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Media Development with Chinese Characteristics

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Abstract: Chinese authorities often frame their activities in the development sector as distinctive from those pursued by Western donors by stressing that they are not seeking to export a specific model but simply to help countries reach their potential. This demand-driven approach has applied to old and new development areas, from education to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and has appeared fairly consistent across countries. This pledge, however, has not meant that Chinese aid is neutral or without significant political implications. China's concessionary loans and support to development projects have tended to shift balances of power by favouring certain actors over others and have challenged existing development paradigms, revitalizing ideas of the developmental state. Building on fieldwork conducted in Ghana, Ethiopia, and Kenya this article explains to which extent China's entrance in the media and telecommunication sector actually challenges the dominant, Western-driven approaches to media development, promoting a state centred vision of the information society.

Keywords: media development, China-Africa relations, conceptions of the information society, African media

Introduction¹

Media and telecommunications are the newest frontier in China's continued engagement with Africa; part of a wider pattern of increasing Chinese investments in African markets, infrastructure, and natural resources. China's expansion in these sectors has included old and new communication technologies and has developed through both top-down policies and through trial and error. It is underpinned by China's "Go Out" strategy, first unveiled in 1999 and later incorporated into the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001–2005) with the objective of encouraging Chinese enterprises to invest overseas, improve competitiveness, and secure an international business presence. At the same time, this engagement also taps into China's efforts to strengthen its image through public diplomacy, shaping African, and global, public opinion in its favour.

¹ Some of the ideas for the article first emerged in conversation with Sam Geall and consolidated in a briefing paper that was published by NOREF in 2014. I am grateful to the three anonymous reviewers, as well as to Nicole Stremlau, Carola Richter and Christine Horz for their helpful comments and feedback.

China's media and telecommunications strategy in Africa builds on a long history of engagement with the continent: the PRC's formal diplomatic relations with African countries date back to the 1950s, when they were characterised not only by the provision of aid, but also by the ambition to communicate directly with African audiences. Many of the country's current engagements in Africa are remarkably similar to the strategies first laid out by Premier Zhou Enlai: China stresses mutual benefit and cooperation over the export of a particular (media) model, and emphasises sovereignty and independence over interference and conditionalities. But there are also important breaks with the past. Ideology has largely disappeared from the language of China-Africa cooperation; China's engagement in Africa is no longer intended to export a socialist revolution to the continent, but to exploit Africa's resources and untapped potential. And the resources 21st century China can mobilize are much greater than in previous eras. Chinese media are among the few that are able to boost operations in Africa in an era when the crisis of profitability of traditional journalism has forced many outlets to pull their correspondents out of the continent.

Other nations have regarded China's renewed activity in Africa as a threat. In 2011, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made her country's concerns clear during a visit to Tanzania, when she warned of the possibility of a "new colonialism" in Africa (Wasamunu 2011). A few months later, British Prime Minister David Cameron told an audience in Lagos, Nigeria, that new forms of "authoritarian capitalism" may be taking root in the continent, in reference to China's entry into African markets (Groves 2011). These concerns have been echoed in the media and telecommunications sector: critics have suggested that China is "reshap[ing] much of the world's media in its own image" and "promoting an anti-Western media model" (Farah and Mosher 2010, 4). Others have alleged that Chinese telecommunications giants Huawei – which is a private company, but whose founder served as an engineer in China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) – and ZTE may be hiding "backdoors" in their equipment to allow the Chinese government to spy on users, including African citizens, or to shield its own spying efforts elsewhere (Protalinski 2012). However, recent leaks from the former United States' National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden, revealing that the NSA itself tried to install backdoors in Huawei's networks, have given such accusations an ironic twist. As Thomas Rid succinctly put it, "there is now more publicly available evidence that the [United States'] NSA exploited Huawei than there is public evidence that shows the PLA or other Chinese agencies did so" (Rid 2014).

By focusing specifically on China's role as an emerging media development actor in Africa, this article seeks to respond to some of these concerns, and bring more clarity to a significant component of China's engagement in the global media and telecommunication sector. The behaviour of the Chinese government has not helped dispelling misunderstandings, quite the opposite, as China has refused to report transparent outcomes of official aid, export credits, and other flows of development finance (Brautigam 2011). Also among scholars, journalists and

advocates, however, there has been the tendency to base commentaries more on ideological grounds than on empirical evidence.² The practice of singling out China to denounce problematic practices that are shared by a wider variety of actors has become increasingly widespread and, as I later explain, this has been particularly common when it comes to information and communication (Hairong and Sautman 2013).

This article will first address how “traditional” donors, those belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), have conceptualized and funded media development and will then explore the main ways in which Chinese actors have supported media and telecommunications in Africa, reflecting on the extent to which some of them comply with, while others challenge traditional modes to support the media in developing countries. These findings are based on fieldwork conducted in Ghana, Kenya, and Ethiopia between 2008 and 2013, where semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of governments, (e.g. ministers and cadres in ministries of communication and/or information technology), civil society organizations (e.g. local and international NGOs promoting freedom of expression and media development), and the private sector (e.g. employees of major telecom companies). In Kenya and in Ethiopia, representatives of Chinese telecommunication and IT companies, as well as Chinese journalists working for Xinhua news agency, China’s Central Television (CCTV) and the China’s Daily Africa edition were interviewed. For countries other than Ghana, Kenya and Ethiopia secondary data was also collected to build a continental perspective of China’s role in the media and telecommunication sector.

A new type of media development?

Understanding China’s media development and how it compares to the strategies championed by “traditional” Western donors is a complex effort, as it intersects with at least two major debates which are far from being settled and have been little aware of one another.

The first major debate is on media development per se, or international media assistance as it is often referred to. This debate has been animated by scholars (Allen and Stremlau 2005; Berger 2010; Kalathil 2008; Kumar 2006; Myers 2009), donors, international organizations (e.g. USAID, IDRC, UNESCO), NGOs, and foundations (e.g. Internews, IREX, BBC Media Action, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Knight, Ford and Gates Foundations). As surveys of donor agencies supporting media development have indicated (Gagliardone 2010; Myers 2009) most donors seem to have developed a paradoxical relationship with the media. Many agencies recognize the importance of strong and unfettered media, but are frustrated by the inability of monitoring and

² This phenomenon has been denounced, for example, by Giles Mohan, who has demanded greater engagement with the field and greater reliance on empirical data. See (Mohan 2013).

evaluating the effects that investments in this area are producing. Some donor agencies still struggle to distinguish between media development (as the support to the media as a sector) from media for development (as the use of the media to support other development outcomes). Scholars, for their part, have advanced different, but often overlapping, categorizations of media development (Kalathil 2008; Kumar 2006), and have called for “problematizing” and updating the whole concept (Berger 2010). The rising complexity characterizing media ecologies, along with the emergence of new platforms for expression and new media actors, including social media and citizen journalists, has made understanding which media should be most effectively targeted through assistance increasingly difficult (Kalathil 2008).

Despite the differences and ongoing contentions, however, the analysis of both practical and conceptual approaches to media development indicates that at least three overarching modes of operation have tended to characterize most interventions in this area: the building of a regulatory and legal framework; the supporting of infrastructure and capital equipment; and training and capacity building (Myers 2008). I will thus consider these three dimensions, while analysing China’s approach to media development.

The second, larger, debate that should also be taken into consideration when seeking to understand China’s entrance as a major player in the media and telecommunication sector, is on the very nature of aid and the standards that should be applied to distinguish it from other financial flows from richer to poorer countries. Differently from the definition of media development, in this case “traditional” donor agencies have sought to reach consensus on common criteria. The 24 members of the DAC recognize as Official Development Assistance (ODA) all

“flows of official financing administered with the promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing countries as the main objective and which are concessional in character with a grant element of at least 25 per cent (using a fixed 10 per cent rate of discount) ... Lending by export credit agencies – with the pure purpose of export promotion – is excluded” (DAC 2003 as quoted in Brautigam 2011, 754).

As Deborah Brautigam has pointed out, however, this definition is not without problems (Brautigam 2011). In some cases loans can be registered as aid even if the interest rate charged is much higher than what is normally charged by private banks. Also, when the DAC settled on a definition of ODA, it also defined a residual category of “other official flows” (OOF) as resources coming from governments but failing to meet the ODA criteria. While ample scholarship is available on ODA (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Hoeffler and Outram 2011), its disbursement and effectiveness, very little research has been conducted on OOF and their potential developmental outcomes, their ability to produce “economic development and welfare”, even if it does not comply with the technical definition of aid (Dreher and Fuchs 2011).

China's unprecedented engagement in developing countries and its increased activity in the media and telecommunication sectors represent a challenge for both debates.

In contrast to donors stressing their determination to push other countries' media systems towards greater openness, China has distinguished itself for providing support with no strings attached, refraining from imposing a particular policy agenda as part of a cooperation package, and collaborating with democracies and autocracies alike – even if its relation with rogue states has changed over time (Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Small 2008). This approach openly contradicts at least one of the pillars of media development: the effort to create enabling regulatory environments for media systems to grow stronger and more open in developing countries. In China, as in many other states, the law has been regularly used to shape and direct the evolution of domestic media systems. In the case of new media, whose regulation has been shared by different ministries for a long time, the use of the law to both enable and restrict specific uses and applications has even exceeded what has been the case in Europe and in the US (Creemers 2014). The Chinese government, however, has refrained from suggesting that regulatory measures adopted in China should be adopted by other countries to inform their own media policies or even that regulation per se should be the mechanism through which specific outcomes should be achieved (Callahan 2009; Shambaugh 2013).

As per the financial instruments adopted with its development partners, China, which is not a member of the DAC, has distinguished itself from other donors, as it “does not separate ODA [Official Development Assistance] from economic cooperation or investment as long as the intent is to expand local capacity” (Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010, 862). As Deborah Brautigam has pointed out, most of Chinese finance is actually provided in the form of export credits, non-concessional state loans and aid used to foster Chinese investment, none of which fit into the official definition of ODA, but nonetheless have a “developmental” goal, as they support projects identified by recipient countries as instrumental for promoting “economic development and welfare”. As she and other scholars have insisted, discarding these instruments – which in OECD parlance would largely be considered OOF – would risk missing important, possibly the most important, implications of China's rise as a development actor.

In this paper, following Brautigam (2011), I adopt an approach that seeks to understand the Chinese approach to Africa in its own terms, rather through the lens of external standards. I thus let the modes of operation that have characterized China's presence in the media and telecommunication sectors in Africa emerge from empirical evidence first, considering a broad range of initiatives involving both public and private Chinese actors. I only secondly ask which aspects bear similarities with the approaches championed by other donors and which others constitute instead a new mode of engagement. As the next sections indicate, in resonance with studies surveying other sectors, the projects

that do comply both with mainstream definitions of media development and with aid are relatively marginal. They consist mostly in support to state media, especially state broadcasters. The largest share of resources, instead, has been going towards financing Africa's information infrastructure, in ways that do fit within the broader goal of strengthening access and capacity as per the conception of media development, but are largely supported through OOF. Finally, the venture of China's own media in Africa, as tool for public diplomacy, does not comply with either definitions (media development or aid), but interestingly rides over some issues that in previous decades characterized the debate on media development, including the strengthening of South-South cooperation and the promotion of a developmental model of journalism.

Aid with state-strings attached

"Aid with no-strings-attached" has become one of the slogans of China's approach to development, the most evident feature used to assert its distinctiveness from Western conceptions of aid. A survey of Chinese assistance in the media and telecommunications sectors indicates this approach has been consistent in the policy realm, where, as has been argued above, Chinese authorities have exercised little or no pressure to promote reforms or shape the regulatory environment (Banda 2009; Zhang 2013). But when it comes to the types of media actors that China has supported, through grants, training, and provision of equipment, it appears that Chinese support has overwhelmingly flowed towards state media, indicating a consistent selection bias in distributing resources. While most other donors have espoused an issue-based approach, seeking to sustain specific agendas first and selecting which partners in each country could best help achieving certain goals, China has preferred an actor-based approach, seeking to increase the capacity of the state media.³ Despite there could be a rationale behind this strategy, as in countries like Uganda and Ghana for example the establishment of strong and relatively independent state media (as it had been the case for the newspapers *The New Vision* and *The Daily Graphic*) has led to greater professionalism and engagement among different factions once the market was liberalized (Gagliardone, Stremlau, and Nkrumah 2012; Stremlau 2008), it seems that privileging the state depends more on China's diplomatic use of aid, as a way to please its partners. A few examples may help make this point clearer.

In Zimbabwe, a 2012 deal on economic and technical cooperation with China, worth 1.14 billion yuan (around US\$180 million), included loans of 31.5 yuan (around US\$5 million) to provide television broadcasting vans to the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) (Xinhua 2012). In February 2013, China donated a broadcasting van in a bilateral governmental meeting in Harare, alongside agreements for food and infrastructural loans (Xinhua 2013). As well as helping to cement bilateral relations between the two states, the vans contribute to the

³ This trait that is also shared by Japanese cooperation which, as Deborah Brautigam has pointed out, has played an important role in influencing China's behaviour as a donor (Brautigam 2009).

broadcasting capacity of the national ZBC broadcaster, which previously had to hire such equipment privately. This equipment also helped to digitise Zimbabwe's broadcasting network, thus helping to meet the June 2015 continent-wide deadline for digital switchover set by the International Telecommunication Union in 2006. In Liberia, China spent US\$4 million on radio expansion, in cooperation with the Liberia Broadcasting System in 2008 (Wu 2012). An agreement between Chinese and Liberian governments in 2012 provided the Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS) with technical assistance for satellite transmission, broadcasting equipment and interpretation; the government will also help with the cost of renting the transmitting satellite for two years.

Most initiatives aimed at supporting local media comply with both the definitions of media development and aid indicated above. They are focused on building the capacity of the local media, albeit selectively, and they are largely provided in the form of grants and donations of equipment and training. As in the case of other sectors, however, Chinese flows that do comply with definitions set by Western donors, represent only a very small portion of China's overall contribution.

The shaping of Africa's information infrastructure

The largest share of Chinese resources in the media and telecommunication sector has been channelled towards supporting Africa's information infrastructures. Similarly to what had been the case with roads and railways, in many countries in Africa China has emerged as one of the most important actors in ensuring connectivity also in the digital realm. The significance of the contribution to developing terrestrial and mobile information infrastructures, however, has varied widely from country to country, and China has displayed a significant ability to fit in and adapt to pre-existing markets and regulatory environments.

To date, Ethiopia is the country that has benefited the most from a partnership with China in the telecommunication sector. On the 8th November 2006 the Chinese telecom giant ZTE and the Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation signed the largest agreement in the history of telecommunications in Africa. Backed by the China Development Bank, ZTE offered a loan of \$1.5 billion (to which ZTE added \$0.4 billion for engineering) to overhaul and expand Ethiopia's telecommunication system. The loan, to be repaid in thirteen years, was disbursed in three phases. The first phase had a particularly symbolic value. Branded "Millennium Plan", it was expected to produce its results – laying down more than two thousand Kilometres of fibre optic cable to connect Ethiopia's thirteen largest cities – by 11 September 2007, the day marking the beginning of the new millennium on the Ethiopian calendar. The second and third phases similarly focused on infrastructure development, expanding coverage to rural areas and building the capacity of the system to support 20 million mobile users (from the initial 1.2 million) and more than a million Internet broadband users. Some of the funding also went to upgrade e-government projects, including Woredanet, which

facilitates routine communications between the Ethiopian Prime Minister, cabinet ministers and local constituencies (Gagliardone 2009, 2014).

China's support allowed the Ethiopian government to reach goals no other African country had achieved before, dramatically expanding access in a regime of monopoly. Elsewhere in Africa the liberalization of the market was what drove an expansion in coverage and a lowering of costs. Countries that opted for a system tightly controlled by the state, such as neighbouring Eritrea, have severely lagged behind in developing information infrastructure and services (Gagliardone and Stremlau 2011). By providing the capital, equipment and expertise, ZTE, which is partially state-owned, has not only brought the Ethiopian government out of the cul-de-sac in which it had put itself by stubbornly defending monopoly, but has also helped it realize its vision of a tightly controlled but developmentally oriented national information society.

As Amare Anslau, the CEO of the Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation at the time the project with ZTE took shape remarked in an interview in June 2008,

“Holding telecommunications is not just about security. We need this instrument for development. We need it for the people. Ethiopia is not like any other African country. Those countries just think that they can become rich, the individual can become rich. But what we want is instead building in the mind of people the attachment to their land and to their country. Once you have technology you become addicted to it. So, if you allow the private they can certainly make money. But what about the society? The society will not benefit from it. So the government is the one that has to make sure that things are done in the interest of the people [...] You have to hold all keys in your hands otherwise change, real change, will be impossible”.⁴

Five years later, on 7 June 2011, the now re-branded Ethio-Telecom issued a tender to further boost the capacity of Ethiopia's mobile-phone network to 50 million subscribers by 2015, and to introduce 4G connectivity, a mobile broadband technology allowing browsing speeds of 100 Mbit per second. The tender was similarly based on a vendor-financing scheme, as had previously been the case with ZTE. However, in contrast to 2006, the tender was public and various companies competed. As the Wall Street Journal put it, however, “again, financing won the day, with the two [ZTE and Huawei] pledging a total of \$1.6 billion. Western equipment suppliers, such as Ericsson and Alcatel Lucent SA, couldn't match the Chinese offer” (Dalton 2014). With the signing of two separate contracts of \$800 million each with Huawei and ZTE, competition was introduced in the shape of a rivalry between two Chinese companies that have been contending for shares of the Chinese market for a long time.

In neighbouring Kenya, where the market is more liberalized and competitive, China played a different role, while still maintaining some similarities with the approach adopted in Ethiopia. As in Ethiopia, China has been deeply involved in the extension of Internet connectivity. Huawei and ZTE, together with the French

⁴ Interview: Amare Anslau, CEO, Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation, Addis Ababa, 27 June 2008.

company Sagem, participated in Kenya's first National Optic Fibre Backbone Infrastructure (NOFBI) expansion, bringing fibre optic infrastructure to the main urban centres and allowing a first series of e-government projects to be delivered regionally (Okuttah 2012). The country was split into three sections, each handled by one company. Sagem laid out cables in the Coast and North Eastern areas, Huawei in Nairobi and Central area, and ZTE in Western Kenya. A second round of NOFBI (known as NOFBI II) was directly funded with Chinese resources. In 2012 China's EXIM Bank provided a \$71 million loan to support further extension to 36 administrative district centres across the country, with the objective of allowing people in remote areas to access faster internet. A condition for the loan was that the implementing agency had to be Huawei, which is now in charge of the realization of the project (Wahito 2012). As in Ethiopia, the Chinese government and Chinese companies have thus supported the expansion of government led initiatives aimed at extending Internet connectivity and improving e-government services. In the Kenyan case, however, Chinese support fits into a much wider context, where a plurality of actors have been competing to offer better services at lower prices. For example, soon after the signing of the agreement for NOFBI II, Kenya's leading telecom operator, Safaricom, decided to invest an additional \$95 million to build 2,400 more kilometres of fibre optic cable to support its growing customer base. Interestingly, a large share of the contract has been assigned on a commercial basis to Huawei, which had already worked in collaboration with Safaricom to roll out the 4G network at a cost of \$143 million. A remaining share of Safaricom's expansion project was assigned to Ericsson (Okuttah 2012). As Bitange Ndemo, Permanent Secretary of Kenya's Ministry of Information and Communication during Kibaki's second term remarked: "China is not bringing an ideology, but with its support it is winning hearts and minds. But we are a free market economy and that won't change. The Chinese understood and have adapted to it".⁵

Beyond Ethiopia and Kenya, China has been instrumental in supporting numerous other projects in the telecommunication sector, helping either state or private operators in developing infrastructure, but also providing value added services. In Guinea, Eximbank loans have supported the state-owned Société des Telecoms de Guinée (SOTELGUI) expanding its fibre optic infrastructure (TeleGeography 2013). In Nigeria, Eximbank offered Nigeria a US\$100 million loan for the development of its Galaxy Backbone ICT network, to boost "the sophistication and effectiveness of the government's efforts to tackle security challenges" (Ndubuisi 2012). In 2010, Eximbank supported e-government projects in Ghana with two concessionary loans, worth US\$30 million and US\$150 million (Gagliardone 2010). In Tanzania, Chinese concessionary loans funded the construction of the National ICT Broad Infrastructure Project (Rugonzibwa 2013).

Projects funded by China in the telecommunication sector appear compliant with one of the principles of media development, and namely the support of

⁵ Interview: Bitange Ndemo, Permanent Secretary of Kenya's Ministry of Information and Communication 2008-2013, Nairobi, 2 May 2013.

infrastructure and capital equipment, even if some specific traits of Chinese approach deserve particular attention. Historically, support to telecommunications has seldom figured in media development projects, in most cases because of the sheer amount of resources needed to make a difference in this area – notable exceptions are the Leland initiative which already in 1996 received US\$15 million to provide internet connectivity to some selected African countries (USAID 2001) and infrastructural projects supported by the World Bank (Foster and Briceño-Garmendia 2009; World Bank 2010). China's ability to act as a very large lender, however, is setting it apart from most other donors. In addition, media convergence has made understanding the ripple effects infrastructural investments may have on a plurality of media increasingly difficult. The same content can be accessed through different channels, and most interactive spaces that are transforming communication in Africa are emerging precisely at the crossroad between traditional and new media and telecommunication (as represented for example by interactive radio talk shows, where participation is ensured by audiences calling, sending SMS, posting on the show's facebook page or writing to its twitter handle).

On the contrary, when considered through the parameters set by the DAC for ODA, China's assistance in this area cannot be accounted as aid. Loans to support telecommunications are in fact usually provided either in the form of concessionary loans offered by the China Eximbank or China Development Bank to African governments, but tied to having a Chinese company implementing the project, or of export credits offered directly to Chinese companies, which use them to implement a project envisioned by a national government.

Public diplomacy or development journalism?

Another important area where China has made inroads into Africa is the expansion of its own media, including CCTV, Xinhua, and the China's Daily. Initiatives like these are usually comprised under the rubric of "public diplomacy", which is separated from media development, and is funded in ways that cannot be accounted for neither as ODA nor as OOF. Also in this case, however, China's approach presents challenges to mainstream definitions and categorizations.

When CCTV Africa – the news production centre created in Nairobi by state owned international broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) – launched on 12th January 2012, it became the largest non-African TV initiative in Africa. It employed more than 100 journalists, mostly African, between its headquarters in Nairobi and reporting from across the continent. Building on its considerable resources, CCTV Africa was the only international TV initiative to guarantee one hour of original reporting from Africa every day, targeting African and global audiences. One year later, this was increased to one-and-a-half hours, split into two tranches and featured globally on CCTV News. CCTV Africa added to a long list of previous media initiatives on the continent. In Kenya, China Radio International (CRI) had launched its own local FM stations in three East African

cities, broadcasting in English, Mandarin and Swahili, and it has AM channel coverage across the country (Wu 2012). State news agency Xinhua, whose presence in Africa dates back to the 1950s, also significantly expanded its scope and reach in Africa in the 2000s and 2010s, and its news stories have begun to appear regularly in national newspapers (Xin 2009). In 2012, the same year CCTV Africa started operating, the state-controlled English-language newspaper China Daily launched its Africa Weekly edition, the “first English language newspaper published in Africa by a Chinese media enterprise” (China Daily 2012).

These initiatives are aimed at different targets and seek to improve the image of China among African audiences in more or less direct ways. Agencies like Xinhua tend to be seen as closer to state interest (Zhao 2004), while international broadcaster CCTV Africa has been more innovative (Gagliardone 2013). Most of them, however, share some common traits. For the purpose of this paper, the most relevant is the emphasis placed on the idea of “developmental journalism”. Chinese media actors have been insisting on a conception that positions the media at the centre of a country’s efforts to build the state, the nation, and guarantee better development prospects. This position is remarkably in line with UNESCO’s earlier efforts to create a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), which represented one of the apexes in the debate on media development, stressing South-South cooperation and the ability of voices coming from the Global South to be heard and affect global narratives. This is also a conception that has found resonance among some of the African journalists working in the Chinese media. As Douglas Okwatch, an experienced Kenyan producer working for CCTV Africa, explained:

“A lot of debate has been going on in this country about watchdog journalism. In the 1980s and 1990s during the transition period we required a more aggressive style of journalism, we required watchdog media and we were working to produce change. This change came more slowly than we expected but it eventually came. The media freedom is there now. And now the question is different. Now the question is about the use that we can make of the space that we created. Now it is not the time for fighting as much as before. Now we have to play a better role in promoting growth in our countries, in promoting development”.⁶

This conception of a distinctive model of journalism shared by some Chinese and African journalists working for CCTV Africa, however, seems to struggle to find a concrete application in everyday’s reporting. As the few analyses of the content broadcast by CCTV Africa – mostly through his news programme Africa Live – indicate, the Chinese channel does not dramatically distinguish itself from other international broadcasters, in terms of reporting conflicts and crises (Marsh 2014; Zhang 2013). CCTV may offer a different spin on certain news, be more critical of Western initiatives and interests, but it still struggles to find a narrative that is at the same time appealing and different from the aggressive styles of journalism championed by channels such as Al Jazeera, which have become increasingly popular among African audiences (York 2013; Zhang 2013).

⁶ Interview: Douglas Okwatch, Senior Producer, Talk Africa, CCTV Africa, 12 September 2012.

This third area of China's entrance in the media sector in Africa seems therefore to still exist outside of the boundaries of what we can define media development, but it is a space to watch. There seems to be a commitment on the side of Chinese editors to develop a distinctive narrative, building on ideas of South-South cooperation, leveraging the image of Africa as a continent of opportunities, but Chinese channels abroad seem not to have found – yet? – a distinctive image and space that does appeal to African and global audiences.

Conclusion: A state-centric idea of media development

The ways in which the Chinese government has disciplined domestic media, together with the tendency of OECD donors to advance their own media model when providing media assistance, has created the expectation that China would be a net exporter of authoritarianism (Cook 2013; Farah and Mosher 2010). A better examination of the empirical evidence shows the picture is more complex.

Despite China's interventions have not been guided by the idea of media development – which is a substantially alien concept for Chinese development actors (Gagliardone, Repnikova, and Stremlau 2010) – the disbursement of resources from the Chinese state in the media and telecommunication sector in Africa does raise questions that are relevant for the media development and the aid debates. As this article has indicated, some modes of operations that have characterized China's entrance in this area do bear similarities with the ways in which traditional donors have provided media assistance. The most interesting questions, however, are probably not whether and how China fits or will fit in pre-defined categories, but what repercussions China's entrance may have on media development at large. I conclude by focusing on two of these.

First, as the analysis of Chinese support to local media and to the building of information infrastructures has shown, China seems to have adapted to the requests of its local partners, rather than supporting template approaches, offering greater space for manoeuvre to actors trying to fend off Western conditionalities and put forward their own agenda. The tendency to privilege relationships with incumbent governments across its various lines of support, however, poses questions on whose agency China is supporting. Functioning media systems are built through the contribution of a variety of actors, including the private sector, grassroots organizations, and the state. By reinforcing the ability of the latter, rather than the formers, to shape the evolution of national media systems, China is supporting in practice a vision of the role of the media in society which is skewed towards the state. While the interest in building functioning and capable states is not exclusive to China, this tendency can lead potentially harmful consequences. China's support to incumbents, for example, and to a vision where the state is seen as the prime mover, may lead to deepening divisions between “Western powers” and civil society organizations on one side, framed as advancing foreign agendas that may harm a country's sovereignty, and government actors supported by China

in their path towards development on the other. While this dichotomy is clearly a result of a selective reading of the national and international politics of development, it has already been gaining ground in countries like Ethiopia, as exemplified by the case of the imprisonment of bloggers accused to be using social media to incite unrest in collaboration with “foreign human right activist organizations” (Maasho 2014).

The second is a question about whether the insistence over a “no-strings-attached” model is always beneficial for donors and recipients. As illustrated earlier, this approach has been consistent in the policy realm, where China has not put pressure for media reforms, but conditionalities can be found in the type of financial flows the Chinese government has disbursed (e.g. export credit for Chinese companies to support infrastructural projects in Africa). As the comparison between the Ethiopian and the Kenyan cases in the building of infrastructural projects has illustrated, there may be a more fundamental problem with this approach. The support of the Chinese government and to Chinese companies to the expansion of access in a regime of monopoly in Ethiopia, as required by the Ethiopian government but against the experience China itself had in expanding its own telecommunication system, has led to the creation of a poorly functioning system with little incentive to improve itself. Chinese companies have fared much better in Kenya, where they have been operating in a regime of much tougher competition, as it had been the case in China. China’s insistence in avoiding lecturing its partners seems it can backfire. In its own path towards development China has demonstrated a remarkable ability in localizing foreign technologies, and its experience could offer important lessons for Africa (Fu, Pietrobelli, and Soete 2011; Fu 2008). Very little opportunities have been created, at least in the media and telecommunication sector, for the lessons China had learned to be transferred to its African partners.

China’s entrance in the media and telecommunication sector in Africa is still very recent, and much can change in the years ahead. It is important, however, to broaden the range of questions asked to Chinese actors. The tendency of Western countries to consider the aid they disburse morally better or more effective than China’s, denounced for example by May Tan-Mullins, Giles Mohan, and Marcus Power (2010) can be a serious obstacle in understanding what the contribution of China can actually be in terms of shaping media development in Africa, for better and for worse. The increasing relevance of China in this sector should be seen as an opportunity to re-consider some of the practices, assumption and contradictions that have characterized it, rather than to affirm a supposed supremacy of some over others.

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