World Public Opinion and International Diplomacy

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Abstract: The coexistence of traditional media and new information technologies, is increasing the flow of international news available to the general public at any given moment and faster than before. Hence, the notion of international or world public opinion is rapidly gaining a certain ‘momentum’ with consequences yet to be known. The quick availability of diverse information and the possibility of exchanging ideas might transform such a specific category of public opinion, making it more influential in the dynamics of international diplomacy, despite constraints imposed by the traditional spheres of decision-making in foreign policy and multilateral politics.

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The concept of public opinion has remained almost unchanged since it was first conceived three centuries ago. Worth to mention that it “came into widespread use only in the eighteenth century and as the product of several significant historical trends, primarily the growth of literacy (...) and the circulation of literature enabled by the printing press” (Donsbach and Traugott, 2008).

In the traditional sense, it is defined by a variety of features with deep roots in the domestic arena and well linked with mostly national policies and/or actions, even those whose application is abroad, such as the foreign or international policy. The evolution of public opinion is important and has been regarded closely by many governments.

“Public opinion is critical because it is a key component of the socio-political context within which policy makers operate. Public opinion can fundamentally compel or constrain political, economic and social action to address particular risks” (Leiserowitz, 2007). This explains how the role of the media has growth and also, the relevance of public image and perception.

Traditional media is an increasingly fundamental component of electoral campaigns and, a tool *per se* for propaganda. Awareness among the population on what concerns to the concrete actions projected, planned, financed and implemented by governments at all levels -local, regional and national-, has helped to develop the public opinion as we know it today.

Nonetheless, since its conception, there has been a debate on whether public opinion really has a say in public affairs. The interest in the sometimes huge divide between words and actions by policy makers has created a challenge for them, posed by stake-holders in the form of non-governmental organizations, pressure groups, social movements, student bodies and so on.

Their interactions seem natural and their joint manifestations are clear. Public opinion though, until recently, has been studied from a specific geographical context, hence limiting its radio and also, its impact. Still, the notion of society does not tend to go beyond national borders and this of course, creates boundaries impossible to cross in terms of public opinion.

To put it simply, public opinion cannot be tied then to a more open scope. This however is been challenged by current facts that can be witnessed on a daily basis around the globe. The
emergence of international or world public opinion has brought into discussion whether a truly international society does exist.

Until now, the concept of international community was common in the discourse of many political leaders. Those who are in charge of multilateral organizations and other global entities, have also constantly referred to this theory, that relates all or at least most of the independent countries recognized as such by the United Nations.

However, common understanding around such concept links it with the more traditional one of Nation-States. More specifically, the whole idea of international community refers or tends to relate with the governments of those countries we can consider as part of it. The notion of international society by other hand, has a broader consideration.

It includes their citizens and, more technically speaking, the public opinion they form all together. World public opinion is now a reality that confronts preconceived ideas and generates a “process of forming opinions that transcends borders and affects a new concept of citizenship, relatively oblivious to matters of purely national public interest” (Monzón, 1996).

From the variety of concepts regarding international or world public opinion, we could use the following as a reference:

The international public is a form of social grouping that consists of individuals or groups of different countries that acquire images, general or particular, and perform common evaluations on international events from the information provided by their insertion into transnational communication flows. These images or joint assessments facilitate collective action (...) The views held by that public can be named as international public opinion (Calduch, 1991)

It is clear then that the generation of an international public opinion usually relies on an international event that deserves the adoption of a common position which is expressed in the form of an opinion or statement. The concept is not though, free of skeptics and authors who refuse to accept such a revolutionary term.
Most of the arguments against it can be grouped as follows:

1) Human beings living under different contexts do not have a common base. Instead, they have many cultural and ideological backgrounds that might collide, becoming difficult to have same moral values regarding any issue or topic. The rationale in the end, is that multiple languages, religions and sets of beliefs and other ‘barriers’, including the variety of political, legal and economic systems that coexist worldwide, oppose to the possibility of a single ‘opinion’, creating instead a heterogeneous society with a diversified ‘opinion’.

2) Bearing in mind the above, possibilities of communication between subjects from different countries is troublesome, not only for practical problems such as different time frames but also due to technical issues that make complicated a flow of interactions to: (a) discuss issues that might be of interest and, (b) set courses of actions to handle or tackle those issues, depending of their nature. No public opinion can theoretically arise if communication among their members is limited or even nonexistent. And, in the words of Marcel Merle, “international public opinion can only arise from demonstrations led by pressure groups who achieve a more or less concerted activism in several countries”.

3) Information regarding international news is not widely available at any time and, considering several issues more ‘close’ to the population -insecurity and inflation rates, to name just a few-, interest in ‘global’ topics and those who are from or refer to, a particular or given country, is fair or poor. Without any issue of importance, the activation of a world public opinion will not take place at any time.

4) In almost all cases, when public opinion expresses itself through street protests or just presenting claims to the authorities, demanding a specific policy or the reverse of one already in place, there is recipient of those at any level of government. Taking into account the systems theory, one could certainly expect a response to the demands presented by civil society. In the international arena however, it might be hard to find
a single recipient or entity against which such actions can or could take place, making this public opinion “ineffective”.

These arguments seem all valid but each one can be contested in a certain degree, analyzing the world as it is right now. Certainly, heterogeneity is an obvious feature of the international society but it is also common inside most countries. To assume that a Nation-State per se has a diversified population that thinks the same way about pressure topics, is not accurate.

Cultural barriers do exist but they do not necessarily determine or create divisions in what concerns to opinions regarding any issue. It is possible then, that a Latin American shares the exact same values with a Japanese, despite clear differences of perspective between them and the completely oppose contexts where they have both develop their personalities.

The second argument has been almost entirely suppressed due to the emergence of new technologies which of course, with the digital divide present, are not accessible to many persons in several countries. Every single day, millions of forms of interactions do occur around the world using tools as traditional as the phone and as new as Skype.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have developed innovative ways of communication on real time in a fast form. Recent examples might include the ‘No+FARC’ protests that were held in a number of countries and, the phenomenon of the Arab Spring that quickly spread across the Middle East and North Africa.

Internet has created also a very effective information mechanism that allows the flow of news instantly. The user, connected via PC, laptop, tablet or mobile phone is now able to know what is happening in any country of the world at any given time. Cable TV has evolved also to make foreign and international networks of easy reach, way beyond their headquarters.

Environmental and human rights issues around the world for example, are at the center of debate in many countries, including those far away from where the concrete situation is taking place. Distance is not a dilemma anymore. World public opinion activates fast enough to promote a global response, as in the case of the kidnapped girls in Nigeria.
Finally, international organizations are the focus of the international public opinion. Persons regard them as institutions that could provide a concrete answer to many global problems, despite political interests inside them, mainly in intergovernmental organs like the Security Council or the Human Rights Council of the United Nations.

This has made the United Nations to open more space to civil society and the press, although some Member States publicly oppose to it. As Joseph Nye said, the post-Westphalian era features “an increasing role of social agents” in international relations and of course, global structures realize it.

World public opinion polling largely remains as a topic to be discussed in further research. The design of surveys or inquiries to measure the international public's views regarding a particular topic or series of topics is in a very early stage. Questions like how surveys are to be conducted and then read are yet to be answered.

“In sum, international public opinion can function as a constraint on and as a resource for U.S. and foreign elites to engage in joint action, protracted policy preference modification attempts, or even direct, confrontational opposition” (Bobrow, 2005). International diplomacy is quickly changing and public diplomacy, many decades ago, was just the beginning.

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References:


