

How Influential Are Chinese Media in Africa? An Audience Analysis in Kenya and South Africa

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The increased presence of Chinese media in Africa has been the focus of much debate since the early 2010s. Discussions tend to revolve around issues of production and content, providing little evidence on the way audiences decode media messages aimed at extending China's "soft power." This article uses data from seven focus groups with media and communication university students in Kenya and South Africa to explore the efficacy of Chinese-mediated public diplomacy. We show that Chinese media have little impact on students' information habits, demonstrate that attitudes toward China are predominantly negative, and argue that this stereotyping affects opinions about Chinese media. We also suggest that some students' favored news values overlap with those associated with Chinese media. This may indicate a potential affinity between the journalistic practice of Chinese media in Africa and that of future Kenyan and South African media professionals, which could increase the chances of China's media engagements having an impact in the long term.

Keywords: CCTV, CGTN, Chinese media, Africa, audience, focus groups, journalism

Over the past decade or so, Chinese state-owned media launched a multilingual FM radio station in Kenya (2006), began printing an African weekly edition of the *China Daily* English-language newspaper (2012), opened the first Chinese overseas television broadcasting and production center in Nairobi (2012), and developed the "I Love Africa" multimedia phone application featuring news and entertainment (2012). Also during this time, Xinhua News Agency's network of correspondents in Africa grew to cover dozens of cities and private enterprises, such as ZTE and StarTimes, and secured deals in the media and telecommunications sectors (X. Zhang, Wasserman, & Mano, 2016). Some Chinese ventures unfolded

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without much public scrutiny (i.e., the launch of *China Daily*), whereas others faced notable opposition. For example, when the Pan-African Network Group (PANG), a subsidiary of the Chinese pay-TV operator StarTimes, was chosen in Kenya as one of two signal distributors during the migration from analog to digital TV, Kenyan private broadcasters condemned the decision, partly because of PANG's Chinese ownership (Mbuvi, 2013). Equally criticized was the involvement of Chinese investors in the 2013 acquisition of South Africa's Independent Media by Sekunjalo Investments (Sole & McKune, 2014). Both controversial and uncontroversial projects demonstrate Beijing's interest in developing a stronger mediated relationship with Africa (Li, 2017b). Whether the interest at the government level is matched by a receptive audience has been an elusive question. This article uses evidence from focus group discussions at universities in Kenya and South Africa to provide an answer.

The political-economic imperative underpinning China's engagement in the African media landscape explains why some projects have caused considerable controversy (Bräutigam, 2009; Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). Discourses about Sino-African relations in general have been marked by suspicion over China's intentions, leading sometimes to accusations that China is acting in an imperialist fashion; that the nature of its engagement in, for instance, the commodities sector is exploitative; and that it flouts human rights (for overviews of these discourses, see Alden, 2007; Mills & Thompson, 2009; and Sautman & Hairong, 2007). Questions about the impact of Chinese media come on the back of these broader debates. Critics of China's involvement in the African media landscape contend that it will introduce normative values that could pose a threat to media freedom and independence—often fledgling and fragile—on the continent (Banda, 2009). The combination of Chinese state influence and/or control of Chinese media, and these media's approach to journalism, which differs from the dominant Western "watchdog" model, has been interpreted by some as a potentially dangerous influence (Ngomba, 2012).

That most Chinese media lack some of the freedoms enjoyed by media organizations in liberal democracies (Hassid, 2008) and follow different editorial styles from those associated with Western media operating in Africa (Y. Zhang & Matingwina, 2016) has resulted in China's involvement in the continent being subjected to a higher level of scrutiny than was the case with other global news outlets (Thussu, de Burgh, & Shi, 2018). While Western media have historically been criticized for using clichéd portrayals of Africa (Bunce, Franks, & Paterson, 2016), concerns about Chinese media extend to a hypothetical influence on values, such as press freedom and the media's role as the Fourth Estate. Chinese investment in African domestic media, like Independent Media in South Africa, is seen by some as a possible threat to local "media culture" (Harber, 2013, p. 151), while more alarmist views warn of China seeking to "stamp out" independent media on the continent (Mosher & Farah, 2010).

To date, the study of China's mediated relations with Africa has mostly focused on system-level analyses (Banda, 2009; Gagliardone, 2013; Wu, 2012) or on media content (Li, 2017a; Marsh, 2016), with the impact of the engagement largely assumed or speculated on. Building on the few studies that have focused on the reception of Chinese media in Africa (Gorfinkel, Joffe, Van Staden, & Wu, 2014; Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2017; Wasserman, 2016), this article provides a description of the consumption of, attitudes toward, and responses to Chinese media by 61 students enrolled in media and communication programs in Kenyan and South African universities. We focus on university students for two reasons. First, most students in our sample will become media professionals. The environment in

which they will work is likely to include multiple global media (from China, Russia, the United States, and so on) competing for influence. Exploring how they see this potentially contested space now would enrich current and future debates. Second, because young Africans engage regularly with nonlocal media texts, their experiences are particularly worth exploring. In a study of South African youth, Strelitz (2004) found that students use "globally produced media texts as part of their ongoing attempts to make sense of their lives" (p. 626), and instead of viewing the entry of global media into African spaces as forms of cultural imperialism, they see it as an opportunity to "speak back to" metropolitan centers (p. 627). Concurring with Strelitz and others who have contributed to African media studies' long-standing concern with the interaction between youth consumers and global media (Ndlovu, 2008), we assume that young people in Kenya and South Africa are well positioned to discuss their engagement with Chinese media content as one among many global platforms from which they may derive meaning and construct their worldview.

Chinese Media in Kenya and South Africa

Media have become an increasingly important part of the "going out policy" that characterized China's approach to international relations in the post-Cold War era (Shambaugh, 2013). In the 1990s, this strategy was limited to trade and industry, but since the mid-2000s, it has broadened to include the media as a vehicle for public diplomacy (Xin, 2009). The media constitute such an important component that reference is made to them in all the action plans of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation guiding Sino-African relationships. The 2006 text, for example, reads, "Recognizing that increased contacts between their respective news media contribute to comprehensive and objective news coverage of the other side, the two sides encouraged their respective news media to play a positive role in enhancing mutual understanding and friendship" (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2006). This use of the media to improve China's image and strengthen its international relations coincided with the deepening of political and economic connections with African countries (Wu, 2012). Although China's media have had a long history in Africa, dating back to the 1960s and 1970s (Üngör, 2009), Chinese media and communication companies have widened their footprint on the African continent over the past decade. The expansion of Chinese media in Africa arises from both the desire of Chinese media to increase their international market share and the political aims of China's leadership to use media to strengthen its discursive power globally (Madrid-Morales, 2016).

Chinese involvement in the African media sphere has impacted all countries with which China has diplomatic relations.² In smaller countries, such as Togo or the Comoros, China's national broadcaster has signed agreements to distribute content dubbed into French (Xinhua News Agency, 2014). In larger markets, such as Kenya and South Africa, the presence has been more diverse. Madrid-Morales and Wasserman (2017) suggested that Chinese engagement in the continent covers five areas. Applying this typology to the cases of Kenya and South Africa, some representative examples would include the publication of *Chinafrica* magazine in Johannesburg and the launching of CGTN Africa in Nairobi³ (content

² Chronologies of Chinese ventures in Africa can be found in Morin-Allory (2011) and Li (2017b).

³ At the time of research, CCTV was the brand name for the overseas operations of China's Central Television. On December 31, 2016, the new name of CGTN (China Global Television Network) was adopted. In this article, we use the two names interchangeably.

production); the establishment of StarTimes as a pay-TV operator offering Chinese and non-Chinese content in both countries (content distribution); ZTE's contribution to expanding one of South Africa's cell phone networks or the provision of digital TV to rural Kenya by StarTimes (infrastructure development); the acquisition of 20% of South Africa's Independent Media by Chinese investors (direct investment); and the provision of scholarships to African students to pursue media-related studies at Chinese universities (training).

The intensity of media exchanges has given way to criticism about the intentions of Chinese companies in the continent (see, for example, McKune, 2013). Implicit in the concerns is the assumption that Chinese media values, practices, and culture will exercise a significant influence on the way media content in Africa is produced and that Chinese newsmaking standards will impact audiences' normative expectations of the media's role in African societies and their understanding of African society and politics (Mosher & Farah, 2010). Previous studies among South African journalists have found, however, that Chinese media have very little impact on the routines and attitudes of journalists in the country, even as influences vary in degree (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2017; Wasserman, 2016). While some journalists have adopted Chinese media as a source of information, even pragmatic users of Chinese media only accessed them sporadically and remained critical of their content. Others remain unconvinced of the value of Chinese media for their work, and some actively resist them on the basis that Chinese media are a mouthpiece for government. These findings echo those of Gorfinkel et al. (2014), who found very limited consumption of Chinese news media among university students in South Africa and the general public in Kenya. Based on this evidence, we propose our hypothesis:

H1: Chinese media have a limited impact on media consumption habits of Kenyan and South African university students.

Mediated public diplomacy, defined as "using mass communication (including the Internet) to increase support of a country's specific foreign policies among audiences beyond that country's borders" (Entman, 2008, p. 88), has been part of China's diplomatic activities in Africa for decades (Wekesa, 2017). The idea is that through direct or indirect means, exposure to mediated content will generate more favorable views, and in the long term, this will lead to an increase in "soft power," defined by Nye (2008) as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (p. 94). Direct means refers to firsthand consumption of Chinese media by African audiences. Indirect means would include exposure to Chinese narratives through opinion leaders, who might consume Chinese news media and/or participate in public diplomacy activities sponsored by China (Benabdallah, 2017). Chinese leaders' preoccupation with the way their country is perceived abroad became more intense during the months before the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing (Wang, 2011) and has not receded since. In Africa, public opinion surveys show that attitudes toward China are becoming increasingly positive, although criticism toward certain issues (e.g., labor practices, poaching) has not dissipated (Lekorwe, Chingwete, Okuru, & Samson, 2016). Using survey data, Bailard (2016) concluded that the improvement in attitudes can be explained by China's media expansion. Explaining the mechanism through which this occurs is the focus of the next research question:

RQ1: How do Chinese media in Africa contribute to boosting China's soft power in Kenya and South Africa?

Journalistic Models and African News

One of the reasons that Chinese news media in Africa are often seen as a threat is their depiction as incompatible with the notion of "watchdog journalism." Chinese media's persuasive approach to news, aiming to win over African audiences in order to support Chinese soft power objectives (Gagliardone, 2013); their generally positive tone and favoring of official perspectives (Marsh, 2016); and their criticism of the West's involvement in Africa (X. Zhang, 2013) have led critics to fear that Chinese media may make African media less vigilant in holding power to account. The approach of "constructive journalism" (Y. Zhang & Matingwina, 2016) as an official directive to Chinese media in Africa may hold an appeal to African audiences familiar with other alternative models to the watchdog approach, such as developmental and peace journalism, which have existed alongside Western models of watchdog and socially responsible journalism in African contexts (Wasserman, 2014). For Chinese media to challenge the dominant journalistic models, they would first need to find a receptive audience in current and future media professionals. From this, we formulate a second research question:

RQ2: To what extent do university students in South Africa and Kenya perceive "Chinese journalism" in Africa as an attractive alternative model?

A recurrent theme in the way Chinese media approach news gathering in Africa is the self-expressed preference for more "positive stories" from the continent. In interviews given when CCTV Africa launched in 2012, the station's executive director told one journalist after another that China was in Africa to tell "positive news" (McKenzie, 2012). In a study of Chinese journalists in Africa, Gagliardone and Nyiri (2017) found evidence that this idea had been transmitted to those on the ground. Chinese correspondents described their work as belonging to "a style of journalism that focuses on collective achievements, rather than divisive issues or sensational news" and elicited the idea of "a new form of developmental journalism, one that could provide information that can be directly incorporated in activities beneficial for a country's growth" (p. 6). In China's own discourse about its role in changing representations of Africa in the media, it is common to read accusations that Western media portray the continent in a negative light, and therefore, a "new voice" is needed (Y. Zhang & Matingwina, 2016). Given the prominence attached to the notion of "positive news" by Chinese media in Africa and how often it is discussed in the literature, we propose a final research question:

RQ3: How much does the notion of "positive news" resonate with Kenyan and South African university students?

Method

This article is based on data collected from seven focus groups with tertiary education students in Kenya and South Africa. Focus groups have been extensively used in audience studies (e.g., Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990) to "understand the complexities involved in how people understood and interpreted

media texts" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 11), but they remain alien to the study of Sino-African encounters. Focus groups aid researchers in identifying "participants' preferences, attitudes, motivations and beliefs," while providing "interviewing flexibility and insights regarding group dynamics" (Brennen, 2013, p. 59). Moreover, focus groups are likely to "generate more focused, richer, more complex and more nuanced information" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 40) than other methods of inquiry. Given the emphasis of this article on perceptions of Chinese media by young Kenyans and South Africans and that little is known about how Chinese media texts are decoded and interpreted by foreign audiences, focus groups seem a more suitable method of inquiry than survey research or interviews.

Participants

This study involved 61 students enrolled in media and communication programs at South African and Kenyan universities. Three focus groups were organized in South Africa and four in Kenya.⁴ The largest group had 10 participants and the smallest had six. The authors acted as moderators of the discussions. Focus groups lasted between 72 and 90 minutes; the average length was 79 minutes. The research design was approved by human ethics review bodies at the University of Cape Town and City University of Hong Kong. Informants were guaranteed anonymity; therefore, all names in this article have been substituted with pseudonyms. We did not offer any compensation to participants, but refreshments were provided before and after the discussion.

We recruited participants through snowball and convenient sampling. The sample consists of 27 undergraduate and 34 postgraduate students.⁵ Most informants were female (65.6%). In terms of nationality, 32 students were Kenyan and 25 were South African. Four students hailed from other African nations (Burundi, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe) but were pursuing their studies in Kenya or South Africa, so they were familiar enough with the local media environment to contribute to the group discussion. A summary of the demographics is presented in Table 1. As noted earlier, we recruited media and communication students for two reasons. First, although researchers should always guard against blanket assumptions of groups of media consumers, including the youth (Dillman Carpentier, 2013), we assumed these students to be regular consumers of global media, probably more so than others in their generation, and thus to have the background knowledge to contribute to discussions on media representations and journalistic norms. Second, we understand that many of these students will go on to pursue careers in the media sector, putting them among the elite audience that global Chinese media would like to target (Thussu et al., 2018).

⁴ The authors would like to thank Gabriël J. Botma, Sr. Agnes Lando, Jude Mathurine, Kioko Ileri, and Jacinta Mwendu for their assistance in organizing the discussions.

⁵ We organized separate focus groups for graduate and undergraduate students: three undergraduate focus groups and four graduate focus groups.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Focus Group Participants.

University	Level	Male	Female	Total
University of Cape Town (UCT)	Postgraduate	2	6	8
Stellenbosch University (SUN)	Postgraduate	5	5	10
Cape Peninsula Univ. of Technology (CPUT)	Undergraduate	3	6	9
Daystar University	Undergraduate	3	6	9
Daystar University	Postgraduate	3	7	10
University of Nairobi (UoN)	Postgraduate	1	5	6
United States International University (USIU)	Undergraduate	4	5	9

Research Design

We prepared an interview guide with a dozen key questions divided into four sections matching our research questions: (1) general media consumption (e.g., “Where do you go when you want to know what is going on in the world?”); (2) stance on different journalistic models (e.g., “How would you describe the news packages you just watched?”); (3) attitudes toward Chinese media (e.g., “What do you know about the presence of Chinese media in Africa?”); and, given the abundance of negative views toward China’s engagement in the continent, (4) attitudes toward ongoing debates on Sino-African relations (e.g., “Some people think that China has ‘hidden intentions’ in Africa. How do you feel about such a statement?”). A copy of the interview guide is available from the researchers.

We used two stimuli to spark discussions. The first consisted of two news packages about the 2014–15 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, one from Al Jazeera (2014) and one from CGTN Africa (2015). In choosing the topic for the stimulus, we were guided by two studies (Li, 2017a; Y. Zhang & Matingwina, 2016), with a third recently supporting the argument (Marsh, 2018), that compared the way Ebola was covered in the Chinese and global media in English. We found that reports in the Chinese media were less critical of government responses, focused more on solutions to the crisis, and equally voiced officials and the general public. Following the descriptions provided in these studies, the CCTV/CGTN report we selected was factual, included abundant statistical data, and featured sound bites from affected citizens and the government. The Al Jazeera piece was more interpretative, less factual, and more situational. It presented the story of a recently affected community but did not include the point of view of the authorities. Being aware that the topic could create biases in discussions about media portrayals of Africa, responses to questions such as “Do you feel negative news are predominant in the media?” were recorded before participants saw the news packages. Identifying information about the news station was removed from the news packages by magnifying the footage and cropping out lower thirds and logos. The second stimulus was a list of Chinese media companies operating in Africa: Xinhua, CCTV, CRI, *China Daily*, CNC, *People’s Daily*, Weibo and WeChat. While showing the list, we asked questions such as, “Which of the following media are you familiar with?”

Analysis

Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed shortly after. Based on the notes taken during the discussions, an initial list of key themes was put together. Using NVivo 11, qualitative data analysis software that assists researchers in "recording, sorting, matching and linking" data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013, p. 2), we coded the transcripts based on the preliminary list of themes. All newly identified themes were noted during this process. These were then used in a second round of coding. By combining inductive and deductive coding, we believe a richer picture of the data emerges; the data are not only connected to the questions we were hoping to answer but also include topics that were not foreseen and themes derived from the direct experiences of informants. After two rounds of coding, we grouped coding categories into three themes: media consumption, journalistic models, and Chinese soft power.

Findings

This article set out to explore students' attitudes toward and their response to China's increased mediated engagements in Kenya and South Africa. To better draw connections between different parts of the group interviews, we do not follow the running order of the discussion, but organize responses around three topics: Chinese media consumption (H1); bolstering China's soft power (RQ1); and the question, "Is 'Chinese journalism' an alternative?" (RQ2 and RQ3).

Chinese Media Consumption

With H1, we wanted to find out what impact Chinese media have had on news consumption habits of Kenyan and South African students. Our data support the hypothesis that the use of Chinese media is almost nonexistent in both countries, while awareness appeared to be higher among Kenyan students. To the question, "Tell us how you get your daily news," only one informant, a postgraduate student from Kenya, listed a Chinese source: CCTV and, more specifically, a show (*Global Business*) that is often presented by a Kenyan journalist. Because CCTV Africa is headquartered in Nairobi and employs well-known local journalists, it is more recognizable by Kenyan than South African students. When we presented students with the first stimulus, the news packages where logos had been blurred, all groups were quick to identify one as Al Jazeera, but only some Kenyan students could recognize the CCTV/CGTN clip. When asked about how frequently they watch the channel, responses ranged from "When I'm surfing through international channels then I do check it out, but I won't sit and actually watch it" (Junior, UCT) to "I do watch. It comes late in the night, so I leave work and that's what I'll watch" (Anny, UoN).

The second stimulus, a list of eight Chinese media, prompted similar responses. CCTV/CGTN was familiar to most, but none could identify CNC and *People's Daily*, despite both having content specifically targeted at African audiences. Other names on the list sounded vaguely familiar to one or two students for apparently tangential reasons. For example, Jacques from Stellenbosch University knew of Xinhua because his father used to work as a journalist in Hong Kong. Carla, a Zimbabwean at UCT, had heard of *China Daily* not because she had read it, but because it was mentioned in a book by an American travel writer. And CRI was familiar to Anny (UoN) because "it's next to Radio France, which is 90.1, so when you're tuning, you hear it, when they do the Chinese and then they translate it into Swahili . . . but I've never

really engaged with it actively.” Three groups noted that they were mildly aware of CCTV/CGTN and Xinhua because they had learned about them in class.

Weibo, a microblogging platform, sounded familiar to a fair number of students, who quickly labeled it “China’s version of Twitter” even though they had never used it. When discussing Weibo, issues of censorship and China’s blocking of non-Chinese social media ensued. Most students were familiar with the instant messaging app WeChat, but no one used it regularly. The following dialogue between students at Stellenbosch University summarizes how they came to know WeChat:

Host: Is WeChat more familiar to you?

Leah: Yes.

Isabella: They were big on advertising; they were very big.

Johan: You know when you get those icons at the bottom of some television ad or even a news article, like a Facebook icon, a Twitter icon and all the social media and there was always a WeChat icon, I never understood why.

Christiaan: I also don’t know why it’s big, my feed keeps telling me to get it and I just ignore it.

Isabella: There was this “Money for Jam” thing on WeChat where you can make money by taking photos for them. It was like random stuff that they wanted you to do and you must subscribe and say where you’re based and then they give you a task to go take a picture of three people that does this or whatever. . . .

Host: Does anybody have WeChat installed on their phone?

Leah: I used to have it.

Christiaan: I think I’ve got it on [my] tablet, but it’s there, it’s a default thing.

Host: What did you use it for?

Leah: Last year there was this promotion where you could get a free coffee if you get a code, like every day had a code so I downloaded it because of that and I don’t use it anymore.

Only students at this same university, as well as those at UCT, could link WeChat back to its parent company, Tencent, and were aware that a South African media company, Naspers, is one of its main investors. That WeChat hailed from China came as a surprise to most.

Bolstering China’s Soft Power

Given the limited consumption of Chinese media by students in our sample, it appears safe to infer that a simple answer to RQ1 would be that Chinese media have a minimal contribution to boosting China’s soft power in both countries. What seemed interesting to investigate next were the reasons for this low consumption and the process through which those who had never been exposed to content by Chinese media form an opinion about it. Two key findings came to light. First, stereotypes about China in general are used to make sense of Chinese media, particularly by those who have never been exposed to their content, and second, some students had very strong negative biases against Chinese news media

that only surfaced when we told them that the content they were watching came from a Chinese source, and not when the source was masked.

China appeared as a distant country that very few had visited. Discussions about images of China in students' minds revolved around topics that the news media focus on regularly, be it for their oddity or because they are controversial. Among the images students described, the accuracy of which could be disputed, are that products made in China are of low quality, Chinese are conservative, China is involved in poaching, there are no traffic jams in China, and some Chinese like to eat dogs. Most students accepted that their knowledge of China is limited and that this inevitably leads to stereotyping. For instance, Carla (UCT) said, "Well I don't know very much about them . . . I don't know anything about them and so we come with a whole set of fears." This stereotyping tends to be negative and often related to what students see as limited freedoms in China: limited freedom of expression, limited political participation, or limitations on the number of children per family. The limited knowledge also means that students do not have strongly formed opinions about most things Chinese, yet this does not stop them from making bold claims, such as those of Danielle from UCT, who bluntly confessed, "I don't trust them, that's it," or Lucy (UoN), who simply said, "I don't like them at all."

While opinions and attitudes toward China were similar in both countries, when we asked about Chinese media, views differed. South African students associated Chinese media with "censorship" and "state propaganda." For example, Carla (UCT) said, "There's a stigma and the fact that [they are] so heavily censored . . . you just think to yourself: 'It's biased reporting, I'm going somewhere else,'" while Tiaan (UCT) noted, "China and media, they don't go hand in hand because Chinese people like control." Opinions in Kenya were mixed. Some students, like Anny (UoN), did focus on issues of control and, without direct reference to it, identified certain forms of cultural imperialism:

Chinese media are really controlled; they don't have much freedom and then. . . it's like they're trying to . . . they are really portraying their culture in a way that . . . their culture is trying to swallow other cultures.

In other groups, the dominant theme of the discussion was less critical. This is the case of postgraduate students at Daystar University, who associated Chinese media with "having a lot of money," recruiting local journalists, and wanting "to show the world that they are at the top."

These preformed opinions affect the way content is interpreted. A telling example of how rooted negative biases can be is the evolution of how Viola, a UCT graduate student, perceived CCTV/CGTN content before and after she knew a clip she was shown was produced by Chinese media. Before the reveal, she described the news package as "objective," "based on facts," "toeing the line," and "responsible" reporting. After finding out that it was in fact a CCTV/CGTN story, the narrative changed.

CCTV, I've got nothing against them or anything, I just find their Web page is very off putting because it's very patronizing. . . . I see it that way. I feel there's an agenda and I'm not saying the Americans and Al Jazeera [don't have] their own, I just don't agree

with the Chinese one because it's very much . . . it's off-putting for me, like Russian television. That state . . . it's all propaganda. (Viola, UCT)

When asked about the change in opinion, Viola suggested the package must have been taken from an international news agency feed, although the clip was indeed produced by a CCTV/CGTN reporter, a British national based in Nairobi.

I would put my head on a block that was probably a Reuters feed that went out that they took off. . . . I could tell you that that was not a CCTV insert, I could tell you that. That insert was coming from one of the agencies in London who put that together, that CCTV subscribes to. I picked that up immediately. (Viola, UCT)

Other participants in the same focus group conceded they would have been biased had they known the clip came from CCTV/CGTN. When we showed the group three more clips, this time without masking the logos, opinions had evolved to the point that a student found himself saying, "I never thought I'd say it, but the CCTV one was actually the best one for me, they're a good mix" (Tiaan, UCT). Similar disbelief to that of Viola was expressed by some Stellenbosch University students, although the negative bias was not shared by everyone:

Christiaan: I've been on CCTV before, I've watched it before.

Johan: I mean some of their stuff is better than CNN.

Christiaan: It's like Russia Today, people think that Russia Today is a complete conspiracy but it's not about that.

Johan: They've got good stuff.

Christiaan: Yes, they've got some good reporting.

Johan's and Christiaan's opinions are more aligned with the reaction that CCTV/CGTN elicited of Kenyan students. In South Africa, students were unable to identify the clip and, while guessing, suggested that it might be from an African local station. In Kenya, students rapidly identified the anchorwoman in the CCTV/CGTN clip, Peninah Karibe, a well-known figure in the country. For most Kenyan students, even if they don't watch it often, CCTV/CGTN is a reputable international media organization and therefore considered to be somewhat more prestigious than local media in an imaginary ranking of news organizations. The following quote brings together several ideas about how CCTV/CGTN is perceived by Kenyan students:

When I watch it, it's like I get a feeling I'm watching NTV [a local Kenyan station]. Plus, the stories there, I can resonate with them and they carry a lot of African stories in African countries, and more on the East African region. . . . One reason I watch it sometimes is because I like to follow up with some of the Kenyan journalists they have, and I have to compare them and see how they're performing with other international journalists that I do know from BBC or CNN. It's not my "go to" source of news, it's my "by the way, I watch" source. (Iregi, USIU)

Is "Chinese Journalism" an Alternative?

With the last two research questions, we sought to understand whether the journalistic norms and values embraced by many Chinese journalists in Africa (i.e., solution-oriented journalism, nonconfrontational tone, preference for positive news) resonate with students. In RQ2, we explored the attractiveness of "Chinese journalism" as a model for the African continent and found that, to some students in both countries, the reporting style of CGTN/CCTV appears to be closer to their normative understanding of journalism than the reporting style of Al Jazeera, which we used as an example of watchdog journalism. Responses to the stimulus could be split in two clear groups. On the one hand were those who commended the CCTV/CGTN package because they felt it was more balanced, solution oriented, and included the point of view of the government, as well as that of those affected. On the other hand were students who preferred the Al Jazeera piece because they thought it was more real and personal, more "on the ground," and less loaded with statistics.

Rather than diverging points of view within groups, a certain consensus dominated discussions in each of them, so it is possible to split opinions by university. Students at Daystar, UoN, and CPUT felt closer to the CCTV/CGTN clip, whereas students at UCT, Stellenbosch, and USIU preferred the Al Jazeera package. Those who praised the CCTV/CGTN story used adjectives such *objective, informative, detailed, factual, credible, balanced, and positive*. In contrast, they saw the Al Jazeera story as *negative, one sided, noninformative, dry, alarmist, and fearful*. Those students who commended the Al Jazeera package used adjectives such as *personal, objective, engaging, interesting, entertaining, humane, up-close, and professional*. To them, the CCTV/CGTN story was generic, too official, governmental, and noneducational. These quotes capture well the spirit of the discussions on each side:

When you compare both videos, the first one [Al Jazeera] portrays this big Western stereotype that Africans can do nothing for themselves, but you contrast to the second video [CCTV/CGTN] which actually says that the government is stepping in to do something about this, without help from anybody. (Naledi, CPUT)

The second one [CCTV/CGTN] looks like what a government owned media house would do. The first one [Al Jazeera] was like how a news outlet would do it. This is me recording, something like what Christiane Amanpour [a CNN correspondent] you know, when you see her in the front line, where there's war. And I'm like: "Wow, this is real reporting!" (Danielle, UCT)

Without being prompted to discuss these issues specifically, the groups who seemed to prefer the CCTV/CGTN clip focused their attention on two questions: the solution-oriented nature of the package and the importance of having the point of view of the government in the story, both of which appear to describe the way Chinese journalists like to practice the profession in Africa (see Gagliardone & Nyíri, 2017; Y. Zhang & Matingwina, 2016). To many students, that the CCTV package highlighted the steps being taken to solve the Ebola crisis stood out because they believed it was not common for international broadcasters to do so. Samuel (USIU) framed it in terms of the profit-driven nature of the media:

To me, most international organizations, they just want to sell their news. That's what I think Al Jazeera was doing. Some may think they were objective but they left out some very crucial details about what is actually being done.

However, Paula (Daystar) felt this was a structural characteristic of how global media organizations cover Africa: "It's common in most international media houses that there's this struggle between Africa as a black continent where all the problems and all the troubles come from. But what about we talk about the health problems and the solutions?" These ideas were complemented by multiple observations about the absence of the government's perspective in the Al Jazeera story:

Just because I like Al Jazeera, [it] doesn't mean I like everything about Al Jazeera. If they paint Africa in a negative light, fine. If it's the truth, no problem. But just tell both sides of the story: if the government is doing something to remedy it, just tell me, tell the world, it's not me, tell the world that the government is doing something. Don't just come here to some village and go to a poor child who is having Ebola and someone, I don't know, just tell both sides of the story. I think it works better. (Samuel, USIU)

Finally, in RQ3, we explored "positivity" as a possible news value, given that it is said to be paramount in China's reporting on Africa. Most students were convinced that negative portrayals of Africa dominate in international media, and they would like to see these representations changed. Isabel (Daystar) felt that, "plain and simple, they have something against Kenya because it's always the negative, like when they called us 'a hotbed of terror.'" Chloe (CPUT) had a similar view about U.S. media:

It's like Africa is this rough, not so nice place to go to and there's always negative stories coming out of there. I would go to Twitter when it was that time with the big Ebola stories. It was like Ebola this, Ebola that: "Don't go to Africa, it's like the scariest place to be." They're portraying the wrong image of Africa.

Dissatisfaction with current representations of the continent was not limited to foreign media. Students in Kenya equally criticized local and regional media. Some saw a possible explanation for why foreign media tend to focus on negative stories in the way journalism is practiced domestically:

What do we really think of ourselves? What are we showing to them [international media]? . . . The first news in our headlines is "Twenty people have died," "Corruption this and this." . . . But, what if we did it in a different way? What if our first headlines become something positive? I am sure, with time, these guys would also change, because we believe it ourselves first. You cannot tell somebody to believe in you and yet you don't believe in yourself. I think it starts with us. (Mark, Daystar)

When probed further, most acknowledged that the prevalence of negative news is not exclusive to Africa. Some argued that negative stories are in fact indispensable, revealing how, to a few students at least, the role of journalism should go beyond highlighting governmental success, an option generally favored by Chinese journalists on the continent. Veena (USIU) noted,

One of the rules in journalism is creating awareness of societal injustices or human rights injustices . . . so we tend to focus on negative stories . . . because we want to show people “These are the things that are happening in your community, and you need to improve them.”

Lucy, a graduate student in Nairobi, added, “If we have too many positive stories, the government will just relax. Sometimes the negative stories jolt us back to reality and . . . maybe we put the government to task or we take action.”

Overall, students called for a more balanced representation of Africa. In the words of Aaminah, “as much as the negative things exist and they are there, it can also be shown what good things are there.” Students felt the need to highlight the normalcy of their everyday life, which they don’t see on the news.

People don’t create these ideas that, actually, we have a stock market that runs smoothly, there is all kinds of positive investment coming to Africa these days, a vast majority of our country is democratically run, and there are a few leaders out there who are doing pretty well. (Johan, Stellenbosch)

Discussion

A pressing question in the study of Africa–China relations has been: What impact are Chinese media having on the continent? This article has offered new evidence that among one of its key target audiences, young and aspiring media professionals, the impact is rarely felt. Confirming H1, we found that media and communication university students in Kenya and South Africa, who could be expected to have the most diverse news diet of their generation, not only hardly ever choose Chinese media to be informed but also have very limited knowledge of China’s most internationalized news organizations. Two notable exceptions were found. In Kenya, CCTV/CGTN, which has its main newsroom in Nairobi, appears to be well known, although it isn’t frequently watched. In addition, in both countries, the messaging app WeChat is on many students’ phones—but they hardly ever use it. Chinese media’s limited impact does not appear to be a problem of access or availability, but one related to the association of China to negative stereotypes. We found deep-rooted negative biases against Chinese media, particularly among South African students, which are hampering soft power acquisition. We showed how these beliefs are difficult to reverse, even when students are confronted with their biases.

Our data concur with previous studies that used qualitative methodologies to analyze the impact of Chinese media on African audiences (see, for example, Gorfinkel et al., 2014; Wasserman, 2016). It does not support, however, Bailard’s (2016) conclusion that improved attitudes toward China in recent years can be linked to the increasing presence of Chinese media on the continent. Given the limited consumption of Chinese media by Kenyan and South African students that we found, paired with existing evidence that many South African journalists seldom access Chinese media (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2017), it seems difficult to imagine that Chinese media have had anything to do with the improvement of public opinion toward China.

Speaking to the wider literature on youth media consumption in Africa, we presented evidence that students in Kenya and South Africa are critical consumers of global media texts and, as Strelitz (2004) suggested, "speak back" to dominant global discourses. When presented with different narratives of a similar event, one by a Chinese news organization and one by Al Jazeera, some students indicated a certain affinity toward the news values sponsored by most Chinese media organizations operating in Africa: a preference for official sources, a nonconfrontational approach to news, and facts-based reporting instead of personal accounts of events. This receptivity could form the basis for more meaningful and deeper engagement with Chinese media in the future. It could also contribute to the reshaping of journalistic practice in Kenya and South Africa, which is currently predominantly built on norms that differ substantially from those sponsored by Chinese media (Irerri, 2015; Rodny-Gumede, 2014).

The characteristic of Chinese media that seemed to resonate the most with students is the self-declared preference for positive news about Africa. To many students in our sample, this responds to a genuine concern about how the continent is portrayed by the media elsewhere. That students strongly associated international media with negative reporting on Africa even before they were shown the two Ebola news packages would seem to indicate that, despite recent shifts in how global media cover Africa, represented by the emerging narrative of "Africa rising" (Nothias, 2014), the overall perception has not changed. By associating themselves with the notion of positive news, Chinese media appear to be taking the lead in appropriating a narrative that other news organizations have been developing for some time.

Conclusion

For more than half a century, China has been investing large sums of money in keeping an active media presence in Africa. Since the early 2000s, this presence has grown and become more diverse, particularly in large African media markets. As this grows further, studies looking at mediated Sino-African encounters will inevitably have to move beyond descriptive accounts of the process to examine the impact that Chinese actors are having on local media, journalistic practices, and audiences. Although our data reveal that, at present, the impact of China's media activities is limited, they also suggest that an indirect effect might be occurring: Some students, both in Kenya and South Africa, were receptive toward some of the news values and journalistic norms that characterize Chinese news reporting in Africa. This deserves further exploration.

We acknowledge three limitations in this study that we believe do not devalue the wealth of the data we presented. Based on only two countries, inferences about the influence of China across Africa cannot be made. Also, because of time constraints, we only exposed participants to short video clips of the shows they discussed. This resulted in less direct knowledge of the subject for some participants, which, nonetheless, gave rise to rich exchanges. Finally, we only provide the view of an urban and educated population. Consumption outside big cities could be very different from that pictured here. In some areas in rural Kenya, where news consumption is limited to certain radio stations, CRI might have a larger presence, and, given the low prices offered by pay-TV operator StarTimes, some families might come across Chinese content more often than what students self-reported. These are questions that will also need to be addressed in future studies.

The findings of this article might not represent the entire population of the continent, but they do constitute the largest study focused on the reception of China's mediated public diplomacy. The results point toward three areas where more research is needed. First, the strong negative biases held by some participants toward content produced by Chinese media—biases that did not surface if the source of the news was withheld—deserves further exploration. Second, the evidence that regular consumption of Chinese media is very low should be validated in continent-wide surveys that are nationally representative. Finally, future studies should investigate whether the resonance of certain reporting patterns that we found between Chinese news media and South African and Kenyan media students is a sign of changing journalistic practices in Africa, particularly among those journalists who have been educated under China's sponsored training programs (Benabdallah, 2017). Our contribution to these possible lines of inquiry is the exploratory evidence presented here.

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