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# THE BRICS JOURNALIST WITHIN THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF THE EARLY 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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This special issue of *African Journalism Studies* provides the first collection of articles with BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) journalists' views on their profession and practice within the changing techno-economic-political-social dynamics of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The strategy for the study was to understand these countries' media systems through the human dimension, taking a view from within, from the subjective world of the journalist-practitioners themselves. This study is the key empirical component of the international project 'Media systems in flux: The challenge of the BRICS countries, 2012–2016', funded by the Academy of Finland (<http://uta.fi/cmt/tutkimus/BRICS.html/>).

To the best of our knowledge, no study has considered the journalists of the BRICS countries together. Even recent global comparative projects, such as *The global journalist for the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (Weaver and Willnat 2012) and the first phase of the *Worlds of journalism study* (Hanitzsch et al. 2012) did not include journalists



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from all the BRICS countries. Moreover, both projects focused on traditional mainstream news media, and this did not provide a sufficient understanding of contemporary journalists and global trends in journalism in the context of the omnipresent digitalisation of their work and lives (Pasti, Ramaprasad and Ndlovu 2015, 1). Our study fills this gap; it includes journalists from all the BRICS countries as well as from digital news outlets, and adds the dimension of metro-provincial city differences (metro cities were the capital and second metropolis, while provincial cities were those removed from the capital). The choice of both types of cities was made based on their importance in the economic or geo-political development of the country, but also very importantly their diversity in terms of traits such as smaller size, geographical dispersion and regional/local flavour.

In essence, this issue of *AJS* aims to share with its readers the findings on the profession and practice of BRICS journalists, as reported by them, but also to attract attention to this still peripheral zone of comparative research. These growing economic powers, the BRICS countries, are where media and the journalism profession are on the rise, and this volume gives their journalism and journalists their due.

Within the overall purpose of presenting BRICS journalists' profession and practice, from their viewpoint, in the context of the changing dynamics of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (where applicable), the study examined opined differences and similarities between online and traditional (offline) news media and their journalists, and also compared findings between metros and provincial cities. The digitalisation of the news media in some countries and the booming growth of online news were the impetus for the online/offline comparison. Possible differences in their respective infrastructure, politico-economic power bases (Li et al. 2013) and socio-cultural influences were the reason for the metro/provincial city comparison.

Research in new media has grown since the early 1990s due to the increase of 'new media' programmes at universities and the 'mainstreaming' of new media in communication research (Lievrouw 2004). The definition of 'new media' is, however, not fixed: Lievrouw (2011, 6) notes that '[i]n everyday use, the boundaries of what people mean by new media are uncertain. By new media, do we mean the latest technical gadgets, novel forms of entertainment, sophisticated ways to find information, or (by far the most common usage) just anything having to do with the internet?' In our study, online news media were of interest and were defined as separately established, independent, Internet-based news media organisations. Some of these were born, in contrast to traditional media, without the help of media moguls or the government, often from the independent initiative of journalists and active citizens. In this independent, often personally motivated, birth of online news media around the world, the potential for a new type of journalism and journalist exists. As McQuail (2013, 172–173) has suggested, journalism will change in some

fundamental ways as a result of the digital revolution. Characteristics of online news media most relevant to the change are

the opening of access for all to online networks, in principle; the expanded possibility for producing and distributing news content; the interactive potential that differentiates the relation between sender and receiver from the traditional print or broadcast mass media situation of one-way transmission; and the multi-mediality that allows text and pictures to be mixed at will. (McQuail 2013, 172–173)

The study used ‘a *committee approach*, in which an interdisciplinary and multicultural team of individuals who have expert knowledge on the cultures, languages and research field in question jointly develop the research tools’ (Van de Vijver and Leung in Hanitzsch 2008, 101). The committee approach in our study used systematic communication with each other (via e-mail, phone, Skype, Facebook) and a series of annual seminars, in Tampere in 2012, Dublin in 2013, Hyderabad in 2014, and Montreal and Rio in 2015, as well as one upcoming in Beijing, in 2016. Available members of all national teams met in person and together formulated the research approach (qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews), the research tools (interview and sampling protocols), and the strategy and tactics of the study (time period, training interviewers, translations [where necessary]), discussed issues and planned publications.

Specifically, the interview protocol included questions on demography; working conditions, professional values and the future of journalism; organisational structures and professional solidarity; and economic changes, technological innovations including the use of social media, and political factors including freedom from government control, particularly of new technology. While the protocol provided the overall data framework, the lines of questioning using probes could differ for each interview, allowing the journalists to spend more (or less) time and to reflect (or not) on questions that were particularly relevant locally or to the journalist. This added depth and relevance to the gathered information, but naturally resulted in data that were sometimes, but not totally, topically dissimilar or differently nuanced across the interviews in the five countries.

Sampling decisions specified convenience sampling for the selection of cities, news organisations and journalists (including snowball sampling at this level) but within certain parameters. Thus, the sample would include both metro and provincial cities, and news organisations that are 1) traditional and online; 2) national and regional; 3) of different types: newspaper, magazine, radio, television, online; and 4) as applicable, private, mixed and state (government owns over 50% of their direct or indirect assets). It would include both quality (influential in public life) and popular (large audiences) news vehicles. And, it would represent journalists from various ranks, genders and ages (actual and professional age).

Additionally, the sampling frame specified 24 news outlets in each metro and 12 in each provincial city, two journalists from each outlet, and an even split between journalists from traditional and online news. Thus in each country 144 journalists would be interviewed (96 metro, 48 provincial city, 72 traditional, 72 online) for a grand total of 720 journalists from all five BRICS countries. The sampling plan was not always realised due to local circumstances in terms of the growth of online news, accessibility to (and willingness of) news outlets and journalists to participate, and other factors. Further, samples were localised to reflect critical indigenous factors. For example, in selecting news organisations, the Brazilian team defined quality news vehicles as those having the highest impact on the political agenda, whereas the South African team defined them as community media. Or, for example, in some cities of South Africa, China and India, purely online news outlets were small in number or non-existent, and thus news portals and online versions of traditional news media were included. The final sample had 729 journalists because South Africa included 150 journalists, China 146 and India 145; the split by metro and provincial city was 487 metro journalists, 242 provincial; and that between offline and online was 484 offline journalists and 245 online. The time period for data collection was December 2012 until January 2015, and teams adhered to this schedule.

The implementation of the protocol included face-to-face or phone interviews, conducted in a setting (office or café) preferred by the interviewee, but ensuring privacy. The protocol was administered in a language the interviewee was comfortable with (Portuguese, Russian, English, Bengali, Marathi, Hindi, Telugu, Urdu or Chinese). On average, interviews lasted 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted by national researchers and also trained research assistants (mostly students of journalism and mass communication). All interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed by authors, or trained coders in consultation with authors, to arrive at counts for those questions that allowed such analyses, as well as for commonalities and singular opinions, employing the technique of thematic analysis. In essence, coding was quantitative, descriptive and thematic, as applicable. Quantitative and descriptively coded data are presented as tables and themes are discussed in the text. Where required, teams received IRB permission, and requested consent from and promised confidentiality to their interviewees.

While adhering to the main purpose of profiling journalists and making comparisons, each article in this volume is somewhat idiosyncratic in the data it presents because of the nature of qualitative research, which allows probes and follows the lead of the interviewee into areas of importance to her/him, locally/nationally. Thus some articles use city headings while others use topical headings, but they all present major findings and make comparisons. There was also a practical reason for this difference; while the teams worked in tandem, they decided what the best presentation format was depending upon the distribution of data collection,

responsibility by city, and the consequent familiarity with the details (either city-wise or thematically).

The local/national foci reflected in this volume's articles are particularistic. In Brazil, the authors focused on the profession of journalism in online and traditional news media, considering both the history of political clientelism and the contemporary predominance of a market-oriented mindset. In Russia, the focus was on the conflict between the non-free traditional media and the freedom of the Internet, especially in light of the recent political protests and the 2011–2012 rise of the 'snow revolution', wherein online news along with social networks played an important role. In India, the spotlight was on the increasing corporate role in news and the concomitant political inroads into media ownership, as well as the huge growth of news media in general – but not of independent online news outlets. In China, the authors focused on the dynamics in contemporary journalism when digital transformation met the commercialised government-dominated media, creating contradictions and social change. In South Africa, highlighted issues related to the changing social/demographic profile of journalists as newsrooms begin to reflect some gender and racial balance; the job insecurity of journalists; a perceived narrowing of the democratic space for the media; and growth in the use of social media and in digital journalism.

This volume presents articles in order of the BRICS acronym. The collection begins with Brazil, South America's biggest country. The authors Raquel Paiva, Márcio Guerra and Leonardo Custódio use the results of the BRICS study to present an analysis of the political, social, economic and cultural aspects of Brazil as a context for journalism as a profession. The article tackles issues of generation and professional experience, degrees, work stability and income, the role of unions, the influence of gender, ethics in media regulation and the impact of the popularisation of the Internet on the profession. In balancing the data with contextual information, the authors present a rich introduction to the status of journalism in Brazil. One of the results indicates that despite the innovations and possibilities opened up by the Internet, traditional news media are still considered very prestigious. Considering that most respondents were under 40 years of age, this opinion is an intriguing paradox.

The second article, following Brazil, is on Russia. Its authors, Svetlana Pasti, Dmitry Gavra and Maria Anikina, clarify differences between the new online and the old traditional media in the context of the increasing importance in public life of the Internet and independent online news outlets, as was evident in the political protests of 2011–2012. Exploring differences in the occupational structure and political values of journalists in four Russian cities, the authors conclude that journalists from the two types of media are more similar than they are different, with regard to the study's parameters. However, the authors do indicate a fundamental difference between the two, which derives from 1) the commitment of the online

media to the political independence of the profession (many journalists have gone online because of censorship in traditional media, which is dependent on the state and/or capital); 2) their frugality, rationality and innovativeness given the lack of government subsidies; and 3) their integration with social media. These online news media characteristics can enable them to grow into an alternative to the old order of things, with the potential to democratise the news media system from within.

The article on India, by Jyotika Ramaprasad, Nagamallika Gudipaty and Ravindra Kumar Vemula, is third in order. It is particularly focused on the current dynamics in India's news media ecology as articulated by the interviewees: privatisation, corporatisation, 'politicalisation', feminisation, regionalisation, language diversity, and tremendous news media growth, but a paucity of independent online news outlets due to an Internet penetration of only 19 per cent. While smartphones have contributed immensely to Internet penetration and are increasingly being used for news access, and social media are becoming audience access points and journalists' sources, it is still the traditional news media that carry prestige. The growth of traditional media comes from a rise in local language news media which have a wider circulation than English-language news outlets. While the feminisation of the profession is bringing new talent and gender equality to the table, privatisation has led to corporate values of profit-making and to politicians owning news media. These factors are of considerable concern to Indian journalists for their impact on the veracity of the news they are sending into the public sphere.

The China article, authored by Ruiming Zhou, Yu Xu and Xianzhi Li, is the fourth in this collection. It presents an understanding of the changes and contradictions in contemporary journalism when digital transformation meets commercialised, government-dominated media. The authors summarise the social profiles, work conditions, political values and professional orientations of both traditional and online journalists, and examine how individual differences are related to the organisational form and geographical location of the media. Although several differences exist, the results indicate consensus on the roles as well as the functions of journalism. Even though a number of new media institutions are funded by private capital today, 'guiding [the] opinion' – in which the Chinese Communist Party asks journalists to help form opinions, much like Western-style analysts – is widely accepted.

The fifth and final article is about South Africa's journalists. Written by Musawenkosi W. Ndlovu, it points to the dangers for the journalistic community posed by the narrowing democratic space, the financial instability of media institutions/markets and job insecurity of journalists themselves. Also, the article points out that, because of the country's population dynamics that influence news reception, the already dominant traditional journalism (particularly broadcast journalism) will continue to co-exist with growing digital journalism media for a very long time. Digital journalism is not only growing, but is also becoming far more interpretive and opinionated.

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