

Understand China's Media in Africa from the perspective of Constructive Journalism

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Abstract

China's quest to improve its international image has increased exponentially in the last decade through cultural diplomacy and the media. However, the expansion of China's state-led media has received mixed reactions and even stereotypes in Africa. By examining scholarly responses towards China's media in Africa, this paper observes that the arguments seem fall from one side to the other and new perspective is needed for better understanding of China's media in Africa. Therefore, based on the analyses of Challenges and stereotypes against the so-called 'positive reporting' of China's media in Africa, the paper proposes to revisit the journalism of China's media from the concept of constructive journalism to figure out what exactly makes the engagement of China's media different from Western media in Africa. The paper concludes that it is indeed too simple labeling China's media with positive reporting and constructive journalism helps to offer a new perspective to understand China's media.

Key words: China, Africa, Western, media, constructive journalism, soft power

Globalization and the promotion of NWICO

Globalization is seen as having consequences for the distribution of power and wealth both within and between countries. Nowadays, the media are playing a key role in enhancing globalization, facilitating culture exchange and multiple flows of information and image between countries, especially through international news broadcasts and the internet.

During the 1970s and 1980s, on the platform of UNESCO, the debate on international communications was widely carried out. In the debate, Western media, especially Western news agencies were specifically under attack for they failed to cover enough the developing countries, the material covered was inadequate and a biased image was reinforced. New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was raised and promoted by the Third World thereafter.

However, more than thirty years has passed and that goal has not been achieved yet. What even worse is, in recent years, international flows of information has largely related to the expansion of global capitalism, new technologies and the increasing commercialization of global media. The influence of Western media still remained very strong. Western media systems and practices of journalism had great impact in many growing independent nations, even shaped or have been shaping the evolution of media systems.

Therefore, as developing countries, both China and African nations are confronted with common challenges: one is to understand the impact of rapid expansion of global communications, the other is to involve ourselves actively and effectively into the process of media globalization to have their own say in the global media sphere. So, both China and African countries are challenged to build authentic media of our own to make their voice heard in the world.

It should be admitted that there is a battle for mindshare being waged in the field of international news nowadays. The USA (CNN-CNBC, VOA and several channels on pay TV bouquets), the UK (the BBC), France (France24 and TV5MondeAfrique, CFI, RFI, Canal+, AFP), Canada, Germany (Deutsche Welle TV and Radio) and Russia (Russia Today) are broadcasting heavily in Africa in a race for audience share, along with Al Jazeera.

As a matter of fact, any discussion of the media position and tradition in Africa should take into consideration the fact that African media are indeed entangled with colonial history and the current marginalized position of Africa in the global context. Meanwhile, the mass media in Africa have diversified in recent years with the development of satellite broadcasting and new media. However, the ongoing technological, cultural and economic globalization exerts tremendous pressure on the media in Africa. Therefore, African countries are challenged to build authentic media of their own to make African voice heard.

Aims and efforts of China's media in Africa

Since 1990s Chinese soft power shifted from “opening up” to “going out” (Li & Ronning, 2013). In recent years, the China's media is much more visible in Africa, not only the state-owned media like CCTV Africa, China Daily Africa Weekly, Beijing Review along with Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International (CRI), but also private media companies, like Star Times, the private Chinese digital pay TV operator. Meanwhile, over the last decade, as Africa's largest trade partner, China has also invested in building communications infrastructure in Africa, providing technical upgrades for state broadcasters and training journalists from across the continent. All these effort is to meet the close cooperation and improve the understandings between China and the African continent.

In 2006, CRI began its local broadcasting from Nairobi, Kenya, while Xinhua News Agency now has over 20 bureaus across the African continent. In the start of 2011 Xinhua's television station, CNC World, began broadcasting to African satellite and

cable viewers. In April 2011 Xinhua partnered with a Kenyan mobile operator and started to provide news feeds for mobile phones.

CCTV launched its first overseas news production center --- CCTV Africa in Nairobi in January 2012 , which has been hailed as a new voice of Africa. The launch of CCTV Africa is a milestone in the sense that CCTV has become the first international media to establish a news production center in Africa which is responsible for gathering news from the continent and distributing to a global audience through the CCTV News platform. In addition, CCTV has become the first international media to dedicate more time to Africa through CCTV Africa programs such as Africa Live, Talk Africa and Faces of Africa. On average it can be noted that CCTV has a minimum of 10 hours in a week for Africa to tell its story to the world.

In December 2012, the China Daily launched its African Weekly edition which is published in Nairobi, Kenya and printed by Nation Media Group (the largest media company in East and Central Africa) (Daily Nation, 2012). According to China Daily, the newspaper is circulated throughout the African continent and is also available in digital format. It publishes 24-page editions from Monday to Friday in addition to 16-page editions on Saturday and Sunday. The paper mainly uses cutting-edge design combined with photographs and artwork which includes in-depth reports to analyze affairs both in China and globally. It also has a China Watch section which is a monthly publication distributed as an insert in mainstream newspapers in US and Europe such as the Washington Post, the New York Times, the International Herald Tribune, the Financial Times and The Daily Telegraph (China Daily, 2012).

All these efforts as claimed by Chinese Government aim to further strengthen the relationship between China and the African continent and to be the alternative but authentic storytellers of China and Africa. Therefore, rather than simply rebutting Western media overly critical and biased reporting of Sino-African relations, China's state-led media are making efforts to produce its own content for African consumption. Likewise, when the French Government launched France 24 in 2006, it also declares that its mission “is to cover international current events from a French perspective and to convey French values throughout the world.”¹ So, China's media is not alone among international media to promote one's national interests.

CCTV is considered one of China's most influential media outlets and thus a major part of its outreach campaign is designed to spread its culture, values, language and diplomacy around the world. That is why China's expanding media presence is considered as an exercise in ‘soft power’ to increase international influence, and the Chinese Government hope to shape and construct the narrative that tells the story of China in Africa with Chinese perspective.

Responses and debates of China's media in Africa

¹ France 24 website, <http://www.france24.com>.

It is clear that China's quest to improve its international image has increased exponentially in the last decade through cultural diplomacy and the media. However, the expansion of China's media has received mixed reactions with some observers stating that China had already displaced American and European capitalistic and diplomatic soft power in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

In March 2012, the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton while addressing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said that the United States was “engaged in an information war. “We are losing that war”, she said and cited the emergence of international broadcasters like Al-Jazeera, Russia Today and CCTV. Some critics point to China's sole aim as seeking to be portrayed as a peaceful and responsible power with credibility.

While Western negative criticism of China globally and in Africa outweighs positive attribution, there are a number of Western Scholars who view the China-Africa engagement with a measure of balance and rather positively. Gagliardone, Repnikova and Stremlau (2010) in their paper *China in Africa: A new approach to media development*, seek to demonstrate how China has become a key player in the communications sector of many African countries. Similarly, Shinn & Eisenman (2012) in their book, *China in Africa: A Century of Engagement*, say that China's officials have long felt that their policies towards Africa receive unfair treatment in the Western press and that disparity exists between China's growing economic strength and its media's relatively weak influence in Africa. This, they argue, has led to an expansion of China's state-owned overseas media outlets led by Xinhua and to a lesser degree CRI and CCTV. The media outlets, they further argue, have sought to project a softer, more cooperative images of China to Africans.

In its efforts to increase its soft power through media expansion in Africa, accusations of media and cultural imperialism towards China are emerging from Western media and academia. One concern is that the PRC is exporting a form of journalism that resembles their own, less free and independent media (Farah & Mosher 2010). This perspective poses the question as to whether China's news media is seen, at least by the West to be far less independent and reliable than Western media. However, Gagliardone(2013) points out the potential for mutually enriching encounter between Chinese and African media, that is, journalists from both sides may learn from each other's media operations.

Available literature about China's role in Africa suggests its presence in the continent is always viewed as being either exploitative or benevolent development partner. A number of scholarly inquiries have focused on this growing relationship. Franks & Ribet (2009), point out that China's current intervention in Africa is either a 'reinvention of old style colonialism, exploitation or a refreshing new kind of geopolitical relationship which is helping African development, free of the constraints often attached to Western aid'. Indeed, well-documented Western concerns over China's engagement with Africa assume added resonance to this view. Franks & Ribet (2009) note that existing Western studies of China's media do not exhaustively

investigate the local network of China's media industries in Africa. Instead, the focus appears to be on 'propaganda' or 'ideology' deployed as concepts to critique China's media (Donald & Keene, 2002). Kapchanga (2013) observes that the growing presence of China's media in Africa has drawn the attention of experts who are interested in knowing whether they will adjust their style to suit non-Chinese markets. While according to Gabriël J. Botma (2013), African responses to China's media involvement leads to the debate about the power shift from Western imperialism to Chinese imperialism and he further argues that Chinese efforts to strengthen its soft power will be judged against the history of Western colonialism in Africa.

Media engagement between China and Africa needs to be viewed from the broader historical perspective as Wekessa (2013) points out. He traces the growing presence of China's media in Africa to the 2006 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) III which outlined media and communication guidelines. Similarly, Jackson Banda once says that whilst Chinese assistance to African media is not new, what's different now is that it is being administered in the post-cold war era with a greater degree of openness. According to Banda (2009), even before the Cold War, China was involved in "some level of media engagement in Africa." He points out that the China-Africa media relationship is part of China's wider agenda aimed at fostering political independence, creating friendly relations and supporting the development of African countries.

It is worth noting that the 21st Century has witnessed a high level of engagement between China and Africa. Clearly, the perceptions of China's media as soft power are discussed in the context of the growing competition between China and the Western countries in terms of trade, investment and political influence. Wasserman (2012) argues that the understanding of China's role in Africa is a complex one based on his research findings of the overall balance between positive, negative, and neutral statements of China in South Africa. Such observations are based on the background that China's media is state-owned and driven by the motive to get Africans understand more about China as a whole and promote good relations with the governments and people in African countries.

It is worth noting that the discourse on the rise of China's media in Africa is silent on the role of Africa and Africans in the relationship. Western and African scholars showed their deep concerns about China's media engagement in Africa. In general, the various responses reflected their understandings of the relationship of China's media, African media and Western media, and the potential changes to the existing media landscape in Africa as well. As to different scholarly responses, we see China's media in Africa is partially regarded as new comer and a stranger compared with the Western media which rooted in Africa for a long time.

However, it could be observed that African scholars prefer to welcome China's media as a new partner for a balance of international news flow or even constructive information platform to present African countries alternatively, but they on the other hand tend to keep an eye on it from the distance for further observation. Worries

could be told from both Western and African scholars about influences of the journalism of China's media, and identity of China's media as state-owned turned to be the central concern related to other problematic issues, such as editorial independence, propaganda, reliability, freedom of speech, and etc.. So, the arguments seem fall from one side to the other as to the presence of China's media in Africa and new perspective is needed for better understanding.

Challenges and stereotypes against journalistic style of China's media in Africa

Among the mixed responses towards Chinese media's expansion in Africa, the journalistic approach practiced by Chinese's Media is always under heated debate. Wang-Thomas (2012) notes that the Western media have sought to present China's media in Africa as less credible because of its links to the State. ACNN story written by McKenzie (2012) soon after the launch of CCTV Africa also questions the credibility of CCTV and describes the initiative as part of China's efforts to build its national image in Africa. The view is supported by Zhang Xiaoling (2013) who argues that gaining credibility would require CCTV to be free of state interference. Further, Ngomba (2011) questions whether the Chinese media system and paradigm has a place in Africa.

The positive reporting practiced by China's media in Africa has been questioned by the Western media, as well as some of the African media institutions which follow the "negative reporting" approach. Gagliardone (2013) reveals that while there was a stated desire for CCTV Africa to use 'positive reporting' in telling the African story, therefore, domestic African controversial political stories are likely to be ignored by China's media (Yick, 2012).

In spite of the differences between Western and China's media systems and practices in Africa, we could see that African media are tending more towards the developmental and the public watchdog models. It appears that the journalism of China's media is a very different and even deviant in African media sphere. Challenges and stereotypes against journalistic style of China's media in Africa is quiet common.

In this paper, the authors would like to revisit the journalism practiced by China's media against the stereotype of the so-called 'positive reporting' of China's media to further figure out what exactly makes China's media different from Western journalism. The discussion is particularly important in the context of the growing engagement of China's media in Africa. Therefore, by following the concept of constructive journalism, the paper hopes to add a new perspective to look at the practice and performance of China's media in Africa.

Constructive Journalism as the journalistic concept of China's media in Africa?

As to the news coverage, Moeller (1999) notes that the media use formulaic coverage, where issues are represented as positive or negative, good or bad and black or white.

He points out that the Western media approach represents issues from the extreme perspective of ‘negative’, which fits within the framework of the ‘watchdog’ role of the media. It is also argued that China’s media might have adopted an approach different from the watchdog model (Farah & Mosher, 2010).

Distinguished from watchdog journalism, the concept of constructive journalism focuses the public attention on any one problem for a period of time to stimulate discourse which would lead to a solution (Rosen, 1996; Rosen, 1999). So, constructive journalism goes beyond exposing corruption and alike by channeling the people’s outrage into something constructive(Hickman, 2011). According to Seligman (2011), constructive journalism is guided by five key themes, namely positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meanings and accomplishment. Here, positive emotion requires the journalist to reveal the people who have solved the problem or conflict. However, constructive journalism watch the society and government for the interest of the public not only as a ‘dog’ which barks and bites in the distance but also as a member of the society to monitor it through responsible engagement.

As constructive journalism covers positive and solution-focused news formats, narratives, angles, and styles of debate, within classical reporting, the media report under this journalistic concept empowers the people and information can be used constructively while remaining accurate and critical where necessary(Zhang, 2013). And of course, ‘solution-focused’ does not mean media play the single role for solutions of any problems and issues, instead, media’s role is to generate the people and institutions to find out solutions by offering necessary information and setting media agenda to raise the public concerns and debates. In this process, media is responsible for themselves as well as for the goodness they believed.

Kapchanga (2013) observes that the growing presence of China’s media in Africa has drawn the attention of experts who are interested in knowing whether they will adjust their style to suit non-Chinese markets. Clearly, the observation is made against the background that China’s media is state owned and is assumed to be driven by the motive to defend the interest of the Chinese Government and the governments in African countries which have good relations with China. In fact, Chinese international state-owned media follow the China’s foreign policy of non-interference in the first place, and therefore stories of Sino-Africa partnership and friendship are given more priority.

Yick (2012) argues that China’s policy of non-interference means that domestic African political stories deemed to be controversial are likely to be ignored adding that CCTV Africa avoids politically controversial news stories. This is an interesting observation, which partially disclosed the preference of China’s media. An analysis of the main objectives of the three CCTV Africa programs, namely Africa Live, Talk Africa and Faces of Africa, reveals a commitment to offer a new view of Africa which is different from that projected by the Western media. The use of constructive journalism on CCTV Africa demonstrates a commitment to showcase that Africa like

other parts of the world has numerous problems but at the same time the people are active players in shaping their destiny and finding solution to their problems(Zhang & Matingwina, 2014). CCTV Africa's Bureau Chief, Song Jianing once remarked thus:

“We hope to strengthen a positive image of Africa in Africa and worldwide. If you take the case of Somalia, our journalists do not cover only war or violence, but also want to stress other aspects of life in Somalia, how life in the capital is improving, how the African Union is making a difference and even how a country like that has been able to send athletes to the Olympics.”

Yu-Shan Wu (2012) asserts that “One thing they (CCTV) are doing right is to provide a platform for Africans to speak their point of view”. What CCTV Africa is trying to do is not just to report itself differently against the Western media but also to construct its relations with African countries and people as well.

It is worth distinguishing Chinese journalism from propaganda or just positive reporting. Gagliardone (2013) describes positive reporting as a narrative that places emphasis on collective achievements while overlooking divisive issues. The scholar concedes that application of such type of journalism may have positive outcomes for Africa. However, it is important to note that such a conception of positive journalism is based on the notion of news that overlooks divisive issues. Most literature on China's media in Africa has focused on the extremes of positive and negative journalism with the assumption that negative news or watchdog journalism is good while positive news is viewed as propaganda. The pitfall of such an approach is that it blurs out the possibility of an approach that can highlight events considered as divisive from the perspective of engaging the people to find solutions.

The concept of “constructive journalism” is advanced as a key concept to revisit China's media in the world media sphere(Zhang & Matingwina, 2014). The important question to consider is whether journalism be more than just a profession to narrate events. Constructive journalism of China's media covers positive and solution-focused news within classical reporting. As Kenya Media Owners Association Chairman Kiprono Kittony argued, Chinese media companies mean well for Africa and enhanced media cooperation will play an important and positive role in promoting China-Africa relations. Kittony also said “China's media offer fresh, alternative and balanced perspectives on Africa.” So, the aims of China's media is to empower the people and information can be used constructively while remaining accurate, critical and balanced.

In China, it is believed that media should be socially responsible while being informative. What China's media is doing in Africa is to “construct” and “reconstruct” not “destruct”. As Ma Shukun from Xinhua stated, “Xinhua Africa Regional Bureau is endeavoring to present not only challenges the continent is facing but also positive developments the continent is making.” Against this background, “constructive

journalism” could be considered as a new paradigm and concept to exam China’s media in Africa (Zhang & Matingwina, 2014).

Conclusion

The concept of constructive journalism differs from the traditional Western journalism approaches where emphasis more on negative reporting. Based on the analyses of the challenges and stereotypes against the so-called ‘positive reporting’ of China’s media in Africa, it is indeed too simple labeling China’s media with positive reporting.

As to the different journalistic style of China’s media in Africa, constructive journalism may offer a new perspective to understand the performance of China’s media in Africa. What’s more important, China’s media now take the lead to rebuild NWICO. Then, what should be the reactions of African media for next step? Media environment and political systems of African countries are different from those of China. Direct transplantation of Chinese domestic media practice onto Africa is risky. However, constructive journalism could be given further attention for the discussion over the issues of both the development of African local media and Africa.

It is recommended here that China’s state-led media in Africa should challenge themselves to find out and follow a more suitable journalistic approach, including better narrative of China itself and African issues, nevertheless, this is about the improvements of reporting techniques, communication skills and editorial arrangements and alike. Constructive journalism could also be practically improved by China’s media for its journalistic guidance in Africa.

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