GLOBAL MEDIA AND CHINA
全球媒體與中國

Data on demand

Global Media and China
2019, Vol. 4(2) 157–161
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DOI: 10.1177/2059436419856281
journals.sagepub.com/home/gch
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Keywords
Algorithms, benchmarks, China, global rankings, soft power

This special issue of *Global Media & China* critically examines the current fascination with indexing, mapping, ranking and metrics worldwide as they apply to nations, regions, municipalities, publications and even citizens. We now live in age of information abundance. This abundance has in turn generated enthusiasm for increasing scrutiny of data, big and small. Many questions therefore arise: how valid is the measurement? Who benefits from the accumulation of data? And in this age of constant evaluation, is there any way for individuals to avoid their performance being ranked, their web browsing history monitored and their daily movements subject to surveillance?

Globally, organizations are investing resources in measuring, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the success and impact of activities on a national level. This has given rise to a whole new industry that conducts longitudinal studies and feeds interest in where a nation is positioned in global rankings. Governments use their country's position in these rankings as an indication of attraction; a rise in global rankings is good news, unless this represents a negative indicator, such as pollution or press freedom. Rankings seek to measure a range of issues, including social progress, innovation, happiness, food security, Internet access and connection speeds and pop culture exports. It seems that today everything is quantifiable.

One of the most pervasive indicators of national reputation is soft power, with organizations such as Portland developing rankings for institutions including the Annenberg School of Communication, the British Council and the government of Wales. Meanwhile, *Monocle* magazine publishes its own soft power rankings at the end of each year. These surveys reflect an obsession with rankings that reinforces the mistaken assumption that soft power is little more than nation

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branding or a popularity contest. At the same time, the preference for easily measurable 'outputs' – how many viewers watch a particular international television broadcaster and how many international students are studying in our education system – rather than 'impacts' (what do viewers or students actually *think* and *feel* about their interactions?) means we receive a mere snapshot of soft power capacity. This makes the evaluation of soft power strategies by quantitative methods difficult and dependent on minimum information, denying access to a comprehensive analysis of how audiences are responding (or not) to soft power initiatives.

Some have argued that China's soft power and social progress rankings would be far higher if they were measured according to values endorsed by the Chinese government rather than by the more liberal norms of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) institutions. Moreover, measurement itself reveals little about the emotional response of audiences to cultural products or their engagement with political institutions. Clearly, we need to pay more attention to qualitative rather than quantitative research if we wish to know how and why audiences engage with a particular country or government.

Rankings in history

The use of intricate systems of records to track people's activities, register economic progress and calculate the movement of populations dates back to the ancient society of Mesopotamia, geographically located in a territory now shared by Iraq, Kuwait and parts of Syria. John Lent writes about how Mesopotamian society invented a writing script to make lists of items such as 'receipts of tribute, itemization of war booty, distribution of rations, and payments to officials' (Lent, 2017).

Another nation to make significant advances in record keeping was China. Valerie Hansen (2012), in a magisterial anthropology of the ancient Silk Roads of the Han Dynasty, describes how meticulous records were kept of delegations leaving and entering China. By then, the Chinese had developed a hieroglyphic language that has changed little over centuries, as well as inheriting the zero symbol of the Arabs by the 14th century. Chinese systems of imperial record keeping led to the bureaucratization of governance and the idea of the welfare state (Woodside, 2006), the latter idea becoming a mainstay of Western governance by the 20th century.

Metrics and performance indicators, according to Jerry Muller (2018), author of *The Tyranny of Metrics*, have become cultural memes. 'Embracing them', he says, 'promises a seat on the train of historical progress'. Metrics are gathered by people referred to disparagingly as 'bean counters'. Their counting does hold the promise of better outcomes, better policy and better business decisions a lot of the time. However, much of the time, wrong questions are being asked, resulting in gaps in data and misleading comparisons, simply because counting tangibles is far easier than designing methods to measure the impact of intangibles. Perhaps most worrying is the fact that surveys can be devised to 'game the system', that is, to produce results that appear valid to the non-expert, and even to academics.

Muller locates the birth of performance metrics in the education system in Victorian Britain in the 1860s. This was the time of the great British cultural reformer Matthew Arnold, who developed a theory of how ordinary people could be elevated by a system of learning not dissimilar to the Chinese model of exposure to the great Confucian books. Arnold was opposed to rewards based on results, which was introduced as a means to encourage schools to improve performance. Later on, in the United States, the baton of performance metrics was taken up by Robert McNamara, who was US Secretary of Defense during the period of the Vietnam War and went on to become the president of the World Bank. His introduction of body counts to register success on the battlefield in Vietnam was anathema, even to many US generals who saw this as an inaccurate measure that distorted political and popular opinions of the war's progress.

Modern society has taken record keeping to extreme limits. Today, people live in a data-saturated society. It seems that people's activities are constantly screened by both governments through social welfare systems and by corporate 'bean counters'. In the modern university system, researchers' outputs are now tracked, mapped, indexed and used as 'key performance indicators' that allow comparisons among colleagues and across institutions. Universities compete to climb global rankings, and this is only achievable if researchers and academics have dynamic international profiles.

In the sphere of business, regions and cities are subject to analysis in an effort to understand the growing influence of subnational actors, for instance, the movements of populations that might contribute to a region or city's talent base or investment readiness. Rankings also compare cities according to their liveability, global connectivity, friendliness, cultural diversity and creativity.

Today, 'big data' is accelerating the trend, harvesting large volumes of raw data from individuals. With the use of information technologies, these data are converted into knowledge outputs, for instance, rankings of countries, cities and movies. Data are then visualized, that is, presented in a more readable friendly format for politicians and business leaders to share. Scholars working across the social sciences and the humanities are complicit in creating masses of data, often without agreeing on what those data are or the criteria for their evaluation (Borgman, 2015, p. xviii).

The methodology behind such metrics has attracted less attention than the rankings themselves, though understanding this is crucial for our interpretation of the data. Data gleaned from research can be used for specific agendas and is open to manipulation, depending on what organization or government agency is commissioning the research. In recent years, the rising vocation of 'data scientists' is indicative of a global preoccupation with data.

On a more mundane level, social media apps allow consumers to rank restaurants, ride sharing trips, travel providers, doctors, dentists, health providers and even masseurs. Based on recommendations from 'peers', people make decisions that previously might have been educated guesses. People derive a sense of agency from the freedom to rank choices, but this in turn allows businesses to send us information that we probably don't need. The 'democratisation' of rankings also feeds the suspicion of expert opinion that has been so crucial to the rise of populist politics across the world. Why do we need to trust professional journalists, commentators, restaurant critics or film reviewers when we can all share our own opinions with a potential global audience? When asked 'who do you trust?' increasingly, the answer is 'people like me', and the notion that 'the people know best' is at the heart of populist political campaigns. Advertising and politics have long been based on metrics to convince audiences of expert opinion – 9 out of 10 cats prefer our brand of cat food, 78% of consumers agree that our shampoo alleviated their dandruff problem – so today, it is a little surprising that those very same metrics are often used to undermine the authority of experts.

There are four papers in this special issue. In the first paper, Alberto Carrera locates the birth of city rankings in the evolution of the economic press, the consolidation of mercantilism and the development of financial capitalism in Europe from the 16th to 18th century. The paper is notable first for its historical contextualization, and second, a regional case study of city rankings. Carrera questions how rankings are viewed by heads of local government agencies and their effect in designing and implementing public policy in four Mexican cities. The paper argues for an ‘implied effect’ of such listings. He says that rankings are invariably prepared from the perspective of the organization that creates them, and while these are not always decisive, they contribute to ‘perceptions’ of social agents. The rankings, furthermore, serve to create a ‘benchmark’, or point of comparison.

The paper by Zhang and Wu on soft power indexes also references the concept of benchmarking. They say that ‘Because of the ostensibly scientific nature of benchmarking exercises, the resulting rankings, once promulgated, are difficult to dislodge from public discourse’. A second problem is that the benchmarking process itself risks simplifying reality and assuming national performance as universally ‘evaluatable’, irrespective of historical and structural contexts. Using this critical framework, the paper examines two notable examples of national soft power, first the Portland Soft Power Index, also known as *Soft Power 30*, and second, the *China National Image Global Survey*. The paper investigates inherent bias in the structure of such ‘reports’. Notably, the *Soft Power 30* epitomizes benchmarking that is imprinted by Western perspectives about soft power, namely Western values of liberalism. The *China National Image Global Survey*, on the contrary, relies exclusively on ‘subjective’ data derived from opinion polls, asking how other nations’ perceptions of China have changed. In essence, the *Soft Power 30* passes itself as a global benchmark, claiming to use both quantitative and qualitative methods. The *China National Image Global Survey* is ostensibly about China reflecting on its place in the world, seen from the vantage of other nations.

The paper by Yecies, Keane, Yu, Zhao, Leong, Wu and Zhong references the Chinese term *wenhua qiangguo*, translated as both ‘cultural power’ and ‘cultural empowerment’. *Wenhua qiangguo* is used as a substitute for cultural soft power (*wenhua ruanshili*) in China. The paper discusses why cultural power is important to China. The first section of the paper considers the relationship between culture and power, providing examples from ‘great civilizations’ of the past. The paper argues that cultural power had considerable purchase in the western hemisphere until the late 20th century, a time when the focus of governments began to turn to creativity, along with various spin-offs such as creative cities, creative economies and creative classes. The focus on creativity in China has taken a new direction with the emergence of China’s ‘digital champions’, sometimes abbreviated as BAT: Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent.

The second part of the paper briefly investigates several examples of indexes and their approaches, including the Portland *Soft Power 30*, the Lowy Asia Power Index, as well as a number of reports issued by Chinese academics. The *Soft Power 30* index, as discussed in the previous paper, effectively privileges Western liberal democracies; the Lowy Asia Power Index, on the contrary, offers China a privileged position, although its choice of cultural indicators is questionable due to a heavy reliance on Google search. In the last section, the authors introduce the ‘Cultural Power Metric’ (CPM), an alternative model devised as part of an ongoing research project on the influence of Chinese digital platforms in the Asia-Pacific. The CPM attempts to apply big data methods to capture attitudinal and geo-locational changes over time.

The final paper by Karen Wong and Amy Dobson considers ‘social credit’, a term now used to describe China’s ambitious plan to merge financial credit score systems with a broader range of lifestyle quantifications. Wong and Dobson’s paper provides a timely analysis of this ‘credit system’ in China (which is still being trialled) and comparable systems in Western liberal democracies, mostly linked to ascertaining the creditworthiness of potential consumers. The paper argues that China’s advanced data collection, securitization, and management of populations may encourage other nation-states to follow the example, in this way, digitizing all aspects of social, cultural, economic and political life. This scenario certainly raises questions about the relationship between governments, financial institutions, big data management systems and digital platforms.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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