

China-Africa media relations: What we know so far

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Abstract

The increased presence of Chinese media in Africa has been a topic of much debate in recent years, and has given rise to a burgeoning research area. Seen as a platform upon which China can exert its 'soft power' in Africa as part of its outward-looking international relations policy, Chinese media has been considered instrumental in portraying a more positive picture of China among African audiences, partly in an attempt to support the expansion of Chinese economic activities on the continent. Critics have however questioned the influence that Chinese media practices may have on journalistic value systems and press freedom on the continent. These criticisms assume that Chinese media may have a big impact on African media, although the empirical basis for such claims have often been lacking.

Keywords

Africa, audiences, BRICS, China-Africa relations, geopolitics, Kenya, soft power, South Africa

Introduction

During the course of the past decade, China has increased its media presence on the African continent significantly. This has taken place across various levels, namely infrastructure development, training, content production, content distribution and direct investment (see Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2017, p. 5 for more details).

This increased footprint of Chinese media on the continent is not entirely new, as the presence of Chinese media in Africa dates back at least until the 1960s and 1970s (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2017, Üngör, 2009; Yu, 1965). However, the more recent increase in Chinese media in Africa is widely seen as linked to its broader economic activities on the continent. Chinese media presence is considered by these observers as a means to exert Chinese 'soft power' (Nye, 2004) to support this economic involvement. China's increased media presence on the continent can also be

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seen against the background of two major international relations frameworks, namely the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the BRICS group of emerging states (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Attention to the media's role in fostering China-Africa collaboration is included in the FOCAC action plans, where the news media on both Chinese and African sides are expected to provide 'comprehensive and objective news coverage of the other side' and to 'play a positive role in enhancing mutual understanding and friendship' (FOCAC, 2006).

The media also forms part of the cooperation envisaged as part of the BRICS partnership. Deepening cooperation 'among media organizations' is mentioned in the Xiamen Declaration following the 2017 BRICS summit (BRICS, 2017) for instance, as part of 'people-to-people exchanges' with the goal of 'promoting development and enhancing mutual understanding, friendship and cooperation among BRICS peoples'.

It should be clear therefore, that the increased presence of Chinese media on the continent has formed part of broader strategic aims, as part of multi-lateral agreements and partnerships aimed at promoting the country's profile abroad.

For media scholars, this raises a number of questions:

- First, how has China's increased media presence, and its broader involvement on the continent, been represented in African media?
- Second, What are African journalists' attitudes towards Chinese media?
- Third, how have African audiences responded to Chinese media?

This article summarises the findings of research into these questions that has been conducted over the past few years (and which have been reported in more detail elsewhere). The focus falls on South Africa, as this country has been represented in the BRICS group of nations, but the discussion will also draw on data gathered in Kenya, as well as debates on China's presence on the continent more broadly.

Taken together, these three dimensions provide a picture of the impact and success of Chinese media as a vehicle for soft power in Africa.

How have China-Africa relations been represented in African media?

Two types of data have been used to answer this research question. First, content analyses were utilised to establish South African media's coverage of China's presence in Africa, and South Africa's relationship with China as part of the BRICS framework. The findings of these analyses (see Wasserman, 2012 for details) suggested a fairly balanced picture of China's involvement in Africa as far as South African media coverage is concerned, and even displayed a cautiously optimistic stance towards China when this country's involvement on the continent was framed as a business story which highlighted the potential economic opportunities that this relationship might bring. Second, interviews with South African journalists were conducted to establish how important they considered the relationships with China to be for their news agenda. In other words, do they access and use Chinese media as sources, thereby amplifying Chinese perspectives through their reports? The findings of these interviews (see Wasserman, 2016 for a more detailed discussion) showed that South African journalists tend not to access Chinese media, or see no reason to prefer Chinese media to Western sources. South African journalists viewed Chinese media with

uncertainty and mistrust due to Chinese state control of the media. Despite concerns raised by scholars and in popular media discourses that the Chinese media presence in Africa would impact adversely on press freedom and editorial independence, South African journalists did not express strong fears in this regard. However, they did feel that their integrity would be compromised if they were to rely on Chinese media sources. Chinese media content also did not seem engaging enough for it to be included in local news agendas, sought out by local journalists. The 'China story' would only enter local news agendas when it impacted on local politics or economic matters.

In terms of the representation of China in South African media, it would therefore seem that despite an absence of overly negative portrayals, South African journalists do not portray China-Africa relations overly critically. However, these initial findings suggested that Chinese media are not frequently used as a source in reports by South African journalists. This suggests that Chinese media do not influence the coverage of China-Africa relations in South African media to any significant extent. This study was later followed up by a more in-depth look at journalists' attitudes towards Chinese media, which will be discussed next.

What are African journalists' attitudes towards Chinese media?

The study of South African media content related to China-Africa relations, and the extent to which Chinese media are used as a source that was referred to in the previous section, was later followed up by further research to deepen our understanding of African journalists' attitudes towards Chinese media. This study, which again was based on interviews with journalists, focused on attitudes and perceptions of South African journalists, working across various platforms, towards Chinese media. The findings of these interviews (see Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2017) provided a more nuanced picture than the previous study, and indicated a diversity of positions with regard to Chinese media. South African journalists could be categorised in four terms: adopters, pragmatists, undecided and resisters. This means that although some journalists still were very critical of Chinese media, as the previous round of interviews showed (described in the previous section of this paper), some of them did report that they adopted Chinese media as sources in their reporting. Others would take a pragmatic stance and only use Chinese media as sources when they want to get the Chinese perspective on a particular issue, while others were still undecided about the relevance and importance of Chinese media for their work. In terms of the impact of Chinese media on South African news agendas, the influence still seems mostly on the low side.

How have African audiences responded to Chinese media?

Most studies of China-Africa media relations, including the ones from this project discussed above, have thus far tended to focus on broader, macro issues such as the political economy of Chinese media in Africa, coverage of this relationship in local media or the influence of Chinese media on African journalism norms and practices. A gap in the research has been the attitudes of African audiences towards Chinese media. An initial, exploratory study (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018) among South African and Kenyan university students has brought to light a very low level of media usage and high levels of ingrained bias against Chinese media. The impact of Chinese activities among young Kenyans and South Africans is therefore very limited. While one would expect university students of media and communications to be interested in a variety of media,

almost none of those students interviewed in these two African countries chose Chinese media as an information source. These students also have very limited knowledge of China's news organisations present in Africa. The problem at the heart of this lack of usage or interest did not so much seem to be a lack of access to Chinese media, but rather deep-seated biases against Chinese media. Students did not view Chinese media to be credible or trustworthy, although Chinese media's proclaimed aim of presenting a more positive picture of Africa than its Western counterparts, did resonate with the students. While the roots of these biases may be varied, one could assume that the strong Western professional values in which South African journalism has been based in the post-apartheid era may account for some of the resistance to what is seen as biased or propagandistic media. In the liberal-democratic normative framework that South Africa has adopted, independence and freedom of the media is paramount. The fact that Chinese media is state-owned raises the spectre of control of the media, against the background of many African states where the state dominates the mediated public sphere and independent, critical journalists are threatened or suppressed. This motivation however needs substantiation that could be provided by further research.


Conclusion

Chinese media presence in Africa has grown in leaps and bounds over the past two decades. Not only is Chinese media present in Africa and do they dedicate significant amounts of coverage to stories on the continent, but China has also lent its support to African media on the level of infrastructure development, training, content production, content distribution and direct investment. However, despite this heightened activity in the African mediasphere, the impact of Chinese media on African journalists and audiences still seem to be low. While some coverage of China in Africa more broadly speaking has been found to be balanced and optimistic when the potential economic benefits of Chinese involvement in Africa were considered, Chinese media are viewed with a large degree of scepticism and distrust. Research conducted over the past three years in South Africa and Kenya suggest that this low level of usage and influence is not due to lack of access or availability of such media, but due to deep-seated preconceptions, biases and stereotypes about Chinese media among African journalists and audiences. It may be difficult to reverse these negative biases, and the impact of Chinese media in advancing Chinese 'soft power' in Africa may therefore remain low, although Chinese media's positive coverage of Africa might, in the long run, become a welcome alternative to Western stereotypes and could wield some more influence over local audience in future.

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