

Media Visibility of International Organizations Worldwide: Politicization of International Authority or ‘Boots-on-the- Ground’ Work?

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Abstract

This paper uses large-scale automated text analysis to create the first map of media visibility of a large set of global international governmental organizations (IOs). Synthesizing insights from media studies and International Relations (IR), I develop a theoretical framework that highlights the importance of IOs’ operational ‘boots-on-the-ground’ activity. This complements, but also challenges, the reasoning underpinning the sizable literature on IOs’ authority and its politicization. First, based on my framework, I expect IOs’ visibility to be significantly lower in high-income countries than in low-income countries. Although much of the literature on IO politicization focuses on the former, it is the latter where the bulk IOs’ operational activity is performed. Second, exploring variation across IOs, I expect the operational activities and ‘size’ of IOs, rather than their political authority *per se*, to drive visibility patterns. To evaluate the validity of the framework, I present an extensive empirical account of the media coverage of 35 global IOs worldwide, based on automated translation and analysis of close to 870 000 carefully sampled online news texts from across 150 countries, in the pre-Covid years 2018-2019. The data strongly support the validity of the theoretical framework. Controlling for numerous country and media characteristics, IOs are twice as visible in low-income countries than in high-income countries. Further, visibility is higher for IOs with large operational activities, while the association with political authority is weaker.

Keywords: international organizations; media; visibility; international authority; politicization; operational activity

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1. Introduction

The growing contestation of international organizations (IOs) and the liberal international order is the subject of one of the most dynamic areas of research in IR (De Vries et al. 2021; Dellmuth and Schlipphak 2020; Hooghe et al. 2019a; Stephen and Zürn 2019; Zürn 2018). While one important challenge to IOs and global governance comes from rising powers, an equally important one is emerging from *within*, from the core states of the liberal international order (Lake et al. 2021). In a number of the Western states, globalization, openness, and international cooperation are increasingly turning into matters of political contest (Hooghe et al. 2019b). Increasingly, IOs need to legitimate themselves not only in the eyes of foreign policy elites, but also of the general public.

At the same time, important insights into the politicization and legitimation mechanisms at work in the core institutions of the liberal international order are missing. We do not know, systematically, *how visible IOs are to the general public in member states*, let alone what information about IOs they receive. Our understanding of the contestation of IOs is thus impaired by the principal lack of empirical data on the patterns of IOs' media visibility. In line with that, we also do not have a solid theoretical framework for understanding *what factors make IOs more visible in some countries than in other countries, and what drives the differences in visibility across IOs*. For the advancement of the research on IOs' authority and contestation, this is an important agenda.

This paper seeks to address these issues and develop and test the validity of a new theoretical framework for studying the visibility of IOs. Synthesizing insights from media studies and from political science and IR, I argue that IO visibility is likely to vary both across countries and across IOs. First, despite their global standing, the prestige associated with it, and often considerable (and growing) political authority (Zürn et al. 2021), IOs are rather distant to citizens in most countries. Especially in high-income countries, IOs' work and contribution are often abstract and detached from everyday lives. The expert and bureaucratic nature of IOs' work hardly triggers passions (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). However, this is much less the case in countries at lower levels of socio-economic development. It is in these countries that IOs primarily deliver tangible results and to which they bring unique, locally unavailable expertise. In countries with lower levels of economic development, human development, and governance capacity, the work of IOs is much closer to matters of peoples' everyday concerns.

The visibility of IOs is then likely to be much higher there than in the developed world. Second, the literature on IO authority leads us to expect that IOs will be more visible when they enjoy significant authority. While not disputing this, my theoretical reasoning points to ‘on-the-ground’ operational activity of IOs as the likely primary driver of IOs’ visibility, precisely because IO’s operational work, rather than their often abstract authority, makes them directly relevant for the general population and for media.

To probe the validity of this reasoning, but also to contribute to the broader research agenda on the public visibility of IOs and its effects (Schmidtke 2019; Parizek and Stephen 2021; Rauh and Zürn 2019), this paper provides a first large-scale map of the presence of IOs in (online) media across 150 countries of the world. The paper covers 35 IOs – the entire United Nations System, complemented with several further IOs selected in an earlier study by Hooghe et al. (Hooghe et al. 2019a; Hooghe and Marks 2015). I identify automatically how often each of the 35 IOs has been referred to in online media read in each country. To do so, I analyze the full texts of 869 102 carefully sampled articles in 2653 online media outlets across the world. Most of these articles have been automatically translated into English from one of 62 languages. The media outlets have been selected from the GDELT database (GDELT 2019), based on a new readership geography data from the Amazon Alexa Web Information Service (2021). This uniquely sizable and comprehensive dataset opens the space for the exploration of the content of media, worldwide, so far not available in IR or even broader social sciences.

The empirical analysis shows strong support for the theoretical framework. IOs’ in general receive relatively low attention, though they are by no means invisible. The United Nations, by far the most visible IO in my sample, was mentioned in 2018-2019 in around 2.7% of all the analyzed articles. This is comparable to countries such as Italy or Australia. The second in rank, the IMF, was comparable to Romania. Based on the data for subsample of the 35 IOs covered, I find the expected systematic variation in the media visibility of IOs across countries. In low-income countries, the share of articles mentioning at least one of the 35 is around twice as high as in high income countries. Furthermore, IOs’ media visibility is associated with their authority levels, but even more strongly with the size of their operational activities. Both findings support the reasoning underpinning my theoretical framework, while also challenging the expectation that IOs’ media visibility should be associated primarily with the politicization of their authority.

The article forms a part of a larger research project on the *Global Flows of Political Information* (GLOWIN).² Within the project, we seek to map how intensely connected individual countries are to the outside world in the realm of public information: to other states and to IOs. This article represents the first output of the IO-related leg of the research project. The paper is structured as follows: In Section 2, I outline the core tenets of my theoretical approach. Section 3 briefly presents the empirical data collection techniques employed and aggregate descriptive statistics across IOs. Finally, in Section 4, I turn to the core explanatory results regarding variation across states.

2. Theoretical framework: information about IOs in media

Communication and information is fundamental to politics. For Karl Deutsch, to take one of the classics, communication is constitutive of political order (Deutsch 1963) because it gives rise to its fundamental political communities, the nations (Deutsch 1966). Almond understands political communication, or ‘the flow of information through the society and through the various structures that make up the political system’, as one of the core system functions that ‘determine whether or not the system will be maintained or changed’ (Almond et al. 2004, p. 49). In the last decades, political communication has been dramatically affected by the prominent trend of the mediatization of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999), or by a process where “the media have become the most important source of information and vehicle of communication” in politics (Strömbäck 2008, p. 230). We find that today in politics “mediated reality matters more than any kind of actual or objective reality” (Strömbäck 2008, p. 239). Understanding politics, and the legitimacy of political order, then necessarily also means understanding the portrayal of politics and institutions in media.

In line with that, the study of IOs has been recently increasingly turning to the attention paid to IOs by the general public (Dellmuth and Schlipphak 2020). A host of empirical studies has emerged that study theoretically and empirically IOs’ legitimation and self-legitimation (Gronau and Schmidtke 2016; Schmidtke 2019; Dingwerth et al. 2020; Tallberg and Zürn 2019; von Billerbeck 2020). This research is closely connected to that on public knowledge about

² <http://glowin.cuni.cz/>

IOs (Dellmuth 2016), public attitudes and legitimacy beliefs towards IOs (Dellmuth and Schlipphak 2020; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2020; Schlipphak 2015), as well as on how IOs cater for their public image institutionally (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2017, 2018).

A prominent line of theoretical and empirical research in IR, over the past years, has focused on how the growing authority of IOs translates to their politicization and contestation (Hooghe et al. 2019a; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Rauh and Zürn 2019; Zürn 2018; Zürn et al. 2012). Because of the authority and power IOs wield, what they do has consequences which the public is able to perceive, and for which it may seek to hold them accountable (Keohane 2003).

An important element of these debates, albeit so far rather understudied, is the information the general public receives about IOs. If we are to understand the public attitude towards IOs, and the patterns of their support and contestation, it is important to understand what information, and how much, the public receive about them (Pfetsch et al. 2008, p. 467). On the one hand, the politicization literature presumes that as the authority of IOs grows, and the public becomes aware of it, the salience of IOs, including in media, grows (De Wilde 2011, pp. 567–568; Hutter and Kriesi 2019, p. 999). At the same time, there are reasons to be sceptical about how much aware an individual in the general population is about IOs even if they enjoy what political scientists see as considerable authority. Like foreign affairs in general (Bennett et al. 1996), IOs' are often not seen as sufficiently directly relevant and familiar for the people to make news (Dahl 1999, p. 24; Aalberg et al. 2013, p. 390). In the logic of media systems IOs are often too distant from people's important social networks and individuals' affinity to IOs is low, which lowers the value of information about them (Koopmans and Vliegenthart 2011, p. 638; Hester 1973, p. 242; Galtung and Ruge 1965). Indeed, an important argument in the discussion on the democratic deficit of IOs is that citizens may not be interested in and informed about IOs as the stakes for most citizens in IOs' work are missing or unclear to them (Moravcsik 2004, pp. 360–361; Dahl 1999, p. 31). For most individuals, 'attitude importance' of IOs, or a 'subjective interest in and concern about [one's own] attitude' towards IOs (Dellmuth 2016, p. 677), is then low. And so is the motivation to seek information about them.

There are at least two reasons for that. One reason lies in the often abstract nature of problems connected with IOs' work and authority. IOs' basic legitimacy stems primarily from

their bureaucratic nature and from reliance on depoliticized, depersonalized, rational-legal authority and technocratic expertise (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). News pertinent to abstract procedures and technocratic policy-making are likely to be of low news value (see O'Neill and Harcup 2009a, p. 165). Of course, in crisis times, the situation may be more nuanced (Kreuder-Sonnen and Parizek 2021). Contestation, politicization, and hence also media attention paid to IOs may grow in unique crisis situations where the consequences of IO authority become apparent (Hutter and Kriesi 2019). But in normal times, the abstract conflicts surrounding IOs' exercise of authority may be hardly visible. Furthermore, clear-cut and unambiguous assessment of IOs' performance, that would consistently make for a story of IOs' successes and failures (Galtung and Ruge 1965, p. 65), is often compromised by the abstract relationship between the IOs, with delegated and/or pooled authority, and its key member states (Elsig 2010; see Anderson et al. 2019). Often the blame for failures is distributed between the IO and member states, and so is the praise for successes (cf. Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl 2020).

The second important reason for IOs' likely low overall media visibility is that global IOs are not rooted in a shared sense of community among their member states (Hooghe et al. 2019a). For regional IOs – which lie beyond the scope of this study - this may be different (de Wilde 2019, p. 1196). But global IOs cannot enjoy the advantage of representing and generating the sense of community, belongingness and we-feeling among people that (*nation-*)states often generate (Deutsch 1966; Easton 1975; Russett and Oneal 2001, p. 75). While a political order based on community can rely on mutual trust of its members and the recognition of a sense of common fate among the community members, and this is what makes it directly relevant, governance based on no sense of community among its members is predominantly contractual, transactional (Hooghe et al. 2019a, Chapter 2; Deutsch et al. 1957; Klaus Armingeon and Besir Ceka 2014). IOs cannot appeal to identity-driven passion and affection, and often the deep sense of loyalty among members of a community that generates interest in news about it.

While these factors are likely to suppress media visibility of IOs, their relevance is likely to vary both across IOs and across states. Indeed, media studies offer relevant insights into the factors that are likely to drive IOs' visibility. As there is no single work in media studies that would provide a comprehensive theoretical take on the visibility of IOs (see de Wilde 2019 for

a partial exception), I synthesize insights from three connected strands of literature to formulate an original framework. These are 1) the literature on news value (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O’Neill 2001; O’Neill and Harcup 2009b), 2) the literature on (international) news flows (Segev 2015a, 2015b), and, the literature on the diffusion of news (Koopmans and Vliegenthart 2011). What these literatures share in common is the expectation that there are three key factors determining the media visibility of international political entities. *First*, the characteristics, or traits, of the source of information are essential. In our case, the source may either be an IO, or a country in which the IO operates or with which the IO is concerned (see also de Wilde 2019, p. 1196). *Second*, IO visibility is likely to be connected with the occurrence of distinct events pertinent to their work. Again, the events may either concern the IO as such, or the operations of an IO in a particular country or region. *Third*, IO visibility is likely to be affected by the relatedness of the IOs’ work to the media audiences, via social ties or homophily mechanisms (Koopmans and Vliegenthart 2011; McPherson et al. 2001).

Connecting this framework with the literature on IOs, these three general factors identified in media studies translate into concrete expectations regarding the visibility of IOs *both across states and across IOs*.

My first hypothesis will concern variation across countries. The framework highlights why the ‘attitude importance’ of IOs (Dellmuth 2016, p. 677), and hence their media visibility, is likely to be higher in developing countries than in the developed countries. For one, across the developing world, IOs conduct significant operational activity and deliver tangible results in virtually all spheres of socio-economic development. The work of IOs, and their materially visible presence in the countries, represent significant opportunities for individual and collective socio-economic development. Moreover, IOs are important pools of expertise and information (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Especially in low-income and low-capacity countries, IOs may represent an important source of insight and a natural body to refer to when reporting in media (Busch et al. 2020; Eckhard and Parizek 2020). To be sure, epistemic authority is a key feature of IOs in general (Zürn et al. 2012), but it is likely to make IOs more visible in media in those countries in which the asymmetry between domestic and international administration is largest.³ These are characteristics that make IOs directly

³ But see the discussion in Kreuder-Sonnen and Parizek (2021) for the case of the WHO and COVID-19.

relevant in the developing world. In the developing countries, they give IOs high status and endow them with a priori relevance, which is crucial for the news value of reporting on IOs. These characteristics are only rarely present in the developed world, and certainly to a much lesser extent.

Second, distinct media-attractive events are also likely to occur more frequently in countries of IOs' operations. To be sure, decisions by the UN Security Council or major intergovernmental conferences will resonate worldwide (though certainly not the least in regions directly affected by the decisions). In the aggregate, however, most events related to IOs are likely to pertain to very concrete activities of IOs, such as the building of large infrastructure projects, peace-keeping operations and (violent) engagements associated with them, etc.

Third, relatedness factors are likely to play weak roles for IOs in general (de Wilde 2019, p. 1196), perhaps with the exception of the ties of staff working in headquarters or regional and national offices. At the same time, in reporting on IOs, social ties and homophily mechanisms may play a role in reporting on events related to IOs in specific countries and regions. The mechanisms of relatedness should lead to that such events will be more likely reported in similar or closely tied foreign countries than in countries more different and distant. Once again, thus, the mechanism points in the direction of likely higher media visibility of IOs in low-income countries.

All these three mechanisms point in the same direction, as reflected in my first hypothesis:

H1: *International organizations are likely to be more visible in countries at lower levels of socio-economic development.*

My second hypothesis pertains to variation across IOs. Based on the literature on the authority of IOs, we can expect that more media visibility will be enjoyed by IOs with significant authority – political or epistemic authority – (Zürn et al. 2012; Liese et al. 2021; cf. Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012). It is these IOs the words and deeds of which are likely to prove impactful, and therefore media-relevant. At the same time, the logic of my theoretical framework points to the importance of the visibility of IOs in their everyday operational work.

Even organizations with relatively little delegated or pooled authority may be highly media attractive if they conduct work materially visible in the countries of their operations. To be sure, sizable activities often require centralization and delegation (Abbott and Snidal 1998). But conceptually political authority (and even more so epistemic authority) is distinct from implementation work. As a result, I argue that variation across IOs is likely to depend on the size of IOs' operational activities and their material resources. Because I will not be able to assess empirically the *epistemic* authority of the 35 IOs in this paper, I focus my second hypothesis on their *political* authority and *operational* activity:

H2A: *Visibility of IOs increases with their political authority.*

H2B: *Visibility of IOs increases with the size of their operational activity.*

Before moving to the empirical part of the article, I should highlight that there are three studies which I am aware of that estimate, in a quantitative manner, systematically the coverage of (several) IOs in news across (several) countries. First, there is an article by Schmidtke (2019) who studies, systematically over sixteen years, the coverage of 3 IOs in quality press in four democracies. Using media coverage of IOs, Schmidtke seeks to understand elite legitimacy communication pertinent to IOs. Second, Rauh and Zürn study four economic IOs' coverage in three major international and two national newspapers over 21 years (Rauh and Zürn 2019). Third, Parizek and Stephen use measures of media visibility of more than 30 IOs, over twenty years, as a moderating factor in their analysis of the patterns of IO secretariats' staffing, showing that highly visible IOs have systematically different (more representative) patterns of country representation in secretariats than lowly visible IOs (Parizek and Stephen 2021). There are also other studies that focus on different types of texts than media, in relation to IOs, such as parliamentary interventions (Rauh and de Wilde 2018) public speeches (Rauh et al. 2019), or annual reports (Dingwerth et al. 2020). On the case of the EU, a theoretical discussion of the logic of media coverage has been proposed, though so far without systematic empirical data (de Wilde 2019; see also Marquart et al. 2018). While the existing literature contributes a number of insights useful for my purposes, no study I am aware of measures and theoretically accounts for how much attention media pays to numerous IOs across a large number of countries.

3. Measuring the visibility of 35 IOs across 150 countries

I now turn to the presentation of empirical data I will use to test the theoretical expectations. The analysis maps the media visibility of the entire United Nations System, with its 1) main bodies, 2) its programmes and funds (e.g. UNDP, UNICEF), 3) the 15 UN specialized agencies, including the World Bank and the IMF, but also e.g. the WHO, IMO, WIPO, WMO, as well as 4) eight IOs that are officially 'UN-related' in the classification of the UN System (e.g. the WTO, IAEA, IOM). This is by no means a complete list of globally relevant IOs, but it covers the very core of global governance. In addition, five global IOs unrelated to the UN, but covered by in earlier studies by Hooghe et al. (2019a), are also included (e.g. Global Environmental Facility and the Permanent Court for Arbitration). The appendix to this article (**Table 3**) contains the full list. In the coding, separate codes were devised for the main bodies of UN: Security Council, General Assembly, Secretariat, ECOSOC, and ICJ, but in the analysis these are all subsumed under the UN label. The same applies for World Bank's subunits. The measurement period is restricted to the pre-Covid years 2018-2019.

The key source I use to monitor media content across the world is GDELT, or the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT 2019). GDELT is unique in that it covers, at least to some extent, media in virtually all countries of the world. While, later on, I refer to 150 countries, disregarding data for very small states with few article observations, the underlying source covers virtually the entire world. With more extensive data collection in the future, more countries can be included in my analysis. The geographic scope of commercial news aggregators (e.g. Factiva) is limited to several dozen countries. This also applies to commercial application newsapi.org, with 54 monitored countries. It also partly applies to the source closest to broad enough coverage, the 84 national and linguistic variants of Google News. GDELT processes the content of around 60 000 media outlets, literally worldwide, and publishes openly the results of these procedures. These results, amounting to around 0.5 million articles processed every day, contain large amount of information extracted from the articles by GDELT itself, but most importantly it also provides URLs of each of the processed article. This is the key information I use to access the full-text of a representative sample of these articles, download them, and process them using my own algorithms.

One problem with GDELT is its extreme inclusiveness with regard to sources covered. To remedy this problem, I collected systematic data on website rank of all the sources covered by GDELT as estimated by Amazon Alexa Web Information Service (AWS)(2021). This unique commercial service tracks numbers of visitors and their behaviour on millions of domains across the world, including with regard to audience geography. I use AWS to filter the sources covered by GDELT drastically, and only keep in the analysis media outlets that rank 500th or better in at least one country. Further, because most media outlets have at least some readership in more than one country, I only include an outlet as a source in those countries in which the website achieves this ranking. That is, the majority of the around 60 000 websites tracked by GDELT is discarded, and my analysis is based on the content of articles from 2653 domains that show significant relevance in the audience countries. From these domains, a random sample of articles is selected for download and processing. Further significant reduction of data used in this article is due to the limits on automatic translation of the texts download. The translation is performed by Google Translate, and for this article more than 692 000 non-English articles have been translated.

A more comprehensive note on the sampling procedure is due at this point. The sampling strategy I employ combines three sampling procedures (Daniel 2011, Chapters 5–6). The very first step is based on availability/convenience sampling, where I rely on sources tracked by GDELT, the only data source available that provides the requisite coverage of online media in around 200 countries. Second, purposive sampling strategy is implemented by filtering out from the dataset only those media outlets that achieve certain volume of readership, based on the AWS estimates of audience geography. These two steps establish the universe of online media content I am interested in. Third and finally, I download, process, and analyze a representative (random) sample of articles that passed through the first two steps. In this article, this procedure leads to a set of 869 102 articles. These articles form a representative sample of around 2% of all the articles that satisfy the criteria outlined above, from 307 randomly sampled days in 2018-2019. Furthermore, I exclude from the analysis media in countries with less than 1 million inhabitants and less than 1bill. USD of GDP, because of the very low numbers of analyzed articles for these countries. This reduces the set of countries covered from close to 200 to 150 countries.

The sampling procedure, in particular its first part, carries a risk of a possible bias for my effort to estimate the visibility of IOs in media. Countries differ by orders of magnitude in the sizes of their media markets. This is also translated into the widely varying numbers of outlets covered in GDELT. If the media systems are differently structured, reflecting major differences in the size of countries' economies, any comparative analysis of media content can be influenced by this inherent structuration differences. It could be argued, for example, that these differences may lead to that different types of media outlets are covered for different countries. While in economically smaller countries the few, general, top media are tracked, in larger countries, with more structured media markets, also more specialized outlets are tracked. This could disfavour large countries, in terms of IO visibility, if IOs appeared, on average, in higher ranking media outlets.

To mitigate these risks, I employ two strategies. First, in the explanatory analysis below, I use a set of controls to account for media and article characteristics. Most importantly, I evaluate the general exposure of media, across countries, to foreign news. Second, the sampling procedure described above, whereby only media outlets ranking above certain country threshold are used, lowers the variability of the underlying media outlets population. Considering the outlets of the 869 102 articles analyzed in this text, audience geography data from the Amazon Alexa website ranking indicate a great deal of variation in the outlets covered by GDELT, across countries. For example, it covers 136 media outlets that rank in TOP500 in the US, 111 in Mexico, 29 in Cuba and Iraq, and 14 in Albania and Mozambique. These are significant differences, but they are still much smaller than if the TOP500 selection criterion was not applied. This sampling procedure then ensures maximum homogeneity across countries, while still reflecting the enormous differences that exist between countries' media systems.

Out of the 869 102 articles I analyze, 176 972 were originally in English language. The remaining 692 130 were automatically translated into English from one of 62 languages of the media outlets, using an API accessing programmatically Google Translate capabilities on a large scale. The other most frequently occurring languages in the data source, beyond English, are Spanish (103 802 articles), Arabic (60 900), and Chinese (54 548). Among the least frequently occurring languages still covered were, for example, Malay (105), Swahili (135), or Punjabi (129 articles).

For each of the close to 900 000 articles, I use a natural language processing script (in R) to extract the counts of explicit references to one or more of the IOs in my sample. My algorithm detects the presence of the names of all the IOs in English, typically their full name and the abbreviation.⁴ Regular expressions were used to maximize the accuracy of measurement, allowing the capturing of, for example, the abbreviation *UN* without conflating it with instances in which the string “UN” forms a part of a word (e.g. *unbalanced*, *Munich*). My approach disregards grammatical structure or further nuance in the underlying texts (Grimmer and Stewart 2013, p. 272).

Let me now turn to basic descriptive statistics regarding the relative visibility of IOs, globally. From the 869 102 articles, a reference to at least one IO from the list of 35 was made in 38 972 articles (4.5%). **Table 1** shows the twenty most frequently occurring IOs. The ranking is led by the UN, by a wide margin, with a reference in 23 700 articles (2.7%). UN occurs in media more than five times as frequently as IMF, second on the list, and eight to nine times as frequently as the third WHO and fourth World Bank.

Table 1: TOP 20 most frequently occurring IOs

Rank	IGO	Articles with a reference	Rank	IGO	Articles with a reference
1	UN	23700	11	IAEA	525
2	IMF	4432	12	FAO	471
3	WHO	3057	13	UNDP	349
4	WB	2695	14	ICJ	344
5	UNESCO	1940	15	WFP	341
6	WTO	1497	16	IOM	297
7	ICC	1251	17	OPCW	279
8	INTERPOL	875	18	ITU	222
9	UNICEF	826	19	UNFPA	162
10	ILO	533	20	ICAO	147

The data enable me to provide a preliminary test of the second hypothesis which presumes that IO visibility is connected with its political authority (H2A) and the size of its operational

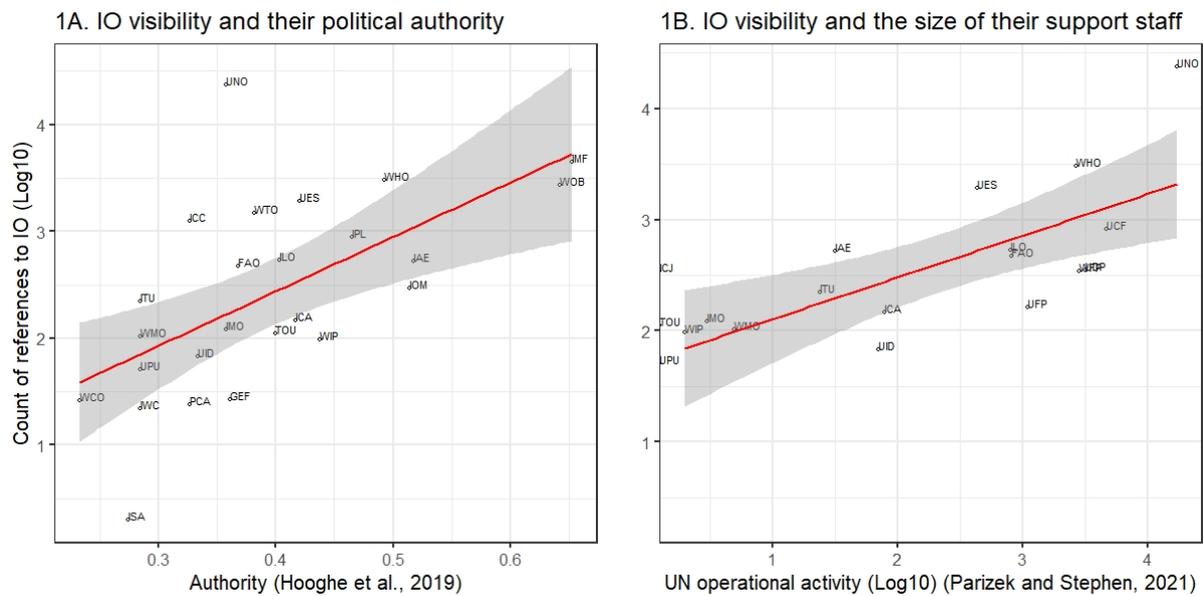
⁴ I do not use the IO abbreviation for the WHO, though, because my procedure cannot ensure a clear distinction of the IO name and the interrogative pronoun.

activities (H2B). To evaluate the former, I use the Hooghe et al. (2019a) data on IO authority delegation and pooling. To evaluate the latter, I use the data on the number of general services (support) staff working across all the bodies of the United Nations, including all specialized agencies, in all individual countries. This data has been used previously as a measure of IOs' operational activity (Parizek 2017; Parizek and Stephen 2021). Unfortunately, each of these datasets only covers a part of the list of 35 bodies I study here, and they do not overlap fully.

In **Figure 1A**, IO visibility – the overall number of articles referring to the IO, globally (log 10) – is plotted against IO authority, measured as the average of delegation and pooling scores in the Hooghe et al. dataset (2019a). The figure confirms a strong relation between the two variables. It also shows, however, a significant outlier – the UN – with high visibility but only below-average authority within the sample. In **Figure 1B**, I plot IO visibility against the data on the number of non-HQ UN general services (support) staff. The figure highlights an even stronger relationship, with an almost perfect match between general services staff, as a measure of IOs' operational 'boots-on-the-ground' activities, and their visibility. It should be highlighted, though, that the staff data only cover the UN and its funds and specialized agencies, even excluding the World Bank and the IMF, so the sample is not fully comparable to that in **Figure 1A**. Furthermore, again the UN Secretariat garners a visibility premium, compared to all other bodies.

The visual representation in **Figure 1** seems to support both hypotheses H2A and H2B. Intuitively, these key characteristics of IOs – their formal political authority and their size of operational activities – are strongly connected with their visibility. Especially due to the unique role of the UN as a clear outlier in **Figure 1A**, hypothesis H2B seems to garner even stronger support in the data than H2A. Moreover, the association of visibility with authority is much weaker when we consider delegation and pooling as orthogonal dimensions of authority, instead of merging them in a summative index (Hooghe and Marks 2015). **Table 4** in the Appendix shows results of OLS models with authority and staff size as predictors of media visibility, supporting the notion of a strong connection of visibility with operational activity of IOs and a clearly present, yet weaker and more nuanced relationship with authority.

Figure 1: IO visibility as given by political authority and operational activity



Interpreting the overall visibility figures of IOs, the 2.7% of articles making a reference to the UN, globally, is fairly close to the visibility of Australia or Italy, in the same media outlets covered here (I performed an analogous analysis of media visibility for countries, and this comparison is based on it). The 0.5% of articles making a reference to the IMF makes it comparable, in visibility, to countries such as Morocco or Romania. The 0.35% for the WHO and 0.3% for the World Bank are comparable to, for example, Czechia or Kazakhstan.

While I have not set up any fixed criterion for what constitutes high or low visibility of IOs, the overall score of 4.5% of articles making a reference to at least one of the 35 bodies covered appears like a fairly substantial number, though the comparison of the visibility of any other IO than UN to countries is much less favourable. Moreover, it should be clear that the majority of articles is not primarily *about* the IOs, but may only make a reference to them, e.g. to a particular report. This is perfectly in line with the interest of this article, because these are typical instances in which IOs are referred to as sites of epistemic authority (Zürn et al. 2012). But the interpretation of the figures needs to take this into account.

4. IOs' visibility across countries: 'boots-on-the-ground' activity as the driver

I now turn to the test of hypothesis H1, embodying the part of the theoretical framework pertinent to IO visibility across states. The core prediction of the theoretical framework is that IO visibility is likely to be negatively associated with countries' level of development broadly defined – economic development, human development, and governance quality. Because of the relative sparsity of references to most of the IOs covered, in the main analysis I combine data on visibility of all IOs. In addition, though, I also show separate models for four of the relatively highly visible individual IOs: the UN, the World Bank, the WTO, and the IAEA. The first two are prime examples of IOs with significant operational activity in developing countries, and the theoretical framework developed above should fully apply to them. In contrast, the WTO and the IAEA are the most visible programme IOs from my sample, with little operational activity in developing countries. For these two, therefore, my theoretical framework is relatively least likely to apply. This variation can help us shed further light on the validity of my theoretical framework.

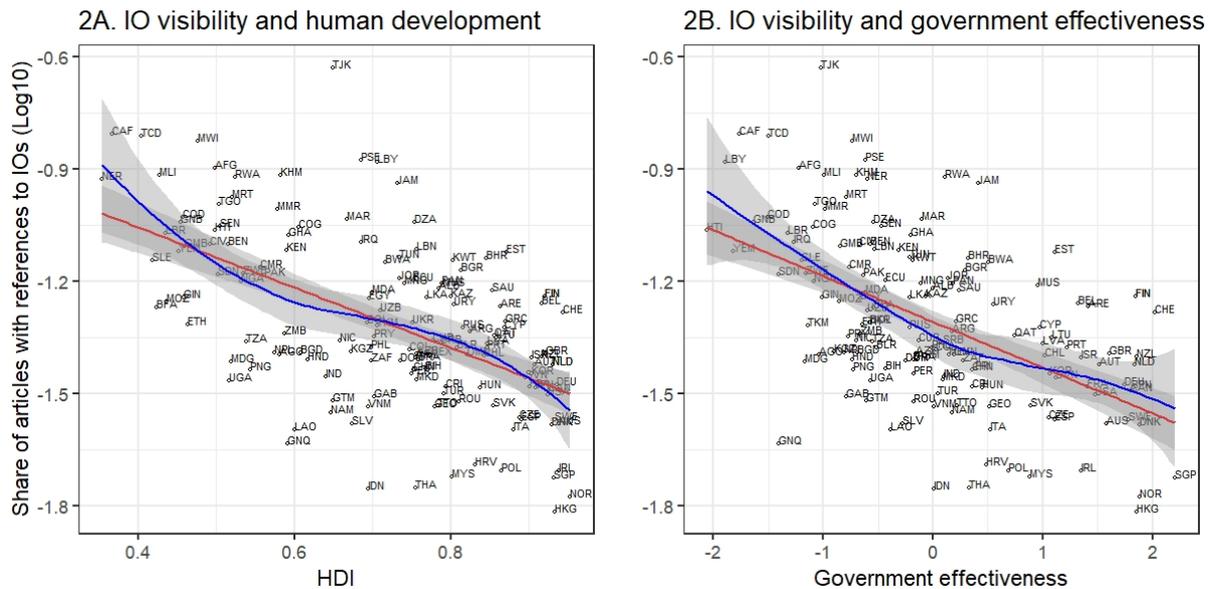
Perhaps the best starting point for the evaluation of H1 is a simple bivariate plot. In **Figure 2A**, I relate IO visibility in a country to the value of its UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) as the most comprehensive measure of human development (United Nations Development Programme 2019).⁵ The visual representation of the relationship shows clearly that the higher the HDI score of countries, the lower the share of news articles referring to IOs. In **Figure 2B**, the picture is replicated with values of countries' government effectiveness scores as estimated by the World Bank (2019). Again, the graph shows a strong negative association between the variables. Countries more advanced in terms of human development and in terms of governance capacity show significantly lower visibility of IOs than countries that score lower on these indicators. An almost equal picture emerges when we use a simple measure of countries' wealth, GDP *per capita*, as I show further below.

My argument is not that visibility of IOs is associated with exactly these specific variables, through a particular narrow mechanism. My theoretical framework presumes that it is the

⁵ The index synthesizes three components: health, education, and economic wealth.

general level of socio-economic development that matters – inherently multidimensional, with human development, economic development, and governance capacity aspects. It is countries that are weaker on these measures of development success in which media show significantly higher propensity to report on IOs.

Figure 2: IOs’ visibility and countries’ human development and governance quality



I now turn to a more systematic multivariate test, using a set of logistic regression models. Because a particular article can be read in more than one country, if the audience geography data from Amazon Alexa indicate so, the logistic regression models are on article-country rather than article level. The 869 102 articles mapped thus translate into close to 1 500 000 observations. I conducted a series of robustness tests to check whether my results apply across various specifications of the media outlets, e.g. only counting media that are read in, say, fewer than five countries, in only one country, ranking in TOP100 in a country, rather than TOP500, and so on. These tests are not reported in this paper but I identified no notable differences. In all the models, I cluster (robust) standard errors by country and by the media outlet.

To test my hypothesis H1, I use three alternative core independent variables, corresponding to three main aspects of socio-economic development: the country HDI, its governance

effectiveness score, as presented in Figure 2 above, and the country *GDP per capita* (log 10). I also introduce to the models several controls pertaining to the characteristics of the countries and, equally importantly, to the characteristics of the media outlets and individual articles.

From the country characteristics I include, first, information on country economic size, its GDP (log 10). Societies in larger countries can be presumably less interested in information on IOs, because of the sheer volume of reportable (newsworthy) activity at home. Second, I include the Polity IV democracy score to account for variation across political regimes. Democracies are said to be more interested in institutionalized cooperation (Mansfield et al. 2002).

There are four controls related to the characteristics of the media and articles. First and most importantly, I add information on the exposure of countries to foreign news (variable *Foreign news media coverage*). The variable captures the share of news, for each country, that contain a reference to at least one foreign country. I constructed this measure using the same news content dataset used here to measure the visibility of IOs. Instead of references to IOs, though, I counted here references to foreign countries. This is an important addition, because it controls for the possible heterogeneity of media outlets that I am able to track, across countries. It is conceivable that GDELT, as my primary source from which I sample media outlets, tracks more foreign-interested media in some countries (e.g. the less developed ones) than in others. By including this measure of foreign news exposure, I am able to control for this eventuality. Second, I add information on each media outlet country rank. More reporting on IOs could be associated with higher ranking (more widely read) or lower ranking media outlets. Third, I add a control for full-text length of each article. Fourth and finally, I include a dummy for whether the article was written in English or underwent, for the purposes of my analysis, automatic translation. All the variables are standardized, so that their *Beta* coefficients are directly comparable.

In **Table 2**, I report the results of seven logistic regression models. In the core overall Models 1-3, the dependent variable scores 1 if any of the 35 IOs is mentioned in the article and 0 otherwise. All models have the same specification, including all the controls identified above, but each uses a different key predictor of interest. In Model 1, the predictor is countries' *HDI*. In Model 2, countries' *Government effectiveness* scores are used. Finally, in Model 3, it is their *GDP per capita* (log 10). All the models show substantively identical results, so I will report on

them combined. First, across all the models, the key predictor of interest – a measure of a country’s socio-economic development – shows a strong and significant association with IO visibility. For each of these predictors, it holds that a one-standard deviation increase in the value of the predictor is associated approximately with a 10-15% decrease in the predicted probability of IO occurrence (based on exponentiated coefficients). From the controls, there is a strong association with the variable *Foreign news media coverage*, capturing the general exposure/openness of the media outlets in the country to foreign news. Finally, articles referring to IOs are significantly longer than average, as reflected in the variable *Full-text length*. Other control variable do not show significant associations with IO visibility in these model settings.

Table 2: Logistic regression results

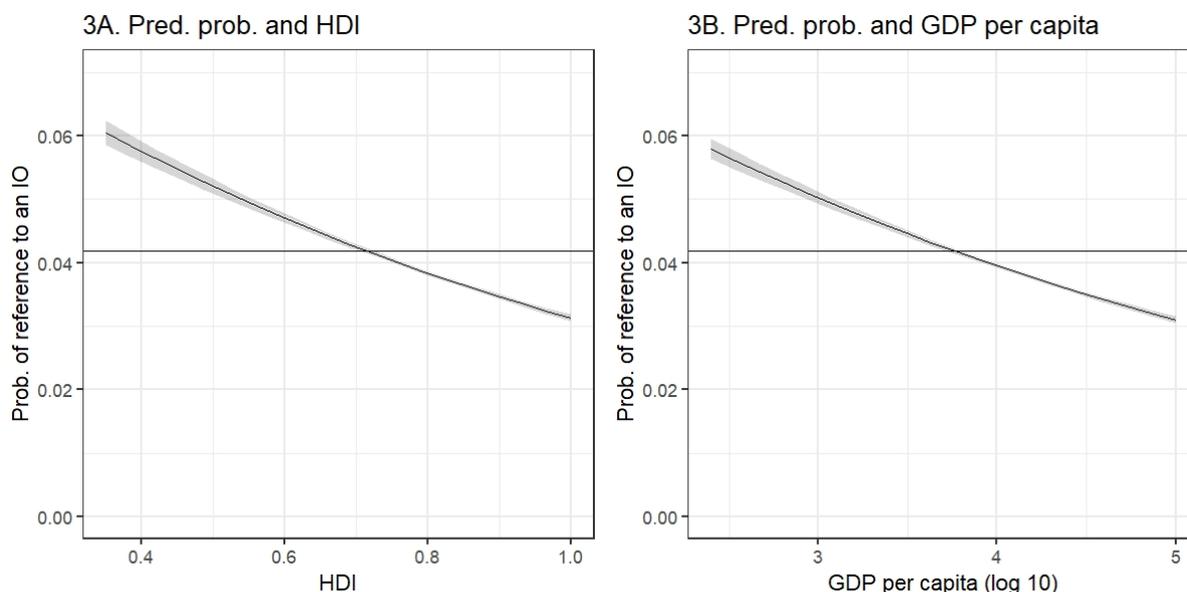
	(1)	All IOs (2)	(3)	UN (4)	WB (5)	WTO (6)	IAEA (7)
HDI (std.)	-0.130* (0.040)			-0.107* (0.038)	-0.311** (0.050)	-0.134 (0.081)	0.198 (0.247)
Government effectiveness (std.)		-0.166** (0.050)					
GDP pc (log 10) (std.)			-0.140* (0.043)				
GDP (log 10) (std.)	-0.039 (0.051)	-0.029 (0.052)	-0.033 (0.051)	-0.066 (0.056)	0.015 (0.086)	0.470** (0.132)	-0.257 (0.304)
Polity IV (std.)	-0.023 (0.034)	0.006 (0.037)	-0.024 (0.035)	-0.034 (0.028)	-0.100 (0.062)	0.001 (0.090)	-0.344 (0.212)
Foreign news media coverage (std.)	0.193** (0.055)	0.193** (0.053)	0.196** (0.055)	0.220** (0.053)	0.132 (0.075)	0.349** (0.093)	0.247 (0.175)
Outlet Alexa country rank (std.)	0.013 (0.022)	0.008 (0.021)	0.009 (0.022)	0.018 (0.024)	0.001 (0.042)	-0.064 (0.054)	-0.071 (0.175)
Fulltext length (std.)	0.413 (0.285)	0.411 (0.285)	0.412 (0.284)	0.272 (0.325)	0.030** (0.008)	0.038** (0.005)	0.028** (0.005)
English article (std.)	0.096' (0.041)	0.115* (0.041)	0.107* (0.041)	0.121' (0.048)	0.247** (0.060)	-0.018 (0.076)	0.047 (0.119)
Constant	-3.221** (0.066)	-3.224** (0.063)	-3.220** (0.065)	-3.755** (0.068)	-5.986** (0.077)	-6.454** (0.100)	-7.875** (0.135)
Observations	1,475,550	1,475,550	1,475,550	1,475,550	1,475,550	1,475,550	1,475,550
Log Likelihood	-	-	-	-	-	-	-5,612.715
Akaike Inf. Crit.	244,676.200	244,541.500	244,637.400	165,362.300	28,098.100	18,673.600	11,241.430

Note:

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

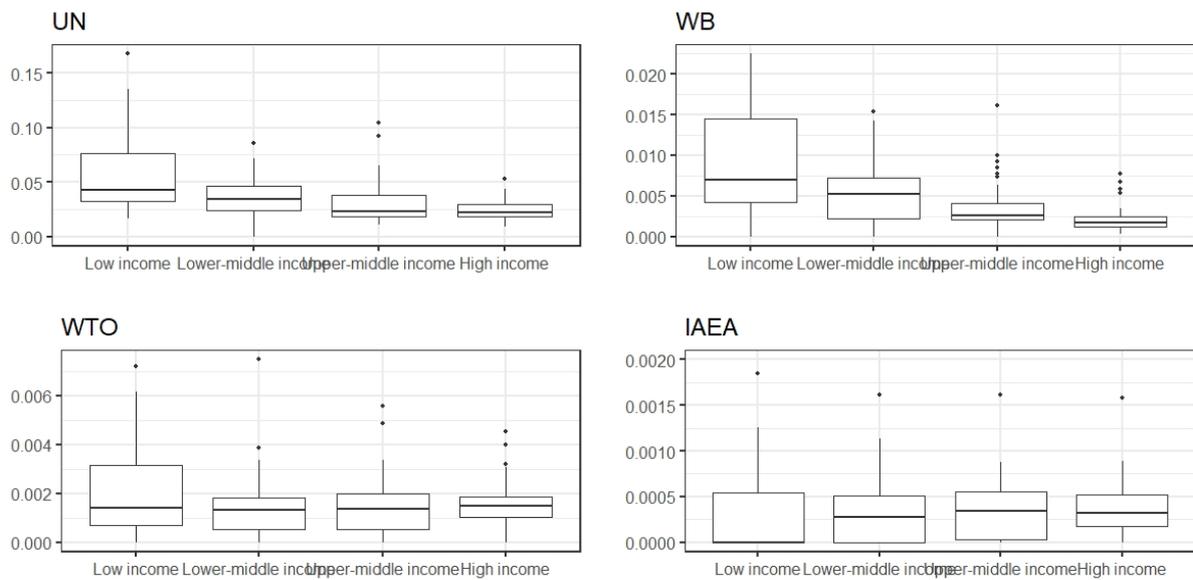
The substantive size of the effect of the predictors of interest is large. The per-unit decline of 10-15% identified above translates, across the ranges of the predictor variables, to a decline in the predicted probability of a reference to IOs from close to 6% to around 3.5%. In **Figure 3**, I plot the predicted probabilities of IO occurrence against values of countries' HDI (3A) and GDP *per capita* (log 10) (3B), extracted from Models 1 and 3. The Figure is fully in line with the descriptive insights from Figure 2 above, where countries' HDI and Government Effectiveness scores were used. When controlling for a range of factors, IOs are approximately twice as likely to occur in media in countries with low levels of socio-economic development, compared to the high-income countries.

Figure 3: Predicted probabilities given by country GDP per capita (log 10)



Models 4-7 replicate Model 1, but separately for four of the most visible individual IOs: the UN and the World Bank as primarily operational IOs, and the WTO and the IAEA as two most visible programme IOs (cf. Rittberger et al. 2019). While I would expect the theoretical framework to apply in the case of the former, for the latter two IOs, without much on-the-ground operational activity focused on the developing world, the reasoning should not necessarily apply. The results are consistent with my theorizing. All core results hold robustly for the UN and the World Bank. For the WTO and IAEA, no systematic association of visibility and HDI is detected in the regression models. The absence of the connection is also well documented in the four sets of boxplots in **Figure 4**. The top two boxplots show the strong decline in visibility for the UN and the World Bank, as we move from low-income to high-income countries. In contrast, for the WTO there is no discernible association. For the IAEA, an indication of a positive association between media values of visibility and income groups is visible in the boxplots, though results in Model 7 above show the relationship is not statistically significant. This variation across IOs captured in Models 4-7 in **Table 2** and in **Figure 4** provides further support for my theoretical reasoning and the mechanisms behind significantly higher visibility scores in low-income as compared to high-income countries.

Figure 4: Operational and programme IOs visibility across income groups



5. Conclusions

This paper presents the first preliminary results of a larger inquiry into the media visibility of IOs across a large number of countries. The results show that all the 35 IOs combined – many of which are among the most prominent IOs globally – were referred to in online media in 2018-2019 in around 4.5% of articles. By far the most visible IO is the UN, occurring in 2.7% of articles, on average. At the same time, in line with my theoretical framework synthesizing insights from media studies and IR, I find that IOs are significantly more visible in countries with low levels of socio-economic development. While the literature on the politicization of international authority may lead us to expect media visibility of IOs to be high because of their authority, the present work – and the variation across countries it identifies – indicates that visibility patterns reflect primarily IOs’ operational activity and their work ‘on-the-ground’. This is further supported by the patterns of variation across IOs. Visibility of IOs appears to be connected with their authority, but a more robust connection exists between visibility and the size of IOs’ operational activities. In line with the logic of media systems (de Wilde 2019), the degree of IO visibility seems to vary across countries and across IOs depending on how relevant IOs are to people’s everyday lives and to the countries they live in.

In the light of the growing politicization of IOs in the developed countries in recent years, these are important findings (Hooghe et al. 2019b; Keohane 2021). They suggest that a part of the reason for the backlash against global governance may be associated with the low visibility of IOs in countries in which they do not deliver tangible benefits to the populations or for which they do not appear highly relevant on everyday basis. If IOs are not systematically visible in the economically dominant countries, that to a large extent finance and staff them, their long-term legitimation in these advanced countries may face serious challenges. IOs may be increasingly associated with the global order that sustains openness and globalization. They may be seen as representing values against which much political forces has been turning over the recent years, across a large number of countries. In dealing with this challenge, IOs will need to secure higher visibility – as a necessary condition for successful legitimation – not only in lower income countries in which they operate and for the populations of which they are directly relevant, but also in the most economically advanced countries in which their work and relevance is not immediately obvious.

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7. Appendix

Table 3: List of IOs/bodies covered

IO name	IO abbr.	Source of sampling	IO classification
Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization	CTB	UN System CHEB	UN related organization
Food and Agriculture Organization	FAO	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
Global Environmental Facility/Fund	GEF	Hooghe et al 2019	global non UN
International Atomic Energy Agency	IAE	Hooghe et al 2019	UN related organization
International Bank for Reconstruction and Development	IBR	UN System CHEB	UN specialized agency
International Civil Aviation Organization	ICA	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
International Criminal Court	ICC	Hooghe et al 2019	UN related organization
International Development Association	IDA	UN System CHEB	UN specialized agency
International Finance Corporation	IFC	UN System CHEB	UN specialized agency
International Fund for Agricultural Development	IFD	UN System CHEB	UN specialized agency
International Labour Organization	ILO	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
International Monetary Fund	IMF	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
International Maritime Organization	IMO	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
International Organization for Migration	IOM	Hooghe et al 2019	UN related organization
International Criminal Police Organization	IPL	Hooghe et al 2019	global non UN
International Seabed Authority	ISA	Hooghe et al 2019	UN related organization
International Telecommunication Union	ITU	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
International Whaling Commission	IWC	Hooghe et al 2019	global non UN
Permanent Court of Arbitration	PCA	Hooghe et al 2019	global non UN
Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons	PCW	UN System CHEB	UN related organization
International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea	TLS	UN System CHEB	UN related organization
World Tourism Organization	TOU	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
United Nations Children's Fund	UCF	UN System CHEB	UN funds and programmes
United Nations Development Programme	UDP	UN System CHEB	UN funds and programmes
United Nations Environment Programme	UEP	UN System CHEB	UN funds and programmes
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	UES	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
United Nations Population Fund	UFP	UN System CHEB	UN funds and programmes
United Nations Human Settlements Programme	UHB	UN System CHEB	UN funds and programmes
United Nations Industrial Development Organization	UID	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
United Nations	UNO	Hooghe et al 2019	UN main
Universal Postal Union	UPU	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
World Customs Organization	WCO	Hooghe et al 2019	global non UN
World Food Programme	WFP	UN System CHEB	UN funds and programmes
World Health Organization	WHO	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency

World Intellectual Property Organization	WIP	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
World Meteorological Organization	WMO	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
World Bank	WOB	Hooghe et al 2019	UN specialized agency
World Trade Organization	WTO	Hooghe et al 2019	UN related organization

Table 4: IO visibility as given by authority and staff

	Counts of references to IO (log10)					
	HLM 2019	HLM 2019	HLM 2019	HLM 2019	PS 2021	Overlap HLM 2019 - PS 2021
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Authority	5.091** (1.401)	5.371*** (1.130)				1.335 (1.583)
Delegation			3.171* (1.248)			
Pooling				3.304* (1.209)		
Non-HQ support staff					0.316*** (0.079)	0.459*** (0.086)
Constant	0.404 (0.570)	0.204 (0.462)	1.551*** (0.374)	0.697 (0.645)	1.907*** (0.191)	1.227' (0.591)
Observations	25	24	25	25	19	14
R2	0.365	0.507	0.219	0.245	0.487	0.760
Adjusted R2	0.337	0.484	0.185	0.212	0.456	0.716

Note:

'p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001