

Measuring Soft Power with Conventional and Unconventional Data

Soft power can be measured both in conventional and unconventional terms, drawing on research in foreign policy, political communication, and trust and social capital. Conventional measures include international exchange in migrants, visitors, education, and culture. In the long run, it may be possible to create a dataset of soft power measurements based on transparently collected data that can be repeated over time much like data that generate national Gross Domestic Product in the economics arena. The unconventional measurements of soft power including tracking the generation of digital content, how it physically connects, the meaning it generates.

In the foreign policy literature, soft power begins with Joseph Nye's definition that is a country's influence by attraction or persuasion, not coercion or payment. Great soft power is manifest in successful diplomacy. The reasons for successful diplomacy are many; they include great military power (coercion), great economic power (payments), and great diplomatic skill. Soft power is the term that captures everything else. This catch-all quality to the concept is reflected in the research to date. For many scholars the sources of soft power include culture, values, education, media, and religion, none of which are easy to define or measure. The focus of the soft power literature, reflecting its roots in the study of military and economic power, is on the country projecting the power. Much less attention is paid to the characteristics of the country subject to soft power influence. Concepts from the fields of political communication and the study of trust and social capital will address these weaknesses.

In political communication, research is just as focused on how people receive and understand a message as how people send a message. Ien Ang examined the reaction of Dutch viewers to the hugely popular US soap opera *Dallas* in the 1980's, including their views of US cultural imperialism. J.P. Singh emphasizes that interactivity changes both the identities of participants and their shared view of interests and goals. Applied to foreign policy, if movies are a source of soft power, for example, it is not the number of movies a country produces, but rather how many people in other countries who watch those movies that reflects soft power.

Research on trust and social capital focuses on the ties that bind people together and improve cooperation in society. Elinor Ostrom's work emphasizes that trust can be created through a series of reciprocal actions. Based on a case studies from around the world, she investigated how people with a common resource to share govern themselves successfully for the group's overall benefit. Ostrom's conception of "trust" is not simply an act of faith, but a choice that can be taken based on experience out of rational self-interest.

Robert Putnam's work on social capital characterizes several types of bonds among people that can lead to cooperation: formal and informal; thick and thin; inward and outward; and bonding and bridging. The difference between inward and outward looking social capital is that inward focuses on helping members of the group; outward on achieving a public good. Bridging social capital is among people who are different; bonding among people who are similar. Putnam's work focuses on the kinds of bonds that hold society together; Ostrom focuses on how these bonds can be built.

These three sets of literature bring complementary insights to the question of measuring soft power. The foreign policy literature provides the goal – greater international cooperation that relies less on coercion and payment. Political communication identifies the correct subject

for investigation – the countries influenced by soft power, not just those projecting it. The trust and social capital literature provides a framework for characterizing interactions among nations.

Methods: Conventional measures of soft power

There have been several serious efforts to measure soft power. Jonathan McClory has developed an annual index that ranks countries by their soft power, based on quality of government, diplomatic infrastructure, cultural output, and other qualities. The RAND Corporation in 2005 discussed measuring soft power in terms of how effective non-state actors like corporations and humanitarian organizations are in international negotiations. Ernst and Young also released an index measuring soft power of rapidly growing countries. In 2010 they identified China, India and Russia as the three greatest soft powers in terms of global media image, immigration and tourism, and integrity in rule of law. While each of these provides insight into the range of sources of soft power, they share a common weakness in focusing on the projection instead of reception of soft power. Also, their sources of data are not always transparent, or readily replicable over time.

In theory there are range of data sources to measure short term attraction – such as buying a ticket to see a movie from another country, to long term attraction – emigrating to a foreign country. What matters for soft power is less how many of its students study abroad and more how many foreigners come to study. The figure shows how these several elements can be considered on a spectrum of short-term to long-term attraction.

Degrees of attraction to another country

<i>Short-term attraction</i>	Movie	Visit	Education	Emigration	<i>Long-term attraction</i>
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For example, the International Institute for Education tracks both the top destinations for students going abroad, and the country of origin of international students within a given country. In 2011, in China, the largest fraction of international students originated from South Korea; in France, from Morocco; in Germany, from Turkey. For China, France, and Germany this is one indicator that they have a powerful positive image in the students' countries. From the United States, most students going abroad when to the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain; by this measure, these are the countries that have may have the most soft power influence with Americans.

Another example is counting foreign tourists who visit. The UN World Tourism Organization data on top tourism countries by arrivals. Between 1995 and 2015, France, Spain, and the US were the top three most attractive destinations for tourists. Also, during the same period tourism arrivals quadrupled in China and Turkey, which suggests that in this period their soft power grew.

There are still more elements of soft power and more potential sources of relevant quantitative data to explore. Other possible elements include which languages are learned as second languages, sport, fashion, television shows, and video games. It is possible to create a dataset that can be updated over time that show the cultural and social relationships among as many countries as data allow. Rather than creating a single index, a set of data will allow more detailed comparison among nations engaged in a conflict or negotiation. For example, if there

are several countries engaged territorial rights discussions in the South China Sea, the measures could answer what shifts in soft power have occurred in the last decade? This data set will put soft power on a more even analytical footing with military and economic power in foreign policy analysis.

Methods: Unconventional measures of soft power: bringing in digital data

More challenging but possible would be to measure the impact of digital streams of communication on soft power. This is important because the online world contains a wealth of evidence of how attractive and influential one country is to another – from Japan’s release of Pokemon Go to Taylor Swift’s latest musical release. This is unconventional because meaningful measurement of digital data is still in early stages. While there is a large volume of possible metrics, making sense of them in a scholarly, rigorous manner is still a new pursuit.

There is a simple link between digital data and conventional measures of soft power discussed previously, especially in the areas of movies and education. Movies and a related form of entertainment, video games, are a major presence online. Examining fans and participants in this arena will reveal a new community of international relations. Also, online education is growing rapidly and is another promising area to examine transnational relationships.

There is a more complex link between online communities and soft power which requires a clearer understanding of how people reciprocate online, build trust, and accumulate social capital. Building on Ostrom and Putnam’s work, I aim to develop frameworks to categorize different types of online cooperation which in the long run will contribute to our understanding of how online activity affects a country’s soft power.

In her work, Ostrom was able to arrive at a framework describing the context in which people were likely to cooperate successfully in sharing a scarce resource like water. Successful communities had a resource with clearly defined boundaries, the costs of governing were proportional to the benefits, there was monitoring for compliance, sanctions were graduated depending on the violation, for example. These traits are broad enough to be widely applicable, but specific enough to begin conversations on how to improve communities. Similarly, it is possible to develop a framework for understanding how online communities influence a country’s soft power, a framework that is general enough to be widely useful, but specific enough to address and improve problems.

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