

World's Cognizance of Oman

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Abstract:

In the modern era and new world order, especially after the new millennium, some international actors have resurrected such as non-governmental organizations, think tanks, and individuals, and some have emerged as effective international actors and tools such as social media, global media, and transboundary world publics. Those actors and tools play significant roles in shaping a country's global image and cognizance. Today, a country's cognizance in the world arena is becoming increasingly important, as it indicates the assets and soft power of the country in the modern world. Diplomacy is one of the most important tools in building a positive image of a country. The inimitable Omani foreign policy has succeeded in the country's establishing and maintaining friendly relationships with countries throughout the world and has enabled it to become known as a reliable mediator in the resolution of several conflicts in the Middle East region such as the Iran Nuclear Deal in 2015. Nevertheless, is classical diplomacy enough to increase the global cognizance and image of a country in today's vertiginous world? To understand the level of Omani cognizance in the world public, two projects were launched. First, any broadcasted news related to Oman was checked in regionally selected 17 countries on six continents to examine the global media coverage during the period between 2011 and 2022. Second, a survey was launched in 63 countries with more than 500 respondents physically and virtually to measure the knowledge of the world public about Oman. Interesting findings were found. One of the important findings of the project and surveys is that Oman remains largely unknown by the world's public despite its noteworthy and constructive functions within the region and widespread reputation as a peaceful country within a conflictual region. It is a problematic situation for Oman in today's public diplomacy world. Therefore, the article ends with the policy alternatives of running public diplomacy in selected countries to revive its world cognizance.

Keywords: Cognizance, Oman's Public Diplomacy, Prestige, Global Image, Soft Power.

1- Introduction

Oman, as a small country, has been following a quiet and humble foreign policy, far from any media hype. Its unique foreign policy is based on peaceful coexistence, good neighborliness, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. Oman has become a trusted diplomatic mediator in the Middle East since Sultan Qaboos assumed power in the country in 1970; it has played important political and diplomatic roles in resolving many conflicts in the region. Despite this, Oman has preferred to keep these roles out of the limelight; therefore, some like to describe Oman as a silent partner. Oman was the first Arab country to establish diplomatic relations with the world. For example, the US-Omani relationship goes back more than two centuries. In 1833, the two countries signed the "Treaty of Amity and Commerce" which is the first bilateral agreement between the US and a Gulf state. In 1840, Oman sent Ahmad bin Na'aman Al Kaabi to New York on board the Sultana. Bin Na'aman is considered the first Arab diplomat to the US, and the Sultana was the first Arab ship to sail to the US. Oman has also become a reliable and neutral diplomatic mediator between various conflicting parties in the Middle East region. In 2012 and 2013, Oman led secret talks between the United States and Iran to resolve the Iranian nuclear program crisis. Indeed, in 2015 a historic agreement was reached between Iran and the 5 + 1 to end the

crisis that had lasted for more than 12 years. Despite unique diplomatic skills and the ability to solve complex political disputes in the turbulent Middle East, Oman plays this role modestly and quietly, away from the media spotlight. Therefore, few in the world know of Oman and the achievements of its diplomacy and foreign policy.

The purpose of this project is to propose and undertake fresh organizational research on relations between Oman foreign policy, world public opinion, and the international media. In the last decade, Oman's foreign policy has been rising dramatically and it offers a unique opportunity to study complex relations among new foreign affairs and the world public opinion (Zhang & Meadows, 2012). In the new world order, these types of silent policies are not enough to be a valuable player in the world arena; global image, (Buhmann, & Ingenhoff, 2015) and world public opinions are the soft power tools (Wright et al, 2020) in the hands of the states today. Because of this, it is very important to have a reliable measure of Oman's global image in the world. In this study, two phases were pursued; news about Oman on television and a survey to measure the world publics' knowledge about Oman.

First, to understand the global image of Oman, 17 countries were selected on five continents: the American continent, Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. All Persian/Arab Gulf countries were excluded from the project as, due to their proximity to Oman, they cannot be thought of as 'world' relations, but as 'regional' relations. Second, the most-watched local television channels in the 16 countries were identified. In this second step, we categorized all news according to rating points: economic, social, cultural, and political relations (domestic) and international relations (foreign policy). In the third step, we counted each news item featuring Oman in each of those categories. This was done by designing a matrix table for the television news channel in each of the countries. In the second phase, a survey was launched to examine world public opinion and knowledge about Oman and Omani foreign policy. The survey was conducted in 63 countries, virtually and physically resulting in 506 respondents. Each answer was interpreted one by one and, at the end of the study, the results of two phases (international media and Oman, and world public opinion and Oman) were compared. It may be seen that these results are not at a satisfactory level in today's competitive world.

2- Methodology

This project aims to investigate the status of Oman in the world not just at the state level, but in world public opinion. It is a vertical study, which shows what is provided from the top (media, news, advertorial) and what is taken from the bottom, knowledge of the world public about Oman. This means that media, (not states), represent (top) the independent variable, (bottom) the dependent variable is represented by world publics. In the modern era, media is one of the most powerful soft power instruments (Shypovskiy, 2020) and cannot be ignored (Coban, 2016) by any type of (democratic, hereditary, even autocratic) government. In the first step of this study, all news items about Oman aired in some selected countries were studied. Those countries were selected as good representatives of their continents. From Africa: Egypt, Kenya, and the Republic of South Africa; from Europe: United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Poland, and Turkey; from Asia: Russia, China, and India; from the

Pacific: Indonesia, Australia; and from America: Canada, the United States, and Brazil were selected.

In those 17 countries, the leading television channels were indicated in accordance with their ratings. Official rating institutions were consulted and embassies contacted to officially double-check and confirm their leading status. News channels were prioritized rather than direct rating channels of entertainment or sport. The main selection criterion of television channels was that the broadcasting language should be the local language. For example, in Russia, rather than RT, which broadcasts in English, Channel 1 (Russian language) was selected to reach average citizens, rather than elite citizens who are the minority in all countries. It is assumed that second-language speakers represent the minority of the population in many countries today.

After indicating the rating lists, all 10 year-news items about Oman were collected from top news channels in those 17 countries and those items were categorized into four columns; social-culture, economic, (domestic) politics, and international relations in the last six years between 2011 and 2016. Social-cultural news included sports, health, education, music, festivals, and entertainment. Following the categorization of news in the 17 countries, a matrix including 4 specific columns and a total column was created, such as Russia has broadcasted around 100 news items featuring Oman in the last decade which is very low as a challenging power in the Middle East.

In the second part of this study, the “bottom” – world public’s knowledge about Oman - was measured. To explore that, physical and web surveys were conducted in the 17 countries. In addition, a web survey was sent to some other countries, in total 63. Survey questions were prepared by taking some suggestions from key people in academia, officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and some experts from the field.

The survey includes dichotomous (“Yes,” “no”, or “I do not know”) and multiple-choice questions. Questions are prepared in vertical answers style. The survey has two parts: following the personal questions, the first part presents very simple questions to examine respondents’ general understanding of basic information such as the capital city, local currency, and the location of Oman. The second part seeks deeper information concerning Omani politics, international relations, and the economy. Except for four English-speaking countries, the survey was translated into local languages in 13 countries and checked at least by two language experts prior to issuing. After preparation, surveys in different 13 languages were sent to centers in those countries and, in addition, they were uploaded in "Google Forms" with the invitation link. To reach people in those countries, four types of email groups were created; universities, civil society groups, think tanks, and companies.

3- Findings of Two Studies

3.1. Media Matrices in 17 Countries

The results were as expected, as the global public knows little about Oman. News coverage about Oman on local television channels in the 17 examined countries was poor in the four fields. In Europe the United Kingdom, through the BBC, ranked first in terms of the number of news items on Oman during the study years from 2010 to 2022. Social-cultural news was the most covered by the BBC during the study period, and this can be attributed to the

growing cultural relations between the two countries in various fields, especially education. The UK universities, along with US universities, are the best destinations for Omani students abroad. News of politics and international affairs came in second place; most of the BBC's news coverage during that period was about political developments during the so-called Arab Spring in the Middle East and Gulf regions, including the protests in some Omani cities in 2011.

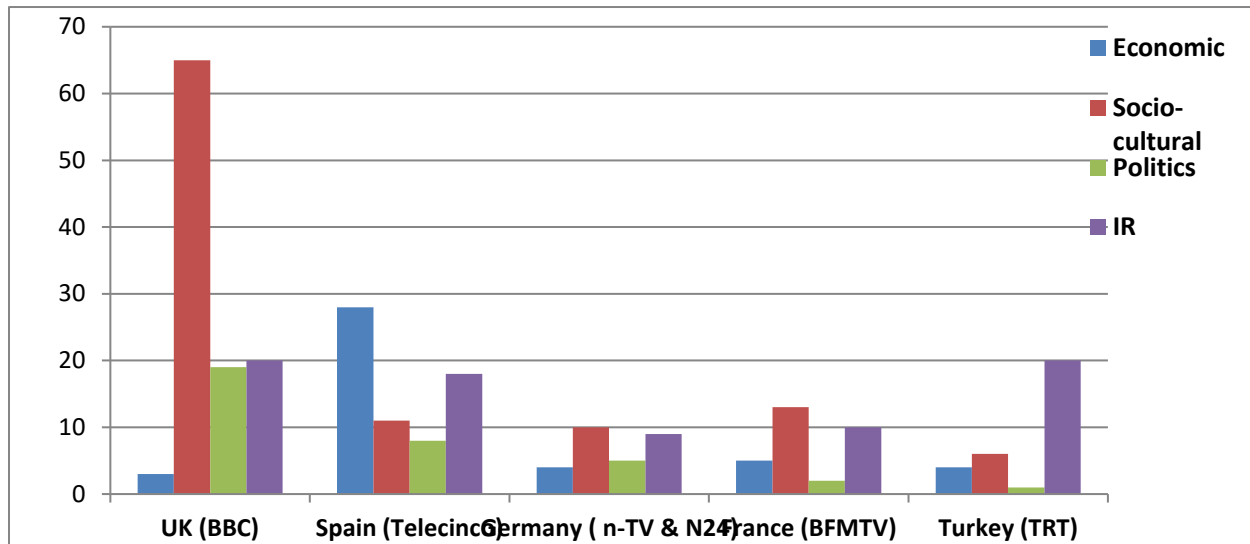


Figure 1. Omani News on 4 Categories in 5 European Countries (2010-2022)

In Spain, the Telecinco television channel covered Omani economic news predominantly, followed by news of international and political affairs, and then closely related to the Social-cultural news. The strong Spanish interest in the Omani economy in that period can be explained by the opening of the Economic and Commercial Office of the Spanish Embassy in Muscat in October 2010. According to Sergio Villa Ortiz, head of the Spanish Economic and Commercial Office in Muscat, after the opening of the Economic and Commercial Office of the Spanish Embassy in Muscat in October 2010, major Spanish companies visited Muscat to conclude commercial and economic deals. Exports and imports between the two countries doubled during this period (Kola, 2013).

In Germany, n-TV and N24, subsequently rebranded as "Welt," also focused primarily on Omani socio-cultural news. This clearly reflects the German interest in socio-cultural fields in Oman, especially in the fields of university education and tourism. According to the Federal Foreign Office, bilateral Omani-German relations are growing in various fields, particularly in the cultural fields. The two countries are implementing many cultural cooperation projects, especially in the fields of science, technology, and university education. In 2014, Germany and Oman signed a declaration of intent to cooperate in culture, education, science, and research. Oman is also a favored destination for German tourists, with Germans currently representing the second largest group of tourists from Europe (Federal Foreign Office, 2020).

Like Germany, in France, BFM TV covered primarily socio-cultural news, followed by political and international affairs news, and then a smaller number of economic news items.

Meanwhile, TRT TV, in Turkish, focused primarily on Omani international affairs news, and secondly with a lower number of socio-cultural news items. Oman's economic news was the least covered by all television channels in the five European countries, the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, France, and Turkey. This reflects the economic situation of Oman, which is weak compared to the rest of the Gulf countries.

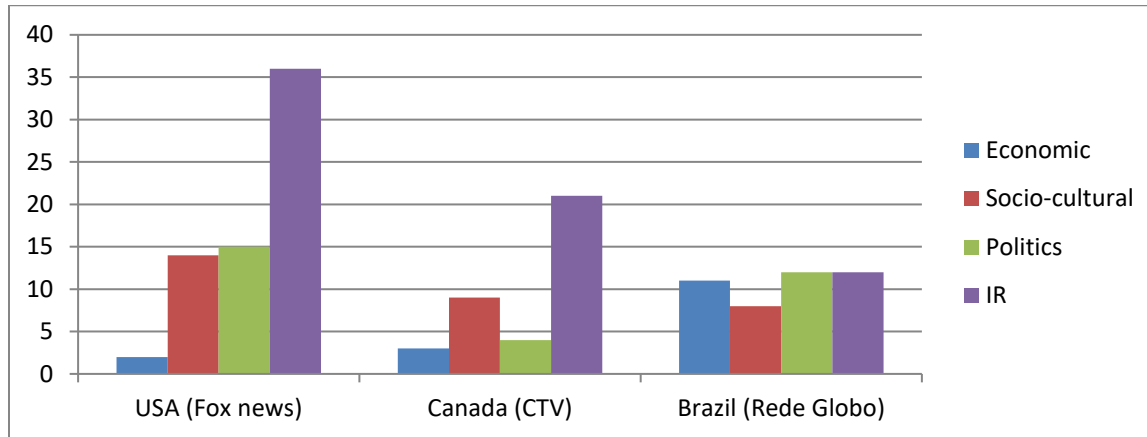


Figure 2. Omani News on 4 Categories in 3 American Countries (2010-2022)

In addition to the significant potential offered by Fox News in comparison with the Canadian channel CTV and the Brazilian Rede Globo Channel, the interest of the media in the United States in political issues and international relations in Oman can be attributed to the security and political tensions in the Persian Gulf region, particularly in the Strait of Hormuz, and maritime piracy in the Arabian Sea. The reason can also be attributed to the role of Omani diplomacy during the period in the 5+1 – Iran Nuclear Deal negotiations (Yenigun et al., 2020), and the role of Oman in the release of many American hostages from Iran and Yemen. Besides political news and international relations, there was also interest from the three television channels in the United States, Canada, and Brazil, in covering socio-cultural news. Finally, there was a remarkable interest by Brazil in the economic news of Oman, and this could be a result of the signing of many trade and economic agreements and mutual visa exemptions between the two countries within that period. In addition, the strong presence of the Brazilian company Vale in the Sohar (Oman) industrial zone cannot be ignored.

On the continent of Africa, three top rating local televisions were scanned in three different countries in northern, eastern, and southern Africa, namely Egypt, Kenya, and South Africa.

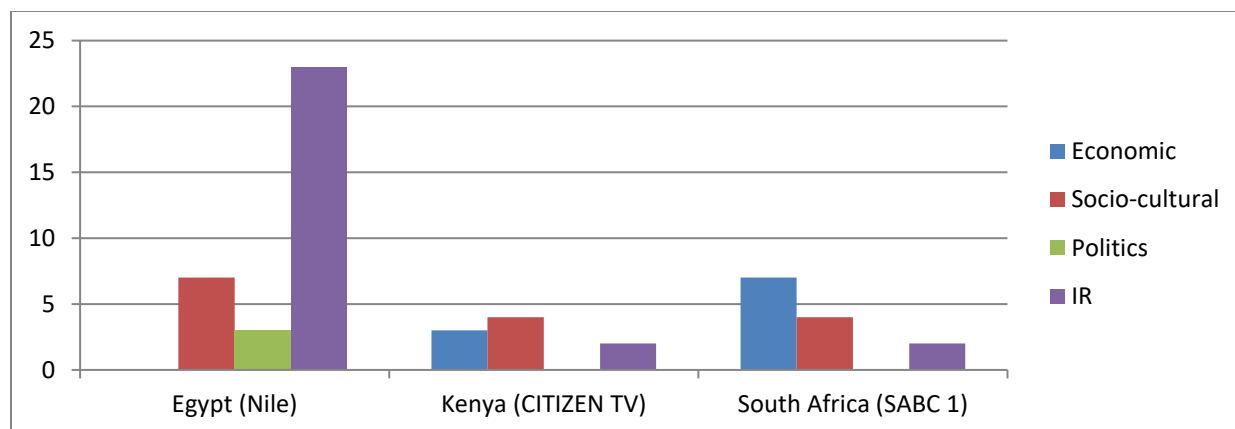


Figure 3. Omani News on 4 Categories in 3 African Countries (2010-2022)

Despite the historical Omani presence in East Africa for 200 years, this study shows that in eastern, central, and southern Africa the television media has no interest in Oman. Except for Egyptian Nile TV, which broadcasts in Arabic, there was very little news coverage of any kind on Citizen TV in Kenya and SABC 1 in South Africa. The Egyptian Nile TV covered primarily Omani international relations with 24 news items in those years, and then only 7 socio-cultural news items. This (being the highest among the other African countries) is not surprising, given that Egypt is an Arab country that is a member of the Arab League, like Oman, and has historic diplomatic relations with Oman. Besides, Egyptian expatriates represent one of the largest Arab communities in Oman. Again, Omani news is still infrequent in Egypt despite the above-mentioned facts and ties.

In the three Asian countries, Russia, China, and India, news coverage on Oman is modest, especially on economic issues. China CCTV and Russia Channel One are primarily interested in covering Omani international relations, then social-cultural news. This can be attributed to the efforts of both countries, China and Russia, to expand their presence in the Middle East and the Gulf regions.

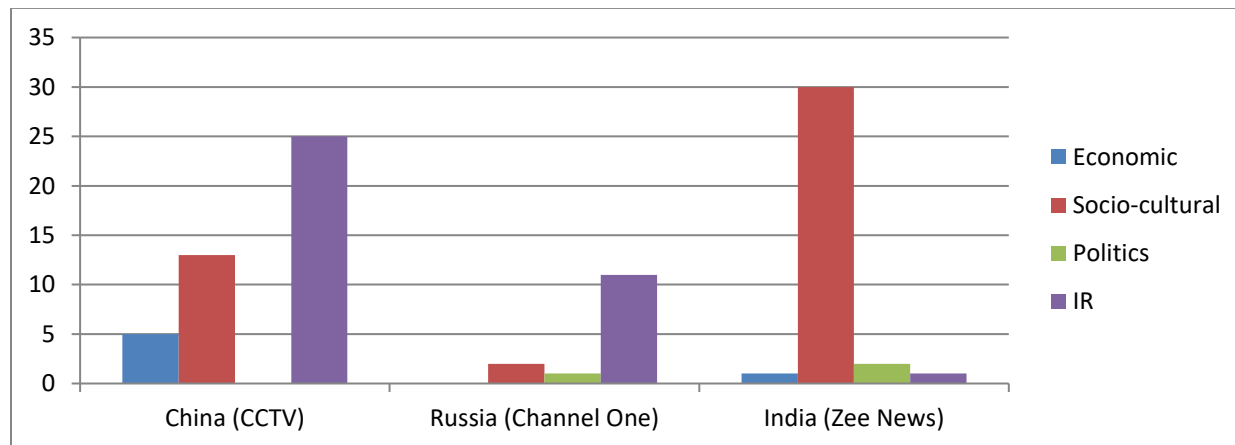


Figure 4. Omani News on 4 Categories in 3 Asian Countries (2010-2022)

Indian Zee TV primarily covered socio-cultural issues in Oman. This can be attributed to the fact that 600,000 Indian expatriates make up the second-largest community in Oman after the Bangladeshi community. It is evident from the above that although Oman is located on the same continent, Asia, there is very little news coverage about Oman and its political, economic, and cultural affairs in the Asian countries.

Similarly, Oman appears modestly in the main Asia-Pacific countries, Australian and Indonesian media. Australian ABC TV focused on social-cultural news and then on Omani international affairs, while economic news appears rarely.

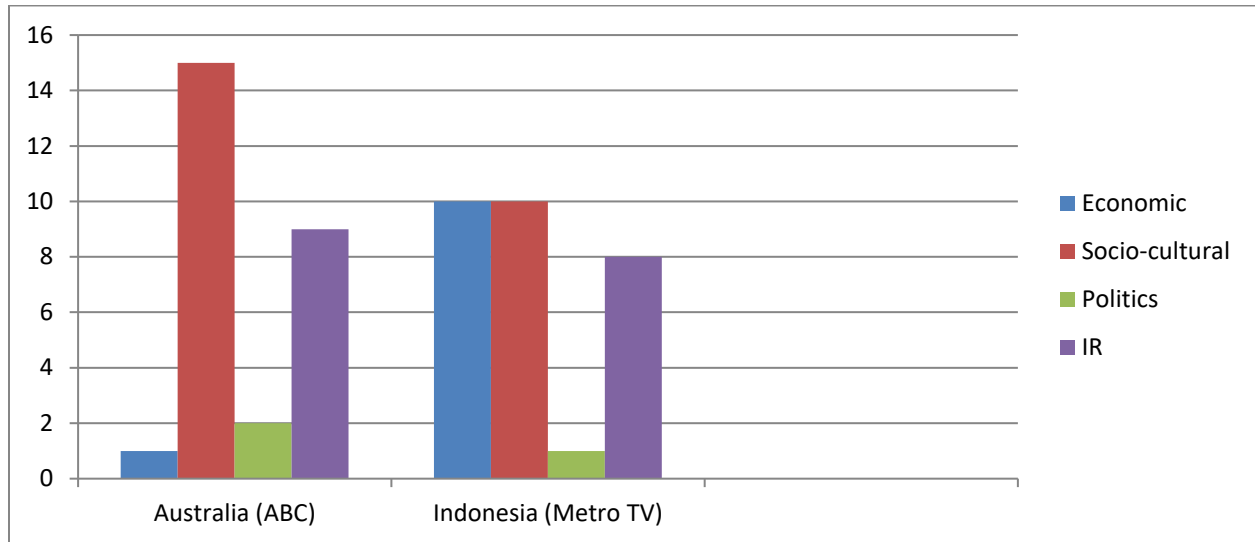


Figure 5. Omani News on 4 Categories in 2 Asia-Pacific Countries (2010-2022)

Indonesia's Metro TV is concerned primarily with socio-cultural news, almost equally with economic and international affairs news in Oman. Again, only 10 news items on an economic and equal number of news on socio-cultural topics are seen low. Because Indonesia and Oman diplomatic relations are good and a large of Indonesian expatriates work in Oman. This needs attention, too.

3.2. Survey Results in 63 Countries

Select your country

506 responses

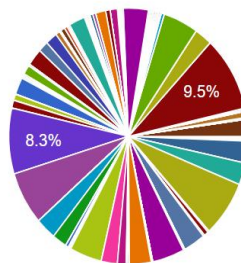
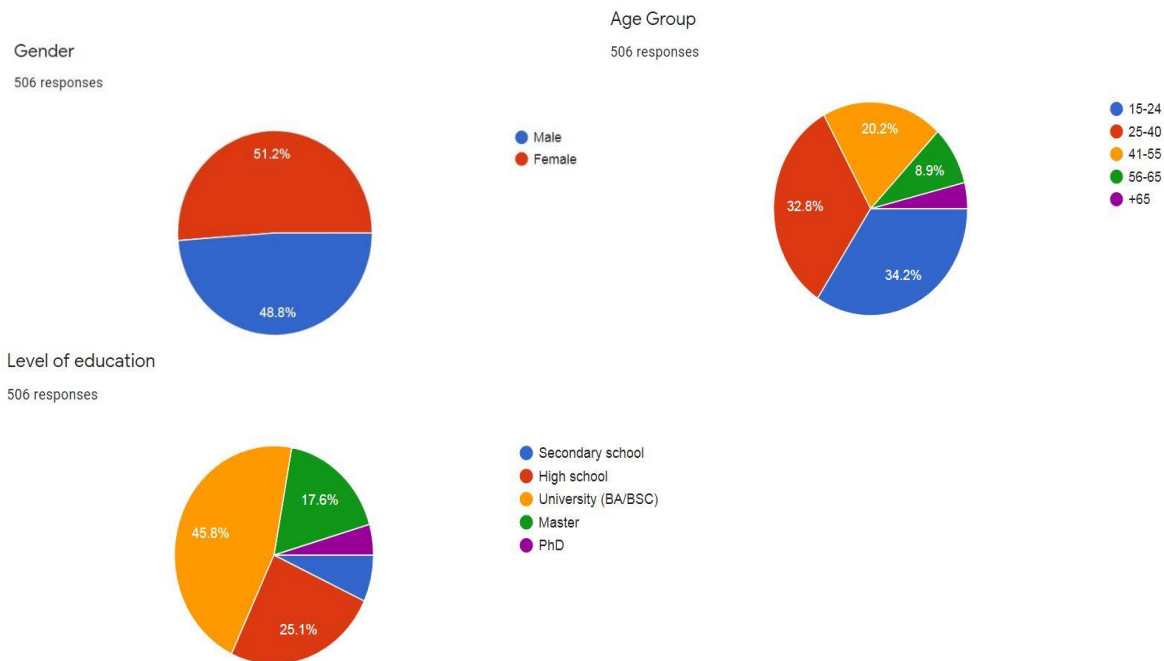


Figure 6: Country Distribution of the Survey

The survey results also show that the world public, in 6 continents and 63 countries, knows a little about Oman's historical, contemporary political, socio-cultural, and diplomatic roles in the Middle East. 506 respondents from 63 countries participated in the online and physical surveys in English. The highest numbers of participants among 63 countries are the United States with 9.5%, the United Kingdom with 8.3%, Australia with 7.1%, France with 6.7%, Turkey 4.7%, and Canada and Denmark with 4.3%.

**Figure 7: Gender, Age Group and Education Level of the Responders**

Respondents' personal information is rich in terms of survey quality. In particular, the gender distribution almost matches the world average. Females represent 51.2%, and males 48.8% of the survey participants. The age distribution is well distributed also. The age group 15-24 years is the most participating part, as it represents 34.2% of the total participants. The age group 25-40 years represented 32.8% of respondents. Ages 41-55 years represents 20.2%; while those aged over 56 years represents 12.9% of all participants. A good indication about the quality of the survey is that the majority of the respondents (with the ratio of 67.9%) have a minimum university degree, 15.6% are master's degree holders, and 4.5% are Ph.D. holders. 25.1% have a high school diploma, and 6.9% a secondary school diploma, which is very low among the 506 responders.

The purpose of initial basic questions about Oman is to explore the general information level of the world public about Oman. For example, the geographical region of Oman, its capital city, and the currency of Oman were very simple braces to understand Oman's general information in the world.

Where is Oman located?

506 responses

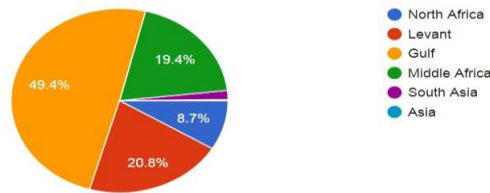


Figure 8: Results of “Location of Oman”

The survey shows that 50.6 % of the respondents do not know the location of Oman. Less than half (49.4%) of the respondents answered the question correctly. 20.8 % think Oman is located in the Levant, 19.4 % suppose Oman is a Central African country, 8.7 % perceive it as a North African country.

What is the capital of Oman?

506 responses

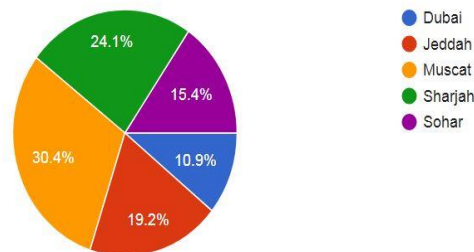


Figure 9: Capital of Oman.

Similarly, another simple question regards the capital of Oman, Muscat. Unfortunately, almost 70 % of the world does not know which city is in the capital of Oman. 24.1 % answered that the capital of Oman is Sharjah, which is one of the seven federal emirates in the United Arab Emirates. 19.2 % of the respondents answered that the capital of Oman is Jeddah, which is a Saudi city. 15.4% of the respondents think that the capital is Sohar, which is a city in northern Oman. 10.9 % think that the capital of Oman is Dubai, which is one of the most famous cities in the United Arab Emirates. Only 30.4% provided the right answer as Muscat.

Another simple question about the currency of Oman draws a similar picture to that of the “capital city” question. Only 25.1 % know that Oman’s currency is the Riyal.

Do you know currency of Oman?

506 responses

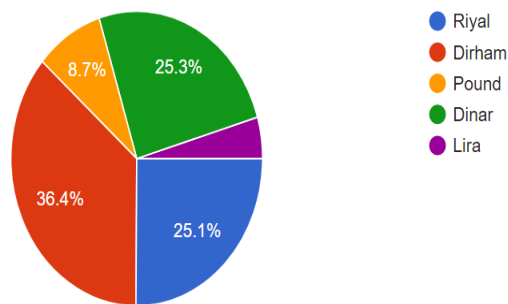


Figure 10: Currency of Oman.

The other portion of 75 % provided incorrect answers such as Dirham (36.4 %), Dinar (25.3%), partially higher than the right answer. In addition, the Pound answer represents 8.7% and Lira 4.5 %.

Perhaps Oman’s most revered person is His Majesty the late Sultan Qaboos. Alongside his long-term unique service to the country, he was the best-known person in the Gulf with his silent but very constructive role in several regional issues including issues between Iran and the Euro-Atlantic zone (Yenigun, 2020). With a 49-year rule, he is the longest-standing head of state in the world after Queen Elizabeth II. He had the most positive and constructive relations with the West and the US, and the majority of the media news in the Western countries involved him. However, according to survey results world public opinion has only minimal information about him.

Who is the Head of State of Oman?

506 responses

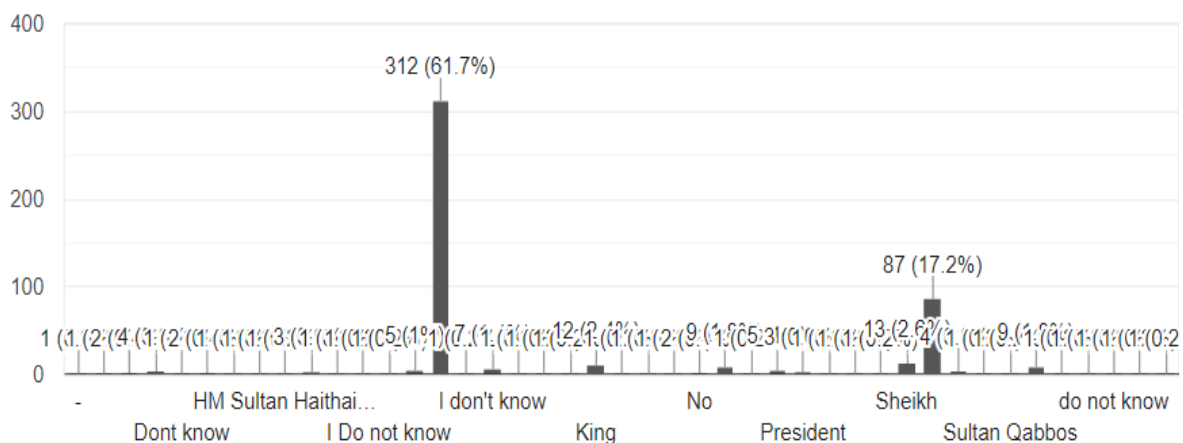


Figure 11: Head of State of Oman

While this project and survey was implemented when Sultan Qaboos was still alive; the data-gathering period concluded in 2022 with Sultan Haitham in power. For this reason, any answer of "Sultan Haitham" "Sultan Qaboos" "Sultan Kaboos," "Sultan," and similar answers were accepted as the right answer. Under the above-mentioned circumstances, (accumulated answers with the wrong writing/typing) only 9% answered correctly. 77.8% responded as "I do not know" and the others responded with wrong answers as seen in the figure above.

The main purpose of the international relations questions of the survey was to understand the world publics' knowledge about Oman's foreign policies and efforts in the region and the world arena. The most important question among them was about the mediator role of Oman in the 5+1-Iran Nuclear Deal Agreement in 2015.

Oman mediated between Iran and the 5+1 in 2015.

506 responses

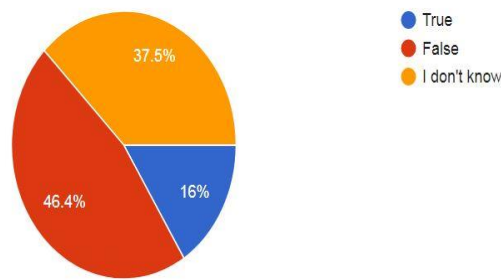


Figure 12: (IR Question) Omani Mediation in 5+1-Iran Nuclear Deal

Despite the significant diplomatic role of Oman in the negotiations between Iran and 5 + 1 in 2015 and in reaching the historic agreement on Iran's nuclear program, 84% of the participants did not know of Oman's pivotal role in these negotiations. Only 16% answered "true", while 46.4% answered "false." In addition, 37.5% answered, "I do not know." This indicates that the diplomatic and political efforts of Oman in the Gulf region and in the world arena remain largely unknown.

In the same manner, Oman was the first Arab country to establish diplomatic relations with the world. In 1840, Oman sent its envoy, Ahmad bin Na'aman Al Kaabi, to New York on the Sultana. Bin Na'aman was the first Arab diplomat to the United States, and the Sultana was the first Arab ship to sail to the United States.

First Arab Ship visited the USA was Omani ship in 19th century.

506 responses

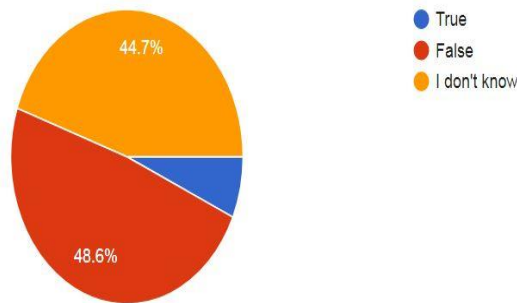
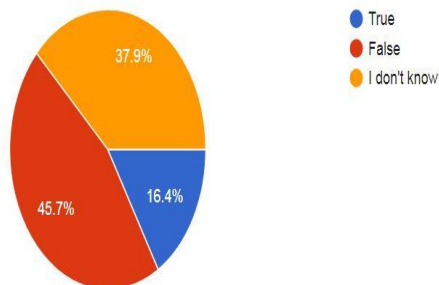


Figure 13: Do you know that the first Arab ship to visit the US was Omani? (History Question)

The survey shows that only 6.7 % of respondents know this fact, while 90.3% are ignorant of it. 44.7% of respondents answered "I do not know", and the largest portion, with 48.6%, answered this information as "false". This also reflects that the contemporary and historical events of Oman are absent from the foreign stage.

Oman has a bicameral parliament.

506 responses



There are general elections in Oman.

506 responses

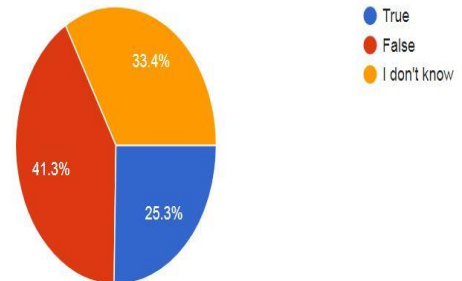


Figure14: Oman Political Questions (Bicameral Parliament and General Elections)

Oman has a bicameral parliament, the Council of Oman (Majlis Oman), which consists of the Council of State (Majlis A'Dawla), whose members are appointed by the Sultan through a royal decree as an upper house, and the Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura), the lower house, which is elected by the people once every four years (Valeri,2008). General and local elections with universal suffrage (including women) and several democratic regulations make Oman the most democratic country in the Gulf region. Nevertheless, the survey shows that 83.6% of the respondents do not know that Oman has a bicameral parliament with authority shared between the two separate houses. Moreover, 74.7% of the respondents do not know that Oman has general elections. Only 25.3 % of them answered "true", while 41.3% answered "false," in addition to that 33.4 % answered, "I do not know".

In the 19th century, Oman has established:

506 responses

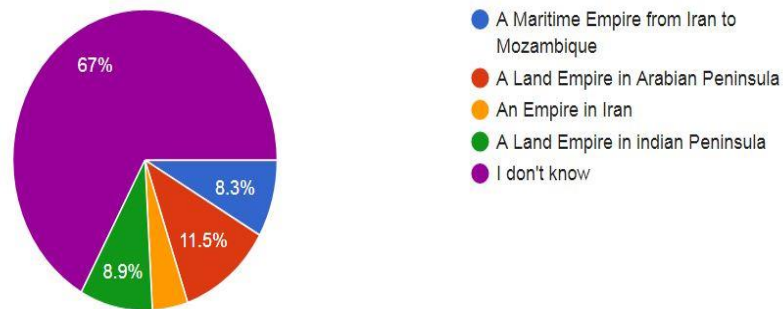


Figure15: Oman's Golden Age (History Question)

In the nineteenth century, Oman was a powerful maritime empire that controlled vast territories along the Persian coast and the east coast of Africa. Only 8.3 % of respondents know that Oman established a maritime empire reaching from Iran to Mozambique in the nineteenth century, while 67 % of respondents answered, "I do not know".

Oman Mediated to release prisoners from Iran, USA and the UK in the last 5 years.

506 responses

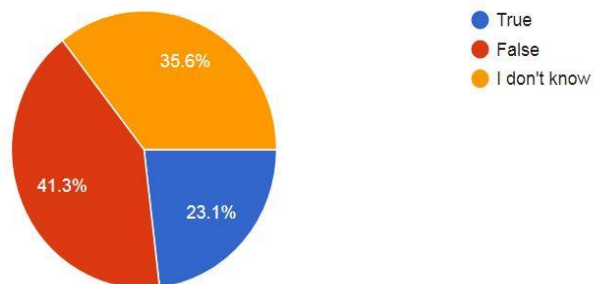


Figure16: Omani Mediation (IR Question)

Perhaps the most significant role of Oman is that of a conciliator, facilitator, and mediator in regional issues and between Iran and the Euro-Atlantic zone. For example, in 2011 and 2013 and 2015, Oman was the mediator for the release of many Western hostages from the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Canada who were being held in regional countries such as Iran or Yemen (Yenigun and Maashani, 2020). The survey shows that only 23.1 % of the respondents know of Oman's diplomatic role as a mediator in the release of these Western hostages. 41.3% of respondents answered this information is "false" and 35.6 % of them answered, "I do not know."

Oman's main income is from

506 responses

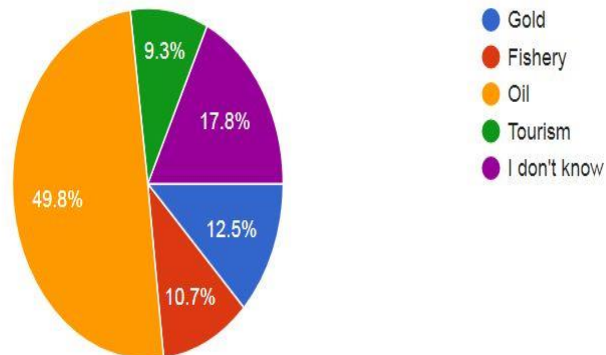


Figure17: Oman's main Income (Economy Question)

Very interestingly, when it comes to the economy the highest percentage of correct answers was given. Almost half of the world knows that Oman's main income is through oil production. It should not be forgotten that the same respondents do not know the location of Oman. Although half of the respondents think Oman is an African country, they are knowledgeable about its main income. The incorrect answers are shared among 12.5 % gold, 10.7% fishery, and 17.8 % "I do not know."

4- Conclusion

Understanding the world public opinion is important information for the states to reshape their policies in accordance with their targets and impact on the world publics. Great power and many European states have been conducting such research directly or indirectly via their media and international media relations (Dutta & Roy, 2019) in their public diplomacy. The Oman Global Image project has shown that world public opinion knows very little about Oman's culture, politics, diplomacy, and economy. It means Oman's very constructive and peaceful diplomacy is not enough to be known by the world publics. This is a very undesirable scenario and should be promptly addressed as in today's borderless world because global image is counted in the rhetoric as soft power (Cotirlea, 2015), especially in the new millennium. It is interrelated with the dominant culture (Enaifoghe & Makhulta, 2020) promoting foreign policy capabilities, and playing an important role in the region and the world. With Oman moving towards diversifying its economy and attracting tourism and foreign investment, it has become imperative for Oman to adopt a more effective media (Jia & Li, 2020) and social media strategy and public diplomacy.

To enhance Oman's image in the world, Oman should implement some policy alternatives in classical diplomacy but, in particular, give more attention to public diplomacy (Nye, 2008). Some social-cultural events, festivals, and media advertorials could be helpful in some pioneering countries in different continents. In addition, scholastic events, conferences, and academic exchange programs could be very beneficial as useful instruments among the world's younger generations. Opening some university branches, not only British but also with great powers to reach to the younger generations, would be helpful in creating future

volunteer ambassadors. In conclusion, it is highly recommended that Oman should work to develop its public diplomacy intensively as a tool of soft power, and establish a public diplomacy department, maybe under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to promote Oman in the world and to build a more influential global image of Oman.

Disclosure statement

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