Does Global Public Opinion Exist?

- Doug Miller, President, The GlobeScan Foundation

For the first time in history, it can be successfully argued that global public opinion exists in sufficient measure to be called a singular entity, mainly due to the high penetration of global news coverage and the Internet creating a common agenda. However, the research industry needs to continue working to fill out its representation of the planet’s 7 billion inhabitants.

Global public opinion is being measured scientifically and regularly by a number of research agencies and networks using acceptable research standards in countries around the world. And the results are being increasingly reported and used as “global opinion” by large media outlets and international institutions.

Reliably measuring the views of what could be called the ‘global body politic’ is a significant feat for the survey research profession. At the same time, it must be admitted even by those of us conducting this international research that global surveys systematically exclude significant numbers of countries as well as the poor and ultra-poor within participating countries.

So-called global polls are often only conducted in 20 to 30 countries, not nearly enough in a world with over 200 countries. Gallup International’s annual 60-country poll is an improvement, but still falls short. A relatively new entrant, Gallup Organization’s ‘World Poll,’ is now being conducted yearly in 160 countries, but it is far from certain that its business model is sustainable. A central problem here is the lack of financial resources that are dedicated to support transnational research, whether academic or commercial.

The second problem of representation relates to the under-representation of marginal groups within countries surveyed, especially the very poor. This is due to a number of factors including methodologies (for example, those that rely on mobile telephone ownership or especially Internet connectivity), endemically high refusal rates among those with no formal education, and the infrequent use of plain-language questionnaires where the level of comprehension is appropriate for ultra-poor respondents.

For example, the literacy rate in India stands at 74 percent (according to the UN; only 65% for women). This suggests that as many as 300 million Indians may be regularly under-represented in typical public opinion surveys due to level-of-language or other barriers, out of a total ultra-poor population in India of 400 million1.

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1 The World Bank Group estimate, April 2014
Clearly, the poor and ultra-poor have views that matter as well, especially in countries with universal suffrage like India. While the poor are predominately focused on their own village/community and on meeting daily needs, they have a wealth of life experience and perspective that deserve to be heard and understood.

Initiatives like the UN Development Programme’s “Million Voices: The World We Want” (2013), the World Bank’s “Consultations With The Poor” (1999), and the GlobeScan Foundation’s “Survey of the Poor” (2015/16), are all attempts to bring the voices of the 1.2 billion people living on less than $1.25 per day into global public opinion.

While we in the research industry need to continue closing these two important gaps in our global representation – including more countries in global polls and being more inclusive of the poor and ultra-poor – there is persuasive evidence that the global public opinion that we currently measure is a valid proxy for the engaged ‘global body politic’ that most influences global governance and policies today.

To demonstrate that global public opinion not only exists but that it behaves in a manner consistent with a singular entity, we will draw from a large body of tracking research GlobeScan and its research partners have conducted across mainly Group of 20 (G20) countries over the last 15 years.

First, we explore what we consider to be a key underpinning of global public opinion – a common agenda created through the pervasiveness of news coverage and the penetration of the Internet – based on survey research GlobeScan has conducted for the BBC.

The 2006 BBC/Reuters Trust in Media Poll revealed strong demand across all 10 countries surveyed and all ages for news: seven in ten respondents (72%) reported following news closely every day - including two in three (67%) in the 18-24 age range.

More recently, GlobeScan’s 26-country BBC World Service Poll released in March 2010 revealed that 63% of home Internet users reported spending more than 3 hours a week on-line for non-work purposes. This figure would be significantly higher if measured today because of very large increases in Internet penetration in countries around the world during the last 5 years. In fact, an elaboration of data from the International Telecommunications Union and other sources suggests fully 100 countries will have greater than 50% Internet penetration in households by the end of 2015.  

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2 Ibid.
3 Source: Internet Live Stats (www.InternetLiveStats.com) An elaboration of data from International Telecommunication Union (ITU), United Nations Population Division, Internet & Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), and World Bank
This close attention to news coverage, both on and off line, together with the explosive growth in Internet penetration in recent years, has helped form an international 'body politic' with shared information and a common trans-national agenda.

As a result, global opinion has become more unified compared to when GlobeScan started global polling in 1999. Public opinion across the world was far from singular as recently as the turn of the century. In fact it was quite fragmented, with citizen views in developing countries at odds with those in the industrial world.

For example, in GlobeScan’s Millennium Poll conducted in 1999 across 23 countries, we found significant differences between citizens of G7 countries (namely: Canada, France, Germany Italy, Japan, the UK and the USA) and those in emerging economies in their levels of consumer empowerment and activism (G7 high, the rest low) and in their views of the relative roles of government, companies and NGOs (with NGOs seen as an important source of leadership in G7 countries while government leadership predominated elsewhere).

The same was true in GlobeScan’s first few international surveys on the environment in 1997 and 1998, which revealed G7 citizens more concerned about global impacts of pollution and about chemical risks compared to citizens in emerging economies. For their part, citizens of emerging economies, including the so-called BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China), were more concerned about the local impacts of pollution on their health, and more inclined to see the benefits of chemical fertilizers outweighing their risks.

This systemic difference between citizens in industrialized countries and those in emerging economies has largely disappeared over the last 15 years of GlobeScan’s global tracking, reinforcing our view that global public opinion is a valid entity to study and discuss.

Minor differences continue to exist between developed and developing countries, but the views often trend in the same direction over time, suggesting a measure of congruence. Where significant differences still exist, it is sometimes surprisingly because views in G7 countries and the BRICs have actually reversed polarity.

Let’s examine three examples of how global views have evolved over the last decade and a half, to illustrate why we have reached these conclusions: first on climate change, then on globalization, and finally on hope for the future.

First, a few words about the way we have chosen to portray the data in the following charts. Given the constraints of black-and-white publishing, including line charts of each country’s results to each question was not seen as feasible. So we have charted average results for G7 countries and for BRIC countries, weighting each country’s
results equally. Like many data series, there are holes in GlobeScan’s tracking with not all G7 and BRIC countries included in all years of the line charts. These exceptions are noted under each chart. The worst case is on the first chart where no Japanese or Italian data is included at all in the G7 average even though GlobeScan has data from these countries for some of the years. In the interest of transparency, GlobeScan is providing all related data in tabular form in an Appendix so the reader can study and portray the data in the manner they prefer.

Climate Change

The earliest international survey exploring views on climate change or global warming was conducted in 1992 by the Gallup International Institute (about the same time as a similar University of Chicago study). The Gallup study revealed a ten percentage point difference in the proportion of citizens of G7 countries (sans Japan and Italy) seeing the issue as “very serious” compared to citizens of BRIC countries (see chart). A similar ten percent higher rating by citizens of G7 countries compared to those in BRIC countries was revealed when GlobeScan asked the identical question (with permission) in 1998.

This statistically significant division in global opinion was consistent with what was observed on a number of global topics prior to the turn of the Century, reflecting generally a more local focus and concern among citizens of BRIC countries compared to their peers in G7 countries.

As this tracking chart indicates, from the year 2000 onwards this division of opinion has sometimes disappeared but also has reversed as the level of concern in G7 countries (sans Japan and Italy) peaked around the time of the 2009 UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen and has since declined to end 2014 fully 20 percentage points below the level 22 years earlier in 1992. Citizens of BRIC countries today are ten percentage points more likely to say the issue is “very serious” than their peers in G7 countries.

(Further research by GlobeScan suggests this reversal has been driven on the one hand by extreme weather events in BRIC countries attributed to climate change in the local media, and on the other hand, by a preoccupation with economic issues among G7 citizens that has pushed down their environmental concerns.)
**Economic Globalization**

Views on globalization have evolved over the last 15 years as well, demonstrating a relative homogeneity of opinion between those citizens in G7 countries (all 7) and the BRICs. Both sets of publics viewed economic globalization most positively immediately following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US. Since then, positive views have slowly declined across G7 countries. A larger decline in positive views has occurred among BRIC publics, ironically, the very ones who supposedly had the most to gain from the outsourcing of jobs that occurred from G7 countries over this period.

But the main point here is that the views of citizens across G7 and BRIC countries on globalization over the last decade have acted as if they are part of the same body of opinion. For example, it is easy to imagine a chart tracking the different views of men and women looking very similar to this.

**Hope for the Future**

One of the very few topics where we have found significant differences still existing between the views of G7 and BRIC citizens is related to hope for the future.

GlobeScan has asked a question across G20 countries for over a decade on whether respondents think their children and grandchildren will have a higher quality of life than they themselves have today. As the trend chart on the right shows, there has been a growing divergence in views on this over the last decade between citizens of G7 and BRIC countries.
The GlobeScan Foundation’s Hope Index\textsuperscript{4} pilot survey in 2013 confirmed this pattern, with the UK and US expressing the least amount of hope of any of the 12 countries surveyed on this very question.

In conclusion, with some exceptions (like hope for the future), GlobeScan’s evidence from 15 years of tracking opinion across the G20 countries reveals increasing convergence, or congruency, of opinion between citizens of G7 and BRIC countries, suggesting that global public opinion can be considered a singular entity, and hence a worthy subject for study and use in global affairs.

It is both surprising and comforting at the same time that people around the world share similar concerns and aspirations, as well as a similar agenda of global issues – all with rich cultural complexity and differences in perspective that we humans can deliver in even small groups let alone across tens of thousands of interviews worldwide.

This suggests that international comparative research is a field with much potential opportunity and influence, especially if we in the research industry continue to close the two important gaps in our global representation – including more countries in global polls and being more inclusive of poor and ultra-poor citizens.

At very least, we believe we have presented persuasive evidence to claim that ‘global public opinion’ as measured by the research industry’s current best practices is a valid proxy for the engaged ‘global body politic’ that most influences global culture, governance and policies today.

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\textbf{Appendix: (separate PDF file)}

Tables of GlobeScan’s tracking data used in the above charts

\textsuperscript{4} The full report of the Hope Index pilot study can be downloaded \url{here}. 