

“For better or worse”? A frame analysis of BRICS activities by digital journalists in South Africa

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to examine the discourse on BRICS that are framed by digital journalists in South Africa. South Africa has been going through an uneasy economic path characterised by high unemployment rates, constant power cuts, and their economy relegated into a ‘junk status’. Against this background, BRICS presents a good opportunity for the country to negotiate and address some of its challenges/problems with other economic super-powers within the economic block. This paper comes against a background of silent research on BRICS yet the block has developed into an economic hub which other developing countries benefiting from it for the development of their economies. I therefore argue that South African digital journalists from the country’s leading news websites, *News24* and *Daily Maverick*, are framing BRICS in a manner in which it reflects the socio-economic and political problems affecting the country. Hence, the study had sought to find out the images of BRICS among the journalist and also information, events, and activities that are being prioritized in reference to South Africa’s challenges. Findings have shown that BRICS is benefiting South Africa. The benefit is seen through trade relations that are framed as having been improved while there are also other potential areas of cooperation that should be utilised.

Keywords:

BRICS; South Africa; Digital Journalists; News Sites; Frame Analysis.

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“Para melhor ou para pior”? Uma análise de quadro das atividades do BRICS por jornalistas digitais na África do Sul

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Resumo:

Este artigo procura examinar o discurso sobre o BRICS que é enquadrado por jornalistas digitais na África do Sul. A África do Sul está passando por um caminho econômico desconfortável, caracterizado por altas taxas de desemprego, cortes constantes de energia e sua economia relegada a um “status de lixo”. Nesse contexto, o BRICS apresenta uma boa oportunidade para o país negociar e enfrentar alguns de seus desafios/ problemas com outras superpotências econômicas dentro do bloco econômico. Este artigo tem como pano de fundo uma pesquisa silenciosa sobre o BRICS, mas o bloco se transformou em um polo econômico do qual outros países em desenvolvimento se beneficiam para o desenvolvimento de suas economias. Por isso, argumento que jornalistas digitais sul-africanos dos principais sites de notícias do país, News24 e Daily Maverick, estão enquadrando o BRICS de maneira a refletir os problemas socioeconômicos e políticos que afetam o país. Portanto, o estudo busca descobrir as imagens do BRICS entre os jornalistas e também informações, eventos e atividades que estão sendo priorizadas em referência aos desafios da África do Sul.

Palavras-chave:

BRICS, África Do Sul; Jornalistas Digitais; Sites de Notícias, Análise de Quadros.

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There is fairly body of literature on BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) since its inception and its current activities (CHIYEMURA, 2014; SANDRY; JANSEN, 2013). However, most of these studies are mainly inclined to international relations and economic development and they seek to show the relevance of this economic bloc to regional and global trade (MARRIAN; MAQUTU, 2015; CAMPBELL, 2013). For South Africa, BRICS presents an opportunity for her to turn-around the economy which has on several occasions been downgraded into a junk status [1] (OMARJEE, 2019). Taking into account that BRICS continues to be seen as key for the revival and survival of the economy, the media are crucial plyers in mediating economic developments. This paper locates itself in this trajectory where it seeks to examine the framing of BRICS activities by selected South Africa news websites. Hence, the study looks at ‘economic journalism’ which refers “to journalism about business, financial markets and economics” (MARE; BRAND, 2010, p. 407). Business news which are core of this study are influenced by the vitality of economics which are an important ‘area of knowledge acquisition for effective participation in modern democracies’ (MOGWEEKU, 2005). Resultantly, business news is crucial for the livelihood of all mankind and different spheres of society. Of major interest and key driver of this study is that business journalists contribute to public knowledge about the state of the economy, treaties, and given possible direction which the country should take (GAVIN, 1998). Furthermore, the media is crucial in that it acts as a public sphere where economic ideas are debated, and ideologies are simplified (BRAND, 2010).

South Africa, one of Africa’s economic powerhouse, joined BRICS in 2010. The coming in of South Africa transformed the name from BRIC to BRICS with Brazil, Russia, India and China having formed the economic bloc earlier in 2009. Coming against the background where South Africa’s ratings had been repeatedly downgraded into a junk status by several reputable rating agencies (ASUELIME, 2018), the advent of BRICS presented a good opportunity for the country to assert itself and looked like a ‘positive new dawn for the country’ (JETHRO; ASUELIME 2013). Hence, joining BRICS was a biggest economic opportunity that “will give the country the opportunity to alleviate some of its challenges and achieve its goals and objectives as set out in the National Development Plan (NDP)” (ASUELIME, 2018, p. 130). South Africa has been making significant strides in its global trade with trade relations between South Africa and BRICS having increased tremendously, up to 70 percent in the year 2014.

In total, South Africa's trade with BRICS was worth R382 billion in the year 2014, up from R268 billion in 2011 (ASUELIME, 2018). Africa had doubled its total trade with BRICS since 2007 to \$340 billion (R4.2 trillion) in 2012 and this was projected to reach \$500 billion in 2015 (SOUTHAFRICA.INFO, 2015). This confirms the assumptions of the economic theory that trade gains are wider when the great suites of countries are involved. This study is hinged on the poor economic performance that the country is experiencing, and seeks to assess how BRICS which the country joined so as to improve its international trade is framed by the *News 24* and *Daily Maverick* which are both one of the leading news websites in South Africa. The study, thus, broadly seeks to examine the framing of BRICS and the key issues that are being appropriated by digital journalists. The study will first discuss economic journalism which is a form of journalism which digital journalists are practicing. Framing theory, which is used as a theoretical framework, will be discussed before detailing frame analysis, an analytical method. Lastly, the study will discuss the findings which demonstrated that BRICS Bank' was helping to revitalise the country's economy, and that BRICS was promoting international trade.

'Economic journalism': An African perspective

In its reportage on BRICS, journalists will be practicing economic journalism which plays an important role in raising awareness on the state of the economy. Such information role includes monitoring market performance and also keeping check of government activities like trade deals (BRAND, 2010; PARKER, 1997). As such, governance, this study argues, is about economy, and the reportage on BRICS activities is a critical for country like south African experiencing a sluggish growth. Stemming from the view that African journalism is crucial for the survival of the nation, African newsrooms have taken the task and invested more in economic reporting to help simplify hard data for the benefit of audiences, and also check on the government's promises (KAREITHI; KARIITHI, 2005, p. 120). However, it is important to also note that economic reporting is a new beat in Africa as most newsrooms where largely investing in politics, entertainment and sport (MARE; BRAND, 2010; KAREITHI; KARIITHI, 2005). More so, the economic journalism model indicates that media has the power to influence decision making where they can advocate for adoption and rejection of certain policies (TAMBINI, 2009). In this study, I argue that journalists' reportage on BRICS is designed to mediate country's problems with the aim of coming up with solutions. The study further argues that digital journalists stand a bigger

chance to cover and disseminate information on BRICS because of the “presence of immediacy and hypermediacy in new media” that has ‘refashioned’ the media landscape (BOLTER; GRUSIN, 1999, p. 39). Furthermore, “major characteristics of new media include digital, interactive, hypertextual, virtual, networked, and simulated” (DUTTA; GANGOPADHYAH, 2019, p. 715), have been the key drivers of the new media landscape. Resultantly, the development has led to “passionate, public conversations among diverse voices and perspectives and has initiated the return of point-of-view style of news writing” (DUTTA; GANGOPADHYAH, 2019, p. 721). Friend and Singer (2007) further notes that internet has threatened the hegemony of established media by creating ‘new storytelling possibilities and ushering in a degree of practical reality to the ideal of journalism as a public conversation.’

Framing Theory

The study is also informed by framing theory. Goffman (1974, p. 22) was the first scholar to theorise framing as a form of communication and defined “framing” as a “schemata of interpretation” that enables individuals to “locate, perceive, identify and label” occurrences or life experiences. The study will show how frames are used to report on BRICS related stories. Frames will include major issues around South Africa’s economy, benefits of being in the economic bloc, and also economic areas of concern. Scheufele (1999, p. 100) contends that framing has to do with making sense, interpreting and giving meaning to what happens in the ongoing world. Thus, framing has important implications for political communication in that it constructs what is perceived as real. In gender and feminist studies, the media has been constructing reality which shows women politicians in domestic duties not in their heroine deeds. Entman (1993, p. 55) supports this stance and argues that frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, lead audiences to have different reactions. He further notes that ‘framing in this light plays a major role in the exertion of political power, and the frame in a news text is really the imprint of power – it registers the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text.’

In addition, Scheufele (1999, p. 103) contends that within the realm of political communication, framing has to be defined and operationalised on the basis of social constructivism. He notes that mass media actively set the frames of reference that readers and viewers use to interpret and discuss public events. Entman (1993, p. 53) clarifies the meaning of framing arguing that it is “a central organising idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding trip of events, weaving a connection among

them.” Therefore, framing is important in showing the nature of business reporting especially on BRICS related stories. The study argues that there are some issues that will be framed as important while some will be silenced, and this act of journalistic practices shows that structure the value attributed to certain business issues over others.

Brief notes on methodology

The study selected News24 and Daily Maverick for analysis. The former prides itself as South Africa’s premier news source that provides breaking news on national, world, Africa, sport, entertainment, and technology. The publication, created in October 1998 by the multinational media company, Naspers, publishes its information in English language. Naspers, under the “24” brand, operates sites such as Channel24, News24 Nigeria, News24 Kenya. Therefore, it was selected for analysing in this study because of its immediacy and global reach. On the other hand, Daily Maverick is a South African daily online newspaper founded in 2009 and edited by Branko Brkic and published by Styli Charalambous. Every part of Daily Maverick is free-to-air and no payment is required, although free registration is required for a small subset of functions and pages. More information obtained from the websites indicate that Daily Maverick [2] is run by an independently owned, private company with no affiliation to any other media group (or political party or religious organisation.) It is funded mainly through advertising. In selecting stories, key word ‘BRICS’ was entered into each publication’s search engine. Stories that mentioned BRICS were avoided as they couldn’t give a deeper analysing. Hence the study selected stories that were mainly addressing BRICS related activities.

Framing analysis, which is a form of qualitative content analysis, was employed in the study to help identify the biases and assumptions in the coverage, as explained in the analysis. Framing analysis is useful in showing how news organisations manipulate language, structure and other aspects in order to emphasise certain aspects of a story while suppressing or omitting others (see ENTMAN, 1993). Reese (2007) cited in Spangers (2012, p. 13) is of the view that “framing is used in studies of the media and mass communication as a tool of analysis in order to find how issues are constructed, discourse constructed and meanings developed”. Goffman (1974) also argues that framing analysis looks at what is set up on stage and where the act is carried out. Hence, framing analysis is used to analyse actors who are mostly given prominence during an act on stage as “...the others on stage, especially those not

engaged in talk with the current social person tend to be arranged out of focus, their actions muted, the result being that the attention of the audience is directed to the speaker” (GOFFMAN, 1974, p. 140).

Characters that are mostly given prominence on stage are analysed to find out how they frame national identity relative to the land reform programme of 2000. Hence, in explicating framing devices, Van Gorp (2007, p. 64) states that these include, choice of words, metaphors and examples, descriptions, arguments, visual images. Such a view is also supported Gamson and Modigliani (1989) cited in Pan and Kosicki (1993, p. 56) who state that “there are five...devices that signify the uses of frames: metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images”. In its basic function, framing analysis shows “how the language and structure of news items emphasize certain aspects (and omit others)” (BILLIG *et al.*, 2005, p. 2). Pan e Kosicki (1993, p. 59) also argue that there are different types of framing formation in news presentation. These include script structures (narrative style), rhetorical structures (metaphors), syntactical structures (headlines, order of presentation), thematic structures (casual statements or implied statements).

Analysis

The analysis below seeks to show key issues that are being prioritised by the news websites. Through framing analysis, the study observed that South Africa’s economy was on the verge of improvement owing to the financial bailouts that the country is getting from the BRICS ban. More so, the country is framed as benefiting from its association as a member of the BRICS bloc as there is an improvement in international trade. Therefore, two key themes were explored in this study and these are; ‘Banking on *BRICS Bank*’: *BRICS Bank and the revitalization of the economy* and *A good move: BRICS and the promotion of international trade*. These themes are discussed in-depth below.

‘Banking on BRICS Bank’: BRICS Bank and the revitalization of the economy

One of the key issues being propagated by news websites is that the National Development Bank (NDB) [3] popularly known as the BRICS Bank is bailing out ailing companies which are crucial for the revival of the country’s economy. In the story, *BRICS Bank approves R6bn for Eskom project*, the journalist indicated that the R6bn

funding to Eskom is, therefore, ‘in line with the bank’s general strategy of supporting infrastructure and sustainable development projects’ (SMITH, 2019). Eskom is presented as a key frame on countries economy, as the economy depends much on stable electricity supply. In another story, *BRICS bank to lend Eskom billions to alleviate pressure on SA grid*, journalist from *Daily Maverick* indicates that the funding will assist the ‘ailing South African power utility battles to keep power supply steady’ which constants power cuts ‘threatening the productivity of Africa’s most-industrialised economy’ (HENDERSON, 2019). Entman (1993, p. 52) indicates that to frame is to take “some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described”. As such, given headlines suggest that BRICS Bank has managed to come to the rescue of this ‘ailing power utility’ which is the backbone of the economy. Therefore, the framing of stories is showing that South Africa is benefiting from its membership of BRICS because they are getting financial bailout. Gamson and Modigliani (1989, p. 143) further elucidate the idea of framing and state that it is “a central organising idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding trip of events, weaving a connection amongst them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue”. Hence, the essence of the issues is that South African economy is unstable and has managed to get assistance from the useful BRICS bank.

Besides the focus on Eskom, the study found that the BRICS bank is credited for a financial package to resuscitate several economic sectors. In the story, *Sanral gets R7 billion from Brics bank to improve toll roads*, Mangubane (2019) indicates that for South African National Roads Agency (Sanral), “the news may come with some relief” as the institution was “grappling with non-compliance with the tolls”. Words such as ‘some relief’ and ‘grappling with’ are frames that have been constructed to show the extent in which the company has been in deep liquidity crisis. Hence, as postulated by Goffman (1974), language is used to express certain aspects and its use in the story has been to show the significance of BRICS bank to South Africa’s economy. More so, the story also indicates that ‘the bank approved four infrastructure and sustainable development projects worth about \$1.4bn, bringing the bank’s total portfolio to 42 projects, with loans of \$11.6bn’ (MANGUBANE, 2019). The financial package which was extended to other sectors of the country’s economy is also captured in the story; *SA has tapped \$2bn from the BRICS New Development Bank — and more is coming*. In the story, the bailout is framed as having managed to assist the “cash-strapped South Africa” for the “badly needed infrastructure financing” (FABRICIUS, 2019b).

The choice of words is not innocent but it shows the work of framing which refers to the way events and issues are organised and made sense of and given meaning to (GAMSON; MODIGLIANI, 1989).

Framing analysis, which is a form of qualitative content analysis (WIMMER; DOMINICK, 2006, p. 152-153), was employed in the study to help identify the biases and assumptions in the coverage, as explained in the analysis. As such, the study notes that digital journalists from *News24* and *Daily Maverick* practiced economic journalism where they reported on economic policies and best way of reviving an economy which is underperforming. As such, framing analysis is useful in showing how news organisations manipulate language, structure and other aspects in order to emphasise certain aspects of a story while suppressing or omitting others (see ENTMAN, 1993). In this study, BRICS bank was the key frame that journalists opted to prioritise. The bank was framed as having managed to save South Africa's economy. Therefore, the study argues that BRICS is hyped and treasured as an important institution key for the revival and growth of South Africa economy.

A good move: BRICS and the promotion of international trade

The findings demonstrate that BRICS is appropriated as promoting international trade with South Africa benefiting from trading with world superpowers like China and Russia. Economic journalism is practiced through the framing or turning attention to key areas in which South Africa can tap from, and strike lucrative deals, something which she cannot be able to do outside BRICS. Energy remains key issue that journalists are reporting on, and needs the country's attention. As such, in the story; *BRICS energy co-operation: Why Russia and South Africa still need each other*, the *Daily Maverick* indicates that 'by 2040 the BRICS nations will account for 45% of all global energy consumption and production, the Analytical Centre of the Government of the Russian Federation predicts' (MPUNGOSE; CHKONIYA, 2019). With framing being about making sense, interpreting and giving meaning to what happens in the on-going world (REESE, 2007), journalists are indicating that South Africa can alleviate its power generating problems by getting assistance from Russia which is 'one of the world's largest gas and oil producers and exporters, with significant proven reserves and extensive expertise and technological capacity' (MPUNGOSE; CHKONIYA, 2019). The turn to energy and the need to strike a deal with Russia is further supported by giving a clear picture of how South Africa will benefit from its trade with Russia.

While nuclear seems off the radar for now, in January 2018 an agreement was signed between the Russian state energy company Rosatom and the South African government to construct small hydropower plants in Mpumalanga to power rural regions of the country. This is a key component of South Africa's energy security strategy. Each mini hydropower plant is expected to power 250 to 400 houses (MPUNGOSE; CHKONIYA, 2019, Online)

Besides trade deals with Russia, South Africa is also seen as standing to benefiting from its trade with China. China is seen in the story; *China's Xi promises \$14.7bn in investments in South Africa*. The story indicates that "Chinese President Xi Jinping has committed China to investing \$14.7-billion in South Africa ... This would be a significant boost to Ramaphosa's international drive to raise \$100-billion in investment over the next five years" (FABRICIUS, 2019a). More so, South Africa is framed as going to benefit more as "Xi himself announced at the same joint press conference with Ramaphosa that China would take 'active measures' to boost imports from South Africa to support the country's development agenda and priorities" (FABRICIUS, 2018). Therefore, *China's building BRICS in South Africa* (FRANSMAN, 2018). The study argues that stories are structured in a way that convince readers that South Africa is not being exploited by the super powers, instead, she is reaping the good fruits of international trade that have been created by formation of BRICS. To add more, South Africa is appropriated as going to be the BRICS centre for research with *Pretoria still expecting BRICS to deliver vaccine research centre in South Africa* (FABRICIUS, 2019c). The BRICS Vaccine Research Centre (BVRC) [4].

The discussion above highlighted that the benefits of BRICS membership were evident in the presence in South Africa of Brazilian bus manufacturers, Russian train manufacturers, Indian automotive companies and Chinese machinery producers. As such, the manor role of journalists in reporting BRICS related activities has been to inform citizens, and also guide them on possible improvement that they might expect from the country's economy which is ailing. The study argues that the reportage is largely designed to give hope and shed more light on South Africa performance and benefit from this trade bloc. Framing analysis became useful in the study because it enabled the researcher to unpack key issues that the media found to be of importance and value to it audiences.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that economic journalism being practiced by selected digital sites is designed to promote the work of BRICS in the country. With South Africa experiencing an economic downgrade coupled by ailing state institutions like

Eskom, the media stands as key vehicles in providing and educating readers on the state of the economy. As such, the study argues that more stories were framed with the view of informing readers. Stories were not critically engaging or scrutinising trade deals. Therefore, the study contends that BRICS is framed as a vital institution important for the revival of the economy which is in dire need of funding. Hence, BRICS bank remains the key rallying point or point of reference which journalists write about as it has the money to assist south Africa is in its equities to regain its status. Furthermore, findings demonstrate that while there is a skepticism over the presence of world powers like China and Russia whom some view them as ‘colonizing African countries’ or ‘neo-colonialism’ (MBELE, 2018), economic journalists have shown that BRICS is also benefiting South Africa. The benefit is seen through trade relations that are framed as having been improved while there are also other potential areas of cooperation that should be utilized. In the end, South Africa is benefiting more from being a member of BRICS.

Notes

[1] South Africa has also been relegated into junk status on numerous occasions with the latest being April this year. Bloomberg reported that Moody’s Investors Service cut South Africa’s credit rating below investment grade, ‘delivering the country a full house of junk assessments as it grapples with a nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus’. Disponível em: <<https://businesstech.co.za/news/finance/385575/south-africa-downgraded-to-full-junk-status/>>. Acesso em: 13 abr. 2020.

[2] Daily Maverick further states that it is a unique blend of news, information, analysis and opinion delivered from our newsrooms in Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa. They brag that there are many ways to describe exactly what they do (and for the price of a cup of coffee we’re capable of talking your ears off about it), but the best way to understand the end result is to experience their content.

[3] The NDB was established in 2014 by the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) to mobilise resources for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS and other emerging economies and developing countries. Its funding is to complement the existing efforts of multilateral and regional financial institutions for global growth and development through public or private projects.

[4] The research centre is expected to focus on finding a vaccine for tuberculosis and the Brasilia Declaration did welcome the Collaborative Research Programme for TB, developed by BRICS TB Research Network in 2019, aimed at promoting new scientific, technological and innovative approaches to tackle the TB burden, by supporting scientific projects in a wide range of relevant issues related to TB.

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