



Deconstructing the BRICS

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This article questions the utility of considering Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa as a single grouping—the BRICS. Not only are there at least as many differences between the countries' economies and media as there are similarities, but many of their characteristic features are shared with a much wider range of societies. The scale and rates of growth of the five economies are very different. Politically, they range from a long-established democracy to an equally long-established one-party state. They all have high levels of corruption, including of journalists, but estimates of the degree of media freedom and the degree to which journalists are jailed or murdered vary widely. Overall, there is little to warrant considering these countries as a homogenous bloc. Of these countries, China is by far the largest and the only one that is today a serious challenger to Western domination.

Introduction

The collective term BRIC, used for the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, and China and extended to BRICS in 2010 to include South Africa, has been wildly successful.¹ First coined in 2001 by Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs, it has penetrated economics, journalism, and the academy, and even developed into a formal group of the five countries' leaders that has met yearly since 2009 and issued public statements. This article aims to investigate how substantive this grouping is as an analytic category, particularly with regard to these countries' media.

The context of the term is clearly important. The shape of the world economy is unquestionably shifting, as is the global political and military balance in consequence. The old domination of the West is passing, and with it the more or less politely disguised looting and coercion that have been its unlovely foundations. However, it is another, very large step from recognizing that this epochal shift is under way to arguing that it can best be understood as the emergence of a particular group of countries that can, in

¹ There are less influential alternatives: the OECD, for example, uses the term BIICS, deleting Russia and inserting Indonesia (OECD, 2010).

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any useful sense, be considered as a single type of economy, still less a single type of society with a single type of media.

The grouping is certainly a political and diplomatic reality, united by some common aspirations and substantial trade flows. Closer examination, however, reveals not only well-known tensions between some of its leading members but also quite substantial differences in the scale and dynamics of the economies in question. An even closer look at their main social and political structures, and particularly at the nature of the media and of their relationships to social and economic power, reveals differences so large as to call into question the utility of trying to see them as anything other than a somewhat ad hoc grouping of governments that are at least as different as they are similar. Moreover, the factors they do have in common are seldom exclusive to the group itself, but are rather more general features of a broad range of societies.

This article therefore begins with a brief rehearsal of some of the economic realities that have forced the BRICS to the attention of the western world before moving on to consider the relationships between their media and other centers of economic and political power. Throughout, the discussion draws comparisons with both other developing countries and those of the developed world, notably the United States (USA) as the largest economy and richest media system in the world today. It concludes that there is little basis for considering the BRICS either a unique or a coherent grouping in the developing world, and that there are other, more illuminating ways, to analyze the shift in the balance of world power.

Economic Scale and Rates of Growth

The most obvious fact concerning the economic scale of the BRICS is that they vary greatly in size. As Figure 1 demonstrates, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Chinese economy is, at purchasing power parity (PPP), more than 2.5 times larger than India's, nearly 5 times larger than Brazil's or Russia's, and more than 20 times the size of South Africa's. In fact, in 2010, the size of China's economy, at 75% of that of the United States, was closer to that of the world leader than to any of its fellow BRICS. A similar picture of China far outstripping the other countries emerges for share of global GDP at PPP. Of the five, only China and Russia are net exporters, and while in China's case the surplus is largely generated through manufactured goods, Russia's exports are predominantly hydrocarbons (International Monetary Fund, 2012).

Such a static picture might be seen as misleading: after all, the expansion and contraction of economies is a constant reality in the contemporary world. Figure 2 presents the IMF's projections for the future size of the BRICS and U.S. economies at PPP. Note that from 2012 onward, these are *projections*, and that there are strong historical reasons to expect major revisions to the figures in the future. All these figures are subject to the unpredictable rhythms of the world trade cycle, which are highly unlikely to have a uniform effect across all six countries under review.

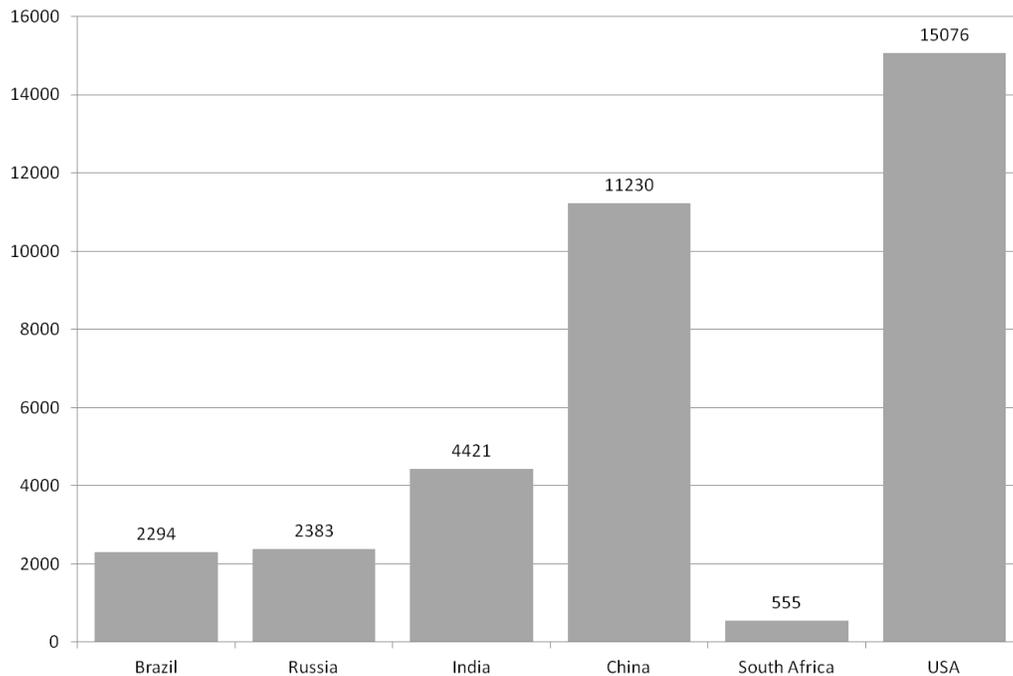


Figure 1. 2011 Gross Domestic Products in US\$bn at PPP.

Source: IMF World Economic Outlook Database.

For example, recent movements in the price of natural gas might significantly reduce estimates of growth rates for Russia. Powerful arguments, considered below, contend that internal factors may negatively impact Chinese growth. Nevertheless, these figures are the closest we have to “official” estimates of future growth, and the pattern predicted here does not differ drastically from the historical trends provided by the World Bank for 2008–2012 (World Bank, 2013).²

² The figures for average annual growth given by the World Bank are as follows: Brazil 1.8%; Russian Federation 4.8%; India 5.4%; China 8.8%; South Africa 1.9%; USA 1.0%. These figures are for percentage rise in GDP measured in local currencies and therefore are not directly comparable with results given in Figure 2. Nevertheless, they present a similar overall picture: according to both institutions, China has grown and will grow much more rapidly than any of the other countries.

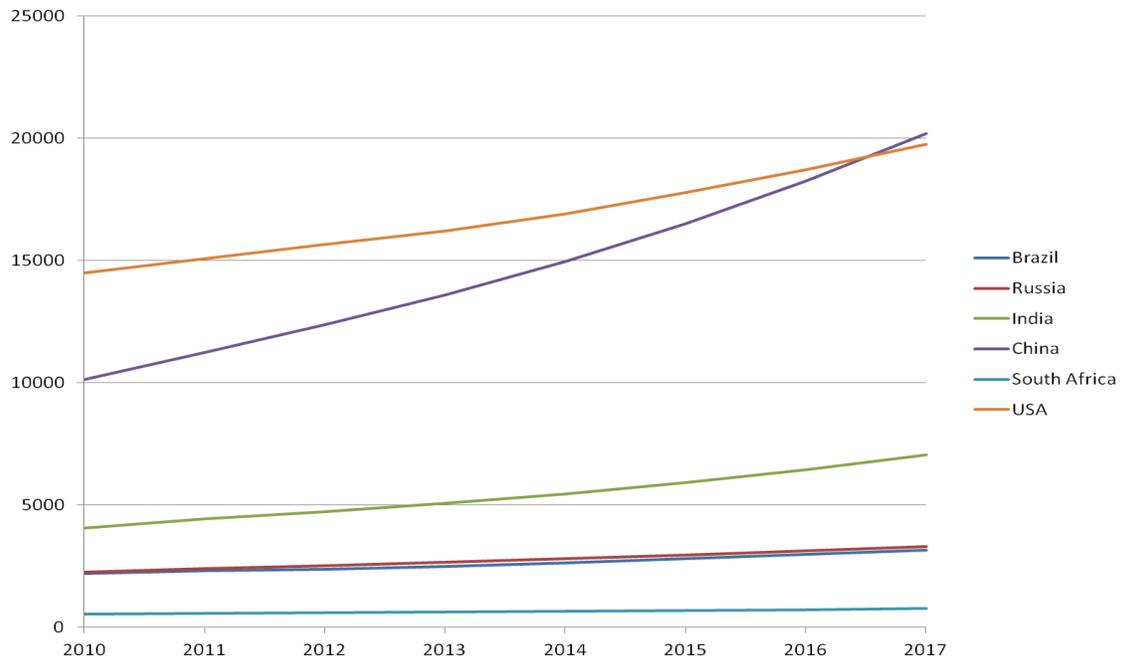


Figure 2. Projected growth of GDPs in US\$bn at PPP.

Source: IMF World Economic Outlook Database.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Figure 2 is the prediction that, in PPP terms, the Chinese economy will be larger than the USA's by 2017, but the concern here is with the projected rates of growth rather than absolute figures. As Table 1 shows, while all of the economies will grow significantly, China will grow more rapidly than any of the other countries, with its economy 99% larger in 2017 than in 2010. The USA is projected to have the slowest growth of all six economies considered here, but its starting base is so much higher that the absolute gap between the size of its economy and that of the other four BRICS will actually increase. China aside, the growth rates projected for the other four countries are not, in fact, exceptionally high. During the same period, for example, Indonesia is projected to grow by 70%, Vietnam by 74%, Malaysia by 57%, and Thailand by 52% (International Monetary Fund, 2012). All these developing economies are already larger than that of South Africa, so it is difficult to see any rational basis, at least in terms of economic scale or pace of growth, for including the latter in the BRICS grouping rather than any of the others.

**Table 1. Projected Percentage Growth 2010–2017
and Absolute Gap with USA in US\$bn at PPP.**

| | Brazil | Russia | India | China | South Africa | USA |
|----------|--------|--------|-------|-------|--------------|-----|
| Growth | 44% | 47% | 74% | 99% | 44% | 36% |
| Gap 2010 | 12312 | 12262 | 10448 | 4371 | 13972 | -- |
| Gap 2017 | 16600 | 16449 | 12703 | -453 | 18985 | -- |

Source: IMF World Economic Outlook Database.

From the point of view of scale and growth, then, the concept of BRICS is of little utility. Wide divergence within this group is identifiable with regard to the balance between extractive and manufacturing development, to current size, and to past and projected growth rates. One could easily construct other groups, perhaps with less catchy acronyms, to better capture the economic dynamic of the “rise of the rest.”

Wealth and Poverty

Upon consideration of how these economic fruits are distributed amongst the populations of the respective countries, one finds much greater similarities, albeit ones hardly unique to the BRICS. As Figure 3 demonstrates, these are all relatively poor countries.³ In fact, the distribution of per capita income per country differs greatly from that of the actual scale of the economies. The two giant developing economies are much poorer per head than are the three much smaller BRICS; their relatively large absolute GDPs are a function of their being considerably more populous than the others. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Russia (more correctly, the Russian Federation) and Brazil are classified as having a “high” level of human development, while South Africa, India, and China fall into the category of “medium” human development (United Nations Development Programme, 2011, pp. 127–129).

³ Figure 3 and the subsequent Table 2 use a different “official” source than the earlier exhibits; namely, the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) *Human Development Report 2011*. Table 2, in addition, uses a series taken from the World Bank’s Poverty and Inequality Database. As is evident from the patchiness of the figures, gathering this kind of data is not a priority. Discrepancies between different sets of figures are inevitable, but so far as is possible each series has one source, and any problems are noted.

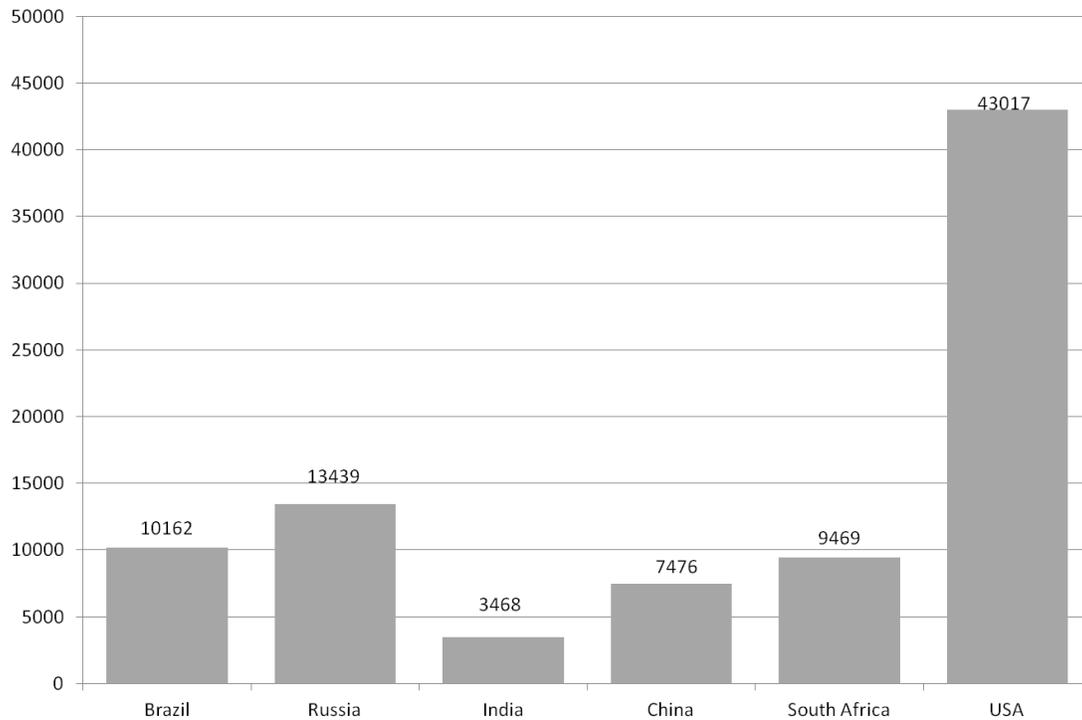


Figure 3. 2011 per capita Gross National Income in 2005 US\$ at PPP.

One area where the BRICS do display a higher degree of convergence is the way in which the limited available per capita income is distributed: they all tend to be unequal societies. Using the "Gini coefficient," a simple but very widely used measure of economic inequality in a society, Table 2 shows two sets of figures that demonstrate the relative degrees of inequality.⁴ To give some perspective on this measure, a few other countries are included for comparison. Conventional wisdom has it that a Gini coefficient of more than 40 (sometimes written as 0.4) signifies a society where economic inequality has reached levels that may be expected to provoke social unrest and, by this measure, of the BRICS only India has an income distribution below the threshold. These figures place South Africa and Brazil among the most unequal societies in the world, while China and Russia fall into the same category of high inequality as the USA and Hong Kong.

⁴ There is no figure for Japan from the UNDP report. There is considerable evidence that the World Bank figure underestimates current inequality in Japan (Yamada, 2012).

Table 2. Estimated Gini Income Coefficients.

| Country | UNDP 2000-2011 | World Bank (most recent) |
|--------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| Brazil | 53.9 | 54.7 (2009) |
| Russia | 42.3 | 40.1 (2009) |
| India | 36.8 | 33.4 (2005) |
| China | 41.5 | 42.5 (2005) |
| South Africa | 57.8 | 63.1 (2006) |
| USA | 40.8 | 40.8 (2000) |
| Hong Kong | 43.4 | 43.4 (1996) |
| Sweden | 25.0 | 25.0 (2000) |
| Japan | — | 24.9 (1993) |

Source: United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report 2011; World Bank Poverty and Inequality Database.

In fact, there is evidence that these figures paint too rosy a picture of the level of inequality, at least in the case of China. Official figures have the Gini coefficient peaking at 0.491 in 2008 and falling to 0.474 in 2011, but credible unofficial estimates put it as high as 0.61, in a grouping with Brazil and South Africa (Agence France Presse, 2013; Holland, 2012). Again, however, these groupings are not exclusive to the BRICS, as numerous other societies in the world also face rampant inequality. Basing groupings on a combination of geographical and cultural proximity, for example, Brazil would be alongside, although rather more unequal than, Argentina (0.458), Uruguay (0.424), Chile (0.521), and Mexico (0.517) as well as several other Latin American countries. Alternatively, Thailand (0.536) could be placed alongside China, while Indonesia and Vietnam have distributions quite similar to India's (United Nations Development Programme, 2011, pp. 135–137). The BRICS are unequal societies, and some are extraordinarily unequal, but this factor does not single them out as a unique, coherent group.

Many of the commonplace explanations given for these figures, notably in the case of China, do not stand up to even cursory scrutiny, as the additional figures in the table demonstrate. The very high degree of inequality in China cannot be attributed to some supposed "East Asian" social model, since Japan is unquestionably both an East Asian society and significantly more equal than China. Neither is it ascribable to the very real imperfections of the Chinese version of capitalism (rampant corruption,

persistent state intervention, extreme exploitation of workers and peasants, etc.), since it is, in longer-term figures, in the same category as the USA and Hong Kong, the latter of which is regularly praised by none other than the Heritage Foundation as “the freest economy in the world” (Lau, 2013).⁵ Political perspectives do not seem a satisfactory explanation either: China and the USA have rather different political systems but similar levels of inequality, and Sweden, the social democratic paradise incarnate, has a low level of inequality similar to that of Japan, which has been ruled by a rightist party for most of the last 60 years.

Severe income inequality is one aspect of a more general feature of the BRICS (and many other developing economies). A relatively small proportion of the population enjoys approximately the same standard of living, and opportunities to purchase luxury goods, as do denizens of the advanced world, while a large proportion of the population lives in very serious poverty. These disparities—which are sometimes not obvious to the visitor who is met at the airport by charming, fluent, English speakers, often respectful former students, and whisked in a smart car from airport to hotel to delicious dinner to well-equipped university campus and back to the airport—are one aspect of what is often called the “combined and uneven development” of these economies. Alongside modern production and consumption, and essential to its functioning, older forms of production and consumption continue to thrive.

In sum, then, the evidence from measures of income and inequality suggests that whereas all of the BRICS are relatively poor (they are, after all, developing countries) and very unequal countries, these elements are neither unique nor sufficiently proximate to form the basis for a grouping clearly distinguished from other poor and developing countries marked by economic inequality.

Poverty, Inequality, and the Media

A major factor influencing the shape of the media in any given country is the source and scale of available revenues, which relate directly to the economic factors considered above. The primary forms of commercial revenue available to the media are advertising and subscription. The former was historically the major source of support in market economies, but various forms of subscription are of increasing importance in the developed world, at least for television. For both sources, the scale of the economy as a whole, the level of per capita income, and the distribution of that income are significant factors.

In the case of the BRICS, all the major media depend primarily on commercial revenues, particularly advertising income, which invariably relates, albeit indirectly, to the scale and structure of an economy. Figure 4 displays figures for advertising spending (adspend) across the BRICS and the USA. China has overtaken Brazil with the largest adspend of any of the BRICS, but its total is still 5 times less than the USA’s, though China’s economy as a whole is 75% of the size.⁶ In fact, all the BRICS countries’

⁵ Like China (and the USA), Hong Kong’s Gini coefficient has been increasing. According to the city’s Census and Statistics Department, it reached 0.537 in 2011 (Chong & Lee, 2012).

⁶ In fairness, it should be pointed out that the figures for advertising in Figures 4 and 5, which are the only ones readily available, are in U.S. dollars, while the figures for GDP used in Figures 1, 2 and 3, and in

advertising industries are proportionately smaller, compared to the USA, than are their economies. This is evidence of immature advertising industries, which in all the BRICS nonetheless experienced relatively rapid expansion during the decade 2001–2011 in contrast with the USA, whose industry contracted 15% in constant dollar terms over the period. Of course, the choice of dates means that the U.S. figures reflect sharp cyclical movements in the economy that had a major impact on advertising revenues, but were not present in the Chinese case. However, even according to these figures, which tend to overstate the rate of convergence, only in the mid-2030s will advertising expenditure in China surpass that in the USA (World Advertising Research Centre, 2013).

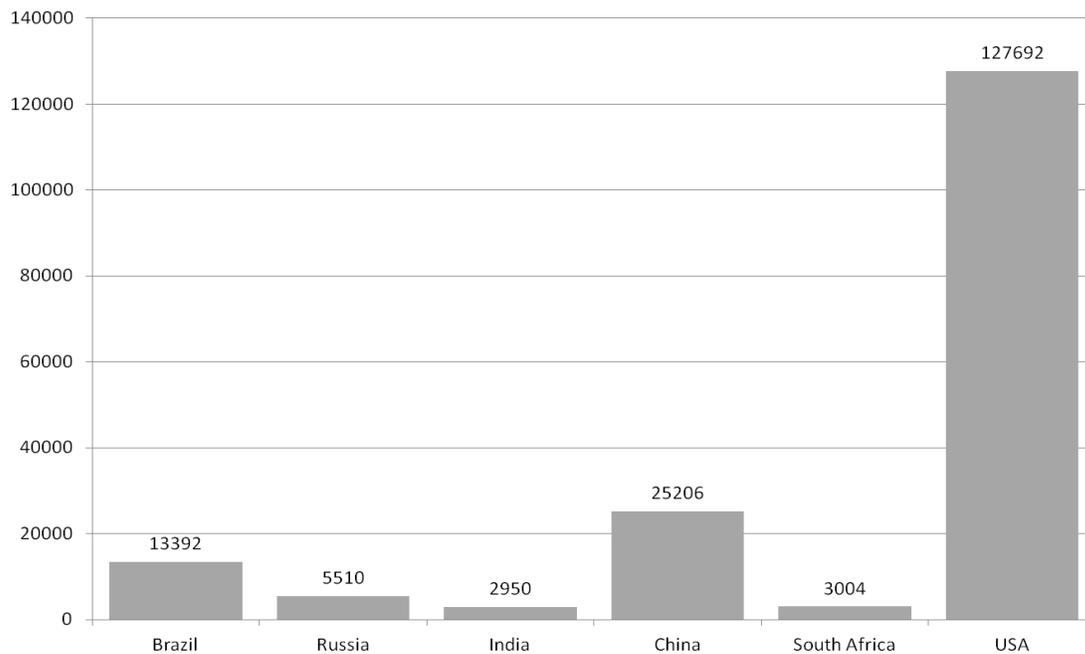


Figure 4. Adspend in 2011 at constant 2005 \$USm.

Source: World Advertising Research Centre.

The second important way the overall economic structure of the BRICS affects advertising revenues is through the distribution of disposable income. As we saw above, the BRICS are all relatively poor countries, so the figures given in Figure 5 are hardly surprising. What is, however, notable is that the figures for China and India are very low indeed: The USA's per capita adspend is 20 times larger than that of China and more than 100 times greater than India's. Across all the BRICS, however, the relatively low per capita adspend, combined with very high levels of income inequality, means that what advertising

Table 1, are at PPP. Exchange rate effects probably exaggerate the differences between China and the U.S. for advertising expenditure.

expenditure there is will likely be highly concentrated amongst the relatively small number of people who enjoy higher incomes.

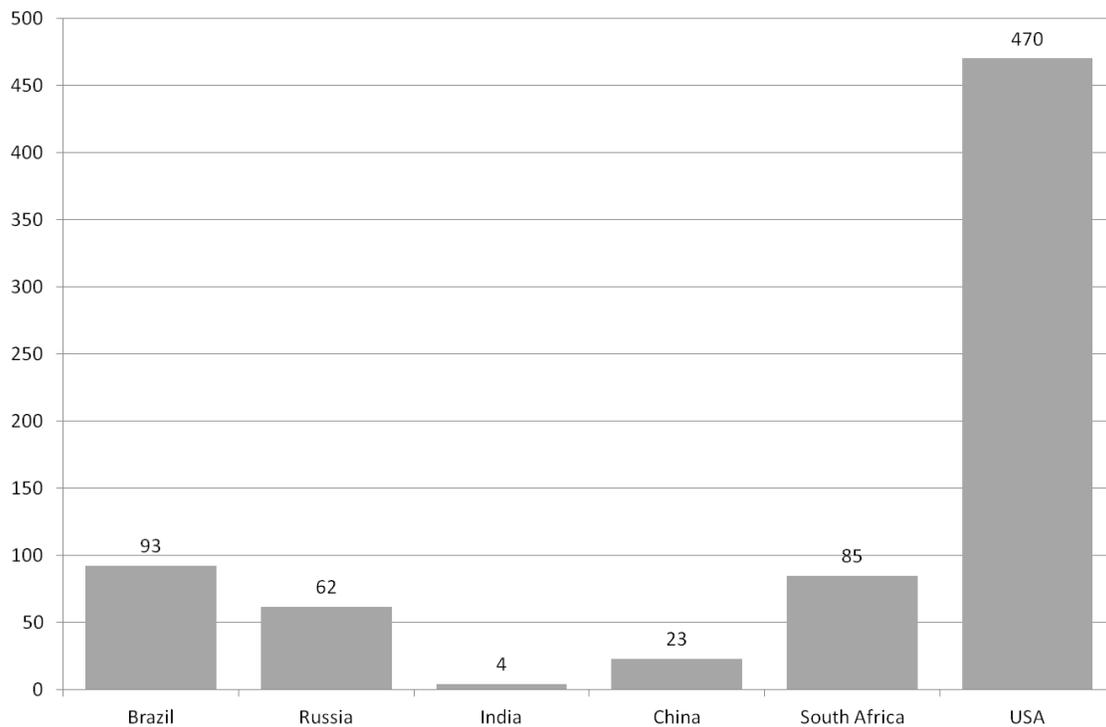


Figure 5. Per capita adspend in \$US in 2011.

Source: World Advertising Research Centre.

These characteristics are neither distinctive of the BRICS nor supportive of the claim that they are a unique grouping, as the same features appear in many other developing countries. They do, however, have three important consequences for the media. In the first place, although the media in some of these countries can command relatively large audiences, they are not on average very rich, and consequently the producers do not enjoy access to the very substantial financial resources that underlie the success of the U.S. cultural industries. The economies of scale enjoyed by the latter are not due solely to the large size of their domestic market, but to its being both large and rich: high production values can be discounted across an audience that is, in absolute terms, very much smaller than that available to, for example, Indian or Chinese media. Second, size of the population and the distribution of incomes, and thus of likely adspend, mean that even though media in these countries that address a mass audience must operate with financial resources that are scant compared to those available in the USA, those that

address an elite audience are in a much more equal position. Third, because of the low income of the mass of the population, the shift from advertising support to subscription as a major source of revenue is likely to be restricted to those media addressing the same elite audiences. Even more than is the case in the advanced world, the overall media market is likely to be polarized between generic material that reaches a relatively poor mass audience and a much more diversified media serving niches within the wealthy elite. Combined and uneven development is part of the pattern of the media as much as of the broader economy.

Political Power and the Media

If it is difficult to find compelling reasons for singling out the five members of the BRICS as having unique characteristics either in their economies generally or in basic media economics, it is even more difficult to find distinctive features of the relationship between the media and political power, broadly conceived. Forms of government differ widely. Despite its obvious limitations, India is a long-established political democracy that, since 1947, has only been interrupted for 21 months (June 1975–March 1977). China, on the other hand, remains a state where power has been exclusively and uninterrupted in the hands of the Communist Party since 1949. Although different factions of the party have sometimes engaged in struggles, notably the Cultural Revolution and on a smaller scale the Bo Xilai debacle in 2012, the struggles have always been within the party and have never resulted in a substantial shift in the group monopolizing political power. Even the great challenge of 1989, which certainly had the potential to transform the political system, resulted in the victory of the party's conservative wing over both its inner-party opponents and the popular movement. Brazil is today a democracy that emerged from its most recent period of military rule in a long, contested process beginning in the 1980s. South Africa emerged from apartheid and became a democracy in 1994. Russia was unquestionably ruled by the Communist Party until 1991, and how democratic the subsequent chaotic years actually were remains questionable. Certainly, since the mid-1990s, the state has been increasingly authoritarian. Thus there is no apparent common political pattern among the BRICS, at least at the level of the formal arrangements of power.

Despite these substantial differences, in all cases there is strong evidence of interchange between political, economic, and media power at other levels. This finds its most obvious expression in the high levels of corruption present in all of the countries, although once again this is hardly unique to the BRICS. Figure 6 presents data from a well-respected but unofficial source in which a high score represents a low level of corruption. These indices refer only to perceived corruption in the public sector, but they illustrate the degree to which it pervades these societies. This generalized corruption finds a reflection in the media: common terms for journalists receiving what are in effect bribes include "red envelope journalism" (China), "brown envelope journalism" (South Africa) and "paid journalism" (India).⁷

⁷ The official term in China, Professor Zhao informs me, is *youchang xinwen*, which is best translated as "paid journalism." "Red-envelope journalism" is the more popular term. If a phenomenon has both an official and unofficial terminology, it is probably rather pervasive.

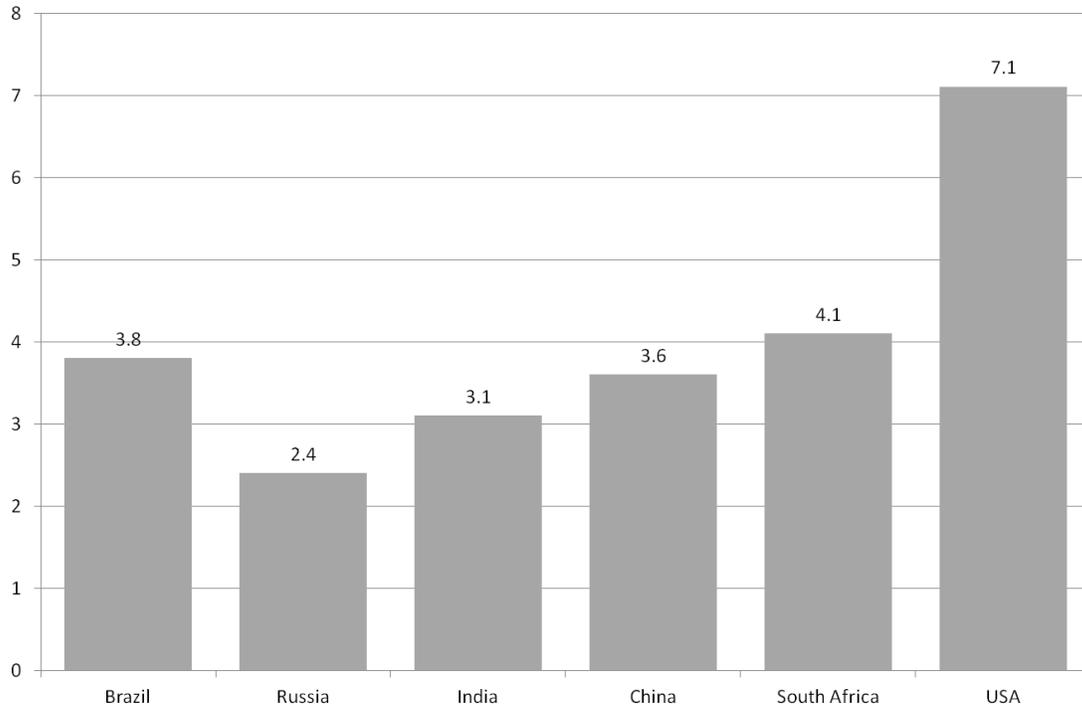


Figure 6. A rough measure of corruption.

Source: Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2011.

Rather more nebulous, but equally important, is the relationship between political power and media ownership. In the Chinese case, there is little question but that the party-state owns all the legal media and controls them very closely. Furthermore, the people who run the media are appointed and removed at the whim of the party. In Brazil, the direct benefits of close ties between the media and the ruling groups have long been evident, and the restructuring of media ownership in South Africa and Russia has, in different ways, depended upon political interventions. Overall, on the spectrum of the links between political, economic, and media power—which ranges from societies like the USA, in which they are relatively indirect and informal, to China or North Korea, where they are direct and formal—India lies closer to the USA while South Africa, Brazil, and Russia are in different degrees closer to China, a positioning they share with large numbers of other developing countries.

All of the BRICS are societies marked by relatively high levels of violence, perpetrated by both individual citizens and the state apparatuses. Even democratic India is engaged in a range of internal armed conflicts with disaffected peasants and minority ethnic and religious groups. In all the other countries, clashes, sometimes armed and often fatal, between sections of the citizenry and the police and

army are unfortunately quite common. Predictably, the situation of journalists working in societies with these kinds of economic and political conflicts differs in important respects from that of their counterparts in most of the developed world. Table 3 quantifies some of the harm personally suffered by journalists in a range of countries.

Table 3. Persecution of Journalists in Selected Countries.

| Country | Imprisoned Journalists 2012 | Confirmed Murders of Journalists 1992–2012 |
|--------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Brazil | 0 | 24 |
| Russia | 0 | 54 |
| India | 2 | 29 |
| China | 32 | 2 |
| South Africa | 0 | 3 |
| USA | 0 | 5 |
| Finland | 0 | 0 |

Source: Committee to Protect Journalists.

Among these countries, China stands out as the one where the imprisonment of journalists is by far the most common. Worldwide in 2012, in absolute terms, only Turkey, with 49 in jail, had more imprisoned journalists than China. Controlled for size of population, countries like Eritrea (28 in jail) have worse records, but on this measure journalists are far more likely to end up in prison in China than in the other BRICS. On the other hand, regarding what the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) considers directly work-related deaths of journalists, Brazil, Russia and India stand out as particularly dangerous societies.⁸ China and South Africa, on this measure, are closer to the USA, although it should be noted

⁸ The formal definition reads:

We consider a case “confirmed” only if we are reasonably certain that a journalist was murdered in direct reprisal for his or her work; was killed in crossfire during combat situations; or was killed while carrying out a dangerous assignment such as coverage of

that the three killings in South Africa all date from 1992–1994. No journalists have been killed since the end of the apartheid regime, and none are in jail today, placing that country in the same very safe category as Finland and the other Nordic countries. Once again, the BRICS neither fall into a single group nor distinguish themselves from many other countries. Four of the countries can be placed in the large group of states where journalists are likely to suffer persecution, either through being killed or jailed, but in South Africa today, journalists can operate without these threats.

“Press freedom,” a much more nebulous concept, is clearly open to ideological manipulation. Several well-known attempts are under way to measure the degree of press freedom around the world, but none are readily acceptable as reliable and impartial. Figure 7, in which a higher score equates with less media freedom, compares the estimates of the two best known: those by Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) and Freedom House (FH). The scales and absolute measures differ to an extent that demonstrates how relatively unreliable they are as precise indicators.⁹

Notwithstanding their different methodologies, both organizations rate four of the BRICS rather poorly, making similar relative judgments about restrictions on their media: China is the most restrictive in both estimates, followed in order by Russia, India, Brazil, and South Africa. The most remarkable feature of the two estimates is the difference between their respective estimates of South Africa relative to the USA, but whatever conclusion one draws about this, on both measures the former has the freest media of all BRICS countries, although only in FH’s view is it closely followed by India.¹⁰ The overall picture is one of a wide range in the degree of press freedom in the BRICS; one pessimistic estimate

a street protest. Our database does not include journalists killed in accidents such as car or plane crashes. (CPJ, 2012)

Other cases still under investigation that the CPJ considers possibly linked to professional issues number 8 in Brazil, 24 in Russia, 19 in India, and 3 in China. In South Africa there are none; in the USA, 1; and in Finland none. Other news workers, including “translators, drivers, guards, fixers, and administrative workers” have been killed in similar circumstances, but the CPJ has collected these figures only since 2003 (CPJ, 2012). In the countries reported here, only India has cases (3) in the “confirmed” category.

⁹ Not only do the two have different ranges of results, but the RSF scale includes, bizarrely, a negative element for the countries they judge as freest (which are, of course, mostly Nordic). The objectivity and independence of FH’s judgments have sometimes been called into question, e.g., by Hermann and Chomsky (2008, p. 26).

¹⁰ Perhaps understandably, FH rates the USA higher than does its Paris-based counterpart, but they certainly differ markedly in their estimate for South Africa: RSF ranks it 42nd in the world, 5 places above the USA, whereas FH places it 72nd, 57 places behind the USA’s 17th-ranked spot (Reporters Sans Frontières/Reporters Without Borders, 2012; Freedom House, 2012). Although RSF judges South Africa to be declining in standing, it also judges the USA to be declining, and rather more rapidly. Perhaps the timing of the respective surveys and estimates of the likely outcomes of current events explain these discrepancies. Alarming developments in South Africa are certainly threatening to increase government influence over the media. At the time of writing, the press is still strongly resisting them and their success is uncertain (Krüger, 2013).

describes them as “partly free” at best. Again, this tendency toward less freedom is hardly a unique characteristic of the BRICS: In FH’s judgment 73, countries have freer media than South Africa, but another 123, including Italy, have less media freedom (FH, 2012).

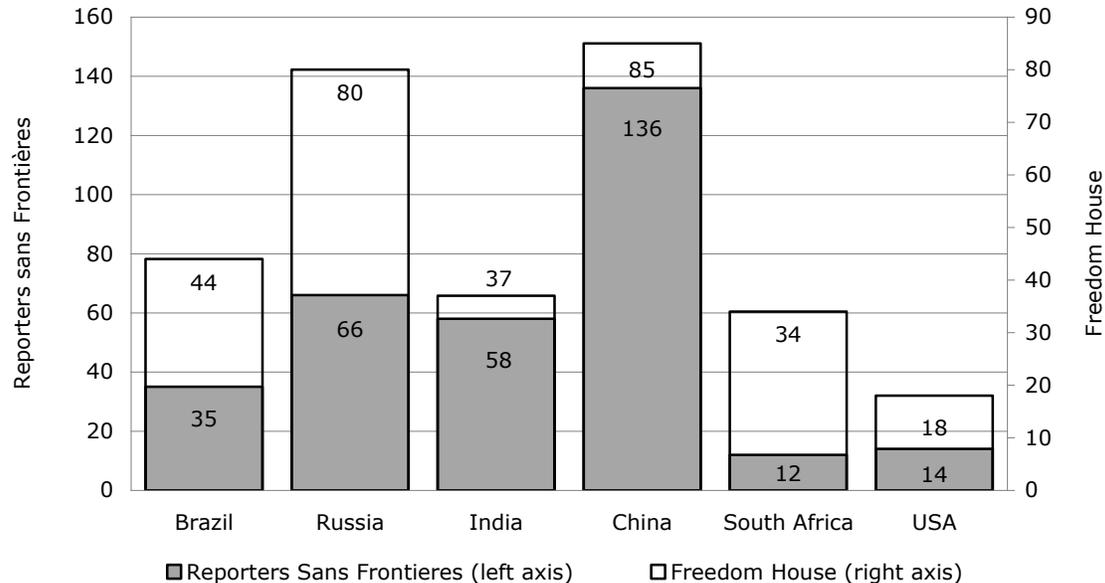


Figure 7: Rough measures of media freedom.
Sources: Reporters Sans Frontières; Freedom House.

In all of these countries, television is very widely available, while newspapers remain a minority pursuit. However, in the BRICS there is no evidence of the rapid decline in newspaper circulation that has been so marked in the developed world. While the average paid circulation of daily newspapers in the OECD countries declined by 2.7% between 2000 and 2008, with much greater losses in some major countries like the USA, in India it grew by 45%, in South Africa by 34%, and in China by around 30% (OECD, 2010, p. 24). Circulation in Brazil has also been growing, at a steady but much less spectacular rate (Barbosa, 2012; Folha de Sao Paulo, 2013; World Association of Newspapers, 2009, p. 265). Figures for newspaper circulation in Russia are unavailable, but the number of daily titles has clearly been growing (World Association of Newspapers, 2009, p. 772). This overall growth is attributable to changing social structures: Brazil, India, and China are experiencing urbanization, rising living standards, and improved education. Yet again, however, neither these factors nor the prevalence of television is exclusive to the BRICS.

Overall, although the BRICS exhibit some similarities in terms of the media's economic situation, their relationship to other centers of power, and their relative degree of freedom, these are neither particularly close nor distinctive.

The Online World

No discussion of the media in the contemporary world is complete without discussion of Internet penetration, usage, and impact on older media. Figure 8 presents a set of estimates of Internet penetration as of June 30, 2012.¹¹ As before, no single clear, discernible pattern unites the BRICS or distinguishes them from many other countries. Internet penetration rates in Brazil, Russia, and China are approaching half of their populations, while India and South Africa record much lower figures. In percentage terms, none of them approaches the USA, although of course in absolute terms China, with a population near 1.4 billion, has a far larger number of actual users: 538 million as of June 30, 2011, according to Internet World Stats (2013b).

Comparisons of usage are much more difficult, in part because of the problematic status of the available statistics, which tend not to provide equivalent figures for equivalent time periods. Comparison is particularly complicated by the fact that in China, many well-known international online brands like Facebook, Google, and Twitter, are either refused legal entry or eclipsed by their national competitors. A similar situation with local competition prevails in certain other segments in other countries, notably Russia.

One comparison that can be drawn, at least in general terms, is between usage of Twitter and that of its Chinese equivalent, generically known as Weibo. While the USA is home to by far the largest number of Twitter users in a recent measure, India has the 3rd highest number, followed by Brazil in 5th and Russia in 6th place. South Africa, with by far the smallest population of the BRICS, ranks 26th (Alexa: The Web Information Company, 2013). As for China, it had around 300 million individuals, 55% of total Chinese Internet users, with registered accounts across the range of equivalent services at the end of 2012 (Xinhua, 2013).¹² These figures, cautiously interpreted, suggest that microblogging is particularly important within the BRICS, although again this is not a defining feature, since Mexico, Indonesia, and Turkey are also amongst the 10 countries with the most current users.

¹¹ Internet World Stats defines an Internet user as

Anyone currently in capacity to use the Internet. In our opinion, there are only two requirements for a person to be considered an Internet User: (1) The person must have available access to an Internet connection point, and (2) The person must have the basic knowledge required to use web technology. (Internet World Stats, 2013a)

Using this definition, Internet World Stats lists Norway, with 97% penetration, as the most connected truly independent country in the world; meanwhile tiny Monaco is reported as having a rate of 101%. As in the other data used in this article, these figures are only indicators of relative position.

¹² "Registered accounts" does not mean active users.

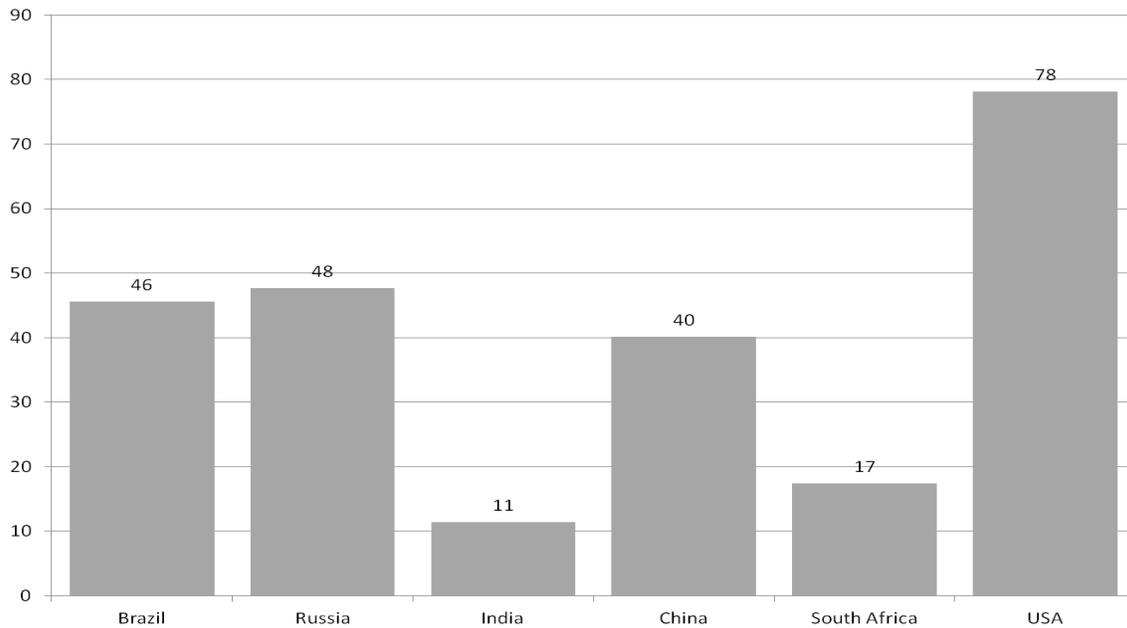


Figure 8. Estimated percentage of Internet penetration as of June 30, 2012.

Source: Internet World Stats.

In the West, the Internet's most marked economic impact on the traditional media has been the flight of advertising revenues from printed newspapers to online locations, mostly search sites. Figure 9 shows that this process is beginning in all the BRICS and is undeniably farthest advanced in China, where the proportion going online is comparable to that in the USA. But overall in these six countries, as in many others, television is the major beneficiary. Only in India is the proportion of adspend going to newspapers at all comparable to that going to television. No BRICS country, however, has recorded a slump in advertising revenues of printed newspapers akin to that found in the USA.

Internet penetration varies greatly from country to country, but it does not obviously correlate with per capita income. The economic impact of the new media compared to the old is also highly varied. Outside China, where it has reached a proportion comparable to that in the USA, it is still substantially below that of television, although it has surpassed that of the press in Russia. Levels of microblogging usage seem very high in all the BRICS, but in no other respect do they form a clearly defined bloc.

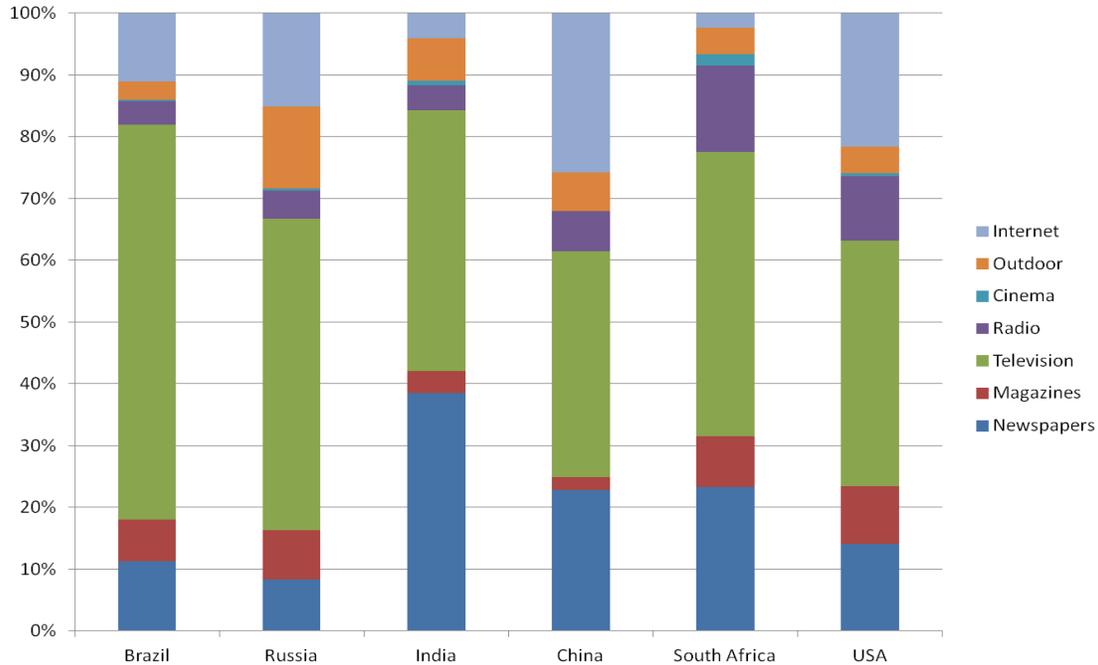


Figure 9. Distribution of adspend in 2011.

Source: World Advertising Research Centre.

Positive and Negative Features of the Category BRICS

As I have shown, the BRICS display common characteristics for very few factors in their general political and economic structures, or in their media. Moreover, many of the features they display are scarcely unique to this grouping alone, but rather are usually shared with many other developing countries. Even where a common category appears to single them out, as with the density of micro-blogging, closer examination might reveal that different social dynamics are at work in each case. It is therefore very tempting simply to say that the concept of BRICS is empty and should therefore be discarded as useless for analytic purposes.

Yet that entirely justified response still fails to explain why so many people with so many different occupations, social researchers among them, have found the concept useful. Part of the answer lies in the fact that the concept is a geopolitical reality, albeit new and relatively powerless as a body. More important, however, is its powerful rhetorical significance, owed to the clear label it puts upon a process that is long-term and diffuse but undoubtedly real. Whatever reservations people might have, and however dubious certain predictions about the future may be, the economic geography of the world has

changed fundamentally in the last quarter-century. The international political structure is already changing, and it is reasonable to assume that culture will eventually begin to reflect these growing forces. This multidimensional "rise of the rest" is what the use of "BRICS" as a slogan captures: these countries, taken as the vanguard of this changing order, have helped force its reality on many people, some of whom are most reluctant to accept the extent of the changes.

On the other hand, use of this category can obscure more than it reveals. The above analysis demonstrates the deep differences between the constituent countries of the BRICS bloc. Most strikingly, in terms of the scale of its economy and the nature of its political and media systems, China stands out as different in degree from all of the others, a reality that corresponds to the birth of the BRICS as an international grouping: China was and is the moving force and the dominant player in this initiative. Chinese preeminence is partly a matter of scale and partly a matter of growth rates. The Chinese economy is vastly bigger than the economies of the other BRICS, and China is also growing much faster than the other countries; indeed, the gap grows larger every day. In some important respects, the USA is a more obvious comparator for China than are the other BRICS. In most respects, this disparity of scale between China and the rest will continue indefinitely, primarily because of the sheer size of the Chinese population. In the longer term, the only other society that can expect to reach the same absolute size is India, which has an almost equally large, and faster growing, population.

A great shortcoming of such a general category, especially one that is devoid of intellectual content, is that it obscures attention to the specifics of China's economy, society, polity, and media. It also has the disadvantage of deflecting attention away from the unique way in which China's development is influencing the rest of the world, and most notably the USA.

A Closer Look at China and Its Impact

As noted above, China stands out from the other BRICS in several ways that merit a brief review, since they demonstrate this catch-all category's limitations in illuminating social reality. Perhaps China's most obvious distinction is that it remains a one-party dictatorship that exercises strong, direct control over the media, which correspondingly are regarded as lacking in freedom relative to the other BRICS by both of the international measures considered here. It has been argued elsewhere that these differences, while important in themselves, can conceal some significant underlying parallels, but for current purposes it is worthwhile to complement the analysis of media control with consideration of the social meaning of microblogging. Weibo, in terms of the extent of its penetration of daily life in China, does not appear to differ qualitatively from the different usages of Twitter around the world.¹³ Similarly, just as elsewhere, Chinese Internet usage, including Weibo usage, spans a very wide range of activities, including commerce, leisure, travel, search, gossip, gaming, and so on (Lai & To, 2012). On the other hand, Weibo is also the site of genuine popular discussion, sometimes highly politicized, of breaking news of public interest. Unlike

¹³ According to Sullivan, Twitter usage in China is confined to a small, highly politicized echelon of intellectuals who evade official blocking. In his judgment, Weibo is a depoliticized environment: "The most popular daily trends on Sina Weibo are generally entertainment news, gossip, commercial information and sports" (Sullivan, 2012, p. 776). This seems mistaken, for the reasons given below.

in the press and on television, which are censored in advance, stories expressing critical views and reporting sensitive incidents can appear on Weibo, although they are likely to be removed as soon as the censors realize their import (Li, 2013). So, for example, a recent struggle over censorship at *Southern Weekend* found a public airing on Weibo (Hille & Hook, 2013; Kennedy, 2013). In a society where frequent outbursts express popular discontent ("mass incidents"), and incompetence and corruption are ingrained patterns of behavior for officials and businesses, such crises occur regularly, impacting social media in ways that are extremely rare in traditional media.¹⁴

The extent to which this represents a transformative potential can certainly be exaggerated: some senior party officials, like Executive Vice-President of the Central Party School Li Jingtian, have told western reporters that Weibo has a role to play in curbing official corruption (Orlick & Baker, 2013). Admittedly, a certain amount of publicity, whether in the traditional media or online, can help the leading party bodies identify, and exercise better control over, their corrupt, incompetent, unruly subordinates, but it also certainly has disruptive effects as well. The clearest example of this dynamic was the high-speed rail disaster in Wenzhou in July 2011. Despite many casualties, official media were very reluctant to cover the event; meanwhile it was vigorously reported and debated on Weibo. Eventually, this pressure resulted in much more extensive and thorough coverage in the official media (Branigan, 2011).¹⁵

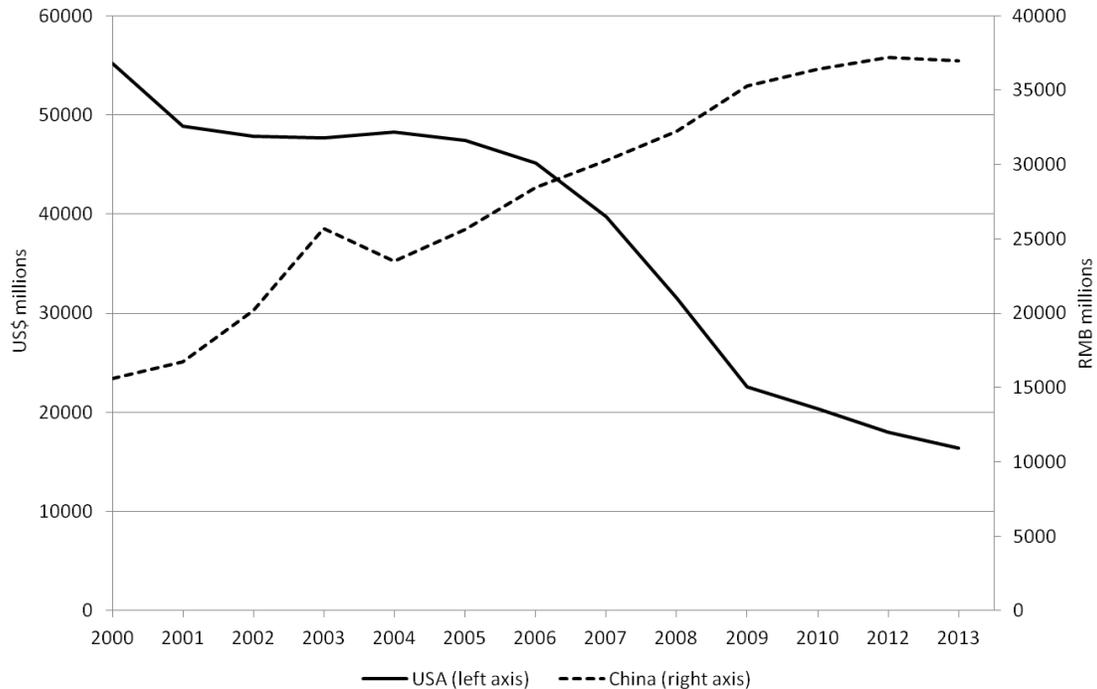
The state of the printed press offers a second illustration of how subsuming China under the general category BRICS can obscure important distinctive features of the society that require further analysis. As mentioned above, China resembles most of the other BRICS in having, at least until very recently, an expanding newspaper market.¹⁶ Unlike the other BRICS, however, it has large and growing online adspend, a feature it shares with the USA, where the growth of online advertising notoriously led to a sharp drop in newspaper advertising as most of the expenditure shifted to search sites, notably Google (Pew Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2012). As Figure 10 demonstrates, however, this trend has not yet repeated in the case of China, where newspaper advertising was growing steadily until recently and is projected to decline only marginally in 2013.

¹⁴ The number of mass incidents in China is a matter of debate. Estimates rise year by year; one high estimate is around 200,000 for 2012. According to *Legal Daily*, as excerpted by *Danwei*:

It's worth noting that in 13.3% of mass incidents new media Weibo was used as an organizational tool. One can see that the nature of mass incidents is changing with the development of the Internet, and there are more and more methods of organizing people who have never met before into an interest group that encourages a mass incident to break out. (Goldkorn, 2013)

¹⁵ The China Media Project has collected images of the disaster posted on social media (Bandurski, 2011).

¹⁶ However, according to official figures from the General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP), which may not be entirely reliable, there has been a modest decline since 2010 (personal communication from Dr. Zhao Yanhua).



USA in constant 2005 US\$m; China in constant 2005 RMBm

Figure 10. Comparative movement of newspaper advertising revenues.

Source: World Advertising Research Centre.

The reasons for these radically different performances are not yet well understood, although it is clearly significant that the Chinese newspaper press is operating in an advertising market that is still expanding robustly, in contrast with the USA, where the market in 2012 was still nearly 10% below its 2007 peak in current dollar terms, and 18% down from the 2007 level in constant dollars (World Advertising Research Centre, 2013). Perhaps the Chinese newspaper press is at the tipping point and will soon encounter difficulties in the form of falling circulation and declining advertising revenues, which would set it even further apart from the other BRICS.

The third distinctive feature of China is the implication of scale, which echoes through all spheres of international relations from geopolitics to culture. At present, and for the foreseeable future, China is alone among the BRICS in constituting a serious economic challenge to the USA. This has led numerous commentators to speculate on the possibility of future conflicts between the two states as the rising power challenges the sitting hegemon, just as Germany challenged the UK a century earlier. Growing Chinese

military power, dangerous conflicts in the East and South China Seas, and the USA's intent to shift the majority of its military power to the Pacific have all been taken as signs of increasing tension. No one can tell whether some obscure and uninhabited rocky outcrop will come to have the same accidental notoriety that Sarajevo acquired in 1914. Still, the probability of a major war provoked by China seems low: As Figure 11 demonstrates, the balance of military power is currently so uneven that any such conflict would certainly result in a U.S. victory.

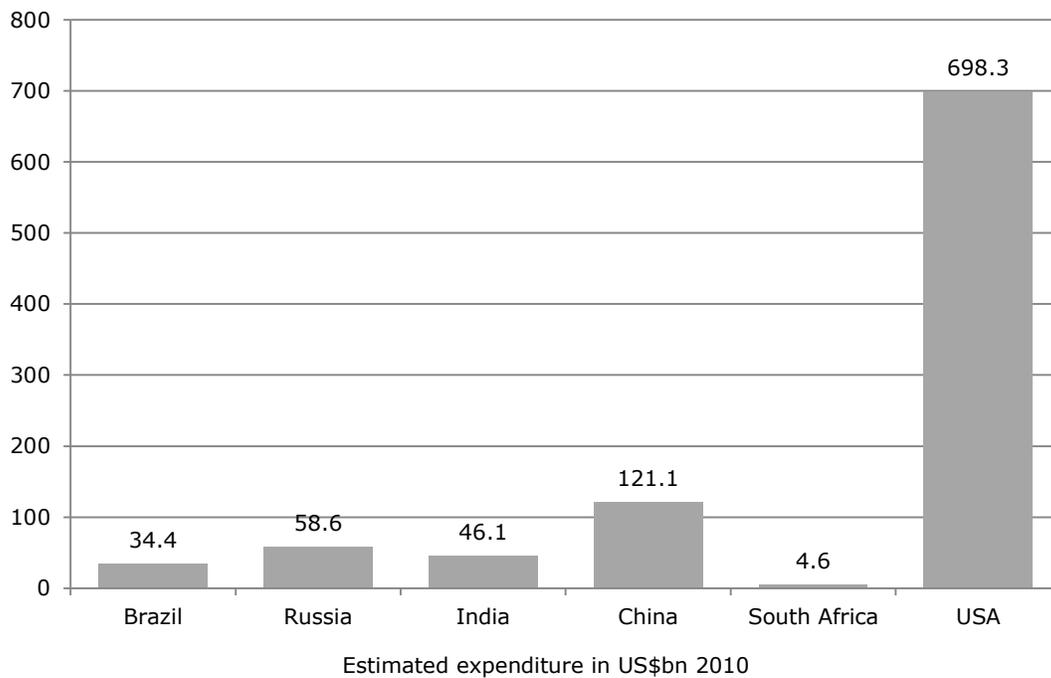


Figure 11. Not yet a military balance.

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2012.

These figures are in dollar terms, and although an estimate at PPP would alter the picture somewhat in China's favor, the imbalance is still obvious.¹⁷ Maybe now, or in the near future, the People's Liberation Army can achieve its tactical aim of making it difficult for the U.S. Navy to operate freely inside the first island chain, but to dream of a serious challenge to the USA's position of global dominance is delusional.¹⁸

¹⁷ It is a mark of the priorities of China's leadership that the budget for internal security is reportedly higher than that for the military proper.

¹⁸ Certainly some voices in the USA will draw the exact opposite conclusion from the current disparity in military strength, although the current U.S. Secretary of State plans to consider a more conciliatory line: "We have a lot more forces out there than any other [nation] in the world, including China, today. . . . You

To argue, or at least to hope, that military conflict is unlikely is not to say that conflicts are not already apparent in other areas. For our purposes, cultural conflict is the most relevant dimension to explore. Conflict and potential conflict in the cultural area span both China and the USA on a spectrum ranging from higher education to popular culture. Potential for cultural conflict has risen sharply since the Chinese government launched its "going out" strategy in an attempt to gain what it considers soft power. For example, one part of this strategy, the highly successful initiative to establish Confucius Institutes in universities around the world, has been the subject of attack and controversy in the USA (Redden, 2012).

On a more popular level, in November 2012, Hollywood released a remake of *Red Dawn*. The original, released in 1984, hinged on a Soviet invasion of the USA, but the remake has North Koreans in the aggressor's role. Given that North Korea's estimated population is about 24.5 million, as compared with around 314 million for the USA, it may be wrong to consider this film as a realist text. In earlier versions of the remake, the invaders were Chinese; apparently the nationality was changed for commercial reasons (*Global Times*, 2011). The substitution of China for the former USSR as a potential occupying power clearly has some appeal in the USA. On the Chinese side, such reversions to the simpler narratives of the high Cold War tend to be less institutional, finding expression in apparently spontaneous popular protests against Western misreporting on China and other perceived slights. The official line, even when articulated in the rather threatening terms of *Global Times*, is that "China is sincere in pursuing peaceful development," although "the possibility that in the future China will become tougher cannot be excluded" (*Global Times*, 2013).

Conclusions

Whatever its popular appeal to bankers, journalists, politicians, or the general public, the BRICS concept has severe weaknesses from the viewpoint of scholarly enquiry. It is hard to find a single major dimension, in economics, politics, or media, in which these five countries are (a) uniform and (b) collectively distinct from other developing countries. The primary value of the term is to draw attention to the fact that the world is shifting. The global domination of the West is passing, although the process is much more gradual and uneven than is commonly imagined. Among these rapidly developing states, China stands out as by far the biggest and most dynamic. If there is a near-term challenge to the West, or more specifically to the USA, then it comes from China, not from the BRICS as a collective. In the longer term, India has the potential to emerge as an equal—perhaps as an equal partner, but possibly as a serious rival. Already one might well argue that culturally, India has much more international influence than China.

Whether it is the BRICS, all developing countries, or just the potential giants of China and India together that are under consideration, or whether a more immediate view restricts the field to China,

know, the Chinese look at that and say, 'What's the United States doing? They trying to circle us? What's going on?'" (Agencies, 2013).

clearly the processes in question will be neither smooth nor painless. Here the stress is on the differences between the constituents of the BRICS bloc, but there is one dimension that they share with each other and with a much broader group of countries: They all rest upon systems that at bottom ruthlessly suppress the majority of their populations. All these countries face serious internal opposition, and all have notoriously corrupt governmental systems. The same problems—minorities facing discrimination, persistent oppression of women, peasants robbed of their land, workers subject to exploitative regimes and sometimes cheated of their wages—are found in all these countries. So, too, is the same brutal repression of organized dissent, often effected through armed force; and so, too, is brave and determined resistance.

That the economic center of the world will shift is largely certain, although it remains unknown whether the BRICS will be the sole beneficiaries of this change. We can hope for two things: first, that geopolitical shifts do not have the same disastrous consequences for the world that they did in previous episodes; and second, that the workers and peasants of the emerging economies succeed in winning for themselves at least the same limited control over their lives that those in the declining West still enjoy. Indeed, one can even hope they will show people everywhere how to win a great deal more.

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