

A stylized world map composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to represent specific countries or regions.

Changing the Narrative

China's Media Offensive in Africa

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- China's media offensive in Africa is an expression of the need to create advantageous conditions for its own trade relations and for strategic alliances, for example in international organizations.
- At the same time, China's global charm offensive or »charm defensive« is also a reaction to what China often feels is unfair reporting in western media about China and China in Africa.
- Consequently, the Chinese leadership is investing in internationalizing and expanding its state media in cooperation with African state media and in ambitious exchange and training programmes for African journalists.
- The aforementioned objectives of Chinese foreign media are accompanied and supported by strategic Chinese corporate investment in information technology and telecommunications infrastructure in African countries. In other words, China's soft power approach is flanked by hard power.
- German foreign and development policy should carefully analyse the growing competition and criticism of western reporting about Africa and draw conclusions for media development cooperation.



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1. Internationalization of Chinese State Media

The »Rise of the Rest« (Zakaria 2012), which includes China, goes hand in hand with developments in international communication structures that point to a world in which international news is defined not only by CNN and the BBC, but also by Xinhua, the Chinese state news agency, and China Central Television (CCTV).

Against the background of global shifts in power and China's growing global economic presence, strengthening Chinese »soft power«¹ has been declared a priority of Chinese foreign policy. China's political decision-makers have recognized the significance that the prerogative of interpretation in international media has for an emerging and expanding country. This is particularly true for a huge empire ruled by an authoritarian government intent on assuring the world that its rise is peaceful and of mutual benefit.

Nowhere is China's media offensive as visible as in Africa. While western media were steadily reducing the number of Africa correspondents even before the outbreak of the economic and financial crisis, China has been rapidly expanding its media presence, in particular in the past five years. In the Action Plan agreed at the Fifth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2012² the media sector is mentioned as one of the priorities for cooperation with African countries. Because African media have little international clout, the international image of Africa is defined by the leading western players (CNN, BBC and France 24), Al Jazeera and, increasingly, the official Chinese media.

China's media offensive, which is closely followed internationally, is not least a reaction to its PR disaster in the run-up to and during the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. The Chinese leadership had hoped that the Games would demonstrate to the world the country's resurgence and simultaneously generate a positive image of China that would last 20 years. The reality was different.

The violent clashes in Tibet in March 2008 led to calls for an international boycott of the Olympic Games, and the Olympic torch relay, conceived as a global triumphal procession, degenerated into a regular gauntlet running. At the same time, a number of prominent US actors and their supporters latched onto China's involvement in Sudan as a reason to brand the games the »Genocide Olympics«. After that there was little positive reporting about the Olympic Games and the Middle Kingdom in the western media.

After working through their incomprehension and disappointment, the Chinese leadership took the decision to invest six billion US dollars in its existing foreign media services, including improving international coverage in the national media. Whereas Xinhua and China News Service, the Chinese state news agencies, have always been active abroad and China Radio International – as the name implies – had an international focus, CCTV, the state television service, and China Daily and the People's Daily, the two national print media, were specifically and selectively internationalized. According to official sources, 8.7 billion US dollars have been invested in these so-called *Big Six* since 2009. All six media are directly answerable to the Information Office of the State Council (the Chinese government) and, hence, comply with its editorial guidelines.

Domestically they fulfil the traditional functions of the Chinese state media, i.e. they disseminate the views of the Communist Party and the government, educate the population and report internally to government offices on sensitive topics (*neibu canku*). They do not function as a fourth estate that controls the rulers. That said, there is growing political tolerance of media as society's public voice on social and ecological matters. Thus, the media landscape in China is torn between cautious investigative journalism vs. educational propaganda and state controls vs. free-market competition. Whereas in China itself competition between the traditional state media and the Internet community, which eludes state control to some extent, is combined with overtures by the official media towards grassroots initiatives, abroad China has so far relied exclusively on its state media.

Indeed, China's soft power approach is primarily government-managed. To date, China lacks an equivalent of India's Bollywood or Brazil's Telenovelas – both driven by the private sector. Therefore, China's leadership seeks

1. Definition of soft power by Joseph Nye (2004): »The ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced. (...) If you learn to use soft power, you can save a lot on carrots and sticks.«

2. Action Plan of the Fifth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), 23.07.2012.

to exercise soft power through public diplomacy³. The internationalization of the state media is an important component of this public diplomacy and, hence, of the superordinate agenda of Chinese soft power.

2. Chinese Media in Africa: Xinhua, CCTV, CRI and China Daily

■ The Xinhua News Agency, the state press agency, is the most authoritative of all Chinese foreign media. In reporting foreign affairs it sets the official tone, which is followed by other Chinese media. Xinhua has also had a longer presence in Africa: already in the 1950s and 1960s the official Chinese news agency provided support for the news agencies of African liberation movements in the form of material aid and journalist exchanges. Owing to the social upheaval in China, Africa disappeared from foreign reporting in the following three decades. In 1986, Xinhua opened a regional bureau for sub-Saharan Africa in Nairobi.

Today, Xinhua has 30 bureaux, 60 journalists and 400 local employees on the continent. As a rule, Xinhua cooperates with the local state news agencies. For instance, it has signed cooperation agreements on content sharing with state broadcasting corporations in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya and Nigeria.

Beyond this, Xinhua also offers its reports to all the local media. In this field Xinhua has a comparative advantage over western media in Africa inasmuch as African media may reproduce Xinhua reports at little or no charge. African newspapers already print more news from Chinese than from western sources. Xinhua has responded to the explosive growth of mobile devices in Africa and their use as a source of news with an Internet application programme designed for smartphones called »I Love Africa«. The agency has signed a cooperation agreement with Safaricom, a Kenyan mobile network operator that enables it to send a mobile newspaper as an MMS direct to mobile phones. Xinhua distributes reports on Africa to the Chinese public through its huge domestic network (radio, television, newspapers and magazines).

3. Definition of public diplomacy after Hans N. Tuch (1990): »Public diplomacy is a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture as well as its national goals and current policies.«

■ CCTV's African news production centre in Nairobi was inaugurated in 2012. Since then, 40 Chinese and 70 African employees, recruited from competitors such as Al Jazeera and local stations, have been working for China's state television broadcaster. CCTV Africa addresses above all an African audience and reports primarily on developments in Africa. CCTV Africa broadcasts a one-hour programme every day in different editions, including *Africa Live*, *Talk Africa* and *Faces of Africa*. These programmes are subsequently broadcast on CCTV's English-language news channel. The programme can currently be received in 25 countries in Africa. In cooperation with MultiChoice, the largest pay-television platform in Africa, CCTV has launched Great Wall Africa, a bouquet of 11 channels.

■ China Radio International (CRI) began transmitting to Africa in 1956. At its Beijing headquarters, CRI has not only English, French and Arabic editorial departments, but also Hausa and Swahili. In Africa, CRI has offices in Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Senegal and Niger and broadcasts news on shortwave radio and the Internet. For long-distance broadcasting CRI uses a shortwave station in Mali. CRI has signed a cooperation agreement with the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) to broadcast on VHF in Kenya.

■ At the end of 2012 China Daily, a Chinese newspaper, launched a weekly edition called *Africa Weekly* from offices in Johannesburg and Nairobi. Zhu Ling, editor-in-chief of China Daily, characterizes the Sino-African relationship as one of the most important in the world. According to Zhu, »This relationship is growing, is complex and is not always understood. (...) We should like to correct these misunderstandings, which is why China Daily has launched its Africa edition« (Kapchanga 2013). At the same time, the reporting is also intended to persuade the Chinese public of the relevance of China's greater involvement in Africa.

3. Digression: China's Extensive Involvement in Africa

Are these objectives representative of China's media offensive in Africa, and what are their general consequences?

The answer to this question is predicated on a broader

understanding of China's growing involvement in Africa. Besides the travel diplomacy of China's leading politicians and the presence of Chinese citizens on the African continent, estimated to number one million already, China's most obvious involvement is its intensified economic activity in Africa. Under Mao in the 1960s and 1970s China's interest in Africa played out against the background of the ideological struggle with the Soviet Union for pre-eminence in the socialist camp. However, since the turn of the millennium commercial interests have had priority, regardless of an ideological legitimation for internal consumption or political rhetoric for external consumption. The signal for China's economic expansion abroad in the late 1990s – not only in Africa – was the Chinese government's *Go Global Strategy* (*zou chu qu zhanlue*) to guarantee adequate supplies of strategic raw materials and promote Chinese corporate investment abroad. In addition to many niche acquisitions of African resources, China also grasped the possibilities that a market of one billion potential consumers offered for Chinese goods. Trade in goods rose by 30 percent per year on average between 2000 and the end of 2012, i.e. from 10 billion to about 200 billion US dollars. In 2008, China's share of African exports was only half that of the USA's; by 2012 China was by far the largest market for African products. Oil and other commodities accounted for the bulk of these exports. In contrast, China exported machinery, means of transportation, communication technology, electronics and all kinds of consumer goods to Africa.

In the past ten years China's share of overall African trade has increased from three to just less than 20 percent. Whereas since the outbreak of the financial crisis in particular many US and European investors have been withdrawing funds from Africa or have failed to keep their investment promises, Chinese businesses, both state-run and private, took advantage of falling prices. In this they were supported by China's leaders, who made a part of China's enormous foreign currency reserves available for efforts to advance the Go Global Strategy. In mid-2012, then Prime Minister Wen Jiabao took stock: by June of that year China had already invested 45 billion US dollars in Africa (for further details see Grassi 2013).

4. Huawei and ZTE

Two Chinese information and communications technology (ICT) companies already dominate the telecommunications infrastructure market in Africa.⁴

Huawei, a networking and telecommunications equipment firm and provider of cloud computing services, is the second largest company in the world in this industry, with 150,000 employees and annual sales of 35 billion US dollars. Huawei generates 15 percent of its global sales in Africa.

ZTE (Zhongxing Telecommunications Equipment Corporation) is the fifth largest company in the world in this industry, with 70,000 employees and annual sales of 11 billion US dollars. ZTE generates 12 percent of its global sales in Africa.

Already in 2010 the two companies were active in 50 countries on the continent, providing services to 300 million customers. The two companies have launched third-generation ICT networks in more than 30 countries in Africa. In many, for example Zambia, Uganda, Ghana, Sudan, Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire, Chinese companies have won the contract to implement the »digital migration« that is set to be completed in 2015. To maintain its infrastructure in Africa Huawei has established training centres in seven countries, a research and development centre in Johannesburg and a network service centre in Cairo.

In 2007, Chinese companies laid about 10,000 kilometres of fibre optic cable in Tanzania to enable Huawei to construct an ICT network. Apart from networking national educational institutions, the goal of the so-called backbone project is to link up with the communication infrastructures in East and Southern Africa. The Tanzanian government has signed a contract worth 170 million US dollars with Huawei and negotiated a loan of 100 million US dollars with the Export-Import Bank of China (EximBank). The fibre optic cable was linked up with the undersea cables SEACOM, TEAMS and EASSY; as a result, Tanzania is now linked with the infrastructure of Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi in East Africa and Zambia and Malawi to the south.

4. See Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: China-Africa Economic Cooperation, September 2013 (<http://www.forac.org/eng/zfgx/jmhz/t1078997.htm>). See also Huawei wiring Africa: For Surveillance, for money?, 6.8.2013 (<http://www.ictafrica.info/FullNews.php?id=10422>).

In 2012, Huawei was awarded a contract in Angola to build an LTE 4G network for Movitel, the state-owned mobile telecommunications firm. In summer 2013 it signed a contract in Nigeria worth 750 million US dollars to expand Globacom's network.

In summer 2013, Huawei and ZTE were jointly awarded a contract by Ethio Telecom worth 1.7 billion US dollars to construct a 4G network in the region around Addis Ababa, the capital, and a 3G network in the rest of the country.⁵

Also in 2013, Huawei launched its Huawei4Africa mobile telephone: »made for Africans by Africans«.

All over Africa there are similar symbiotic relationships between governments and the two major Chinese companies, which provide the technology and infrastructure that form the backbone for the respective countries' future economic and social development. In many cases Huawei and ZTE have long-term contracts to operate and maintain the systems they install and also to make decisions about future expansion and/or upgrading. Increased market share means that not only greater influence for these companies in the African telecommunications market, the second-largest in the world, but also for China.

To maximize this effect the Chinese government encourages ICT companies such as Huawei and ZTE to coordinate their international expansion with the respective national media abroad by means of, among other things, generous loans – arranged mainly through the state-owned China EximBank. In this way Chinese soft power is flanked by »hard power«.

Furthermore, the Chinese government encourages the state media companies to enter into joint ventures with local media so as to gain a better understanding of the local consumer market. For this, too, generous loans are provided through the EximBank and the China Development Bank. In August 2013, China International Television Corp., with the support of leading members of the ANC, bought *Independent News and Media*, one of the largest South African media groups, which owns newspapers in all the major cities in the country. The private

5. Author's note: In Ethiopia, as in other countries, including Angola and Zimbabwe, Chinese companies have been explicitly accused of helping the local government to install surveillance technology.

Chinese firm *StarTimes* has acquired an interest in *TopTV*, a South African digital satellite platform. Moreover, the Chinese state co-financed the purchase of *Independent News and Media* by the Sekunjalo consortium. Not least because of their lack of transparency, these investments have raised concerns in the South African media landscape, which has traditionally been very critical of government.

5. Changing the Narrative

In the West, the view is widespread that China is interested only in securing access to Africa's raw materials for its own economy, but not in African development. Hence, in western media it is not uncommon to find monolithic portrayals of China as an actor pursuing its competitive advantage in Africa with (im)moral indifference.

This stereotypical reporting about China's involvement in Africa bothers the Chinese leadership. At the same time, China's criticism of western reporting about Africa builds on African criticism. Thus, western media are accused of »parachute journalism«, i.e. of concentrating on short-term negative reporting about war, crisis and disease, with little interest in following positive developments over the long term.

Chinese media consciously distance themselves from this approach, reporting instead about the successful travel diplomacy of leading Chinese politicians and emphasizing collective development successes in the countries of Africa. Their reports are full of facts and figures that underscore the contribution of Africa's largest investor and most important trading partner, namely China. To win the hearts of the African public, Chinese media highlight the narrative of Africa as a prosperous continent flush with investment opportunities. This line accords with the Chinese approach of »developmental journalism« or »positive reporting«.

The content of the exchange and training programmes for African journalists provides strong evidence that the goal of Chinese public diplomacy is to challenge the discourse hegemony of western media. Western »media development aid« normally includes normative references to democratization and liberalization. By contrast,

Chinese training, in addition to encouraging personal ties between Chinese and African journalists, focuses, according to participants, on instructing media professionals in the Chinese path of development and China's experience in creating Xinhua News Agency and on honing their critical faculties with regard to western reporting, in particular about China.

According to official Chinese media, between 2004 and 2011 a total of 300 African media managers and executives from 48 countries attended Chinese training programmes organized by the Information Office of the State Council. Each year, 30,000 short training courses and 18,000 scholarships are offered for African journalists. Over and above this, the Action Plan of the Fifth Ministerial Conference of FOCAC (2012) decided to create a China-Africa Press Exchange Centre that will organize internships in China for African journalists.⁶

Mention must also be made of Chinese media reporting on the »Africa Rising« narrative popularized by neo-liberal western media such as *The Economist* and *Time* magazine in the past two years. For example, in its piece on »Africa investing – the hottest frontier« CCTV Africa quoted verbatim the assessment of *The Economist*, a British newspaper, that Africa is currently the world's most attractive investment location.

6. Perception of Chinese Media in Africa

On account of the diversity of the media landscape in Africa, local assessments of the presence of the Chinese media in Africa vary considerably. Some observers, for example Anton Harber, professor at Witwatersrand University, fear it will promote the model of top-down journalism and undermine progress in open and investigative bottom-up journalism on the continent. Others, for example Hopewell Radebe, the secretary-general of the South African National Editors' Forum, view the addition of a South perspective as an exciting complement to views of the established western foreign media or as nothing more than an alternative business opportunity.⁷

6. Cf. the speech of Hu Jintao at the FOCAC Ministerial Conference, 2012.

7. A debate that the author attended at the Highway Africa Conference in Grahamstown, South Africa in 2012. See also Herman Wasserman: Hard questions on soft power, *China Daily*, 20.9.2013.

In principle, positive economy and business-focused reporting that avoids controversy is welcomed in many African countries, in particular by politicians who prefer court reporting. Beyond that, though, Chinese »positive reporting« is also astute insofar as it strikes a chord with many Africans after decades of negative reporting by western media.

It is indisputable that in many African countries China's image has improved as the economic advantages of its involvement become obvious. However, it is difficult to quantify the role that the Chinese media have played in this improvement. At the same time, it is too early to make any precise statements about the consequences and prospects of success of China's media offensive abroad: to date the stronger presence in the media sector has been very much a case of trial and error.

That said, especially young Africans still appear to find western culture more appealing. So far, China cannot offer any really attractive alternatives to hip-hop music, Hollywood films and European football. Unsurprisingly, this affects the acceptance of Chinese newscasts. A major disadvantage for Chinese foreign media is the negative image of the Chinese domestic media landscape. In the view of Wang Handong, professor of journalism at Wuhan University, the long-term success of the media offensive depends on whether Africans perceive Chinese reporting as independent or as a propaganda tool. Broadcasters such as the BBC are respected because they also criticize the British government, i.e. the source of their funding.

China's media offensive in Africa illustrates that there are limits to what soft power can achieve when it is driven solely by state actors. According to Joseph Nye, genuine soft power comes from civil society, the private sector and individuals, not from governments: »The best propaganda is no propaganda« (Nye 2012, 2013).

Consequently, Anbin Shi, a Chinese soft-power expert, professor at Tsinghua University and adviser to the Information Office of the State Council, suggests in future integrating new media and grassroots initiatives into China's public diplomacy. Perhaps in the future we shall be surprised by soft power with Chinese characteristics, while we experience a further »de-Americanization« of international soft power as a result of the NSA and future leak scandals.

It will be fascinating to watch whether joint ventures with liberal media in countries such as South Africa and Kenya and the confrontation with a critical local civil society will cause Chinese media to shed their ideology and further commercialize themselves in ways not anticipated by Beijing.

7. Summary

The state-promoted extension of the Chinese *Go Global Strategy* to include the media sector is an expression of the need to create favourable conditions for China's trade relations, in particular in Africa. As China is interested in not only economic, but also strategic alliances in Africa, for instance in international organizations, Chinese media are expected to contribute to improving China's image for this purpose as well.

At the same time, China's global charm offensive – or charm defensive – is also a reaction to western reporting about China and Chinese activities in Africa, which China feels is often unfair. The aforementioned objectives of China's foreign media are accompanied and supported by strategic, state-promoted investments in information technology and telecommunications infrastructure in African countries.

To date there is no evidence that Chinese media have specifically attempted to influence the freedom of expression or freedom of the press in their host countries. On the contrary, China's media make every effort to allay suspicions that they serve to propagate China's ideology or its development model.

Nevertheless, the presence of Chinese media in Africa does indirectly influence the media landscape in various ways. Whereas western media also collaborate with private sector media and civil society initiatives in their media development cooperation and their cooperation projects with African partners, the activities of Chinese media and telecommunications companies are focused on state actors at government level. The effect is a relative weakening of the non-state media. The topics of choice of the Chinese media are positive, uncontroversial reports on economics and business that avoid any criticism of governments. To this extent they weaken the media's watchdog function of controlling the rulers,

while promoting court journalism. At the same time, it cannot be expected of the Chinese media that they develop a countervailing argument to dubious, neoliberal paradigms like Africa Rising, which have replaced the fatalistic view of Africa once commonplace in western media. Indeed, there is evidence that in the absence of their own alternatives they, too, perpetuate this discourse. Last but not least, the official Chinese media model as a state institution could be paradigmatic for countries with similar political systems, for example Ethiopia.

Support for state media monopolies such as the Zimbabwean Broadcasting Corporation, which has traditionally been controlled by President Mugabe's ZANU-PF, the authoritarian ruling party, could directly influence politics in Zimbabwe, if the broadcaster were not so universally disliked.

8. Recommendations for German Foreign and Development Policy

German foreign policy should keep a close eye on both the growing competition and on criticism of western reporting about Africa. The complexity of China's media offensive in Africa and the way it is perceived in African countries needs to be thoroughly analysed to better assess its strengths and weaknesses. German embassy reports should take account of these developments. This is all the more important in the light of Africa's growing political relevance and the radical economic and social upheavals the continent is experiencing.

In principle, it would be conducive to a more comprehensive and differentiated German assessment of Africa if German foreign policy paid greater attention to developments in Africa besides wars and crises. Such a step would also preclude the Chinese media from criticizing western reporting on Africa for their own ends.

Despite the fact that the model of the Chinese foreign media does not appeal to most countries, and these media have the disadvantage of a domestic media landscape with a less than positive image, the ostensibly rigid, authoritarian regime has proved to be an adaptable and adaptive organism. It cannot be excluded by entering into joint venture Chinese media companies will steadily improve their understanding of the interests of

the local populace and respond with increasingly attractive programming. The critical view of western reporting about Africa makes this all the more likely.

Above all, China's state media are extremely well funded and can use their resources to disseminate media content in Africa, post correspondents to Africa and arrange journalist exchange programmes. Furthermore, they benefit from the ICT investments of companies like Huawei and ZTE. The Chinese have always presented this as a contribution to international understanding. Recently they have announced they want to intensify exchanges about the »Chinese dream« – the central goal of the new leadership – and the »African dream« (Li 2013; Shi 2013).

At the same time, China's involvement in the media and telecommunications sector – part of China's more extensive involvement in Africa – is presented as an important contribution to the improvement of living conditions and, hence, to socio-economic development in African countries.

From the perspective of German media development cooperation, free, independent and viable mass media may, as an additional effect, be effective drivers of economic development. However, in fundamental contrast to the Chinese approach, media are not viewed primarily as power-stabilizing instruments of public education, but as controllers of political activity and as guarantors of the freedom of expression and of information in the interests of democratic development.

To prepare for the unavoidable competition from China, German development policy should also improve the funding of the relevant organizations of German media development cooperation. That said, the plurality of German media development cooperation at the levels of both government and civil society is an important characteristic and its greatest strength; that it should be retained is beyond question.

In addition to training programmes, in recent years German media development cooperation has focused on creating an environment conducive to the freedom of expression and information. It should continue to do this. Creating a more favourable working environment for media representatives in partner countries should enhance the reach and effectiveness of their training programmes. On the premise that the media environment will continue to improve, German training and development programmes for African journalists as well as scholarship programmes should be expanded.

Training should give greater weight to the requirements of a participatory style of communication – including in particular hitherto disadvantaged journalists. Accordingly, cooperation with independent and alternative African media and with African civil society organizations working to promote the freedom of expression and information should be further intensified.

German media development cooperation should also advance the cause of an inclusive information society by helping to improve the environment for media convergence.

Given the level of Chinese investment in the ICT infrastructure of African countries, it would be useful to study the extent to which official German or European media development cooperation could also make a substantial contribution to expanding ICT infrastructure in Africa, possibly in conjunction with the German private sector. China should be given moral support in its efforts to integrate new media and grassroots initiatives into its own media offensive abroad. Last but not least, the exchange between western and Chinese journalists and a dialogue on professional and ethical standards – especially in third countries – should be intensified.



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