Guardian, 03/27/2013).
4.4 A place in the world

In previous sections, results from a content analysis were shown to explore in what measure – and in what terms, international opinion is talked about in a body of selected articles. Tensions concerning the possibility of BRICS constituting a real “community” underlie media discourse, and these tensions are shaped by matters such as the bloc’s posture towards the West, the idea of future and the “spill over” effect from economy towards other areas. Additionally, the topic of international opinion is presented as a complex dynamics were both people, states and other organizations take part.

This shows that, according to media, the idea of an international public opinion of the BRICS is a pertinent one, although the relevance and features attributed to this phenomenon vary according to the different positions taken by the authors. This international opinion, in turn, does not live in a vacuum. Its relationships to a wider scenario are presented with statements such as: “the group is poised to play a bigger role on the world stage” (China Daily, 03/28/2013a). A newspaper from Russia quotes the president of its country in the following terms: “We invite our partners to gradually transform BRICS from a dialogue for um that coordinates approaches to a limited number of issues into a full-scale strategic cooperation mechanism that will allow us to look for solutions to key issues of global politics together” (The Moscow Times, 03/24/2013). According to this paper, Putin also said that “the BRICS members were working on joint declarations on the conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan, Iran’s nuclear program, the situation in the Middle East and other issues”. (The Moscow Times, 03/24/2013)

On one hand, the voice of BRICS in the global stage is shown as a counterweight to the most powerful and “developed” countries. On the other hand, the capacity and even the responsibility of representing the less advantaged countries are attributed to this voice: “The bloc is increasingly looked upon as an important force safeguarding the interests of the developing world”, China is willing to see the bloc making more contributions to “promoting the democratization of international relations” (China Daily, 03/28/2013a), “South Africa’s role as the voice of Africa’s interests at the fifth BRICS summit will be tested” (Mail & Guardian, 03/26/2013).

Clearly, when media refer to the “voice” or the “opinion” of the BRICS countries, it is not only in terms of communication, but also in terms of power. The position of BRICS in the global stage is presented, above all, within the balances and unbalances of power that shape the world. This position, in turn, appears strongly associated with the economic weight of these countries in current international relations. However, what the exploratory analysis shows it that this place cannot be fully grasped without considering these countries “position-taking” presented in terms of opinion.
5. Conclusions

The exploration of relationships between international opinion and emerging powers is a question of how two problematic topics are related. Although “international public opinion” is an expression frequently used in diverse everyday contexts, a clear definition of the phenomenon these terms represent does not exist. On the other hand, neither there is a consensus about the role of “emerging powers” in the present day international stage. However, both subjects persistently appear as part of an ineluctable reality. Differences among authors do not de-emphasize the possibility of countries and people sharing opinions beyond national boundaries, nor the fact that these opinions can have political relevance. On the contrary, in a world of growing global interconnections these dynamics seem more intense than ever.

Countries whose economic gravitation is growing can be seen against this background. Governments and societies from emerging powers are protagonists of international opinion. Their voice—or their voices, within the international concert can be understood as an analytical category to be studied, described and interpreted. Although we did not attempt to face these challenges, we attempted to point out their importance as open fields for research.

With exploratory purposes, considering the importance of media as “creators of reality”, we have analyzed some media articles, and as a result we stressed the fact that countries of BRICS are not presented only as five emerging economies. Instead, media discourse assigns specific communitarian features to them, which in turn are related to an idea of international public opinion. Despite the varied positions about the BRICS we studies, including enthusiastic and pessimistic views, all of them engage in some contribution to this discursive construction of community.
6. References


### 7. Articles used in content analysis

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