

Winds of Change? BRICS as a Perspective in International Media Research

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This article explores the potential that BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) has in providing an alternative angle of analysis to the Western centrism that still dominates the international media studies landscape. BRICS is presented as a heterogeneous group of countries united by a common cause: the struggle for recognition in the face of Western hegemony in the neoliberal global order. As postcolonial studies attribute the existing patterns of asymmetry to the burden of the colonial past, a BRICS perspective focuses on the unipolar neoliberal global order and the manner in which it influences the logic of academic research.

Keywords: BRICS, comparative research, international media studies

BRICS emerged recently as a topic of scholarly research. An acronym formed by the initials of Brazil, Russia, India, and China, the term *BRICs* was coined by Jim O'Neill, chief economist of Goldman Sachs investment bank, as a new hotspot of investment in the global financial market. In 2009, BRICs became something else: the embryo of an international bloc, an alternative to the West. In 2011, its name changed to BRICS, after South Africa joined the group. Rapidly, BRICs evolved from a group of countries recommended for Western financial investors to a group intending to provide a political and economic alternative to Western global dominance and, more precisely, the neoliberal order. Despite the countries' historical, political, economic, and cultural differences, they have proved able to coordinate actions in the United Nations and have promoted ambitious initiatives as the creation of the New Development Bank in 2014 and the BRICS University League. Naturally, the BRICS initiative was not without precedents; it was anteceded by other notable initiatives, such as the Conference of Bandung in 1955 and the creation of the movement of nonaligned countries in 1961, in the wake of the decolonization process (Bandyopadhyaya, 1977), and UNESCO's McBride Report, which called for a New World Information Communication Order in 1980 (Fuchs, 2015; Thussu, 2015).

As classic colonialism, neoliberal globalization is a world-scale civilizing project, which some authors have described as having recolonizing characteristics (Cammack, 2002; Dutta & Rastogi, 2016). There are big differences between them, however. Classic colonialism was carried out mostly by European rival nation-states disputing the control of "noncivilized" territories across the world (Wallerstein, 2004); otherwise, the core forces behind neoliberal globalization are the U.S. government and major international financial

institutions (IFIs), specially the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund, which have promoted an agenda known as the Washington Consensus. In addition, the challenges posed by classic decolonizing movements and BRICS also differ. As Ekeh (1975) observed, much of the effort carried out by the elites of the recently independent countries was to demonstrate that their standards were “as good as those of their former colonizers” (p. 101), and therefore they were worthy of equal treatment. BRICS, on the other hand, proposes that non-Western countries also deserve center stage in the global order.

The convenience of looking for alternative analytical angles seems particularly relevant in the face of recent developments that raise doubts about Western democracies’ well-being, such as the 2007–2008 economic crisis in the United States and the Eurozone, the rise of extreme right and populist politics in Europe, and more recently, the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union (“Brexit”) in a referendum, as well as the election and troubled performance of U.S. President Donald J. Trump (Zelizer, 2018). Furthermore, the emergence of China as an economic world power and the growing political and military role played by Russia in the international arena have been perceived as evidence of a global crisis in the West (Aouragh & Chakravartty, 2016; Li & Marsh, 2016; Zhao, 2014).

In this article, we contend that the rise of BRICS provides an opportunity for challenging the dominance of Western-oriented paradigms in international media studies. The first section explores the U.S. foundation of media studies, and its further internationalization, in the wake of the neoliberal globalization process. We argue that, despite allowing research to become more international, neoliberal globalization has worked as a homogenizing force as it consolidates a universal ranking system structured around criteria that privilege Western (and particularly U.S. and UK) views (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999; Lauf, 2005; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Paasi, 2005). The second section explores the potential of BRICS to serve as an analytical category. After examining the evolution of BRICS from an investment brand to a political group challenging Western (and U.S. in particular) economic and political privileges in the neoliberal global order (Ban & Blyth, 2013), we claim that BRICS is a performative category, defined by a common struggle for recognition (Honneth, 1996, 2011; Wolf, 2011b). The last section explores the potential of a BRICS perspective to provide an analytical alternative to Western centrism in international media studies. We argue that a BRICS perspective offers the opportunity to review core ethical, epistemological, and methodological premises underlying the research on this issue and provides alternatives to them.

Neoliberal Globalization and International Media Studies

Communication emerged as a research area in the United States in the 1930s, on the eve of World War II, and consolidated as an academic discipline in the following decades. Initially, its agenda was closely associated with the U.S. military, intelligence, and foreign policy agencies (Glander, 2000; Zelizer, 2011), with financial support provided by U.S. foundations (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999; Pooley & Park, 2013). The close association with U.S. government-led programs of psychological warfare (Glander, 2000; Simpson, 1996) had a deep impact in the further development of communication as an academic discipline, both with respect to its political bias and its core theoretical and methodological foundations, which were strongly empiricist and influenced by a behaviorist and applied view of communication studies (Peters, 1986; Pooley & Park, 2013).

The consolidation of communication as an international field of research occurred only decades later, roughly in the 1990–2000s, in a time when media systems of several countries around the world faced huge transformations, such as massive privatization and deregulation associated with the neoliberal globalization process (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Humphreys, 1996), which were initially described as the “Americanization” of their media (Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1996). In fact, despite some authors’ claim that globalization provides an opportunity to promote diversity in media research (Reese, 2008; Wasserman & de Beer, 2009), there are reasons for some caution on this respect.

By analyzing the articles published in *Journal of Citation Reports*-listed communication journals from 1998 to 2002, Lauf (2005) found evidence of a lack of diversity in the national distribution of its authors, as those working in U.S. institutions corresponded to 69.8% of the sample. The set of Anglophonic countries comprising the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand corresponded to 87.6% of the sample. Another 10.1% worked in institutions located in the European Union and 3.5% worked in Eastern Asia. The rest of the world (including Africa, Central and South America, other Asian countries, and European countries not belonging to the European Union such as Switzerland and, at that time, Norway) had merely 5.2% of the authors.¹ Wiedemann and Meyen (2016) identified an analogous pattern in their analysis of the leadership of the International Communication Association: They noted that, despite the manifested purpose of this association to internationalize, the association’s former presidents and fellows were overwhelmingly Americans or had institutional ties with U.S. universities.

Similar trends also have been found in economics (Fourcade, Ollion, & Algan, 2015), education (Bogosi, 2012), and geography (Aalbers, 2004). This suggests that the imbalance toward the West is not a topical phenomenon; rather, it is related to more general circumstances affecting the production and circulation of scientific knowledge related to the process of neoliberal globalization. This happens in two ways. On the one hand, as neoliberal globalization sets the rules of the game for international scientific publishing, it provides certain views (from the United States and United Kingdom, especially) with a structural advantage over others. On the other hand, neoliberal globalization is also a social agenda, which has been actively promoted by myriad agents interested in directly or indirectly influencing the academic debate.

Neoliberal Globalization, Rankings, and Academic Publishing

Although neoliberalism presents itself as a return to the core principles of classic liberalism, in practical terms, it is something entirely different. As liberalism refers primarily to individual freedom, neoliberalism aims to assure the ideal conditions for the market economy to flourish and focus on “extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action” (Brown, 2005, p. 40). Neoliberal globalization is a worldwide process of social reorganization around neoliberal principles (the Washington Consensus) that, beginning in the late 1980s, was put into practice by a consortium led by the U.S. government, the WB, and the International Monetary Fund (Babb, 2013).

¹ Given that some articles were written by authors from different countries, the sum of these percentages is greater than 100%.

Neoliberalism initially referred to a set of economic policies imposed to debtor countries by the IFIs through conditionality, that is, in exchange for loans (Williamson, 2008), but its influence later expanded to other social institutions, such as university education and research. Two phenomena are especially important here: the rise of academic capitalism (e.g., the adoption of market-like behaviors from universities and faculty; Slaughter & Leslie, 2001) and its internationalization through a world university rankings' system (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007), which stimulated universities and faculty around the globe to compete for "world-class" status.

These circumstances work as a homogenizing force as they constrain researchers from the entire world to publish their articles in a small group of journals, most of which are published in English, based in the United States or United Kingdom, and ranked by the U.S. firm Thomson ISI (Bogosi, 2012; Paasi, 2005). In addition, approximately 70% of articles indexed in the Web of Science were published by five top publishers (Larivière, Haustein, & Mongeon, 2015). Further problems emerge from the fact that most of these journals' referees also come from the United States and United Kingdom (Lauf, 2005), and tend to endow their own cultural views and academic conventions with a universal value (Aalbers, 2004). Given that neoliberal views have been stronger in the United States and United Kingdom than anywhere else, these circumstances provide them with a competitive advantage in comparison to other theoretical models originated elsewhere (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999).

Promoting the Neoliberal Agenda

In the late 1990s, the WB replaced the authoritarian conditionality method with a softer approach, rebranding itself as a "knowledge bank" committed to "sharing knowledge" and "building capacity" (Cammack, 2002). Accordingly, it expanded the scope of its expertise to a range of issues considered crucial for sustainable governance and viable economic growth—for instance, establishing the rule of law (Santos, 2006), fighting corruption (Rothstein, 2011), curbing poverty (Dutta & Rastogi, 2016), and promoting freedom of the press as a means for warranting government accountability (Norris, 2010)—as a part of its comprehensive development framework (Cammack, 2002; Lera St. Clair, 2006; Rothstein, 2011). Critics have pointed out that these initiatives have a negative impact on the countries' sovereignty, dubbing the comprehensive development framework a "comprehensive dependency framework" (Cammack, 2002). Specifically, the WB engaged in a systematic effort to influence scholarly research by gathering and publicizing data and rankings, publishing academic journals, and developing theories and methodological tools (Lera St. Clair, 2006; Santos, 2006).

Besides the WB, many other organizations have conveyed neoliberal views into the academic debate. Two of them—Transparency International (TI) and Freedom House (FH)—have been especially influential in international media studies. A corruption-fighting nongovernmental organization, TI follows closely the agenda of the WB. Its most important product, the Corruption Perception Index, ranks countries around the world according to the prevalence of corruption within them, based on surveys with business people. The Corruption Perception Index has been criticized for focusing on the local and public aspects of corruption, excluding transnational and private ones, reinforcing prejudices about certain countries, and being vulnerable to political manipulation (Bukovansky, 2015).

Despite being officially a nongovernmental organization, FH has close ties with the U.S. government, which provides two thirds of its funding (Giannone, 2010); also, many of its prominent officials have solid ties with the U.S. national security apparatus (Tsygankov & Parker, 2014). Its main product, the Free Press Index, is largely used by academic researchers and policymaking agencies, despite the innumerable critiques raised about its methodological flaws (Becker, 2003) and its neoliberal—antistate, promarket—political bias (Giannone, 2010; Sapiezynska & Lagos, 2016). All in all, the WB, FH, TI, and other organizations like them provide the neoliberal credo with academic legitimacy by mediating the relation between policy-promoting agencies and the academic milieu. Still more important, they provide an appearance of objectivity—through a “ranking” framework—to a moral hierarchy by classifying different countries as more or less “free” or, alternatively, more or less “corrupt,” which reaffirms the Western privileged position as the normative center of the world (e.g., Bukovansky, 2015; Norris & Inglehart, 2009; Sparks, 2015), and they provide support for a contemporary version of imperialistic reason (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999).

BRICS as an Analytical Category

Created in 2001 by Goldman Sachs’s chief analyst Jim O’Neill, as an international investments brand, in the context of neoliberal globalization, BRICs evolved to become an international alliance that presents an expressive challenge to the neoliberal order. To make its product more attractive for investors, Goldman Sachs used an empowerment rhetoric—the name of the group alludes to the idea of solidity (bricks)—and suggested that, in 2050, BRICs countries would surpass G7 as the biggest economies in the world (Wansleben, 2013). The same tactic was used later to promote other groups of countries as opportunities for investment—for instance, in the cases of CIVETS (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, and South Africa) and EaGLEs (Emerging and Growth Leading Economies); a negative example of the same strategy is provided by the acronym PIGS, referring to four southern European countries (Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain) falling in disgrace during the Eurozone debt crisis. As it happened with these other categories, BRICs is a performative rather than a descriptive concept, given that the core purpose behind its inception was not depicting reality, but doing things with words (Austin, 1962; Fourcade, 2013).

However, different from these groups, Brazil, Russia, India, and China captured Goldman Sachs’s empowerment discourse for their own benefit, building an international political alliance in 2008. In 2011, South Africa joined the group and, as a result, it officially changed its name to BRICS. Since its inception, BRICS has called for a realignment of the global order toward a more fair and multipolar world (Armijo, 2007; Brüttsch & Papa, 2013), and has called for a reform of the global financial order, which they describe as proportioning exorbitant privileges for the United States and rich Western nations (Ban & Blyth, 2013).

BRICS as an Analytical Category: Pros and Cons

There is a considerable controversy about the validity of BRICS as an analytical category. Usually, the debate on this topic focuses on the greater or lesser economic or political virtues of the countries integrating the BRICS group or the solidity of the ties bonding them. BRICS supporters commonly justify their position based on prospects about BRICS’s potential to promote a major shift in the global order, either from an economic (Käkönen, 2015; Nordenstreng & Thussu, 2015; Zhao, 2014) or political and international

relations view (Armijo, 2007; Brütsch & Papa, 2013). It is essentially a discourse about the future. Otherwise, skeptics emphasize the artificial character of the BRICS group, claiming it is too diversified in its political and economic systems and cultural backgrounds to allow a coherent group to exist (Ladwig, 2012; Pant, 2013; Sparks, 2015).

Alternatively, this article proposes that the relevance of BRICS as an analytical category is related to its capacity to name a collective project shared by a set of countries:

a common vision of a future global order where the rules prevent any one state, or an alliance of states, from dominating the international system, and they have chosen to refer to this approach to global governance as a strategy of coexistence. (de Coning, 2015, p. 25)

It is argued that, similar to postcolonial studies, a BRICS perspective provides an analytical alternative to Western centrism. However, they differ in the manner in which they approach their subject: Whereas postcolonial studies focus on the historical process that led to the construction of an asymmetric global order, a BRICS perspective refers to a common agenda of the struggle for recognition, shared by a group of countries questioning the U.S.-centered unipolar order.

BRICS and Postcolonial Perspectives

Both the BRICS and the postcolonial perspectives share the fight against Western centrism as their prime motivation. Apart from this, they differ fundamentally in several aspects. To begin, they refer to asymmetries originated in different historical periods. On the one hand, the postcolonial perspective focuses on a process that began in the 16th century and lasted centuries: According to Quijano (2007) and Mignolo (2011), colonialism is the dark side of modernity. On the other hand, a BRICS perspective highlights the neoliberal globalization and the privileges to Western-originated views, practices, and rules associated with it. In the wake of this process, the sovereignty of diverse non-Western countries—conquered along the decolonization process—has undermined a series of initiatives promoted in the last decades by a group of agents that includes IFIs and major Western governments (the United States in particular), including the imposition of economic, legal, and political reforms (Cammack, 2002; Dutta & Rastogi, 2016; Thussu, 2000; Williamson, 2008) and also direct military interventions, often justified as humanitarian actions (Thussu, 2000; Wallerstein, 2004).

Another difference relates to the chief agents promoting Western centrism in both cases. The postcolonial approach emphasizes the role played by a group of Western European nations and, consequently, it often presents Western centrism as Eurocentrism (Wallerstein, 2006). In a BRICS perspective, the United States—associated with a group of international organizations—receives the main credits. A former British colony itself, the United States emerged as a superpower after World War II. In this position, the United States presented itself as a model for the development of non-Western societies (including those recently independent) through the notion of modernization (Lerner, 1958; Wilkins, 2004) in competition with the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States became the uncontested center of a unipolar order. As this happened, some conservative analysts and politicians became

progressively less ashamed of using the word *imperialism* to describe the kind of “benevolent” rules exerted globally by the United States (Hesmondhalgh, 2008).²

Finally, a third aspect refers to distinct manners by which Western centrism is legitimized in both cases. The postcolonial perspective criticizes the mainstream view for associating universal values (e.g., modernity and Enlightenment) with a certain group of societies, a phenomenon that Wallerstein (2006) named “European universalism” and, at the same time, denies value to contemporary non-Western societies, presenting them either as primitives (Ekeh, 1990) or as the decadent heirs of glorious civilizations that existed in the past (Said, 1978). As Chakrabarty (2000) summarizes it, “the European colonizer of the nineteenth century both preached this Enlightenment humanism at the colonized and at the same time denied it in practice” (p. 4). Alternatively, the neoliberal type of Western centrism depends less on the explicit reference to broad theoretical models than on a networking system organized according to the logic of academic capitalism and international rankings (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). Given that the United States (and, in a minor degree, other Western countries) dominates the key nodes of this system—for instance, most highly reputed journals and the institutions evaluating them (Aalbers, 2004; Larivière et al., 2015; Lauf, 2005)—views originated on these societies have many more opportunities to obtain global status than those originated elsewhere (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999; Kamola, 2014). These circumstances have been instrumental to allow a group of powerful nonacademic agents—especially IFIs, think tanks, and nongovernmental organizations—to exert considerable influence on the scholarly research agenda. The WB’s case provides a prime example here, such as allied policymaking power and academic prestige in different areas (including media studies), by rebranding itself as a knowledge bank (Babb, 2013; Cammack, 2002; Lera St. Clair, 2006; Norris, 2010; Santos, 2006).

BRICS as a Performative Category: The Struggle for Recognition

Originally, the concept of a struggle for recognition refers to processes occurring in an intersubjective level, which modifies the self-understanding of parties engaged in a contention. The discourse of recognition finds resonance in both private (intimate) and public spheres (Taylor, 1994). According to Honneth (1996), struggles for recognition result from the interaction of feelings and a moral grammar associated with normative expectations coming from three realms: love, rights, and social esteem. Even social contentions usually conceived as attempts of social groups assuring their interests—labor unions on strikes for keeping jobs or income levels, for example—depart from a background of moral feelings shared by individuals through collective identities.

Considering these definitions, the analysis of international relations in terms of a struggle for recognition faces a conundrum, as it ascribes to states—in practical terms, bureaucratic staffs allegedly steered by rational-strategic goals—a kind of behavior usually attributed to individuals and homogeneous groups. Nevertheless, a growing body of literature has stressed that contemporary modern states may

² The publication of Bruce Gilley’s article “The Case for Colonialism” in *Third World Quarterly* provides additional evidence on this regard. The article was later withdrawn by the journal given the enormous controversy generated by its publication.

engage in struggles for recognition under some precise circumstances, such as political isolation, economic disparity, and acts of perceived disrespect (Honneth, 2011; Ringmar, 2011; Wolf, 2011a, 2011b). As Wolf (2011b) observes, the demand for respect is a core factor behind building BRICS as an international alliance given that the countries integrating it perceive that the West denies them due consideration, corresponding to their economic relevance and political ambitions.

Accordingly, BRICS summits have emphasized their demands with a basis in values familiar to Western democracies such as transparency, meritocracy, representativeness, and participation. In their second summit joint declaration, BRICS countries asked for “a substantial shift in voting power in favor of emerging market economies and developing countries to bring their participation in decision making in line with their relative weight in the world economy” (BRIC, 2010, para. 11). Added to this, in their fourth summit, they called “for a more representative international financial architecture, with an increase in the voice and representation of developing countries” (BRICS, 2012, para. 8). These examples underlie a core aspect referring to the struggle for recognition: the esteem and consideration given to an individual or group because of its contributions to the community. Moreover, they present these demands in terms potentially acceptable to Western countries. This common ground offers prospects for a fusion of horizons and an intersubjective struggle for recognition, which presents a clear potential of constraining all the concerned countries to (re)define their identities in their own terms rather than reinforcing Western definitions of what a good civilization is.

The BRICS Angle in International Media Studies

In the last decade, BRICS attracted growing attention in international media research. Studies about BRICS can be divided in two groups that approach BRICS media as a research *subject* and a research *problem*. The first group includes works that essentially raise the same questions and apply the same methodologies used elsewhere in analyses about BRICS countries, either taken individually (e.g., Nordenstreng & Thussu, 2005, Chapters 5–9) or comparatively (Pasti & Ramaprasad, 2015). Many of these studies adopt a descriptive approach, and those that generalize usually evaluate BRICS countries in function of their greater or lesser distance to Western standards and rankings and, in consequence, tend to present the BRICS countries as occupying an inferior position relative to the West (Milton & Fourie, 2015; Pasti, Ramaprasad, & Ndlovu, 2015).

The second group explores the specific characteristics of BRICS countries’ media without taking the West as a touchstone of comparison. In most cases, these studies compare pairs of BRICS countries. An example refers to Chindia—a bloc composed of the two most populous countries in the world, China and India—as a potential alternative to the West (Thussu, 2013). Meng and Rantanen (2015) compare the Chinese and Russian media in light of their shared communist legacy. Rao and Wasserman (2015) argue that Indian and South African media share common patterns of exclusionary behavior, associated with the historical inheritance of the caste system in the first case and apartheid in the other, and contend that the commercialization of the media contributed to aggravate this trend. Albuquerque (2016) presents colonial heritage as a core factor in explaining the recent conflicts taking place between the mainstream, elite media—which present themselves as the voice of the enlightened public opinion—and popular elected governments in Brazil and South Africa. Other studies have focused on how BRICS countries’ media interact

with BRICS as a group. For instance, Wasserman, Paulino, Strovsky, and Pietiläinen (2015) present recent initiatives of inter-BRICS media exchange, and Grincheva and Lu (2016) compare how Russian and Chinese media adopt different approaches with respect to BRICS.

BRICS as a Perspective

By dubbing BRICS a perspective, we suggest that it provides a potentially universal angle of analysis in international media studies as an alternative to Western centrism. This happens for many reasons. To start, BRICS is a global group, including countries from Africa, America, Asia, and Europe. Whereas initiatives such as inter-Asian studies (e.g., Tae, 2014) and Afriethics (Kasoma, 1996) are necessarily limited to the historical and cultural particularities of certain regions of the world, a BRICS perspective has a much broader scope. Here, the fundamentally artificial character of the group—which some authors present as a weakness of BRICS as an analytical category (Ladwig, 2012; Pant, 2013; Sparks, 2015)—is indeed a factor of strength, as this prevents building generalizations based on characteristics typical of a specific group of societies. What unites BRICS countries is their adhesion to a common project of a struggle for recognition occurring in the context of (and in opposition to) the unipolar model of neoliberal globalization led by the United States. Taken in this view, BRICS is a performative rather than a descriptive category as its reason to exist is “making things with words” (Austin, 1962; Fourcade, 2013). Subsequently, some ethical, epistemological, and methodological consequences that follow the adoption of a BRICS perspective are briefly presented.

Taken from an ethical standpoint, a BRICS perspective is associated with a struggle for recognition, understood as “struggles against similar ways of thinking and acting that establish and sustain status difference and economic and political inequality” (Downey, 2008, p. 70). The core principle here is that, apart from their struggle for recognition and calls for a more multipolar global order, a BRICS perspective does not present BRICS countries as models to be followed elsewhere. Indeed, this would not be possible anyway, given that the BRICS countries are so different from each other in practically every aspect—politics, economics, culture, and so on—that it makes no sense speaking of a BRICS model in the singular. Therefore, it is not about BRICS countries’ supposed virtues; it is about diversity.

In practical terms, a BRICS perspective stimulates researchers to question the universal validity of premises grounded on the historical experience of Western countries. A noteworthy example refers to the notion that a free press would be an agent naturally committed to democracy. This notion has been championed by the United States since the end of World War II (Glander, 2000; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956), but gained a special impulse after the process of media globalization in the 1990s. The WB has been an active promoter of this conception (Norris, 2009), together with nongovernmental organizations specialized in “media assistance” (Miller, 2009) and “democracy promotion” (Christensen, 2017). From a BRICS perspective, the notion that a single normative model may be used to explain the relationship between media and politics in the entire world requires it to be relativized based on historical evidence provided by non-Western societies. Roudakova (2017) argued persuasively that Russian journalists’ ethical standards declined sharply following the end of the Soviet Union. In addition, it has been noted that in Egypt (El Issawi & Cammaerts, 2016) and Brazil (Albuquerque, 2017), the mainstream news media helped to legitimize attacks against the democratic order.

From an epistemological standpoint, a BRICS perspective adopts a critical stance about the academic circuit that privileges Western and particularly U.S. views in international media studies. The influence of a variegated group of nonacademic agents—IFIs, nongovernmental organizations, and think tanks—whose rankings and ready-made interpretations contribute to objectify a Western-centered moral order is especially relevant here. Possibly, no other agent has been as influential in this respect as FH, whose Free Press Index has been ubiquitously employed as having a self-evident value, despite evidence about its methodological flaws (Becker, 2003), political bias (Gianonne, 2010), and institutional ties with the U.S. government (Tsygankov & Parker, 2014).

Kellam and Stein (2016) provide a very powerful illustration of how the naturalization of the Free Press Index is instrumental in promoting a neoliberal bias in scholarly research. Based on these data, they argue that, during the 2000s, there was a significant drop in freedom of the press in the Latin American countries that turned to the left. In view of that, they conclude that leftist governments—especially those that come to power through landslide victories—are more likely to silence the press. This argument is in line with the neoliberal view of politics as it takes for granted that the privately owned press is a virtuous political agent, at the same time as it portrays electoral freedom as a factor of uncertainty for democracy. As it rules out press misbehavior as a relevant political factor, this argument blinds researchers to the possibility of the press, under certain circumstances, undermining the democratic order.

Finally, a BRICS perspective fosters alternative approaches to the methodological nationalism dominating much of international media studies. In synthesis, methodological nationalism takes unproblematically the countries under analysis as coherent, “closed” units of analysis to be investigated either individually or comparatively (Livingstone, 2003). A particularly relevant example refers to the research on international media systems, which became increasingly popular after Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) influential work. Recently, methodological nationalism gained impulse in function of the growing influence exerted by ranking institutions on academic research (Cooley & Snyder, 2015; Giannone, 2010; Lera St. Clair, 2006; Santos, 2006). Their rankings not only present the countries analyzed as monolithic entities, but also locate them in a continuum, a moral hierarchy.

Otherwise, a BRICS perspective challenges methodological nationalism in three ways: (1) It considers the countries under analysis from a relational perspective and explores other units of analysis existing in both (2) a supranational and (3) an infranational level. Adopting a relational approach means essentially that researchers should avoid considering the specific societies they analyze in isolation, as existing apart from other societies. An especially important problem refers to the role performed by the West as a reference for non-Western countries. A BRICS perspective insists on the necessity of analyzing non-Western societies based on their own problems instead of in terms of their relative distance from Western norms and standards. Thus, a BRICS perspective takes the West as a relative term of comparison, by focusing on the relations of power it establishes with the rest of the world. In this view, much of the normative standards guiding international media research should be considered as being a result of the power asymmetry rather than deriving from their intrinsic merit. The power to define globally applicable standards based on historical experiences specific to certain societies (Kamola, 2014) provides a solid example of Western privilege. Accordingly, a BRICS perspective criticizes the use of double standards for evaluating Western and non-Western countries (Nordenstreng & Thussu, 2015; Wu & Taneja, 2016).

The focus on supranational phenomena refers mainly to the impact of transnational agents on the global arena. Two questions are particularly relevant here. One refers to the role played by transnational Western media organizations—CNN provides the best example here (Gilboa, 2005; Thussu, 2000); more recently, social network organizations such as Facebook and Twitter have performed a similar role (Thussu, 2015; Wu & Taneja, 2016) in shaping a common agenda and rules in the global order and countermeasures taken by non-Western countries as a means for containing their influence in their national territories (Popkova, 2016; Thussu, 2015) or, alternatively, to dispute the agenda-setting power in the global arena, as illustrated by the cases of Qatari Al Jazeera (Seib, 2012), Venezuelan TeleSur (Zweig, 2017), and Russian RT (Miazhevich, 2018). The other has to do with the role of transnational Western organizations both influencing research agenda (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999; Giannone, 2010; Lera St. Clair, 2006) and promoting practical measures intending to change the world, usually presented as “assistance” initiatives (Christensen, 2017; Miller, 2009), which sometimes have been accused of being a source of political instability in the countries targeted by them (Stone, 2010; Sussman & Krader, 2008).

On the other hand, adopting an infranational approach means fundamentally that countries are not considered to be monolithic entities; rather, they experience the “West versus the Rest” divide inside their frontiers, as some sectors (usually their elites) perceive themselves as bastions of Western values living in predominantly non-Western societies, and often appeal to foreign models to legitimize their demands of status and power (Whitehead, 2006). By doing this, they act as agents of an internal colonialism (Baysha, 2016; González-Casanova, 1965). This problem has been observed in different societies, for instance, in the problem of the “two publics” in Africa, one related to the primordial group to which the individual belongs and the other to the institutions inherited from the colonial administration (Ekeh, 1975); the “two Russias” opposing the Westernized, “cosmopolitan” sector of the society to the “ordinary people” (Matveev, 2014); and the manner of how the mainstream press claims to represent the enlightened public opinion in opposition to the government elected by ordinary people in both Brazil and South Africa (Albuquerque, 2016).

Conclusion

This article has explored BRICS’s potential to provide an alternative angle of analysis to Western centrism, which still dominates the international media studies landscape. BRICS is a contested category. Critics have presented it as an artificial bloc uniting a disparate group of countries under a smart catchphrase (Ladwig, 2012; Pant, 2013; Sparks, 2015). Alternatively, it has been suggested that the analytical relevance of BRICS as a category does not refer to its capacity to describe the concrete features of a singular group of countries but, rather, to its ability to name a common project of struggle for recognition shared by them (de Coning, 2015; Wolf, 2011b). Therefore, BRICS is fundamentally a performative category rather than a descriptive one.

As it pertains to postcolonial studies, a BRICS perspective poses a challenge to Western centrism. However, whereas the postcolonial view associates the West chiefly with Europe and supposes that the existing patterns of asymmetry benefiting the West are a direct consequence of the colonial past, a BRICS perspective focuses on the unipolar neoliberal global order—led by an alliance that includes the United States, IFIs, and other international agents—as a source of unbalance that benefits Western views (Aouragh

& Chakravartty, 2016; Ban & Blyth, 2013; Lauf, 2015). Different from what happens in classical colonial logic, neoliberal Western centrism does not depend primarily on general systems or discourses but relies on networks established with basis in the logic of academic capitalism and a global university-ranking system (Bogosi, 2012; Kamola, 2014; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Paasi, 2005), which provides a structural advantage for U.S. (and UK) views. Notably, this system has provided opportunities for a group of nonacademic agents (as IFIs, think tanks, and nongovernmental organizations) to promote specific views—as a neoliberal approach on freedom of the press and corruption, for instance—in the field of scholarly research through rankings and ready-made interpretations that are often presented as objective data. By doing this, it continues to provide scientific and moral legitimacy to a global order that, ultimately, is based on power asymmetry.

The adoption of a BRICS perspective has some concrete consequences. From an ethical viewpoint, the struggle for recognition is associated with the search for a more multipolar approach in international media studies (Aouragh & Chakravartty, 2016; Nordenstreng & Thussu, 2015; Zhao, 2014). In practical terms, this implies cultivating a critical attitude regarding the unspoken premises and values that serve as a basis for much of international research, by taking them as grounded on the historical experience of Western societies rather than endowed with a universal validity and, accordingly, promoting other analytical approaches that are more able to describe the specific problems faced by the societies currently occupying a peripheral position in the global order.

From an epistemological angle, a BRICS perspective promotes awareness of the fact that the agenda of scholarly research is not immune to the influence of nonacademic agents. Indeed, a significant part of the debate on international media studies reproduces premises or data provided by nonacademic agents, which usually are key players in the neoliberal global order—for instance, the WB—or closely associated with them, as FH and TI (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999; Giannone, 2010; Lera St. Clair, 2006). Thus, a BRICS perspective emphasizes the political biases lying behind the data presented by these agents. Finally, from a methodological angle, a BRICS perspective challenges the dominating perspective of methodological nationalism (Livingstone, 2003) by considering the countries investigated based on their relations with others and exploring supranational (Thussu, 2015; Wu & Taneja, 2016) and infranational (Albuquerque, 2016; Ekeh, 1975; González-Casanova, 1965) units of analysis.

Three final remarks are necessary. First, a BRICS perspective does not present the BRICS group or countries as providing a normative model to be followed elsewhere, apart from the struggle for recognition and defense of multipolarity. This happens, in part, because the BRICS countries are different from each other in almost every aspect. Therefore, there is not a single, coherent model to be imitated. In addition, this characteristic makes BRICS an appropriate standpoint for discussing the problem of multipolarity. Second, BRICS's relevance as a perspective does not depend on BRICS's legacy as a concrete international group because its analytical strength is not related to the concrete policies implemented by this group. Finally, the relevance of challenging Western centrism in international media studies gains momentum at a time when Western democracies are feared to be experiencing a serious crisis (Zelizer, 2018); at the same time, there are growing signals that countries that once were peripheral are on their way to becoming more influential in the global arena (Aouragh & Chakravartty, 2016; Li & Marsh, 2016; Zhao, 2014). In a time of change, new perspectives seem to be more necessary than ever.

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