

The challenge of the BRICS countries: overview of an international project

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Abstract: The challenge of the BRICS countries is an overview of an international project. First, the history and rationale of the project is shortly reviewed. Secondly, main points of the research plan submitted to the Academy of Finland in 2011 are presented with selected references of literature. Thirdly, the implementation and results are summarized with links to respective pages of the project website and with main publications.

Keywords: BRICS; Media systems; Journalists; Journalism education; South-South co-operation.

O desafio dos países BRICS: visão geral de um projeto internacional

Resumo: O desafio dos países do BRICS é uma visão geral de um projeto internacional. Primeiro, a história e a lógica do projeto são revisadas brevemente. Em segundo lugar, os principais pontos do plano de pesquisa enviado à Academia da Finlândia em 2011 são apresentados com referências selecionadas da literatura. Terceiro, a implementação e os resultados são resumidos com links para as respectivas páginas do site do projeto e com as principais publicações. **Palavras-chave:** BRICS; Sistemas de mídia; Jornalistas; Educação em jornalismo; Cooperação Sul-Sul.

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The idea for this project was born in 2010 while contemplating which proposals to submit in response to an annual call of the Academy of Finland, the main state agency for financing academic research in the country. I had already had several projects on media in Russia funded by the Academy and this time it seemed wiser to broaden the scope beyond Russia, without relinquishing that country as part of it. At this time the BRIC initiative – spearheaded by Russia and involving the continental superpowers Brazil, India and China since 2006 – was making its entry into international politics after its first summit in Yekaterinburg (Russia) in 2009. It also entered the study of international relations and provided an ideal framework for a new international project. Meanwhile, in media and communication studies, comparing media systems was a hot topic after such landmarks as Hallin and Mancini (2004) and Christians et al. (2009).

Consequently, I put together in November 2010 – in haste as usual – an application for four-year funding for a project entitled *Media Systems in Flux: Lessons from the BRIC Countries*. The partners listed were Professors Raquel Paiva (Brazil), Elena Vartanova (Russia), Bharthur Sanjay (India) and Zhengrong Hu (China). In addition to these colleagues I consulted Professor Colin Sparks (University of Westminster), who had just published an article on China's media in a comparative perspective (SPARKS, 2010). The application went through the customary assessment by an international panel and failed to gain approval for funding against fairly tough competition.

I repeated the application in the next round in 2011, trying to improve the 12-page research plan in light of the comments received. Now BRIC had been extended to include South Africa with BRICS as the new acronym. Accordingly, the project subtitle was reformulated to *The Challenge of the BRICS Countries* and Professor Herman Wasserman was added as the fifth partner. The proposed project was presented as part of the trendy tide of internationalization and de-westernization of the field (THUSSU, 2009; CURRAN; PARK, 2000). The application noted that the concept of media system remains unclear and hazy and that “a lot of homework remains to be done” This project was foreseen to be an endeavour towards accomplishing that homework.

Research plan in 2011

The 12-page research plan had its point of departure in my team's earlier research on Russia, noticing that the old way of viewing Russia as something special was no longer valid (NORDENSTRENG, 2010). An overview of the media in contemporary Russia (NORDENSTRENG; PIETILÄINEN, 2010) was presented as evidence that, despite setbacks in the transition from autocracy to democracy, the overall picture was not totally gloomy. A collection of contributions from earlier Academy research projects on media in Russia (ROSENHOLM; NORDENSTRENG; TRUBINA, 2010) provided quite a varied landscape. Indeed, the Russian media system was seen to be in flux – as is the whole country highlighted by the title of the Academy's Russia in Flux Research Programme 2004-2007.

The same flux metaphor was also applicable to the rest of Central and Eastern Europe and indeed to China. Our Swedish colleague Professor Jan Ekecrantz (2007) showed the way from examining Russia to considering China, and the link from Russia to China was also made in the epilogue of the anthology from the Academy project on Russian media in the 1990s (NORDENSTRENG; VARTANOVA; ZASSOURSKY, 2001).

Moreover, Sparks (2010) raised critical questions about the theoretical basis of comparing media systems. Like the concept of a media system, the question of comparison had also become a vital topic in media and communication studies –

at a time of global integration making nation-states increasingly problematic although by no means obsolete. Highlighting the same trend was *Comparative Media Systems: European and Global Perspectives* (DOBEK-OSTROWSKA *et al.*, 2010).

The comparative perspective of the global media landscape was high on the scholarly agenda, but most scholars approached it from a particular national or regional angle. The angle of the present project was widened from Russia, with China as a point of comparison, and to also cover Brazil, India and South Africa, opening up perspectives on the consolidation of democracy in large developing countries on different continents.

Against this background, the research objectives of the project were specified as follows:

First, the project will critically examine the *theoretical concepts* of

- a) media system
- b) role of media and journalists in democracies
- c) freedom and independence of media

by placing the BRICS countries within a global context.

Second, the project will investigate the *empirical situation* of

- a) citizen participation in and through media
- b) professional orientation of journalists
- c) education of journalists

in the BRICS countries in a comparative context.

The participation of citizens as non-professionals in and through media was noted to be a central issue in the field, as demonstrated by Nico Carpentier (2011) and Peter Dahlgren (2009). It was high on the agenda in the Western industrialized countries, both in the practice of civic journalism and in the theory of democratic media. However, it was also emerging as a hot topic in the BRICS countries along with the gradual awakening of the civil society and increasing tension between the market and the party/state interests as highlighted in the case of China by Yuezhi Zhao (1998; 2008). This topic was foreseen to be pursued in the research team by Leonardo Custodio from the Brazilian perspective, Svetlana Pasti from the Russian perspective and Peixi Xu from the Chinese perspective. India as an established democracy and South Africa as a new democracy constituted important points of comparison.

The professional orientation of journalists was a topical issue particularly under conditions of development and socio-economic transition, foreseen to be studied by Svetlana Pasti on the basis of her research on Russian journalists. The education of journalists was an issue attracting relatively much public and political attention in most countries but had not been widely studied. The BRICS countries offered a challenging case for comparative analysis in this topic, too, as shown by the example of comparisons between journalism education in South Africa and Brazil (WASSERMAN; DE BEER, 2010).

An overall hypothesis of the project suggested that the group of BRICS countries provided an intriguing platform for studying media systems, with both differences and similarities in their socio-economic development and political structures. The urgent challenge they presented concerned democracy in general and the role of media and journalism in democracy in particular.

Implementation and results 2012–

This time we were lucky in the “academic lottery” and got 600,000 € + a matching 150,000 € from my university for 48 months in 2012–16. As seen in the project website <https://research.uta.fi/brics/> the logo of the project displays the five BRICS letters in the colours of the respective national flags followed by an exclamation mark in the colours of the Finnish national flag, reminding of the country of co-ordination and financing.

The project organization was naturally built around the senior partners in the five countries – see <https://research.uta.fi/brics/members/> The launching workshop and first events in Helsinki and Moscow in November 2012 were displayed in the project website <https://research.uta.fi/brics/meetings/> while most conference presentations were placed at <https://research.uta.fi/brics/materials/> (the last few years not properly updated).

The theoretical concepts of the research objectives were elaborated by those involved in panels and papers on various occasions, notably at annual IAMCR conferences and Moscow Readings, and published in numerous articles. An overview of the media landscape and its theoretical perspectives was published in *Mapping BRICS Media* (NORDENSTRENG; THUSSU, 2015). In addition, the standing project website was built to provide comprehensive data on the media systems in the five countries <https://research.uta.fi/brics/data/> The same page also includes national reports on the surveys of journalists and journalism education institutions.

The empirical part of the project included over 700 interviews with journalists in the five BRICS countries, carried out by local teams under the co-ordination of Svetlana Pasti in Tampere. The survey yielded a picture of the professional orientation of journalists in these countries and of their role in democracy, especially using online media. The results were first published in a special issue of *African Journalism Studies* (“THE BRICS...”, 2015) and later in *Contemporary BRICS Journalism* (PASTI; RAMAPRASAD, 2018)

A separate survey was conducted on journalism education under my co-ordination. The results, published in a special section in *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* (“JOURNALISM...”, 2017), show that the BRICS countries do not constitute a separate unit on the world map but are largely governed by the same tendencies as the rest of the world, albeit with different emphases and a desire to avoid Western dominance.

The project was launched eight years ago and its final published report is forthcoming (THUSSU; NORDENSTRENG, 2020). In hindsight, the above objectives of the research plan were more or less fulfilled, except for the aspect of citizen participation, which was left without proper attention. The project was an instructive example of how comprehensive research plans are seldom fully materialized.

In general, the project demonstrated that trendy talk about media systems is misleading unless complemented by specific features of each country and a critical analysis of the media system concept itself. Although the concept could not be much clarified by the project, it was admitted to remain a useful intellectual vehicle for understanding media in society as well as the relation of media and journalism to the international system and its conflicting tendencies.

And for this understanding the BRICS coalition, which connects different continents, has proven particularly useful. It pushes us towards big meta stories and invites us to pursue reflective de-Westernization.

An important merit of the project was the simple fact that for the first time media scholars from these five countries were brought to a common platform. The project immediately showed that there had been very few contacts between media scholars in the BRICS countries – apart from those between Russia and China – and that practically no community of scholars existed across all the BRICS countries. Thus the project gave rise to a unique network of BRICS media scholars. Small Finland was pleased to have facilitated the beginning of a big topic in South-South co-operation.

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