

## CCTV News and Soft Power

JOHN JIRIK

Independent Researcher, Turkey

This article looks at the soft power strategies of CCTV News, the global English-language television, Internet, and mobile news service run by China's state broadcaster, China Central Television. The article focuses on the television operation, since that is the core of CCTV News and is the operation from which the other services draw much of their content. The article also addresses the concept of soft power and asks whether it is an adequate framework for understanding the channel's strategies. It does this by answering two questions: how is CCTV News positioning itself in relation to the soft power policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and what soft power challenges does CCTV News face from, and pose to, competitor news channels?

*Keywords: China, global news channels, hegemony, propaganda, soft power*

This article looks at the soft power strategies of CCTV News, the global English-language television, Internet, and mobile news service run by China's state broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV). The article focuses on the television operation as it is the core of CCTV News and is the operation with which I am most familiar. The article opens with a discussion of two related concepts—"soft power," in the sense in which Nye (1990b) originally used it, and "going out" (see the following section)—as the Chinese polity and academy use them and as they relate to CCTV News. The U.S. foreign policy concept of soft power has traveled widely since Nye introduced it in 1990. It has, however, never possessed the rigor of a fully developed social scientific concept. Afrasiabi, for example, described soft power as "an excellent theory that can never be refuted precisely because it cannot be pinned down, its core assumptions too nebulous to lend themselves to scientific parsimony" (2007, para. 11). From an analytical perspective, an argument could be made that concepts such as cultural or public diplomacy might better explain what CCTV News is doing. But Nye sees cultural diplomacy as an instrument of public diplomacy and as an "important soft power tool" (Nye, 2010, para. 1), so clearly for him the concepts are closely related.

My thinking is similar to that of Afrasiabi, who rejects the amorphous character of Nye's conceptualization and points to Max Weber, Antonio Gramsci, and Michel Foucault as better starting points for an understanding of the "the subtleties and complexities of power" (2007, para. 11). Nevertheless, it was Nye's conceptualization of "soft power" that the Chinese polity and academy embraced. So regardless of the poverty of the theory as such, to understand Chinese soft power we must understand how Chinese politicians and scholars use the term.

To do that, this article addresses two questions: how is CCTV News positioning itself in relation to the soft power policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and what soft power challenges does CCTV News face from, and pose to, competitor news channels?

I close my argument with a discussion of what can be gained by thinking about soft power in terms of Gramsci's work. Nye acknowledged the power of Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony (J. Nye, 2002), which in the case of CCTV News helps pinpoint the dilemma the Chinese leadership faces in its desire simultaneously to keep control over CCTV News and have it recognized as a credible international news service.

This article resulted from several years of work at CCTV News (1999–2000, 2003–2005, and 2013–2015) and draws on and updates my earlier work on the topic (Jirik, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2010, 2015). That said, my most recent time in Beijing did not have an academic objective, so I did not keep a diary in the academic sense but rather recorded my personal observations. The findings of this article should therefore be understood as grounded in my earlier research and at the same time tentative due to the methodological limitations of my latest research.

I flesh out the challenge of doing this kind of research in the methodological discussion that follows. Suffice it to say here that my position simultaneously as a journalist and researcher put me at all times at an intersection of reflection and action that stretched the definition of participant observation as it is usually understood in the literature, since participant observation is not normally designed to change the institution under observation. Over and against this understanding, my mission at CCTV each time was to bring to bear on the institution my previous experience as a journalist: with NBC (freelance assistant desk editor, 1991–1992, Moscow) and Reuters (producer and senior producer, 1992–1999, Moscow, Hong Kong, and Singapore), and also as an academic (2008–2013). CCTV was aware that I was doing doctoral research while I was working there from 2003 to 2005. My return in 2013 followed five years as a tenure-track assistant professor at Lehigh University. CCTV invited me back with a mission to oversee news planning. In short, CCTV was open to being the object of research and was also open to me putting the fruits of that research into practice. Therefore, my work over time with CCTV can perhaps best be characterized as the simultaneous holding of emic (as a participant or practitioner) and etic (as an observer) positions.

Finally, I want to note at the outset that despite its role as an agent of soft power, determining what kind of channel CCTV News should be was one of the sharpest internal debates there. According to management, the goal of CCTV News was twofold: to project China's voice globally, and to join channels such as Al Jazeera, BBC, and CNN in shaping the global retail news agenda.<sup>1</sup> However, that goal sustained a debate that was based neither on passport nor on party affiliation. From my observations and discussions with personnel, some of the harshest critics of the propaganda model at the heart of the Chinese news system were Communist Party of China (CPC) members. Meanwhile, and somewhat counterintuitively, many of the foreign professionals who joined CCTV News from the likes of the BBC, CNN, and Sky TV appeared comfortable in their role as mouthpieces for the CPC and Chinese state.

---

<sup>1</sup> Author's observation and discussions with CCTV management.

I was comfortable because I am cynical about the claims to balance and objectivity made by Western and international news organizations, including my former employer Reuters, over and against the clear biases evident in the objectivist news tradition that political economic analyses of institutional histories and behaviors and longitudinal analyses of so-called objective news content have consistently shown (Boyd-Barrett, 1980; Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Jirik, 2013; Paterson, 2011). My own sense of what journalism is and how it works blends political economy and cultural studies. In my work as a journalist I draw heavily on Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Foucault's analysis of power and put these concepts to work in the service of best practice, as evident in the work of institutions such as Reuters. I worked to change CCTV News from within, while acknowledging and respecting the long and complex history of journalism in modern China, which, as my earlier work showed, is not blunt propaganda as characterized by its harshest critics (Jirik, 2008).

### **Soft Power, the "Going Out" Project, and CCTV's Overseas Expansion**

CCTV News is an instrument of soft power in the particular sense in which Nye's concept has been taken up by academics and politicians in China. From the outset (see the following discussion of Xu Guangchun), the Party and government made clear that CCTV News existed to promote China's image abroad and influence the conditions under which China would attempt to expand its international standing.

Xue suggests that the term "soft power" entered the Chinese political lexicon in the early 1990s, shortly after the publication of the Chinese translation of Joseph Nye's *Bound to Lead* (Nye, 1990a; Xue, 2012, p. 7). Nye conceptualized soft power as the ability of one country to get "other countries to *want* what it wants" and noted that this ability usually relied on "intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions" (Nye, 1990b, p. 167).

As Xue noted, Wang Huning, a professor who became one of the closest advisors of Jiang Zemin when the latter was CPC general secretary and president, published an article in 1993 stressing the need for China to develop soft power (Xue, 2012; see also Li & Worm, 2009). Other academics weighed in and the debate about soft power entered the policy sphere. As Wang (2008) observed, "Few Western international relations phrases have penetrated as deeply or broadly into the Chinese vocabulary in recent years" (p. 258).

Linked to the concept of soft power was the idea of "going out," which also began to appear in policy documents in the early 1990s (Jiang, 2014). In October 1992, Jiang Zemin listed 10 major tasks for developing outbound trade and investment in a report to the 14th CPC Party Congress. These included the need to "expand Chinese enterprise's [*sic*] foreign investments and transnational operations," which Jiang Shixue suggested could "be seen as the germination of the 'going out' strategy" (2014, p. 1). According to Jiang Shixue, Jiang Zemin first publicly used the phrase "go out" on a visit to Hebei province in June 1996 (Jiang, 2014, p. 2). The term "going out" entered top-level policy discourse on October 11, 2000, when it was included in the CPC Central Committee's proposal for the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001–2005) (Jiang, 2014). Going out and soft power therefore were inextricably linked, as they represented the material and ideological dimensions of the Chinese polity's decision to increase China's engagement with the outside world.

In 2001, Xu, at the time deputy head of the Central Publicity Department (CPD) and head of SARFT,<sup>2</sup> took the going out project to CCTV, telling a meeting of station managers that Party leadership wanted CCTV-9 (the then-extant iteration of what would become CCTV News) to be developed as a global, 24-hour, English-language service (Xu, 2002, cited in G. Liu, 2006). The particular role of CCTV-9 was to enhance *wai xuan* (external publicity) to promote China's going out. This was done by establishing multilanguage services that broadcast from Beijing and a global English-language broadcast operation. In short, as Liu notes, the expansion of services such as CCTV-9 (rebranded in 2004 as CCTV International, then rebranded as CCTV News in 2010), was aimed at strengthening governance, including foreign policy, through media (G. Liu, 2006). In Xu's words, CCTV's English language global service was asked to "help with the government's policy-making" (Xu, 2002, cited in G. Liu, 2006, p. 39).

CCTV News operates a center-hub system to service a single 24/7 global broadcast. In mid-2015, the Beijing-based headquarters aired 117 hours (70%) of programming a week, the Washington, DC, hub (CCTV America) aired 36.5 hours (22%) of programming, and the Nairobi hub (CCTV Africa), aired 14.5 hours (9%) of programming. Of that, 123.5 hours (74%) consisted of live news or first runs of prepared programming, and 44.5 hours (26%) consisted of repeat broadcasts.<sup>3</sup> The center and two hubs have relative editorial autonomy, although Beijing determines the editorial line of the channel.<sup>4</sup> The relative autonomy of the three production centers gives DC and Nairobi some leeway to decide what to cover and how. To ensure that Beijing retains final control of the broadcast operation, output from DC and Nairobi is channeled through Beijing before transmission to the broadcast satellites.<sup>5</sup>

Each of the three operations has staff correspondents, and they share the services of an extensive network of freelance correspondents outside China. That CCTV News was seen as a serious professional option was evident in the presence of former Al Jazeera, BBC, CNN, Sky, and other personnel among the CCTV News staff. CCTV News works closely with the Associated Press (AP) and Reuters, which together supply much of the on-air material (Jirik, 2008, 2013, 2015). AP and Reuters also offer on-the-ground correspondent services to CCTV News, making their reporters available for live and package reports.<sup>6</sup> CCTV News also takes material from CNN Newsource (<http://cnnnews.com/>) and a number of other sources such as the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) was reorganized as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) following the March 2013 announcement of SARFT's merger with the General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP) for regulatory and content management reasons, which, as one commentator pointed out, would also ensure that censorship of the audiovisual and print sectors could be brought into line and made more uniform (X. A. Liu, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Author's fieldwork.

<sup>4</sup> Author's discussion with managers; author's observation.

<sup>5</sup> Author's observation.

<sup>6</sup> Author's observation.

<sup>7</sup> Author's observation.

### How to Analyze and Predict What CCTV News Will Air

This article does not test a theory. Rather it is an investigation of how CCTV News works to deploy what the Chinese polity understands as soft power.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the theory presented here is designed to help a reader to analyze and predict what content CCTV News will air, not what its effect, if any, might be. In its simplest form, the theory suggests that notwithstanding the "sensitivity" (see the following paragraph) of a story, whatever was not explicitly prohibited from broadcast was permitted.<sup>9</sup> Absolute interdictions existed. Typical examples were: do not discuss the families of the leadership unless they are legitimately in the news; do not report any story related to the leadership that Xinhua (China's state news agency) has not reported; use Xinhua as an editorial guide; only report negatively on the Dalai Lama; do not report on the Catholic Pope; ignore Taiwan unless the report is apolitical or serves China's interests; do not question China's foreign policy; do not report positively about Japan unless so doing enhanced China's interests; and so on.<sup>10</sup> What was left and permitted was a huge field of news.

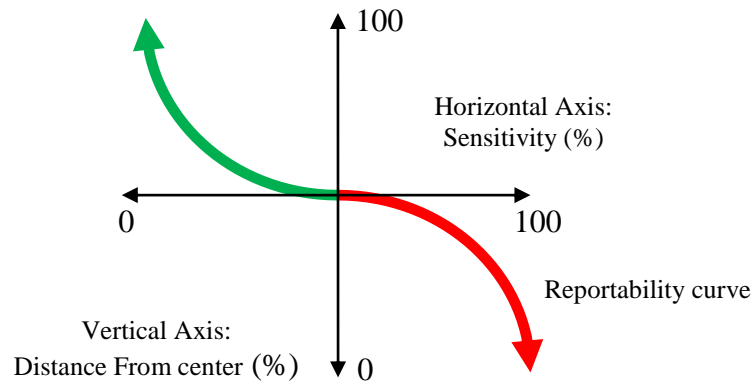
"Sensitivity" is at the heart of the editorial system at CCTV News. It was used to refer to a vague catch-all category that editors regularly evoked but rarely explained. Moreover, different news editors had different degrees of sensitivity: a story might be green-lighted in an editorial meeting one day, then prohibited by a different editor the next (or vice versa). I developed a rule of thumb for sensitivity, which is that the closer a story came to Party and state interests and the closer the Party and/or state interests in question were to the political center (Beijing), the less likely the story was to be reported, unless a higher Party or state interest authorized its reporting. Figure 1 illustrates this theory. My conclusion was that CCTV News could air whatever the Party and state dictated from the center (very little), and much of what the Party and state did not prohibit, guided by a managing editor's gauge of the sensitivity of the story.

---

<sup>8</sup> Any reference to 'soft power' from this point on, unless otherwise noted, refers to soft power as it has been understood and used by the Chinese polity, not to Joseph Nye's conceptualization of the term.

<sup>9</sup> Whether censorship or self-censorship was the bigger problem at CCTV News appeared to correlate with one's position. The channel's director told me that whatever was not prohibited was permitted and that self-censorship was the biggest problem CCTV News faced. Chinese journalists and editors would tell me a mixture of beliefs. Foreigners tended to say censorship, although in my case I was well aware that I was also self-censoring.

<sup>10</sup> One might say the equivalent "rules" governing U.S. media are: the families of leaders are off-limits unless they are legitimately in the news; do not report on any story the lawyers might have problems with; be careful with any story deemed "sensitive" (a vague category that usually involves anything to do with corporate ownership or institutional control); only report negatively on Vladimir Putin; do not question U.S. foreign policy; do not report positively about Venezuela, and so on.



**Figure 1. Reportability of a story in terms of sensitivity and distance from central power.**

(Source: Author)

### Methodology

This article reflects sustained work at, and observation of, the CCTV News operation over five years, underpinned by data, documentation, interviews, and conversations with personnel during my years of M.A. and Ph.D. fieldwork from 1999 to 2000 and 2003 to 2005, respectively. The first draft of this article was written in early 2015, when my title was Senior Planning Editor, CCTV News, a position I left in July 2015.

During each of the three visits, I kept a diary in which I recorded my observations and conversations. During my two earlier stints at CCTV this was done rigorously, in line with academic expectations. My latest diary (August 2013–July 2015) was more of a personal reflection on what I was doing and why, in the context of what I was observing. The problem for science of observer bias is well known. But as the social scientific literature notes, although certain fields such as anthropology and sociology constantly struggle with the observer observed relationship, empirical and statistical data provide rich support for valid and reliable observations (Babbie, 2001; Creswell, 2009; Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, 1999). My M.A. and Ph.D. studies were grounded in documents and interviews collected on site and longitudinal analysis of content. Those data and five years of academic reflection underpinned my observation and practice during my most recent visit.

My last role at CCTV News, as senior planning editor, gave me unprecedented access to the editorial process at CCTV News.<sup>11</sup> This level of access was not possible during my earlier visits to CCTV, when I had been hired to work as a copy editor but was additionally and de facto a journalist, journalism trainer, and management consultant. Despite its subjectivity, my final diary therefore recorded a level of insight not previously possible. I attended daily editorial meetings, a weekly editorial and planning meeting, and a fortnightly planning meeting with the DC and Nairobi hubs. In addition, as the sole permanent member of the CCTV News "SuperDesk" (from late 2014), which oversaw the newsmaking process in real time, I had an excellent vantage point from which to watch, take part in, and take notes on the editorial process on a day-to-day basis.<sup>12</sup> Finally, I worked on a range of consultative documents, including with Paul Cutler on the design of the central desking system at CCTV News.<sup>13</sup>

However, my role as the channel's senior planning editor also showed me how removed I was from the higher level editorial processes that ultimately framed decision making. This was not a Party issue. Many of the decision makers who had access to sensitive information at CCTV were not members of the CPC. In addition, many of them were not CCTV staff, but contracted employees. I concluded that the defining characteristic for exclusion from the higher-level editorial process at CCTV News was one's nationality. In other words, foreigners were excluded from more than consultative power at the apex of the news editorial system.

Inclusion and exclusion were implemented through what was and was not communicated: which meetings one attended, what emails one received, and so on. For example, CCTV News ran an interlinked network of WeChat (a group-chat app similar to WhatsApp) forums in which the channel's agenda, its handling of particular stories, and similar topics were discussed by editors, producers, and journalists. No foreigner, including myself, had access to the *chief editors'* group, where real-time coverage decisions were made. In short, the more I learned about CCTV News, and the higher I rose within the editorial ranks, the more clearly I saw the constraints on my work and the limitations to what I could be sure of from an academic standpoint.

---

<sup>11</sup> My job offer and mission were as follows: "chief planner of CCTV News' news gathering team . . . [to provide] more western perspective to cover domestic and international events for [the CCTV] news gathering team" (e-mail from the CCTV News HR Department, March 2012).

<sup>12</sup> The "Super Desk" was the editorial heart of CCTV News. When it was set up in late 2014, I was its only permanent member. Its other members rotated: news director, executive producer, domestic news editor of the day (and assistant), and foreign news editor of the day (and assistant).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Cutler was hired in late 2013 for a year as the channel's "senior consultant" (see footnote 17 for more on the channel's consultants). He wrote a blueprint, drawing in part on my documents, for a centralized desking system which was partially introduced in late 2014.

### **The Two Questions of This Article**

*RQ1: How is CCTV News positioning itself in relation to the PRC's soft power policies?*

The decision to use CCTV to project soft power dated to at least the 15th Party Congress in 1997, after which discussion began about the need for a channel similar to CNN or the BBC but with "Chinese characteristics" (Chou Wiest, 2003; Dong & Shi, 2007). The launch of Al Jazeera (Arabic) in November 1996 had shown television executives and regulators in China that the BBC-CNN duopoly in the global information sphere could be broken at the regional level, although Al Jazeera Arabic's cultural proximity (see the following discussion) to the region it targeted was an advantage a China-based English-language television channel would lack.

In September 2003, SARFT formally ordered CCTV to restructure CCTV-9 as a "rolling news" service (Jirik, 2010).<sup>14</sup> That order resulted in the May 2004 launch of CCTV International, a hybrid of live news, programming, and repeat broadcasts. On October 1, 2004, CCTV added a 24-hour shared French and Spanish service, which it split into separate services three years later, on October 1, 2007. CCTV Arabic went to air in July 2009, and CCTV Russian was launched on September 10, 2009 (Jirik, 2010). In addition to the five broadcast channels, CCTV subsidiary CNTV ([www.cctv.com](http://www.cctv.com)) runs Web-based versions of the broadcast channels and online channels in Kazak, Korean, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Uighur. CCTV International was rebranded as CCTV News on April 26, 2010. In 2012 CCTV opened broadcast centers in Washington, DC, and Nairobi, Kenya.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the impressive scale of the CCTV News global operation, the channel faces several challenges in carrying out its mission to project soft power. One important challenge is the question of the audience. Another is the question of funding.

### **The Question of the Audience**

Nye wrote that if a state's "culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow" (Nye, 1990b, p. 167). Conversely, "If the content of a country's culture, values and policies are not attractive, public diplomacy that 'broadcasts' them cannot produce soft power" (Nye, 2010, para. 5). As an agent of soft power, one challenge for CCTV News was therefore to be attractive to its audiences. To

---

<sup>14</sup> A rolling news service is a service that can provide news at any time. As of late 2015, despite SARFT's 2003 order CCTV was still not a rolling news service, as the news editors were unable to break into repeat broadcasts or programming. Repeat broadcasts were put to air by a Master Control Room (MCR), over which CCTV News editors had no override authority. Management had also failed to solve the staffing problem should a repeat broadcast be preempted by live news. As a result, no technical staff would be available to produce the live broadcast. Finally, the programming department zealously guarded its broadcast time, and had no interest in live news preempting its output. As a result, the news department at CCTV News could not stay with breaking stories or break stories outside scheduled live news time.

<sup>15</sup> CCTV News senior management told me they were aiming to open the London hub by late 2015. However, as of July 2016, the hub had not opened.



assess how effective CCTV News has been in this respect, I want to borrow from media studies the concept of cultural proximity, which Straubhaar (1991) identified as a key indicator of the potential attractiveness of a cultural product. Cultural proximity assumes that audiences are attracted to programming with which they are culturally familiar. Although the theory was first tested on fictional programming (Latin American soap operas), it also has relevance for news because it points to the underlying psychology of viewer preference.

A global news channel has two options to make itself culturally proximate. One is to create a programming model that is as culturally neutral as possible, thereby appealing to the greatest number of people possible regardless of cultural differences. The alternative is to put culturally proximate fare and faces on air in different cultural settings within a global framework, a form of news "glocalization" (global form, local content) (Robertson, 1995). Both approaches have advantages, and most global news channels mix them. For example, CCTV News favors "Western" and Chinese anchors for its Beijing and DC-based news but foregrounds African faces on its Nairobi-based news segments. Conversely, in mid-2015 all but one of its Beijing-based reporters were Chinese nationals.

A particular strength of CCTV News, with regard to cultural proximity, is its use of local reporters on local stories. Many in its worldwide network of freelance correspondents are local reporters or foreigners with local language skills who are familiar with the local scene. This has included correspondents based in Egypt, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia, South Korea, and Syria, as well as across the Americas and Africa. Glocalization is the other side of the coin of cultural proximity. Alongside the local reporters are headquarters and hub-based anchors, correspondents, and editors with varying degrees of international experience, who project the stereotypical image of a global news channel, filtering the cultural specificity of the local reporter for a global audience. The "anchor" function is critical here, making the unfamiliar familiar through the framing of the story by the anchor's persona and style, a bland professionalism that is indistinguishable from one 24/7 news channel to the next.

Accepting, then, the attempt that CCTV News has made to appeal to different audiences, the question remains: Is anybody watching? According to CCTV, in 2009 its channels were available to over 800 million subscribers in 137 countries (Nelson, 2013). CCTV America's website said in 2014 that CCTV News was available in over 85 million homes in more than 100 countries and territories. This included 30 million households in the United States and almost 8 million in Britain and France. Multiple platforms carry CCTV News in Asia (CCTV America, 2014).

But as Nelson pointed out, making a channel available does not mean people are watching it (2013). Ratings for CCTV News were not shared with foreign staff in Beijing. Citing a study based on audience feedback, Liu noted that CCTV America reached "some Chinese students and a small number of scholars" interested in China issues, while channel recognition among its intended audience (as will be discussed further) was "low" (Q. Liu, 2014, p. 9). In early 2015, *The New York Times* quoted its former Africa correspondent Howard French as saying,

I am quite skeptical about the popularity of Chinese media in Africa. . . . I spent most of the summer in East Africa, and people I spoke with in several countries said that not only did they not watch Chinese TV, but that they generally didn't know other people who did, either. (Feng, 2015, para. 15)

Nevertheless, even if CCTV News lacks a mass audience, this may not be a problem for China's soft power—not as understood in the sense Nye conceptualized it, but rather seen as a messaging system that targets foreign elites and institutions. The channel's audience might be small, but if its viewers include opinion makers in target countries who are open to (if not quite persuaded by) its message, then CCTV News could still succeed in getting its message across precisely to those people who are in a position to influence policy in target countries. Nye defined soft power as "getting others to want what you want." He saw American popular culture as a vehicle of soft power, noting its "widespread appeal" globally (Nye, 1990b, p. 167). But if the goal of soft power is to sway a polity, can this not be achieved as easily by targeting elites in a country rather than relying on broader appeal? Guo Chun, deputy director of CCTV America in 2014, provided an almost textbook definition of an elite audience when describing the target audience of CCTV News as "middle and upper class North Americans, as well as people who are interested in issues related to China" (Q. Liu, 2014, p. 9). Such an audience would not be that identified by Nye in his discussion of popular culture, but it might well include the kinds of opinion makers that CCTV News is targeting.

### ***The Problem of Funding***

Taking Guo Chun at her word that CCTV News is targeting an elite rather than mass audience, given the latter's potential for funding the channel, is the channel shielded from a future funding squeeze despite the protection afforded it as a voice of the CPC and Chinese state? In 2009, media reported that the government had earmarked 45 billion yuan (U.S. \$6.6 billion) for overseas expansion of China's central media, and CCTV was a major recipient (Wu & Chen, 2009). However, the media revenue and funding model in China has changed radically since the going out and soft power projects were launched in the early 2000s.

Although the advertising revenue of CCTV, the parent of CCTV News, climbed spectacularly after 1979 when advertising was reintroduced into China's media, in recent years that revenue has started to plateau—and at the same time it has been eclipsed by the growth of online media advertising. In 2013, the advertising revenue of online search giant Baidu was US\$4.8 billion, double CCTV's primetime advertising revenue. Moreover, from 2012 to 2013 Baidu's online advertising revenue increased 43%, compared to an 11% increase for CCTV in primetime advertising revenue (Larson, 2014).

The possibility of a domestic revenue squeeze was cited as one motivation for CCTV's global expansion (Nelson, 2013). Such a move would not be at odds with the going out project understood in its original sense as a challenge to China's industries to seek growth and profit abroad. However, a reorientation of CCTV News requiring it to generate revenue, in addition to its primarily ideological role to showcase China's rise and win hearts and minds abroad, would be quite a challenge for a channel that has no discernible revenue stream, and does not appear to have the kind of mass audience assumed by the

commercial media model. Moreover, if Guo Chun is right and CCTV News is targeting an elite audience, then any change to the channel's revenue stream in the form of advertiser-funded broadcasting based on broader appeal is unlikely.

A second and related problem concerns the 2009 injection of U.S. \$6.6 billion for the expansion of soft power institutions such as CCTV News: Was this a one-off grant? The funds will run out at some point (if they have not already), which begs the question of whether they will be renewed. If not, and if its parent, CCTV, continues to lose advertising revenue to online and social media as is projected, then a real funding problem could develop for CCTV News. How the channel's principals will deal with that problem when it almost inevitably emerges is a question for future research.

When I left Beijing in 2015, CCTV News managers assured me that so long as the Party and government remained in power, CCTV News would continue to receive funding. This seemed overly optimistic to me. At some point the Party and state will demand a return on investment. In the absence of measurables to show that CCTV News is either influencing elite opinion makers abroad or attracting a mass audience, it seems unavoidable that a crisis will occur as the funding model that has propped up the television system continues to unravel. If the economics of the system cannot be sustained, its ideological function will also fail.

*RQ2: What soft power challenges does CCTV News face from, and pose to, competitor news channels?*

The appeal of the concept of soft power to the Chinese academy and polity was its apparent recipe for cultivating one's interests by presenting them as the interests of others. In the material sphere this has worked well. Since the launch of the going out project, China has emerged as the world's workshop and number two economy in terms of gross domestic product. "Made in China" has become a completely acceptable, if not yet fashionable, label to find on products ranging from shoes to computers to high-speed trains. Overseas direct investment in China is growing, as is direct Chinese investment in many countries, especially those in the developing world and Global South with trade, investment, and/or material resource opportunities for China.<sup>16</sup>

However, in the ideological sphere CCTV News has encountered several obstacles to its successful deployment of soft power. Apart from the problems of the audience and funding already discussed, a third problem is the identity of the channel itself. The defining characteristic of the current iteration of CCTV News is the involvement of foreigners. Prior to the launch of CCTV Africa and CCTV America in early 2012, the only foreigners employed by the channel were based in Beijing and were permitted only two roles, anchor and/or copy editor.<sup>17</sup> However, with the expansion of CCTV News into Africa and the Americas, the

---

<sup>16</sup> See, for example., China's pledge of U.S. \$60 billion in aid to Africa in late 2015 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/world/africa/china-pledges-60-billion-to-aid-africas-development.html>).

<sup>17</sup> Occasionally CCTV would bring in an outside consultant. Two who had significant influence were John Terenzio, who came to CCTV as part of a deal with News Corporation and provided some of the earliest

majority of staff hired to run the Nairobi and DC hubs have been locals.<sup>18</sup> In addition, foreigners were hired into key editorial and technical positions in Beijing. Put simply, CCTV News currently looks much more like its competitors (Al Jazeera, BBC, CNN, etc.) than it did in any previous iteration. Whether this is beneficial or a problem for the projection of soft power is the question.

In commenting on then Chinese president Hu Jintao's call in 2007 for China to "increase its soft power," Nye suggested that China had made

the mistake of thinking that government is the main instrument of soft power. In today's world, information is not scarce but attention is, and attention depends on credibility. Government propaganda is rarely credible. The best propaganda is not propaganda. For all the efforts to turn Xinhua and China Central Television into competitors to CNN and the BBC, there is little international audience for brittle propaganda. (Nye, 2013, para. 8)

Notwithstanding that the BBC is a quasi-state institution, Nye is right. But identifying that the best propaganda does not appear as such suggests that soft power works best as an attractive rather than coercive power. The conceptual frame for understanding this form of the play of power was first outlined by Antonio Gramsci (1971). Nye acknowledged Gramsci's contribution when he explicitly evoked the latter in the context of soft power as a power that co-opts, entices, and attracts, often leading to "acquiescence or imitation":

Political leaders and thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci have long understood the power that comes from setting the agenda and determining the framework of a debate. . . . If I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to force you to do what you do not want to do. (Nye, 2002, p. 5)

Nye's formulation is close to a textbook definition of hegemony, or consent to domination (Gramsci, 1971).<sup>19</sup>

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci (1971) identified the church and the school as the two key sites where hegemony was produced and maintained. Many scholars have since pointed to the hegemonic function of media (Curran & Park, 2000; Gitlin, 1980; Zhao, 2008). If CCTV News wants to bolster the PRC's political influence through media, one way of so doing would be to disavow its obvious task—to be a

---

ideas for the overseas expansion of CCTV News, and Jim Laurie, who was brought in to consult on the expansion project once it was underway and later was instrumental in setting up CCTV America.

<sup>18</sup> Author's observation.

<sup>19</sup> Nye emphasizes the role that civil society plays for soft power (J. Nye, 2002). For Gramsci it is the relationship between state and civil society that matters for hegemony. I have not addressed civil society in this article because CCTV News is a state institution. Nye's argument that government propaganda is "rarely credible" (J. Nye, 2002) is at odds with the success globally of public service broadcasters, a curious lacuna given his recognition that the best propaganda is not propaganda.

mouthpiece for the Chinese Party and state—and instead appeal, attract, and seduce by appearing to be what it is not, namely, by presenting itself as an analog of other 24/7 news channels like the BBC and CNN.

Liu's study of the CCTV America newsroom captures exactly that dynamic, a struggle to assert a second identity that would make the channel more palatable to its audience by masking its real identity (Q. Liu, 2014). Writing about the failure of CCTV America to report on a corruption case that involved its parent, CCTV, Liu emphasized the struggle of the local American staff against the management directive to not air the story. Liu analyzed the ambivalence of multiple perspectives at play in CCTV News, especially at CCTV America, as a failure of CCTV News to articulate a coherent soft power perspective. However, whereas Liu saw this as a weakness of the channel, I see it as a strength. Liu cited Zhao's (2013) recognition of the market-oriented, depoliticized, and culturally centered character of China's soft power strategy being a natural extension of the going out project, as a business strategy appropriate to the overseas expansion of China's state-owned media. Zhao argued that this suppressed "ideological differences in the global symbolic arena" and focused instead on "image building" (Zhao, 2013, p. 21, cited in Q. Liu, 2014, p. 32). Zhao may be right, but this is exactly what the Central Publicity Department wanted: "China's CNN, only cleverer" (Jirik, 2009, senior CCTV manager to the author).

Rather than call on CCTV News to deliver a coherent counternarrative to global capitalist neoliberalism when China's development and CCTV's own institutional development mitigated against such a move, the channel's founding managers appear to have embraced that narrative and set out to create one more national channel, in line with what they saw as the bias of the globalized media model associated with the likes of the BBC and CNN.

In contrast to Liu and Zhao (Q. Liu, 2014; Zhao, 2013), I would argue that only when the audience can no longer tell the difference between these channels and CCTV News, except in terms of nationalist rhetoric, can the latter hope to serve China's political interests, even if these interests are those of a narrow elite within China, indistinguishable from the interests of other national elites, and at odds with the well-being of the vast majority of China's people, which is Liu's and Zhao's point. The irony is that it is the foreigners at CCTV News, not their Chinese bosses, who are working hardest to realize soft power as hegemony, producing news that is indistinguishable from the sort produced at channels where they had previously worked. This leads me to suggest that were CCTV News to become indistinguishable from its competitors, its ability to attract an audience (which would be turned off by its propaganda) and its ability to influence elites would be improved. In other words, the greatest threat that CCTV News as an ideological agent poses to its competitors would be to emulate them. The greatest threat facing CCTV News in its struggle to assert an identity as a global news channel would be a failure to mask its difference.

### **Conclusion**

This article looked at two questions concerning CCTV News: its role as an instrument of China's soft power in the context of the going out project, and the position of CCTV News vis-à-vis that of its competitors. The article found that the going out project had resulted in an expanded global presence for

CCTV News, but that this, in and of itself, was no indication of the success or failure of China's soft power policy. Moreover, analysis of the function of cultural proximity in making programming attractive suggested that the best chance of success for CCTV News lay in making itself a hybrid of local faces on local stories, while seeking through its central and hub operations to appear as unobtrusively similar as possible to its competitors such as the BBC and CNN.

This, however, begs the question that if CCTV News looked like every other global news channel, what particular goal would it serve and what particular appeal could it have? The answer lies in Nye's recognition that the best propaganda is not propaganda. Nye's evocation of Gramsci recognizes consent to domination in the audience's embrace of ideological differences, which always mask themselves and appear as familiar. Thus cultural proximity and professional resemblance can be put to work to mask political interest. Ironically, therefore, it could be argued that CCTV News has a dilemma: if it really wants to bolster the PRC's political influence through media, one way of so doing would be to disavow its obvious task and strip CCTV News entirely of its salient and explicit state propaganda.

Finally, Nye's suggestion in 2013 that CCTV had failed to project soft power (Nye, 2013) can in part be explained by the different periodizations of the two theories.<sup>20</sup> Gramsci sought to address long-term, emergent, relatively autonomous, and often implicit operations of media, education, institutional religion, and other such institutions in the ongoing fray of political contention. Soft power and analogs such as public and cultural diplomacy are usually shorter term activities, although the status of CCTV News in this regard is unclear. Whether the role of CCTV News in China's going out project, for which soft power provides the ideological dimension, is longer or shorter term will depend on the state's continued commitment to the channel. At some point in the future, the financial pressure of CCTV News on its parent, CCTV, as the latter's advertising revenues plateau and advertising dollars continue to move online, is likely to force managers at CCTV and CCTV News to either cut costs or generate more revenue. The latter appears to be less of an option than cutting costs, so it remains to be seen whether the ongoing global expansion of CCTV News can continue at the rate envisaged when the Washington, DC, and Nairobi hubs were launched in 2012. Before I left CCTV in mid-2015, managers made clear that they expected a European hub planned for London to go ahead. But the level of funding and the scope and scale of its operation remain to be seen.

### References

Afrasiabi, K. (2007). The illusion of American "smart power." *Asia Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/IK13Ak02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/IK13Ak02.html)

Babbie, E. (2001). *The practice of social research* (9th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

---

<sup>20</sup> In part, because of the irrelevance, already noted, of civil society for discussing CCTV News in terms of soft power.

- Boyd-Barrett, O. (1980). *The international news agencies*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Boyd-Barrett, O., & Rantanen, T. (Eds.). (1998). *The globalization of news*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- CCTV America. (2014, November 14). *About CCTV America*. Retrieved from <http://www.cctv-america.com/2014/11/14/about-cctv-america>
- Chou Wiest, N. (2003, April 27). CCTV news will be a test of reform; Transparency will be the key to the launch of 24-hour broadcast. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.scmp.com/article/413706/cctv-news-will-be-test-reform>
- Creswell, J. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Curran, J., & Park, M.-J. (Eds.). (2000). *De-westernizing media studies*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Deacon, D., Pickering, M., Golding, P., & Murdock, G. (1999). *Researching communications: A practical guide to methods in media and cultural analysis*. London, UK: Arnold.
- Dong, S. G., & Shi, A. (2007). Chinese news in transition: Facing the challenge of global competition. In D. K. Thussu (Ed.), *Media on the move: Global flow and contra-flow* (pp. 182–197). London, UK: Routledge.
- Feng, B. (2015, January 7). China strives to be on African minds, and TV sets. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/07/china-strives-to-be-on-african-minds-and-tv-sets/>
- Gitlin, T. (1980). *The whole world is watching*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. New York, NY: International Publishers.
- Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Jiang, S. (2014). Chinese investment in the EU. *Working paper series on European studies* 8(1). Institute of European Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Retrieved from [http://ies.cass.cn/webpic/web/ies2/en/UploadFiles\\_8765/201401/2014011009510935.pdf](http://ies.cass.cn/webpic/web/ies2/en/UploadFiles_8765/201401/2014011009510935.pdf)
- Jirik, J. (2000). *Narrative and news production: A case study of the English news and its making at CCTV, China* (Master's thesis). University of Leicester, Leicester, UK.

- Jirik, J. (2004). China's news media and the case of CCTV-9. In C. Paterson & A. Sreberny (Eds.), *International news in the 21st century* (pp. 127–146). Luton, UK: John Libbey Publishing for University of Luton Press.
- Jirik, J. (2008). *Making news in the People's Republic of China: The case of CCTV-9* (Doctoral dissertation). The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2152/3907>
- Jirik, J. (2009, March 20–22). *The PRC's "going out" project: CCTV International and the imagination of a Chinese nation*. Paper presented at the China's Rise and Its Impact on Asia: Democratization, Development and Culture conference, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY.
- Jirik, J. (2010). 24-hour television news in the People's Republic of China. In S. Cushion & J. Lewis (Eds.), *The rise of 24-hour news television: Global perspectives* (pp. 281–298). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Jirik, J. (2013). The world according to (Thomson) Reuters. *Sur Le Journalisme, About Journalism, Sobre jornalismo [En ligne]*, 2(1), 24–41. Retrieved from <http://surlejournalisme.com/rev/index.php/slj/article/view/65>
- Jirik, J. (2015). The CCTV-Reuters relationship. In R. Jeffrey & R. Sen (Eds.), *Media at work in China and India: Discovering and dissecting* (pp. 201–227). New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications.
- Larson, C. (2014, November 19). China's online ad spending booms. *Bloomberg*. Retrieved from <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-11-19/baidus-online-ad-revenues-roughly-double-that-of-cctvs-prime-shows>
- Li, X., & Worm, V. (2009). Building China's soft power for a peaceful rise. *Copenhagen Discussion Papers*. Asia Research Centre, Copenhagen Business School, DK. Retrieved from <http://openarchive.cbs.dk/bitstream/handle/10398/7829/CDP%25202009-028.pdf>
- Liu, G. (2006). *From China to the world: The development of CCTV International in the age of media globalization* (Master's thesis). University of Westminster, London, UK.
- Liu, Q. (2014). *Ambivalence in China's quest for "soft power": A case study of CCTV-America's multiple news standpoints* (Master's thesis). Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. Retrieved from [http://summit.sfu.ca/system/files/iritems1/14521/etd8604\\_QLiu.pdf](http://summit.sfu.ca/system/files/iritems1/14521/etd8604_QLiu.pdf)
- Liu, X. A. (2013, April 19). *China's two main censorship bodies to merge*. Retrieved from <http://uncut.indexoncensorship.org/2013/04/sarft-gapp-china-censorship/>



- Nelson, A. (2013). *CCTV's international expansion: China's grand strategy for media?* Center for International Media Assistance. Retrieved from [http://www.academia.edu/4875611/CCTVs\\_International\\_Expansion\\_Chinas\\_Grand\\_Strategy\\_for\\_Media](http://www.academia.edu/4875611/CCTVs_International_Expansion_Chinas_Grand_Strategy_for_Media)
- Nye, J. S. (1990a). *Bound to lead: The changing nature of American power*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Nye, J. S. (1990b, Autumn). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153–171. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580>
- Nye, J. S. (2002). Hard and soft power in a global information age. In M. Leonard (Ed.), *Re-ordering the world* (pp. 2–10). London, UK: The Foreign Policy Centre. Retrieved from <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/36.pdf>
- Nye, J. S. (2010, January 1). *Soft power and cultural diplomacy*. Retrieved from <http://publicdiplomacymagazine.com/soft-power-and-cultural-diplomacy/>
- Nye, J. S. (2013, April 29). What China and Russia don't get about soft power: Beijing and Moscow are trying their hands at attraction, and failing—miserably. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/>
- Paterson, C. (2011). *The international television news agencies: The world from London*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Robertson, R. (1995). Glocalization: Time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity. In M. Featherstone, S. Lash, & R. Robertson (Eds.), *Global modernities* (pp. 24–43). London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Straubhaar, J. (1991). Beyond media imperialism: Asymmetrical interdependence and cultural proximity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8(1), 39–59.
- Wang, Y. (2008). Public diplomacy and the rise of Chinese soft power. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616, 257–273. Retrieved from <http://ann.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/616/1/257>
- Wu, V., & Chen, A. (2009, January 13). Beijing in 45b yuan global media drive: State giants to lead image campaign. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.scmp.com/article/666847/beijing-45b-yuan-global-media-drive>
- Xu, G. (2002). Speech given at the national meeting of the chiefs of broadcasting and film bureaus. *The Important Documents of Broadcasting and Film Work 2001* (pp. 523–543). Beijing, China: SARFT.

- Xue, L. (2012). *China's dilemma in its soft power: How to build its national image?* (Master's thesis). Aalborg Universitet, Aalborg, DK. Retrieved from [http://projekter.aau.dk/projekter/files/65554672/the\\_whole\\_thesis1.docx](http://projekter.aau.dk/projekter/files/65554672/the_whole_thesis1.docx)
- Zhao, Y. (2008). *Communication in China: Political economy, power, and conflict*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Zhao, Y. (2013). China's quest for "soft power": Imperatives, impediments and irreconcilable tensions? *Javnost—The Public*, 4. Retrieved from <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/92982685/chinas-quest-for-soft-power-imperatives-impediments-irreconcilable-tensions>