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China in Africa: A New Approach to Media Development?

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China in Africa: A New Approach to Media Development?

Abstract

This report is based on the outcomes of the workshop organized by the Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy (PCMLP) at the University of Oxford and the Stanhope Centre for communications Policy Research. The workshop reflected on China's growing influence in Africa's communications sector and on the implications this has on the prevailing local and Western approaches to media assistance and media development in Africa and beyond. It brought together researchers from Africa, China, and Europe to build a common research agenda and to develop an innovative and multi-actor approach to studying the transformations experienced by media systems in an increasingly multi-polar world.

Disciplines

Communication | International and Area Studies

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Executive Summary

This report is based on the outcomes of the workshop organized by the Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy (PCMLP) at the University of Oxford and the Stanhope Centre for Communications Policy Research. The workshop reflected on China's growing influence in Africa's communications sector and on the implications this has on the prevailing local and Western approaches to media assistance and media development in Africa and beyond. It brought together researchers from Africa, China, and Europe to build a common research agenda and to develop an innovative and multi-actor approach to studying the transformations experienced by media systems in an increasingly multi-polar world.

In the past few years China has rapidly become an important player in the media sector in many African countries in at least three ways. First, its economic success and the impressive growth of media outlets and users within China have quietly promoted an example of how the media can be deployed within the larger political and economic strategies of developing states, moving beyond the democratization paradigm promoted in the West. It has shown that heavy investments in media and information and communication technologies can go hand-in-hand with a tight control over them, posing a lesser challenge to local governments and to political stability. Second, the Chinese government, and its associated companies, have enhanced their direct involvement in the telecommunication and media markets in Africa. Chinese companies have started winning large bids on the continent, as exemplified by the 1.7 billion dollars project won by the Chinese telecom giant ZTE to overhaul Ethiopia's telecommunication system. At the same time, the Chinese government has provided significant support to state broadcasters in selected countries, such as Kenya and Zambia. Third, China's public diplomacy strategy has been stepped up through expanding the reach and content of its international broadcasters

including China Central Television-CCTV and China Radio International-CRI. There has also been a heavy investment in the growth of the government news agency, Xinhua. Cultural diplomacy has been growing through the continued establishment of Confucius institutes. And programmes that offer scholarships for foreign students and journalists to study in China have been expanded.

The workshop approached these issues from different angles, ranging from broad philosophical approaches to the media, to specific case studies and comparative analyses. It aimed at developing a new set of questions, and at exploring paths that could lead to a possible normative synthesis. The participants were asked, for example, what the shared elements were across different traditions of understanding the role of the media in governance, particularly in fragile states. It was asked whether there was a Chinese approach to using the media to build a harmonious society, what resonance it had in African states emerging from conflict, and whether there were commonalities with the ideas of harnessing the media for unity and integration supported by leaders of pan-Africanism such as those of Julius Nyerere, the first President of Tanzania, and Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana.

Main issues

The diverse expertise of workshop participants allowed for a discussion that addressed key themes from multiple perspectives, identifying shared ideas on which new syntheses could be built. A few central points emerged from the discussions:

- 1) It was highlighted how the very concept of media assistance, which has been employed by international organizations, Western donors and NGOs to define their efforts to promote independent media in developing countries, has little applicability to China's engagement in Africa. Chinese actors prefer to frame their activities in the media sector as forms of collaboration and exchange, aimed at encouraging mutual understanding, at strengthening diplomatic and economic ties, and at counterbalancing the negative reporting of both China and Africa in Western media.
- 2) In recent years China has been both praised and criticized for its "no strings attached" policy, that is, for the lack of conditionality in providing aid to developing countries and the tendency to support projects "as requested" by individual governments. At a discursive level, this strategy appears to have also informed collaborations in the media sector. Some participants, however, challenged some aspects of the idea of neutrality embraced by Chinese authorities, indicating that the lack of conditions and ideology might resemble a different kind of ideology in and-of itself, an attempt to frame China as a benevolent partner. While there was agreement that China is not trying to force its "development model" on Africa, it was indicated that the very structure of Chinese interventions is facilitating change in certain directions and not others, and cannot be considered as purely "neutral". One example of this is the tendency for the Chinese government to privilege state media over private media. This stands in contrast with Western governments that have largely focused on supporting civil society or the development of the private press.
- 3) Despite efforts by African governments to define their own approach to media development, the normative framework is still largely inspired by a Western liberal model. Some African countries, especially those struggling to find a balance between stability and development, find some of the elements that informed the evolution of the media in China relevant for their national media systems and are increasingly citing this as an example. However, rather than completely shifting from a Western-oriented to an Eastern-oriented "media model", it was argued that media systems in Africa are more likely to combine new ideas, norms and technologies with existing ones. It was made clear that this is not colonialism, nor the Cold War. African states are not forced to choose sides nor are they making uninformed choices.
- 4) Possible junctures between Chinese and African traditions were found in a shared conception of "communitarianism". The importance of the community in relation to the individual is captured in traditions across Africa but is perhaps most recognizably by the concept of ubuntu in South Africa. In China, based on the Confucian tradition, the government has been recently encouraging the development of the concept of a 'harmonious society'. There are also the partially overlapping ideas of "positive reporting" in China and "developmental journalism" in Africa, both of which stress the importance of focusing on collective achievements and offering citizens tools to contribute to national development rather than reporting on divisive issues or

sensational negative news. A shared concern was the importance of checking on possible abuses of these concepts by those in power, who may use claims of communitarianism to justify suppressing dissent, as much as other political actors may exploit media freedoms to further their own individualistic, and often divisive, agenda.

- 5) Through the analysis of the transformations of China's international broadcasters (CCTV and CRI) and news agency (Xinhua), it was discussed how Chinese authorities have stepped up their public diplomacy strategies, but are still struggling to attract audiences in an increasingly competitive "market for loyalties". In contrast, it is still mostly the contributions to infrastructure development and new efforts at training and education opportunities that are perceived in Africa as symbols of China's increasing presence and have contributed to building the overall images of China in Africa.
- 6) Finally, participants stressed the importance of developing better and less normative tools to capture the transformations experienced by media systems in Africa. A more nuanced approach is needed, that captures the efforts of institutional development, the multiple, and often competing, external and internal influences, along with the multifarious concerns of rights versus state stability. The situation in Africa is not unique, governments around the world are operating in a communications environment that is becoming increasingly competitive, in part because of media outlets broadcasting from abroad. China's involvement in communications on the continent was perceived as an opportunity to challenge some of the assumptions and prescriptions that have guided media development. By giving space to a wider variety of perspectives on the role of the media in developing societies, it may open a dialogue and lead to more effective and local approaches.

Statue of Kwame Nkrumah, Accra, Ghana



Background

China's engagement with Africa has attracted significant attention from policymakers, scholars, and journalists worldwide. Critics and observers have often either blamed China for "an imperialistic encroachment" into Africa (Keenan, 2008) or appreciated its effectiveness in delivering aid and improving infrastructure (Brautigam, 2009; Moyo, 2009). From an economic point of view, the results of this relationship are relatively evident: trade has increased tenfold between 2001 and 2010, reaching US\$100 billion (French, 2010); China's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Africa 'jumped to US \$1 billion' in 2006 (Zafar, 2007); loans from China have surpassed those from some of the major international donors (French, 2006); and the investments in natural resources have increased exponentially, with Chinese companies becoming dominant players in oil rich countries such as Angola and Sudan (Osei, 2010).

The political dimensions of this strengthened China-Africa relationship, however, are less clear. Some scholars have argued that the model emerging from China, based on rapid economic growth, centralization, and containment of democratizing forces, is going to influence development strategies outside of the country, especially in poor nations, supported in some cases by an active involvement of the Chinese government (Farah & Mosher, 2010; Jacques, 2009). Others have stressed that the apparent "no strings attached" policy pursued by the Chinese authorities when striking deals with partners in developing countries or providing aid will not necessarily lead to the exportation of the values and principles that have guided China's development but will simply reinforce the processes that are already ongoing in individual developing countries and that are promoted by their respective leadership (Alden & Alves, 2008; Brautigam, 2009)

China's increasing involvement in communications in Africa is an emerging area of study and can offer a critical "entry point" to understanding the broader political implications of the China-Africa relationship.

Is China's engagement strategy in the communications simply aimed at improving the country's image abroad, or is it attempting to support discourses alternative to those advocated in the West? Is the increasing role of Chinese companies in the continent simply the result of the occupation of niches unexploited by other players, or is it part of a longer-term strategy that might impact the power balance in the media sector, favouring for example public and state-owned actors over private ones? Or is it a combination of all of the above?

In the West the idea of "media assistance" has typically been associated with democratization and liberalization of the media. Since the end of the Cold War, the development thinking about the role of the media has been largely driven by neo-liberal ideologies. The formula prescribed to developing countries to shape their media systems has been based on the experience of established Western democracies. "Rolling back the influence of the state and pushing the privatization of state services" represented the pillars of these strategies, supported by the "belief that the growth of private media is central to developing a media structure that advances democratic values and development" (Putzel & Van der Zwan, 2006, p. 5). As a corollary, the principles and the models that informed the evolution of media systems in the West became standards against which to measure how free or how developed a country and its media are.

China has largely resisted the liberal media model advocated by Western donors. The state continues to control the media. Private ownership of media is not allowed, and China ranks as one of the lowest countries on press freedom. The Western press often reports incidents of Chinese journalists being punished for critical reporting, and censorship still being pervasive in China. Certain topics, including the coverage of issues related to Tibet and Taiwan are off limits. Besides direct censorship and monitoring of media content, the state also employs indirect tactics of constraining the media, including control of its financing and personnel, and by using the weak legal system to punish some journalists for crimes unrelated to their reporting.

However, looking beyond this bleak picture of media control, Chinese media have transformed immensely in the past 30 years: the media system has undergone commercialization, with many media outlets operating as businesses, similar to the West. While private investors can only own up to forty-nine percent of any media outlet, this development has transformed the operations of the media, forcing journalists to be responsive to the audiences, as well as the Party, diversifying the voices in the press, and multiplying newspapers across the nation. While commercialization has led to the diversification and specialization of media contents in China, as well as the multiplication of media outlets (for instance, increasing number of TV channels and newspapers) across the nation, it has also increasingly affected journalistic practices in China: journalists are no longer responsive only to the Party but now also to audiences. This, in turn, has spurred the development of investigative reporting and advocacy journalism, and the public increasingly relies on the media to express their concerns and criticism. While in the past four years there have been setbacks in media freedom, the overall trend has been towards partial opening. The state's mixed signals of control, and the vagueness characterizing most media regulations, however, induce self-censorship, leaving advocacy journalists in a minority category. It is important to keep in mind when examining Chinese media that as in other spheres, the Chinese government has embarked on partial planning and partial experimentation in regards to regulating the media, making the "Chinese model of media and journalism" a concept difficult to define.

Unlike what has happened in the case of Western democracies, which have advocated the values inspiring their own models while providing media assistance to countries in Africa, Chinese actors have been more ambiguous about their desire to engage in the media sector in Africa. While early studies have indicated how certain traits of Chinese engagement in the media in Africa have started to emerge, such as privileging support to state actors over private actors (Banda, 2009), in this emerging phase understanding China's involvement in the media sector in Africa

still requires in-depth empirical research to assess its significance and implications. The participants have been asked to grapple with these issues, and by relying on their previous research experiences, to develop appropriate questions and tools to address this emerging phenomenon.

The objectives of the workshop were to explore and unpack the issue of China's influence on the media in Africa through:

- Establishing a network of scholars, who can develop and master tools capable of capturing the transformation occurring in African media systems from multiple perspectives.
- Encouraging international dialogue that promotes a multi-polar outlook and attempts to engage with emerging issues that are reshaping the global geo-political, economic, and cultural landscapes.
- Identifying the questions that are the most promising to begin analyzing China's approach to media assistance to Africa and building the foundations for further research.
- Comparing China's involvement in Africa's communications sector with Western approaches of media assistance, identifying possible shared theories and lessons.
- Tracing China's media assistance to Africa theoretically, historically, as well as through case studies and empirical examples.
- Comparing different models and practices of journalism, in Africa, in China and in the West, outlining similarities and distinctions.
- Critiquing and possibly modifying the mainstream mechanisms for assessing media systems used by the international community. Specifically, through analyzing instruments such as the Freedom House, Freedom of the Press Index and the IREX Media Sustainability Index, we seek to develop complementary and alternative questions.

Workshop Summary

I. China's Media Assistance to Africa: Historical and Theoretical Overview

The first session analyzed China's media assistance to Africa from historical and theoretical angles. The goal of the session was to broadly conceptualize what Chinese media assistance to Africa entails, how it has evolved over time, and to theorize future developments.

China's media assistance to Africa was presented as an element of China-Africa media cooperation, and part of the larger phenomenon of China-Africa relations. It dates back to the 1950s, with mutual visits between African and Chinese journalists, and, although it has developed at a slower pace than other sectors, it has recently gained greater momentum. The Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) identified the media as one of Beijing's priorities in building bilateral ties and defined common goals in using the media, for example in facilitating greater knowledge of respective cultures, and countering the Western bias in the news' coverage of China, and Africa, as well as the Sino-African relationship.

The weaknesses of China-Africa media collaboration were identified in its slow development in comparison to other sectors; its focus on central government (as opposed to local governments and local media); and its unbalanced structure, with a greater number of Chinese journalists and media workers involved in Africa, as compared to their African counterparts in China. In addition, it was argued that China's engagement in Africa's media sector should be assessed carefully, differentiating China's public relations strategy from actual media engagement, as well as analyzing the potential fit of China's media model into Africa's media landscape. African media practices are often more oriented towards the Western liberal media model and might not be compatible with Chinese media practices and traditions.

The panel highlighted the lack of a definitive agreement of what constitutes China's media assistance and cooperation with African countries. The presenters preferred to use the term "cooperation" rather than "assistance." One way of studying China's media engagement in Africa is to consider it through the larger prism of either Sino-African relations or China's global 'soft power' and communications' strategy.

Box 1: FOCAC: Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

A total of four conferences, starting in 2000, have taken place, aiming at fostering China-Africa cooperation. By far the most significant one, was the FOCAC summit that took place in Beijing, in November, 2006, gathering 35 heads of state or heads of government of African countries.

The FOCAC Summit produced a declaration calling for a strategic partnership between China and African countries. The announced partnership stressed cooperation in agriculture, infrastructure, industry, fishing, information technology, public health and personnel training.

FOCAC also provided opportunities for Sino-African cooperation in the media sphere, ranging from journalists' reporting on bilateral events, to Chinese universities training African journalists, to increasing bilateral media coverage, and bilateral investments in the media sphere.

Conclusions

- Sino-African cooperation in the media sphere is an element of Sino-African relations, though it is less developed than other aspects of bilateral cooperation.
- The cooperation in the media sphere is not a new phenomenon; it dates back to the 1950s.
- Chinese actors do not frame their interventions in the media sector in Africa as “media assistance” but more as exchanges and cooperation at the highest governmental levels (between central governments). Within this context, less attention is paid to local media initiatives.
- While on the superficial level media cooperation is likely to persist, it remains unclear how much of the Chinese media model could be adapted to Africa, considering the divergent journalistic practices and media landscapes in African countries.
- More empirical research is needed to consider how China’s media assistance varies across the continent, as well as to analyze its efficacy in practice.

Box 2: Examples of Chinese media assistance/cooperation with Africa

Exchanges

1950s The earliest Africa bureaus of the Xinhua Agency are set up.

1955 The Egyptian Journalist Association, invited by the All-China Journalists Association, visits China. This visit by the Egyptian delegation sparked a number of similar visits from other African countries.

1956 The first Chinese journalists’ delegation visits Africa. It arrives to Cairo to begin implementing a Sino-Egypt cultural cooperation agreement. During the same year, Chinese journalists’ delegation has traveled to a number of other African countries.

1973 Chinese journalist delegation, led by the vice head of the Xinhua News Agency, visits Ethiopia.

1976 A Chinese journalist group headed by Ling Jianhua, a leading member of the People’s Daily editorial department, visits Benin, Ghana and Togo.

1970s and 1980s Most of the existing bureaus of Xinhua in Africa are set up.

2000 The first conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation takes place in Beijing, and promotes many more official visits and media cooperation to take place in the following 10 years:

Journalists’ training

2006 Chinese Media University welcomes over 20 radio and TV journalists from 15 African countries.

2006 The Third Workshop for African Journalists takes place with 42 journalists attending from 23 English-speaking African countries.

2006 Xinhua News Agency begins to host journalists from African countries invited by the Chinese government.

2007 Chinese Media University holds a two-week training course for over 30 journalists from French speaking African countries.

Technical Assistance

2005 China Great Wall Industry Corporation, a state-owned hardware manufacturer, wins a \$311 million contract from the Nigerian government to manufacture and launch the NigComSat-1 communications satellite.

2006 China sends FM transmitters to Zambia, coinciding with Zambia’s national elections. Some argue that China aimed at supporting the pro-Beijing ruling MMD Party.

2006 China provides a loan of \$120 million to the Ugandan government for national ICT backbone infrastructure.

2006 Huawei becomes the leading CDMA network provider for Nigeria’s Multi-Links, a Nigerian private telephone operator.

2007 Three Chinese companies -- Sagem, ZTE, and Huawei -- win contracts to lay down fiber optic cable in Kenya.

II. Case Studies of China's Media Assistance to Africa

The second session took a closer look at China's media engagement in Africa, by focusing on one of its most significant outlets, Xinhua News, and on one of the recipient countries of China's media aid, Ghana. This session questioned the effectiveness of China's media operations in Africa noting the low credibility of China's news sources and exploring the rapid changes and transformations of China's international media.

The role of Xinhua News in Africa, one of the most influential central news organizations in China, has been growing. With more than 20 bureaus in Africa, mostly in the south of the Sahara, Xinhua Agency is attempting to increase its influence and coverage in Africa. Its success has been unclear, however, with no significant changes in the news consumption patterns of its target audiences. Xinhua has tough competition with more established global news services such as AP and Reuters. While the pressure on Xinhua journalists to focus on pro-government reporting has lessened in recent years, one speaker argued that credibility of Chinese media outlets is still low and it is affecting their development and reception by African audiences. More field research is necessary to determine other impacts of Xinhua's operations in Africa.

In terms of China's media assistance to Ghana, bilateral cooperation mainly exists in the television and radio spheres, less so in the print media. One speaker argued that China's efforts in Ghana face similar challenges to those of Xinhua Agency in Africa, and are focused on expressing camaraderie with 'the oppressed', promoting a positive image of China, while winning over African audiences from its Western competitors, including the CNN and the BBC news. With credibility being a key issue, it remains unclear to what extent China has been able to succeed in Ghana.

The discussion centered on the differences in styles of journalism reporting in China, Africa and the West, and the cultural notions connected to these differences. The 'positive' reporting practiced by many Chinese journalists in Africa stems from the early days of the propaganda model of China's media industry, with negative events to be downplayed and positive developments highlighted. Some Chinese participants,

linking this approach to Confucian culture, argued that it was conducive to portraying a more holistic perspective on Africa, rather than just focusing on disease and war, as it was argued the Western media often do. It was also argued that positive reporting is particularly important for economic development and nation-building.

Conclusions

- China's efforts to reach out to African audiences with its news reports through central news agencies and broadcasters, such as the Xinhua Agency, China Radio International, and the CCTV, have produced mixed results. The low credibility of these news sources makes it challenging for them to compete with Western media, despite China's strategy being centered on 'positive reporting' and on challenging the Western bias.
- The contrast between "positive" and "negative" reporting deserves more scholarly research. Specifically, it seems valuable to discern whether China's "positive" reporting approach stems from its cultural values or mainly from the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. It would also be important to contrast China's positive reporting in Africa with Africa's local journalistic practices and with the idea of developmental journalism.

Box 3: Xinhua News Agency in Africa

Xinhua has over 20 bureaus in Africa, the majority (18) of which are located in sub-Saharan Africa. While the quality of its reporting has increased in the past few years, it still faces a challenge of credibility, as it often endorses the official line of a story as offered by government sources. At the same time, its friendly relationship with African leaders, together with the increasing presence of its bureaus in Africa, is making Xinhua a source of unique pieces of information from the continent, often reporting on events that are not covered by other international media or news-wire services.

III. Alternative thoughts and assessments of media systems in Africa

The third session engaged with alternative ways to analyze media systems in Africa from two different angles: a mechanism for assessing media in Africa, as exemplified by the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), and a case study of Guinea and the role of music in its cultural diplomacy with China that emphasized the importance of taking a broader approach to communication beyond focusing solely on the mass media.

In terms of media assessments in Africa, the most widely used mechanisms, the Freedom House and the IREX rankings, were critiqued in favor of using new approaches that were more grounded in African traditions and institutions. One speaker argued that the Western frameworks are viewed with suspicion in Africa, and are criticized for the monolithic nature of their assessments and for using vaguely framed questions in their questionnaires. While the APRM is one of Africa's latest tools for encouraging good governance, part of the New Partnership for African Development, it does not include the media in its assessment framework. Its model, however, could be used to create a similar assessment tool for the media. The peer review principle, could be used where other African countries assess and compare the media and freedom of expression in selected countries. While the idea is attractive in principle, it may be challenging to implement due to the lack of enforcement mechanisms (the APRM is dependent on the willingness of countries to participate), and the wariness of many African regimes to include the media as one of the dimensions to be assessed on.

Box 4: Media cooperation is not always in the form of assistance

On Sept. 16, 2008, China's Anhui Daily Group and South Africa's MIH Media Group set up a new group, Xin'an Media Limited Company, in Hefei, in China's Anhui province. It was the first joint venture of a provincial-level newspaper group with a foreign company that was authorized by the central government.

Box 5: Background on the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)

- Launched by African leaders in 2002, as the brainchild of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). The idea behind it was to create an Africa-based assessment mechanism, which would have more credibility in Africa than the Western assessments that currently construct Africa's image to the world.
- Headed by a forum of heads of state and governments of participating countries, and assisted by a panel of seven eminent African personalities, drawn from different sectors. Each country's review team is headed by a member of the panel, affirming the objective nature of this review process. The APRM secretariat, based in South Africa, is right below the panel, and addresses media inquiries and all the administrative matters.

The APRM is a voluntary system, and countries agreeing to take part in it would be required to submit to peer review within 18 months of acceding to the APRM.

The analysis of Guinea shed light on the different waves that characterized the relations between China and Africa. In the 1960s the cooperation between China and Guinea started with cultural exchanges and visits of national dance troupes, later progressing with China constructing the largest and most prestigious concert venue in Guinea, as well as People's Congress and Guinea's first recording studio. China's exchanges with Guinea declined in the 1980s and 1990s, but renewed Chinese investment in Guinea in the past decade has been accompanied by more bilateral cultural engagements, similar to those in the 1960s. However, in this later phase the responses to China's initiatives in Guinea have been mixed. Following the massacre of pro-democracy workers on September 28th 2009, the public started to associate China's cultural efforts with its support for the ruling regime. The top-down cultural initiatives of China, while welcomed by the ruling regime, were not similarly welcomed at the grassroots levels, which tended to hold pro-Western allegiances in both culture and politics.

Box 6: Guinea

1958 The first French colony in Africa to gain independence, and the second country to gain independence in the whole continent

1958-1984 Governed by Ahmed Sékou Touré

1959 The first sub-Saharan African country to establish diplomatic ties with China, which remained strong for the following 20 years. This included a visit of the Guinean dance troupe to China in 1965, and the Chinese government funding the most prestigious concert venue in Guinea in late 1960s.

1984-2008 Governed by Lansana Conte.

1980s and 1990s Decline in cultural ties between Guinea and China

2008 Moussa Dadis Camara seizes power

2009 Government forces crush pro-democracy protesters. At the same time, the announcement is made that China is to invest in the largest mining operation in the country

The discussion centered on exploring methods of assessing media systems in Africa, including the possibility of employing a peer review approach similar to the African Peer Review Mechanism and incorporating music or other non-traditional media into the framework. While there was an agreement on the need to seek alternative frameworks with involvement of local actors from different African countries, and engage with a wider range of mediums of communication, particularly in regimes that are less tolerant of free speech, the participants also acknowledged the challenges of such an endeavor. Questions explored included: how to include more country-specific questions into media assessment tools without losing a regional focus; how to enforce media-related recommendations on countries with little regards for freedom of speech, such as Zimbabwe; and how to grasp the attitudes towards the media at the grassroots level?

Conclusions

- There is a need to work towards alternative tools for assessing media systems in Africa. These tools must emerge from Africa rather than from the West, and should take into account country-specific dynamics and alternative forms of communication, such as music, which play an important role in many countries.
- There are a number of challenges in creating more nuanced media assessment mechanisms, including the lack of an enforcement mechanism and the possible unwillingness of a large number of states to participate in such assessment exercises.
- There is a stark distinction between the top-down cultural initiatives and the receptiveness of them at the grassroots' levels, as was exemplified by China's cultural diplomacy with Guinea. If one wants to grasp a full picture of the phenomenon, it is important to look into different societal layers and study the receiving audiences.

**National TV and Radio Station,
Moroni, Comoros (built with support
from the Chinese government)**



Box 7: Exercise: The Critique of the Freedom House Media Ranking System

Participants discussed questions to be altered or added to the three sections of the Freedom House' survey: legal, economic, and political restrictions of the freedom of the press. Most suggestions concerned the legal environment section, and mainly focused on incorporating more diversity, detail, and complexity into media assessment. For instance, it was noted that there are no questions in the Freedom House survey that reveal the differences of media freedoms across regions, especially between urban and rural settings.

There is also no evaluation of the information environment, or the importance and the accessibility of media to the public. In some countries the public demand for diverse media content might offset some of the controls of the media imposed by the government, as the public might push journalists to stretch the boundaries of freedom. While in others, the freedom of the press is ranked higher, but the public might not take full advantage of it.

The survey also focuses on the press, and does not take into consideration alternative forms of communication, such as music, or political cartoons. In a tightly controlled media environment, these alternative channels might be more significant than the traditional media.

Lastly, the workshop participants found some of the terms used in the survey too broad, and thus, open to a variety of interpretations. Concepts, such as 'freedom' and 'control' have very loose definitions.

Overall, the exercise revealed that it is important to continue thinking of alternative media assessment tools, or at least some modifications to the existing ones. What seems obvious is that mechanisms, such as that of Freedom House, fail to grasp the diversity of media systems, and thus, might fail to take into account some of the shifts occurring on the ground, which cannot be reflected in "free" versus "partially free" and "unfree" categories.

IV. African Models and Traditions of Journalism and Media Development

This session focused on a larger theme of indigenous communication in Africa: communication's traditions and practices, and the ways in which these communication patterns could be incorporated into media assessment mechanisms.

Ubuntu has been presented as a philosophy indicative of other traditions across the continent that significantly affects communication patterns and approaches to regulation. While it is not termed 'ubuntu' in Ethiopia or Ghana, cultures often have similar traditions that focus on expressing humanity towards one another, and on living as part of a larger interconnected community. This communal approach has often been neglected in recent scholarship when considering communication practices and the role of the state in Africa, but participants argued that this is an area ripe for further research, particularly given the possible synergies with Chinese political philosophies. Also, arguably these approaches should be taken into account when analyzing African media systems.

Political cartoons were discussed as one example of communication practices that are often overlooked when researching the media and political discourse in Africa. But in Zimbabwe, South Africa and across the continent cartoons have emerged as an important tool for offering nuanced criticism. In the case of China's involvement in Africa, they have often revealed the mixed feelings of Africans towards this phenomenon, and the existence of a diverse array of voices and opinions among African media and public. Quoting Eko, it was argued that: "Perhaps cartoons should be seen as 'slices of African visions and obsessions, expressed in African idioms' (Eko, 2007). Some of the themes played out in the cartoons included China's occupation of Tibet, the unreliable nature of Chinese products, and China's appetite for Africa's natural resources.

Other than being acknowledged as separate elements of Africa's communication systems and practices, another central idea of this session was to find ways to incorporate these indigenous communication traditions into media assessment mechanisms. These traditions might help the assessor to understand the view from the inside, and the ways in which African

citizens might benefit from media freedom. One example illustrating the importance of grasping the insider perspective was considering civil society and its impact on the freedom of press. It was argued that a Western conception of civil society as a facilitator and defender of freedom of press sometimes obscured the reality of civil society organizations becoming vehicles for partisan agendas and even obstructing the rights of journalists. This normative conception also overlooked other areas, or sectors of society, that provide important checks on the government.

The discussion centered on conceptualizing and analyzing different traditions of beliefs on the continent, and how they affect indigenous communication practices. The ways in which media assessment mechanisms overlook these traditions, such as ubuntu and political cartoons, were highlighted as an important area. It was also suggested that there is a significant need to unpack the term "civil society" and its different meaning across contexts.

Conclusions

- Indigenous communication practices and traditions matter in assessing African media landscape, and should be taken into account.
- Alternative and independent media in Africa differ from the mainstream media in their portrayal of China's involvement in Africa. While the political implications of these critical voices remain unclear, they are important to understand and study in more depth.
- The idea of defining a purely African system of communication is challenging, and not necessarily feasible, but conceptualizing and defining the unique practices in different African countries is useful for understanding their media.
- Civil society is not a universal concept, and while it might be associated with freedom of the media in the West, it could have different significance and roles in Africa and in China.

V. Chinese Models and Traditions of Journalism and Media Development

The session centered on China's domestic journalism practices and the use of media in fulfilling soft power agenda. This session problematized some common assumptions about China's media, questioning for example the existence of a monolithic Chinese model of media development and journalism practices, as well as the concept of soft power.

The panel argued that there was no coherent Chinese journalism model, noting that domestic journalism practices and the Chinese government's regulation mechanisms of the media are diverse and complex. While what's being exported to Africa is mainly centered on official media channels, including the Xinhua Agency, CCTV, and China Radio International, inside China itself, there is a wide range of media with different editorial lines, and there is an active and engaged media audience eager for more information. The media environment in China is fairly unpredictable depending on economic and political circumstances and the policies of managing the media are often experimental.

In terms of China's soft power, media undoubtedly plays an important role in ensuring its success. Chinese authorities have accorded increasing importance to strategies of gaining international influence, and the media are an essential part of this, attempting to capture international audiences and redress the Western negative coverage of China's engagement with the world. China Radio International is an important example of a media tool being used in public diplomacy, as the Chinese government is focusing on the technological innovation of the CRI (i.e. broad use and integration of the Web portals and social networks for delivering content), posing competition to its Western counterparts, mainly the BBC and the VOA.

The term soft power, however, was also challenged by the participants for its vagueness. In relation to its use in Africa, it has often been addressed as a fairly monolithic concept, not taking into account the agency of Africa in the policy making process,

nor the receptiveness to China's soft power initiatives on the ground. While China presents itself as non-ideological and non-political, this lack of ideology might resemble a different kind of ideology in and of-itself, or a hidden agenda that is being subverted by the soft power rhetoric. While there is much talk about China's soft power initiatives both in China, and across the globe, there is little critical discussion of what this concept actually means and how it should be analyzed.

The discussion further unpacked the notion of soft power, questioning its meaning, effectiveness, receptiveness on the ground, and the possibility of its emulation by African countries. While the idea of soft power initiatives might look good on paper, they do not always translate into practical implementation. The Confucius Institutes, for instance, that are so widely talked about, are just small centers for the study of Mandarin in many African countries. And while the Chinese government is making significant investments in international broadcasting of CRI, for example in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria, people are often unaware of these broadcasts or of other initiatives pursued by the Chinese authorities to improve China's image abroad.

In contrast, it was pointed out that hard power initiatives, in the form of investments in trade and infrastructure, are more often perceived in Africa as symbols of China's increasing presence.

As for the emulation of China's soft power strategies by African nations, it seems to be an issue of economic resources. Soft power is not a cheap enterprise, and while African governments might attempt to adopt some of China's strategies, their financial means make such projects difficult.

Conclusions

- When speaking of a Chinese model of media development, it is important to keep in mind the complexity and diversity of China's media system. Investigative journalism and professional reporting can coexist with official media and channels of information that largely follow the Party line. While the latter is more likely to be exported to Africa, it's important to remember that it doesn't reflect Chinese media as a whole.
- When discussing and analyzing China's soft power initiatives, it is necessary to firstly understand what we mean by soft power and whether its importance is not being exaggerated. To truly grasp the significance of China's soft power initiatives in Africa we have to study the receiving audiences, as well as the various agents involved in the process of 'delivering' and 'receiving' on the ground. Soft power is not a monolithic concept and should be assessed in multiple layers.
- Media are an important component of China's soft power agenda, in Africa and around the world. While large investments are being poured into the official media outlets to improve their international reporting and broadcasting, the success of these initiatives is questionable, and has to be studied in more depth in the receiving countries.



Radio Justice, Tamale, Ghana

VI. Media and Nation Building

The final session focused on the media as a tool for nation building in China and in Africa. While it has been agreed that media are an essential element in nation building, using media for this purpose also has a number of obstacles. First, both China and Africa face the challenge of battling their coverage by the Western media. Second, using media for nation building might lead to a suppression of dissenting voices, and block the development of a media system that is both open and diverse.

Both China and Africa face the a challenge of remedying their international reputations as created by the Western media. China has often been portrayed as the “uncertain other”, while Africa is presented as the “disappointed backyard”. China has been employing a number of tactics to shift its reputation towards the “friendly other”. Some of these tactics include self promotion through big events, such as hosting the Olympic Games and using defensive explanations. Africa, in turn, is attempting to showcase its achievements, independence, and success by referring to Western standards. China and Africa could cooperate and learn from each other in building national identity through the media by balancing independent thinking with defensive arguments.

While reversing established global perceptions of one’s country through the media is a serious challenge, the process of doing so can have serious implications for domestic media practices and freedoms. As noted in the case of Ethiopia, the government’s use of media “for development”, has led to a crackdown on independent voices and the shrinking of space for freedoms of association and expression. It is suspected that some of the elements of control of the media have been provided by China including the provision to the Ethiopian government of Internet filtering technology. In addition, some argued that some of the rhetoric in Ethiopia concerning the

use of the media for developmental purposes has been borrowed from China. The use of media for development and national identity building, thus, comes with potentially significant costs, which have to be taken into consideration by policymakers and analysts alike.

This session concluded with a discussion of criteria for judging the success of a media system, and China’s consideration for voices discontented with its Africa initiatives. While there was no agreement on what criteria determines the optimal or most effective media system, it was an integral theme of the whole workshop, and is something left for further study and analysis. It was determined, however, that new frameworks are needed. As for China’s attitude towards criticism, Chinese participants argued that while some people might critique China’s efforts in Africa, overall, no African government has asked China to withdraw, which signals a level of acceptance of China’s engagement in Africa.



Forum on China Africa Cooperation, Beijing, China

Conclusions

- Nation building through the media is an important task for both China and Africa. A major priority of both African states and China was to eradicate or at least to balance out the negative imagery of their countries in the Western media. Doing so, however, is a challenging process, as it requires convincing global audiences to trust news sources emanating from Africa or China more than those of the Western media. Cooperation between China and Africa in this mission might benefit them both, but it's unclear how much of it is happening in practice.
- Using media for development and national identity building can also result in suppression of opposition voices and non-official media. Thus, while the national image might improve globally, it could be outweighed by domestic instability or at least dissatisfaction at some levels of the society. Again, to better grasp the implications of building national identity through the media we have to examine domestic political and societal shifts associated with these efforts.
- The Chinese government and Chinese companies might be encouraging the use of some of its policies or mechanisms for media control in African countries, as exemplified by the case of Ethiopia. This could be a trend or an isolated incident, but should be watched more closely.
- Success of a media system means different things for different countries and governments. While succeeding in national identity building through the media might be key for China, having a diverse public discourse through the media might be of more importance to some African governments.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The workshop was organized on the premise that China-Africa relations are significant not only for the two sides involved, but for the world at large. Understanding China's approach to media development can offer insight into the potential of ideas emerging from China to influence media development and media policies in other countries seeking both development and stability. The discussions and presentations highlighted the complexity of China's engagement in the media in Africa, questioning the types of initiatives sponsored by China, their reception on the ground, and potential in affecting African societies and Sino-African relations.

Independence Square, Accra, Ghana



Recommendations for researchers

The different layers of China's media assistance to Africa require further investigation through field research and case studies. China's technical assistance in the media sector, journalists' training programs, exchanges between Chinese and African media practitioners, and Chinese media operations in Africa are major areas for inquiry. In all sectors of research it is important to conduct comparative studies of African countries with different political, cultural, and economic landscapes.

Areas for mapping include

Technical assistance: What are the activities on the ground? Do they have political implications? Which sectors are benefiting the most and why? Pay attention to initiatives that might have political implications, such as the possible involvement of China in facilitating the development of censoring technology in Ethiopia. These case studies are important in determining whether China's media assistance to Africa has any ideological or political underpinnings.

Journalists' training: What does it entail? Study the curricula of training programs and explore them through participant observations.

Media exchanges: How frequent are the media exchanges and what do they involve? Is there substance to them beyond the official rhetoric? Chinese media operations in Africa: How do Africans perceive Chinese media reports? Study the receptiveness of African audiences towards Chinese media reports at different societal levels to grasp how credible and influential Chinese media reports are on African public.

Additional research areas include

Research into how African media outlets react to China's presence in Africa: Conduct a comparative study of Africa's mainstream and alternative media's responses to China's engagement with Africa. Analyze the dissenting voices and try to grasp their roots and capacity to influence the

public at large. Methods: content and critical discourse analysis, audience surveys

Explore how Chinese media differs in its coverage of Africa from Western media outlets: Conduct a comparative study of BBC and Xinhua's coverage of Africa and China's coverage. Highlight some of the important differences in coverage of specific events of high relevance to both China and Africa. Method: content analysis and critical discourse analysis

Study the financial involvement of China in Africa's media sphere: Map the ownership of the media structure to show how much the ownership is changing, and what part China plays in this process.

Examine the ways in which cultural foundations of media philosophy could be studied. Are there philosophical lines of convergence between African philosophies and Chinese Confucianism philosophy?

Recommendations for Chinese policymakers

Expand cooperation in the media sphere to include local media initiatives, in addition to those that are currently being driven by the Chinese government. Local level initiatives and more dialogue might be more effective in reaching the public, and might be perceived more positively on the ground than the official exchanges.

Conduct studies of the public's receptiveness to media reports produced by Chinese media outlets in Africa to understand which areas require further improvement to better reach the local audiences.

Study the practical implementation of the soft power initiatives in Africa to ensure that policy translates into action.

Cooperate with African policy-makers and media practitioners on nation-building strategies

through the media. Explore the issue through bilateral exchanges at the policy, media, and scholarly levels.

Recommendations to African policymakers

While it appears clear that rankings by organizations such as Freedom House and IREX are insufficient in fully depicting the African media landscape, there is a clear market and desire for Africa-based media assessment' mechanisms. It is important for those concerned to develop alternative tools for assessing media systems in African countries, incorporating country-specific dynamics, such as alternative forms of communication, which hold relevance to understanding their media systems. While creating such alternative tools will inevitably meet a number of challenges, it is still essential to initiate the process through cross-country dialogue. Such mechanism could be modeled on the African Peer Review Mechanism, or it could be an entirely new approach. The tools themselves also help in facilitating a discussion about what the role of media is in nationbuilding and the complex relationship between media and politics.

Collaborate with China on finding mechanisms for effective nation building through the media.

Recommendations to Western policymakers

Seek possibilities to develop partnerships with Chinese actors in areas such as infrastructure development, capacity building, and journalism training. This would help understand the capacity for integration of different traditions to benefit African media.

Revise media assessment mechanisms to pay greater attention to alternative media models and to communication mechanisms that are highly influential in Africa but are granted little consideration in the West, such as poetry, religion, and other forms of informal communication.

Box 8: Contested concepts

Workshop participants identified key concepts, in the form of keywords, that are often misunderstood or have multiple meanings and interpretations.

Soft power: What constitutes 'soft power' and is it culturally specific?

The monolithic concept of "soft power" into multiple layers, and then apply the theoretical analysis onto the case study of China's soft power initiatives in Africa.

A Chinese journalism model: Does journalism in China constitute a model or a diverse set of practices?

Contrast journalism practices exported to Africa through training workshops with those happening within China.

An African journalism model: Are there journalism practices unique to the African continent? Do any practices transcend the more commonly defined models of Anglophone Africa/Lusophone Africa or Francophone Africa?

Contrast journalism practices across African countries and seek some unifying principles.

Civil society: Does this concept differ across cultures?

Study the comparative conceptualizations of 'civil society' in China and in Africa, and contrast it with the Western conceptions of it. This could reveal how compatible Chinese and individual African societies are with one another.

'Positive' and 'Negative' reporting: What's at the root of this dichotomy?

Discern the origins of positive reporting in China and negative reporting in the West, and understand whether they are cultural or ideological in nature. Contrast China's style of 'positive' reporting and the Western style of 'negative' reporting with Africa's local journalistic practices. Such analysis would reveal not only how compatible Chinese reporting style is with African audiences, but also to what extent China's journalistic practices could be transferred to Africa.

Media for development versus media for society: What are the major differences, and can one exist along with the other?

Study these concepts more theoretically, and then apply them to case studies and see which model is more appreciated by the public.

Freedom: What does it constitute in the case of the media?

While freedom from government interaction in the media is often considered to be a positive thing in the case of the media, commercial forces can be just as detrimental to media freedom. Apply this concept carefully and define it as precisely as possible when discussing the media.



**Cable Gold Television, Accra, Ghana
(Started by a Chinese entrepreneur)**

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