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Expert Analysis
April 2014

China in Africa's media and telecommunications: cooperation, connectivity and control

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Executive summary

China is changing Africa's media sphere. The country supports African broadcasters with loans, training, and exchange programmes and has set up its own media operations on the continent, creating an African arm of the state-run broadcaster CCTV and expanding existing initiatives, such as the state news agency Xinhua. In the telecommunications market China is helping national governments, both democratic and authoritarian, to expand access to the Internet and mobile telephony, and it offers export credits to Chinese companies willing to invest in African markets.

For China, media expansion in Africa is a part of its "Going Out" and "soft power" strategies to extend the country's influence in new sectors and locations. Yet for some this process represents a move in an "information war" in terms of which Chinese-built telecommunications infrastructure is a cybersecurity concern and the tendency of Chinese media to promote "positive reporting" is a threat to independent watchdog journalism. Such rapid and contested changes in Africa's media and telecommunications sphere are an overlooked and illustrative example of the impacts and influences of a rising China that warrant particular attention from policymakers and civil society in Africa who wish to ensure both increased cooperation and connectivity and free and secure communications among citizens.

Introduction

Media and telecommunications are the newest frontier of China's engagement with Africa and part of a wider pattern of increasing Chinese investments in African markets, infrastructure and natural resources. China's expansion into these sectors has included both old and new communication technologies and has developed both through top-down policy and trial and error. It is underpinned by China's "Going Out" (or "Go Global") strategy, first unveiled in 1999 and later incorporated into the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–05) with the objective of encouraging Chinese enterprises to invest overseas, improve competitiveness and secure an international business presence. This engagement also taps into China's effort to strengthen its "soft power" in order to shape African – and global – public opinion in its favour.

China's media and telecommunications strategy in Africa builds on a long history of engagement with the continent: the People's Republic of China's formal diplomatic relations with African countries date back to the 1950s, when policies were characterised not only by the provision of aid, but also by efforts to communicate with African audiences at large. Many of the country's current engagements in Africa are remarkably similar to the strategies first laid out by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1964, i.e. stressing mutual benefit and cooperation over the export of a particular media model, for example. However, there are also important breaks with the past. Firstly, 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. Secondly,

1 The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Yunnan Chen.

China's resources are now much greater than in previous eras and Chinese media, for example, are now able to invest and operate where others simply cannot afford to engage.

Other nations thus tend to regard China's renewed activity in Africa as a "game changer" for development and international relations. In 2011 then-U.S. 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. 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 a reference to China's entry into African markets. 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 & Mosher, 2010: 4). Others have suggested that Chinese telecommunications companies, such as Huawei and ZTE, may be hiding "backdoors" in their equipment – charges they deny – to allow the Chinese government to spy on users, including African governments, or to shield its own spying efforts elsewhere.

Recent leaks from the former U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden that revealed that the NSA itself tried to install backdoors in Huawei's networks have given such accusations an ironic twist: while China supports the illiberal concept of "Internet sovereignty" – something that many fear could lead to a "Balkanisation" of the Internet (Schaake, 2012) – there is a risk that countries' fears of U.S. government surveillance could make this a reality. However, whether or not the Chinese government conducts surveillance through its own technology companies, it certainly offers backing to governments, both democratic and authoritarian, that use media and telecommunications development for both control and increased connectivity. Examples of control include the monitoring of political opposition figures or groups, which risks violating the rights of citizens to communicate freely and securely. This expert analysis sets out some of the key dynamics and developments in these overlooked themes and their links to wider debates around China's presence in the media sector and the "information society" in Africa.

Media

After the Third Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Beijing in 2006, China began to play an increasingly important role in Africa's media sector, both directly, by expanding its own media operations to attract and influence audiences in Africa, and indirectly, by supporting African broadcasters with loans, training, and exchange programmes for African journalists and media professionals. Both approaches have been characterised by ambition and a desire to experiment with new strategies on a relatively "safe" terrain: the continent is still perceived as a space where it is possible to make mistakes. In the case of the media, this has created greater opportunities for journalists to experiment with new styles and to enjoy freedoms that are difficult to exercise in China.

China's media strategy over the past few years has been characterised by a series of variably interconnected initiatives. When CCTV Africa launched on January 12th 2012 it became the largest non-African TV initiative in Africa, employing more than 100 journalists, mostly African, either at its headquarters in Nairobi or reporting from across the continent. Building on its considerable resources, CCTV Africa became the only international TV initiative to guarantee one hour of original reporting from Africa each 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.

Chinese companies, including StarTV, compete to offer cheap TV packages in the growing digital terrestrial television markets in Africa, each including CCTV channels as part of the offer (often together with the BBC, al-Jazeera and other international news channels). CCTV also seeks partnerships with national TV broadcasters to host its content. The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and CCTV signed a memorandum of understanding that will see ZBC broadcasting CCTV's news programmes for the next three years (*China Economic Review*, 2012).

China also seeks direct media influence through other channels. In Kenya, China Radio International has 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: 13-15). In 2012, the same year that CCTV Africa launched, 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). State news agency Xinhua, the first Chinese media organisation to begin operations in Africa back in 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.

Chinese print and new media have emphasised "positive reporting" in their strategy in Africa, typically characterised as a way to influence perceptions of China by "advancing new ways of looking at Africa", a counter to purported Western media tropes of poverty and corruption. This positive, pro-China message taps into a "rising Africa" narrative that stresses the collective achievements of China-Africa cooperation while avoiding "divisive" stories

2 This was also the subject of a recent discussion at the Oxford University China-Africa Network conference New Trends in African Media: The Growing Role of China; see <http://oucan.politics.ox.ac.uk/images/stories/oucan%20conference%20report%20media.pdf>.

(Gagliardone, 2013: 2-3).[2] This entails tight control over controversial topics such as human rights and some environmental themes, such as the role of Chinese ivory demand in the elephant-poaching crisis (York, 2013), and coverage of countries, such as Swaziland, that maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

This, however, is a difficult balance, as "positive reporting" may well be at odds with competitiveness and commercial success (Cook, 2013: 19). Questions remain about the appeal of such operations for African audiences, and whether viewers may prefer more familiar and more editorially independent international media such as the BBC, CNN and al-Jazeera over content that is directly controlled by the Chinese government. Furthermore, in countries with rapidly growing public and private media, like Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria, potential opportunities for international media have been progressively eroded.

China claims that its indirect involvement in Africa's growing media sector is consistent with its "no-strings-attached" policy in terms of which it provides support without imposing a particular model. However, a survey of specific assistance projects suggests that state broadcasters and state-controlled initiatives are the primary beneficiaries of this form of engagement. For example:

- In Zimbabwe, a 2012 deal on economic and technical cooperation with China worth 1.14 billion yuan (around $180 million) included loans of 31.5 yuan (around $5 million) to provide television broadcasting vans to the ZBC (Xinhua, 2012). In February 2013 China donated a broadcasting van during a bilateral governmental meeting in Harare, simultaneously concluding 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 broadcasting capacity of the national Zimbabwe 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 northern Nigeria, China is supporting the digitisation of Kaduna State Media Corporation, the primary broadcaster in Kaduna state, with a 2012 Exim Bank concessionary loan worth $30.6 million, to be repaid over eight years. The loan should see the establishment of booster substations to ensure television coverage across the whole state and a switch from analogue to digital broadcasting before the 2015 deadline.

- In Liberia, China spent $4 million on radio expansion, in cooperation with the Liberia Broadcasting System in 2008 (Wu, 2012: 15). An agreement between the Chinese and Liberian governments in 2012 provided the Liberia Broadcasting System 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.

The former U.S. secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, referring to the expansion of Chinese and Russian television networks at a time when the presence and influence of other international media are diminishing, remarked that the U.S. was "engaged in an information war and we are losing that war" (Gaouette, 2011). However, for Beijing, media expansion and support are framed as an aspect of its "soft power" campaign, alongside resource diplomacy, student exchanges, foreign aid and other initiatives. The new African Union (AU) building, erected by Chinese and Ethiopian construction companies as a gift from the Chinese government and inaugurated in 2012, just before the 50th anniversary of the AU, is an example of how this new relationship may be communicated in different forms, and not exclusively through the media (BBC News, 2012).

Telecommunications

China's multipronged approach in Africa can also be seen in the telecommunications sector. China is engaged both in the production of content and meaning and in the infrastructure on which African information societies are being built. China has made inroads into the emerging telecommunications market in Africa through a mixture of loans, which are part of aid packages, and export credits, which are used to foster Chinese investment by offering resources to Chinese companies willing to invest in African markets. For example:

- In Guinea, Exim Bank loans have supported the state-owned telecommunications firm SOTELGUI.

- In Nigeria, Exim Bank offered Nigeria a $100 million loan for the development of its Galaxy Backbone ICT network that should boost "the sophistication and effectiveness of the government's efforts to tackle security challenges" (Francis, 2012).

- In 2010 Exim Bank supported e-government projects in Ghana with two concessionary loans worth $30 million and $150 million. Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei was awarded the contract for the project's "technical realisation".

- In Tanzania, Chinese concessionary loans funded the construction of the National ICT Broad Infrastructure Project in Tanzania.

To date, Ethiopia is the country that has most benefitted from a telecommunications partnership with China. In 2006 it received a loan of $1.9 billion to overhaul its telecommunications system, followed by another loan of $1.6 billion five years later to further expand mobile and Internet connectivity (Zhao, 2009; BBC News, 2012). In the first case the Chinese telecoms giant ZTE was selected to implement the project, helping state monopolist Ethio-Telecom to expand mobile network penetration from 900,000 users in 2006 to 17 million by 2012 and to upgrade e-government projects, including Woredanet, which facilitates routine communications among the Ethiopian prime minister, cabinet ministers and local constituencies (Gagliardone, 2014). The second loan was equally split between ZTE and its Chinese rival Huawei.

While Ethiopian citizens have benefitted from improved connectivity, the Ethiopian experience also illustrates some of the contradictions of Chinese interventions in Africa. Chinese authorities have distinguished themselves from other multilateral and bilateral donors with their "no-strings-attached" policy. However, this approach has been consistent only to the extent that the Chinese government does not impose policy choices. The imposition of Chinese partners as implementers of projects funded through concessionary loans essentially results in a form of "tied aid". In the case of Ethiopia, where state monopolist Ethio-Telecom controls telecommunications, China's failure to push for any form of liberalisation – and the fact that it permitted Ethio-Telecom to expand access in a regime of monopoly – eventually backfired. Chinese companies, with little competition or local capacity, ended up providing very poor-quality services that built a bad reputation for themselves – so bad, in fact, that even tightly controlled official government media have been allowed to criticise technical glitches and incompetence (e.g. see Balleh, 2014).

Surprisingly, perhaps, Chinese companies have fared better in countries where they have encountered greater competition. Huawei has opened offices in 18 countries in Africa, including Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, with its headquarters in Johannesburg, South Africa. It has invested billions since the 1990s in the African telecommunications sector, building towers, and fibre optics and cellphone networks, and is heavily involved in the day-to-day operations and development of these networks. In Nigeria, Huawei signed a $750 million contract with the Globacom network (Ait-Hatrit, 2013) and was been selected by Kenya's leading operator, Safaricom (which is partially owned by Vodafone), to construct its fibre optics network. ZTE has also won contracts with Nigeria's Globacom and has taken over its 4G network (Ventures Africa, 2013).

China's increasing dominance of core, backbone telecommunications systems in Africa has also been seen as a cybersecurity issue. Michael Chertoff, the U.S. secretary of homeland security, has suggested that Huawei has potentially significant control and surveillance of African information networks via technological "backdoors". "If you build the network on which all the data flows", he noted, "you're in a perfect position to populate it with backdoors or vulnerabilities that only you know about" (Reed, 2013). Related to this are the concerns that African networks could be used as a means of shielding Chinese spying activities elsewhere.

Huawei and other Chinese companies have denied such claims, but as media infrastructure grows in many African states, so has the evidence that many governments are keen to use Chinese-made technologies for the control and interception of information for political purposes. For example:

- In Zimbabwe, the government used Chinese equipment to jam shortwave broadcasts in 2005 (Reporters Without Borders, 2006).

- In Zambia, the government has apparently employed Chinese Internet surveillance and censorship equipment and expertise since February 2013, after an order from President Sata authorised the interception of telephone and Internet communications.

- In Ethiopia, the government held a Chinese-supported "Internet Management" workshop on monitoring citizens' communications (Reed, 2013).

At the same time, it should be noted that evidence of the use of software for censorship and surveillance has also indicated collusion with U.S.- and European Union-based companies. In Ethiopia, where the telecommunication markets is dominated by Chinese companies, the British software FinSpy was used to spy on opposition figures. The Milan-based Hacking Team has provided interception technology to target Ethiopians living in the U.S. (CitizenLab, 2014).

Chinese firms have also been accused of adopting corrupt practices in local markets. In Zambia, ZTE contracts for close-circuit television surveillance cameras were terminated after an allegedly corrupt process in which tenders were not open and costs were said to have been inflated. Corruption controversies have also arisen in Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya over allegations of cost inflation and shady contracting (Malakata, 2013). In 2012 both Huawei and ZTE were found guilty of bribing executives at the Algerian state-owned network Algérie Télécom and banned from operating in the country for two years (Malakata, 2012).

In response, both Huawei and ZTE emphasise their corporate social responsibility (CSR) portfolios. In 2011 Huawei's CSR report said that it "strongly implements 'transparent procurement' and 'transparent sales', and opposes bribery, corrupt activities, dumping … to build a harmonious business environment" (Huawei, 2011). Huawei's 2013 White Paper on Cybersecurity said that the company "[has] never been asked to provide access to our technology, or provide any data or information on any citizen or organization to any Government, or their agencies" (Huawei, 2013).

Whether or not the activities of such companies represent cybersecurity concerns – or indeed, if China's increased media presence should be interpreted in terms of an "information war" – these rapid changes in Africa's media and telecommunications sphere are an overlooked and illustrative example of the impacts and influences of a rising China, which warrant greater study and attention from policymakers and civil society in Africa and elsewhere, in particular those who are keen to ensure both increased cooperation and connectivity and free and secure communications among citizens.

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