South Africa and China as BRICS Partners: Media Perspectives on Geopolitical Shifts

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This talk

• Based on article in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*

• Growing area in media studies – how emergence of regional centres impacts on transnational flows of media content and capital

• The formation of the BRICS group epitomises the ‘Rise of the Rest’ as a geopolitical shift

• Focus on relationship between China and SA as BRICS partners, against background of increased China-Africa engagement

• Content analysis and exploratory survey of journalists

• Question – how is this engagement playing out in SA media?
Media and shifting geopolitics

• China-Africa relations in political and economic domain growing in recent years
• Foreign policy of ‘going out’ becoming more assertive
• Media seen as key tool to ‘change narrative’ about China – can be understood in terms of notions of ‘soft power’ and public diplomacy
• Media important arena on two levels – competing representations and part of flow and counterflow of capital
• Media a proxy for negotiation of key values: ‘Debates about media are often debates about democracy’
SA & China in context of BRICS

• China-Africa relationships not entirely new - first Sino-African contact 1415
• Chinese support for liberation movements, infrastructure projects e.g. Tan-Zam railroad – historical loyalties
• Gathering pace in 1990s, Africa’s largest trade partner
• China invites SA to join BRIC in 2010 – confirmation of growing economic ties
• SA’s hosting of BRICS summit 2013 – projects itself as economic leader on continent
SA & China in context of BRICS

• But also much controversy in media

• Around BRICS:
  – BRICS just ‘catchy acronym’
  – Different political and economic systems
  – Internal competition
  – SA’s membership eligibility

• Around China-Africa relations:
  – Labour practices and loss of local jobs
  – Commitment to human rights
  – Potential impact on press freedom
Discursive tropes

- Western reporting often marked by fearmongering or paternalism
- Often binaries: partner or predator, friend or foe, etc – little room for nuance or complexity
- Paul Zeleza - three themes: imperialism, globalization, solidarity
- Could add: Orientalism (Said) – positive: exotic, mysterious; negative: evil, threatening, ominous, unknowable
- Jan Nederveen Pieterse: Rise of Rest either ignored (doesn’t fit national narratives in West), represented as a threat (fits or extends existing enemy images) or celebrated (business media – triumph of marketplace)
Charm offensive

- Media is central to China’s soft power strategy
- Kurlantzick: ‘Charm offensive’
- Anbin Shi: ‘Charm defensive’
Charm offensive in Africa

• Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), China Daily - increased presence since 2006
• African bureaux for Chinese broadcast, print, mobile
• Xinhua 23 bureaux in Africa – cheaper alternative to Reuters, AFP (free if can’t pay); TV version (CNC World) carried on SA-based satellite TV
• Use of mobile platform to broaden reach: Xinhua, CCTV app
• Investments in training African media
• Professionalizing international broadcasts of CCTV
• Recently – Chinese consortium part of Sekunjalo group’s purchase of Independent in SA
Interpenetration of media

- African media markets differ and require different strategies
- Flow and contraflow: Naspers ‘rides big Chinese wave’ through Tencent
That creaking sound

• Challenge for Western ‘media assistance’ and soft power initiatives

• ‘That creaking sound you hear is the global see-saw tilting eastwards’ (Harber)

• “Chinese media culture is not going to sit easily in Africa where we have been developing and hopefully entrenching much more open democratic media culture” (Harber)

• China ‘not a danger to media independence – it will be business and nothing more than that’ (Radebe)
Key questions

• How has South Africa’s membership of BRICS, in particular its relationship with China, been represented in media?
• What are the attitudes of senior journalists and editors towards South Africa’s position within the changing geopolitical landscape?
Methodology

• Content analysis (Media Tenor) – build on previous periods
• Online survey of senior journalists and editors in major print and broadcast outlets
SA coverage of China

Volume of SA media coverage on BRIC countries over time

Russia
Brazil
China
India

SA coverage of China

**Volume**

- Economic situation
- Companies' market position
- Executives/management
- Perceptions of companies
- Procurement of capital
- Mergers/co-operations
- Products
- International politics
- Accidents
- Water sports

**Ratings**

- Economic situation
- Companies' market position
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- Perceptions of companies
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- Products
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- Accidents
- Water sports

- Negative
- Neutral
- Positive
Coverage findings

- Dominance of China compared to rest of BRICS
- BRICS coverage balanced (except Russia)
- Coverage of last 3 years shows balanced view of China emerging, becoming more positive
- Cautiously optimistic attitude in media – not pigeonholed as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ story
- China firm place on news agenda
- Strong economic focus, little social coverage
- Economic interest supersedes political or social issues (‘upstairs’ vs ‘downstairs’)

Online questionnaire to editors

- Asked senior journalists and editors about:
  - View of SA’s membership of BRICS
  - Relative importance of different BRICS countries on news agenda
  - If and how views of China have changed over recent years
  - What aspects of SA/China within BRICS readers are most interested in
  - Use of Chinese media sources
Questionnaire findings

• Generally positive view of BRICS membership – ‘seat at big table’
• Like content analysis – benefits seen mostly in economic terms
• China seen as most important to cover because of influence, India for ‘democratic relevance’
• Preference for trade and industry topics
• Almost all respondents developed more nuanced understanding of China due to more information (=soft power?)
“Yes, I now have more information about China and there are more on China to speak to in South Africa. My views have changed from suspicion to seeing China as a pragmatic actor working in different way with better results and growing its economy. I don't think China is trying to colonize Africa. China needs Africa. (The) country (is) multi-facetted, (and it has) changed a lot in last 20 years and holds lessons. (China is) not a benign force coming into the country. (It) has self-interest at heart. SA has to do the same.”
“The relationship is as ambivalent as it is important, and I think the real texture of what is happening is missed in both the "yellow peril" discourse that runs through too much reporting on the subject, and the boosterism that is its counterpart. China's own stance is evolving, and it seems to me to be a good deal more sophisticated than is often credited. The short answer is that my view is much the same, but there is more evidence and detail to support a nuanced view.”
“Certainly it's not a partnership of equals, China is dominating. To a certain extent Brazil is a bit dominant as well, I'm not sure about Russia, I'm not sure if they belong to that group”

“SA is the like the stepbrother, the adopted child, the johnny-come-lately. China is definitely head and shoulders above the other partners. Russia and India are closer to China but SA is definitely at the bottom with China dominating”
Use of China’s media

“I refer to both Xinhua and CCTV from time to time, both for a sense of what the official Chinese line is on key issues, and for a sense of where Chinese interests line. It is also interesting to get a sense of what is possible in China's heavily controlled official media.”

“We use them to try give a context on how things are reported and represented there, but we very careful to declare the nature of the paper, whether it's partisan and alighted to the ruling party.”
Conclusion

• Coverage of China-Africa within BRICS alignment cautiously optimistic
• Increasing nuance at least partly due to exposure to Chinese media – ‘soft power’ among hierarchy of influences
• Media likely to remain space for battles over attitudes and perceptions
• ‘Upstairs’ still has to be followed by ‘downstairs’
• Conducting follow-up study
Thank you

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