Soft Power and Media Power: Western Foreign Correspondents and the Making of Brazil's Image Overseas

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Abstract

Despite a growing recognition of the role of the media in nation branding, a clear understanding of the relationship between the latter and foreign correspondents is absent and needed. Although foreign correspondents are a key target of nation branding, studies generally depict these journalists as vehicles exploited by authorities and consultants rather than actors in their own right. Drawing on twenty-one interviews with foreign correspondents who have covered Brazil in the last two decades, this article identifies three relationship modes between journalists and nation branding: 'challenging', 'aligning with' and 'filtering' soft power. These modes open up a more nuanced understanding of the soft power-journalism nexus, with foreign correspondents having the potential to be collaborators or antagonists of soft power. Acknowledging the agency of Western journalists in relation to soft power initiatives is especially important for Global South nations, due to the dependency of the latter on securing positive coverage by overseas news organisations and their perceived need to be recognised by the West. Moreover, although foreign correspondents claim to contest the version of Brazil put forward by authorities, they ultimately favour similar forms of national imagination, emphasising economic performance, global inequalities and consequently restricting alternative possibilities to communicate the nation.

Keywords: Soft Power, Mediated Nationhood, Nation Branding, Foreign Correspondents, Brazil

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, governments throughout the world have relied on the concept of soft power –that is, the supposed ability to attract and persuade others, drawing on the culture, values and policies of a nation (Nye, 2006)– to justify persuasive practices aimed at communicating overseas a specific image of a nation-state (Kearn, 2011; Wright, Scott, & Bunce, 2020). Nation branding is, together with public diplomacy, the most visible of these practices, with advocates presenting it as a 'tool' to develop or maximise soft power (Fan, 2008, p. 155). Previous efforts to manage national images, such as propaganda or psychological warfare, were concerned with supporting or avoiding armed conflict (Taylor, 1997). Nation branding departs from these efforts due to its reliance on promotional techniques to communicate 'new' or 'updated' versions of national identity to advance predominantly economic goals (Aronczyk, 2013). Nation branding is in consequence a communicative and media-centric practice, fostered by globalisation, the proliferation of digital technologies, the adoption of neoliberalism by the public sector and the spread of promotional culture (Castelló & Mihelj, 2018; Kaneva, 2018).

Despite a growing recognition of the role of the media in nation branding, the media are often depicted as neutral arenas *exploited* by soft power practitioners (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015). This approach overlooks that the media –understood as people, technologies and institutions– are constituted by actors that construct and communicate *their own representations of national identity*. The role of foreign correspondents is critical here.[1] They routinely inform about distant nations, set the foreign news agenda and can influence the perception that elites and the general public may have of a given nation (Hannerz, 2004; Nothias, 2020; Willnat & Martin, 2012).

Foreign correspondents are actually one of the main target audiences of nation branding (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015; Valaskivi, 2016), and are considered by some governments as 'vehicles' useful to 'talk to other governments and publics' (Terzis, 2015, p. 311). Research on nation branding has however largely neglected the views of these journalists (but see Archetti, 2011; Wright et al., 2020), focussing predominantly on the analysis of specific campaigns or on the viewpoints of branding consultants and authorities (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015). This article seeks to address this gap by examining three questions:

(1) How do foreign correspondents perceive nation branding efforts?

(2) To what extent do they embrace, as implied by advocates, messages promoted by nation branding practitioners?

(3) Under what conditions do they seek to ignore or modify nation branding efforts?

Theoretically, and inspired by previous studies (Bebawi, 2017), the article looks at nation branding through the prism of *media power*, understood as 'a set of relationships that help to organize the deployment of the symbolic resources that play a vital role in social reproduction and that […] help to structure our knowledge about, our ability to participate in, and our capacity to change the world' (Freedman, 2014, p. 30). This relational definition of media power is useful to shed light on the different interests and institutions containing, conditioning or challenging the plethora of media representations of a nation. Consequently, and in line with previous studies about the media and the nation (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Mihelj, 2011; Saunders, 2015), this approach offers a more powerful, socially relational and contextually based understanding not only of nation branding, but also of the broader processes involving the mediation of nationhood in the current media environment.

Empirically, the study draws on twenty-one interviews with Western foreign correspondents who have covered Brazil in the last two decades – a nation that until the mid-

2010s was considered to be a 'rising' or 'emerging' soft power (Chatin, 2016)–, examining how they mediate soft power initiatives by others and craft their own representations of national identity. This article therefore advances theoretically and empirically a largely overlooked topic, identifying and conceptually refining the frictions and potential alignments between promotional and journalistic efforts shaping the overseas communication of a nation.

I briefly review the existing literature on nation branding first, noting 1) its lack of attention to and theorisation of the media as agents actively involved in shaping the image of a nation, as well as 2) the unexplored relationship between foreign journalists and soft power. The discussion then turns to the significance of both nation branding and Western foreign correspondents for Brazil. Importantly, unlike nations in the so-called Global North, 'southern' ones like Brazil often lack resources to invest in their own transnational broadcasters, and therefore depend on persuading foreign journalists to give them positive coverage (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2010; Valaskivi, 2016).

Having positioned foreign correspondents as key to nation branding in Brazil, the article then identifies and elaborates on three distinct relationship modes between foreign correspondents and nation branding. These are conceptualised in terms of 'challenging', 'aligning with' and 'filtering' soft power. Each of these modes illuminates the unexplored nexus between foreign correspondents and nation branding, stressing a shifting and ambivalent dynamic between them. In the conclusion, the article draws these observations together, outlining their implications for a more empirically grounded and theoretically nuanced understanding of nation branding and journalism. Notwithstanding their differing modes of interaction, the study observes that both nation branding and foreign correspondents favour representations of national identity that perpetuate global inequalities, stressing economic performance as the standard against which a nation's worth is measured, and the dominance of the West in a global hierarchy of nations.

Nation Branding and Media Power: Theoretical Considerations

The adoption of nation branding has been followed by a growing corpus of academic research, in fields such as cultural studies, marketing, international relations and, especially, media and communications. Instrumental approaches (e.g. Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2016) justify nation branding as a way to control how a nation is communicated overseas, in order to secure material benefits. Critical studies conversely raise concerns about this control, particularly when in private hands, warning about the risk of transforming the nation into an hegemonic community of consumers (e.g. Aronczyk, 2013; Kaneva, 2018). Despite the perceived significance of the media in these studies, and the fact that a substantial amount of research has been conducted by media scholars, the media 'have been described as passive tools in the orchestration of nation-branding campaigns, lacking agency of their own' (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015, p. 3066).

This is partly due to inherent shortcomings in the concepts guiding these practices. There are competing understandings of nation branding (see Dinnie, 2016; Fan, 2010), and soft power has been criticised due to its vagueness, ineffectiveness, and resemblance to the outdated *transmission model of communication* (Flew, 2016, p. 285; see also Hall, 2010; Kearn, 2011). More concretely, soft power assumes that messages about a given nation, usually crafted by state A, travel freely towards an audience in state B. This approach overlooks that states are not the sole actors crafting national images, dismisses the agency of audiences, and tends to see news media as mere vehicles for message transmission (Kaneva, 2018; Saunders, 2015).

Despite their weaknesses, discussions about soft power and nation branding deserve serious attention. Both terms have become widely used beyond academia, informing and justifying state decisions based on strategic aims of persuasion and influence (Hall, 2010; Kearn, 2011).[2] Recent studies have painted a more refined view of the role of the media in

relation to soft power and nation branding, examining news organisations taking part in these initiatives (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015), and acknowledging the viewpoints of journalists working for transnational state-funded broadcasters (Wright et al., 2020). Regardless, the perceptions and beliefs of foreign correspondents on nation branding remain unexplored.

In order to address this blind spot, this article proposes looking at nation branding through the prism of media power. Whilst the precise definition of media power is disputed, it largely refers to a set of economic, political, technological and symbolic relations, conducted by actors inside and outside of the media, which shape what, how and by whom things, people and experiences are represented and communicated (Couldry, 2000, 2012; Couldry & Curran, 2003; Freedman, 2014). As Couldry and Curran observe (2003), the most common understanding of media power refers to how civic, corporate or state actors use the media *as terrains* where they conduct their struggles. That is the dominant view in the nation branding literature, with both instrumental and critical approaches describing the media as arenas devoid of power, exploited by governments and consultants to stage their own representations of national identity (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015; Kaneva, 2018).

A more productive perspective of media power, adopted by this article, acknowledges that the media –and the individuals working for media organisations, such as foreign correspondents– are power holders, shaping the symbolic representations constructing and performing social reality (Couldry, 2012; Freedman, 2014). This view adds an additional dimension to the study of nation branding, recognising that the media are not mere vehicles, but *actors* taking part in the communication of a nation.

Adopting a view inspired by media power draws the study of nation branding closer to the literature on mediated nationhood, such as the influential work of Anderson (1991) and Billig (1995), and which many scholars in this field have surprisingly ignored (but see Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2020). These seminal works shed light on the key role that the media have in the

creation, maintenance and contestation of the nation as the primary social form. Reports by foreign correspondents, for example, not only act as the main source of information about distant settings, but perpetuate the idea of the world as 'naturally' divided into nations (Roosvall, 2014). Moreover, the media may legitimise particular versions of nationhood, depending on political, economic and technological arrangements (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2020; Mihelj, 2011). For instance, nations that adhere to a liberal democratic and market oriented model tend to be reported more positively by Western foreign correspondents, in comparison with those that follow alternative paradigms (Kantola, 2010).

Media power is consequently a useful prism to recognise that the overseas communication of a nation occurs in a contested field, with different actors struggling to impose their own representation as the 'real' nation (following Couldry, 2012; Freedman, 2014). For example, although state agencies and communication consultants are arguably the main actors behind nation branding, their initiatives can clash with versions of national identity created by corporations, NGOs, social movements, or the media (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Saunders, 2015). Media power also stresses how representations may be shaped by other forms of power, including political, economic and cultural. Nation branding for instance depends on governmental support, economic resources, technological capabilities and private interests, therefore requiring the complicity of state, corporate and civic actors (Aronczyk, 2013; Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015). In consequence, an acknowledgment of media power addresses a significant gap in the nation branding literature, that is, the need to 'move beyond a conceptualization of media as mere vehicles for message delivery and to recognize the multifaceted processes of mediation that underlie the symbolic and cultural production of places' (Kaneva, 2018, p. 187).

Foreign Correspondents and the Image of Brazil

A focus on media power is also helpful to address underlying structural inequalities (Freedman, 2014). This acknowledgement is crucial for a better understanding of the relationship between nation branding and foreign correspondents, particularly in the Global South. Whilst nation branding was born in the United Kingdom and the United States, Global South governments have enthusiastically adopted it, often hiring Western advisors who promise to deliver economic development and greater political influence (Aronczyk, 2013).

The Brazilian case is useful to examine these trends. Due to its limited military resources –or 'hard' power–, tendency to solve conflicts by diplomatic means and fame of its cultural expressions, Brazil was considered until the mid-2010s an example of a nation looking to 'attain international standing through the mechanism of soft power' (Chatin, 2016, p. 370). Whilst various governments have engaged in the task of communicating Brazil overseas since at least the early 20th century (Saraiva, 2014), Western debates about soft power and nation branding injected a sense of urgency to local perceptions that Brazil required a *brand* to boost its image (e.g. Chagas de Moura, 2013).

Although Brazil never developed a fully coordinated nation branding strategy, until the mid-2010s there was a general consensus among local and foreign observers that the country enjoyed a positive image overseas, due to its political stability, steady economic growth, reduction of poverty, as well as successful bids to host the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics (Buarque, 2019; Chatin, 2016). The subsequent political and economic crisis that led in 2018 to the election of right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro led some to argue that Brazil's image had been damaged and its soft power waned (e.g. Trinkunas, 2018).

Despite these setbacks, the enthusiastic adoption of nation branding by nations such as Brazil is a symptom of an unequal global allocation of economic, political as well as media power, which gives especial weight to narratives and imagery constructed and consumed by the Global North. Several campaigns claimed to show Brazil to *the world*, yet they were

actually pitched at tourists, investors, politicians and journalists primarily from the United States and Western Europe (e.g. Chagas de Moura, 2013; Niesing, 2013). Unsurprisingly, the alleged success or failure of these initiatives was measured by surveys or interviews with individuals predominantly based in the Global North (Buarque, 2019). Furthermore, 'southern' nations usually lack resources to develop their own transnational broadcasters like the BBC or Voice of America, and when they do it, these have limited global impact (Morales, 2020). Local governments consequently depend on persuading Western foreign correspondents to put out positive coverage of these nations (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2010; Valaskivi, 2016). Hence, despite claims of levelling the playing field (Anholt, 2007), nation branding perpetuates a hierarchical view of the world, with emerging nations competing for the attention of those in the Global North.

Methodology

Whilst media power can be examined from different viewpoints, including ownership, corporate aims, public policy and discourses (Couldry, 2000; Freedman, 2014), its focus is primarily on the *practices* and *assumptions* of what people do with the media (Couldry, 2012). Previous studies of the overseas coverage of Brazil have largely focussed on representations (e.g. Buarque, 2015; Guazina, Prior, & Araújo, 2018). An empirical examination of 'the multifaceted processes of mediation' (Kaneva, 2018, p. 187) requires however looking at the production level, that is, at what media professionals 'do with the media'. Whilst this is by no means the only possible approach (see Freedman, 2014), the perceptions of foreign correspondents are a fertile ground to empirically observe the soft and media power nexus.

For the purposes of this study I chose semi-structured interviews as data collection method, due to their ability to obtain accounts about beliefs and experiences, as well as their

flexibility to incorporate themes not initially considered (Gaskell, 2000). A purposive sample technique (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) was originally employed.[3] I contacted by email or Twitter foreign correspondents working as either freelancers or permanent staff for Western media, including but not limited to *BBC*, *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Telegraph* and *Reuters*. This first set of interviews led to a 'snowballing' sampling method (Weiss, 1994), with journalists helping me to contact other participants. Twenty-one interviews (9 men and 11 women) were conducted until data saturation was reached. Each interviewee was given a pseudonym. Some media organizations and nationalities are not named to protect anonymity.

The interviews lasted on average one hour, and were conducted between March 2014 and September 2017 in Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia, London and New York. The questions were sufficiently open-ended to encourage spontaneous responses. With assistance of specialist software QDA Miner, the interviews were examined using thematic analysis, in order to find, scrutinise and report patterns across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Three interrelated relationship modes between nation branding and foreign correspondents were identified: (1) *challenging soft power*, which is the supposed rejection of nation branding due to its perceived opposition to journalistic ideals as well as its lack of effectiveness; (2) *aligning with soft power*, that is, the occasional overlap of promotional and journalistic approaches when communicating a nation; and (3) *filtering soft power*, namely the active transformational work of foreign correspondents to make nation branding fit with the perceived interests of audiences, as well as with pre-existing global news storylines. These modes, along with their implications for a better understanding of mediated nationhood, merit a detailed analysis.

Challenging Soft Power: Resistance and Dismissal of Nation Branding

When asked about their reaction towards nation branding, the immediate response of most interviewees was to claim to challenge it, on the grounds that it was simply propaganda. American journalist "Tim" held that nation branding amounted to communication strategies trying to 'sell an image' as well as to show 'how the government chooses to represent itself'. Similar statements by other foreign correspondents corroborate previous findings about how journalists resist attempts to be used as vehicles for soft power (Archetti, 2011; Wright et al., 2020). On a broader level, they also confirm how news professionals hold highly negative views of promotional activities, considering them 'dark arts', 'fabrications' or outright lies (Macnamara, 2014, p. 740).

Importantly, not all journalists claimed to challenge nation branding in the same manner. Some adopted a confrontational attitude, stating that foreign correspondents should actively defy it, on the grounds that that it opposes journalistic ideals of autonomy and objectivity. American reporter "Michael" was adamant that his role consisted of holding authorities accountable because he was 'not doing PR for them', whilst European correspondent "Hannah" complained that government officials had a 'fundamental misunderstanding' of her job, expecting her to write positive stories to 'publicise Brazil'. These viewpoints are significant, because they emphasise an inherent tension, observed in other settings (e.g. Wright et al., 2020), between journalistic values and the expectation among governments and consultants that media professionals should be *used* as conduits for particular versions of national identity (see Terzis, 2015).

Other foreign correspondents were however less confrontational, on the grounds that nation branding was simply ineffective. American journalist "Nick" mocked the authorities' reliance on public relations firms, who contacted him and other reporters with offers of press releases, interviews with authorities and press trips. "Nick" expressed disdain, stressing that his news agency was powerful enough to reach the authorities: 'They didn't understand that

we are [name of news agency], and we are already in the country, with very good access to any minister we would like to talk to'. Similarly, British journalist "Diana" held that nation branding initiatives were not newsworthy:

> We were taken on city tours, which were interesting, but I can't imagine any journalist finding that really valuable in terms of going on to write something. It's great to show people part of the city, but I don't think anybody wrote about that afterwards. They also produced all these kinds of things, like shiny booklets, and gave reporters notebooks and pens, but I'm not sure that achieved anything really, other than just being good hosts.

Whilst doubts about the efficiency of nation branding have been addressed by critical scholars (Aronczyk, 2013) and even some of its early advocates (e.g. Anholt, 2013), the views of "Nick" and "Diana" shed light on the shortcomings underpinning it. Foreign correspondents are far from simply mirroring the representations of national identity staged by governments and branding consultants, claiming to actively question, criticise, or outright dismiss them (for a similar observation, see Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015).

Although nation branding is often justified as a means to bridge the gap between the image and the essence of the 'real' nation (Aronczyk, 2013), foreign correspondents substantiated their resistance on authenticity claims, stressing that their accounts –rather than the promotional efforts by authorities– showed the 'authentic' Brazil. European correspondent "Leanne" held that her work made visible 'what Brazil really is, with all this inequality, all these problems that still haven't been resolved', whilst British journalist "Matt" stated:

> It's not that we journalists decide to write good things about Brazil and then we change our minds and write shit things. We wrote good things because good things were happening. Brazil was coming up; it

> had reduced inequality and its commodities were feeding the world. It was doing great. And now it is not doing great and that's why people are not writing such great things. To me, it's just really obvious.

Most foreign correspondents I interviewed therefore emphasised how their news stories were windows to show and see the 'authentic' Brazil, in contrast to the propagandistic, glossy images of nation branding. Their accounts are not only a reminder of how truth claims are constitutive of journalism (Roosvall, 2014), but also corroborate how foreign correspondents, as holders of media power, sustain the perception that news media are vantage points to access social reality (Couldry, 2000, 2012). Nonetheless, their words should not be taken at face value. Whilst these journalists may effectively act as watchdogs of soft power, their accounts –as observed by plenty of studies on news production– are shaped by economic, political, institutional and individual pressures (Nothias, 2020). Furthermore, as the next section will demonstrate, they may occasionally align with the authorities' efforts to stage and communicate particular versions of national identity.

Aligning with Soft Power: Nation Branding, Economics and Emotions

Despite the shared self-perception among foreign correspondents that they challenge soft power initiatives, the interviews suggest an occasional alignment of nation branding and journalism, with both framing Brazil from the perspective of economic performance. Although long-term political aspirations, such as becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council, have been used to vindicate soft power and nation branding in Brazil (Garcia & Coelho, 2018), economic benefits are the dominant argument (Niesing, 2013). "Tim", a journalist who has covered the country for several decades, corroborated the increasing relevance of the economy:

> During the [Brazilian] military dictatorship, there was always concern about how they [the authorities] were going to be portrayed overseas with issues of repression, torture or exile. Now it's more about the economic situation, so it has evolved.

The shift observed by "Tim" confirms how state initiatives aimed at communicating the nation overseas have moved beyond political and geopolitical interests. They are nowadays deeply entrenched in with the economy, approaching the nation as a 'commodity' rather than a 'community' (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2010). Importantly, the economic performance of Brazil drove not only communicational efforts by the authorities, but also foreign news coverage. American journalist "Jim" acknowledged that he moved there 'to cover an economic boom', whilst "Hannah" reflected that 'although there are many interesting things about Brazil, like race relations, arts or whatever, it is primarily an economic story'. Journalists also admitted that this economic boom, together with the hosting of global sporting events, meant that Western media organisations were more willing to pay for stories about Brazil. Consequently, some interviewees admitted that, despite previously having limited knowledge about this nation, they moved there to advance their careers:

> The World Cup and the Olympics gave me a chance to be a foreign correspondent in a place that had very little foreign coverage […] And I knew of some journalists who moved to South Africa for the 2010 World Cup, set up their own little agency for English-language media and did really well. And that was kind of my inspiration, because at the time I was thinking, where the next World Cup will be? Wouldn't it be interesting to do the same thing? ("Anna", English journalist)

In addition to the economic frame, the capacity to tell an emotionally compelling story was also important. Whilst the seeds of Brazil's economic boom were sewn in the late 1990s (Montero, 2014), most interviewees moved to Brazil after 2003, when Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva became President. Foreign correspondents held that the charisma and personal

history of Lula –from union leader with little formal education to global political figure– made him, as two journalists told me, a 'sexy' and 'fascinating' human story. The relevance given to his personal story lines up with branding efforts such as 2009's biopic *Lula: Filho do Brasil* (Lula: Son of Brazil, 2009), a film that narrates his poverty-stricken childhood as well as his activism during the military dictatorship. Although the movie was privately funded, most of the sponsors had government contracts. Furthermore, the Ministry of Culture selected it as Brazil's submission for the 2010 Oscars and Lula himself chose the music for key scenes (Dennison & Meleiro, 2016).

The focus on Lula is unsurprising, given that Western media organisations often frame political leaders as representatives of the international legitimacy and values of a nation (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013). For the interviewees, the story of Lula was therefore crucial not only to direct more attention towards Brazil, but also to the millions of Brazilians who emerged out of poverty during his administration. Foreign correspondents stressed how the positive accounts of people bettering their living conditions was one of the most attractive features to report. American correspondent "Nick" admitted that it was an 'easy story to sell' to Western editors, whilst European journalist "Hannah" stressed that Brazil was also setting a global example of how to tackle inequality:

> Cutting the numbers of people living in abject poverty by such an enormous amount was an amazing story. It used to send shivers down my spine when I thought that somewhere had managed to do that. So exciting, and I wanted to write that over and over again, you know? […] That was a lesson for the world, that you can improve lives in a big poor country.

The above quote strongly echoes Brazil's soft power initiatives at that time. A key objective of the 2014 World Cup was communicating overseas that Brazil was 'making explicit developments in reducing poverty and inequality' (Ministério do Esporte, 2011, p. 7),

portraying it as a model to be followed by other emerging nations. This aim was not met. The World Cup preparations were marred by protests and by the start of the 2016 Olympics, Brazil's economic growth had stalled, then-President Dilma Rousseff had been impeached, corruption scandals affected the whole political spectrum –with Lula controversially arrested and convicted on corruption charges two years later–, and poverty and violence were increasing. In hindsight, some foreign correspondents stated that they could have adopted a more critical tone towards the authorities' messages. American journalist "Nick" observed that, '[the boom years were] a good news story and we as the media bought into it a lot more then. Whereas now, our natural reaction is, oh, wait, that's spin.'

"Nick's" words explicitly acknowledge how journalists sometimes align with nation branding. In the case of Brazil, this alignment happened through a complicity of both emotional and economic angles. Whilst a good economic performance lured foreign correspondents to Brazil, this was insufficient *on its own* to sustain journalistic interest over time. The feel-good story of people getting out of poverty was more exciting, which, as "Hannah" recalled, inspired journalists to report 'over and over again'. Brazil was nonetheless still approached fundamentally from an economic perspective. The compelling elements of feel-good stories that drove individual journalists actually fit with the demands for profit of news organisations, as demonstrated by the quotation that they were an 'easy story to sell.' Foreign correspondents thus reinforced the overarching logic that underpins nation branding and the mediation of nationhood more broadly, that is, economic performance as a key measure of a nation's worth, including newsworthiness (Castelló & Mihelj, 2018).

Filtering Soft Power: Nation Branding, Audiences and Global Storylines

The occasional alignment of foreign journalists with nation branding did not mean that the former were simply mouthpieces of the state. Despite the continuous attempts by authorities and communication consultants to steer Western news coverage towards the official version of Brazil, journalists still retained significant power. Even though foreign correspondents did not always directly challenge nation branding, they sometimes filtered official promotional messages, depending on the interests and expectations of the audiences for whom they reported as well as perceived global news storylines.

Discussions on Brazil's soft power or brand often describe the 'image of the nation' as a static object that circulates the globe unproblematically (e.g. Mariutti & Giraldi, 2012). This approach fails to acknowledge that the communication of a nation is often shaped by exogenous factors. Foreign correspondents usually 'domesticate' news, highlighting or downplaying aspects of a given nation in order to appeal to the largely national audiences that each journalist caters for (Hannerz, 2004). As "Oliver", a freelance journalist who sells articles to various news agencies, explained:

> I try to be honest and balanced with all [news agencies], but the choice of stories sometimes changes a little. When I did my thing for East Asian countries, I didn't talk so much about murders and things like that, because that kind of thing didn't play well in more conservative countries. And agencies of Muslim countries weren't interested in covering the Sao Paulo Gay Pride Parade or LBGT issues. So I try not to pitch everything everywhere.

Although foreign correspondents claim to offer vantage points on to the 'authentic' Brazil, "Oliver's" words demonstrate that journalists communicate distinct accounts of overseas nations in order to meet the expectations, interests and restrictions of distant locales. In the above example, audiences of Muslim countries were less exposed to messages about the Sao Paulo Gay Pride Parade, even though this state-sponsored parade is one of the biggest

LGBTQ events in the world. Likewise, stories about crime and violence, which have continuously tarnished Brazil's soft power (Mariutti & Giraldi, 2012), are downplayed in East Asia due to local preferences and not because of any successful effort by the Brazilian authorities. This is consequently a perfect example of media power at play, with the various arrangements governing the media –editorial agendas, profit, perceived demands of audiences– constraining the scope of mediated representations about 'what Brazil is' (following Couldry, 2012; Freedman, 2014). National images are therefore not an object, but a relationship whose outcome –the mediated content– will differ depending on context and the specificities of each audience.

The mediation of the Brazilian nation was also shaped by broader trends. The choice of what, when and how to cover distant nations is often influenced by global storylines, that is, 'a frame into which a journalist can place seemingly random events and give them coherence' (Lederman, quoted in Hannerz, 2004, p. 102). Examples of global storylines are the Cold War, the War on Terror or more recently, the global rise of populism. Brazil's soft power efforts have consequently been filtered by some of these storylines, which amplify or minimise the promotional efforts of the authorities.

As discussed previously, good economic performance was a staple of the projected image of Brazil in the early 21st century. Yet, as Spanish journalist "Pedro" admitted, the predominantly optimistic news at that time were partly a reaction to the 'social and economic crisis that we were having in Europe [in 2007 and 2008]. Brazil was going to teach us how to get out of it.' Likewise, according to American correspondent "Tim", the attention received by the protests preceding the 2014 World Cup, which spoiled official branding efforts to portray Brazil as a harmonious and happy nation (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020), was driven by 'an enhanced sensitivity to this kind of thing, as a result of the Arab Spring.'

The image of Brazil therefore varied depending on the perceived importance of news from other settings. Moreover, as American correspondent "Sonia" admitted, journalists reporting from Brazil had to compete with colleagues posted in other locations: 'You have news from the Middle East, from Africa, from Asia and so on, and there is usually little space to show what we are doing here [in Brazil].' This scarcity of space was also expressed in terms of scarcity of attention, with nations deemed of interest only during specific periods. European journalist "Hannah" reflected:

> There's a fickle finger that moves and points from country to country, and it's only pointing at you for a little while. I mean, it was Mexico in the 1990s. You only have some years in that position, and it is going to move away, because that's what the news agenda is like [...] Brazil looked for a while that it was going to be a real good news story, and then it did not. And, well, you know, this is a big world and there are many other countries.

The scarcity of space and the 'fickle finger' of the media corroborate that foreign correspondents, as holders of media power, can produce and reproduce symbolic inequalities (Couldry, 2012; Freedman, 2014). Nations are thus competitively represented as more newsworthy or as 'doing better' than others. For instance, when a 2009 front page by *The Economist* –referenced by all the interviewees– had an illustration of a flying Christ the Redeemer statue with the headline 'Brazil takes off', this newspaper did not merely inform about Brazil, but also approved its adherence to a particular set of economic models and behaviours. Likewise, four years later the same newspaper posed the question, 'Has Brazil blown it?', expressing its disappointment in view of the political and economic crises that had started to manifest throughout Brazil. Both accounts confirm that, rather than simply reporting about other nations, foreign correspondents actually evaluate them (Kantola, 2010). The image of a nation should therefore be understood not merely as an expression of nation

branding initiatives, but as a complex construct, shaped and filtered by forces beyond official control.

Concluding Discussion: The Shifting Dynamic of Nation Branding and Journalism

Despite the stated importance of the media in nation branding research, the media are often depicted as *arenas* where governments and consultants stage and disseminate their own representations of national identity (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015; Kaneva, 2018). This article challenges this presumption by looking at soft power initiatives through the prism of media power. Acknowledging the media –and the individuals working for media organisations– as power holders recognises that they are not simply vehicles to be exploited, but *actors* that shape the perceived social reality of a nation. Governments and branding consultants are therefore only one among several actors taking part in the mediation of nationhood, with foreign correspondents being another –but by no means the only ones (see Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Saunders, 2015).

Recognising the agency of the media in relation to nation branding is especially important for nations in the Global South. Although digital technologies and advertising techniques play a significant role in nation branding (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2020), 'southern' nations such as Brazil remain highly dependent on securing positive coverage by overseas news organisations, due to their limited resources to establish their own transnational broadcasters, as well as the perceived need to be recognised by the West. Hence, although foreign correspondents might be an 'endangered species' in the West (Willnat & Martin, 2012), they remain significant because they have the power to shape how *the world is looking* at the Global South.

As previously stressed, foreign correspondents were not mere vehicles for nation branding. They had a shifting, complex and ambivalent relationship with these initiatives.

Three interrelated relationship modes were brought to light. First, on an explicit level, foreign correspondents claimed to *challenge* these efforts, either because they were deemed to oppose journalistic ideals of autonomy and objectivity, or were considered ineffective. Second, despite previous claims, the work of foreign correspondents was occasionally *aligned* with official promotional initiatives, for example, when they coincided in using economic performance as the main standard against which to measure a nations' worth. This alignment does not mean that news media were subsumed by nation branding. As the third and final mode of relationship shows, journalists may ultimately *filter* elements of soft power initiatives, selecting those that better fit with the perceived interests, expectations and restrictions of distant audiences, as well as with pre-existing global news storylines that provide coherence to otherwise disconnected events.

Foreign correspondents should therefore not be understood as collaborators or antagonists of soft power necessarily. They can potentially play these roles at different times, strengthening or undermining initiatives to promote a nation overseas. There is consequently a dynamic involving nation branding and journalism which sometimes aligns, when soft power efforts get communicated, and sometimes clash, when journalists do not trust or ignore them because they make the journalist appear as not 'autonomous' or 'objective' (see also Wright et al., 2020). Foreign correspondents perceive nonetheless that their power eclipses soft power. According to them, news media organisations filter, transform, appropriate and even reject nation branding messages before the latter reach, if they ever reach, their intended audiences.

Whilst further research is required to compare these claims with actual media representations, the interviews add nuance to the nation branding and journalism nexus. Nation branding emerges as a messier, less effective and more fragile practice than instrumental and critical approaches have stated. These initiatives therefore appear as neither

a source of material and political benefits, as argued by its advocates (e.g. Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2016), nor as all-too powerful tools restricting national identity, as some of its critics hold (e.g. Aronczyk, 2013; Kaneva, 2018). Arguments put forward by critics of nation branding are nonetheless still valid, although they should be approached as part of a broader critique of the mediation of nationhood. As demonstrated by the interviews, the dominance of neoliberal approaches driving nation branding (Castelló & Mihelj, 2018) was shared by foreign correspondents, who evaluated nations positively or negatively depending on economic performance. Hence, although Western journalists contested the version of Brazil put forward by authorities, they favoured similar forms of national imagination. Likewise, foreign correspondents perpetuated a global hierarchy of nations, with 'emerging' ones seeking attention and approval from those in the West.

The struggles for the image of Brazil in the news media are therefore not necessarily between authentic or propagandistic versions, or local and foreign ones, but often between versions produced by and for the Global North. This evidences a concentration of media power in Western news organisations, which mirrors the similar concentration of nation branding consultants also in the West (Aronczyk, 2013). This concentration intensifies and naturalises imbalances regarding 'who can effectively speak, and be listened to' (Couldry, 2000, p. 192), and stresses that nation branding is a symptom, rather than the cause, of constraints imposed on the mediation of nationhood in the current hybrid, transnational, but highly Westernised media environment.

Although nations are continuously contested, particularly in societies with structural inequalities and a weak state like Brazil, only certain forms of mediated nationhood, particularly those that stress the economy as the main measure of a nation's worth and position the Global North as the dominant force, are favoured. Despite their stated disputes and diverse aims, both nation branding and foreign correspondents perpetuate a competitive

and asymmetrical version of the world, characterised by unequal power relations governing the circulation of national images. Western journalism and soft power initiatives therefore narrow the scope of possible representations of national identity –particularly those from the Global South– that can circulate in and through the media, effectively conditioning, containing and constraining alternative possibilities to imagine the nation.

[1] There are competing understandings of what a foreign correspondent is, depending on nationality, employer, recognition, and contractual conditions. Whilst acknowledging these differences, I use Brüggeman et al's (2017, p. 541) broader definition of 'persons employed by a news organization who make their living by journalistic reporting to an audience in another country'.

[2] For example, in February 2020 the first Global Soft Power Summit was held in London, organised by BrandFinance. The event was also used to launch the Global Soft Power Index, a survey of perceptions of foreign nations conducted with 55,000 people in 100 countries.

[3] A representative sample was not possible. There is no reliable information on the number and general characteristics of foreign correspondents in Brazil. Although the Association of Foreign Press in Brazil told me that they have around 300 members, several journalists whom I met were not part of that organisation.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Simon Cottle, Sabina Mihelj, Pawel Surowiec, Nadia Kaneva, Göran Bolin, Michael Skey, and James Pamment for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article. He would also like to thank the organisers of the workshop 'Public Diplomacy in Conflict: Nordic, Baltic and East European Perspectives', held at Södertörn University on May 2019, for allowing him to discuss some of the ideas presented here. Finally, he is extremely grateful to the ICA Public Diplomacy Interest Group for the surprising honourable mention this article received in the ICA 2021 conference.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/S011846/1].