China’s multifaceted influence on Africa’s media

By Emeka Umejei
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About Author

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Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been described as China’s most ambitious push for a dominant role in global geopolitics and trade. Launched in 2013 by China’s President Xi Jinping the overarching goal of the BRI is to promote interconnectivity and partnership among countries along the ancient maritime silk road which spans Asia, Eastern Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The US-based Council on Foreign Relations estimates that 139 countries that have signed up to the BRI: 49 of the 54 African nations are signatories. In 2020, the African Union and China signed an agreement to promote the BRI in Africa, becoming the first agreement signed between China and a regional body to jointly promote the initiative. The BRI has three fundamental objectives: to explore drivers of global growth in the post–great recession era, to rebalance globalisation, and to create new models for regional cooperation in the twenty-first century. It is underpinned by five components: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds. The people-to-people segment is where media sits in the ecology of the BRI.

An action point from the Forum on Africa-China Cooperation (FOCAC) in Dakar in 2021 was for the two sides to “actively promote exchanges and cooperation in the field of press and publication”. But the ‘going out’ campaign of the Chinese media was first launched in response to the Western media’s framing of events leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. This, along with China’s increasing bilateral trade with Africa, provided an important background to its media expansion on the continent. It was eager to counterbalance international media coverage of China’s engagement within Africa, that framed it as being driven by self-interest and a desire for natural resources. In 2007, with the objective to tell a different story of China-Africa relations and support from former prime minister, Wen Jiabao, who urged China to extend its cultural engagement with other countries, the country’s efforts to shape the African it was confirmed that Chinese media outlets going international would receive funding to enable them ‘present a true picture of China to the world’.

By 2006, the Africa regional editorial office of Xinhua News Agency had already relocated from Paris to Nairobi. But in 2010 it commenced mobile news delivery. These developments were followed in 2011 by the establishment of China Central Television - now renamed China Global Television Network (CGTN) - in Nairobi, the first and largest bureau of CGTN outside China. The following year saw the launch of the African edition of Xinhuanet, an online service of the Xinhua News Agency (XNA). The Economist estimates that China now spends as much as US$10 billion annually on its media internationalisation project globally.

However, there are growing fears that Chinese media expansion into Africa is impeding freedom of expression and engendering limited professional autonomy among journalists. This, in part, accounts for why Chinese presence in the media space on the continent continues to elicit widespread anxiety both within the industry and among outside observers. While some express concern over the authoritarian model employed by Chinese media, others are worried about how its narrative may impinge on, and indirectly impact, the continent’s fragile democratic space.

On the whole, Chinese media outlets subscribe to a model of journalism that emphasises ‘positive reporting’ over the western model of ‘watchdog journalism’ that seeks to hold leadership to account. This ‘positive reporting’ model of journalism entails collaboration between the media and government which limits scrutiny of the latters actions. There are concerns that if Chinese media replicate this model of journalism in West Africa democratic governance will be further threatened by authoritarian tendencies. But the expansion of Chinese media challenging dominant Western narratives about the continent and has sparked competition between China’s state-led media and the Western media organisations for audience. African-focused broadcasting programmes such as the BBC’s Focus on Africa and CNN’s Inside Africa which started in 2012 and 2014 respectively, responded to the creation of CTGN and its two hours of dedicated Africa news bulletins, which began in

1. Eritrea, Benin, Mali, Sao Tome and Principe and Eswatini have yet to join.
Reflecting on these dynamics this paper will outline some of the key ways in which China engages and cooperates with African media operators and journalists to better understand how much influence they are really trying, and able, to exert, and what impact this has on wider narratives.

Exchanges and training for journalists

China-Africa media cooperation first gained traction at the 2006 FOCAC meeting in Beijing, where Chinese and African journalists convened under the auspices of the Sino-African Cooperation Forum. This was expanded with an action plan on media training and exchanges that was formalised at the 2009 FOCAC meeting in Egypt. Three years later, China proposed a ‘China-Africa Press Exchange Centre’, under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with a focus on developmental reporting between Africa and China at the fifth FOCAC meeting. It is estimated that China has trained more than 1,000 African journalists and media professionals in the last decade through workshops and training camps under this programme. These exchanges and training vary in length but all are well-funded by the Chinese government. Some last for as little as two weeks, others from three months, some for six to ten months, whilst scholarship programmes can last a year or more. Consistent across is that journalists are trained in various aspects of Chinese culture, politics, and society. The experiences of these exchanges and training programmes have been described in overwhelmingly positive terms by participants with many of those who attended believing them to be beneficial to their own development and countries wider media environment.

However, a forthcoming study on the perception and influence of Chinese media exchanges for journalists in Nigeria and Sierra Leone suggests a more nuanced picture. Although participants found it to be a useful avenue for enhancing capacity, there were differences on the journalistic content offered. Short-term participants – those attending trainings last weeks rather than months - perceived it to lack journalism content and viewed it more as an avenue for channeling China’s soft power. However, long-term participants – those attending classes for six months or more - said that Chinese-media exchanges offer viable approaches that are taught by experts who introduce them to key journalism concepts. Yet it is the case that Chinese media privileges a model of journalism that is underpinned by the concept of ‘constructive journalism’ which covers positive and solution-focused news within classical reporting.

Opponents argue that these training programmes are used to promote Chinese ideology and to introduce African journalists to the Chinese media system in ways that may subvert Western journalistic traditions currently prevalent in Africa. This has bred concerns that Chinese-sponsored media exchanges and training programmes could influence the dominant liberal journalistic orientation in Africa.

But this is arguably what China is seeking to do with its media exchange programmes. It sees media assistance: as a “form of collaboration and exchange aimed at counterbalancing the negative reporting of both China and Africa in Western media”. This is set out in FOCAC Dakar Action Plan (2022-2024) which highlights the significance of media training for Africa journalists as a countervailing force to Western media framings of ‘China in Africa’. The action plan emphasises that China will “continue to implement training and capacity building programmes for African media practitioners; help African countries train high-caliber professionals in news, broadcasting and television; promote more exchanges between Chinese and African media personnel; support the capacity building of radio and television media in journalists to better understand how much influence they are really trying, and able, to exert, and what impact this has on wider narratives.


8. Stremlau, N et al. 2010. ‘China in Africa: A new approach to media development?’. Other Publications from the Center for Global Communications Studies. Available at https://repository.upenn.edu/cgcs_publications/18/
The Belt and Road News Network (BRNN) emerged from President Xi Jinping’s address at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017. The BRNN facilitates its members to tell the stories about the BRI in a way that “shapes healthy public opinion and helps the BRI yield more substantial results for people living in countries along the Belt and Road”. The BRNN comprises 208 media organisations from 98 countries of which 40 sit on its council. Seven are from Africa: ThisDay newspaper (Nigeria), Al-Ahram Newspaper (Egypt), Ethiopian News Agency, Independent Media (South Africa), Alintibaha Daily Newspaper (Sudan), The Guardian Limited (Tanzania), and Zambia Daily Mail. A joint statement of the BRNN members issued in 2019 details how it seeks to disseminate truthful, accurate, objective, and impartial news, and information to the whole world, and to play a constructive role in strengthening understanding, mutual trust, cooperation, and exchange among people of various countries and regions.10

The BRNN represents China’s first attempt at reinforcing its media model through partnerships with African media organisations. The assumption is that Africans are more likely to believe their own media organisations than Chinese media and so this new media initiative is billed to be a more effective way of promoting carefully curated narratives on the continent. There are already indications that members of the BRNN are less likely to cover stories that are considered unfavourable to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This author’s own analysis of the African media organisations of the BRNN has found that stories that are critical of China’s persecution of Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Province are rare to non-existent.

Dialogue platforms are another form of engagement. The China-Africa Media Cooperation Forum (CAMCF) has supported regular engagement between Chinese officials and African journalists since it was first held in Kenya in 2013. At that meeting the Chinese ambassador to Kenya stated his belief that “our media should report China-Africa friendship positively”. More recently CAMCF was held on the sidelines of the FOCAC Ministerial Summit in Senegal with attendees from 36 countries across the continent. Participants expressed admiration for the ongoing media assistance is an instrument of foreign policy, intended to further the aims of both donor and recipient.9

News alliances and forums

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Seven are from Africa:

- ThisDay newspaper
- Al-Ahram Newspaper
- Ethiopian News Agency
- Independent Media
- Alintibaha Daily Newspaper
- The Guardian Limited
- Zambia Daily Mail


China’s multifaceted influence on Africa’s media

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In the realm of infrastructure, the ‘African Satellite Digital Project’ , one of the outcomes of the sixth FOCAC summit held in South Africa in 2015, was a promise President Xi Jinping made to improve access to satellite television project for 10,000 villages in 25 African countries in order to expand access to digital media in rural communities. Implemented in Africa by StarTimes, each village selected received two StarTimes projector televisions, one 32 inch digital television set and 20 DTH decoders and satellite dishes and solar power systems to support their operation. The ‘10,000 Satellite TV Village’ project provided a more straightforward opportunity to create a favourable impression of China among local populations in Africa. Ongoing fieldwork conducted by the author in Uganda, Nigeria and Zambia suggests that the project is having the desired impact. One Ugandan resident noted that “in this village of Bendegere, many people wanted this Chinese satellite TV but didn’t have the capability to buy it. The Chinese came and gave us the Chinese satellite at a discounted rate. The satellite TV is working properly. There was a heavy wind in this village that destroyed many of the antennas but many of us that have Chinese satellites weren’t affected”.

This approach is an example on the ‘downstairs people-to-people’ approach of Chinese engagement on the continent, which although successful has encountered more bumps along the way than the ‘upstairs-government-to-government’ approach, which has largely seen convergence. China promotes a conception of the internet known as cyber sovereignty, where the state has absolute control over the internet. This approach differs significantly from the West’s conception of the internet as a borderless global community. But when China’s Huawei proposed a new Internet Protocol to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in July 2020 which would limit interoperability and likely enhance a cybersovereignty model of the internet, Nigeria was among ten African countries - the list also included Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal, South Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe - that allied with China’s proposal.

Content sharing is another area of newsroom collaboration. A 2020 International Federation of Journalists report which surveyed media professionals across Africa found that more than a third of the respondents reported that content-sharing agreements with Chinese outlets were in place in their countries. In some instances, Chinese state media content, such as Xinhua stories or CGTN footage, is offered for free, while in other cases companies are paid to carry supplements. XNA is heavily involved in content-sharing agreements with media organisations across Africa.

Media infrastructure and connectivity

In Nigeria, for instance, there is a memorandum of understanding on information exchange between the News Agency of Nigeria and XNA. Xinhua also has an information exchange partnership with the Ghana News Agency signed under the Belt and Road Economic Information Partnership. Other content sharing agreements are in place in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Senegal. Agreements can be ‘exclusive’ – meaning that only Xinhua content will feature in the foreign news section of the newspaper or online site – or on a case by case basis, with features by Xinhua appearing alongside content reported by the outlet or from elsewhere. There is also a two-way flow of information, with Xinhua media partners sharing content on domestic issues that it can then reproduce on its platforms.

The implications of China’s conception of cybersovereignty are numerous but the most significant is censorship.

The implications of China’s conception of cybersovereignty are numerous but the most significant is censorship. Freedom House’s Freedom on the Net 2021 ranked China as the world’s worst abuser of internet freedom for the seventh consecutive year. But according to a 2017 McKinsey report, Chinese telecoms vendors such as Huawei and ZTE have ‘built most of Africa’s telecoms infrastructure’. The development of ICT infrastructure that is able to enforce cybersovereignty has implications for freedom of information and political pluralism on the African continent. In the last decade the African continent has witnessed rising incidences of internet shutdowns and bans on social media platforms during elections or popular protests. An indication that digital authoritarianism is growing on the continent.

In November 2019, the Opera web browser – a Chinese company - launched a digital news hub in Nigeria, the first algorithm-enabled digital news production and distribution platform in Africa. Opera news hub has since expanded into Ghana, Kenya and South Africa. The hub is an open platform that utilises an AI technology-powered recommendation algorithm to help creators distribute their content to a targeted audience. A recent study conducted by the author suggests that information sourced with Opera news hub has credibility issues. Some content creators on the hub argue that the platform promotes clickbait and rewards sensational journalism. David Hundeyin, a former content creator for Opera, has argued that “it does not want criticism of Chinese-style government and promotion of democracy on its platform”. Recently, the media adviser to former national chairman of the Peoples’ Democratic Party, Prince Secondus, in Nigeria accused Opera of “unprofessional acts and consistently publishing libellous articles”. Other media professionals have also stated their belief that the platforms algorithmic code is written to not allow the publishing of stories that are considered anti-China or pro-Taiwan or that discussed the origin of Covid-19, among other things.

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A multifaceted influence operation agenda

The Covid-19 pandemic, which has wreaked havoc on the economies of many African countries, has made the BRI more prominent and influential. Many African countries are looking to Chinese investment to close infrastructural deficit gaps. As a result they have become, or will become, more susceptible to China’s influence and messaging. This, combined with the financial crisis wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw many media organisations forced out of business or to recalibrate operating models to remain afloat, has made them more susceptible to external influence. Whilst the effect of China’s influence operation in the media space in West Africa may not be clearly visible in the short-to-medium term, it has the potential to manifest in the long term, particularly in more authoritarian states. The result will be a less critical media that is subject to greater government control that may make it difficult for citizens to fully understand what is going on and hold its leadership accountable.
