

Media faces **ACCOUNTABILITY SURGERY** in BRICS countries

The past few years have been dramatic for the media in BRICS countries. This explosive growth brings up thorny questions of media freedom, accountability, and independence.

By Shakuntala Rao

Western countries seem to have finally realised that places like India, South Africa, Brazil, and China are just not exotic locations to spend one's holiday; they are promising investment destinations and growing economies with the potential of becoming the engines of world growth in years to come.

The inspiration of the word Brics, coined by Goldman Sachs in 2003, came from the realisation that five countries in the world, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, are poised to be the top world economies by 2050. This is not to say that it is easy to provide a sound-bite definition of five large countries and their economics and try to lump them together under one workable definition. Rather than giving up on trying to find linkages and settling for definitions for what they are not (ie the advanced economics of US, Western Europe and Japan), a more useful approach would be to identify some of the benchmarks that makes Brics an economic and geopolitical cluster.

Very little research in journalism has focused on Brics or its implications in a new global media order or that the "road to BRICS-dom" is not without challenges.

Phenomenal growth of media industries

These countries, individually and collectively, have seen some of the highest growth rates in their media

industries. For instance, since the early 1990s, Indian television has grown exponentially with more than 800 channels, out of which roughly 300 are round-the-clock all-news channels available in multiple languages. There are 330 million newspapers sold daily in the country. Second only to China, a staggering 900 000 million, about 75% of the population, have access to mobile phones. In China, with the weakening of old ideological shackles, there are 2 200 newspapers catering to 500 million people and a television industry which, although highly controlled, reaches approximately 700 million people daily. Brazil and South Africa have emerged as the biggest media centres in their continents. Russian government claims a 24% growth in media economy in the last decade, the fastest growth of any media market in the world.

Such explosive media growth also brings up thorny questions of media freedom, accountability, and independence.

More media, more accountability

The concept of accountability, in modern democracies, is linked to the possession of power. Those who wield power are expected to answer for how they use it. Journalists are often seen as those who wield power of information dissemination.

The past few years have

been dramatic for the media in Brics countries. With the proliferation of internet, iPhones, and other hand-held mobile devices, the possibility of user empowerment has dramatically increased. A new relationship between society and the media has evolved. The possibilities of public participation in debates about the quality of media content and governance have increased, be it on the level of actor transparency or on the level of post-production correction.

This is especially true in the democracies of India, South Africa, and Brazil but also true in a non-democracy like China and an illiberal democracy like Russia.

China hosts some 300 million microblog accounts, and officials say that domestic social media put out more than 200 million posts every day. These microblogs have become the main source of media and political accountability.

The high-speed rail collision in Wenzhou, Zejiang province, in July 2011 was the turning point. The government took a beating by public opinion over the crash, in large part because social media harnessed anger over the bungled rescue effort, the safety of the high-speed rail network and corruption in the Railways Ministry. And in summer 2011, two other embarrassing public opinion defeats for China's leadership originally took off on the internet: the Guo Meimei affair,



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which exposed irregularities at the government-run Red Cross Society of China, and the massive and well-organised public demonstrations against a chemical project in Dalian.

In India, we have seen large street protests against corruption and sexual violence. Dubbed the “India Spring”, these protests have been brought about by wall-to-wall television media coverage of political and police corruption, an increasing gender gap, and daily violence against women. The 240-million strong urban middle class, the primary consumers of the new media, is seeking more political and media accountability.

In Brazil, resistance to the tearing down of favelas or slums in Rio de Janeiro to gear up for the 2016 Olympics has resulted in young Brazilians posting videos on websites and on Twitter. Such social-media activism has forced the otherwise pro-Olympics mainstream media to write and cover news stories of illegal bulldozing of properties.

And in Russia, the high-profile killings of two prominent anti-Kremlin journalists, Anna Politkovskaya and Alexander Litvinenko, in 2006 and 2007 respectively, has resulted in an increased awareness among the Russian public about how important freedom of press and media accountability are.

Changes in media practices: for the better and worse?

As the media economies expand in the Brics countries, do journalism practices improve, thus making media more accountable? The answer is both yes and no and depend on the country in question.

In India, we have seen the strengthening of media institutions and increased media accountability with more open and public discussions of media ethics

and appointments of ombuds by major newspapers. An independent agency called the News Broadcasters Association has been established which has developed the first ethics codes and guidelines for practices for television journalists. Journalism ethics is now being taught as part of the curriculum in every major university.

Yet, ethical lapses in journalistic practices are on the rise. The case of the Delhi teenager Aarushi Talwar's murder in 2008 which was sensationalised by the round-the-clock television news cycle is a prime example, among many, where news media was found to have fabricated images and broadcast gossip as facts. The justices of the supreme court of India, in a rare gesture, issued a statement about media coverage of the Talwar case as “lacking in sensitivity, taste, and decorum”. One well-known journalist labeled this coverage a “media scrum” where the practice of breaking news had become the excuse for broadcasting a massive amount of inaccurate information. And with no clear system of accountability and no repercussions on the media companies, retractions were few.

In China, the government is being held accountable by underground bloggers and social media activists but the national media remains firmly in the hand of the state. In hopes of getting a handle on the potentially threatening surge of information from the internet, the government has started a campaign that aims to quash what it calls internet “rumours”, ie, statements that it says threaten the public order but that it has no way of defining what is and is not rumour. The communist party has been pressuring social media providers to weed out allegations it finds threatening, and state media has tried to whip up fear over their malignant cultural effects. Since December 2012, the government has been blocking

online searches of politically sensitive terms, smothering what it deems embarrassing news events for the party, blocking online messages from dissidents, and deleting microblog posts that it dislikes.

In Russia, President Vladimir Putin, an ex-KGB agent and second-time president, has not been an advocate of a free, accountable, and independent media. Russian media's spectacular economic growth and expansion has not been matched by a growth in freedom of expression. Becker calls Russian media a "neo-authoritarian media regime" where "formal democratic institutions may appear to exist but they are rotten at their core". Arrests of journalists are common and a few government-friendly oligarchs control most of the private media. And private media owners, like Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, who have not openly supported Putin have been jailed, exiled, and harassed on fake tax evasion and fraud charges.

Scholars argue that Russian media today, under Putin, is far less free than during the post-totalitarian days of the early 1990s.

South Africa, one of the most diverse democracies in the world, has witnessed both a consolidation and a weakening of a democratic press. Within a few years, South African media had to move from an isolationist siege economy to an economy that had to compete in the global marketplace.

After a smooth start in the early post-apartheid period, South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress, was increasingly afflicted by contradictions between its idealistic principles and the conduct of many of its leaders. These behaviours currently include threats to institute tighter controls over the judiciary, the ANC's critics and the media.

The 2012 Ibrahim Index of African Governance shows that although South Africa ranks fifth overall among African governments, its scores

have consistently declined over the past five years, with a significant reduction in scores for rule of law, accountability, and public participation. Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press* report downgraded South Africa from free to partly free status in 2011. With the recent passage in the National Assembly of a bill titled "The Protection of State of Information Act", aimed at prohibiting public access to information about many decisions and acts of government officials, the downward trajectory appears set to continue.

Of the Brics countries, Brazil has had, historically, a relatively free press. Journalists have been able to report freely during elections and there has been a wide spectrum of political voices available in the media. But the neoliberal economic model of media has touched media practices in Brazil, as it has touched the other Brics countries, with increased emphasis on entertainment rather than hard news and consolidation of media in the urban centres of Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, and Brasilia. Brazilian media owners also exert enormous political power which has led to an environment of corruption, undue pressure on individual journalists, and court-ordered censorship.

Future of media accountability in Brics

Much has to change in each of these countries before media can be considered free, accountable, and independent. And the journalists in each country face unique challenges.

In India, Brazil and South Africa, as democratic institutions such as the judiciary and electorate politics consolidate the press is likely to remain free. While in South Africa we have witnessed efforts by the government to curtail freedom of the press, in India we have seen a commercially-driven press abuse its freedom and act unethically. A truly accountable and free press in a democratic society is not only assured in the written law, but must hold itself accountable for unethical lapses and must create an environment where journalists can work without fear for their safety or of legal repercussions. In China and Russia existing political systems do not provide any guarantee for media freedom and accountability.

The latest Brics heads of state meeting, held in Durban, South Africa, in March 2013, had many issues on the agenda such as unemployment, establishing of a development-oriented bank, and environmental concerns. There was no discussion about freedom of the press or media accountability.

While the road to increased media accountability remains fraught with danger, there is also hope. Social media and mobile technology are weakening state control and information dissemination may not be as centralised in the future as it has been in the past. If so, journalists and media owners must use new media to seize opportunities to reach their publics quickly, directly, and with minimal state intervention.

References

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