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# TRACKING THE VISIBILITY OF THE BRICS CONSTELLATION IN BRAZILIAN NEWSPAPERS:

a longitudinal content analysis  
(2011-2019)



AUGUSTO SANTOS<sup>1</sup>

*Universität Erfurt, Erfurt – Thüringen – Germany*

*ORCID: 0000-0002-7162-3219*

REGINA CAZZAMATTA<sup>2</sup>

*Universität Erfurt, Erfurt – Thüringen – Germany*

*ORCID: 0000-0002-9574-3776*

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**ABSTRACT** – This study assesses the visibility of BRICS, its member states, and associated themes within the Brazilian-mediated public sphere. The theoretical framework centers on the role of journalism in monitoring foreign systems through foreign news coverage. Additionally, we consider the traditional structure of foreign reporting to discuss the potential factors shaping the media salience of the BRICS constellation. By conducting a quantitative and longitudinal (2011-2019) content analysis, we examined 1,451 articles from the newspapers O Estado de S. Paulo and O Globo. The Brazilian press primarily discusses global powers, crisis regions, neighboring states, and Brazil's key trade partners. China (5.1%) receives the most coverage among BRICS countries, likely due to its geopolitical power and strong economic ties with Brazil. Russia-related issues (4.1%), particularly those involving security and justice, also receive considerable focus. Conversely, Indian (1%) and South African (0.8%) issues receive noticeably less coverage. The BRICS bloc itself exhibits relatively low visibility, potentially hindering its recognition among the Brazilian public.

**Key words:** Foreign news coverage. Brazilian media. Public discourse. International communication. BRICS.

1 Universität Erfurt, Erfurt – Thüringen – Germany. E-mail: [augusto.da\\_silva\\_santos@uni-erfurt.de](mailto:augusto.da_silva_santos@uni-erfurt.de)

2 Universität Erfurt, Erfurt – Thüringen – Germany. E-mail: [regina.cazzamatta@uni-erfurt.de](mailto:regina.cazzamatta@uni-erfurt.de)

## MAPEAMENTO DA VISIBILIDADE DO AGRUPAMENTO BRICS EM JORNAIS BRASILEIROS: uma análise de conteúdo longitudinal (2011-2019)

**RESUMO** – Este estudo avalia o grau de visibilidade do grupo BRICS, de seus estados membros e dos temas a eles relacionados dentro da esfera pública brasileira. O arcabouço teórico centra-se no papel do jornalismo em monitorar sistemas estrangeiros por meio de coberturas internacionais. Além disso, consideramos a estrutura tradicional do jornalismo internacional para discutir os possíveis fatores que moldam a visibilidade midiática dos países do BRICS. A partir de uma análise de conteúdo quantitativa e longitudinal (2011-2019), examinamos 1.451 matérias publicadas pelos jornais O Estado de S. Paulo e O Globo. A imprensa brasileira discute, principalmente, potências globais, países em crise, estados vizinhos e os principais parceiros comerciais do Brasil. A China (5.1%) é o país dos BRICS com mais visibilidade, provavelmente devido ao seu poderio geopolítico e fortes laços econômicos com o Brasil. Questões relacionadas à Rússia (4.1%), especialmente aquelas envolvendo segurança e justiça, também recebem foco considerável. Temas envolvendo a Índia (1%) e a África do Sul (0.8%) recebem significativamente menos atenção midiática. O próprio bloco BRICS exibe uma visibilidade relativamente baixa, o que pode dificultar o seu reconhecimento entre o público brasileiro.

**Palavras-chave:** Cobertura internacional. Imprensa brasileira. Discurso público. Comunicação internacional. BRICS.

## MAPEO DE LA VISIBILIDAD DEL GRUPO BRICS EN PERIÓDICOS BRASILEÑOS: un análisis del contenido longitudinal (2011-2019)

**RESUMEN** – Este estudio evalúa el grado de visibilidad del grupo BRICS, sus estados miembros y los temas relacionados con ellos dentro de la esfera pública brasileña. El marco teórico se centra en el papel del periodismo en el monitoreo de sistemas extranjeros a través de la cobertura internacional. Además, se considera la estructura tradicional del periodismo internacional para discutir los posibles factores que dan forma a la visibilidad mediática de los países del BRICS. Mediante un análisis de contenido cuantitativo y longitudinal, se examinaron 1.451 artículos publicados por los periódicos O Estado de S. Paulo y O Globo. La prensa brasileña discute principalmente potencias globales, países en crisis, estados vecinos y principales socios comerciales. China (5.1%) es el país del BRICS con mayor visibilidad, probablemente debido a su poder geopolítico y fuertes lazos económicos con Brasil. Los temas relacionados con Rusia (4.1%), las relacionadas con la seguridad y la justicia, también reciben una atención considerable. Los temas relacionados con la India (1%) y Sudáfrica (0.8%) reciben significativamente menos atención. El propio bloque BRICS exhibe una visibilidad relativamente baja, lo que puede dificultar su reconocimiento entre el público brasileño.

**Palabras clave:** cobertura internacional. Prensa brasileña. Discurso público. Comunicación internacional. BRICS.

### 1 Introduction

The rise of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as a political platform in 2009 underlined the emergence of a multipolar era characterized by stronger South-South relations (Stuenkel, 2016). Over the past decade, the BRICS group has, for instance, established its own bank, the New Development Bank (NDB), and coordinated action within the United Nations. More recently, the group's announcement regarding the inclusion of new member states

and its stance on the Russo-Ukrainian war have made headlines worldwide (Borger, 2023; Lee, 2022; Stuenkel, 2020). Considering these events, it is becoming more difficult to ignore the existence of BRICS. This fact is not only valid in the field of international relations but also among global communication scholars. Much of the current debate revolves around the impact of the group's namesake countries on media flows and their potential to reshape the global communication order (Sodré et al., 2020; Thusu, 2020; Thusu & Nordenstreng, 2015). As Wasserman (2018, p. 449) observes, the regional prominence of BRICS media and "the stronger presence of China in the African communications landscape, [pose] a challenge for the hegemony of Western models and [undermine] older center-periphery models of global communication".

From the perspective of BRICS as an analytical category, a key question concerns the group's striving for internal and external recognition (Albuquerque & Lycarião, 2018; Dwyer & Arifon, 2019). This quest for recognition goes hand in hand with the visibility of communication, that is, the visibility of specific intergovernmental organizations and their respective actors and issues in the news media (Trenz, 2004; Wessler et al., 2008). These multinational institutions' media visibility is thus contingent on the ability of journalists to monitor them and transmit their discourse constellation to the domestic public sphere (Trenz, 2004). This rationale also relates to the first-level agenda-setting concept, which posits that the more media attention a country or an actor arouses, the more they will be perceived as significant by the audience (Golan, 2006; McCombs, 2014). Therefore, our inquiry delves into the extent to which the BRICS group, its thematic agenda, and respective member states (except Brazil) are evidenced by the Brazilian media system.

What we know about the visibility of BRICS in the Brazilian public sphere is based on a few empirical studies. Paulino and colleagues (2013, as cited in Wasserman et al., 2015) analyzed 31 editions of the newspaper *Correio Braziliense* and found that the coverage was highly political and economically oriented. In a qualitative investigation, Bomfim (2016) concentrated on the magazine *Veja's* coverage of BRICS during the group's constitution period (2005-2010). The author concluded from the analysis of 32 news items that the group was portrayed as a threat to the international system, and Brazil was regarded as the "black sheep" of the group (Bomfim, 2016). A recent foreign policy study by Fernandes

et al. (2021) examined public opinion data concerning Brazilians' perception of BRICS and the affiliated countries. Most participants (90%) did not know the group existed. The respondents, nonetheless, displayed a positive view of the grouping and its members (Fernandes et al., 2021).

The extent to which Brazilian news media monitor and give visibility to the BRICS constellation remains unclear from a longitudinal and up-to-date perspective. This study aims to fill this gap and shed new light on this debate by investigating the degree to which issues related to Russia, India, China, South Africa, and the BRICS group per se have penetrated the Brazilian sphere of public discourse. Within this analysis, we discuss the positioning of BRICS within the scope of attention of the Brazilian media system through the lens of the typical structure of foreign news coverage (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Golan, 2010; Hafez, 2007; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984; Wu, 2000). Methodologically, a quantitative content analysis approach was used to examine discursive international news ( $n = 1.451$ ) published between 2011 and 2019 by the leading newspapers O Globo and O Estado de S. Paulo. In addition to elucidating the visibility of the BRICS group and its member states in the media discourse, this study offers some insights into the production and structural dimensions of foreign reporting in the Brazilian press.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Foreign news coverage: cross-border media monitoring and news geography

One of journalism's fundamental functions is to monitor political actors and policymaking processes, thereby ensuring the effective operation of the public sphere (Christians et al., 2009; Habermas, 1989). As observers of multiple systems and subsystems, mass media play a crucial role in processing information and carrying public discourse so that the audiences can access a set of values and interpretations that enable them to understand their milieu and engage in cultural change (Habermas, 1989; Peters, 2006). Specifically, national news media primarily monitor the national realm (i.e., domestic systems and subsystems), resulting in more intensive communication flows "within the sphere than between

inside and outside” (Wessler et al., 2008, p. 8). Concurrently, there exists a dynamic of “exchange and observation between different national publics or public spheres” (Peters, 2006, p. 89). This process of “communicative border-crossing”, facilitated by national journalism, is commonly termed ‘foreign coverage’ (Hafez & Grüne, 2022, p. 21). Hence, it is primarily through foreign news delivered by the national media that other nation-states and external actors gain visibility within the national public sphere (Hafez, 2007; Hafez & Grüne, 2022).

In essence, “visibility of communication is the necessary precondition of the public sphere”, which means that communication about specific country-related issues is observed by media and the public (Trenz, 2004, p. 2). The extent of visibility accorded to particular countries by media outlets closely aligns with the first-level agenda-setting theory, which posits that a heightened share of news reports about a nation increases the likelihood that recipients perceive that nation as important (Golan, 2006; McCombs, 2014). In other words, there is no public debate about international issues in the national realm if they are not visible in the domestic media sphere (Hafez & Grüne, 2022). In the context of this study, it becomes crucial to uncover the frequency that the BRICS constellation is observed by the Brazilian press, as well as discuss the possible reasoning behind their coverage.

BRICS is a relevant case because it prompts us to question whether Brazil’s participation in the group and bilateral relationships with the BRICS member states have intensified the discussion of these countries within the Brazilian media sphere. This inquiry is underpinned by the argument that transnational interdependencies and issues may enhance media monitoring across politically or economically interconnected countries, thus intensifying communication flows among these nations (Wessler & Brüggemann, 2012). For instance, Koopmans and Erbe (2004, p. 101) emphasize that “in an intergovernmental polity, it may matter a great deal who wins the elections in another member state, or what kind of new policy another member state develops in a particular policy field”. Given this framework and considering BRICS’s pursuit of greater South-South cooperation and joint advocacy for a multipolar order (Freire, 2020; Stuenkel, 2016), it seems plausible to inquire about the visibility of Russia, India, China, and South Africa within the mediated debate in Brazil.

The positioning of BRICS member states within the scope of attention of the Brazilian media system<sup>1</sup> can be determined by various factors shaping the geography of news. Research on international news flow indicates that journalists tend to allocate more attention to countries with specific contextual attributes. For instance, elite nations (i.e., global powers) are more likely to receive news coverage (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Golan, 2010; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984; Wu, 2000). Attributes such as economic and geographical proximity between the reporting country and the covered country often dictate the news media's focus.

The nature of events (event-driven approach) can also influence the structure of international news coverage. Countries involved in conflictual issues (e.g., wars, economic, political crises) tend to attract more attention (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Hafez, 2007). These factors have shaped a pattern of foreign coverage that emphasizes certain types of countries: global powers (e.g., the USA and Western European nations), neighboring countries, crisis regions, and close trading partners of the reporting country (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Heimprecht, 2017; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984; Wu, 2000). Consequently, the geography of news, especially in Western media systems, is marked by the near invisibility of African and Latin American countries (Tiele, 2010; Wilke et al., 2012). These patterns highlight the North-South divide as a structural feature of foreign news coverage (Hafez & Grüne, 2022; Wilke et al., 2012).

While the literature provides critical insights into the nations typically monitored by news media, one should note that news geography can vary across national media systems due to their operation in different regional environments (Hafez & Grüne, 2022). Thus, "very different topics and countries are discussed below the thin 'tip of the iceberg' of world news about crisis-hit regions and 'metropolitan' states" (p. 63). Moreover, within an interdependent geopolitical landscape, which includes the BRICS grouping, empirical investigations are imperative to understand whether "globally influenced processes have a greater impact on media discourse" (Hafez & Grüne, 2022, p. 52). Hence, it seems pertinent to verify whether the combination of nations monitored by the Brazilian press aligns with the traditional structure of foreign news coverage and to determine the position of BRICS member states in the mediated debate.

Based on the theoretical framework discussed above and considering that Brazil's "leading newspapers still carry great prestige

and continue to help set the political agenda, which makes their analysis crucial to comprehend Brazil's political sphere" (Herscovitz, 2019, p. 95), we formulated the following hypothesis:

H1: (a) China is anticipated to have greater media visibility among the BRICS states, partially owing to its economic proximity (contextual news factor) to Brazil. (b) The attention dedicated by Brazilian newspapers to the BRICS nations is expected to vary over time, mainly influenced by event-driven coverage (event-centrism).

## **2.2 Mediated discourse components: thematic agenda and intergovernmental actors**

The previous section showed that the substantial visibility of specific countries and the invisibility of others in the national media discourse tell us something about the interplay between the political and media systems. However, this information alone is not exhaustive, as discourse constellations involve various elements like political topics, speakers, and references to actors (Hurrelmann & Wagner, 2020; Trenz, 2004; Ulrich, 2016). Thus, beyond exploring country-related issues in Brazil's mediated debate, it is crucial to unpack (a) the salience of subjects linked to BRICS cooperation, and (b) the visibility of the BRICS group per se.

Firstly, regarding the thematization in international news coverage, discussions linking international affairs to domestic actors or issues (home news abroad) tend to attract more attention from domestic media and resonate more strongly with domestic audiences (Hafez & Grüne, 2022; Hanitzsch et al., 2013). Such topics align with the normative expectation that mass media report on subjects of common concern and relevance (Habermas, 1989; Hafez, 2007). Within the BRICS context, the conversations among the five members initially concentrated on economic issues. However, the thematic scope of BRICS discussions has expanded significantly in recent years, encompassing foreign policy, security, justice, health, agriculture, and governance (Stuenkel, 2020). The query arises regarding how these subjects feature in Brazilian media coverage of the BRICS members. As previously mentioned, in addition to economic and political closeness (contextual factors), event-related factors can influence the thematic distribution within international news reporting (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Golan, 2010; Schulz, 1976; Staab, 1990). For instance,

previous studies have confirmed foreign reporting's tendency to cover political and conflictual topics (Cazzamatta & Santos, 2023; Hafez, 2007; Tiele, 2010). Specifically, the focus on political matters in international news coverage can be attributed to political events inherently fulfilling the requirement for general interest, and "strategic public relations carried out by political institutions make it easier to access information abroad" (Hafez, 2007, p. 34). Therefore, the second hypothesis is as follows:

H2: unlike the typical emphasis on political issues in foreign news coverage, Brazilian newspapers are expected to focus their debate about the BRICS member states primarily on economic matters – which relates to the shared economic focus that initially united these countries.

Another component of public discourse, particularly within the global governance framework, refers to the visibility of transnational and global intergovernmental institutions. Aligned with the monitoring function of journalism (Christians et al., 2009; Habermas, 1989), establishing legitimacy for an intergovernmental platform requires the active engagement of news media. This entails a comprehensive discussion of these institutions, thereby bringing their policies and stances to the public's attention (Wessler et al., 2008). In this vein, a much-debated question is whether intergovernmental organizations have propelled national public spheres to higher levels of discursive integration with supranational actors. This is exemplified in the studies on the emergence of a transnational public sphere among the European Union member states (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Trenz, 2004; Wessler et al., 2008). One fundamental premise in these studies is that the more a nation-state commits to a multinational institution, the more likely its media system is to observe the institution – vertical observation (Trenz, 2004; Koopmans & Erbe, 2004).

Regarding the BRICS group itself, its visibility within the press of the member states may contribute to enhancing internal recognition (Dwyer & Arifon, 2019). To solidify its institutional character, BRICS has established entities like the New Development Bank and Contingency Reserve Arrangement, conducted multifaceted policy meetings, and collectively advocated for more robust participation in global governance institutions (Freire, 2020; Stuenkel, 2020). These activities could potentially heighten the newsworthiness of BRICS, thus attracting more coverage from the Brazilian press. However,

“a shift from an increasing number of coordination mechanisms to a focus on implementing decisions taken at summits” remains necessary to “enhance the group’s delivery-based effectiveness and legitimacy” (Larionova, 2020, p. 272). Thus, we hypothesized:

H3: Brazilian newspapers are likely to devote relatively minimal attention to the BRICS bloc, partly due to its nascent institutionalization and effectiveness, particularly when compared to intergovernmental organizations led by elite nations.

### 3 Material and method

A quantitative and longitudinal content analysis was conducted to gain deeper insights into the visibility of the BRICS group, its thematic agenda, and respective member states within the Brazilian media coverage of international-related issues. Two quality and leading newspapers, *O Estado de S. Paulo* and *O Globo*, were selected for analysis based on three criteria: circulation<sup>2</sup>, ownership, and political leaning. While both publications are generally considered center-right, *O Estado de S. Paulo* displays a stronger tendency toward conservatism, and *O Globo* exhibits a relatively more liberal orientation (Schmitz, 2017).

Moreover, the focus on these quality newspapers stems from their enduring influence within the Brazilian media sphere. Despite the prevalence of television and social media as primary information sources among Brazilians (Newman et al., 2024), “national newspapers and magazines remain the main agenda-setters in their coverage of politics” (Herscovitz, 2019, p. 99). They shape political media coverage “as TV news offers only short, fragmented perspectives and social media (Twitter, especially) provide minimal information, referring readers back to links to contents prepared by newspapers and magazines” (p. 99). This observation resonates with the notion of intermedia agenda-setting, positing that quality newspapers likely influence the agenda of other media outlets (Reinemann, 2003; Wessler, 2018).

This analysis includes articles that were published between January 2011 (the year South Africa first officially joined the BRICS summit) and December 2019 (just before the covid-19 outbreak). Given the substantial volume of articles encompassed within this multi-year analysis, we employed the constructed week technique to constrain the sample size (Riffe et al., 1993; Rössler, 2017). Thus, the sampling design involved randomly selecting days of the week to

construct an artificial week for each half-year period (one Monday in March, one Tuesday in July, and so forth). This proceeding resulted in a total of 18 constructed weeks.

The print editions published within the specified timeframe were accessed via the PressReader platform and the newspapers' digital archives. Our approach involved a curation of foreign news reporting – “the content [...] of media coverage of realities beyond the home state” (Hafez, 2007, p. 24). This selection process adhered to three criteria. First, articles were exclusively considered if they surpassed the threshold of 150 words. Second, our focus included articles on topics pertinent to the areas of BRICS cooperation or articulated within its communiqués: economics/finance, politics, specific social issues (climate change, migration, public health, demonstration, and press), security/justice and international politics (Stuenkel, 2020). Third, given our research emphasis on public discourse, the analysis was confined to discursive articles, that is, articles featuring statements, arguments, opinions, or evaluations (e.g., interviews, background reports, analyses, opinion pieces, external contributions) (Wessler et al., 2008). As this study is part of a larger research project that examines media content across all BRICS countries, this sampling scheme resulted in a total of 3.945 articles. For the purpose of this present study, we used a sample of 1.451 articles from both Brazilian newspapers.

### 3.1 Content variables

The operationalization of our analysis included the coding of specific content variables. First, we sought to determine which countries were placed in the foreground of the discursive articles (geographical focus). Up to five countries or world regions (e.g., Europe<sup>3</sup>, South America, Oceania) were registered per article. To assess the visibility of intergovernmental institutions, we categorized the frequency of articles focused on the BRICS group (0 = Absent; 1 = Partial focus; 2 = Strong focus) and identified up to five supranational organizations referenced in the news items (e.g., EU, UN, IMF, Mercosur, African Union). For thematic analysis, we assigned codes to each article's primary broad subject (economics and finance, politics, international affairs, and a restricted range of social issues) and the main specific subject (e.g., economic crisis,

technology sector, elections) discussed. Lastly, the geopolitical scope of the articles' broad subjects was operationalized (supranational, supranational BRICS, extra-BRICS, intra-BRICS, and national) following the framework of Koopman and Erbe (2004).

The codebook for this study, which includes the variables and detailed coding instructions, is available online<sup>4</sup>.

### **3.2 Reliability**

As this study stems from a larger research project involving the cross-country analysis of media discourses, three trained coders participated in the general coding process. Krippendorff's alpha coefficient was used to calculate the intercoder reliability (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). The test considered a subsample of 150 articles. The results show a high level of reliability for the variables in this study: geographical focus (0.86); main subject (0.80); specific subject (0.69); BRICS focus (0.95); reference to supranational organizations (0.81); and geopolitical scope (0.77).

## **4 Results**

The descriptive statistics presented in table 1 reveal that China (5.1%) and Russia (4.1%) received the most attention among the BRICS members from Brazilian newspapers, which confirms H1(a). Compared to the number of discursive reports on the United States (23.5%), the visibility of China and Russia in the news is relatively small. The considerable visibility of the United States is not surprising, as this is a well-acknowledged trend in news geography (Kamps, 2008; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984; Tiele, 2010). Venezuela, the second-ranked country, corresponds to 8.3% of the sample. Besides being a neighbor of Brazil, Venezuela can be considered a crisis zone, which adds to its newsworthiness. Therefore, it is significant that two BRICS fellows were among the six most thematized countries within Brazil's public discourse. Conversely, India (1%) and South Africa (0.8%) were paid scant attention. In general, 189 discursive articles out of 1.451 were related to the BRICS members.

**Table 1**

*Most thematized countries/world regions – excluding Brazil – in discursive articles published by O Estado de S. Paulo and O Globo (2011-2019)*

Countries/world regions	N* (countries featured)	% of total
United States	500	23.5
Venezuela	176	8.3
<b>China</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>5.1</b>
Argentina	106	5.0
Europe	93	4.4
<b>Russia</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>4.1</b>
Syria	68	3.2
United Kingdom	55	2.6
Israel	52	2.4
France	47	2.2
Egypt	43	2.0
Germany	39	1.8
Iran	38	1.8
Cuba	37	1.7
Spain	34	1.6
Greece	28	1.3
Italy	28	1.3
Iraq	26	1.2
Palestine	26	1.2
Uruguay	26	1.2
Paraguay	25	1.2
Colombia	23	1.1
<b>India</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>1.0</b>

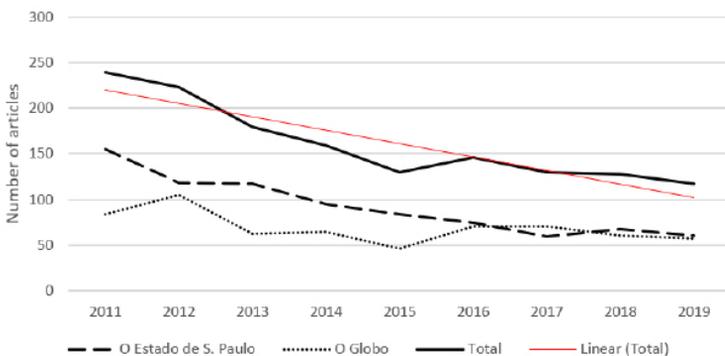
Ukraine	21	1.0
Libya	20	0.9
Mexico	19	0.9
Afghanistan	18	0.8
Bolivia	18	0.8
Ecuador	18	0.8
<b>South Africa</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>0.8</b>
Others	305	14.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,125</b>	<b>100</b>

\**Note.* In this table, “n” refers to the number of countries/world regions involved in the news discourses. We coded up to five nations/regions for each article. Thus, the total number of coded countries/regions (2.125) exceeds the total number of analyzed articles (1.451).

To investigate H1(b), we began by examining the temporal distribution of the comprehensive sample. This approach aimed to identify discernible trends, particularly fluctuations in the volume of foreign reports over time. Figure 1 reveals a substantial share of articles originating from publications in 2011 (O Estado de S. Paulo) and 2012 (O Globo). Notably, both newspapers show a general decline in the prevalence of discursive articles on international issues, with intermittent fluctuations. The distribution of articles from both sources further emphasizes this temporal decline, as portrayed by the linear trendline in figure 1. This trend aligns with a previously identified phenomenon in other countries, where news outlets have dedicated less attention to international news over time (Hafez & Grüne, 2022; Hanitzsch et al., 2013; Thussu, 2004). Potential explanations for this shift could include budgetary constraints leading to reduced numbers of foreign correspondents, as well as the substitution of international news with soft news and infotainment (Aalberg et al., 2013; Altmeyden, 2010; Otto & Meyer, 2012). Nonetheless, a deeper exploration of this tendency and its underlying causes within the Brazilian media system falls outside the scope of this study and warrants future investigation.

**Figure 1**

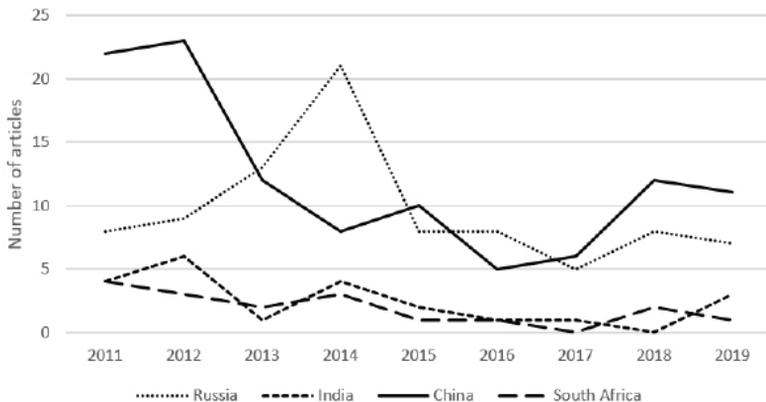
*Temporal distribution of discursive articles about international subjects (n = 1.451) published by O Estado de S. Paulo and O Globo*



Regarding the visibility of the BRICS states over the years, figure 2 indicates a pronounced decrease from 2013 in the number of articles related to China. This decline aligns primarily with the overall downward trend observed in international news discourses, as shown in figure 1. Notably, the news discourse about China in the first two analyzed years was mainly linked to the country's economic growth and political performance on the global stage, as well as the significance of the Chinese expansion for Brazil. However, post-2012, the discourse surrounding China shifted towards specific events. For instance, the peaks in article volume concerning China in 2015 and 2018 coincide with the Chinese economic slowdown and the initiation of the US-China trade war, respectively (Santos & Cazzamatta, 2024). As established previously, event-driven news factors, particularly crisis and conflict, traditionally shape international news coverage (Cazzamatta, 2020; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Hafez, 2007), and these two events in 2015 and 2018 intrinsically embody such values. Furthermore, a noteworthy anomaly in figure 2 is the surge in Russia's visibility in 2014, which deviates significantly from the general trend across the broader dataset. A plausible explanation for this spike is the extensive media coverage surrounding the Russian invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea that transpired that year. Hence, these findings confirm H1(b).

**Figure 2**

*Temporal distribution of discursive articles revolving around the BRICS countries (n = 189) published by O Globo and O Estado de S. Paulo*



Subsequently, we compared the thematic distribution from an intra-BRICS perspective, which corroborated H2 (see table 2). The results confirm that economic and financial issues (43.4%) dominated the Brazilian public debate about BRICS countries. China alone was linked to 36% of the articles with a focus on economics and finance. A closer examination reveals that the top three specific issues linked to China are trade and finance (27.5%), economic regression and crisis (10.1%), and foreign policy and diplomacy (9.2%). Economic subjects also take center stage when it comes to issues related to India (6.3%) and South Africa (5.8%). Interestingly, the frequency of themes in the field of justice and security (24.3%) is higher than in politics (12.2%) or international affairs (13.8%). This fact is due to the strong correlation between Russia and security and justice issues (20.1%), reinforcing our justification for the peak demonstrated in figure 2.

**Table 2**

*Thematic distribution in the newspapers O Estado de S. Paulo and O Globo (2011-2019), considering the BRICS main policy areas*

		Economy and finance	Politics	Social issues*	Security and justice	International policy	Total
China	n	68	8	7	11	15	109
	% of total	36	4.2	3.7	5.8	7.9	57.7
India	n	12	3	2	1	4	22
	% of total	6.3	1.6	1.1	0.5	2.1	11.6
Russia	n	21	14	3	38	12	88
	% of total	11.1	7.4	1.6	20.1	6.3	46,5
S. Africa	n	11	1	3	0	2	17
	% of total	5.8	0.5	1.6	0	1.1	9
Total	n	82	23	12	46	26	189
	% of total	43.4	12.2	6.3	24.3	13.8	100

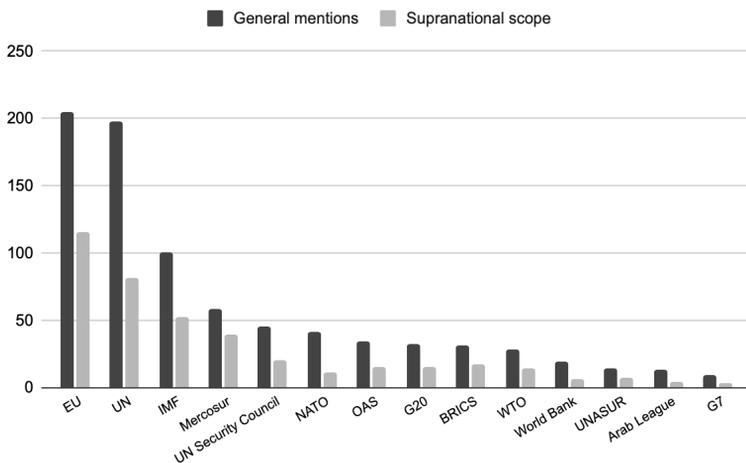
\*Note. The following social issues were considered given the areas of BRICS cooperation or issues articulated within its communiqués: climate change, migration, public health, demonstrations, and the press.

We adopted three approaches to explore the visibility of intergovernmental organizations to test H3. First, we coded the intergovernmental organizations mentioned in the articles by registering each organization's name only once if it appeared multiple times within the same article. We tailed a total of 887 references. Among these, we found 205 (23.1%) references to the European Union, 198 (22.3%) to the United Nations, and 101 (11.4%) to the International Monetary Fund. Figure 3 shows a higher prevalence of references to Western institutions over those from the global South, such as Mercosur, BRICS, and Unasur. Second, we observed the spatial scope of the primary issue discussed in the articles. Articles were classified as having a supranational scope if their central topic was related to an intergovernmental organization (i.e., vertical observation of cross-border debates). As a result, we discovered that most issues

were also correlated to Western organizations. Figure 3 indicates the propensity of *O Globo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo* to predominantly monitor issues associated with the EU, UN, and IMF. Finally, we investigated the frequency of articles directly discussing the BRICS group itself. Articles were categorized as having no, partial, or total focus on BRICS (refer to the codebook for detailed specifications). By employing this approach, we found that only eight articles (*O Globo* = 2, *O Estado de S. Paulo* = 6) centered on the group. Overall, these findings confirm H3 and suggest that geographical proximity plays a role in determining the visibility of intergovernmental organizations, with Mercosur outranking BRICS.

**Figure 3**

*15 most mentioned intergovernmental organizations in discursive articles published by O Globo and O Estado de S. Paulo (2011-2019)*



## 5 Discussion

Intergovernmental platforms and their member states achieve recognition and relevance in the domestic public sphere when they are significantly observed by national news media (Hafez & Grüne, 2022; Trezn, 2004; Wessler et al., 2008). This assertion is

further supported by the notion of first-level agenda-setting (Golan, 2006; McCombs, 2014). Bearing this in mind and considering the determinants of foreign news coverage, this study examined the degree to which the Brazilian press discusses the BRICS group, its member states, and associated themes.

Our results confirmed H1 (a), as China and Russia are the BRICS members that stood out in the debate fueled by the Brazilian press. Based on news flow and news factor studies (Cazzamatta, 2020; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976; Staab, 1990; Wu, 2000), one possible explanation for the frequent appearance of both countries in the articles' foreground derives from their acquired power status in the current context of multipolarity (Stuenkel, 2016), which likely renders them newsworthy. The global significance of China and Russia lies, for example, in their permanent membership in the UN Security Council (Stuenkel, 2016). Additionally, Chinese and Russian foreign strategies vary from unilateral military enforcement and monetary expenditures to multilateral involvement and discursive regional establishment. Specifically, Russia is a military and energy power; China, with the world's second-largest GDP, actively engages in global investment projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Salzman, 2019; Stuenkel, 2020). While Spark (2014, p. 392) considers that "China is by far the largest and the only one that is today a serious challenger to Western domination", one can argue that Russia has also successfully transformed economic power into strategic geopolitical purposes (Ebert & Flemes, 2018).

China's visibility can also be plausibly attributed to the news factor economic proximity. Since close trade partners often receive significant coverage in foreign reporting (Schulz, 1976; Staab, 1990; Hafez, 2007), it is reasonable to assume that this is one of the reasons why China, Brazil's main trading partner since 2009, has been closely observed by the Brazilian press. Our thematic analysis corroborated this reasoning, which revealed that China is most frequently discussed within the economic and financial framework, especially concerning trade and finance issues.

Furthermore, two key aspects emerge when analyzing Brazilian newspapers' focus on the BRICS nations over time. Firstly, the general decline in foreign reporting (see figure 1) intensified competition for media coverage, making it more challenging for BRICS nations to gain visibility in Brazilian media. Consequently, for these nations – Russia, India, China, and South Africa – to

garner attention from the Brazilian press, their issues likely became increasingly contingent upon meeting multiple news value criteria. Secondly, and in correlation with the preceding point, the temporal distribution of articles on the BRICS countries suggests the influence of event-related factors on the fluctuating visibility of these four nations (H1b). This aspect highlights the role played by the news factor conflict and further explains why the volume of Russia-related articles in 2014 deviated notably from the general trend observed across the broader dataset.

This study found limited discursive articles with a focus on India and South Africa, which seems to be a trend in intra-BRICS media coverage (Santos & Cazzamatta, 2024; Wasserman et al., 2015). The near invisibility of both nations in the sample suggests that their membership in BRICS did not render them sufficiently newsworthy to meet the journalistic selection criteria reported in the literature. From the angle of the Brazilian press, India and South Africa lack geographic and economic proximity for increased coverage, although India has relative commercial relevance for Brazil<sup>5</sup>. More attention in Brazilian newspapers was directed toward countries holding the status of global players (e.g., the United States and China), conflict/crisis zones (e.g., Venezuela, Russia, and Syria), neighboring countries (e.g., Venezuela and Argentina), and close trade partners (e.g., China and the United States). These findings suggest that the hierarchy of nations within the mediated debate in Brazil follows similar patterns identified in foreign reporting across various Western media systems. Consequently, despite the potential for BRICS membership to intensify intra-BRICS media monitoring, it appears to have not guaranteed significant visibility for distant nations from the global South within the public discourse in Brazil.

To investigate H2, we focused on subjects related to intra-BRICS cooperation. Our findings partially overlap with a previous study analyzing the coverage of Russia, India, China, and South Africa in the newspaper *Correio Braziliense* (Paulino et al., 2013, as cited in Wasserman et al., 2015). Similar to that study, we observed a strong focus on economic issues, particularly regarding China. However, compared to articles published by *Correio Braziliense* in 2012, our analysis of *O Globo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo* exhibited a diminished focus on politics. Instead, these newspapers featured more articles centered on security and justice themes (e.g., international security). This emphasis on economic and security matters within the mediated

debate on the BRICS states is noteworthy for deviating from the traditional political focus observed in foreign news coverage (Hafez, 2007). Specifically, the high visibility of security and justice issues can be associated with the individual role of BRICS countries in global security. Examples include China and Russia's permanent membership in the UN Security Council, the Russian intervention in the Syrian war, the Indo-Pakistani territorial dispute over Kashmir, China's claims in the South China Sea, and the reluctance of Brazil, China, India, and South Africa to condemn "Russia's policy toward Ukraine" (Stuenkel, 2020, p. 162).

The scarcity of articles focused on BRICS as an institution corroborated H3. Apart from the annual BRICS summits, the members have collaborated on several policy areas and established their multilateral institutions (Stuenkel, 2016, 2020). Nonetheless, the group's discussions were less visible to the Brazilian public than those of organizations like the European Union, United Nations, IMF, and Mercosur. This outcome is unsurprising considering that, contrary to perspectives framing BRICS as a revisionist group, Brazil maintains close ties with and benefits from Western-led organizations (Stuenkel, 2016). Brazil's active involvement in implementing the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement, contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, and relations with the IMF (Harig & Jenne, 2022; Juutinen & Käkönen, 2020; Tardy, 2012) exemplify its engagement with these organizations, which helps explain why they draw more media attention. Additionally, based on determinants of foreign reporting, it is plausible that Brazilian journalists accord substantial visibility to these organizations due to their association with elite nations (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Regarding Mercosur, geographical proximity likely influenced the degree of attention it received.

All in all, given the correlation between the salience of specific actors in the media and public awareness (first-level agenda-setting), this low visibility of the BRICS group in the Brazilian-mediated debate may obstruct the group's pursuit of domestic recognition. Consequently, this limited prominence of BRICS may explain the Brazilian public's unfamiliarity with the term BRICS (see Fernandes et al., 2021), along with other factors such as news consumption patterns.

## 6 Conclusion

In the post-Cold War era, two significant primary trends influencing international politics are the diffusion and transition of power (Ebert & Flandes, 2018). The emergence of the BRICS grouping gained relevance in this geopolitical climate and substantiated the rise of a multipolar order. Within this framework, this study underlined that membership in BRICS cannot be understood as the sole factor that shapes how the Brazilian press monitors the group itself or its respective member states. Outside the group's scope, Brazil's bilateral and multilateral relationships with its BRICS partners also influence their visibility in the mediated debate. These contextual factors and event-related aspects result in disproportionate attention given to BRICS actors and highlight an imbalanced communication flow from these nations toward the Brazilian public sphere.

On the one hand, the varied attention afforded by Brazilian journalists to the BRICS constellation may support Sparks' (2014) viewpoint, suggesting a lack of substantial grounds to consider BRICS as "either a unique or a coherent grouping in the developing world" (p. 393). On the other hand, there are ongoing efforts to strengthen intra-BRICS cooperation. BRICS membership has become "a significant element of each member country's foreign policy identity" (Stuenkel, 2020, p.3). Therefore, if the group continues its trajectory of institutionalization and fosters deeper interdependence among member states, we can expect it to garner greater attention from the Brazilian press and occupy a more prominent position within public discourse.

To our knowledge, this study is one of the few that explore how news media outside the Western world monitor intergovernmental organizations. It also offers insights into the production and structure of foreign reporting in the Brazilian press. However, two limitations require further exploration. First, while we recognize the influence of quality newspapers on media agendas, future research should encompass a wider range of Brazilian news outlets to ascertain the generalizability of our findings. Second, this study would benefit from complementary qualitative analyses to explore how the Brazilian media frames the expansion of the BRICS group and its member states, for example.

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- 1 The Brazilian media system is characterized by the concentration of media ownership, a weak regulatory system, a constrained public broadcasting service, a shift from television as the primary source of news to the rise of online platforms, and the low circulation coupled with an elitist orientation of newspapers (Albuquerque, 2011; Matos, 2016; Newman et al., 2024; Paulino & Guazina, 2020). Nevertheless, leading newspapers in the country, such as those considered in this study, remain playing a core role in setting the coverage of politics of other media outlets (Herscovitz, 2019).
- 2 According to the Instituto Verificador de Comunicação (IVC), the top 3 highest circulated newspapers in Brazil in 2021 were: Super Notícia (99.534), O Estado de S. Paulo (80.832), and O Globo (78.167) (Meio & Mensagem, 2022).
- 3 Throughout this study, the terms European Union and Europe designate two variables. We discuss the European Union concerning the visibility of intergovernmental platforms (figure 3). Conversely, when we refer to Europe, it pertains to the visibility of countries or world regions in the coverage (table 1). For instance, articles that concentrated on the European Union without specifying a particular EU member state were categorized with the geographical focus designated as Europe, while the variable pertaining to intergovernmental organizations was coded as EU.
- 4 The codebook can be accessed at: [https://osf.io/8ah67/?view\\_only=b0303ea4186a4ce08a220c3486d9b67f](https://osf.io/8ah67/?view_only=b0303ea4186a4ce08a220c3486d9b67f)
- 5 According to the Brazilian Ministry of the Economy, three BRICS members were among the top 10 Brazil's import partners in 2021: 1st China (21.72%), 5th India (3.07%); 6th Russia (2.60%) (g1, 2022).

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**AUGUSTO SANTOS.** Ph.D. candidate and lecturer in the Department of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Erfurt, Germany. He holds a master's degree in Communication from São Paulo State University, Brazil. His work has been published in international journals such as *Journalism*, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *International Journal of Communication*, and *Journalism Practice*. Collaboration on this article: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, formal analysis, funding acquisition, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review, and editing. E-mail: [augusto.da\\_silva\\_santos@uni-erfurt.de](mailto:augusto.da_silva_santos@uni-erfurt.de)

**REGINA CAZZAMATTA.** Ph.D., postdoctoral researcher, and lecturer in the Department of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Erfurt. Leader of the comparative research project “Disinformation Context and the Emergence of Fact-Checking Organizations in Europe and Latin America”, which is funded by the German Research Council (DFG). Author of the books *Brasilien-Berichterstattung in der deutschen Presse* and *Lateinamerikaberichterstattung der deutschen Presse: Struktur und Entstehungsbedingungen*. Collaboration on this article: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. E-mail: [regina.cazzamatta@uni-erfurt.de](mailto:regina.cazzamatta@uni-erfurt.de)

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