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# THE MACBRIDE REPORT IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CAPITALISM, THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE BRICS COUNTRIES

**Christian Fuchs**

*The MacBride Report was published in 1980. The report communicated the need for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). With the breakdown of what used to be called “actually existing socialism” in the East and with the rise of the neoliberal commodification of everything, a NWICO indeed emerged, but one that looked quite different from that the MacBride commission imagined. Thirty-five years later, it is time to ask how the situation of the media and communications in society has changed. This contribution asks the question of what we can make of the MacBride Report today in a media world and society that has seen the rise of an economically driven form of globalisation that also has impacts on the media, the expansion of the information economy with a new young precariat at its core, and the emergence of the World Wide Web and its change into a highly commercialised system, including the emergence of so-called “social media” whose capital accumulation model is based on targeted advertising.*

**KEYWORDS** NWICO; MacBride Report; Internet; social media; information capitalism; global capitalism; political economy of global communication

## Introduction

The MacBride Report was published in 1980. The report communicated the need for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) and reported the results of the UNESCO’s International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems that was set up in 1977 and chaired by the 1974 Nobel Peace Prize winner Seán MacBride (for a detailed discussion of the context see Nordenstreng 2015). With the breakdown of what used to be called “actually existing socialism” in the East and with the rise of the neoliberal commodification of everything, a NWICO indeed emerged, but one that looked quite different from that the MacBride Commission imagined. Thirty-five years later, it is time to ask how the situation of the media and communications in society has changed.

The USA and the United Kingdom tended to see the MacBride Report as a southern and eastern communist attack on freedom (of private property and advertising) and an embracement of communism. They left UNESCO which had commissioned and published the Report, which according to Nordenstreng (2015, 78) was also connected to the USA’s turn from multilateralism to unilateralism under Reagan. The US State Department said in December 1983, when it announced that the USA would depart from UNESCO: “Unesco has extraneously politicized virtually every subject it deals with, has exhibited hostility toward the basic institutions of a free society, especially a free market and a free press,

and has demonstrated unrestrained budgetary expansion".<sup>1</sup> The US Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs Gregory J. Newell argued: "Unesco policies, for several years, have served anti-U.S. political ends".<sup>2</sup> The *New York Times* reported:

The Washington-based Heritage Foundation has been attacking the organization for about two years in reports and statements contending that the United Nations had turned into a largely anti-American club dominated by the Soviet bloc, by European leftists, and by radical countries in the third world.<sup>3</sup>

The United Kingdom only rejoined UNESCO in 1997 and the USA in 2003. The US and UK retreat also resulted in the departure of UNESCO's Director General Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow:

NWICO was attacked as a curb on media freedom, whereas in reality the concept was designed to widen and deepen the freedom of information by increasing its balance and diversity on a global scale. For its initiators, NWICO was an idealistic instrument of diplomacy, and Third World dictators did not need it as an excuse for suppressing media. The anti-NWICO campaign was an ideologically apologetic exercise by private media proprietors, and it became effective only because of the extraordinary power with which it was waged. In this sense it is justified to call the campaign a "Big Lie". (Nordenstreng 2013, 350)

Struck monetarily by the US and UK departures, UNESCO as a consequence "not only abandoned the strategic direction of the South and the East; it did its utmost to appeal to the West" (Mansell and Nordenstreng 2005, 23–24). The Report was criticised as eclectic, giving in too much to liberal ideology, and neglecting how media and communications are embedded into societal totality and underestimating the role of transnational corporations (Hamelink 1980).

In 2005, 25 years after the publication of the MacBride Report, there were debates about its legacy. Daya Thussu argued that the Commission's concerns remained true, especially because in a digital world the "biggest beneficiaries of the processes of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation and the resultant WTO agreements, have been the transnational corporations (TNCs) which dominate global trade", such as in the media world Disney, Time Warner and News Corporation (2005, 54). "Murdochisation is the ideological shift in media culture from public service to profit-oriented programming. [...] As Murdoch triumphs in this marketisation of media systems internationally, MacBride must be turning in his grave" (Thussu 2005, 57 and 59).

Kaarle Nordenstreng (2005, 59) argued that the "MacBride Report was indeed relatively lightweight", but "carried quite a lot of political weight and came to signify the global movement towards democracy and equity in communication spurred on by the decolonisation offensive of the early 1970s". Armand Mattelart said that:

its greatest merit is the fact that it existed. It was the first time a document legitimised by a UN institution conferred viability on structural imbalances in the field of communications while also proposing a number of clues for solving them. (2005, 53)

Andrew Calabrese wrote that the "Report projects a spirit of hopefulness about how a better world is possible" (2005, 25).

## Computing and the Internet

Thirty-five years after the publication of the MacBride Report there is much talk about social media, which is an impact of the combination of computing, globalisation as well as

social and technological networking, and an expression of the development of the means of communication that have become immediate productive forces. In 1980 computers were still predominantly used in offices and had not entered households to a significant degree. Home computers such as the IBM PC, the Macintosh (Apple Inc.), the ZX (Sinclair Research Ltd), the Commodore 64 (Commodore International Ltd) or the Amiga 1000 (Commodore International Ltd) were introduced in the early 1980s.

The MacBride Report argues that a:

new era of communication is opening up. It is now conceivable that a worldwide communication system could be built that would link any point of the planet with any other. Conversely, it is also possible to envisage a web of networks that would integrate autonomous or semi-autonomous decentralized units. (MacBride Commission [1980] 1984, 32)

In 1980, the Internet was still the ARPANET, the number of hosts was limited to around 100<sup>4</sup> and the TCP/IP protocol was not yet used. The World Wide Web (WWW) did not exist for another nine years. The Internet's scope was therefore still very limited. What the MacBride Commission describes as a web of networks is a good description of the technological structure of the Internet and the WWW. The Commission, however, warns about the threat that technological advances "are the privilege of a handful of countries" ([1980] 1984, 32).

### **Information and Communication Inequalities in the Global and Digital Age**

A major concern of the MacBride Report is the existence of unequal access to and benefits from information and communication, a situation to which it has reacted by demanding a human right to communication (MacBride Commission [1980] 1984, 147–148 and 215–216).

Limits to freedom and equality in the context of communications that the MacBride Commission discusses and criticises include the political and commercial censorship of information, media concentration caused by commercial or political media monopolies, top-down elite communication that excludes ordinary citizens, the lack of the publication of a diversity of sources, content and opinions; cultural domination on a world scale that is driven by big international media and can result in parochialism and cultural stagnation, the ignorance or distorted representation of developing countries in the news media, developing countries' unequal access to telecommunications networks, the postal system, book publishing, libraries, news agencies, newspapers, television sets, informatics and computers; and the power of the advertising industry, repression against journalists, unbalanced one-way information flow from elites to the public and developed countries to developing countries, stereotyped and distorted news, cultural homogenisation and lack of media attention to disadvantaged groups.

The MacBride Commission made 82 recommendations aimed at "eliminating imbalances and disparities in communication and its structures, and particularly in information flows" ([1980] 1984, 192). They aimed at strengthening an alternative, public, commons-based, local and decentralised organisation of the media. The Commission envisioned a NWICO that is based on "international assistance and contributions towards international understanding" ([1980] 1984, 220), "co-operation on a worldwide scale" (220), "open relations of interdependence and complementarity, based on mutual interest and the

equal dignity of nations and peoples" (221) and "more free, more equal, more just relations within all societies and among all nations and peoples" (233).

Media and cultural development since the time the MacBride Report was published has shown that capitalism does not necessarily result in a cultural homogenisation that uniformises habits, tastes, preferences and opinions (as argued in MacBride Commission [1980] 1984, 128–129). Bollywood, Nollywood, Japanese video games, Brazilian and Mexican tele-novelas, news provided by Al-Jazeera, the BBC, CCTV and Russia Today, and so forth, show that cultural globalisation is not automatically Americanisation, McDonaldisation, Disneyfication and Murdochisation understood as western or US capitalist control. The existence of capitalism is perfectly compatible with a diversity of tastes and does not necessarily have uniformising effects. The problem is rather that the capitalist model of organising the media and culture is globally dominant and that the neoliberalisation and entrepreneurisation of everything<sup>5</sup> makes the survival of publicly or commonly controlled media that disseminate public service content (Williams [1974] 1990, 83–84) difficult.

The sociologist Vivek Chibber argues in this context in his book *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*:

[As] capitalism spreads across the globe, it does not inevitably turn every culture into a replica of what has been observed in the West. The universalization of capital is perfectly compatible with the persistence of social, cultural, and political differentiation between East and West. Capital does not have to obliterate social difference in order to universalize itself. It merely has to subordinate those dimensions of social reproduction that are essential to its own functioning. These dimensions are the ones directly involved in the production and distribution of use-values. [...] Capitalism can sustain a broad gamut of power relations and social identities. (Chibber 2013, 150–151)

The plurality of identities and cultural contents helps to universalise the commodity form: for everyone, there is a specific, flexibly specialised commodity. The point is that through diversification of its content, the commodity form becomes universalised. The media/culture/digital/creative industries are in fact not industries in the plural, but a culture industry that through diversity creates capitalist uniformity.

One should also look at the distribution of power between media flows and contra-flows. The "revenues of non-Western media organizations, with the exception of Japanese animation, are relatively small and their global impact is restricted to geo-cultural markets or at best to small pockets of regional transnational consumers" (Thussu [2006] 2010, 234). India is the second largest exporter of computer services and China is the largest exporter of assembled mobile phones and computers, whereas no developing or emerging economy is among the largest exporters of newspapers, journals, periodicals and audio-visual content (data source: Trade Map—International Trade Statistics, data for 2012, <http://www.trademap.org>). India and China are sources for cheap labour that produces and assembles software and hardware. They are to a much lesser extent the source of globally influential ideas, news and cultural products. In 2012 the USA controlled 48.1 per cent of the largest exporters' volume of audio-visual content, and the EU27 countries 39.8 per cent. Russia accounted for 1.3 per cent, Argentina for 1.2 per cent, China (including Hong Kong) for 0.8 per cent and South Korea for 0.7 per cent (data source: WTO International Trade Statistics 2012, table III.40). We are today confronted with the globalisation of the capitalist model, profit-making, capital accumulation, privatisation of communications and other services, inequality, advertising, cultural sponsorship, public relations and consumerism (Schiller [1991] 2010).

Is there communication and information inequality in the online realm? Digital inequality involves unequal access to digital media technologies, the unequal distribution of digital skills, usage capacities and the motivation to use digital media, as well as unequal benefits from using them. Although Internet access in the developing countries has increased from 2.1 per cent of the population in 2000 to 27.3 per cent in 2012 and from 0.5 to 14.8 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa (data source: Millennium Development Goals 2014, statistical annex), many challenges lie ahead. The physical access gap is far from closed and digital inequality extends to many other levels of access. Digital media evolve and new technologies and potentials rapidly emerge. Given socio-economic, political and cultural-educational inequalities in the world, young, urban, educated and relatively wealthy users are those that benefit first and most, whereas others are excluded and have to catch up. As long as capitalism exists, there will be various inequalities in the world that reproduce themselves in complex manners in the digital realm and communications in general. Seven for-profit telecommunications companies are among the world's 100 largest companies (data source: Forbes 2000, 2014 list, <http://www.forbes.com>), which is an indication that access to communications is largely a capitalist business designed to cost money for all that results in profits for the few. There are alternatives, such as local cost-free wireless community networks, that can challenge capitalist communications. Such alternatives that in a practical manner stand in the tradition of the MacBride report's goals, however, have not proliferated to a significant degree and therefore remain a mere potential for public Internet access.

### **The BRICS Countries and the Information Economy**

What does economic development look like in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) that are sometimes said to have the potential to create a multi-lateral world? The BRICS countries' share of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) increased from 8.7 per cent in 2000 to 20.6 per cent in 2012, whereas that of the USA decreased from 31.2 to 22.3 per cent and that of the EU28 countries from 25.8 to 22.8 per cent (data source: World Development Indicators, GDP in US\$, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-developmentindicators>). China's share increased from 3.6 to 11.3 per cent. According to other statistics that use real GDP data, in 2014 the USA accounted for 16.4 per cent of the world's GDP and China for 15.8 per cent (data source: IMF World Economic Outlook 2014, October, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2014/02/>). According to projections, China will in 2018 account for 17.9 per cent of the world's GDP, the USA for 18.6 per cent, the European Union and the USA together for 34.6 per cent and the BRICS countries together for 30.7 per cent (data source: IMF World Economic Outlook 2013, October, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2013/02/weodata/index.aspx>). Given these data, one should bear in mind that China's total GDP size has to do with its immense population: in 2013, China's 1.36 billion inhabitants accounted for 19.1 per cent of the world population, whereas the USA's 316 million made up a share of 4.4 per cent (data source: World Development Indicators, population). In terms of the GDP per capita there is a quite significant difference: in 2013, it was US \$53,143 in the USA and US\$11,904 in China (data source: World Development Indicators, GDP per capita PPP, in current international US\$).

Given the BRICS countries' significant share of the world's GDP, population share, share of media users and consumers, and increasing shares of foreign direct investment flows and the share of the world's largest transnational corporations, Daya Thussu and Kaarle Nordenstreng (2015, 13) ask whether "these new global players" are "necessarily opposed to the US–UK hegemony" or whether they are "following the same market-driven, infotainment-oriented model". There is no doubt that the BRICS countries' economies, politics and media have complicated "the discourse about international media" (2015, 131). Given the BRICS countries' share of the world's Internet users, Daya Thussu asks:

[W]ill this critical mass contribute to strengthening the voice of the South on the global scene or will they act as surrogates to the US-dominated entertainment-driven media? [...] Will a NWICO 2.0, fuelled by rising powers like BRICS, reconfigure the global communication discourse? (2015, 258–259)

Table 1, based on the Forbes 2000 list of the world's 2000 largest transnational companies, presents data for information companies in the USA and the BRICS countries. Information companies are located in the following economic sectors: advertising, broadcasting and cable, communications equipment, computer and electronics retail, computer hardware, computer services, computer storage devices, consumer electronics, electronics, Internet and catalogue retail, printing and publishing, semiconductors, software and programming, and telecommunications services.

The USA dominates the global information economy's market value, sales, profits and capital assets. The volume of the US information economy's power is between 3.4 and 5.4 times as large as the combined volume of the BRICS countries' information sectors. Even if China and the BRICS' countries further rise economically, then such a change does not automatically mean big changes in the world information system: given that all of the BRICS countries are capitalist societies, their economic development aims at increasing profits and so their economic advancement first and foremost means a shift in the geo-political distribution of capitalist profit. If one sees capital on a whole as a global capitalist, then the crucial question is how its relationship to the global working class looks. One therefore needs to also look at the share of the global worker in global wealth. If advancement of the BRICS economies and their information sectors merely means increased profits, but lower shares of the working class in total wealth, then the assumed emerging geo-political multilateralism is in fact nothing but global capitalist unilateralism.

**TABLE 1**

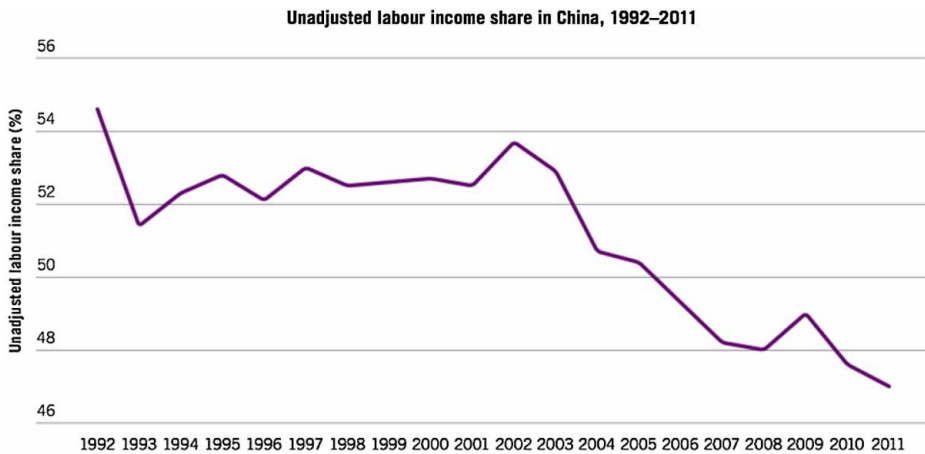
Financial shares of information companies that are located in specific countries, from Forbes 2000 list of the world's largest transnational information corporations

	Number of TNCs (per cent)	Market value (per cent)	Sales (per cent)	Profits (per cent)	Capital assets (per cent)
USA	32.4	52.3	36.1	51.4	38.9
China and Hong Kong	5.1	6.2	5.4	8.0	5.9
India	2.0	2.0	0.8	1.6	0.8
Russia	1.2	0.5	1.0	0.7	1.0
South Africa	0.8	0.9	0.4	0.8	0.4
Brazil	0.4	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.5
BRICS	9.5	9.7	7.8	11.2	8.6

Data source: Forbes 2000, 2013 list.

In the period from 1990 to 2009, the share of labour compensation in the GDP (the so-called labour share) declined in 26 of 30 OECD countries (ILO 2012, 42). The median labour share in these countries decreased from 66.1 to 61.7 per cent during this time period (2012, 42). There were also declines of the labour share in Asia, North Africa, and Latin America. In a combination of 16 developed countries, the decline of the average labour share was from around 75 per cent in the mid-1970s to about 65 per cent before the crisis started. In a combination of 16 developing and emerging economies, the decrease was from 62 per cent in the early 1990s to 58 per cent before the crisis (2012, 42). Wages have risen much slower than productivity, which has resulted in a growth of the capital share at the expense of the labour share (2012, 44–48). The data in Figure 1 show that in China the labour share decreased from around 65 per cent in the early 1990s to slightly above 45 per cent in 2011 (ILO 2015, 27). The data for India in Figure 2 show that the labour share decreased from around 20 per cent in the early 1990s to around 10 per cent in the late 2000s, whereas the profit share (the share of profits in the GDP) increased from around 30 to 55 per cent (ILO 2010, 91).

China's Gini coefficient (a measure of inequality ranging from zero, which represents perfect equality, to one, perfect inequality) rose from about 0.3 in the early 1980s to more than 0.45 in the early 2000s. After 2000, the Gini rose further to a high of 0.49 in 2008. Since then it has declined slightly, but remains well above 0.45. With a Gini approaching 0.5, China's level of income inequality is in the same ballpark as that of relatively high-inequality Latin American countries such as Mexico (0.51), Nicaragua (0.52), and Peru (0.48), although still lower than Brazil and Honduras (0.56–0.57). China is now among the least equal 25 percent of countries worldwide. Very few Asian countries belong to this group. (Sicular 2013, 1)



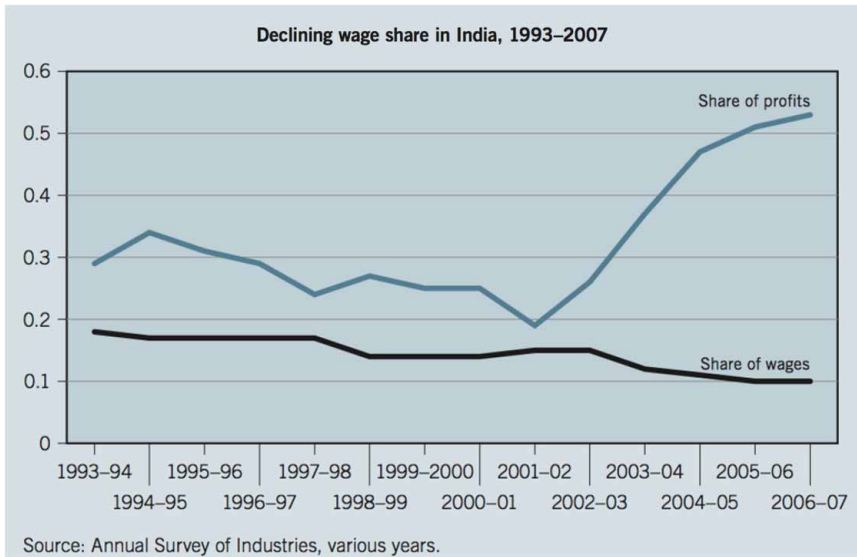
Source: ILO calculations based on data from the *China Statistical Yearbook*, various years.  
Data accessible at: [www.ilo.org/gwr-figures](http://www.ilo.org/gwr-figures)

### FIGURE 1

Development of the labour share in China (source: ILO 2015, 27).

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**FIGURE 2**

Development of the labour and profit shares in India (source: ILO 2010, 91).

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China's rising inequality has to do with the fast growth of the wealth of the rich, urban-rural differences and the dominant class' income from private property (Sicular 2013, 1). Income inequality measured by the Gini index increased in India from a level of 32 per cent in the early 1990s to 38 per cent in 2011.<sup>6</sup> The top 10 per cent have incomes 12 times as large as those of the bottom 10 per cent, which is a doubling since the early 1990s.<sup>7</sup> The cases of India and China show that rising overall economic growth does not automatically mean an increase of wage and income equality. In both countries the opposite has been the case.

Karabarounis and Neiman (2013) created a model that analyses the development of the labour share in 59 (developing and developed) countries from 1975 until 2012:

We start by documenting a 5 percentage point decline in the share of global corporate gross value added paid to labor over the last 35 years. [...] Of the 59 countries with at least 15 years of data between 1975 and 2012, 42 exhibited downward trends in their labor shares. (Karabarounis and Neiman 2013, 1)

The empirical data also show large labour share declines in China and India.

Marta Guerriero (2012) collected and analysed labour share data for the time period 1970–2009. Her samples consisted of 89 countries. The dataset included 33 African, 29 American, 32 Asian, 38 European and nine Oceanian countries. Her conclusion is that the labour share has been “generally declining over time” (2012, 21). The data show a modest increase of the average labour share in Brazil from the 1990s to the 2000s, a fluctuation in Russia with an overall drop from the 1970s to 2000s, and a relatively constant share since the 1970s in South Africa with slight increases. Alternative studies indicate a constant decline of the labour share in Brazil during the past decades and in the long

term (Frankema 2010). According to other estimations the official wage share was at the same level of around 40 per cent in 2012 as in 1995 (ILO 2015, 17). The ILO has calculated that since 2000 the labour share has decreased in South Africa (2015, 17). Guerriero's (2012) data show a sharp drop of the labour share in China and India. Given China and India's huge share of the BRICS countries' population and GDP, it becomes evident that the labour share taken as a whole must have exhibited a quite sharp drop in the BRICS area since the 1970s.

China and India have been among the countries with the highest GDP growth rates in the world. The GDP is a deceptive macroeconomic variable, however, because it mixes together profits and wages. A class analysis requires one to disentangle these components and to have a look at the global relationship between capital and labour. The data presented in this paper show that in recent decades capital has expanded its power at the expense of labour through neoliberal class struggle, and that this development has in the BRICS countries especially taken place in China and India so that economic growth and productivity have in relative terms predominantly benefitted the capitalist class. One should in this context bear in mind that the decisive criterion for analysing the deepening or reduction of capitalist class domination is the relative share in the total economy.

### Is BRICS a Brick against Capitalist Advertising Culture in the Age of Social Media?

In 2014, there were about three billion Internet users in the world (42.3 per cent of the world population). China accounted for 21.2 per cent of them, India for 8.0 per cent, Brazil for 3.6 per cent, Russia for 2.9 per cent and South Africa for 0.8 per cent.<sup>8</sup> The BRICS countries therefore together accounted for 36.4 per cent. The USA's share was 9.1 per cent and that of the European Union 13.1 per cent. Does the BRICS countries' large quantity of users translate into an Internet that is qualitatively different from the western one in a positive sense?

Table 2 presents an overview of the most accessed websites in the BRICS countries. Google (including subsidiaries such as YouTube and Blogspot) is dominant in Brazil, India and South Africa, and plays an important role in Russia. Other US companies relevant in these countries are Yahoo, Microsoft (live.com), LinkedIn and Amazon. In addition, there are platforms that are of particular national or regional importance. In Brazil, Uol is an

**TABLE 2**  
Most accessed websites in the BRICS countries

	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
1	Google.com.br	Yandex	Google.co.in	Baidu	Google.co.za
2	Facebook	Vk	Google.com	Taobao	Google.com
3	Google.com	Google.ru	Facebook	Qq	Facebook
4	YouTube	Google.com	YouTube	Sina	YouTube
5	Uol	Mail.ru	Yahoo	Tmall	Yahoo
6	Globo	YouTube	Flipkart	Weibo	Amazon
7	Yahoo	Odnoklassniki	Wikipedia	Hao123	Gumtree.co.za
8	Live	Facebook	Blogspot.in	Sohu	Wikipedia
9	Mercadolivre	Wikipedia	LinkedIn	360.cn	LinkedIn
10	Aliexpress	Avito	Indiatimes	163.com	Twitter

Data source: <http://www.alexa.com> (accessed December 1, 2014).

advertising-based online portal that is part of the Brazilian media conglomerate Grupo Folha. Globo.com is an advertising-financed online portal owned by Roberto Marinho's media conglomerate Grupo Globo. Mercadolivre is an online shop making profit by selling goods online; eBay owns around 20 per cent of it. Aliexpress is an online shop owned by the Chinese Alibaba Group.

In Russia, Russian companies operate Yandex, Vk, Mail.ru, Odnoklassniki and Avito. Yandex is an advertising-based search engine. The Mail.ru Group owns the social networks Vk and Odnoklassniki and the online platform Mail.ru. Its capital accumulation model is targeted online advertising. Avito is a classified online advert service owned by the Avito Holding. It uses a freemium model that accumulates capital by selling premium advert services.

The India Times is an online portal operated by the Times Group, India's largest media group. This portal uses advertising and the sales of goods in online shops as its business model. Flipkart is an Indian online shop that sells goods. In South Africa, Gumtree that is owned by the Californian company eBay Inc. is popular. This is a classified advert service that makes use of a freemium model to attract users and accumulates capital by selling premium adverts.

Private companies such as Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Sina and Sohu operate China's most accessed WWW platforms. Western platforms are kept out by censorship and control, which reflects capitalism with Chinese characteristics: China's model is an authoritarian form of capitalism, in which private enterprise that dominates the WWW is combined with strong forms of state control. Chinese WWW platforms' capital accumulation models and platforms are not so different from western ones. Baidu Inc. owns the search engine Baidu and the online portal Hao123. It uses targeted advertising as its main profit strategy. The Alibaba Group operates the online shops Taobao and Tmall and accumulates capital by selling goods online. Tencent Holdings Ltd owns the online platform and instant messenger Qq. It sells adverts and memberships. Sina Corp. possesses the online portal Sina and the microblog Weibo. Its business model uses advertising and premium memberships. Sohu Inc. uses the same strategy for its search engine and online portal Sohu. Qihoo360 Ltd owns 360.cn, a platform that distributes antivirus software and uses a freemium model combined with online advertising. NetEase Inc. operates the online portal 163.com that makes profit from online games and advertising.

If one looks at the dominant WWW platforms in the BRICS countries as a whole, then it becomes evident that, just as in the West, commercial logic rules: for-profit companies dominate, targeted online advertising is the main capital accumulation strategy, online shops and online advert services are popular, freemium services are combined with advertising. In Russia and China, national capitals play an important role in the WWW. In Brazil and India, large national capitalist media companies (Folha, Globo, Times Group) are relevant. In the BRICS countries just like in the West, the WWW is predominantly a sphere of commerce and capital accumulation, a large shopping mall and advertising billboard.

The MacBride report warned about the dangers of advertising and argued for de-commercialising the media:

- A "balanced debate in advertising is a contradiction in terms. As advertising is designed to sell goods and services, it tends to promote attitudes and life-styles that extol acquisitions and consumption at the expense of other values. [...] Consequently many

developing countries see advertising as a threat to their cultural identity, since it brings in its wake alien ethical values and may deviate consumer demands to non-priority areas. Moreover, the threat to withdraw advertising can jeopardize press freedom" (MacBride Commission [1980] 1984, 102–103).

- "Even if advertisers do not actually attempt to influence editorial policy, there are often cases where fear of losing a big client can lead editors and journalists to avoid the subject altogether or to tone down their criticism considerably" ([1980] 1984, 109).
- Advertising's "most virulent critics claim that it is primarily concerned with exalting materialistic needs by exploiting hidden anxieties, by doing away with objective arguments and by using manipulative techniques which, they say, turn men, women and children into passive, irrational consumer. Though such accusations are grossly overstated, they cannot be brushed aside entirely" ([1980] 1984, 123).

Given such criticism, one dimension of the MacBride Commission's recommendations focused on reducing the commercialisation of communications:

The social effects of the commercialization of the mass media are a major concern in policy formulation and decision-making by private and public bodies. [...] In expanding communication systems, preference should be given to non-commercial forms of mass communication. [...] As in the field of education, public funds might be made available for this purpose. ([1980] 1984, 205)

Advertising and commercial logic dominate the WWW. So, quite contrary to the warnings of the MacBride Commission, advertising culture has been further extended and has colonised new realms of communication. The Commission's warnings remain highly topical, however, although one should add that one of the important political–economic problems of advertising is the exploitation of users and audiences' digital and consumer labour (Smythe 1977; Fuchs 2014a, 2014b, 2015).

## Conclusion

Wikipedia is the only non-profit civil society platform that achieves large-scale popularity both in and outside the western WWW. It is in contrast to commercial platforms in line with Tim Berners-Lee's original idea of the WWW because it fosters digital commons. Berners-Lee did not envision the WWW for making money, but as a common good for connecting humanity. He therefore released it as open good to the world. Wikipedia's aim is to provide encyclopaedic knowledge about the world that has been co-created by volunteers. It is a non-profit project that is advertising free. It is based on volunteers' ideational contributions and monetary donations. Wikipedia is a commons-based knowledge and peer production project. It did not originate in developing or emerging economies, but in capitalist America, which shows that neoliberalism is not able to completely destroy and colonise humans' desire to collaborate, share and engage with each other outside of exchange and monetary relations. Wikipedia is the world's seventh most used web platform.<sup>9</sup>

Civil society projects such as Wikipedia, WikiLeaks, Sacom, China Labor Watch, Red China, Alternet, DemocracyNow!, Citizen Matters (India), India Together, Mídia NINJA (Brazil), mst.org.br (Movimento dos trabalhadores rurais sem terra, Brazil), Mediazona (Russia), Abahlali baseMjondolo (South Africa), Amandla! (South Africa), AfricaFiles, and so forth, aim at fostering the logic of the commons in society and make use of the Internet

for this purpose. They are expressions of the essential human qualities of sharing, solidarity and mutual aid. They reflect the MacBride Report's stress that communication is a foundational human need, whereas capital accumulation is an alienation of human needs: access to communication is "a fundamental human right", whereas "the freedom of an investors to make a profit from the media" permits in contrast "the commercialization of a social need" (MacBride Commission [1980] 1984, 39).

In the age of social media, media are predominantly unsocial, namely shaped by capitalism's individualistic consumption and accumulation logic. At the same time, the Internet fosters new potentials for the commons, non-monetary social relations, gifting and sharing that transcend capitalism. We need now, just like ever before, truly social media—namely the "decentralization and democratization of production and distribution in the sphere of social communication" (MacBride Commission [1980] 1984, 54).

China and India have been among the countries with the highest GDP growth rates in the world during the past couple of years. This development has included the expansion of the power of capital and the disempowerment of labour in China and India, which means a deepening of capitalist class power. The BRICS countries' increasing shares of economic power and the information sector are meaningless as long as they predominantly result in a growth of the capital and profit shares and a reduction of the labour share. They are at the moment only an expression of global inter-capitalist geo-political and geo-economic rivalries. At the same time the development of the BRICS economies shows the relevance of what Marx (1867) termed the contradiction between productive forces and capitalist class relations of production: the capitalist development of the productive forces grows the overall wealth and socialises the means of production, but given capitalist social relations at the same time relatively deepens exploitation, capitalist class power and inequality.

The decisive question is whether the global working class can strengthen its power.

If the working class in the BRICS countries, especially in China and India, can expand its power, weaken neoliberal and authoritarian capitalism and eventually implement a truly democratic-socialist system, then BRICS power can be a brick in the wall against global capitalism. Class struggles in these countries and the world at large are therefore decisive factors in determining whether an alternative world economic order and an alternative world information and communication order will be possible. Increasing shares of the BRICS' countries in information flows and the information economy alone are not enough because increasing quantities do not automatically mean a different quality. The future of the information society does not depend on quantitative demographic and geo-political shifts, but on the question of whether the global working class in the BRICS countries and beyond can make a difference and transcend capitalism or not.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## NOTES

1. "U.S. is Quitting Unesco, Affirms Backing for U.N." *The New York Times*, December 30, 1983.
2. Ibid.
3. "The U.N. versus the U.S." *The New York Times*, January 22, 1984.

4. See: <http://www.zakon.org/robert/internet/timeline/> (accessed November 30, 2014).
5. Everything can be commercialised, commodified, privatised, but in reality this process is incomplete, contradictory and not total in character.
6. See <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Indias-income-inequality-has-doubled-in-20-years/articleshow/11012855.cms>
7. Ibid.
8. Data source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com> (accessed December 1, 2014)
9. Data source: <http://www.alexa.com> (accessed December 2, 2014).

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