

Perceptions of chinese presence in africa as reflected in the african media: Case study of Uganda

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PERCEPTIONS OF CHINESE PRESENCE IN AFRICA AS REFLECTED IN THE AFRICAN MEDIA: CASE STUDY OF UGANDA

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(NB. THIS IS “WORK IN PROGRESS” - DATA PROCESSING IS ON-GOING)

Abstract

Chinese entry on the African continent and the subsequent impact on global relations using soft power are of increasing interest to many scholars. This paper explores the local perspectives towards this trend by analysing the media coverage of China in Africa using Uganda as a case study. Content analysis of articles on China in two national dailies is being carried out using several variables, supplemented by Key Informant Interviews and observations. A review of the media coverage and general perceptions of China from the West shows a predominantly negative image, portraying China as bringing neo-colonialism and a new capitalist system to Africa. China’s relationship with Africa is seen as exploitative where China is benefitting from Africa’s natural resources without giving due consideration to sustainability issues. Most of the views on China have been propagated by voices outside Africa. Premised within the Political economy and globalisation theories, this paper will analyse local perceptions of China’s engagement in Africa as reflected in the Ugandan media. The findings will make a valuable contribution to the global discourse on China-Africa relations from an African perspective.

Key words: Beijing consensus; flexigemony; globalisation; imperialism; neo-colonialism; Washington consensus

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Introduction

Chinese presence in Uganda has manifested itself in various ways. Apart from the symbolic political cum public diplomacy projects, a lot more takes place at both official and unofficial levels, which buttresses Chinese soft power. In any society, media play a key role as information sources on what is happening not only within the local environment, but also

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beyond. Media can be seen as “society-centric” or a reflection of political, economic and material conditions of a society (McQuail, 2003, p. 6) and as major sources of information, they play a key role in the formation of public opinion (Flook, 2006; Perse, 2001; Sparks, 2009) and have been accepted as constitutive of social reality in contemporary society (Sparks, 2009, p. 133). Media thus act as a mirror that reflects the happenings in society and are regarded as a barometer of society. It is within this context that local perceptions of Chinese engagement in Uganda will be analysed basing on the type of media coverage. The crux of this article is to assess how Ugandan media address issues of Chinese official aid to Uganda; level of political support to the government; Chinese investments; perceptions of Chinese observance of human rights; as well as Chinese philanthropic projects. Of critical interest is the need to know how both the private and public media report and project Chinese – Uganda relations. The analysis examines the underlying philosophical basis for the relationship and the perceived benefits from the engagement for both China and Uganda, plus the projected sustainability of this relationship.

On the other hand, there is need to explore the “grassroots” view of people-to-people (ordinary Chinese-Ugandans) relations in business; empowerment of grassroots communities and reduction in poverty levels; socio-cultural interactions; intellectual and social learning/integrations; and how these are reported in the media. The other issue of interest is the need to highlight the Western view of Chinese rising influence in Africa, given the scenario that the Western countries have been the traditional “donors” to Africa and China is a new entrant on the continent. A common perception among Western commentators is that the main interest of the China-Africa relationship is primarily economic (Infed, 2014; Movius 2010; Sparks, 2009; Yin, 2006), with little genuine concern for sustainability issues. Africa can be seen as the “cash cow”, but there is apprehension that the cow is not being nourished adequately to ensure continuous flow of the milk.

Relations between Africa and China have existed for a long time, but they have intensified significantly in the recent past, since the 2006 Forum for China–Africa Cooperation Summit in Beijing (Hanusch, 2012, p. 492). China’s entry to Africa has been seen as driven by economic imperatives that forced China “to open up” to the world (Castells, 2009; Infed, 2014; Movius 2010; Sparks, 2009; Yin, 2006), given China’s massive population that must be fed and the increased demand for natural resources (Freese, 2009). By the early 1990s, there was a conscious government policy launched to encourage Chinese commercial firms to “go out” and “go global”, but this was intensified in 2008, when China launched its global cultural blitz, attempting to improve its international image and build its soft power (Shambaugh, 2013), thereby making China part of the global village and network society.

To put the analysis into perspective, the article will start with a brief overview of the media landscape in Uganda and how this has been influenced by globalization and political economy theories, after which China’s strategic investment in Uganda’s media and her role in digitalized communication will be highlighted. Before examining local perceptions of China’s engagement in Uganda, the analysis will review China’s image on the global scene. While the impact of globalisation has been a subject of study by many scholars, it is noted that the role of media and communications in globalisation often receives little attention, yet basically, there is no globalisation without media and communications, thus the need for more media and communications research (especially from Africa) in understanding globalisation processes (Movius, 2010, p. 15). Media plays a vital constitutive role in

globalisation debates, as the process of globalisation can simply be reduced to the process of development of media and communication technologies (Ampuja, 2004, p. 65).

Although the story of “China in Africa” has indeed become big news, with a relevant element for media scholars to consider and pursue, very little is known from an African research perspective about African media coverage of China’s involvement on the continent. (De Beer & Schreiner, 2009). It is noted that there is little empirical evidence that evaluates what Africans themselves think about Chinese engagement with their respective countries and the general perspectives are dependent on a few public opinion polls that have been conducted that explore African perceptions on China–Africa links (Hanusch, 2012, p. 493).

This study, under the “Voice of China in Africa” project is a contribution towards better understanding of the role of media and communications in relation to China as an emerging global power, from an African perspective. In order to put the analysis of perspectives on China in Uganda’s media into context, it is important to have some appreciation of the media sector in Uganda. The next section gives a brief on the media in Uganda.

Overview of media landscape in Uganda

Uganda’s media development has been similar to that of other African countries that were under colonial rule. After they gained independence in the 1960s, media continued to be under state control till the 1990s when the policy of liberalization was adopted, with most countries now enjoying media pluralism. In Uganda, after gaining independence in 1962, the country had a predominantly state-controlled media with 1 radio station (Radio Uganda – now Uganda Broadcasting Corporation Radio), 1 TV station (Uganda Television – now Uganda Broadcasting Corporation Television) and a handful of newspapers, with the government-owned paper (currently *New Vision*) having the widest circulation. In 1993, private media opened up in Uganda and has continued to expand, particularly in the broadcasting sector. There are 276 radio stations and 71 Television stations (Uganda Communication Commission, 2014a), most of the stations being privately owned, co-existing alongside the public radio and TV as well as some few community media.

For the print media, this has not witnessed as much growth and several newspapers that opened up did not survive the tight media competition and folded leaving just a few newspapers on the market. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation (South Africa) figures, out of about 5,800,983 readership, the government-owned *New Vision*, a daily newspaper has the highest circulation of 33,312 copies closely followed by the *Monitor*, also a daily that is owned by the Nation Media Group, under the Aga Khan media chain with 22,531 copies (Baguma, 2012). Other papers with relatively wide circulation include *The Observer*, a tri-weekly; *Bukedde*, a daily published in Luganda; *The East African*, a weekly regional newspaper, *Business Week*; and *Red Pepper*, a daily tabloid.

Globalisation and political economy impact on Uganda’s media

Globalisation is linked to economic processes, capitalism and consumerism (Castells, 2009; Infed, 2014; Movius 2010; Sparks, 2009; Yin, 2006) so many definitions are economic, stressing the movement of capital, without specificity (Ampuja, 2004, p. 64), with rapid growth of international financial markets and capital movements between countries (Curran & Park, 2006; Infed, 2014).

As has happened with media elsewhere, the developments in ICT combined with the impact of the globalization processes have reshaped the operations in the media industry.

Globalization has come with new communication technologies that have compressed time and space, transcending national frontiers (Curran & Park, 2006; Hudson, 2006), denationalising economies and creating global markets that transcend state control (Movius 2010), creating cosmopolitanism and global citizenship (Castells, 2009; Waisbord, 2012).

One of the outcomes of globalization influences has been media convergence that has come with mono and cross media concentration of ownership, with smaller media being taken over by the more powerful ones. Apart from convergence within and across media, there has been formation of global multimedia business networks that have converged telecommunication companies, computer companies, internet and media companies brought by “convergence of modes” where initially these were provided by separate platforms (Castells, 2009). In effect, globalisation has brought fundamental changes in the way we communicate, creating a global village that is constituted in and through networks to form the network society (Hudson, 2006; McQuail, 2003; Sparks, 2009), with an increasingly mobile and globally networked digitised communication infrastructure (Thussu, 2012; Waisbord, 2012).

An early proponent of the Network Society, Manuel Castells (2005) contends that “nowadays wealth, power, and knowledge generation are largely dependent on the ability to organize society to reap the benefits of the new technological system, rooted in microelectronics, computing, and digital communication” (p.3). He explains that the network society is based on global networks that make use of digital communication networks that in turn form the backbone of the network society. Thus, he deduces that globalization is another way to refer to the network society that diffuses in the entire world.

Critical political economy theory is very pertinent to the analysis of the changed media landscape in Uganda in relation to media transformations globally. This theory stresses the relationship between globalisation and global media that is seen as the “the new missionaries of global capitalism”, while underscoring the primacy of economic considerations, that has been accentuated by de-regulation of media systems that were previously national but have now become global. Further, the theory views globalisation as resulting in the formation of a worldwide capitalist system that promotes the interest and values of powerful corporations, with global media becoming more of a vehicle for advertising, promotions of brands, culture and consumerism (Ampuja, 2004, p. 68). Media globalisation involves the process of global integration of the media (Sparks 2009) and encompasses various developments like digital platforms, global expansion of media corporations, international spread of commercialism and consumerism (Waisbord, 2013) or what has been termed as a global media culture (McQuail, 2003, p. 111).

In Uganda, globalisation has resulted in the emergence of two major media conglomerates - The Vision Media Group (partly government) that owns several papers (some in local languages); plus several radio and TV stations while the Nation Media Group owns newspapers, together with several radio and TV stations, with some of their media being transnational, including *The East African* newspaper.

Media being a key tool in globalisation processes, the next section will briefly examine China’s investments in media and her role in digitalising communication in Uganda.

China’s investment in media and role in digitized communication in Uganda

The source of most global information is the mass media (Movius, 2010) and most of what we know about other countries, we get to learn through the media, so society is shaped

through perceptions developed and propagated through the media, especially the electronic media (Flook, 2006; Perse, 2001; Sparks, 2009). This makes media important players in influencing national images. Indeed there has been a rise in promotion and brand marketing (of nations) resulting from the economic logic of media commercialisation (Ampuja, 2004). News flow research studies have shown that the media has an influence on public perceptions of foreign nations and that the more negative coverage a nation receives, the more likely the public were to think negatively about that nation (De Beer & Schreiner, 2009). As the global arena is becoming more competitive, the need for nation-states to effectively stake out their identity, pro-actively manage their image and achieve better communication and understanding in the global community is no doubt growing and accelerating (Wang, 2008), facilitated by the digital revolution (Thussu, 2012). As Banda (2009) finds, contemporary Chinese media interventions in Africa must be seen as part of China's long history of anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggle in its project of national and international identification. Most nations therefore make deliberate efforts to ensure that media portray them positively.

Sparks (2014) observes that in the post-1945, US replaced the UK as the dominant power, mainly through the exercise of economic power and the domination of international communication or what is termed as "a marriage of economics and electronics". Of specific importance, he mentions the key influence of commercial companies, primarily broadcasters, who are in turn dependent upon revenues from advertisers seeking to reach large audiences and thus the advertiser's influence on programming. This goes to justify the cliché of "He who pays the piper, calls the tune". Countries are increasingly relying on television and digital advertising in image building. A Global Report on advertising (McKinsey & Company 2013) in its projection, shows the two categories will register the highest growth with television advertising shares in the lead from 38.5% in 2012 to 36.8% by 2017, while digital advertising will increase considerably from 23.7% to 34.4% by 2017. Another Report on Global Advertising spending by medium in 2013 confirms this lead with TV registering the highest with 31%, digital advertising had 25%, newspapers had 14%, Radio had 6% and other media shared 24% (Statista, 2014a). Elsewhere, a Report on the Global electronics industry that analysed market size by country for 2012 showed that China had the highest with 1208 billion euros, followed by US with 524.7 billion Euros and Japan with 313.1 billion euros (Statista, 2014b). Worth noting is that this rapid growth in the size of the advertising market in China has been unprecedented (Sinclair, 2008).

One can therefore deduce that recognizing media's influence (especially television and digital advertising), in building her image locally and globally, China has strategically made investments in media (StarTimes television) and electronics/digital communication (Huawei products) in Uganda. China will thus profit from investing in electronic or mobile media, that has become the dominant form of communication globally (Castells, 2009) with the most explosive growth and having the "biggest digital dividend" (Thussu, 2012, p. 440). While mobile access has grown rapidly globally, Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced most mobile phone growth and impact (Parr, 2013). In Uganda, there has been rapid expansion in the mobile internet subscribers from 610,000 in 2010 to 3,458,351 by 2013, as opposed to the expansion in the Fixed internet subscribers that was 35,000 in 2010 and rose to 95,434 in 2013 (Uganda Communication Commission, 2014b). With the rapid growth in mobile internet access, China's Huawei products like mobile phones, i-phones, modems, etc. have found a ready market in Uganda.

Following the migration from analogue to digital terrestrial broadcasting that was agreed upon under the United Nations framework that is expected to be completed by June 2015,

China has played a key role in several African countries, including Uganda. China's Huawei Technologies has been active in the transition to digitalized communication like laying the fiber-optic cable for the national transmission backbone and e-government infrastructure initiative, supplying and installing the digital equipment for Uganda Broadcasting Corporation and providing other ICT services (Malakat, 2011). Huawei is also a strategic partner of the largest two mobile operators in Uganda (MTN and UTL) and is one of the largest telecom equipment providers in Uganda (<http://www.majestysdirectory.com/huawei-technologies/>).

On the side of television, StarTimes digital television Communication Manager, Christine Nagujja (personal communication, January 8, 2014), revealed that China's StarTimes is leading in the market in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda), having 80% share in the Ugandan market. She disclosed that StarTimes had invested over 30 million US dollars and has plans to expand their coverage countrywide by end of 2014. By 2013, the coverage had gone up to Mbarara in western Uganda and Mbale in the eastern part of the country. Given the increasing demand and expanding market for television, this has provided a conducive environment for StarTimes to realize its mission – “To enable every African family to afford digital TV, to watch digital TV, and to enjoy digital TV” (http://www.startimes.com.ug/About_Us/259141.shtml).

Another important media forum where Uganda has engaged with China is through the Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation, whose objective is to “deepen cooperation and exchanges in the media industry and advance the development of friendly relations between China and African countries” (http://www.ebeijing.gov.cn/Government/Mayor_office/OfficialActivities/t1238859.htm). In June 2014, the Second Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation was held in Beijing and was attended by over 150 delegates from more than 40 African countries (Mpubani, 2014). In his speech at the Forum, Cai Fuchao, Minister of China's State General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, reported that some of the outcomes of the Media Forum were that “both China and Africa have increased their coverage of news and reports in each other's countries, promoting the program exchanges and cooperation, expanding the scale of trade related to radio, film and television industries, and strengthening personnel exchanges and training” (Fuchao, 2014).

Another engagement with the media is through the China-Africa Reporting Project, which is hosted at the Journalism Department of the University of Witwatersrand. This project aims to improve the quality of reporting around China-Africa issues. Under this project, the Chinese government offers reporting grants to Chinese and African journalists interested in “unpacking the China-Africa relationship”, availing grants to cover travel, accommodation plus other expenses incurred in researching for a story (<http://china-africa-reporting.co.za/>).

There have been fears expressed about China's likely influence on professional standards in the media. Wekesa (2014) dismisses such fears about the entry of Chinese media into Africa posing threats to the practice of journalism in democracies, with the expectation that the state-party media control systems in China would be exported to Africa. He says that an analysis of content in China's media such as *China Daily* and CCTV reflects “hardly a bend towards a communist persuasion . . . Rather, one sees Chinese media on a public diplomacy mission, angling stories to show the benefits of China-Africa relations while avoiding narratives that cast China in a negative light”. Other concerns on China's influence relate to the dependency syndrome. Banda (2009) concludes in his study that China's media support in Africa is resulting in an infrastructural realignment reflecting more export of Chinese media

technology and technical knowhow, which have led to increasing African dependence on such external media intervention. This observation is true to Uganda's media, where there is much reliance on Chinese Huawei electronic products like mobile phones, tablets, modems, etc. as well as StarTimes digital television having a big market share.

China's image on the global scene

A national image maybe defined as "the climate of opinion formed by collective expression of perceptions and judgments of a country by its overseas publics" (Wang, 2008 p. 9). China's relationship with Africa has attracted a mixture of favourable and unfavourable images. Wasserman (2012) observes that China's presence on the continent is often viewed in stark binary terms, as either an exploitative, predatory force or a benevolent, development partner. This contrast is well captured by De Beer & Schreiner (2009) in the imagery of China as an "ominous dragon" ready to re-colonise Africa and eventually consume the continent, or that of the "flying goose" bringing economic development and aid to a struggling continent.

Proponents for China see China's engagement with Africa as a give-and-take relationship, where China's hunger for resources is catered for, while Chinese manufacturers have flooded African markets with goods like clothing, jewellery, electronics and building materials (Carmody, 2011; Fergus, 2013; Kofi, 2014). Other views are based on the aspect of China providing an alternative to the Western (especially American) global dominance. After the end of the Cold War, the USA emerged as the world's dominant power (de Beer & Schreiner, 2009; Sparks, 2014) and in concert with its European allies, it promoted through the international financial institutions and through its bilateral diplomacy and aid programmes a particular neoliberal normalizing vision of what constituted "good governance" in African states, so China's entry on the African continent is often presented as a threat to both Western interests and African populations (Carmody & Taylor, 2009). Much to their consternation, traditional Western actors are finding that their once undisputed influence and dominance of Africa is being challenged by aggressive Chinese MNCs in collusion with the state (Alden & Davies, 2006, p. 94).

China's relations with Africa is seen by some as a rise in the "Beijing Consensus", whose approach is more relaxed and pragmatic guided by the policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of African countries that African countries have found more attractive than the "Washington Consensus", whose aid often comes with demands to improve human rights and democracy. China's position, it is noted, has further been strengthened by the shrinking foreign aid budgets of the Western countries (Fergus, 2013). The "good governance" agenda, which Western donors have sought to promote, seems to be under threat from the Chinese approach to business (Alden & Davies, 2006, p. 94) with the policy of non-interference.

China is also posing a threat in academia as it is expanding its influence rapidly beyond China. For instance, the increase in Chinese students studying in US has caused concern in relation to the lower number of students from US to China. According to the University World News (2014), in 2013, there were 14,167 Americans studying in China while there were 237,697 students from China studying in America. Comparatively, this is 5.6% Americans to 94.3% Chinese students. The implication is that there will be more Chinese who understand how American systems work than Americans who understand how Chinese systems work, which aggregate knowledge puts China at an advantage over America.

Most perceptions however do not portray a favourable positive image of the China-Africa relationship. The increased interest by China and other countries in gaining access to Africa's resources has been described as "the new scramble for Africa" (Carmody, 2011). Others view China's committing "billions in aid to Africa as part of a charm offensive" (Fergus, 2013) and accuse China of cynically using development aid to "buy" favours from despotic leaders in Africa (Power & Mohan, 2008), especially those with oil resources.

Although many in the West have accused China of grabbing land, extracting resources and neo-colonialism (Carmody, 2011; Freese, 2009; Movius, 2010), in Africa itself, China is seen favourably (Globescan, 2011; De Beer & Schreiner, 2009; Weihua, 2013), partly as a result of the "flexigemony" policy. Basing on 2 contradicting experiences of China's engagement, in Sudan where it acted as a moderating force and tried to broker a peace deal in the fighting in Darfur, while in Zambia it provoked riots and strikes, Carmody & Taylor (2009) dispel the perception that China's influence is based on soft power solely but contend that it is based on flexigemony. They argue that the relationship or geo-economic strategy in Africa has different strands of engagement and modes of governance: clientelism, proxy force and hegemony, which taken together constitute an incipient new form of what they term as "flexigemony", whereby Chinese actors adapt their strategies geographically to suit the particular histories and geographies of the African states with which they engage. The duo explain that flexigemony as a policy involves economic, political and military levers in flexible strategic combinations that is used to ensure continued raw material supplies, but no direct military force is used to secure interests, but rather proxy sub-contracting and the use of direct economic power. Overall, they argue, flexigemony is first and foremost about economics and the politics required to support China's continued economic ascent.

In principle, flexigemony is similar to what Alden & Davies (2006) call "Competitive political advantage" that implies an explicit willingness on the part of China to work with any state, regardless of its international standing, based upon the Chinese foreign policy precepts of non-interference in domestic affairs in other states, which has been able to invest in pariah regimes which Western firms are barred from doing business in (p. 90).

However, some others believe that China is not influential at the global level. Professor David Shambaugh, a Chinese scholar acknowledges that although China is now clearly the world's second leading power, after the United States, and its aggregate economy is due to surpass that of the United States sometime around 2025, he dismisses the view that China will soon "rule the world", saying that "this perspective is profoundly overstated and incorrect". He concedes that China is an increasingly important global player but the footprint on the globe is not particularly deep, which makes China only a "partial power". He explains that China often stands aside or remains passive in addressing international security challenges or global governance issues, with the common denominator to most of China's global activities and foreign policy is China's own economic development, which leads to a mercantilist trade and investment posture. Distinguishing between global presence and having global power, he contends that while China is a "global actor", it lacks real global power since true "global power" would imply ability "to influence" other nations and events, which attributes China does not have (Shambaugh, 2013). In spite of such arguments, it is observed that "there is no longer a dispute about China's role as a world power" (De Beer & Schreiner, 2009).

Amidst these generally negative images from the West, Chinese consider their relationship with Africa differently as President Xi Jinping declared: "China will continue to uphold the

principle of peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit, and dedicate itself unswervingly to safeguarding world peace and promoting common development." The Chinese President made this pronouncement at the end of his visit to 4 African countries and added that "No matter how the international situation will change, China is always Africa's all-weather friend and partner" (Xi Jinping, 2013). On the accusation of "scrambling for resources" or "neo-colonialism" aimed at imposing its political and economic influence on Africa, this is countered that China's relations with Africa is based purely on political equality, mutual respect, mutual trust and economic win-win cooperation. (Ping, 2009, p. 35). Proponents have further argued that China was giving support to African countries by aligning with them "to oppose the practices of the big bullying the small, the strong domineering over the weak and the rich oppressing the poor" (Fergus, 2013).

Despite increasing unease about China's "go global" strategy, China globally enjoys a positive image. According to a global poll conducted by GlobeScan/PIPA among 28,619 people in 27 countries, views of China's increased economic power had 50% positive and 33% negative across all countries polled with the two most positive views coming from Africa—Nigeria with 82% and Kenya having 77% (Globescan, 2011).

Assessment of perceptions on China's engagement in Uganda *Methodological approach*

Similar to what takes place in other countries like the US, where media corporations depend on key elite publications to set their news agenda (Castell, 2009), in Uganda, most media houses also get their news agendas from the press reviews of the major newspapers. So the choice of the 2 most influential dailies (*New Vision* and *Monitor*) that have the highest circulation is adequate representation of the media and the local perceptions of China as reflected in Uganda's media.

Content analysis – brief on 2 papers covered, time scope, no. of articles analysed

KIIs – Mention interviewees (journalists & editors, UIA, UPSF, MoF, MoFA, FOCAS, Confucius Institute, business community, etc.)

Key findings

Nature of coverage

(Frequency, category, prominence, origin, length, initiator)

Actors, voices, focus/key subject

Journalists' views on China– Framing, China's power, tone and portrayal

Local perceptions of Chinese engagement in Uganda

- Attitudes of government officials towards Chinese in Uganda
- Views on China from the business community
- Perceptions of grassroots/CSOs

Emerging issues

Conclusion

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