International broadcasters and country image management: Comparing audience perceptions of China, Russia and Iran in Latin America

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Abstract
This article focuses on international news channels in the Global South and the perceptions by audiences in Latin America. Designed with the intention of re-shaping global narratives, international broadcasting is considered instrumental to public diplomacy and improving the image of particular countries. While many studies focus on global media policies of specific countries or the messages broadcast by international media outlets, less attention has been paid to the impact on audiences. Based on a series of focus groups conducted in Mexico and Argentina, this article discusses how Latin American audiences perceive public diplomacy efforts as channelled by international news media and their effect on country image perception, by focusing on China’s CCTV-E, Russia’s RT and Iran’s HispanTV. The findings show that preconceived images contribute to undermine the acceptance of international broadcasters. In addition, participants were optimistic about RT’s prospects of success in Latin America, hesitant about HispanTV and pessimistic about China Central Television.

Keywords
China, international broadcasting, international image management, Iran, public diplomacy, Russia

Introduction
Labelled as ‘global threats’ by Washington (Macias & Breuninger, 2019), China, Russia and Iran have invested heavily in setting up their own international media outlets to make themselves heard. In fact, international broadcasting is often considered a tool of public diplomacy to engage with...
global audiences by presenting what they see as an objective picture of the world (Cull, 2019). Although the hope is to influence perceptions and change global conversations about their countries or origin (Rawnsley, 2015), the effectiveness of this strategy is still debated. By focusing on China’s CCTV-E, Russia’s RT and Iran’s HispanTV, this article discusses how Latin American audiences perceive public diplomacy efforts as channelled by international news media and their effect on country image perception.

While studies on Iranian public diplomacy are scant (Wastnidge, 2015), those about Russia and China have flourished. For these two countries, public diplomacy is a state-driven initiative to strengthen their soft power (Wilson, 2015), compete with the United States (Dale et al., 2014), and better communicate their position on contentious issues such as the Ukrainian crisis and the South China Sea (Simons, 2015). In the case of China, its charm offensive has been the focus of studies for over a decade (Kurlantzick, 2007). Beijing’s public diplomacy strategy is seen as a continuation of propaganda efforts since the 1950s (Chang & Lin, 2014), in pursuit of soft power (Rawnsley, 2009; J. Wang, 2011) and with the aim of liberating itself from Western hegemonic discourses (Sun, 2015). Researchers have both discussed Beijing’s global media strategy (Thussu et al., 2018) as well as analysed the specific case of China Central Television’s (CCTV) international expansion (Dong & Shi, 2007; Jirik, 2016; Nelson, 2013; Zhang, 2011), by comparing it to other international broadcasters (S. Li, 2017; Marsh, 2016). Russia’s broadcaster RT, however, is seen as waging an ‘information war’ (van Herpen, 2015) not only seeking status and influence but also challenging Western hegemonic narrative of soft power (Kiseleva, 2015). In its attempt to attract global audiences with different political views (Yablokov, 2015), the overemphasis of nationalist messages can fail to resonate with non-Russian audiences (Just, 2016). Thus, efforts to soften the nationalistic approach on social media are contributing to strengthen the engagement with audiences and generate longer term soft power effects (Crilley et al., 2020).

Audience studies constitute a relatively less explored area of public diplomacy research. While Anne Geniets (2013) conducted one of the few comparative studies analysing the strategies of English-language international broadcasters and audiences in a few African and Asian countries, more recent publications look at the reception of Chinese channels overseas (Maweu, 2016; Morales, 2018; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018) but do not address the issue of image management. Looking at the specific case of China, Falk Hartig (2019) stresses the need for more empirical research to test whether image management efforts have had any effect on audiences. This study aims to fill these gaps by exploring the reception of international broadcasters in Latin America, a region that is increasingly becoming geopolitically important for China (Piccone, 2016), Russia (Blank & Kim, 2015) and Iran (Karmon, 2010). This is further evidenced by the strategic choice of Spanish as one of the main broadcasting languages after English. In fact, CCTV was the first non-western news TV channel to broadcast in Spanish (2004), followed by RT (2009) and HispanTV (2011).

This article is based on a series of focus groups conducted in Mexico and Argentina between September and November 2016. The first section provides a conceptual framework by discussing the dimensions of country image as perceived by audiences, the relation to country branding, public diplomacy and the creation of soft power. The findings show that preconceived images based on assumptions about politics and cultural differences undermine acceptance of international broadcasters by audiences. Furthermore, participants revealed themselves to be interested and were optimistic about the prospects of RT’s adoption by audiences, hesitant about HispanTV’s and pessimistic about CCTV-E’s.
Country image management and audiences

Countries often manage their international images with the intention of improving or enhancing their reputation among audiences overseas (Fan, 2010). Here, audiences are not understood in the narrow sense of passive receivers at the end of Lasswell’s (1948) linear process of communication, but rather as what Virginia Nightingale (2003) calls ‘the people addressed’, that is, a group of people imagined by the message-makers which reflects or mirrors a real or potential audience. In turn, messages are encoded following the cultural tastes of the audience in the hope that it may materialize in a distinct behaviour (Nightingale, 2003). However, research has shown that audiences decode messages in ways that may differ from the preferred meanings intended by encoders (Hall, 1980/2005), thus further increasing the challenge for country image management.

Considering the psychological process of perception by audiences, C. L. Wang et al. (2012) define country image as ‘the mental representation of a country and its people, including cognitive believes [sic] of the country’s economic and technological development stages, as well as the affective evaluations of its social and political systems or standpoints’ (p. 1041). This definition goes beyond that proposed by Kunczik (1997) and draws from the field of psychology to suggest that the image people have of a country is constructed both from objective or factual knowledge (cognitive dimension) and from subjective feelings that certain aspects of that knowledge generate (affective dimension). Indeed, these aspects have been the subject of numerous studies in the field of marketing, with some scholars comparing the impact of both cognitive and affective components in different circumstances, for example, product evaluation and purchase intention during rational and experiential purchases (D. Li et al., 2014). Others aim to identify even smaller dimensions within those two components, which are ultimately more likely to influence consumers’ willingness to buy products from a specific country (Maher & Carter, 2011). A third aspect that is crucial to understanding the importance of country image is that of the conative or motivational dimension, which relates to the behaviour prompted by the cognitive and affective aspects (Laroche et al., 2005), that is, the way consumers act (or at least intend to act) after considering both information and emotions.

The construct of country image has generated great interest from different disciplines. Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009) recognize the three distinct strands within marketing research: (1) those regarding the overall image of a country, (2) those pertaining to countries as point of origin of certain products and (3) those concerned exclusively on the image of products – with a focus away from the country they are produced in. Country image is considered here as a factor that can influence a consumer’s purchase intention and the main concern is to understand how the country-of-origin variable affects consumers’ attitudes and potential behaviour regarding products such as cars, or even brands in general. This approach would see news channels as cultural products that can be offered for sale around the world, to audiences that now become prospective consumers.

The practice of marketing a country’s image is closely related to the concept of nation branding, which Nadia Kaneva (2011) defines as ‘a compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstructing nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms’ (p. 118). Kaneva (2011) also recognizes that most studies on nation branding use three main approaches: technical-economic, political and cultural. The technical-economic approach conceives nation branding as a marketing tool to increase a country’s competitive advantage in international markets (Kaneva, 2011). In this sense, for example, improving a country’s image can be beneficial in boosting consumer confidence in products from that specific country or even attracting tourists. From the political approach, nation branding is a strategy to advance a country’s interests in the international political arena.
Here, nation branding is closer to public diplomacy, with scholars divided on their resemblance (Anholt, 2006; Kaneva, 2011). The cultural approach articulates critical counterarguments to the other two perspectives, by analysing the implications of nation branding practices and power relations (Kaneva, 2011).

The instrumentalization of international broadcasting for country image management purposes has also been linked to a larger agenda of creating soft power, that is, the process of influencing other countries to follow one’s policies by attracting and co-opting, rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). Governments wanting to change the image of their countries direct their messages at audiences that are often considered culturally uniform passive receivers (Szondi, 2010). One clear example is the importance placed by the Chinese government on improving its soft power and shaping its country image as a means of gaining the right to speak (huayuquan) in the international political arena (Xi, 2015). This strategy includes – but is not limited to – setting up international news networks. However, it is only a small contribution to its overall public diplomacy, that is, ‘a set of approaches which an international actor can use to leverage or even increase its soft power’ (Cull, 2019, p. 17). The direct engagement with audiences abroad is at the heart of public diplomacy (Cull, 2008; Melissen, 2013) – unlike traditional diplomacy that seeks to influence other countries through official channels of communication such as ambassadors and departments of foreign affairs. In this quest, international broadcasting is one of the five distinct ways in which international actors engage with foreign publics, together with listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy and exchange diplomacy (Cull, 2019). However, the efforts of international broadcasters such as RT, HispanTV or CCTV-E to direct messages at foreign audiences with the aim of countering hegemonic narratives could also be labelled as propaganda. Nicholas Cull (2019) provides a helpful explanation to distinguish between these two practices: ‘Propaganda is about dictating your message to an audience and persuading them you are right. Public diplomacy is about listening to the other side and working to develop a relationship of mutual understanding’ (p. 1). On a similar note, Joseph Nye (2011) argues that the perception of governments as manipulative can lead to information being considered as propaganda, which in turn erodes all credibility. This observation places the ultimate decision in the hands of audiences and their particular way of decoding messages, hence the need to engage with audiences to test whether the instrumentalization of international broadcasting for country image management is an effective strategy.

**Research questions**

With the aim of exploring whether international news channels can shape and change the perceptions of foreign countries, this study starts with a hypothesis and proposes three research questions.

*H1.* The preconceived images that audiences have of Russia, Iran and China are rather negative, when compared with those of countries culturally and geographically closer to Latin America.

After the first step of testing this first assumption, this study offers the following research questions:

*RQ1.* To what extent can short exposure to RT, HispanTV and CCTV affect the participants’ perceived images of Russia, Iran and China?
Although cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1973) would suggest that brief exposure to media messages does little to affect people’s opinions, this initial question explores whether the first impression generated at least a spark of interest or curiosity that, in turn, would make participants willing to reconsider their preconceived images of these countries.

**RQ2.** Do the participants’ views reveal a heavier weighting of the cognitive or the affective dimension of country image?

This question explores whether the participants’ views are more related to the economy and development of the countries (cognitive dimension) or to affective evaluations of their political systems or culture (affective dimension).

**RQ3.** How do participants assess the likelihood of these channels being accepted by broader audiences in Mexico and Argentina (conative dimension)?

As the conative dimension is linked to action and behaviour after considering cognitive aspects and affective evaluations, this final question explores how participants assess the likelihood of RT, HispanTV and CCTV being successful at attracting viewers, which would contribute to setting the conditions necessary for cultivation effects with regard to country image.

**Methods**

In order to explore H1, RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3, a total of 13 focus groups were conducted in Mexico and Argentina. As the only Spanish-speaking full members of the G20, they could be considered politically important targets for public diplomacy efforts by China, Iran and Russia. Focus groups are a suitable method to test audience response not just through audio-visual prompts, but also by enabling active interaction between participants, which in turn helps to generate new insights. By agreeing or disagreeing with other opinions, participants are prompted to engage in a discussion by building on the reactions of other members (Liamputtong, 2011). The dynamics of the group can be conducive to the emergence of new ideas (Krueger & Casey, 2009), and these can help challenge underlying assumptions.

As shown in Table 1, a total of 75 participants were recruited across seven universities in both countries. While eight focus groups were conducted in Mexico between 21 September and 6 October 2016, in Argentina, the five sessions took place between 21 October and 4 November 2016. Although two groups (M3, M4) failed to reach a predetermined minimum number of participants, the meetings were each turned into a hybrid of focus group and interview because of the value of the opinions of those who joined the session.

The sessions were divided into three parts and followed the same structure in both countries. To test H1, participants were given a list of eight countries which they had to place within a scale from positive to negative, according to the impression they had of them. Participants had relative freedom to choose their criteria, such as their impression of those countries through media reports or even how they would feel about those countries being their source of news. The list consisted of countries with international TV news channels broadcasting in Spanish (either supported by government or privately funded) by September 2016, that is, Germany, China, Colombia, Spain, the United States, Iran, Russia and Venezuela. The list followed Spanish alphabetical order. According
to their personal assessment, participants could allocate between one and eight points according to the level of trust they associated with those countries. Participants were then asked to elaborate on their allocation of points. The aim was to better understand why they held such views and how this related to the different perceptions of country of origin.

In the second part, the participants were shown three compilations of video clips taken from programmes broadcast by RT, HispanTV and CCTV between April and September 2016. Each compilation lasted less than 6 minutes and consisted of edited video clips downloaded from their respective YouTube channels. The videos showcased different formats (e.g. news bulletins, interviews, debates or magazine programmes), presenters (e.g. male/female, native/non-native speakers, etc.), geographies (e.g. Latin America and the broadcaster’s own country of origin) and topics – including those seemingly reflecting the channels’ self-definition as ‘alternatives’ to mainstream international media (as described by their respective About web pages), such as media censorship in Western countries, human rights in the United States or positive reports about female car racers in Iran, among others.\(^1\) In order to minimize any effects of unintentional bias caused the selection of the video excerpts, participants were reminded that the compilations did not reflect the full range of programmes offered by these channels. During viewing, participants were asked to take notes about their impressions. In order to explore RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3, the third part of the session was then devoted to a discussion prompted by questions from the moderator. For the analysis, all transcriptions were anonymized with pseudonyms and subsequently coded using NVivo according to emerging themes. This article discusses only those observations that helped answer the research questions.

**Results**

The results are organized in four sections around two main thematic areas. The first two sections explore preconceived images before viewing (H1) and (un)changing perceptions after viewing

| University                              | Code | Number of participants | Female | Male | Background                        |
|-----------------------------------------|------|------------------------|--------|------|-----------------------------------|
| Colegio de México                       | M1   | 5                      | 2      | 3    | International Relations           |
|                                         | M2   | 5                      | 1      | 4    | Political Science                 |
|                                         | M3   | 2                      | 0      | 2    | International Relations           |
|                                         | M4   | 2                      | 0      | 2    | Politics and Public Administration |
| Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México  | M5   | 5                      | 3      | 2    | Political Science                 |
| Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana       | M6   | 4                      | 4      | 0    | International Relations           |
| Universidad de Conreso                  | M7   | 5                      | 2      | 3    | International Relations           |
| Universidad Torcuato di Tella            | M8   | 4                      | 3      | 1    | International Relations           |
| Universidad de Belgrano                  | A1   | 10                     | 6      | 4    | International Relations           |
| Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires     | A2   | 10                     | 5      | 5    | International Relations           |
|                                         | A3   | 10                     | 4      | 6    | International Relations           |
|                                         | A4   | 8                      | 3      | 5    | Political Science, International Relations |
|                                         | A5   | 5                      | 3      | 2    | Political Science                 |

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Preconceptions

In order to analyse the results of the country ranking exercise, a few adjustments were made. The answers provided by 13 of the 73 participants were excluded due to incomplete responses or confusing data. The results were then adjusted slightly to reflect an equal weighting for participants in both countries – numerically, 48.33% of responses were from Mexico and 51.67% from Argentina. Table 2 shows the popularity ranking by country and combined, before and after adjustment. The results confirmed the proposition that China, Russia and Iran would rank in the lower half. Germany and Spain seemed to enjoy the best reputation in both Mexican and Argentinian focus groups, while Venezuela typically fared badly. Ratings for the United States and Russia were the most unpredictable. Although some participants placed them in completely different positions, there was a pattern that often showed the United States in a slightly more positive light than Russia.

Both the cognitive and affective dimensions of country image were activated during the ranking exercise. In some cases, negative images were attributed to alleged knowledge (cognitive dimension) of problematic practices such as corruption, for example, Alicia (M1) believed “there is more corruption in those countries”2 and argued that journalists were often bribed. In other cases, a degree of unfamiliarity with certain countries prompted the affective dimension to take precedence, for example, Andrés (M1) suggested that cultural distance somehow affected the way he perceived different countries:

[... ] When they talk about Russia, [my reaction is to think] how strange they think. When they talk about Iran, [my reaction is also to think] how strange they think. China, the same. And Venezuela is [a country where they speak] with a tone, it is more familiar to me, that is, if I read them, I know how to interpret them.

(Un)changing perceptions

Exposure to RT, HispanTV and CCTV-E prompted different reactions. While in some cases, perceptions were influenced either positively or negatively by the broadcast excerpts, in other
cases preconceived images were reinforced. RT generated most positive comments, with some transfer of positivity to the image of Russia. For Fátima (M6), it made her feel ‘there can be another type of TV, a type of TV that I didn’t expect being from Russia’. The channel seemed to generate affective reactions by strengthening the cognitive dimension, for example, Gisela (M7) felt RT let her feel Russia more trustworthy. For instance, I had a perception of Russia [that] was a little vague and a little ambiguous, but I have been watching RT for years and, I don’t know, it has changed my perception a lot.

The Peruvian student Nancy (A5) said her perception of RT had also changed in a positive way:

Yes, I had a slightly different opinion of how Russia could present the news. I was really surprised to see that they try to side with the population, without having to . . . I mean, they are not afraid of doing some kind of criticism about how politics is being conducted, how the economy is being handled, stuff like that. [...]

Similarly, Nadia (A5) said she had a good impression of RT because it felt culturally ‘closer’. She was surprised to see how ‘international’ the channel was: ‘one could watch it and maybe not know that it was Russian’. However, greater cognitive clarity did not always result in positive transfer to the affective dimension. Héctor (M8) stressed he ‘still thinks Russia doesn’t inspire trustworthiness [. . .]’.

In the case of HispanTV, the very existence of an Iranian TV channel broadcasting in Spanish (cognitive dimension) produced a certain degree of surprise, albeit with limited transfer to the affective dimension. A Mexican exchange student at UC remarked of HispanTV: ‘I didn’t even know they had a channel in Spanish and that they would address issues from Latin America’. Similarly, Lorenzo (A3) found it surprising that ‘Iran would give so much attention and importance to the Spanish-speaking community’. Laureano (A3) had not expected HispanTV to have a correspondent in Buenos Aires or to have female reporters. Against the preconceived image that ‘women in Iran have no rights’, HispanTV gave him the impression that ‘women are progressing in terms of rights’. However, other participants were less keen to take this perceived cognitive contribution at face value. Despite being surprised by presence of female reporters, María (A5) had a different opinion: ‘I haven’t stopped thinking there is a massive violation of women rights in Iran’. Fellow participant Mariana (A5) mentioned that HispanTV reinforced in her the idea that ‘it is a medium to transmit something that is not so’. Marcelo (A5) completed the sentence saying the content looked staged, that is, something to give a good impression abroad, rather than being descriptive of the reality on the ground. Mariana and Marcelo’s comments show that, in this case, managing the cognitive dimension of Iran’s image failed to produce the desired effect of further positive transfer to the cognitive and conative dimensions. On the contrary, it confirmed Nye’s (2011) argument about the risk of being perceived as propaganda when information is seen as being manipulated.

CCTV-E’s efforts to shape the cognitive dimension of China’s image seemed to have limited or no effect. Argentinian and Mexican students at UC (A1) seemed to agree that their impression of China had not changed. Mariana (A4) thought ‘the one from China did not generate much [interest], to be honest’. Martín still believed China ‘is an authoritarian country’. Other comments revealed that participants had conflicting expectations of a Chinese channel. While some criticized CCTV-E for being exceedingly auto-referential and Sino-centric, others believed there were very
unique and interesting topics about the country. In Mexico, Gustavo (M7) did not like the fact that one of CCTV-E’s video clips focused on fashion in Africa. ‘If I want to talk about fashion, then I watch TV from France or Italy, but not from China’, he explained.

*Perceptions shaped by politics and culture*

The observations made by the participants revealed that the affective rather than the cognitive dimension had a greater weighting in shaping country images. Comments mostly coalesced around two main areas: politics and culture.

Ana (M1) thought Russia and other countries such as Iran and China were authoritarian in the way they broadcast news:

[. . .] it is true that they are authoritarian, moreover when they read the news, at least the ones that we have access to, that are about critical things that happened in those countries, I see that they are much more objective [in their reports about their own countries] than with a criticizable thing that happened in the USA, where I see a wider spectrum of opinions. And for example, [in the case of] Russia, no. [It is] almost always like the government is always good. As in [the case of] Iran.

In Argentina, however, Laura (A3) reported having visited Russia and had the impression that Russia ‘plays a little with the issue of freedom of expression’. This made her doubt the information presented by broadcasters such as RT. ‘It depends on the topic and what I know; the one we know the most here [in Argentina] is Russia Today and there are things on RT that are a disgrace and other things that are brilliant’, Laura explained.

In the case of China, the affective dimension was closely linked to preconceived ideas about freedom of expression in the country. Fernanda (M6) believed people in China had a partial understanding of things because information was centralized and ‘very, very biased because the government interferes with everything’. Fernanda did not consider China a viable source of ‘truthful news’ because if the government ‘is capable of taking away Google from the kids, it is capable of taking away anything’. Fátima (M6) agreed saying China lacked credibility due to excessive censorship; she explained that globally popular social networks such as Facebook were blocked, and Chinese people were restricted to those approved by the government. Similarly, in Argentina, Maria (A4) said her negative impression of China was due to ‘the intervention that there is in that country over the press and the media’. Lack of freedom of expression seemed to devalue Chinese news sources and generated mistrust towards CCTV covering topics such as human rights. Jimena (A2) doubted the trustworthiness of ‘Chinese statistics’ and fellow participant Juana added with irony ‘Yes, the Chinese talking of human rights’, suggesting China lacked credibility to talk about human rights. A similar opinion appeared during another session (A4), in which China was seen as hypocritical for discussing human rights in the United States, while not addressing their own:

*Martin:* [It’s] hypocrisy, China speaking of human rights.

*Manuel:* I don’t know if it’s hypocrisy. We all can talk about human rights. The issue is that I cannot talk about [problems in] the USA when I don’t talk about myself (i.e. problems in my own country). That is where authority is born.

*Melisa:* Well, the same happened with the other channels. There were things that they said, but maybe they were not the best example.
In the case of Iran, the affective dimension seemed to be shaped by the visuality of cultural differences. Compared to Latin America and its predominantly Catholic populations, an element that caught the attention throughout many of the focus groups was that of women wearing hijabs. Alicia (M1) believed Mexican viewers would be less inclined to accept female presenters wearing hijabs ‘because there are a lot of very ignorant people who do not understand that a woman wearing a veil [i.e. headscarf] is not a terrorist’. In Argentina, Ignacia (A1) suggested it was something that indeed would catch people’s attention and ‘shock’ because it was something exotic. Isabel (A1) reported being curious to know more, rather than feeling uncomfortable. Other participants thought it was normal for people from the Middle East. Mexican exchange student Isidoro (A1) thought that even if ‘it is not that common to see someone [dressed] like that in Latin America; you know that in the Middle East it must be like that, or rather it is stipulated [to be] like that’. Josefina (A2) understood people could wear it out of respect for the place they were in, like in Gaza, ‘although if here in Argentina, I see one [woman] wearing the headscarf, indeed it would probably shock me a lot more’.

In several focus groups, this seemingly superficial element evolved into a discussion about women’s rights. In Mexico, Francisca (M6) felt it was attractive to see something different like a female presenter wearing a hijab. Baltazar (M2) felt ‘surprised by the role of women’ on HispanTV and believed the channel was trying to expunge Iran’s international image as a conservative country. In Argentina, María (A4) seemed to have a preconceived image of Iran as oppressive towards women and was surprised:

I wasn’t expecting that there could be female presenters. I know that they were wearing headscarves, but there were too many compared to the male presenters and that surprised me. I am not saying that in Iran women have perfect lives, because that is clearly not the case. But it was surprising to me that an Iranian channel had almost the same number of female presenters as male ones.

Other participants suggested that, if the channel wanted to portray progress in women’s rights, then it was sending contradictory messages. After watching a clip of a report about women participating in car races, Mariana (A4) explained,

I thought it was contradictory, because […] there was a general protest in Iran, where women cannot take off their headscarves. There was a campaign where men were wearing them, [it was] a campaign about women’s rights. And here you see that they are showing you that women compete in car races. And that is completely irrelevant to women’s rights, when you see what is happening in Iran. To me it is completely irrelevant that they show it. They’re showing that they are covering up everything that is happening.

Besides culture, another issue contributing to the negative image of Iran in Argentina was its perceived connection to a series of bombings against the Jewish community in Buenos Aires in the 1990s. Martín (A4) explained that ‘a lot of people died and most of them were Argentinians of Jewish religion and also from other religions’. Marcelo (A4) agreed, saying that is the reason why ‘Iran does not instil trustworthiness’ in Argentina.

Acceptance by audiences in Latin America

The participants’ evaluations about how general audiences would react to the three channels provided an insight into how the conative dimension operates. Four different profiles emerged from the discussion: optimists, conditionalists, cautious and pessimistic.
Optimists were generally excited about these channels. Their views suggested that managing the cognitive aspect of a country’s image could help produce positive affective reactions, which in turn could activate the conative dimension by inviting further viewing. Participants both in Mexico and Argentina mentioned that RT’s format was appealing. Daniel (M4) thought RT’s ‘format is very attractive nowadays’. Isabel (A1), a Mexican student at UC, thought that RT would have more success among the general population, because of the format of the news [bulletin] which is more informal; and in general, I feel that the bulk of Mexican society is more interested in being informed by a news bulletin that is more eye-catching, not so boring [. . .].

Ignacia (A1) agreed and pointed out that the same applied to Argentina, where ‘the bulk of the population could be interested by RT [. . .] because of the format, which is more relaxed’. Jimena (A2) imagined her father using RT as a source of information in the same way as he read a newspaper such as La Nación. Some participants regarded the style as attractive because it was similar to ‘more established sources of information like CNN, by using touch screen and screenshots from social media’, as Natalia from UBA explained. Nadia (A5) agreed, saying it was ‘more modern, [and] people are more used to that’. Although most optimistic evaluations were expressed about RT, some – admittedly very few – were also optimistic about HispanTV and CCTV. Enrique from UNAM thought that ‘alarmist (scaremongering) stories’ such as those on HispanTV had a wide audience in Mexico. Andrés (M1) believed CCTV could attract some viewers because China had become a focus of attention for many, and ‘not necessarily because of the content’.

Conditionalists tended to have a positive view of the channels’ prospects but pointed at changes needed in the way the cognitive dimension was constructed (style) and managed (platforms) as necessary preconditions before the affective and conative dimensions could be activated. For example, Fátima (M6) believed both RT’s content and reporting style would be attractive to Mexican audiences, but improving availability was the main challenge to become more visible. Damián (M4) believed HispanTV and CCTV ‘probably would need a wider strategy than just more publicity and getting in social networks’. Daniel (M4) believed HispanTV was dynamic and plural, and ‘if it had a stronger marketing campaign, probably would have a lot of success’. In his opinion, HispanTV’s ‘bias’ or open ideology would catch viewers’ attention, as well as its Middle Eastern background. Likewise, during the focus group in Argentina, Peruvian participant Nancy (A5) believed CCTV could be attractive, because it offered a different perspective. She believed CCTV could attract some viewers in Peru, due to ‘that approach to show you news that is a little more social or cultural’. She believed viewers were tired of negative news and that CCTV-E ‘could have some success, [because of] that frivolous and uncontroversial way of looking at things’. In Mexico, Estefanía (M5) believed the biggest barrier was language: ‘The truth is that I do indeed feel that if they didn’t have so many problems with the way they speak, many Latin Americans would watch that channel because the topics would attract ‘a certain audience that is very [inclined to watch] television’ such as ‘housewives’.

Unwilling to generalize, some participants were very cautious. Their views suggested that any attempts to manage the cognitive dimension would not necessarily produce desired affective reactions. Ismael (A1), a Mexican student at the mixed session at UC, believed RT’s success would be short lived ‘due to the content’. He followed RT on Facebook and noticed that RT published ‘very silly things’. Isidoro (A1), also from Mexico, argued that this could curtail RT’s credibility, and cost it established followers. He explained that the opinions posted on the comments section of Facebook had left him with this impression. In addition, cautious voices thought that, even if
adjustments were introduced, the impact would be limited, simply because only a very specialized segment of the population is interested in international affairs. Unlike them, the rest of the population might just evince an initial interest that would soon fade away (conative dimension).

Pessimists also had a rather negative view and considered international channels were doomed to fail – seemingly, because people were naturally inclined to be curious about news that affected them directly. Ana (M1) explained that HispanTV would not have a future in Mexico because it felt ‘very foreign’ to our culture and people would not identify themselves’. Alicia (M1) suggested that relative ignorance about Islam could create mistrust (affective dimension), which in turn would prompt viewers to reject HispanTV (conative dimension). Daniel (M4) held a rather pessimistic view with regard to the future of CCTV-E in Latin America and doubted it could be successful ‘even with changes and all the Latin-friendly modifications that one would want’. In his opinion, the channel was unable to detach itself from ‘the Chinese state and its formalism’ (affective dimension). In addition, he thought there was a certain degree of racism against Asian people in Latin America (affective dimension), which would act as ‘quite a strong barrier’ to CCTV-E attracting viewers (conative dimension). Esteban (M5) suggested people would ‘watch it for a while to have a laugh and be entertained by the way they read the news or speak the language’. In Argentina, participants were categorical in suggesting CCTV-E would not have a bright future. Nadia (A5) felt ‘the news was not interesting, and the presenters were cold’. Natalia (A5) thought ‘everything was very schematic and kind of far [removed from our reality]’.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of the country ranking exercise supported the assumption that the images of China, Russia and Iran would tend to be negative among participants (H1). However, the premise that cultural proximity facilitates a positive image was invalidated by the fact that Venezuela ranked even lower than countries geographically distant. Hence, knowledge or familiarity with certain countries (cognitive dimension) can lead participants to be more categorical in their assessments, both positive and negative (affective dimension), even after exposure. Indeed, brief exposure to international broadcasters such as RT, HispanTV and CCTV had a somewhat limited effect on changing the way their countries of origin were perceived (RQ1). While in some instances, participants were intrigued about the channels, in other cases, it helped reinforce preconceived images. The participants’ comments about Russia, Iran and China revealed a much heavier weighting of the affective, rather than the cognitive dimension of these countries’ images (RQ2). However, affective evaluations about Russia and China related mostly to politics, while cultural differences seemed to play a bigger role in the case of Iran.

In parallel with Russia’s more positive image compared with the other countries, RT also resonated better among most participants. A few concerns were raised about its instrumentalization of freedom of speech, whereby it would show itself significantly more vocal in its criticisms towards western countries and relatively quiet on Russian news. Nevertheless, RT was described as culturally closer and more appealing, compared with China’s CCTV which was deemed rigid, formal and lacking the spontaneity of the other two. Linked to the constraints of government censorship, CCTV’s credibility was questioned. Furthermore, China was perceived as being hypocritical when criticizing human rights abuses in other countries but remaining silent about its own. In the case of Iran, it was the cultural distance and a preconceived idea of the country as an oppressive religious regime, particularly against women, that played a significant role in viewers’ perception. Iran’s image was also tarnished politically among Argentinians because of memories of the lethal
bombings in Buenos Aires, against the Israeli Embassy in 1992 and the Jewish community centre AMIA in 1994, whose perpetrators were connected to the Iranian regime (Bergman, 2008).

The overall analysis shows that the acceptance of international news channels from China, Russia and Iran is partly undermined by preconceived images of their countries of origin. Indeed, while the ability of international broadcasters to shape a country’s image appears to be largely restricted to the cognitive dimension (i.e. the knowledge about the country), the affective dimension seems to hold greater agency in activating conative responses. The four profiles identified among participants (optimist, conditionalist, cautious and pessimist) reflect the complex dynamics between these dimensions and provide an insightful framework for assessing the likelihood of potential audiences becoming actual viewers. In this respect, participants were more optimistic about RT’s adoption by audiences, hesitant about HispanTV and mostly pessimistic about CCTV (RQ3).

The findings of this study do not categorically dismiss the usefulness of international broadcasting for country image management, but further validate the idea that changing perceptions is a complex process dependent on multiple factors. While accessibility and content adaptation are some of the first challenges, cultivation theory suggests that prolonged and frequent exposure could be more effective. Despite some participants expressing a burgeoning curiosity about these channels themselves, many were dismissive about incorporating them as sources of news. In some cases, a perceived cultural distance seemed to prevent audiences staying tuned. This aspect highlights the need of further research cultural proximity and its role in jeopardizing adoption and long-term viewership.

While the effectiveness of RT, HispanTV and CCTV-E for re-shaping the images of their countries of origin seems negligible in the short term, the long-term geopolitical implications of the existence of these broadcasters should not be underestimated. Even though local broadcasters dominate the market, the participants’ comments reveal a degree of discontent and lack of public trust in their own media institutions. If international broadcasters succeed in filling this gap, they could attempt to achieve their desired aim of countering hegemonic narratives, changing perceptions and even improving their countries’ image among audiences. Only then could they become instrumental for public diplomacy.

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Notes
1. For a detailed description of the video compilations refer to Morales (2018).
2. This and all translations from Spanish are the author’s own.
3. ‘Ajeno’ in the original Spanish, the meaning of this adjective is ‘other people’s’, that is, something belonging to somebody else. By extension, it could be translated as ‘alien’ or ‘foreign’.

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