

New World Information and Communication Order and BRICS: Legacies and relevance

Global Media and China

2018, Vol. 3(2) 113–116

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DOI: 10.1177/2059436418785029

journals.sagepub.com/home/gch



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Abstract

The role of information and communication in establishing and defining world order formed the basis of a comprehensive call for the New World Information and Communication Order. Many strategic and regional blocs of nations and economic forums have been formed over time. BRICS has made a relatively new attempt in the coming together of several politically, economically and culturally diverse countries. Their summits reflect their intention to work together. By positioning the media system, this brief article looks at the patterns of evolution since New World Information and Communication Order and the comparable aspects of media in these countries. China and India, apart from their membership in BRICS also have historical ties, issues and concerns. Connectivity, as intended in the Belt and Road Initiative, is in a bilateral sense a matter of diplomacy and negotiation. An attempt has been made to contextualise this issue as well.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative, BRICS, China, India, media system, New World Information and Communication Order

The call for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) positions communication as a key variable in international dynamics. The imbalance in information flows and structures of media and content were recognised and the so-called third world countries were described as being victims of all kinds of imperialism, including media.

Post Second World War, many countries gained their independence and embarked upon their nation-building exercise. India is one of the largest colonial territories of sub-continental size. Scholarship pertaining to colonisation and contemporary approaches to globalisation has focused on communication networks and flow of information.

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The growth and spread of the telegraph also brought a news agency system for distributing news to mass media. The colonial origins of these news agencies raised several issues and concerns leading to the articulation of a call for NWICO. This was built upon a more fundamental call for a new world economic order.

There have been alternative mechanisms to address domination, including the formation of several blocks for ideological, strategic, economic, trade and geo-political purposes. India is a part of and has participated in several such formations.

The historical reasons for this were preceded by a call for a new economic order, and there are many scholarly analyses regarding this. It also sets the context for countries such as India to examine their role and position in an international matrix and thereby evolve and respond to their national and strategic needs. Can BRICS (an acronym for an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) a formation address the common concerns of the members is a recurrent question.

The 1990s saw a shift in media reforms across several countries including India. While the emphasis is on the spread, use and access to social media, India's sustained growth in the spread of legacy media is also impressive and print media retains its relative importance.

The focus on the media system has been a dominant topic in BRICS summits and deliberations. BRICS media system study provided an opportunity to examine media in a contextual and comparative framework (Nordenstreng, 2017). It also included a focus on Journalism education. Bilateral and multilateral relations of the respective members of BRICS with each other imply a greater role for media as bridges for better realisation of the goals. Historical factors including ideological alignment and appreciation provide another framework to understand contemporary realities.

The media in India and China, apart from coverage and analysis of BRICS, are also preoccupied with bilateral issues and their respective geo-political agendas. The buildup to India's participation in the Xiamen summit reflects the positions of the countries. Therefore, positioning the Belt and Road Initiative in the discourse as an important initiative by China is yet to be factored in political and media discourses in India. The coverage as on date reflects the official positions of the two countries.

The Indian position as articulated by the spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs refers to the importance of connectivity, but with respect to issues of sovereignty and territorial dimensions. It also highlights its approach:

India shares international community's desire for enhancing physical connectivity and believes that it should bring greater economic benefits to all in an equitable and balanced manner. We are working with many countries and international institutions in support of physical and digital connectivity in our own immediate and near neighbourhood. (Spokesperson, 2017)

The media response gleaned from a few important sources while recognising the official position advocates a diplomatic and negotiated approach. *The Hindu*, for example, in its lead opinion has noted, 'on the BRI, if there is political will on both sides, they need not look too far for creative solutions around India's three concerns: on territorial integrity, transparency of projects and their sustainability' (Haider, 2018).

Indian media within the BRICS context

India and China are constantly debated and occupy considerable academic space with regard to their impending rise as important economic hubs. Correspondingly, many other issues and concerns with

respect to these countries are addressed. Media as important platforms by their sheer spread and growth are discussed. Independently, the media systems in both India and China are amenable for serious analysis. In the recent past, their leadership in BRICS has attracted the attention of the international community.

The growth and development of mass media in India is within a framework of an abiding faith in democracy frequently demonstrated by periodic elections and smooth transition in governance structures. The role of media in supporting and sustaining a democratic framework has been recognised along with the considerable use of the new and social media in the recent elections. Its effective use seemed to have played an important role in the governing polity's landslide victory.

New media in isolation and as adapted by traditional mass media and their projected role is an important variable. Print and broadcasting media have adapted to new media opportunities for content and partial revenue models. For the newspapers, ePaper and subscription-based models are important. The rise of mobile phones, albeit not smart phones, reflects the potential of mobile phones being the new platforms for dispersing media content. New media have also raised several other issues that are common to other contexts-privacy and abuse. The secular framework of the country has also been under strain with gossip and rumour going viral and exacerbating communal tensions. The state is often challenged to maintain a balance between freedom of expression and threats to maintaining law and order.

The legacy media of the press and broadcasting in both India and China have developed, at least until very recently, in the opposite direction to those in the developed world. The circulation of newspapers in the developed world has been declining for years, and in the past decade, advertising revenue has flooded on to the Internet, seldom being captured by the online editions of print newspapers. For years in China and India, newspaper circulation has been growing rapidly and advertising revenues have remained buoyant. Very recently, in both countries, circulation has faltered and the share of advertising going online has risen rapidly, albeit from a small base. In broadcasting, the number of television channels has increased. The online consumption of audio-visual media through sites like YouTube and Hulu is increasing. Subscription has long provided a mechanism for access to broadcast signals in China and, in India too, the trend is towards subscription-enabled information and entertainment services.

Advantage mainstream media for enhanced cooperation in BRICS

While the BRICS media systems are buoyant, the primacy of social media in all the countries is seen as a factor that greatly bridges the people and is seen as having a higher potential. However, there is a problem of lingua franca across BRICS. English language media is not dominant with regard to the status of legacy media in BRICS. The social media spread is correlated with prevalent language patterns and India perhaps offers a high degree of complexity. Therefore, while the potential of social media is recognised, the need for a more formal and organised media distribution is needed to address the focus embedded in BRICS formation and approach. Therefore, when China recently took the initiative of formal media addressing such issues, it made sense. Cynicism might creep in when the experience of the Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool (NANAP) or SAARC media exchange is flagged. The economic viability of the new arrangement may be stronger.

The presidium meeting of mainstream media leaders plans to develop a more practical cooperation arrangement to address four aspects:

The action plan will demonstrate our consensus in the following four aspects: to promote strategic partnership among BRICS countries, to build a fairer international communication order, to fulfil media social responsibilities and to expand exchange and cooperation among BRICS media. (Xinhua, 2017)

Social responsibility and improving the lives of people are highlighted and it revisits the development agenda rather than the often-debated issues of freedom and so on that dominated global media discourse. People-to people understanding, feel-good stories about each other and areas of cooperation can be strengthened.

Guided media agenda may not work at least in the Indian context given the shrill tones of competitive media entities and its ground reality. The examples of the respective media systems and their agendas in the South Asian context may be recalled.

Can media can play a more active role becomes a subject matter of debate. At the practical level, it is academic interactions, say for example, with media schools and incorporation of media system analysis and good practices in the curriculum. Webinars and other frequent forums for interaction may help in distilling the heat and better coverage.

For the present, it is advantage mainstream media that needs to invest in editorial and field reporting in its journalistic practices that may help bridge the language and, where, relevant the cultural dimensions. This may help the well-intentioned formation of BRICS, notwithstanding the critique about its sustained existence.

BRICS summits over several years have engaged in many areas of cooperation such as banking, trade and education. Given the varied contexts of these countries, the bridging role of media is yet to find a place as an agenda item in their discussions (Bharthur, 2016). The Presidium of Media forum initiated by Xinhua news agency may be a starter for a BRICS perspective. On the bilateral side, both China and India in the recent past have opened up several channels of communication to deal with a few vexatious issues and concerns.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Author biography

Prof Sanjay Bharthur teaches communication at the University of Hyderabad. His doctoral research was on the political economy of communication and media. His participation as the Indian member of the BRICS media system study under the aegis of the University of Tampere, Finland has allowed for gaining comparative insights. His research interests span aspects of communication and development and media system analysis.