

China's "Soft Power" and on Editorial Agendas in South Africa

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Abstract

China's increased economic activity in Africa in recent years has already elicited much scholarly and journalistic attention. The debates about China's presence in Africa have taken the by now familiar contours of asking whether China is a friend or foe, imperialist or ally, and what these developments mean for the old powers of the US and Europe (see for instance Alden 2007, Sautman & Harong 2009, Waldron 2009). While these debates are often facilitated by the media, China's activity in the African media sphere itself has in recent years also come under scrutiny. China has over the past number of years increased its influence on the African media space noticeably. Several state-owned Chinese media houses established offices on the continent, especially in Kenya and South Africa. These media include the news agency Xinhua, the newspaper *China Daily* as well as China Central Television and China Radio International. In South Africa, flows and contraflows of private media capital have also included investments in and by China. Perhaps the best known example is the South African company Naspers, which has reaped handsome benefits off its investment in the Chinese social media platform TenCent. The company owns 34% of TenCent, accounting for more than 80% of the South African company's market capitalization (Steyn 2012, Peacock 2014). More controversially, the recent purchase of the South-African based newspaper group Independent Media (previously owned by the Irish magnate Tony O'Reilly) included a capital investment by a Chinese consortium. Although the traffic between Africa and China has therefore not been one-directional, it is China's heightened interest in African media that has raised questions about China's intentions. The notion of 'Soft Power' (Nye 2005) has been used to theorise the objective of China's media expansion, and Kurlantzick (2007) has pointed out strategic efforts by China to revamp its media platforms aimed at global audiences in order to achieve this goal. This paper wants to explore to what extent these soft power initiatives have already started to influence journalistic attitudes and practices in South Africa. Drawing on an exploratory survey of South African journalists across various platforms, the following aspects are investigated:

- *Coverage*: Journalists' views on the China-South Africa relationship in general, within the context of the wider BRICS grouping, and their views on media coverage of this relationship
- *Norms and practices*: Journalists' views on what China's media push on the continent and involvement in the South African media landscape might mean for current norms (e.g. press freedom) and journalistic practices
- *Media as vehicle for soft power*: Journalists views on the usefulness of Chinese media as a source for their own work, and the influence of such media on their conceptions of the China-Africa relationship.

The paper concludes with some preliminary observations about the challenges that Chinese soft power faces in South Africa.

Keywords: Africa, BRICS, China, media, soft power, South Africa

1. Introduction

China's heightened economic activity in Africa in recent years has already elicited much scholarly and journalistic attention. The debates about China's economic activities have taken by now the familiar contours of asking whether China is a friend or foe, imperialist or ally, and what these developments mean for the old powers of the US and Europe (see for instance Alden 2007, Sautman & Harong 2009, Waldron 2009). China's activity in the African media sphere has in recent years started to draw increased attention as well. It is now well-known that China has over the past number of years increased its influence on the African media space noticeably. Several state-owned Chinese media houses established offices on the continent, especially in Kenya and South Africa. These media include the news agency Xinhua, the newspaper *China Daily* as well as China Central Television and China Radio International. In South Africa, private media capital has seen some flows and contraflows as well. Perhaps the best known example is the South African company Naspers, which has reaped handsome benefits off its investment in the Chinese social media platform TenCent. The company owns 34% of TenCent, accounting for more than 80% of the South African company's market capitalization (Steyn 2012, Peacock 2014). More controversially, the recent purchase of the South-African based newspaper group Independent Media (previously owned by the Irish magnate Tony O'Reilly) included a capital investment by a Chinese consortium.

Although the traffic between Africa and China has therefore not been one-directional, it is China's heightened interest in African media that has raised questions about China's intentions. The notion of 'Soft Power' (Nye 2005) has been used to theorise the objective of China's media expansion, and Kurlantzick (2007) has pointed out strategic efforts by China to revamp its media platforms aimed at global audiences in order to achieve this goal. The use of 'soft power' to describe this process has been criticised by some for not adequately capturing China's media activities (several contributions at a conference held at Westminster University in 2013 for instance questioned the appropriateness of the concept). A focus on 'soft power' as underpinning high-level, elite interests, may also obscure the less formal, everyday interactions between South Africans and Chinese migrants that might even be more influential in shaping public views of China's involvement in the continent. These views may for instance be shaped by popular conceptions of Chinese goods as inferior, of Chinese migrants stealing African jobs and outrage at the illegal trade in rhino horns that is widely seen as originating from China (Alden & Wu 2014:25, 27).

It also stands to reason, as Anbin Shi (2013) did, that China's activities on media terrain in Africa is less of an active strategy to extend the power of the nation state, than a response to existing stereotypes, in part sponsored by the Western media. For this reason Shi sees China's media activities as a 'charm defensive', in an apparent reference to Kurlantzick's (2007) reference to China's 'charm offensive' to win hearts and minds. A study of the role of China's media in Africa should therefore not be seen one-dimensionally as a form of 'soft power', but as part of a wider set of engagements between the two countries that include formal and informal, political and economic, strategic and everyday interactions.

As far as Chinese investments in media on the continent is concerned, South Africa has not been a major recipient of China's media assistance in comparison to other African countries. The reason for this may be because of its relatively robust media industry (see Wu's [2012] itinerary of Chinese media assistance projects on the continent).

However, perhaps because of the strength of this industry and the vibrant debates within (and meta-debates about) the South African media sphere, the involvement of China in Africa has met with some criticism from local commentators. Criticism of China's engagements have ranged from everyday concerns about fake or inferior goods (the term 'Fong Kong' to denote these goods has become part of the lexicon, Alden & Wu 2014:25) to criticism in media and civil society circles about media freedom. The Chinese stake in the purchase of Independent by the Sekunjalo Consortium in 2014 has prompted renewed interest in the question of how China's involvement in the African media sphere will impact on freedom of expression – a right that is particularly strongly defended in South Africa in the post-apartheid, democratic era (exemplified by the vigorous opposition against the Protection of State Information Bill by the civil society organisation Right 2 Know, see Wasserman [2013] for related debates). This is not only because of questions about China's commitment to press freedom, but also because Sekunjalo is headed by Dr Iqbal Survé, who has close ties with the ANC government (raising questions about the extent to which editors and journalists in the group will be allowed the freedom to criticise the government). Survé has already fired Alide Dasnois, editor of one of the newspapers in his group, the *Cape Times*, allegedly for running a front-page story about corruption involving the awarding of a state tender for fishery vessels to a Sekunjalo subsidiary (Evans 2014).

Anton Harber's comment on the Sekunjalo deal is illustrative of the kind of fear (or paranoia) surrounding the perceived 'perfect storm' of Chinese involvement in the South African media and local threats to press freedom:

We can assume that this (funding from a Chinese consortium) is tied to the Chinese authorities, and their push for a greater media presence in Africa as part of their "soft diplomacy" drive for influence on the continent. The Chinese government, let us say, is not a friend of a free, open and critical media. They are very clear about their national interests, and their firm hand on ensuring their media interests serve them. One has to wonder what will happen when their national interest does not align with ours. This is relevant when Dr Survé has been so vocal about bringing ownership back home. One can safely say now that Independent Newspapers, the country's second biggest newspaper group, is in hands which are closely tied to our ruling party, the ANC.

Global media flows (China's involvement in Africa and South Africa) and local political contests have therefore coincided to push these questions to the fore. As Alden and Wu (2014:26) point out, the South African public's perception of their own government's interests and lack of transparency is also likely to be articulated in terms of a resistance to state- or party-level engagements between South Africa and China.

Another dimension to these debates about China, soft power and press freedom is South Africa's location in geopolitical shifts. South Africa joined the BRICS alignment of emerging states at the end of 2010, at the invitation of China but after extensive lobbying on South

Africa's part (Alden & Wu 2014:13). Despite controversies about the analytical usefulness of the BRICS category (critics have pointed to the discrepancy in the size of the economies of the constituent member states, the different political and economic systems and the fact that the member states are not only allies, but also economic competitors), South Africa has laid claim to its membership as an acknowledgement of its economic leadership on the continent (even though Nigeria has now overtaken it as the African country with the biggest GDP, see Economist 2014). The South African government has proclaimed the country's membership of BRICS as advantageous not only for the country's economy but having potential benefits for the continent as a whole (Nkoane-Mashabane 2012).

South Africa's membership of BRICS has however not only given the country a strategic advantage in terms of how it positions and brands itself (for instance by hosting the BRICS summit in Durban in 2013), but has also prompted questions about how this new set of relationships will impact on its own domestic and foreign policies. The relationship between South Africa and China in particular has come under the spotlight.

If the Chinese media are seen to be a key vehicle for their soft power initiative (or, in Kurlantzick's terms, 'charm offensive'), the success of this initiative will depend on whether it finds the audiences it is looking for. In this regard, it may compete with local media outlets that may provide contesting frames of China's involvement in Africa. At the same time, China's global media platforms – especially the wire service Xinhua – could potentially serve as a source of news for local news organizations, or at least constitute a new structural relationship with local news institutions (see Reese 2001:182 on how such sources and relationships form part of a 'hierarchy of influence') that could shape media content. The question then becomes how South African media have responded to China's media push on the continent. Would South Africa's newly-forged relationship with China as the leading partner in the BRICS grouping have paved the way for a more positive attitude towards China? Would China's increased economic involvement on the continent lead to more coverage, and how would this involvement be framed? Do South African journalists use Chinese media as a source, and if so, where do Chinese media rank on the 'hierarchy of influences' (Reese 2001) on South African news agendas? How are local developments, especially perceptions of renewed threats to press freedom, impacting on South African media's coverage of China?

The overall objective, in other words, is to find out: To what extent are the South African media amplifying Chinese soft power initiatives exercised via its media?

2. Background

This paper builds on previous studies (Wasserman 2012 and 2014) in which South African media coverage of China relative to other BRICS partners was analysed, and where attitudes of journalists were briefly explored. The aim of this paper is to explore in more depth how South African journalists viewed China, against the background of the country's membership of the BRICS group, with a specific focus on their perceptions on how closer involvement by China in the media sector will impact on press freedom and journalistic norms.

In previous studies (Wasserman 2012 and 2014) it was found that within the BRICS alignment, the South Africa–China relationship is the one that received most media attention. This is in line with previous surveys of public perceptions that view China as the

country's most important trading partner and an example of how to alleviate poverty and unemployment (Alden & Wu 2014: 26). Content analyses over a number of years (Wasserman 2012 and 2014) had indicated that China received the biggest amount of coverage in the South African media, followed by India. (Recent developments in the Ukraine, bringing Russian geopolitical influence to the fore, might have changed this situation on the short term). These previous analyses also found that coverage of the China–South Africa relationship has been cautiously optimistic over the past number of years, perhaps mostly because coverage has tended to frame China's involvement in Africa in economic and political terms as a source of development opportunities, rather than in terms of what can be described as the 'social' cost of these engagements, for instance on issues such as press freedom. Previous exploratory interviews with journalists had indicated that while journalists were not unequivocally positive about the South Africa – China relationship, they recognize the importance of providing coverage to this geopolitical alignment. Some indication was also found that journalists started using Chinese media (especially Xinhua) as sources for their own understanding of the SA-China relationship. Some reported that exposure to these media helped them form a more nuanced understanding of China's involvement on the continent and South Africa's place on the BRICS group. This (very brief) finding raised the question about the possible success, albeit at an embryonic stage, of Chinese soft power on the South African media environment, and prompted further investigation.

This current paper is based on more a more extensive exploration of journalists' views on the South Africa-China relationship. It focused on three main aspects:

1. *Coverage*: Journalists' views on the China-South Africa relationship in general, within the context of the wider BRICS grouping, and their views on media coverage of this relationship
2. *Norms and practices*: Journalists' views on what China's media push on the continent and involvement in the South African media landscape might mean for current norms (e.g. press freedom) and journalistic practices
3. *Media as vehicle for soft power*: Journalists views on the usefulness of Chinese media as a source for their own work, and the influence of such media on their conceptions of the China-Africa relationship.

Questionnaires containing a total of 10 questions were sent to more than a 100 journalists working in print, broadcast, online and wire service media across media houses in the whole of South Africa. Of these, a response rate of about 20% was achieved after numerous attempts. Although the total number of responses (21) are fairly small, the responses to individual questions tended to be well-articulated with substantial information provided. The respondent sample also spans the whole range of media platforms, so that an overview is obtained of the whole media landscape.

Despite the broad range of media represented, the sample remains fairly small and the intention is not to arrive at a generalizable conclusion. Rather, the aim is to provide an overview of the main themes in the responses provided by the journalists so as to get an indication of the issues of concern, range of attitudes and major viewpoints pertaining to the three main aspects of the research question as listed above, namely 1) Coverage, 2) Norms and practices and 3) Media as a vehicle for soft power.

An overview of the responses in each of these categories follows below.

3. Findings

3.1. Coverage

Questions in this category probed journalists' views on the China-South Africa relationship in general, within the context of the wider BRICS grouping, and their views on media coverage of this relationship. The questionnaire first set out to establish how important the China-South Africa relationship is, as the importance attached to this relationship was likely to influence its place and prominence on the news agenda. Secondly this section of the questionnaire explored journalists' view of existing coverage of the China-South Africa story, in order to obtain a self-assessment of the media's stance. In general journalists characterised the China-South Africa relationship as 'important', 'strong' and largely based on economic concerns. Several respondents remarked on the unevenness of the relationship and China's dominance thereof.

Journalists' views seem to confirm earlier content analyses (Wasserman 2012 and 2014) that showed a 'cautiously optimistic' attitude. For instance:

My general view of SA's relationship with China is positive. China is politically and economically one of the most important players and it is to SA's benefit to expand trade and relations generally.

And:

I'm fascinated by it - there's a great deal of negative and borderline xenophobic reporting about it out there, so it's interesting to try and read between the lines and see what's positive, what's negative and what's a little bit in between.

Journalists were however cautious not to sound naively welcoming of China's growing economic presence on the continent and South Africa's relationship with that country, several of them remarked on the potential economic benefits.

Although we are both part of BRICS, the two countries are vastly different in terms of political economics, culture, etc. The relationship is really just business. China sees a market here, and also used SA as its gateway to the rest of the continent. It also wants to dictate terms, as we saw with the refusal to grant the Dalai Lama a visa to attend Bishop Tutu's birthday.

The above respondent touches on a highly controversial issue – not only with regards to what has widely been seen as Chinese pressure on the South African government not to acknowledge the Dalai Lama (who was again unsuccessful in obtaining a visa to attend a Nobel Laureate summit in Cape Town in 2014), but in broader terms, how the relationship with China will play out in South African policymaking. Similar concerns were expressed when South Africa co-operated with China on global affairs, particularly during its tenure as

a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (Alden & Wu 2014:12). These affairs included the countries' positions on Myanmar, Zimbabwe and Libya.

Related to the issue of China's influence on South Africa's international relations, is that of potential influence on South Africa's domestic policies. Another respondent remarked on the question (often mentioned in academic and journalistic accounts of China's involvement in Africa) of whether China will uphold human rights in its African engagements and, specifically, how it will conduct labour relations. Other concerns expressed were the implications of stronger ties with China for the historical partnerships and trade agreements that South Africa has with the US and Europe, local casualties such as the textile industry that was 'decimated' as a result of cheap Chinese imports and China's power to dictate the terms of economic agreements.

Potential benefits were however limited to economic matters. Journalists were much more sceptical about the political implications of the closer economic relationship between South Africa and China. This ranged from caution, like the following respondent...:

I think it is something that needs to be watched closely. SA should learn economic lessons from China, but not follow them on a political and ideological level. South Africa should be careful not to neglect their relationship with the west. Good relations with the east, west and Africa is essential.

... to concern about the impact, like in the case of the following respondent:

Perhaps a greater move to a more socialist society in South Africa. Considering around 45% of the new cabinet are senior members of the SA Communist Party this may already be happening. This may lead to further uncertainty in the investment and business sector in SA.

Overall, though, journalists acknowledged that they were not certain about the political implications of the relationship, mostly because "one is not privy to high-level meetings and what goes on behind 'closed doors' ". Although several respondents expressed the importance for South Africa to remain vigilant of potential political pressure that China may exert, the overall stance was one of circumspection rather than negativity. The wait-and-see attitude that pervaded many of the responses was summed up thus by one respondent:

In general? Very congenial at the moment. The relationship can be compared to young people that like one another and are waiting for that first kiss. It can wonderfully or horribly wrong.

Despite the pros and cons of the relationship that were weighed up in most of the responses, there seems to be consensus that the China-Africa story should remain on the news agenda. As one editor of a major national newspaper remarked:

It is very difficult for any news corporation to be agnostic about China. China has also provided a new investment area for Naspers and it is good to know that new horizons are being explored, which might make cross-subsidies possible between business entities in the company and open up new spaces for other subsidiaries in the company.

As far as existing coverage of China-South Africa goes, journalists were quite critical of the media's ability to portray the complexities and nuances of the evolving story. Media were criticized for providing a 'shallow representation', based on second-hand sources, as most South African media do not have bureaux or correspondents in China, sometimes lapsing into xenophobia. One respondent also questioned the South African media's inclination to only report on China's influence on other countries, and ignoring the domestic development of China. However, several respondents pointed out that it is not the South African media's responsibility to create a better image for China. Several journalists indicated that they tend to focus on political and economic stories, or big news events, rather than ongoing coverage or in-depth reporting on China itself. This might mean that when other big foreign stories pertaining to the BRICS countries break, for instance in Ukraine/Russia, the news focus will shift away from China. The responses also seemed to confirm Park and Alden's (2013) distinction between the 'upstairs' dimensions of new geopolitical relationships (i.e. economics and politics) as opposed to the 'downstairs' dimension of social and cultural implications. By their own acknowledgement, South African journalists focus more on the former than the latter. This may prove to be a failure on the part of the South African media in the long run, as 'un-orchestrated engagements' in the 'informal and subtle spaces' of China-South Africa relations can exert influence on the formal relationship as well (Alden & Wu 2014:25).

3.2 Norms and practices

Related to the above concerns about China's influence on the South African human rights culture is the recurring controversies around China's increased media presence on the continent will mean for the way journalism is conceived of and practiced. Journalists were asked to reflect on press freedom, not only in relation to how the presence of Chinese media platforms may influence attitudes towards journalists on the continent, but also how Chinese investment in local media firms (e.g. the Sekunjalo deal) may impact on norms such as editorial independence.

Given the voraciousness of current debates around press freedom in the country (in the responses to of the POSIB and the proposed Media Appeals Tribunal), it was expected that journalists would express a strong resistance against Chinese media norms and practices and that the fear of a Chinese threat to press freedom (such as the one articulated by Anton Harber, at the beginning of this article). This theme turned out to be less prominent in the responses as was initially expected. Although explicit criticism and rejection of the Chinese

media model was a recurring theme, this view did not translate into a strong theme of threat. South African media were cast as strong enough to resist external pressures, and some allowance was even made for positive outcomes that may result from increased exposure to Chinese media.

The potential positive outcomes that emerged from the responses included a greater diversity of views and complement Western media, the creation of greater mutual understanding, and even the possibility that Chinese media may help to promote tourism to South Africa. Several respondents compared China's expansion of its media interests on the continent with global media channels like Russia Today, Al-Jazeera, BBC and CNN which were seen as playing a similar 'soft power' and public diplomacy role – although China's media were seen as less transparent and open.

Some cautionary notes were however sounded about 'Chinese media culture', and these responses sometimes revealed well-established tropes of China as an 'expansionist' imperial power that is 'tightening its grip' and that may cause 'Africa to lose part of its own identity'. The fact that Chinese media are state-owned and controlled was raised several times. A strong theme in this section is that of uncertainty and lack of clarity about Chinese intentions. As mentioned before, journalists' cautious or wait-and-see attitude seems to stem from their inability to get a clear picture about China's involvement.

Journalists often mention the big difference between South African media culture – i.e. operating with constitutional guarantees of press freedom, transparent routines, editorial independence – and the Chinese media culture that is controlled by the state. Despite the acknowledgement that the Chinese push into the continent is related to their soft power objectives, the idea that Chinese media culture may 'contaminate' South African media norms and practices is not a strong theme in the responses. Despite criticism for China's media culture, the widespread belief among journalists is that the South African media is robust enough to resist pressures, that the South African media has a strong history of independence that would not be easily changed as a result of Chinese influence, and that the Chinese model is 'hardly one that you would want to emulate':

SA media has a rich history and I don't think it can be easily influenced or dominated

The Chinese presence may, it was suggested, even increase the vigilance of local journalists to resist pressures on their independence. An important observation was that local

pressures may have a much bigger influence on journalistic norms and practices than exposure to Chinese media culture:

I think it is way too early to panic about a potential negative influence of Chinese media on South African journalism. The supposed Chinese influence on Independent media as part of the Sekunjalo deal is overstated. Local levers of power have much more influence on news agendas than Chinese investment in a news company will ever have. Even local holders of power find it difficult to influence the news agenda, what not to say of foreign powers. Power over news is not exercised in such a direct way.

Interestingly, one respondent suggested that a reverse influence – a type of normative contraflow – might in fact be possible:

In the longer term, as contact grows, probably yes. In the very little I have seen so far, Chinese journalists tend to be quietly horrified, fascinated, intrigued, and maybe just a little bit envious at the way many South African journos go about their work, so productively freely and noisily – and, yes, sometimes irresponsibly. Maybe some of this will in time rub off on Chinese journalists, while SA journalists in turn may think a little bit more about the “nation-building positives” of people sometimes criticise too harshly as “good news journalism”

The belief in the South African media’s ability to withstand political pressures, either from their own government or influences from Chinese-owned media, resonates with the belief expressed in the vibrancy of African advocacy and civil society groups to keep questioning the cost-benefit ratio of the relationship (Alden & Wu 2014:25, also see examples of this resistance elsewhere on the continent, for instance in Ghana, as highlighted by French [2014]).

3.3 *Media as vehicle for soft power*

Taking as a point of departure Reese’s (2001) notion of a ‘hierarchy of influences’ that shape media coverage, the question in relation to China’s use of media outlets to help meet public diplomacy objectives, is to what extent Chinese media are used as sources of

information by South African journalists. The assumption is that if South African journalists regularly access Chinese media, and trust these media enough to use them as sources for their own journalistic production, the Chinese perspective on news events, politics and international relations will be vastly amplified via local media platforms. A section of the questionnaire therefore explored journalists' views on the usefulness of Chinese media as a source for their own work, and the influence of such media on their conceptions of the China-Africa relationship.

A strong theme emerging from journalists' responses was that China's objective with its extended media presence in Africa is to boost its image. Journalists seem strongly under the impression that China's media are a vehicle for the exercise of 'soft power' and as part of a 'charm offensive'. But this objective is not overwhelmingly seen in negative terms. Journalists compared Chinese media outlets in Africa with other global media platforms such as CNN, Al-Jazeera and BBC that have similar objectives but might be less explicit about their aims.

There is however widespread doubt that Chinese media are effective in achieving this 'soft power' objective. Not only are journalists highly skeptical about the ability of Chinese media to resonate with South African audiences, very few of them actually use Chinese media as sources when reporting on China or the SA-China relationship. The chance that South African media may amplify Chinese media messages is therefore very slim. Consistent with a previous, less extensive survey (Wasserman 2014) in which some journalists indicated that they did consult Chinese media from time to time, some respondents in this study also indicated that they 'keep an eye on Xinhua' and that they consult Chinese media to get an 'inside view' on issues pertaining to China. But overwhelmingly, journalists say that they do not use Chinese media as a source and only very rarely consume it. A strong theme emerging from the responses in this study was a lack of trust in the credibility of Chinese media. For example:

Personally I am pretty skeptical about the credibility of state-owned Chinese media, and prefer to use international media sources, such as NY Times, Guardian, Bloomberg and Reuters.

Another respondent said the following:

I can use Xinhua for basic facts, but I am suspicious about them, I'm not convinced that they will provide all the relevant facts. The same goes for CRI. I came across them when I worked as a correspondent in West Africa, and it is clear that they do not have editorial independence. Their priorities are Chinese audiences - I have difficulty buying the argument that CRI and Xinhua are aimed at winning external hearts and minds. So overall I am reluctant to use Chinese media as a source, and do so only very rarely.

Not only did journalists indicate their reluctance to use Chinese media as a source for their stories due to doubts about its credibility, they also doubt that Chinese media will find a big audience among South African media consumers. Consequently the efforts of China to use media as a vehicle to reach 'hearts and minds' in South Africa are unlikely to change everyday attitudes of xenophobia.

The following response is indicative:

Chinese media is not widely used or consumed or trusted in Africa I think. It's boring and obscure and does not seem to understand African tastes. Even the most uninformed African is also suspicious of Chinese intentions and very well aware that the sweet image China tries to portray is totally inconsistent with the reality in China.

The theme of state control over media in China also surfaced in responses to this question of consumption of Chinese media. Respondents indicated that for soft power via media to be effective, Chinese media have to become more transparent and credible:

The communication effort will have to improve from the agents of the Chinese media themselves and these will never be really efficient convincing as long as there's so much state control and censorship in China.

4. Conclusion

From this exploratory investigation into journalists' attitudes it would seem that Chinese soft power initiatives in South Africa via media are faced by major challenges. Although South African journalists are generally positively inclined towards the country's membership

of BRICS, and this membership has piqued their interest in China as the dominant member of this group, China's media are not capitalising on these positive attitudes.

Chinese media are not contributing to the framing of these stories in the local media. Soft power initiatives could potentially be amplified by journalists if they were to use Chinese media as their sources, as this would allow Chinese perspectives to frame local stories.

However, this cannot happen if journalists do not consume Chinese media, or if the Chinese perspective on news events is rejected.

The major challenges to Chinese soft power exercised via media, as these emerged from the responses, are:

- Access to and preference for Chinese media: A recurring theme was that journalists do not access Chinese media, or see no reason to prefer Chinese media to Western sources.
- Uncertainty and mistrust: A strong theme that figured in several responses was that Chinese media are not used as a source because it is not seen to be credible. Chinese state control of the media and bias towards official views discredited Chinese media in the eyes of South African journalists. Although fears that Chinese media presence in Africa will impact on press freedom and editorial independence locally were not particularly prominent themes, South African journalists felt their integrity would be compromised if they were to rely on Chinese media sources.
- Incongruity with local news routines and agendas: Chinese media content does not seem interesting or engaging enough for it to be sought out by local journalists. The 'China story' would only enter local news agendas if satisfies news values as these are conceived of in local practices and routines, and Chinese media do not seem able yet to present their content in such a way that it is either credible or appealing to local journalists.

What these findings ultimately remind us of, is that global communication is received, interpreted and engaged with in localities. Although Chinese media may therefore be a potentially useful vehicle to disseminate Chinese perspectives to global audiences, the messages carried by these media cannot be assumed to have a direct effect on local audiences à la an hypodermic needle. In the South African context, the long struggle for democratic rights and the continued vocal resistance by local media and civil society is likely to cast serious doubts on any media content that is perceived as propagandistic in the slightest. For Chinese media to be successful conveyors of soft power, they would have to be credible in the eyes of their audiences. As Zhu (2012: 7) remarks in relation to CCTV's attempts to cultivate its attractiveness to global audiences: "Perceived openness and transparency are keys to successful soft power".

Furthermore, the local media's reception and portrayal of China's relationship with South Africa – including deals between Chinese companies and local media houses, as in the case of the Sekunjalo purchase of Independent – is also likely to be influenced by their stance towards the South African government. Given the South African media's default stance somewhere on the spectrum between scepticism and antagonism towards the ANC-led

government, China's engagement in South Africa is likely to also be viewed through a lens coloured by distrust and criticism.

When all of these aspects are taken into account, China's attempts to use media to exert soft power in South Africa will still be met with considerable challenges.

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