

It is about their story

How China, Turkey and Russia
influence the media in Africa





KAS Media Programme Sub-Sahara Africa

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is an independent, non-profit German political foundation that aims to strengthen democratic forces around the world. KAS runs media programmes in Africa, Asia and South East Europe.

KAS Media Africa believes that a free and independent media is crucial for democracy. As such, it is committed to the development and maintenance of a diverse media landscape on the continent, the monitoring role of journalism, as well as ethically based political communication.

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Cover photograph: Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan pose for a family photo during the G20 summit on July 7, 2017 in Hamburg, Germany. (Gallo Images/Bloomberg)

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Foreword

Looking at media involvement in Africa, one can only state that the continent is more important than ever. Next to traditional actors like the BBC or Radio France International, and to a smaller extent of Deutsche Welle or Radio Swiss International, there are new players. They do not seem to have the same agendas as the older ones, but they bring about new versions of journalism, of attempted influence and propaganda.

What differentiates them is, in the case of China, that funds do not seem to matter much. In the case of Turkey, that more and more scholarships are being offered and when it comes to Russia, that old alliances of the USSR in the Cold War are being reactivated.

What separates them even further from the old players are the values that they stand for and try to propagate. They are offering a journalism that praises their own autocratic models of rule and, in the case of China in particular, they promote a positive journalism, that does not ask uneasy questions, a journalism that does not offend or hurt, but that usually pleases the powers-that-be.

KAS Media Africa has asked experts on Chinese, Turkish and Russian media policies to outline the strategies that the state and media institutions are applying when dealing with media houses and media practitioners in Africa. As media experts in South Africa, the DRC or Nigeria are witnessing a growing pressure on their ways of investigating and positioning media in their countries as the Fourth Estate, this publication tries to give an overview, a handbook for orientation.

KAS Media Africa stands for good, professional and thorough journalism and will encourage our partners all over the continent to continue to do so. We wish all readers a thought-inspiring read and look forward to a lively discussion about our findings.

Christoph Plate
KAS Media Africa, Director
Johannesburg, South Africa

Sino-African Media Cooperation

An Overview of a Longstanding Asymmetric Relationship

By Dani Madrid-Morales

The footprint of Chinese media companies across most of Africa is difficult to miss. Jump on a minibus out of Maputo, Mozambique's capital city, and you are likely to notice along the road the orange-painted walls of small shops selling satellite dishes and digital television setup boxes labelled StarTimes, a privately owned Chinese telecommunications company. Visitors to the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), built by Chinese contractors and completed in 2012, might notice that the television screens in the building are often tuned to CGTN (China Global Television Network), the international branch of China's State-run television. Pick up a copy of some of South Africa's most widely read newspapers, from the *Cape Times* to the *Sunday Independent*, and chances are that you will be reading an article written by journalists working for China's State news agency, Xinhua. The list goes on: 2G, 3G, 4G, and soon 5G networks across the continent are built with technology provided by Huawei and Zhongxing Technologies (ZTE), two Chinese telecommunications companies. A growing number of Chinese soap operas are dubbed by African voice actors in China for consumption by African audiences. Journalists, press officers, television technicians, and all types of media professionals are regularly invited to Chinese universities, institutes and government agencies to attend workshops and training sessions in China, where they have the opportunity to improve their skills and, at the same time, get a "chance to experience the traditional Chinese culture, and study Chinese language and philosophies from China's provinces," according to Chen Zhe, head of the China-Africa Press Centre (CAPC).¹

During a visit to some of the country's largest media organisations in 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping urged them to create "flagship media with strong international influence," in order to be able to "tell China's story well".²

This media outreach project had, in fact, started years earlier.³ For more than a decade, Chinese leaders had been repeatedly expressing a desire to see China play a bigger role in the world's media ecosystem and to increase the country's "discursive power", that is, its ability to be heard, and influence global narratives on international politics and the news media.⁴ Under former Chinese President Hu Jintao, Beijing's State-sponsored media organisations took part in China's "going out strategy" in the early 2000s. This State-led plan spanned many economic sectors and reached every continent around the world. The original guiding force behind China's media internationalisation in the early 2010s was the generalised perception that foreign public opinion was failing to "understand" the rise of China and that this was caused by non-Chinese media recurrently portraying the country in a negative light.⁵ In this ambitious, but loose and fragmented strategy, African countries have been playing a central role.

There are multiple reasons for this. Not only does China have vested economic interests in the continent, but it also finds a much more favourable public opinion than anywhere else in the world.⁶ Moreover, political leaders in most African countries — at least those with which China has diplomatic relations — have shown little interest in diplomatic riffs, making the continent a fertile ground on which China can experiment with foreign policy instruments, including media cooperation. In this area, Africa has been Beijing's "sandbox" and "testing ground" for some time. The Chinese government feels at ease in Africa because it has found a politically welcoming environment. It has avoided the kind of controversies with civil society it faces in the United States, Australia or Europe. It has, so far, matched with real actions its narrative of "win-win" relations, which is at the core of China's foreign policy and, more importantly, it has been able to experiment with new forms of outreach and engagement. Africa is the continent of many 'first times' in China's influence operations worldwide: the first Chinese cultural centres in the world opened in Mauritius and Benin,⁷ while the first overseas FM radio station⁸ and the first broadcasting centre outside of China were both set up in Nairobi (Kenya).⁹

Once established that Africa occupies a central position in China's global outreach efforts through the media, the next question we should be asking is: how does China's *current* mediated engagement with Africa manifest? Note the stress on *current*, as China's media presence in Africa has been going on for over half a century. However, the nature of Africa-China media relations today is unique. In the 1950s and 1960s, China was engaged in an ideological confrontation with both the USSR and the West, much of which took place in the news media. Today, the nature of media relations between

African countries and China is more diverse, much deeper, substantially less ideological, and very pragmatic and strategic. At the Second Forum of China-Africa Media Cooperation in Beijing, Cai Fuchao, the minister of China's State General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SGAPPRFT) described China's approach to media cooperation in Africa with these words: "Chinese media organisations will take a realistic and pragmatic attitude by telling the truth, proposing pragmatic advice, doing practical work and seeking practical results, and innovative cooperation models as well as detail[ed] cooperation projects".¹⁰ If we read between the lines, the ultimate message of Cai's speech would seem to be that China is pushing its media to internationalise in Africa in two directions: to assist in developing media infrastructure — which turns into economic profit in the medium term and in potential political and strategic influence in the long term — and to take an active role in the crafting of a media narrative around China's development, China-Africa relations, and Africa's own story of economic and political development.

This chapter explores the diverse range of media cooperation activities by Chinese actors in Africa over the last decade and offers an assessment of the impact that these activities are having on the African media ecosystem as a whole, as well as its audiences, media practitioners, and political life. It starts with a short detour into the historical roots that have facilitated the current upsurge in exchanges and is followed by a detailed account of the six types of engagement that are most prominent today in China's media cooperation efforts in Africa: infrastructure development, content production and distribution, public opinion management, training, and direct investment.¹¹ For each type of activity, the reader will find examples drawn from across the continent, in an attempt to provide a geographically and linguistically diverse picture. The chapter concludes with the argument that Sino-African media cooperation is broad and fragmented, and is grounded in a long-standing asymmetric relationship between China and African countries and that such asymmetry is unlikely to shift, given the privileged position Chinese media and telecommunications companies enjoy.

Many actors, limited coordination

Coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the first diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and an independent African country (Egypt), in 2006, China organised the Third Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in

Beijing, which was attended by 41 African heads of state. The most tangible outcome of the meeting was the “FOCAC Beijing Action Plan and Declaration”. The text includes a section on Sino-African media cooperation, which calls for “news media to play a positive role in enhancing mutual understanding and friendship,” and encourages “more report[ing] and coverage by the news media of the other side”. The text explicitly mentions actions to facilitate “each other’s news agencies in sending resident and non-resident correspondents for news reporting”. There are also references to China’s commitment to training African media personnel, and the agreement to pursue exchanges of press authorities and correspondents from Africa to China.¹² Similar language was included in the FOCAC Action Plans that followed. In the 2009 text, references were made to plans by China to provide free training to African media professionals,¹³ while, in the 2015 Action Plan, China pledged to bring satellite television to 10 000 African villages.¹⁴ The stress on media exchanges and cooperation in China’s foreign policy was exclusive to Sino-African relations for some time, before Beijing began including similar references to other multilateral forums, such as the China-CELAC Forum in Latin America (2015) and the China-Arab Cooperation Forum (2009).

Despite featuring rather prominently in official policy documents, it is important to stress that China’s global media cooperation efforts tend to be rather loosely coordinated and often lack a clear shared strategy, with overlapping goals and common actions between agencies. This lack of a cohesive strategy is not unique to China’s activities in Africa. Writing about Beijing’s foreign policy in general, including its public diplomacy work in Africa and elsewhere, David Shambaugh, professor of political science and international affairs at the George Washington University in the US, has noted that China lacks a “grand strategy”,¹⁵ even though the news media and some commentators might sometimes be signalling otherwise.¹⁶ The wealth of agencies, actors and institutions involved in policymaking and implementation, which often involves competition between them, makes coordination difficult, as Ingrid d’Hooghe at Clingendael, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, has suggested.¹⁷ In the case of the media and telecommunications sectors, while the overarching idea is that all Chinese enterprises operating in Africa, whether State or privately owned, are following Beijing’s “call” to become more global, they operate with varied rationales and circumstances, without coordination from a single agency overseeing all projects. Chinese media rarely exchange content or personnel, and hardly ever cooperate with each other in the production of content. In addition, they have diverse strategic goals. While some actors are concerned with communicating official policy, amplifying the message of the Chinese Communist Party, or working towards improving

China's global image; for others, commercial interests and market maximisation are at the core of their activities.¹⁸

Treating all Chinese enterprises involved in media cooperation activities as a coordinated single unit with similar organisational values, operational logic, and long-term goals might lead to wrongly concluding there is homogeneity of action. This was probably an accurate characterisation of Chinese State-owned media overseas operations in a somewhat distant past, but might not reflect today's reality, where at least four distinct groups of players are active on the continent: 1) State-owned media, 2) diplomatic missions, 3) provincial- and local-level agencies, and 4) private media and telecommunications companies. Not only are there differences between these four groups, such as the areas in which they operate or the goals they are trying to achieve with their projects, but there is significant diversity within them.

The most active and visible of all Chinese actors are State-owned media. They have been increasing their operations on the continent since 2006, when the PRC celebrated the "Year of Africa" in China.¹⁹ It was then that China Radio International (CRI) launched an FM radio station in Nairobi broadcasting content in Chinese, English and Swahili²⁰ and Xinhua moved all its remaining editorial staff — those working for the French language service for Sub-Saharan Africa — from Paris to Nairobi. Over the years, the number of foreign bureaus the agency keeps around the continent has grown, from 16 in 1965 to 24 in 2010 and somewhere between 28 and 30 today.²¹ In late 2011, Nairobi was also chosen as the location of CGTN Africa (back then known as CCTV Africa), a production and broadcasting centre for China's Central Television or CCTV. In January 2012, the centre began airing the first locally produced programmes. That same year, *China Daily*, the most widely circulated English-language newspaper in China, launched a weekly African edition; and, *ChinAfrica*, a bilingual monthly magazine about Sino-African relations, set up an office in Johannesburg.

Traditionally, Chinese embassies and consulates had not played a prominent role in engaging with African media, but this began to change in the mid-2010s, when a new cohort of diplomats was appointed to strategically important missions, such as those in Pretoria (South Africa) or Kigali (Rwanda).²² More tech-savvy and less camera-shy than their predecessors, and also much more confrontational and willing to spar with their critics, these officials, sometimes referred to as "Wolf Warrior" diplomats,²³ a reference to a nationalistic film that became a blockbuster in China in 2017, have become active and vociferous on social media, organise press conferences to put forward Beijing's views on

local and global issues, and are active opinion-piece writers in local newspapers and websites. Embassies are also often the first point of contact for agencies from lower levels of administration in China, such as provincial governments or municipal agencies, as they try to engage in media cooperation themselves.²⁴

As more and more State actors increased their footprint in Africa, so did profit-oriented corporations, such as Huawei, ZTE, StarTimes and, more recently, Opera. Their businesses span from building telecommunications networks, to pay television services and digital content creation. Many of these companies also have active corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes that can be seen as a form of media cooperation.²⁵ It is fair to say that the line dividing State and non-State corporations is often blurred. For example, the Chinese government holds an indirect 30% stake in ZTE, which is listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange, and was in fact created as a State-owned private-operating enterprise.²⁶ StarTimes has enjoyed relatively easy access to credit from China's Export and Import Bank, and benefits from close relationships with high-ranking officials in China, which tend to facilitate negotiations with African governments. Another example of the blurring of lines between State- and non-State-owned enterprises can be found in StarTimes's CEO, Pang Xinxing, who has been able to meet with half-a-dozen African heads of government and State, and secured lucrative deals to assist multiple countries in their efforts to complete the migration from analogue to digital television.²⁷ StarTimes' competitors are unlikely to have such opportunities to directly pitch their services to high-ranking officials.

To overcome the redundancy in efforts in media cooperation between Chinese actors, attempts to coordinate activities have been in the making for some time, even though tangible outcomes of recent organisational changes appear to be limited so far. Two announcements made in 2018 are examples of such efforts. First, in April, Beijing announced the creation of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), which concentrates foreign aid — and this includes some instances of media cooperation and media development programmes — under the supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). According to Denghua Zhang and Hongbo Ji at the Australian National University, “[d]espite CIDCA's creation, much has remained unchanged in the management of the aid system”.²⁸ A few weeks earlier, a different kind of reorganisation took place within some of the country's leading media organisations. CCTV (including CGTN), CRI and China National Radio (CNR) became part of a new China Media Group, sometimes referred to in the media as the “Voice of China”.²⁹ Each entity has kept its brand, and minimal restructuring appears to have occurred since then, but the new media

group is now under the direct supervision of the State Council — China's executive branch — and overseen by the Communist Party's Central Publicity Department.³⁰ Also in 2018, Xinhua was expected to move to its newly built regional office in Nairobi. However, the project's completion date has been postponed twice. The Xinhua Tower is to host not only the agency's offices and residence for its journalists but also CGTN Africa's studios and newsroom.³¹ This would appear to be yet another effort, at least on paper, of bringing closer together different actors involved in foreign influence operations, and to increase cooperation between agencies, which was characteristic of China's media outreach efforts in the past.

The historical roots of Africa-China media cooperation

The earliest examples of Communist China's media reaching African audiences after the creation of the PRC in 1949 were magazines, such as the *Peking Review* (and its French version, *Pékin Information*), *China Reconstructs* and *China Pictorial*.³² These circulated across the continent in bookstores sympathetic to the communist cause, alongside translated copies of books about communist thought. Samples of Chinese magazines were sent to readers, sometimes for free, hoping that those receiving them would be tempted to buy subscriptions, although the price, between 50 cents to \$1.25 US a year, seemed rather steep for most of the population at the time.³³ *China Pictorial*, a magazine short on text and full of colourful pictures, was also published for some time in Swahili, the only African language into which it was translated. Speaking specifically of Tanzania, which is the country where Swahili is spoken most widely, Priya Lal, a historian at Boston College suggests that most of the texts translated to Swahili by the Chinese "would have been irrelevant to many illiterate Tanzanians" in the 1950s and 1960s, but "a number of young intellectuals and activists in urban centres avidly read the *Little Red Book*", the well-known collection of Mao quotations.³⁴

For both Xinhua and Radio Peking, the two most influential Chinese news media at the time, the first point of contact with Africa was Cairo, given that Egypt and China had established diplomatic relations with each other as early as 1956. Xinhua began working from Cairo shortly after and, by 1966, had 16 offices on the continent. The opening in 1959 of Xinhua's first bureaus in sub-Saharan Africa,³⁵ first in Conakry (Guinea), and then in Accra (Ghana) is telling of the role that journalists at the agency had at the time, which fell between being proto-diplomats and reporters. As the first Xinhua correspondent in West Africa, Wang Shu recalls, in an essay published in 2001, that one of his duties at the time

was to facilitate the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and some of the countries that he was instructed to visit. From his base in Conakry, Wang was one of the first Chinese to visit Mali after its independence in 1960. He did so after China received intelligence that Taiwan had sent a potential ambassador to visit the country. Describing what seems incredible ease of access to the highest-ranking officials of the country, Wang recalls:³⁶

I sent a telegram to [Malian] President Keita. Two days later, he called back and invited me for an interview. I immediately flew from Conakry to Bamako. I had been to Bamako more than three months earlier ... I explained to the President, China's rejection of the "Two-Chinas" principle. He replied to me frankly by saying that they had not established diplomatic relations with Taiwan. He said he had heard a Taiwanese national was in the country and guaranteed me he would be expelled.³⁷

One week after that exchange between the Xinhua journalist and the Malian President, China and Mali agreed to establish diplomatic relations.

The content of Xinhua at the time was monitored closely by foreign diplomats and intelligence agencies across the globe. So was that of Radio Peking, the name by which China's international broadcaster was known for decades before, in 1993, it became China Radio International. The United States Information Agency (USIA), an office within the State Department in charge of external propaganda efforts, regularly distributed classified reports that summarised the content of Chinese media. The weekly report of Chinese Broadcasts to Africa for 31 July to 5 August 1962 cited stories such as "Statue of French colonialists in Algeria overturned" (English); "Portuguese Guinean nationalists intensify struggle" (English; French; Swahili); and, "Chinese Embassies in Tanganyika, Somalia, Cairo and Sudan celebrate Chinese Army Day" (French; Swahili). Content by Chinese media during most of the fifties, sixties and seventies was a combination of appraisals of Chinese achievements, attacks directed at international enemies, domestic news that celebrated the struggle of liberation movements in Africa, and reports on China-Africa relations.

Radio programming specifically aimed at African audiences, at least partially, started in 1957 with the first bulletin in Arabic. Radio Peking had begun broadcasts in French in the summer of 1956. An indication of the strong ideological underpinning of the content of radio broadcasts at the time is the explicit instructions given to the journalists working for the Arabic department.

The station had two goals: to publicise the achievements of China's socialist revolution and to publicise China's foreign policy, which was to "defend world peace and oppose aggression and colonialism", according to one of the journalists working for the Arabic service in the 1960s, Liu Yuanpei.³⁸ After the Arabic broadcasts, came the launch of the Swahili and Hausa services in 1961 and 1963 respectively. The addition of the two African languages to the portfolio was not easy, because, at the time, there were no Chinese people who could speak either language. Beijing first recruited "foreign experts", Tanzanians for Swahili and Nigeriens for Hausa, who were jetted to Beijing to train local journalists, rather than to become reporters themselves. Initially, the Swahili and Hausa services broadcast seven hours a week. By 1971, Swahili programmes had increased to 10.5 hours a week and remained like that until the 1990s.³⁹ China's broadcasting in local African languages never grew further, and paled when compared to the offerings of the USSR: 220 hours in half-a-dozen or more languages, including Pula, Lingala, Malagasy, Ndebele, Shona, Somali and Zulu.⁴⁰

Given that radio journalists did not have a chance to travel regularly to African countries for reporting because of limited funding, and therefore had virtually no first-hand contact with audiences, to assess their performance, they often relied on the letters that listeners sent in. Detailed records of such letters were kept and have been examined by academics such as Çağdaş Üngör at Marmara University in Turkey.⁴¹ At the Hausa department, between 1963 and 1978, 47 414 letters were received, with more than 35 000 letters having been sent in 1990, the year the number reached its peak. While Chinese journalists did not appear to have access to audience research other than these letters, USIA researchers did have such data. Dozens of audience studies are kept at the US National Archives in College Park, Maryland. What these surveys reveal is that, historically, the impact of Chinese broadcasts was much more limited than that of other international broadcasters. In French-speaking countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, a small number of people claimed to listen to Radio Peking. In Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), only 16 survey respondents out of 1251 interviewed in 1960 listened to Chinese radio broadcasting at least once a month and, in Dakar (Senegal), the number was slightly higher, 25 people out of 1316 respondents. Listeners to France's RFI accounted for around 10% of the population. The situation was slightly better in Nigeria (3% claimed to listen to Chinese radio) and Ghana (1%). In contrast, 41% in Nigeria and 22% in Ghana said they listened to the BBC every day.

Shortly after the Cultural Revolution began in China in 1966, foreign propaganda stopped being a priority for Beijing, and many Chinese foreign

correspondents stationed in Africa were recalled from their postings. Others were expelled because of their intelligence work.⁴² During the 1980s, a revision of foreign propaganda work was carried out, leading to the creation of new initiatives, such as the launch in 1988 of *ChinAfrica*, a magazine aimed at “middle and upper middle classes and intellectuals” interested in Sino-African affairs.⁴³ A French version, *ChinAfrique*, followed in 1990. Despite the attempts to re-engage with African audiences in the 1980s, the long absence of over a decade during the Cultural Revolution meant that the difficulties that Chinese media had faced during the early days of the PRC to make themselves visible in a crowded media space were only intensified when they tried to reconnect with the continent. Two decades had to go by before Beijing would be able to return to Africa with a much more robust media effort.

A classification of Chinese media cooperation in Africa

Today, media relations between China and African countries have lost most of the ideological component that characterised them throughout the Cold War, and become increasingly pragmatic, even though they are significantly more fragmented. Most African countries welcome Chinese technology, investment and know-how, and, in return, Beijing is content with having access to African audiences, so that its media can showcase an immaculate version of what life in China is like today. Five factors have contributed to this arrangement.

First, the material capabilities with which Chinese media operate in Africa today are among the best of all international media: funding for continental travel is available, newsrooms are well-staffed, and there is a willingness to cover the continent extensively. This makes Chinese media’s content more attractive and marketable. This is in sharp contrast to the hardships endured by the first Chinese journalists in Africa. Second, China’s current outreach efforts are not limited to Africa, but use Africa as a stepping stone. Content produced by global Chinese media in Africa, including documentaries and news reports about China-Africa “friendship”, is relayed to audiences globally, as opposed to the locally targeted messages of the past and help present an image of China as a responsible and well-liked nation. Third, most of the exchanges during the Cold War were unidirectional. China provided content, personnel, and sometimes training, with limited space for African agency. This is not so much the case today. Chinese newsrooms in Africa employ dozens of local journalists, and, although limited, some content from African countries makes its way to China. Fourth, in China’s return to Africa, there is a coexistence of State-owned enterprises and private companies, as opposed to the monopolistic position of

the State/Party in the past. Each of them plays a different but complementary role. Finally, Chinese media have a truly continent-wide presence, that stretches from capital cities to villages, and reaches audiences in multiple languages and through multiple platforms, requiring diversified messages. This widespread presence across Africa, which was unattainable in the past, presents new challenges, such as fragmentation of efforts and limited coordination.

China's more pragmatic approach in its engagement with African media today translates into six main types of activity.

1. **Infrastructure development.** Chinese companies — some under the auspices of the State and some privately owned — are involved in projects aimed at improving existing infrastructure (such as, broadcasting equipment, satellite networks, and mobile technology). Some projects are in the form of assistance and cooperation, while others operate on commercial logic.
2. **Training and education.** Chinese government agencies (from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Education, and a myriad of agencies in between) are actively involved in offering workshops to African public information officers, editors and journalists, as well as numerous scholarships to study journalism, media and communication, and telecoms engineering at Chinese universities.
3. **Content production.** Chinese State-owned media companies are producing multilingual content — news and entertainment — about African countries that is intended to reach local, global and, to a lesser extent, Chinese audiences online and through legacy media, such as radio, television, magazines and newspapers.
4. **Content distribution.** Audio-visual content, including television series, films and documentaries, is regularly exported from China to Africa and is shown on Chinese-owned platforms operating on the continent, such as those operated by StarTimes, or on local African television stations. This content often provides an uncritical narrative of contemporary China.
5. **Engaging with public opinion.** Through social media, the opinion pages of local newspapers, and by organising press events, Chinese officials are increasingly present in the news content of African media. In doing so, they are trying to have a voice in public debates that refer to China (from

protests in Hong Kong to the country's response to Covid-19), and to better "manage" public opinion.

6. **Direct investment and acquisitions.** Chinese companies', investment conglomerates', and individuals' direct investment in African media companies is still limited but, when and where it has occurred, it has received the most criticism. When Chinese investors acquired a 20% stake in South Africa's Independent Media, Craig McKune, a local journalist, echoing the view of other commentators, raised questions about the impact of the deal "on media independence in South Africa".⁴⁴

Some of these activities overlap; some are just emerging, while others are a continuation of efforts that started decades ago; and, some appear to be having a bigger impact than others. In the pages that follow, these six areas of engagement are explored in detail and, when available, evidence of their effectiveness is presented.

Infrastructure Development

Between 2000 and 2014, Chinese companies and State agencies committed to spending around US\$4.8 billion in over 100 projects in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector in Africa, according to AidData, a project led by researchers at the College of William & Mary, Development Gateway, and Brigham Young University.⁴⁵ This sum includes low-interest loans for commercial development projects, donations and aid, as well as State-backed media assistance programmes. Out of 24 sectors for which data are available, such as agriculture, construction and health, ICT ranks ninth in total expenditure, and sixth in the number of projects. This represents around 5% of total aid and assistance provided by China to Africa. Some commitments are modest. For example, in 2002, Equatorial Guinea was given a US\$6.25 million interest-free loan to finance the construction of the new headquarters of the national radio and television network. The contract was given to a Chinese company. In other cases, China's commitments are in the form of grants and gifts: a multi-camera broadcasting van donated to the Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation (TBC); the provision of radio jamming equipment to the Zimbabwean government; or computers (10) and printers (5) gifted by the Chinese Embassy in Yaoundé to the Cameroon Radio Television Corporation (CRTV). However, there are also much larger projects, such as the agreement between Tanzania and the Chinese government to award China International Telecommunication Construction Company (CITCC) the expansion of Tanzania's

broadband network at a cost of US\$403 million, financed by China's Export-Import (Exim) Bank. Large telecommunications companies, such as Huawei and ZTE, are involved in over 20% of the projects recorded by AidData.

Historically, telecommunications infrastructure (from telegraph and telephone networks to radio frequencies and television broadcasting) has been seen by nation states worldwide as highly sensitive, given the risks to national security if foreign actors were to take control of networks, and therefore it has not only been highly regulated but also kept closed to foreign investment and control. However, starting with the deployment of mobile networks in the late 1990s, and more recently with the development of satellite communications, undersea cable networks, and other digital forms of telecommunications, both the costs and the technical knowledge needed to build and maintain such infrastructure have increased dramatically. Some African countries, as is the case with Angola, Egypt, Ethiopia and South Africa, have been able to partly or fully rely on their own technology, expertise and human capital, but many others have seen in China a very convenient partner. Chinese telecommunications companies have won public tenders — some more openly than others — across the continent, primarily because they have been able to offer lower-cost solutions, which are often backed by State financing at competitive rates. This somewhat symbiotic relationship between African governments and Chinese telecommunication corporations has not been free of controversy, but it has generally escaped thorough scrutiny of the potential long-term consequences of increasingly depending on foreign technology and know-how in strategic areas such as broadband connectivity, mobile communications and television broadcasting.

Building Africa's digital television

In 2006, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) established 17 June 2015 as the deadline by which countries in Europe, parts of the Middle East, and Africa would need to have migrated from analogue to digital terrestrial television broadcasts (DTT). This switch in technology was needed to free up frequencies that could be used for other forms of wireless communication, and it opened up the possibility of offering audiences a wider range of channels to watch for free without having to rely on cable or satellite services. The ITU deadline is long past, and, today, less than a dozen African countries, among which are Mauritius, Uganda and Rwanda, have been able to switch off analogue television signals completely. Others, such as Chad, South Sudan and Eritrea, are either at the early stages of the process, or have not yet started the transition. The majority of countries, however, from South Africa

to Nigeria, Benin and Madagascar, have only managed to partially deploy DTT services. In at least two dozen countries, China's StarTimes has been involved in this transition or has signed memorandums of understanding with local governments to participate in the process at some point.⁴⁶

StarTimes's involvement differs from country to country. In some cases, the company provides the technology and builds the infrastructure needed to upgrade existing networks. That is the case with Benin, where, after years of delays, the government announced in mid-2019 that StarTimes had completed the building of new transmission sites.⁴⁷ In other cases, the Chinese company not only builds the infrastructure, but it also operates as a "signal distributor". Signal distributors enlist radio and television channels, some local and some international, who pay a fee in return for having their frequency relayed. In Kenya, for example, StarTimes's subsidiary, the Pan Africa Network Group (PANG) was awarded the rights to compete with Kenya's State-owned Signet as one of the country's first two signal distributors.⁴⁸ In other markets, such as Tanzania, StarTimes's strategy has been to create a joint venture that oversees the development of the network, acts as a signal distributor, and provides the equipment needed by users to be able to watch content, either for a fee or for free.⁴⁹ Particularly in smaller markets, joint ventures participated in by StarTimes enjoy a monopolistic position. Furthermore, while other competing international companies, most notably France's Canal+ and South Africa's Multichoice, have a substantial footprint in the pay television sector in many parts of the continent, no other firm, foreign or domestic, rivals StarTimes's geographic reach and ability to be involved across multiple levels of the digital television industry.

Founded in 1988 by Pang Xinxing, an engineer who started his professional career in the propaganda and education department of a small unit of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), StarTimes officially entered the African market in 2007 in Rwanda. Speaking to China's Xinhua news agency, Pang said in 2012 that he "long dreamed of building a global media empire", that could "counter the negative portrayal of China that he believes exists in Western media".⁵⁰ In more recent interviews, and Pang does not often speak to the media, StarTimes's CEO has focused less on his ambition to counter the "exaggerated and biased reports" about China that he saw "while visiting European countries and the United States in the late 1990s", and instead has been insisting that the company's core objective is to provide affordable television to every African household.⁵¹ Today, StarTimes claims to be present in 37 African countries and to be reaching 30 million users.⁵² These numbers cannot be independently verified.

The company owes much of its success to Pang's ability to rub shoulders with African elites. At the 2018 FOCAC Summit in Beijing, 18 delegations, including the President of the Central African Republic, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, the First Lady of Malawi, Gertrude Mutharika, and the President of Sierra Leone, Julius Maada Bio, visited StarTimes's headquarters in Beijing and were offered a private tour of the company's studios by Pang himself.⁵³ In addition, while travelling to African countries as part of diplomatic delegations and commercial visits, Pang has also met with more than 15 heads of state or government in Africa, to whom he has been able to directly present the services and products offered by StarTimes. A case in point is that of São Tomé and Príncipe. Shortly after China re-established diplomatic relations with the West African country in 2017, Pang was in the archipelago to sign a memorandum of understanding to bring digital television to the country.⁵⁴ Not only has StarTimes benefitted from Beijing's political blessing, but it also has had easy access to the necessary credit to build its presence across the continent. In 2012, the China-Africa Development (CAD) fund, a private equity fund overseen by the China Development Bank, became the company's second-largest stakeholder. In addition, China's Eximbank has provided soft loans to support StarTimes's projects repeatedly.⁵⁵

StarTimes' proven record in Africa was the reason Beijing gave for selecting the company to execute one of Xi Jinping's flagship promises after the FOCAC meeting in Johannesburg in 2015: to provide satellite television access to 10 000 villages in Africa by the end of 2019.⁵⁶ Having a close relationship with Chinese leaders, as well as direct access to State funding to pay for the project, might have also helped StarTimes. According to the company, each of the 10 112 chosen villages in 25 countries received two projector televisions and one (or more) 32-inch television set, to be set up in a shared space, and somewhere between 20 and 30 decoders and satellite dishes for families that already owned a television set. To guarantee the power supply, the sets are said to be equipped with solar power units. Despite all the efforts to make the technology available, as Katharine Schluntz writes in *The China-Africa Project*, most households — at least in Mozambique — only received one month of free access to the most basic pay television bundle (20 channels) offered by StarTimes. Because many families could not afford the cost, they lost access to the service after the promotional period.⁵⁷ This has not stopped government officials, Chinese ambassadors and StarTimes representatives from lauding the many alleged benefits of the project: "closing the digital divide" in the Central African Republic,⁵⁸ providing "access to information on agricultural markets" in Uganda,⁵⁹ and showcasing and promoting "cultural exchange" in Rwanda.⁶⁰

StarTimes's presence on the continent has not always been smooth. The company's closeness with political elites, paired with an opaque corporate culture, and lack of transparency in some of the deals, has created trouble in multiple countries. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, StarTimes's signal was temporarily banned in 2013 amidst allegations that it was operating illegally.⁶¹ A couple of years earlier, in Kenya, all major commercial television stations staged a signal blackout to protest the fact that a foreign company — StarTimes's PANG — had been awarded a signal distribution licence.⁶² Eventually, the Kenyan government agreed to grant new licences. In Mozambique, StarTimes first secured a contract with the Ministry of Transport and Communication to oversee the transition from analogue to digital without public tender, twice missed the deadline to implement the project, and was forced to go through a new tendering process two years after the original agreement was signed.⁶³ There have also been legal battles in Ghana and Zambia⁶⁴ and, in Nigeria, in 2020, senators opened an enquiry into the fact that, after more than ten years, the joint-venture between StarTimes and the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) had reported no profit.⁶⁵

Hardware provision and political alignment

The new infrastructure built for digital television has required updates in the operating hardware of many African broadcasters. In this area, Chinese companies have also been able to assist, both with donations of equipment, and capacity building and training. In Liberia, since 2008, teams of Chinese technicians and engineers have been helping the Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS) in setting up and training personnel to operate all sorts of new technology, including satellite equipment, antennae and transmitters.⁶⁶ In each of the projects, and there have been four of them in ten years, Chinese companies are contracted to set up the technology, Liberian technicians receive training, some of it in China, and eventually a "handover" ceremony is held, during which "control" of the infrastructure is transferred to local actors. At the handover event organised at the end of Phase IV of the so-called "China-Aided Broadcasting Technical Assistance Project", the Chinese Ambassador to Liberia, Fu Jijun, was clear about the goals that his country had for the initiative: it was meant to help "promote and propagate Liberia's policy agenda across the nation."⁶⁷ China's assistance to Liberia has systematically been directed at State-run media, and therefore criticised by media freedom advocates outside the country as supporting the *status quo*. Douglas Farah and Andy Mosher, of the Centre for International Media Assistance, note that in 2008 China also upgraded the infrastructure of Liberia's State-run radio, which, as

opposed to “newly established independent radio stations,” is known for largely propagating “the views of the government with limited coverage of dissenting political opinions, especially coverage of opposition events”.⁶⁸

The case of Liberia is not unique. There have been somewhat similar programmes in places like the Comoros⁶⁹ and Zambia, where China’s involvement in the media sector has been under scrutiny for some time. Thrice, on or right before election years (1996, 2000 and 2005), China provided technical support to Zambia’s state-run radio. In supporting a pro-government media outlet, says Fackson Banda, a former professor at Rhodes University in South Africa, China might have ultimately been trying to silence the oppositional Patriotic Front (PF), which was critical of the PRC and supportive of Taiwan.⁷⁰ More recently, the Zambian National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) has also received material support from StarTimes. The two entities formed a very controversial joint venture (60% StarTimes, 40% ZNBC) to create TopStar,⁷¹ a DTT signal distributor. The power of signal distributors resides in their ability to “turn off” signals at the requests of legislators and, by extension, foreign governments, were they to be displeased with the coverage of a given channel. This explains why, in some countries, including Zambia and Kenya, awarding StarTimes — a foreign company — this role of signal distributor was seen as contentious. StarTimes has also been involved in the remodelling of ZNBC’s studios and control room⁷² and in the provision of multi-million-dollar broadcasting vans.⁷³ The ZNBC-StarTimes deals have faced court proceedings and never been made fully public. All of these have led some, including former US National Security Advisor John Bolton, to accuse StarTimes of having taken over ZNBC. The Zambian government, as well as StarTimes, have vehemently refuted such accusations.⁷⁴

Many (relatively) rich countries, including Japan, Canada, Sweden, Germany and the US, have active media-assistance programmes directed at African nations. Their efforts, however, are significantly different to those of China, as media scholar Valerie Cooper explains.⁷⁵ Primarily, as the cases of Liberia and Zambia show, Chinese aid is almost always aimed at supporting either government agencies and institutions, or pro-government media, and often involves a Chinese private company that is to benefit from the project. Most other countries’ support goes towards independent media, such as community radio stations, and funding is provided for projects run by NGOs that share the funding government’s view of development. In addition, Chinese material support tends to avoid direct involvement in the actual content of the media. Programmes run by countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee

(DAC), which includes most of those in Europe and North America, see media as a tool for the promotion of values such as social justice, gender equality, and support for democracy. In supporting media development, these countries require that projects be based on these shared values. By aligning with media that are supportive of the government, and by not imposing conditions on the type of content, Chinese material support acts as a reinforcer of African political elites that are already favourable towards China, as aid is not dispensed to countries that are critical of Beijing's policies. Ultimately, "infrastructure and technical support is provided in order to realign African countries with Chinese technology," and "such technological dependence is almost always linked to other forms of dependencies — economic, social, educational," warns Fackson Banda, the Zambian professor at Rhodes.

A threat to national security?

Outside of Africa, StarTimes remains fairly unknown, and few foreign powers have flagged the company's operations on the continent as a matter for concern.⁷⁶ In fact, very few African politicians and commentators have taken explicit aim at Pang Xinxing's company. That is not the case of the other two major telecom conglomerates with a substantial presence on the continent, Huawei and ZTE. Both are well known outside of China, and their operations worldwide, including those in Africa, have become a major foreign policy topic in the US, Australia, and the European Union, among others.⁷⁷ The governments of some of these countries are concerned that Chinese firms, even those that are not directly owned by the State, might pose a threat to their national security as they could be hiding a "backdoor access" in their equipment through which Chinese government agencies could gather intelligence and collect sensitive information.⁷⁸ The response to this perceived threat by countries such as Australia and the US has been to ban the use of certain Chinese technology in the development of domestic telecommunication networks and to recommend other countries to do the same. Huawei, ZTE and the Chinese government have repeatedly contested such allegations.⁷⁹

Speaking to *Foreign Policy*, Howard French of Columbia University and a former *New York Times* correspondent in China and West Africa has a slightly different view. The "idea that Huawei would never reveal anything to the Chinese state if asked is implausible", he said, "because any Chinese company has to operate within the rules of the Chinese state".⁸⁰ Neither the possibility of having China get backdoor access to sensitive information, nor pressure from US diplomats to cut ties with Chinese companies,⁸¹ have deterred African governments from

trusting Huawei and ZTE with the upgrade of their telecom networks. When asked about his views on the topic, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa was unequivocal: “we support a company [Huawei] that is going to take our country, and indeed the world, to better technologies”, and added that “we cannot afford to have our economy to be held back because of this fight”.⁸² To Eric Olander, editor of *The China Africa Project*, anti-Huawei narratives are likely to “fail in Africa”, as they have so far, because Chinese companies offer three things: cheaper products, reliability, and easy access to credit.⁸³ A report by Melanie Hart and Jordan Link at the Centre for American Progress, a policy research and advocacy organisation based in Washington, DC, lists more than 50 deals (2004-2019) between Huawei and African governments in which China’s Eximbank acted as a soft creditor. To the authors, this, alongside Beijing’s subsidies to its telecom companies and its ability to interfere in the standardisation processes at the ITU, set the path for Huawei to “extend its dominance into 6G and beyond”.⁸⁴

According to former Chinese Ambassador to South Africa, Li Songtian, Huawei technology has been used in 70% of “the backbone networking infrastructure” in Africa,⁸⁵ which is a crucial component in mobile and other forms of wireless communication. With ZTE technology accounting for another 10%, it is rather evident that Chinese companies do have the upper hand on the continent, where Huawei first started operating in 1997, after receiving a US\$4 million contract in Kenya.⁸⁶ The company’s operational volume has jumped significantly since then. Sales in Africa topped US\$2 billion in 2006,⁸⁷ and by 2011 the company was earning almost 13% of all its annual revenue on the continent.⁸⁸ Huawei, which was founded in 1988, is a private enterprise, and its CEO, Ren Zhengfei, is a former officer in the PLA. In addition to telecommunications network equipment, Huawei’s business in Africa also includes consumer products (including mobile phones, computers, and tablets), which is what most citizens know the company for. Chinese mobile phone manufacturers, from Huawei to Transsion (maker of popular brands such as Itel, Tecno and Infinix), dominate the African market.⁸⁹

Huawei’s corporate campus in Shenzhen, in Southern China, is not far from ZTE’s. Founded three years earlier than Huawei, ZTE has always been partly owned by the State through a complex ownership structure that, according to Japan’s *Nikkei Asian Review*, can be traced back to military-linked conglomerates.⁹⁰ ZTE’s operations in Africa represented almost 20% of the company’s global revenue in 2010, but has been decreasing annually since then. In 2017, it stood at around 5%. Most of ZTE’s success in Africa has been linked to its strategic partnership with Ethiopia’s State-owned Ethio Telecom

in 2006, and then again in 2013, for projects worth over US\$3 billion. ZTE helped build Ethiopia's backbone network in GSM (Global System for Mobile Communications) and CDMA (Code Division Multiple Access) and partnered with Huawei to upgrade 3G and 4G networks. Before agreeing to open up to Chinese companies, writes Téwodros W Workneh of Kent State University, Ethiopia's telecommunications sector had been tightly kept as a vertically integrated monopoly of the State, and was seen as a "strategic asset for the economy and national security, which the state [could not] afford to 'let go'".⁹¹ As the development of telecommunications equipment outpaced the State's capabilities to be technologically self-reliant, Ethiopian officials faced a choice. They could keep potential foreign interference off their over-stretched infrastructure and retain technological sovereignty, or they could partner with China, a political ally, and open up the sector to foreign actors. The latter was seen as the "lesser evil".

Chinese telecoms' reach in Africa extends beyond mobile and wireless communications and it is in these other areas where African civil society and opposition parties have been somewhat vocal in their resistance to some types of Chinese technology.⁹² As part of Xi Jinping's "Digital Silk Road" project,⁹³ Huawei, ZTE and others have been encouraged to up their business in undersea internet cable development; selling surveillance technology, often packaged as "Smart City" technology; or allegedly providing tools to better monitor, control and, when needed, restrict, access to the Internet.⁹⁴ Chinese companies are not alone in these sectors, as numerous countries (Iran, US, and France) are cashing in on some of these lucrative industries, where demand is high.⁹⁵ While pushback against Chinese firms exists, it remains limited. In 2018, the French newspaper *Le Monde*, claimed that IT experts at the African Union had found that the computer servers in the building were sending data back to Shanghai.⁹⁶ Far from unleashing a continent-wide condemnation given how many government buildings in African countries have been built by Chinese contractors, the story was soon killed. Not only were Chinese diplomats quick to appear on local media to discredit the report, which was never retracted by *Le Monde*, but few African officials took a vocal and critical stance. After more than two decades of Chinese engagement in the telecoms sector, many countries on the continent are simply too dependent on Chinese technology to do anything about it.

Content production and distribution

On 11 January 2012, the day CCTV Africa, China's first overseas production and broadcasting centre, was officially launched in Nairobi, Li Guangyuan, China's Ambassador to Kenya, took the floor to suggest that journalists working at the station needed to focus their reporting on three things. First, they should present "the audience of China and the rest of the world with a colourful Africa which is boldly and confidently marching towards prosperity". Second, journalists should introduce "the successful experiences of China's economic development, China's foreign policy of peaceful development, China's brilliant history and culture as well as Chinese people's life," in order to tell Africa a good "story of China". And, third, after accusing an "unjust international media order" of "making false charges against us [China] by misleading public opinion," ambassador Li asked CCTV Africa to "tell the world a good 'story of China-Africa friendship'".⁹⁷ A year later, at a Conference on Propaganda and Thought Work in China, then recently elected President Xi Jinping began using the phrase "telling China's story well," which he has gone on to repeat over and over.⁹⁸ This message has been clear to those working for Chinese media in Africa for some time, whether they are in the news or entertainment industries. To tell "China's story well", Chinese media have benefitted from generous funding that not all of their competitors enjoy; most companies have been able to hire African talent, and, so far, have not been under pressure to reach large swathes of the population, given that most of them are not operating to be profitable, at least not in the short and medium term.

There is some evidence suggesting that audiences of Chinese State-owned media are, in fact, rather small, but their reach has nonetheless been growing over the years, thanks to a plethora of agreements, content exchanges and co-productions with African media, most of them State-owned.⁹⁹ China's extended presence across most of Africa, as well as its commitment to remaining on the continent for some time, has made it relatively easy to develop relationships with local partners, who are eager to receive material and technological assistance. Most of these agreements guarantee that Chinese media will have easier access to domestic audiences (for example, by broadcasting television content produced by China on State-run channels in Africa),¹⁰⁰ but very few of these agreements grant similar access to Chinese audiences to African producers and creators. In other words, when it comes to cooperation in the news and entertainment industries, as was the case with the development of telecommunications infrastructure, China-Africa relations are predominantly

unidirectional, and the prospects that this will change in the near future are minimal.

Chinese news content from Africa, for whom?

There are five Chinese State news outlets operating in Africa that generate content aimed at local and global audiences: Xinhua, CGTN Africa, *China Daily*, *ChinAfrica* and *ChinAfrique*, and CRI. In addition, the *People's Daily*, a newspaper, and Hong Kong based Phoenix TV usually have one or more journalists stationed on the continent, who report mostly in Chinese for domestic audiences, as well as diasporic communities. *China Daily's* office in Nairobi employs four people, two of whom are Chinese.¹⁰¹ They contribute to the newspaper's Africa Weekly supplement, which claimed a circulation of 20 000 copies in 2014.¹⁰² Most of these copies are sent to Chinese embassies and distributed freely to African companies, newsrooms, and government buildings. The combined circulation of subscription-based *ChinAfrica* and *ChinAfrique* is said to be 30 000 copies per month.¹⁰³ The English version is printed and sold in South Africa, and the French one in Senegal. CRI, CGTN Africa and Xinhua have the largest operations, including bureaus in multiple countries. The news agency's headquarters house approximately 40 people, including journalists' family members who reside in the gated compound, while CGTN's production centre in Nairobi employs somewhere between 120 and 150 people, the majority of whom are Kenyan.¹⁰⁴ Employment data for CRI, which also produces some of its African content from Beijing, is hard to come by.

Even though international staff are predominant at CGTN, operations in Nairobi are entirely overseen by Chinese nationals. The bureau chief, managing editor, and deputy managing editor, as well as all department heads (broadcasting, technical, and media operations), programme supervisors and producers are Chinese.¹⁰⁵ Those in managerial positions are rarely involved in the day-to-day business of the newsroom, which is coordinated by a desk editor and several line producers who are not Chinese. However, before a show goes on air, content is always checked by a Chinese national. Because journalists are aware of what might get flagged, self-censorship is common.¹⁰⁶ At Xinhua, all news stories, many of which are written by African collaborators and freelancers stationed across the continent, must be filed with the Nairobi editors, who are Chinese, before they are eventually sent to subscribers.¹⁰⁷ These oversight editorial procedures are standard in most newsrooms worldwide, including those of other international media based in Africa, but the very clear division of roles based on nationality is unique to Chinese media.¹⁰⁸

When CGTN Africa started operations, several well-known Kenyan TV personalities decided to join the station. Journalist Beatrice Marshall, a familiar face to many Kenyans, left KTN, a private broadcaster, to become the lead anchor at CGTN. She was joined by veteran editors with years of experience in local and international media, such as the BBC, as well as young reporters, some of whom have become household names in Kenya since they left their jobs at CGTN, like Eric Njoka and Mark Masai. Working for a Chinese news organisation is seen by many Kenyan media professionals as a form of upward mobility, particularly for young journalists, given the relatively generous salaries they receive, if compared to local media. The downside, at least according to those who decide to leave the station, is that there are limitations to what they are able to report on.¹⁰⁹ In the words of a former CGTN editor, “the major agenda for CGTN in Africa is propaganda, that is propagating China’s interests in Africa, through its own voice and medium”.¹¹⁰ Marshall, who has been anchoring the news for CGTN Africa since 2012, disagrees: “I can guarantee you that we have been 100% in control of our own editorial content. Are there any red lines? Up until this point, absolutely not”.¹¹¹

Researchers who have studied the content of Chinese media in Africa seem to disagree with both characterisations and suggest a more nuanced picture. Not all content published by Chinese media, including CGTN, should be disregarded as mere “propaganda”, and, at the same time, it would be inaccurate to entertain the idea that there are no editorial “red flags”. In reality, not only are certain topics, opinions and expressions completely off-limits,¹¹² but some “unspoken rules” of what can and cannot be said also exist. For example, news reports and documentaries on CGTN must never show images of South African Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu, a close friend of the Dalai Lama, who has supported Tibetan independence, a topic that is never discussed on Chinese media.¹¹³

Instead of describing Chinese media in binary terms (propaganda vs. not propaganda), it might be more useful to think of news content as a hierarchy of topics that determines how much editorial oversight is enforced. News stories that refer to China are closely monitored by editors, and are often reported with the exact same words across all media, since they tend to have to follow the guidelines set by relevant institutions within the Party. However, editorial supervision is minimal when news stories are about non-political stories in African countries.¹¹⁴ Whether journalists are reporting about entrepreneurship in Egypt, or flooding in South Sudan, the general principle is that “positive stories” are preferred. That said, Chinese managers rarely interfere on how African journalists cover uncontroversial topics in Africa. Zhang Yangqiu of

the Communication University of China describes this approach to journalism as “constructive”. Journalists are encouraged to focus on solutions to existing problems, rather than on the problems themselves.¹¹⁵ Because of this preference for “positive news”, content on Chinese media is rarely critical of African governments, and journalists never engage in investigations that could lead to uncovering cases of corruption or abuses of power. In separate studies, Vivien Marsh, from Westminster University, and Selma Mihoubi, from Sorbonne University, have shown that reports on CGTN and CRI focus largely on voicing the views of political elites and government officials, whether these are African or Chinese, rather than civil society, opposition parties, or other potentially critical voices.¹¹⁶

Every day, the staff at CGTN Africa produce two Africa-focused newscasts in English (called “Africa Live”) that are broadcast globally on CGTN, the channel to which the Kenya production centre reports. The newsroom also puts together a daily business programme (“Global Business”), and a weekly talk show (“Talk Africa”), sports magazine (“Sports Scene”), and documentary series (“Faces of Africa”). Part of this content is translated and aired on CGTN’s French-language channel during a daily Africa-focused newscast (“Afrique Infos”). In all of these programmes, content about Africa is predominant. The same could be said about Xinhua’s news output from its Nairobi headquarters. The agency covers the continent in Chinese, French and English, and some of these stories are then translated into other languages. In 2013, Xinhua’s Nairobi hub was dispatching 1800 stories in English, 2000 in French, 2200 photographs and 150 video items.¹¹⁷

However, not all Chinese media in Africa cover the continent as thoroughly as CGTN and Xinhua do. *China Daily’s* Weekly Africa Edition, published in English, and *ChinAfrica* focus most of their content on China and China-Africa relations. In 2019, 7 out of 12 magazine covers of *ChinAfrica*, published by the *People’s Daily* group, the official newspaper of the CCP, were about Chinese domestic policies: rural education, high-speed trains, greener energy, and domestic growth. The rest covered Africa-China topics, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese funding for African start-ups, and China’s role within the African Union.¹¹⁸ On CRI, which has daily broadcasts in Arabic, English, French, Hausa, and Swahili, listeners are likely to find a mix of global news. For example, CRI’s morning news in Hausa on 4 June 2020 featured ten stories: two on China, three about the US, four on Africa, and one about China-Africa cooperation.¹¹⁹

Despite the different approach to reporting the news, all Chinese media in Africa do have one thing in common: their reach among the general population

is limited. That is according to surveys conducted in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa,¹²⁰ given that no official data on audiences is available from Chinese media themselves. In 2018, in Kenya and Nigeria, between 7% and 8% of people said they had watched CGTN Africa sometime in the previous week. In South Africa, the number was 2%. That is far below the BBC, for example, which was a source of information for at least 20% of people. CRI's radio listenership was minimal (less than 1% in all three countries), and so was readership of *China Daily*, either on paper or online (around 1%). A follow-up survey in 2020 revealed no significant changes when compared to 2018. According to the same study, in all three countries, audiences say they know and trust the BBC and CNN better than they know or trust CGTN, but their perceptions of another international broadcaster, Russia's RT are far worse than those of CGTN. Al Jazeera English falls somewhere in between.

Cooperation, partnerships and local distribution of news content

Four years after having opened its first overseas FM radio station in Nairobi, in August 2010, CRI began expanding its broadcasting capabilities on the continent. Its focus has been primarily on French-speaking countries, starting with the wider Sahel region in West Africa (Senegal, Mauritania and Niger), and then moving eastwards to reach Djibouti and the Comoros, as well as other Central and Eastern African nations. In all of these countries, CRI has been granted licences to operate one or more FM radio frequency as part of wider cooperation agreements that often include the provision of infrastructure, training and content exchanges. Between 2010 and 2013, CRI added four frequencies in Senegal that broadcast content in French, with some very limited locally produced content in Wolof (the frequencies operate in the cities of Dakar, Saint-Louis, Kaolack and Ziguinchor); four in Niger, broadcasting in French and Hausa (Maradi, Zinder, and Agadez, plus one in Niamey that opened in 2007); one each in Mauritania and Djibouti broadcasting in Arabic and French; one each in the Comoros, Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic, broadcasting in French; and one in Burundi, with 21 hours of French content and 3 hours in Swahili. Swahili broadcasts also reach Tanzania (Zanzibar), Kenya (Nairobi and Mombasa) and Uganda (Kampala and Jinja). In addition to all these, in 2019, CRI resumed its shortwave broadcasts from a relay tower near the Malian capital, Bamako, a facility that had been operating, with subsequent upgrades, almost uninterruptedly since the 1970s.¹²¹ When, in 2017, China and Mali renewed their arrangement to operate the Bamako relay, Mali's State radio

also agreed to rebroadcast content from CRI on its own frequencies.¹²² Similar agreements have been signed in other countries.¹²³

CRI's strategy to air content through agreements with domestic media has been described by the stations head, Wang Gengnian, as "borrowing boats to sail overseas" (*jiechuan chuhai*).¹²⁴ It has also been adopted by other Chinese media operating in Africa. For example, CGTN Africa's daily newscast is shown on Kenya's national broadcaster, KBC, every day at 10 pm. In 2010, Liberia's LBS agreed to broadcasting three hours of Chinese produced content on its ELTV station every day. To most Africans, directly accessing CGTN's content implies having a monthly subscription to one of the many pay television providers that carry the channel on their bouquets. With agreements like the ones signed with KBC and LBS, however, CGTN bypasses this limitation and might be reaching a wider audience. Also, because this is a casual exposure, audiences might be less likely to associate the content with China, and be more receptive to the State-sanctioned narratives to which they are exposed. There is another "boat" that CGTN has borrowed to reach African television audiences. In some countries, CGTN's signal is now part of the free-to-air line-up of DTT channels. For example, viewers in the Seychelles who do not want to pay a monthly subscription can still watch nine channels for free. On top of the national broadcaster, SBC, the line-up also includes CGTN and CGTN Français, as well as France's TV5 Monde and France 24.

Xinhua's main strategy in Africa has been to provide its content for free or at very reduced costs to African media. This puts the Chinese news agency at an advantage over its competitors, Reuters (UK), Agence France Presse (France), and Associated Press (United States), all of which charge news outlets for access to their continuous output of news content. Xinhua's agreements have been with large media organisations, such as Kenya's Nation Media group, the country's leading newspaper publisher, as well as regional and community media. In 2009, for instance, eight State-run Zimbabwean newspapers began using Xinhua stories in their foreign news pages.¹²⁵ More crucially, Xinhua has struck agreements with a large number of official and State news agencies across the continent, so that they also distribute its content.

For many news media in Africa, State news agencies such as the Ghana News Agency (GNA) or Senegal's Agence de Presse Sénégalaise (SAP), both of which have content exchange agreements with Xinhua, are the primary source of news. In some cases, African news agencies will paraphrase content written by Xinhua and reuse it in their own reporting, but in many cases stories from the Chinese agency are sent to subscribers without changes. In some instance, the

story might be attributed to “Agencies”, or there might not be any mention of Xinhua at all.¹²⁶ Most of the agreements signed by Xinhua in Africa imply some degree of reciprocity, and Chinese media tend to frame them in terms of Sino-African cooperation. This reciprocity means that Xinhua can also make use of the content it receives from the news organisations it partners with. However, given that no African news agency creates content in Chinese, any story produced by an African partner organisation that Xinhua editors might decide to deliver to Chinese domestic news outlets would have had to be translated and, therefore, adjusted to conform to Chinese official policy.

In Kenya, Xinhua has also signed content exchange agreements with the national broadcaster, KBC. In 2017, the station debuted “My Railway, My Story”, a three-part documentary series produced by Xinhua about China’s construction of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) between Nairobi and Mombasa.¹²⁷ Controversies related to the SGR project, from its costs to the environmental impact, are often on the front pages of Kenyan newspapers.¹²⁸ None of these, however, were part of Xinhua’s documentary. KBC and Xinhua have also been cooperating for years in the production of “Dunia Wiki Hii” (“The World this Week”), a 30-minute current affairs programme in Swahili that is primarily based on footage and news stories provided by Xinhua.¹²⁹ The news agency has been expanding its services, and in 2010 launched its own television channel, China Xinhua News Network (CNC).¹³⁰ Although the station is available on many platforms, its impact has been minimal. Its content is rather dry, very focused on communicating the activities of Chinese leaders, and lacks the professional broadcast quality that CGTN has. Despite CNC not being popular, much of the content that Xinhua journalists produce for its programmes is also offered to broadcasters worldwide, including KBC. Audiences are often unaware that the content they are watching, listening to or reading comes from Xinhua and other Chinese media. In this sense, the strategy of “borrowing boats” might be one of China’s most successful ones.

Exporting television dramas and “kung fu” movies

In order to “tell China’s story well”, as Xi Jinping has asked, Beijing is not only relying on the news media, but also the entertainment industry. In this area, StarTimes has been leading the way. In at least 16 African countries, the company provides pay television services where it is able to deliver carefully selected Chinese television content, alongside local and international channels. In Southern Africa, the company operates under the brand StarSat, and in Zambia it uses the TopStar trademark. In some countries, StarTimes only

operates through satellite links, while in others the service is offered as part of the DTT infrastructure that the company is helping build. More recently, and in response to growing competition from video streaming platforms like Netflix, StarTimes has also been promoting StarTimes ON, a mobile app that allows live streaming of television channels and video-on-demand. Following the business model of similar companies elsewhere, StarTimes provides different subscription tiers for its pay television services. The average cost of the basic package is around US\$3.76, which gets access to anywhere between 14 and 60 channels, depending on the country. Only two television stations form part of every one of these basic packages: CGTN (or CGTN Français), and ST Sports Life, which offers live coverage of European soccer leagues, one of StarTimes's biggest selling points.¹³¹

In all but three of the countries where StarTimes operates, the entry-level pay television subscription also provides access to ST Kungfu, a channel that specialises in Chinese martial arts-related content such as films, educational programmes and documentaries. As Cobus van Staden of the South African Institute of International Affairs has noted, African countries have a long history of watching, mostly Hong Kong, martial arts films,¹³² and therefore many have developed a taste for the genre, which is no longer produced *en masse* at the former British colony, but has become a staple of China's film and television industry. By increasing cultural exports to Africa, and this includes films and television series, Beijing is eager to harness more "soft power" than it currently has. That is, it is hoping to ignite interest in China among the general population by exposing them to audio-visual content with the expectation that this will, in the long-term, improve its image and global standing, and lead to being perceived more positively. In many ways, China is following the playbook that brought two of its neighbours, South Korea and Japan, to become global leaders in what Douglas McGray called "Gross National Cool".¹³³ To some extent, Beijing's strategy can also be compared to Hollywood's role in helping spread the idea of the "American Way of Life" through films during much of the post-war period. Hollywood's success is tightly linked to the support it received from successive US administrations that saw film as one of the most powerful propaganda tools.¹³⁴ China's entertainment industry also enjoys State support, but is still struggling to match Hollywood's audience success.

Part of the global "coolness" that Japan and South Korea have been able to cultivate in recent years can be attributed to the popularity of their television soap operas and dramas.¹³⁵ Therefore, it is not surprising that television series have become one of China's largest cultural exports to Africa and that the industry has received broad institutional support. In 2011, the national

broadcasters of Kenya and Tanzania aired for the first time a Swahili-dubbed version of “A beautiful daughter-in-law,” a television series set in urban China about the tensions between a bride and her mother-in-law.¹³⁶ According to Chinese media “more than six million Tanzanians” watched the series.¹³⁷ Since then, the number of exported television series to Africa has been growing more or less steadily, in part because StarTimes has taken an active role in dubbing them into widely spoken languages on the continent, including Hausa, Yoruba, Zulu, Luganda, English, French and Portuguese. In 2017, the company was said to have dubbed more than 8000 hours of television content.¹³⁸ Most of these shows are broadcast on StarTimes’s channels, including one reserved for Chinese television series (ST Sino Drama) and several that focus on linguistic communities (ST Yoruba, ST Swahili, and ST Dadin Kowa for Hausa and ST Eyethu for Zulu). In addition, agreements are periodically signed with African television stations, such as Senegal’s RTS or Kenya’s KBC, to air some of the series.¹³⁹

In a 2018 video news story produced by China.org.cn, a website under the supervision of China’s State Council Information Office, a journalist claims that Chinese television series are popular among African audiences because “modesty, valuing family harmony and other codes of ethics embodied in Chinese films and TV plays hold cultural appeal in some areas of Africa, which also have a large population and a strong attachment among big families.”¹⁴⁰ This is a recurrent narrative that Chinese media use when praising the alleged success of Chinese television content in Africa.¹⁴¹ However, independent audience data do not exist, and therefore it is difficult to assess the actual popularity of this type of content. Most agreements to broadcast Chinese television series, which are usually offered to broadcasters at no cost, are spearheaded by embassies and diplomats, rather than being led by true audience demand, as might be the case for Turkish and Filipino soap operas, which circulate widely in Africa.¹⁴² The type of television content that Beijing is offering to export to African audiences tends to focus largely on urban China, and presents the image of an orderly society, in which social problems are dealt with “harmoniously”. Topics such as severe poverty, the shortcomings of the State, or the treatment of ethnic minorities are absent.¹⁴³ The television series and shows that are exported are not necessarily the most popular in China, but they are tuned to the “main melody”, as former Chinese President Jiang Zemin referred to cultural products that fall in line with the official discourse of the Party.¹⁴⁴

Sometimes “main melody” films become blockbusters in China, but exporting them is not always an easy task. Take the case of “Wolf Warrior 2”, a film directed, produced and starred by Wu Jing, one of China’s best-known actors.

It went on to become the highest-grossing Chinese film of all times, and broke all sorts of box office records, but never took off outside of China.¹⁴⁵ In South Africa, where parts of the film were shot, the Chinese Embassy organised a public screening, and the film was released in early November 2017,¹⁴⁶ but there is no record that the film generated any income in the box office.¹⁴⁷ Part of the domestic success of the film was attributed to its nationalistic storyline, which sees Wu Jing's character fighting foreign mercenaries to rescue a group of Chinese doctors working overseas. The main character has to face a military coup, a corrupt militia, the outbreak of a deadly infectious disease, and pervasive poverty, all of which happen in the span of a few days in one single unnamed African country. Beaton Galafa, a Malawian writer, has suggested that the film "reiterates tropes from Western colonial narratives misrepresenting Africa," adding that "negative images of Africa mar the film's African appeal."¹⁴⁸ The discrepancy between Beijing's official narrative of China-Africa relations and the type of relationship depicted in the film, which had to receive approval from the authorities before it was released, shows the gap that exists between official policy and the actors involved in implementing said policies.

This gap is much more pronounced in the entertainment industry than in the news industry. This is, in part, because there are many more actors that are trying to "tell China's story well" through films, television series, cartoons, and other forms of audio-visual entertainment, than there are news media doing the same thing. This makes it more difficult to craft a single unified message. In Africa, since 2014, different agencies belonging to the Beijing Municipality, a second-tier level of administration in China, have organised broadcasting "seasons" and "exhibitions" in countries like Tanzania, Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁴⁹ As part of these efforts, in 2017, a "Carnival of Films and TV drama" brought 24 films to 16 villages and cities in Zambia. In most of these activities, the city of Beijing has partnered with StarTimes, which has become the main point of entry for Chinese agencies and companies interested in cultural exports to Africa.¹⁵⁰ As part of this partnership, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio and Television and StarTimes announced they would be creating the first "Sino-African talent TV show" in 2019.¹⁵¹ That same year, Nigerian comedian AY (Ayo Makun) agreed to co-produce a film, "30 days in China," with Shanghai-based Huahua Media.¹⁵² Despite isolated cases like these, co-production between African and Chinese creators remains limited.

Engaging with public opinion

According to data from the Afrobarometer, a survey conducted periodically in multiple African countries, in 2019/2020, around 60% of people in the 16 nations from where data are available said that China has a very positive or somewhat positive influence on the continent. This is down from 65% in 2014/2015.¹⁵³ Despite the significant drop in perceptions, views on China remain more positive among Africans than they are among citizens of most Asian, European and North American countries.¹⁵⁴ As the exchanges between Chinese actors and African countries have increased over the years, many of which are over the media, so have the chances that public sentiment might be derailed by small or large crises. In the period that goes from 2014 to 2020, there have been many of those. In February 2018, for example, China's national broadcaster aired its annual Spring Festival Gala, a television extravaganza that was once the most watched television programme in the world. For the first time, it included a comedy skit about China-Africa relations. Far from a warm welcome, it received significant backlash — even though CCTV never saw a reason to apologise for it — because it depicted a Chinese actress in blackface and had several African actors dressed as animals.¹⁵⁵ A few months later, a Chinese “businessman” was expelled from Kenya after referring to Kenyans on social media, including President Uhuru Kenyatta, as “monkeys”.¹⁵⁶ In 2020, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, Beijing had to face accusations that Africans living in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou were racially profiled and discriminated against.¹⁵⁷ A study that compared views towards China before and during the Covid-19 pandemic found that, while, in early 2018, China had a favourability index of 56 in Kenya and 44 in South Africa (where 100 is the most favourable score), in May 2020 the index had decreased to 44 and 37 respectively.¹⁵⁸

Many of the events that might explain the drop in positive views towards China over time are not under the control of Chinese authorities. Nonetheless, Beijing has seen a need to be more engaged in preventing communication crises from escalating and to be more involved in “guiding” public opinion, the same way that authorities have been trying to do in China for years. To achieve this, Beijing has been adding a new set of tools to its media “cooperation” repertoire that are much more short-term-oriented. Harnessing “soft power” through entertainment and building an audience for Chinese news is a slow process. Managing public distrust or criticism requires strategies that will return more immediate results. With this goal in mind, starting in 2016, Chinese officials, including many diplomats, have begun engaging with African audiences directly via social media. After all, the three sample “crises” presented above started

and were amplified on social media. In addition, to overcome the difficulties of having China's voice reproduced on local media, Chinese companies and diplomatic missions have become more active in engaging with these news organisations. These new strategies have arrived with a more assertive tone in how public officials communicate about certain issues, particularly those that Beijing sees as sensitive for its national security.

Wolf warrior diplomacy in Africa

While Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other US-based social media platforms are not allowed to operate in China, global Chinese media have been using them for some time to reach wider audiences outside the country. CRI and *China Daily* opened their first global accounts in 2009, while Xinhua followed in 2012. Some accounts with content aimed at African audiences, such as CRI's Swahili and Hausa pages on Facebook and Twitter, started operating more recently. Their followers have been growing rapidly, amidst accusations that they might have been "acquired" from "click farms".¹⁵⁹ In October 2015, CCTV Africa's (now CGTN Africa) Facebook page was liked by less than half a million users. By early October 2020, that number had gone up to 4.7 million. Those following CGTN Africa's YouTube channel have gone from 28 000 in 2015 to over half a million in 2020. Xinhua's global Facebook page — which has several localised platforms in Africa, depending on each user's language settings — had more than 86 million followers in 2020, compared to 2.2 million in October 2015, and 4.8 million in March 2016.¹⁶⁰ Most of Beijing's social media accounts follow a "monologue" approach to reaching audiences.¹⁶¹ That is, they broadcast messages, but do not engage with audiences when they talk back. There is some evidence that those managing social media accounts were at some point instructed not to reply to users, and sometimes asked to remove messages that were overly critical of China.¹⁶²

The accounts of Chinese media on Facebook and Twitter now share the online space with a growing number of Chinese diplomatic missions, government agencies, and officials. Between January 2018 and May 2020, more than 30 embassies and diplomats based in Africa have created accounts on Twitter. These include the embassies in Mauritania, Liberia, Angola, DRC, Algeria, Mali, Uganda and Kenya, as well as several diplomats, such as China's Ambassador to Uganda, the Deputy Ambassador to Zimbabwe, and the Economic and Commercial Counsellor at the embassy in Rwanda. Some, like Lin Jing, China's Consul General in Cape Town (South Africa), are posting and retweeting at a significant pace. His account (@CGCHINA_CPT) averages 38 posts per day, many

of which are overtly critical of the US.¹⁶³ Other accounts are much less active. The Twitter account of the Chinese Embassy in Bujumbura (Burundi), created in June 2019, had only tweeted 95 times by early October 2020, at an average of barely five tweets per month. Not only has the number of accounts risen in a short period, but the way diplomats — and some embassies — interact is different from what most Chinese media had been doing on social media for years. Aside from promoting their own activities, and reposting messages from Chinese media, these accounts are now more engaged in some form of “dialogue” with audiences through the use of hashtags and mentions. In addition, there are some instances of proactive crisis management. Soon after allegations that some Africans in Guangzhou were discriminated against during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Twitter accounts of the Chinese Embassy in Uganda and Nigeria, as well as the Deputy Ambassador to Zimbabwe posted images of how “normal” life in China was for Africans and deflected blame by attacking other countries for “fabricating” the accusations.¹⁶⁴

The tone used by diplomats on social media has also been changing. Some accounts, say scholars Zhao Huang and Rui Wang, are now exercising “less restraint, discretion, and caution than might typically be expected from Chinese officials who speak in public or post on social media”.¹⁶⁵ This harsher, more direct, and more targeted use of Twitter has gained diplomats such as former Chinese Ambassador to South Africa, Lin Songtian, the nickname of “Wolf Warrior” diplomats. Much like the main character in the film, they are confident, proudly defending their country, and do not shy away from using more assertive language than their colleagues.¹⁶⁶ In an interview with China’s *Global Times*, which tends to represent some of the most nationalistic voices in the country, Prof Chu Yin of the University of International Relations in Beijing justified this new approach to “diplomacy” by saying that “China’s rising status in the world requires it to safeguard its national interests in an unequivocal way”. He added that “the days when China can be put in a submissive position are long gone”.¹⁶⁷

Many in China came to the same conclusion as Prof Chu after seeing how global media covered two events: the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong that took China by surprise in 2019 and the backlash against Beijing for setting up forced “re-education camps” for Uighurs, a Muslim minority that lives predominantly in the Western region of Xinjiang. On social media, Chinese embassies and diplomats often post about these issues, even though they are not particularly relevant to citizens in the countries where they are stationed. In July 2020, China’s Ambassador to Chad gave an interview to the country’s national press agency, ATPE. Ambassador Li Jinjin gave lengthy responses to questions about

China's response to the Covid-19 crisis, China's assistance to Africa, and the approval of a new security law for Hong Kong. The shortest of all responses in the interview was the one to the question, "How do you analyse Chad-China cooperation?"¹⁶⁸ Ambassador Li was doing what most of his colleagues have been asked to do: to make sure that, on certain issues, those representing China abroad take an active stance to present Beijing's view. This is sometimes done through proactive messaging such as officials talking about an issue even when they are not asked about it, or when an issue is not really part of the conversation. In other cases, the messaging is reactive, with the goal of stopping criticism that might appear as too widespread. In reacting to criticism, Beijing is increasingly engaging in extraterritorial patrolling of public opinion. Through coordinated campaigns on social media, or by using diplomatic pressure, Chinese authorities are trying to influence which China-related topics are to be discussed, and how. On the issue of Xinjiang, for example, Beijing has listed the support of multiple African countries, including many with Muslim-majority populations, and limited critical public discussion.¹⁶⁹

The granting of interviews by Chinese officials is not new, but has certainly increased in recent years. Chinese diplomats were well-known for their reluctance to engage with foreign journalists. This reaching out is part of a wider strategy to engage more with local African media, as a way to get China's message out, particularly around topics that are often in the news, and on which Chinese media are unable to set the agenda on the continent. It is not uncommon to see articles and opinion pieces published by China's ambassadors in leading newspapers. Some of these are published in opinion pages alongside other views, which might not necessarily be equally favourable to China. In other cases, Chinese diplomatic missions, and some companies such as StarTimes and Huawei, buy up space on newspapers and websites to publish "advertorials", pages that are designed to look like any other news article but are in fact not written or designed by the publishing house. This approach was chosen by Chen Xiaodong, who was appointed as Ambassador to South Africa in 2020, for his first article in the new role. It appeared as "Sponsored Content" on the website of the Independent Media group, which is partly owned by Chinese investors.¹⁷⁰

In providing "guidance" to African public opinion on issues related to China, Beijing's ultimate goal is not to engage directly with every citizen, but to reach key opinion leaders who might potentially help China amplify its narratives.¹⁷¹ These opinion leaders (scholars, commentators, think tank analysts, and others) who act as bridges between Chinese officialdom and domestic audiences are often quoted by Chinese media as a way to legitimise their message. There is

no easy way to measure whether this strategy is working or not, even though there are some examples that would seem to indicate that, from time to time, it does. For instance, before China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yin, visited Burundi in January 2020, *Le Renouveau*, a government-run newspaper, featured on its front page an editorial signed by Louis Kamwenubusa, the president of the publication. The article praised the role of China in the development of Burundi. The front page also featured an ad for StarTimes. A few months later, Kamwenubusa was interviewed by CGTN on his views about Hong Kong's decision to postpone the election for a new legislative council. He is quoted as supporting the decision, and wondering why "some people in the United States and some European countries are against the decision". In his view, "[p]eople should only care about the internal affairs of their own country", a position which is very much in line with China's foreign policy.¹⁷² The previous year, he had been quoted on CRI's Turkish language service on the topic of Hong Kong.¹⁷³ In 2018, Kamwenubusa was the Burundian official in charge of signing a content exchange agreement between Xinhua and *Le Renouveau*.¹⁷⁴

Communicating Covid-19

As opposed to small crises that have short news cycle spans, the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020 turned out to be a true challenge to how Chinese actors communicated with African and global audiences. Since the first cases of Covid-19 were reported in Wuhan (China), Beijing tried to push back against any accusation that its response to the outbreak had been anything but exemplary. To do this, the Chinese government relied more than ever on its own network of global media, diplomatic missions, and active social media users. During the first few months of the pandemic, Chinese diplomats and the news media, including those based in Africa, became amplifiers of debunked conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus,¹⁷⁵ offered criticism of the strategies undertaken by other countries, and actively promoted messages about the amount of personal protective equipment, masks and medical supplies that China was offering to other countries.¹⁷⁶ Social media efforts were mostly directed at countering the strong anti-China rhetoric that came out of the US, primarily from right-wing politicians and mainstream conservative media, as well as fringe news outlets like the *Epoch Times*, which is well-known for its anti-CCP coverage.¹⁷⁷ A report by Alicia Fawcett at the Atlantic Council's DFRLab suggests that a key component of China's coordinated social media strategy during the Covid-19 crisis can be linked to ideas around information warfare that had been proposed by Chinese military officials in recent years, but had not been addressed by foreign countries.¹⁷⁸

In addition to using social media, in Africa, two other actors were active in spreading State-sanctioned narratives. First, State-owned media used their network of correspondents to send the message that Beijing had managed to control the outbreak in Wuhan, and that it was providing regular assistance to African countries. Second, for the first time, StarTimes became a producer of news content when it launched, on 23 March 2020, a daily newscast exclusively focused on Covid-19. Titled “StarTimes Daily Covid-19 Report”, the 10-minute-long show was produced in Beijing, with versions in English, French, Portuguese, Swahili, Hausa and Chinese. The show, which was still running in early October, was re-broadcast multiple times a day, including the evening primetime, on seven of the platform’s entertainment channels (such as ST Sports Focus and ST Sino Drama), and was available for free on the company’s mobile phone app. By choosing to air the programme on popular channels, the company might have maximised the possibility of exposing a wide range of African audiences to a China-favourable narrative about the outbreak.

The way Beijing has communicated with the world during the Covid-19 outbreak signals a change of approach. Three things stand out: news content is increasingly adversarial and belligerent; coordinated disinformation campaigns are becoming more frequent; and new actors, including privately owned media, are being mobilised. To Maria Repnikova, at Georgia State University, China’s response to the Covid-19 communication crisis shows that “China’s propaganda has matured,” in such a way that “[i]nstead of delivering diktat and defensiveness, the government now engages in selective dialogue with its audiences and their criticisms, featuring those views in its own storytelling, or its retelling of them”.¹⁷⁹

In assessing the effectiveness of China’s strategies during times of crisis, it is important to keep in mind that, as Bates Gill from Macquarie University, writes, “China’s official messaging abroad often has a dual purpose: bolster the Chinese Communist Party (CCP or Party) at home while also seeking to persuade international audiences. To be sure, the former objective is paramount”.¹⁸⁰ In this dual strategy, engagement with African countries through the media (favourable opinion leaders, positive news coverage, limited criticism on social media, among others) are increasingly seen as a valuable source of domestic and global legitimacy for the Communist Party.

Direct investment

With the number of mobile internet users in Africa projected to grow steadily in the next few years, tech companies with an eye on the African market have seen a boom in investment flows. African start-ups raised close to US\$300 million in venture capital in 2015, over US\$400 million in 2016, and US\$560 million in 2017.¹⁸¹ It is in this context of aggressive investment, optimistic outlook, and African tech entrepreneurship that, in 2016, a group of Chinese investors decided to enter the Nigerian mobile services market with a “super app” capable of offering multiple products (such as, payments, transportation, and delivery) within a single closed platform, similar to popular apps in China, like WeChat.¹⁸² They had just purchased a majority stake in Opera software, known for its web browser, and a popular brand in the Global South for its mobile data saving products. Leading the operation were Zhou Hongyi, CEO of Qihoo 360, a veteran of the Chinese internet sector, and Zhou Yahui of Beijing Kunlun Tech, who had experience in high-stakes tech investments outside of China.¹⁸³ At one point, Opera’s businesses stretched from car-sharing to food delivery and a variety of fintech services. However, Opera’s experience in Nigeria has not always been easy, and some of these services have ceased operating.¹⁸⁴

One of the services that has remained popular is Opera News, a mobile app that delivers custom news content produced by thousands of contributors (professionals and amateurs alike), whose revenue is linked to how popular their articles are.¹⁸⁵ Opera News has country-specific portals where users can read the news in multiple languages.¹⁸⁶ Content is curated to each user by a recommendation algorithm powered by artificial intelligence (AI). On the Google Play Store, the app is classified in the “more than 50 million downloads” category. There is no apparent editorial oversight on the platform; content is sensationalistic and click-baiting is very common. A search in October 2020 of news stories tagged with the word “China” on the Nigerian version of Opera News returned headlines such as “Check out why China has the largest economy in the world”, written by a user named “CoronaCure”,¹⁸⁷ “Is China actually an oppressive country to live in, or is this a lie told by Western countries?”,¹⁸⁸ and, “China and it’s Smart Toilet”.¹⁸⁹ One month later, none of the stories had more than 20 views.

Opera News’ popularity pales in comparison to that of TikTok, an app that allows users to create and share short video clips. TikTok is owned by ByteDance, a privately owned Chinese company. It effectively entered the African market in mid-2018, after purchasing Musical.ly, which also had Chinese

owners.¹⁹⁰ While TikTok does not publicise how many users it has in each country, it regularly appears among the most downloaded apps in countries like South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya, where its user base appears to be the strongest in Africa.¹⁹¹ Further proof of TikTok's popularity among African users can be seen in the 2018 launch of Vskit, another video-sharing app. Vskit is run by Transsnnet, a joint venture of two Chinese companies, Transsion, a mobile phone manufacturer, and NetEase, one of China's first web portals.¹⁹² Vskit says that it has gone from 10 million users in Africa in 2019, to 40 million in late 2020. Transsnnet's business focuses primarily on the African market. Its portfolio also includes Boomplay, which claims to be the "biggest and fastest growing music app in Africa" with 62 million users.¹⁹³ Vskit has featured prominently in Chinese State-run media. Using a similar narrative seen when discussing other forms of China-Africa "media cooperation", a news story by Xinhua concluded that platforms like Vskit "can not only help the Chinese to better understand African customs, but give African culture an opportunity to shine around the world".¹⁹⁴

Remarkably popular among teenagers and young adults, TikTok's content is largely apolitical, but that has not stopped the app from being under intense scrutiny due to its Chinese ownership. In 2020, it was banned in India, and then (briefly) in Pakistan.¹⁹⁵ The US threatened to follow suit unless ByteDance divested its US operations. The concerns raised by the US centred around two issues: privacy and censorship.¹⁹⁶ The US government has long been concerned that TikTok could make personal user data available to Chinese authorities. The company has denied such accusations and, in a 2019 report, claimed that, in fact, law enforcement authorities in India and the US had requested TikTok to disclose user data in numerous occasions, while Chinese ones had not. There are no African countries on the list.¹⁹⁷ In addition, TikTok has also faced accusations of censoring content about issues that are considered taboo in China, such as the 1989 Tiananmen massacre or the illegalisation of the religious group Falun Gong.¹⁹⁸ Faced with high levels of political pressure in some of its largest markets, ByteDance has tried to grow its business elsewhere.¹⁹⁹ In Africa, for example, it has mentored content creators to lure them away from other platforms, such as Instagram, and it has signed agreements with mobile phone operators to include TikTok in their free mobile data packages, which often include apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Lite.²⁰⁰

As the case of TikTok reveals, whenever Chinese private firms have tried to enter the global market for internet services, they have done so amidst "controversies" around data privacy issues and their possible connection to the Communist Party/Chinese government. This has not been so much the case in most African countries, where data privacy concerns in general rarely feature

prominently in policy debates. Writing for *The China Africa Project*, Alexandria Williams, a journalist based in Nairobi, notes that “Chinese tech companies have aggressively pursued projects that provide free or reduced services in exchange for African data”.²⁰¹ That is the case of Opera’s business in Nigeria, where the company has been able to acquire a very large and diverse volume of personal data from its users. In September 2020, amidst debates around TikTok’s business practices elsewhere, Falhad Dikow, a Kenyan Senator, asked to “investigate the use of TikTok and whether Kenyan users’ data are secure”.²⁰² In her address, Senator Dikow did not raise specific concerns about TikTok’s being owned by a Chinese company. Similar debates around data privacy, specifically as it refers to tech companies from China, have yet to take place in other parts of the continent.

Heightened scrutiny: Chinese investments in South Africa

South Africa’s relationship with China, including their shared membership in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) alliance, has been a matter of regular national debate. It is therefore not surprising that, in 2013, when a Chinese investment holding acquired 20% of Independent News & Media, one of South Africa’s leading publishing companies, many sounded the alarm. Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*, Anton Harber, professor at Wits University in Johannesburg, said that “[i]f the Chinese seek to impose a Chinese model, there will be resistance. That approach will not sit easily with a lot of journalists”.²⁰³ Beijing’s role in the takeover was, however, not premeditated, or part of a grand strategy of media acquisitions. In fact, the Chinese lenders (China Africa Development Fund, a government institution which had already funded media infrastructure projects on the continent, and China International Television Corporation, a global arm of CCTV) were first approached by the main South African investor in the deal, Sekunjalo, a private group, that was seeking support to raise the necessary capital to complete the takeover. Much of the controversy around the deal at the time had to do with the fact that Sekunjalo’s owner, Iqbal Survé, was a strong supporter of the African National Congress (ANC), the political party that has led the country since 1994. Fears of Chinese meddling in the newsroom overlapped with fears of ANC’s interference.²⁰⁴

Periodically, newspapers published by Independent Media are accused of kowtowing to Chinese interests. In most instances, there is limited evidence of this. Talk to journalists at the *Cape Times* and *Cape Argus*, and you will hear stories about a travel story on Taiwan that was pulled at the last minute so that “the Chinese” would not be offended. Others will describe arguments with

editors about the angle of certain stories or how South Africa-China relations need to be approached. Then, in September 2018, Azad Essa, a contributor to several newspapers in the group took to social media to declare that his regular column had been cancelled after he wrote a story about the treatment of Uighurs in China. "It is official," Essa wrote in a hard-hitting opinion piece on *Foreign Policy*, "[a]fter more than a decade of planning, setting up, and bankrolling African media, the Chinese are finally ready to cash in on their investment".²⁰⁵ Independent's response was that it was overhauling its portfolio of commentators, and that there was no relationship between the topic of Essa's column, and him being laid off. The optics of the case could not be any worse. The Essa incident has been used as proof, again,²⁰⁶ again,²⁰⁷ and again,²⁰⁸ of the "real danger" of allowing Chinese investment in the news media. It seems rather unlikely that, in this case, Independent's Chinese creditors directly requested the journalist's removal. A more plausible explanation is some sort of pre-emptive self-censorship within the newsroom.²⁰⁹

A 2018 study on the consequences that the Independent deal had on South African journalism in general revealed many fears of the "possible" impact, but offered few examples of actual changes on editorial agendas, the preferred approach to journalism, or views on China.²¹⁰ Other forms of pressure on journalistic content, however, have been denounced elsewhere. A 2020 radio documentary from the BBC World Service featured Kenyan journalists who claimed that, after writing articles on the SGR, the Chinese-built railway, editors were warned that Chinese firms would reconsider buying advertisement space on their newspapers.²¹¹ In Malawi, reporters working for both private and State media have talked about pressure from Malawian authorities to report positively on China.

Because the investment in Independent Media is the only instance to date of Chinese capital being used to acquire domestic media assets in Africa, it is difficult to extrapolate from this case to the rest of the continent. Within China, some journalists and scholars have been lobbying for other media acquisitions, not only in Africa, but globally. In early 2020, the editor-in-chief of *China Daily*, who used to be the lead correspondent in Tokyo, wrote that China could learn from the acquisition of the *Financial Times* by Japan's *Nikkei Shimbun*. Cai Hong had four specific recommendations for Chinese investors willing to "borrow boats to sail overseas": to fully acquire, obtain controlling rights, hold equity, or partner with foreign media companies to increase China's influence abroad.²¹²

Since Sekunjalo's takeover of Independent Media in South Africa, the company's cooperation with Chinese media has diversified substantially. In 2015, for

example, Iqbal Survé announced that he would launch a news agency, the African News Agency (ANA), which was to inherit part of the assets of the now-defunct South African Press Association (SAPA). From the beginning, ANA, which has had Independent Media as its main client, cooperated closely with Xinhua. Survé, who has travelled on multiple occasions to China as part of South African economic and diplomatic missions, signed an agreement with CGTN to create a shared multimedia platform. This project, however, never took off. Another Chinese-backed venture that has been struggling to make an impact on South Africa's crowded media market is StarSat, a pay television operator that is partly owned by StarTimes. Formerly known as TopTV, the company was under financial distress when Pang Xinxing's firm decided to join a group of investors to enter a business rescue process. In 2014, StarSat was down to 110 000 subscribers from 300 000 when it first launched. The biggest competition in South Africa comes from Naspers's DStv. The number of subscribers to DStv in South Africa in 2016 was said to be around 5.7 million.²¹³

StarSat's bumpy ride in South Africa is not unique. While TikTok, for example, enjoys very high levels of popularity among younger South Africans, another app, WeChat, owned by Tencent, a Chinese company in which South Africa's Naspers has a 31% stake, has been struggling to enter the local market for quite some time.²¹⁴ Tencent and Naspers's efforts to make WeChat more popular in South Africa have included running promotions and targeted advertising online; using the app as a tool to vote on popular television shows, such as Big Brother, and creating content that could be of interest to South African audiences beyond the Chinese diaspora, which uses the app regularly.²¹⁵ Despite all these efforts, WeChat has been unable to match the uptake of WhatsApp, the number one messaging tool in the country. In 2020, WeChat eventually announced that it was stopping its wallet feature, on which it had placed expectations for long-term growth.²¹⁶ As opposed to State-run media, which are not guided by economic profit, Chinese private companies operating in Africa are often under more pressure to capitalise on their investments in the short- to mid-term. This might explain why, apart from StarTimes, which has the financial backing of the State, cases of direct investment in African media companies remain limited. As most of the previous cases suggest, the African media sector might not be ready for it yet.

Training media professionals

According to a report by the International Federation of Journalists, 70% of developing countries have been invited to send some of their journalists to

attend Chinese-sponsored training schemes.²¹⁷ Data from Reporters Without Borders suggests that one single educational agency, the Research and Training Institute of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), the administrative body overseeing the media in China, has offered training to 3400 journalists from 146 countries in the last few years.²¹⁸ In Africa, this type of media cooperation was included in the list of activities planned in the 2015 FOCAC Action Plan, in which the “Chinese side” committed to “training 1,000 African media professionals each year” for three years, and in the 2018 Action Plan, where no exact numbers were included.²¹⁹ Training programmes, workshops and seminars last anywhere from a week to ten months, and are sponsored by multiple government agencies (like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ministry of Commerce), mass organisations (such as the All China Journalists Federation), and media companies (like China Radio International and the China International Publishing Group). These programmes are free of charge to participants. Their flights, accommodation and daily expenses are covered by the host, and, in some of the longer programmes, there is also a monthly stipend that can go up to CN¥5000 (US\$750).²²⁰

To organise some of these training courses, China has set up specialised institutions. In 2014, for example, it created the China-Africa Press Centre (CAPC),²²¹ which works alongside the China Public Diplomacy Association, a non-profit organisation that brings together media outlets, learning institutions, and global firms. The 10-month-long training programme offered by the CAPC had 8 African journalists participating in 2014, 10 in 2015, 29 in 2017, and 34 in 2019. There are similar programmes targeting journalists in other parts of the world, mostly Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Also involved in the training of foreign reporters are institutions of higher education such as universities and long-established training centres, like the one hosted at the China International Publishing Group (CIPG), which oversees the *Beijing Review*, *China Pictorial*, and *ChinAfrica* magazines. Established in the 1960s, the CIPG Training Centre was, for many years, pivotal in the teaching of foreign languages for propaganda efforts. Now, it specialises in short-term courses for African and Asian journalists. In 2018, it organised a month-long programme for Ghanaian journalists²²² and a 20-day one for Kenyan professionals.²²³

The contents of these training programmes tend to be rather similar, regardless of their length and what institution is organising them.²²⁴ Reporters are given opportunities to visit successful Chinese companies, including media organisations; they often participate in group interviews of government officials, business leaders, scholars, and researchers at local think tanks; they are offered guided visits to provinces outside Beijing, where most of the training

takes place, and are shown examples of China's developmental success; they are invited to attend (and report on) major events such as international summits or meetings of the Chinese Communist Party; and they are taught a variety of subjects, including Chinese culture and languages, Chinese history and politics, and sometimes journalism and development communication. Reporters who take part in the ten-month-long programme organised by the CAPC spend the last two months interning at a Chinese newsroom. Only State-run outlets such as CCTV, CRI, Xinhua, *China Daily*, *People's Daily* and *Beijing Review* are part of this scheme.²²⁵ They also receive a diploma issued by one of China's leading universities, Beijing's Renmin University.

Because most African news organisations do not have the possibility of stationing a permanent correspondent in China, participating in training programmes organised by Beijing gives journalists a unique (and free of costs) possibility of filing stories about China for the media organisations they work for. Take the case of Solomon Elusoji, a Nigerian journalist, who was part of CAPC's 2018 cohort. During the first half of his stay in China, he completed "13 news assignments in the fields of politics, economics, culture and travel".²²⁶ The organisers of training programmes see this as one of the strengths of the initiative. Yu Lei, who oversees the training of journalists from the Asia-Pacific region, told a Filipino journalist in 2018 that "if journalists cannot come here in China, they cannot get first-hand information about China; our objective is also to help them in 10 months to have more direct contact with Chinese people, and then they can introduce the real picture of China to their people in their countries".²²⁷ The extent to which journalists are truly able to see the "real picture of China" could be a matter of debate. Journalists participating in Chinese-sponsored training programmes are rarely given the time, space and visas to report freely, and thus find themselves reporting only on the topics that their hosts would like them to report on. After interviewing over a dozen participants and organisers of these training programmes, Lina Benabdallah, from Wake Forest University, notes that journalists do not "agree that studying in China on scholarships funded by the Chinese government obliges them to frame their reports on China–Africa necessarily in favour of a positive image of China". However, the trainees understood that there are "no-go areas in terms of reporting", such as "open criticism of the Chinese government".²²⁸

After returning from a ten-month stay in China, Alpha Daffae Senkeni, an editor at Liberia's *FrontPage Africa*, told Andrew McCormick of the *Columbia Journalism Review* that his "trip was designed to sell China's image". However, he added, "I am not going to trade my principles for some Chinese belief about journalism".²²⁹ Participants in the training programmes, like Senkeni, are taught

about the notion of “constructive journalism”, which some Chinese scholars allege is the best description of the type of journalism practised by Chinese media in Africa. Retelling his experience in China, Paul Ntambara, a reporter for the *New Times* in Rwanda, writes that constructive journalism is “different from the simple Western “watchdog” journalism. It is not the journalism of extremes of positive and negative reporting”; instead he goes on to say, the “Chinese approach has been more about reporting with a view to finding solutions to problems, while the Western style has done little in this regard”.²³⁰ Not all journalists return from training programmes with the same attitudes towards this kind of journalistic practice. Speaking to the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Bonface Otieno, from Kenya’s *Business Daily*, was rather straightforward: “If the Chinese brought me to Beijing to influence my journalism, they failed”.²³¹

Offering training opportunities to African journalists is not something unique to China. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Ford Foundation in the US funded the International Press Institute to train hundreds of journalists from English-speaking countries and introduced them to “the norms of modern Western journalism”.²³² Today, organisations like Germany’s DW Akademie, funded by the German Office for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), as well as the German Foreign Office and the European Union, also provide training for journalists in developing nations. Aside from differences in the way journalism is conceived (and taught), what sets Chinese efforts apart is the breadth and diversity of programmes offered. For example, Beijing regularly offers scholarships to African journalists to pursue graduate studies in China at leading institutions, such as the Communication University of China, and Renmin and Tsinghua universities. There are also training opportunities for African government officials, some of which are organised by the CCP, which keeps a very active global training programme. Part of the “lesson” Chinese authorities hope to teach foreign visitors is that there might be a “Chinese model” for development that others might wish to adopt. While the impact of this type of engagement is not likely to surface in the short term, there are some examples that it might, in fact, be working. Discussing ways to fight misinformation on social media, the Nigerian Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, referred to his own experience while travelling to China to suggest that there should be more stringent regulation of social media in the country. “When we went to China”, he told the House of Representatives, “we could not get Google, Facebook, and Instagram. You could not even use your email in China because they made sure it is censored and well regulated”.²³³

Asymmetric media cooperation

When communicating its engagement with African countries in the media sector, Chinese authorities tend to refer to projects and activities as “cooperation” between two equal partners. Undoubtedly, over the last decade or two, both Chinese and African actors (including governments, media organisations and, to a lesser extent, media consumers) have benefitted from the increased levels of engagement in the media sector between the two sides. Thus, the popular use of the phrase “win-win” cooperation, which appears regularly in documents describing Sino-African relations. However, the benefits have not been the same to Chinese and African actors. Some of the areas in which the two sides are supposed to be “cooperating”, such as the development of telecommunications infrastructure, have created long-term dependencies that are unlikely to rebalance in the future. Moreover, benefits for most African countries are very short-term-oriented, while China stands to benefit the most in the long-term. These differences stem from a series of long-standing imbalances in Africa-China relations, which, in the media sector, manifest in the form of three asymmetries: volume of exchanges, audiences, and human and material capital.

First, there is a significant imbalance in the number of exchanges between China and African countries. While Chinese companies have benefitted from highly de-regulated media markets, where the entry costs for foreign companies is relatively low, African media would face a much more restricted environment were they to try to explore the Chinese media ecosystem; this applies to content creators, tech firms, and telecommunications companies. The country is not welcoming to foreign investment in the media/information and telecoms industries. China also restricts significantly the amount of foreign media content that can be imported. Despite the many “cooperation” agreements that China has signed with African governments and state media, according to official data, in 2016, China imported no African cartoons nor television series, and just three documentaries. At the same time, the country was able to export four television series, 19 cartoons, and 106 documentaries to African countries.²³⁴

Second, there is an audience imbalance. Because of the severe restrictions that exist in China, domestic audiences are rarely exposed to foreign content and, when they do, it is not coming from African creators. While there have been promises to bring Nollywood films to Chinese cinemas, and to explore co-productions, the crude reality is that Sino-African media cooperation has not worked towards creating a space for African media to reach Chinese audiences

directly; the same way that Chinese companies are able to do in the majority of African countries. Efforts to showcase Chinese TV series and documentaries on national television across the African continent are usually presented by Chinese actors as a way to “help” improve mutual understanding between Chinese and African audiences. As much as this content might be able to shape how some Africans perceive China, there is no similar strategy to help Chinese better understand the diverse reality of Africa.

Third, there is a significant imbalance in human resources and material capital. It is in this area that the “Chinese side” has been more proactive in trying to level the playing field: it has provided training to African journalists and given them the opportunity to report from China, and it has created favourable conditions to facilitate the buying of telecommunications technology by African governments and media companies. However, these same actions are creating long-term dependencies on both technological capabilities and know-how. There are ways in which China and African countries could work towards reverting all the existing imbalances, but, for this to happen, there needs to be an acceptance that the relationship, as it stands, is highly unequal. China is unlikely to notice, given that it stands to benefit the most from the current asymmetries. African governments might need to take a more active role in demanding a more equitable partnership that benefits a broader sector of society, including private and independent media.

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I want you to want me — Turkey and Africa's media

By Deniz Börekci & Dieter Löffler

Turkey as a new player on the African continent

Until the end of the Cold War, Turkey was politically and economically largely aligned with Western Europe and the USA. In the 1990s it began to be more active in foreign policy in other regions as well. The focal points of the new multilaterally oriented foreign policy were the Central Asian states of the collapsed Soviet Union with their Turkic-speaking populations as well as the Balkan states and the states of the Middle East and North Africa, as former territories of the Ottoman Empire. Sub-Saharan Africa was added in 1998 with the Expansion to Africa Action Plan.¹ However, due to the economic crisis in Turkey at the turn of the millennium, it was not until 2005 that Africa actually became an important field of Turkish foreign policy.²

In 2003, the Strategy for Development of Economic Relations with African Countries was drawn up under the leadership of the Foreign Ministry. The Turkish government declared 2005 the 'Year of Africa'. In March that year, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was the first Turkish Prime Minister to visit countries in sub-Saharan Africa, travelling to Ethiopia and South Africa, and on 12 April 2005 Turkey was granted observer status with the African Union.³ From 18 to 21 August 2008, Turkey hosted the first Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit in Istanbul, in which 49 African countries took part.⁴ With the Istanbul Declaration on Turkey-Africa Partnership: Cooperation and Solidarity for a Common Future⁵ and the Cooperation Framework for Turkey-Africa Partnership⁶ adopted there, this summit marked the beginning of the real implementation of Turkey's Africa strategy.⁷

In these two agreements, the fields of Turkish activities in Africa are outlined. The Istanbul Declaration states:

We agree to cooperate with vigour, in particular in the following areas and as outlined in the Framework of Cooperation annexed hereto: 1) Inter-governmental Cooperation; 2) Trade and Investment; 3) Agriculture, Agribusiness, Rural Development, Water Resources Management and Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs); 4) Health; 5) Peace and Security; 6) Infrastructure, Energy and Transport; 7) Culture, Tourism and Education; 8) Media and Information and Communication Technology; 9) Environment.⁸

And the Framework details in Section VIII, Media and Information and Communication Technology (ICT):

Recognising the importance of communication and information flow as a means of promoting knowledge about different cultures and societies in Africa and Turkey, breaking down stereotypes and enhancing mutually beneficial relationships among their peoples, We:

- 1. Commit ourselves to jointly plan and undertake agreed initiatives to proactively reach out to the African, Turkish and international media, and publicise the African Union, as well as African and Turkish priorities and achievements;*
- 2. Agree to promote opportunities for greater interaction and sharing of experiences among media personnel in Africa and Turkey through exchange programs that will create awareness of issues and challenges confronting Africa and Turkey with a view to establishing a framework of collaboration that can help to resolve them;*
- 3. Agree to support each other in the exploration of new technologies that would facilitate faster and more efficient communication and information dissemination;*
- 4. Agree also to support capacity building in the area of information technology;*
- 5. Agree to cooperate in the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Tunis, Tunisia from 16 to 18 November 2005.⁹*

The objectives of the Africa policy were defined by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then Prime Minister, in a circular published in the official journal *Resmi Gazete* on 26 March 2010:

The adoption of an integrated African Strategy in the fields which were accepted in Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit — held in 2008 — and based on joint cooperation has emerged as an immediate need in order to develop political and economic relationships with the rest of the countries in the continent. The Africa Strategy Document will be put into action in order to strengthen the 'partnership' outlook with the African Union (AU); to deepen our bilateral political, economic and military relations with the continental countries within the framework of 'Partnership for a Common Future'; to ensure the active participation of the other ministries, public institutions and non-governmental organisations to the cooperation activities that will be carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; to address the Turkish business environment in sub-Saharan Africa as well as North Africa; to increase support to our country in international organisations; and in order to promote our country effectively in the African countries which do not have adequate information about Turkey.¹⁰

The Joint Implementation Plan of Africa-Turkey Partnership 2015-2019,¹¹ which was adopted at the Second Africa-Turkey Summit in Malabo in Equatorial Guinea in November 2014, outlines the concrete implementation in more detail. This agreement contains several points that are also of interest to the media sector. In chapter I. Institutional Cooperation, Section 1.4 defines TİKA (see section 'TİKA' below) as a cooperation partner for "regional economic communities and civil society". The chapter headed VIII. Infrastructure, Energy, Mining and Transport mentions in paragraph 12. b) information and communication technologies as fields of cooperation. Furthermore, Chapter X is exclusively dedicated to the media sector:

In view of the catalytic role that media and information and communication technology is playing in advancing development, the Parties agree to: a) Encourage the production and broadcasting of programs, including films and dramas produced by Turkish and African producers; b) Provide training for young African journalists and media members; c) Organise a Turkish-Africa Media Forum during the period of this Implementation Plan; d) Support African centres operating in the field of ICT.¹²

The volume of trade with the countries south of the Sahara has grown rapidly in the last two decades: while it was only US\$1.075 billion in 2001,¹³ it was already US\$7.605 billion¹⁴ in 2019. However, this was just a minor item in the 2019 total foreign trade volume of Turkey, which was US\$391.178 billion.¹⁵ At the same time, Turkish Airlines expanded its network to 56 destinations in Africa and is now the second-largest airline in Africa in terms of passenger numbers after Ethiopian Airlines and number one in terms of the cargo sector.¹⁶

However, as important as opening up new markets for Turkey are expanding political relations and securing the support of African states in global institutions such as the United Nations.¹⁷ A first success was the election of Turkey as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in September 2008, with many votes from African countries.

In a diplomatic offensive, Turkey opened numerous new embassies in Africa. In 2002, Turkey only had 12 embassies there. By 2020, the number rose to 42 and eight more are planned.¹⁸ During the same period, the number of African embassies in Turkey grew from 10 to 35. To date, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has visited African countries 42 times, first as Prime Minister and then as President. Even if Erdoğan can be described as 'keen to travel', this shows that Africa has become a new focus of Turkish foreign policy.

What are Turkey's activities in Africa's media sector?

The area of media and information and communication technology, defined in the Istanbul Declaration of 2008, is being cultivated in different ways. On the one hand, state treaties have been concluded with many countries; on the other hand, various Turkish organisations are active in this sector. The spectrum ranges from the state press office to Turkish media and development organisations to purely commercial Turkish companies. However, the state institution that awards scholarships, YTB, and the Maarif Foundation, which runs Turkish schools abroad, are also active in this sector, at least indirectly.

However, the AKP government in Ankara also addresses the people of Africa directly. Thus, the current Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, last had his message of greeting for Africa Day published in various African media on 25 May 2020.¹⁹

Intergovernmental treaties

As part of the Opening to Africa policy, numerous contracts have been concluded with almost all African states. They mainly affect the economic sector, but also military cooperation, the health sector, agriculture and much more. At least with Djibouti²⁰ (2005), Senegal²¹ (2010), Gambia²² (2014), Ghana²³ (2015), Kenya²⁴ (2016), Benin²⁵ (2017), Guinea²⁶ (2020) and, more recently, the Republic of Congo²⁷ (2020), explicit agreements on culture, education, media, youth and sports have also been signed and published in the *Resmi Gazete*, the official journal of the Turkish Republic. These agreements do not differ significantly in terms of their content. For example, the 2010 agreement with Senegal contains the following paragraphs that are relevant to Turkish activities in the media sector:

- (1) *The Parties promise to develop their relations in the fields of education, culture, science, arts, information, sports and tourism.*
- (2) *The parties will allocate scholarships for undergraduate, graduate, research and language education in order to provide education to the citizens of the other party within the framework of existing laws and educations.*
- (3) *Mutual cultural and historical recognition: Exchange of books, publications, journals and researches that are focused on the civilisation and national assets of both countries; ... Exchange of knowledge and experience in the field of cultural assets and exchange of various publications such as books and researches.*
- ...
- (6) *The Parties promote cooperation in the field of press and information; particularly cooperation between news agencies and their institutions responsible for radio, television, cinema, broadcast and advertising. The Parties facilitate the exchange and publication of culturally and educationally beneficial productions and publications. The Parties will develop cooperation between broadcasting regulatory authorities (Radio and Television Supreme Council and Senegal Broadcasting Regulatory Board) and encourage academic exchange including broadcasting research and studies in*

order to prepare more effectively for the new broadcasting environment by following the developments in technology.

Only the 2017 agreement with Benin is a little more specific on the press and media. There it says in Article 5 — Cooperation in the field of Press:

The Parties shall encourage cooperation between the news agencies, press organisations, radio and television institutions of both countries.

- (1) Direct contact between the editors of the newspapers and periodical publications.*
- (2) Exchange of journalists and correspondents of press, radio and television.*
- (3) Radio and television programs exchange for enhancing knowledge about each other.*
- (4) The Contracting Parties shall endeavour to facilitate wider distribution of all forms of news freely by respecting the legislation in force.*
- (5) Cooperation in the fields of written and visual media, including advanced communication opportunities such as satellite and cable.*

It is not known whether other intergovernmental agreements also contain passages that affect the media sector. Because the Presidential 9th Decree on the Procedures and Principles of Endorsement of International Treaties, published on 20 July 2018 in *Resmi Gazete*, article 4 states:

Based on an International Treaty or the mandate of the law; technical and administrative treaties made by the President, a) if not being of an economic and commercial nature, b) if not concerning the rights of real and legal persons subject to the provisions of private law, c) if not changing the Turkish laws, may not be published in the Official Gazette. The President's decisions regarding the ratification of the treaties described in this paragraph may not be published in the Official Gazette.²⁸

Government press offices

At the beginning of the Opening to Africa policy, two government agencies took care of media activities in Africa: The Public Diplomacy Coordination (*Kamu Diplomasisi Koordinatörlüğü'nün, KDK*) and the Prime Ministry Press and Information General Directorate (*Başbakanlık Basın-Yayın ve Enformasyon Genel Müdürlüğü, BYEGM*). Today, both are part of the Republic of Turkey Directorate of Communications (*Türkiye Cumhuriyeti İletişim Başkanlığı*), which is attached to the Presidency Office.²⁹

The Press and Information General Directorate was responsible for initiating contacts with the media sector in Africa. Under the patronage of Vice Prime Minister Bülent Arınç, it organised the Turkey-Africa Media Forum, which took place in Ankara in May 2012 and attracted almost 300 media members from Turkey and 54 African countries. Topics of the forum included Turkish foreign policy, the Turkish media, the political and economic situation in Africa, training in the media sector, conflicts and terrorism in the media, social media, communication technology, and the possibilities of cooperation between Turkish and African media, as well as media support for the development of economic relations between Turkey and Africa.³⁰

As a follow up, the General Directorate participated in the 5th African Media Leaders Forum³¹ in Dakar in November 2012, which was organised by the African Media Initiative (AMI), based in Nairobi at that time. At this forum — again under the patronage of Bülent Arınç — two agreements for further cooperation were signed between the General Directorate and AMI on 7 November 2012: the Declaration on the Establishment of Turkey-Africa Media Platform and the Media Member Exchange Protocol.³² It is not publicly known what the two agreements contain.

The then general director of the General Directorate, Murat Karakaya, explained in an interview in 2016:

One of the concrete steps for the future was to establish a shared organisation for the institutionalisation of Turkish and African media consultations and members. The second one was to establish a journalist exchange program and the third one was, in the presence of our General Directorate and AMI, to build a mechanism to ease the access to technical devices and other devices of African media organisations and to improve African media sector ... Thanks

*to the Turkey-Africa Media Forum, over 300 press members from 54 African states came together.*³³

The intention behind it, Karakaya explained in this interview, was to support the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to campaign nationally and internationally for the Turkish 'Africa initiative' and to develop cooperation in the media sector.

The number of African media members who visited Turkey as part of various training programmes or at the invitation of Turkish organisations also increased sharply after 2012. So, some technical equipment projects for radio and TV stations, and training courses for media staff on site were realised. But the first Turkish-African media forum was not followed by another, in contrast to the media forums with Central Asian countries, for example.

Little is known about the second institution, KDK.³⁴ It is only mentioned in two articles and one book,³⁵ which describe its activities only summarily. As the Prime Ministry's Public Diplomacy Office, it should ensure the cooperation and coordination between public and non-governmental organisations in the field of strategic communication and promotional activities. According to these articles, the KDK focused on influencing Turkey's perception abroad. The government thought the best way to achieve this would be by strengthening its relations with international media. Part of its promotional activities were press releases to international media outlets and organising the Journalist Committees Program in cooperation with the BYEGM.

The Journalist Committees Program promoted bilateral exchanges among Turkish and foreign journalists. In 2013, 21 journalists from Niger, Gabon, Senegal and Kenya came to Turkey and visited various institutions and, in 2015, there was a tour by 16 medical journalists from Middle Eastern and African countries.³⁶ In addition, in 2015, a Journalist Committees Program was held in Uganda and 15 journalists from Uganda visited Turkey for five days.³⁷

Anadolu Agency (Anadolu Ajansı, AA)

Anadolu Agency sees itself as a global press agency that offers its content in Turkish, English, French, Arabic and Spanish and other languages, and also woos African media as customers.³⁸ It maintains a regional broadcast centre for sub-Saharan Africa in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and an office in Abuja (Nigeria). Further offices are planned in Khartoum (Sudan), Mogadishu (Somalia) and Johannesburg (South Africa). The press agency is already represented there with correspondents, as is the case in Kenya.³⁹

As Turkey's state news agency, however, AA is also directly involved in the implementation of the above-mentioned intergovernmental agreements. For example, during a meeting with Senegal's Minister of Communication, Sheikh Abdoulaye Dieye, in Dakar in November 2012, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç announced that AA would train journalists from the state agency Senegal Press.⁴⁰

AA also conducts such training courses in cooperation with other Turkish organisations (see sections 'TİKA' and 'YTB' further down). They are organised by AA's News Academy (*Haber Akademisi*) as part of the Correspondent Training Programs (*Medya Eğitim Programı, MEP*) and are offered to foreign journalists and media professionals in English-language courses. The programme includes in-house training, a general media programme and, since 2012, a special war journalism education.⁴¹ For the last one, a 12-day course offered several times a year, the AA cooperates with the Turkish general staff, the Security Department, the Police Academy and the emergency management organisation AFAD. Journalists from African countries regularly participate in these programmes, for example, in the September 2019 programme, Chad, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sudan, and South Sudan were represented.⁴²

Turkish Radio and Television (Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu, TRT/TRT World)

In 2013, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated a project to supplement radio and television of the state broadcaster TRT with international news channels that, among other things, should convey the positions of the Turkish government and its perspective on world events. Already in March 2014, TRT launched radio channels in Hausa and Swahili, which were also broadcast as web radio.⁴³ In August 2015,⁴⁴ TRT World was launched, initially broadcasting only via satellite. Today, all major social media platforms, such as YouTube,⁴⁵ Facebook⁴⁶ and Twitter,⁴⁷ are also served.

TRT World started as an English-only television and radio station with news, background reports, documentaries and cultural programmes. Today, TRT World broadcasts television and radio programmes in 41 languages, including Hausa and Swahili.⁴⁸ TRT does not yet have an office in Africa,⁴⁹ but a separate station, TRT Africa, is planned for sub-Saharan Africa.⁵⁰

Like AA, TRT also ran a training programme for journalists, the International Media Training Program (*Uluslararası Medya Eğitim Programı, UMEP*).⁵¹ The programme covered all aspects of journalistic radio and television production

and lasted one week.⁵² It was advertised as “an effort to build a universal bridge between hearts, to develop new collaboration opportunities.”⁵³ The programme began in 2009, but seems to have been abandoned after 2017, the year the last reports are found, and also the TRT website mentions no training dates afterwards.⁵⁴ A number of participants from Africa also attended the programme. The published lists of participants for 2015 and 2016 show 27 visitors from sub-Saharan countries.⁵⁵

These UMEP lists show that many of the participants were employees of state TV and radio stations.⁵⁶ This suggests that trainees attended UMEP training under cooperation agreements, such as those concluded during state visits by Erdoğan as Prime Minister or President: in June 2016 between TRT and Kenya State TV KBC,⁵⁷ in January 2017 between TRT and Tanzania National Television and Radio Channel,⁵⁸ also in January 2017 between TRT and Madagascar Radio and Television Corporation⁵⁹ and in April 2019 between TRT and Burkina Faso State TV BRT.⁶⁰

TRT currently runs the Media Techniques Training Program (*Medya Teknikleri Eğitim Programı, METEP*), which covers the technical aspects of broadcast production. In addition, TRT also provides technicians who set up studios on site, for example, for TİKA projects (see section ‘TİKA’ below).⁶¹ In the context of such TİKA projects, media staff attended both UMEP⁶² and METEP⁶³ training.

Private media companies

Natural TV, a commercial Turkish channel, has been broadcasting from Ankara to Africa via satellite since 2017.⁶⁴ It is also present on YouTube,⁶⁵ Twitter,⁶⁶ Facebook⁶⁷ and Instagram.⁶⁸ Current broadcasting languages are English and French but, according to General Director Tuncay Demir, the goal is to broadcast in African languages in the future.⁶⁹ The station has a representative in Cotonou (Benin)⁷⁰ and can be received in 18 countries south of the Sahara.⁷¹ According to the station, the main location of viewers is in Ghana, Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Liberia and Senegal.⁷² The station is operated by NTR Odak Radyo Televizyon AŞ.⁷³

An article in the newspaper *Hürriyet* gives a glimpse into the inner workings of the company.⁷⁴ About 30 of the staff are permanently employed, plus freelance producers. The majority of the team comes from Kenya, Rwanda, Ghana and Nigeria. The average age is 20 years. None of them come from the media or journalism, but most of them are studying or have studied in Turkey. *Hürriyet*'s article gives three examples: Rwandan news anchor Odile Ntual was studying

aviation management; talk show host Anissa Mugeni (Rwanda) was studying business, and health programme host Faustin Rutayisire was still studying medicine at the time the article was written. General Manager Tuncay Demir said, "When we started broadcasting, we met with Africans who had a doctorate and a businessman who was receiving medical training. Over time, our staff grew and we got ideas from them."⁷⁵

The station offers news, sports, health, agriculture, culture, tourism, education, films, series and cartoon films.⁷⁶ However, Natural TV does not produce the news itself, but gets it from Anadolu Agency.⁷⁷ Moreover, since May 2020, there is a cooperation agreement with TRT World, which contributes 3.5 hours to the daily programme.⁷⁸

The station was founded, according to Demir, to help the Turkish economy to develop the African market. In Hürriyet's article, he is quoted as saying: "Bringing Turkish culture and economy into African homes with this station makes me mentally very happy."⁷⁹ The website proclaims: "Natural TV will also promote all products manufactured in Turkey needed on the African market creating a great contribution to both the companies and the national economy."⁸⁰ Therefore, the Turkish state also pays 70% to 80% of the advertising rates for each advertisement of a company that exports its products to Africa, and 65% of the production costs of the advertising clips.⁸¹

However, this export promotion is not the only contact with the Turkish government. Under the heading 'Why Africa', the operators announce: "The economic, social and cultural initiative objectives of HE our President directed to Africa became the fundamental criteria in establishing policies and areas of coverage for our channel Natural TV." Thus, it is not surprising that the channel, in cooperation with the DEİK Turkish-African Economic Business Forum, is streaming Erdoğan's countless speeches live to the African continent. In addition, Natural TV also supports the campaign of the AKP government against the Gülen movement, which successfully ran many private schools in Africa, and which is now, in the government's view, a terrorist organisation against which the African people must also be warned.⁸²

The internationally quite successful Turkish television and film industry also sells its television series and feature films to Africa. For example, the two series *Kuzey Güney* and *Kara para aşk* (Black Money Love) ran dubbed into Amharic in Ethiopia⁸³ in 2016, the historical drama *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (The Magnificent Century), which is set at the time of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, was dubbed into Swahili in Tanzania⁸⁴ in 2018, and in 2019 the two series *Adını Sen*

Koy (You name it) and *Böyle bitmesin* (Don't let it end like this) were dubbed into Hausa on local Nigerian television channels.⁸⁵ These exports are not only a success for the Turkish film industry, but according to Turkish media reports they are also successful media for advertising Turkish products. Exports to Senegal, Tanzania and Kenya are said to have increased by 153%, 134% and 63% respectively after *Kara para aşk* was shown there.⁸⁶ "Especially Turkish products used in Turkish historical TV series are demanded by foreign customers," said Eyüp Kerem, the founder of the Bazarea ecommerce website, who stressed that TV series are Turkey's soft power and that they gain more influence with each passing day.⁸⁷

Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Coordination (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, TİKA)

TİKA was founded in 1992 to coordinate and promote economic, social and cultural cooperation with developing countries and is now under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.⁸⁸ From 2005 to 2019 TİKA, opened offices in 18 sub-Saharan countries.⁸⁹ TİKA thus took a pioneering role in Turkey's Opening to Africa policy and was the first Turkish state organisation to implement projects in sub-Saharan Africa.

Even if the media are not explicitly mentioned in the objectives of TİKA, an article on the website of TİKA states:

In particular, enhancing the cooperation in the media field with African countries has significant importance in terms of Turkey's opening strategy to Africa. TİKA promotes the economic, commercial, cultural and social relations between Turkey and African countries by providing technical equipment supplies and training programs to media organisations.⁹⁰

Between 2012 and 2017, TİKA mainly supported State media with technical equipment in a dozen smaller projects.

Supply of Technical Equipment

Year	Country	Media Organisation	Equipment
2012	Guinea-Bissau	Mansoa Local Radio	Technical equipment ⁹¹
2013	Kenya	African Media Initiative (AMI)	Technical equipment, telephone switchboard, assistance for the installation of a teleconference system ⁹²
2013	Tanzania	Tanzania Radio & Television Corporation	Cameras, VTR, character generator, cutting set, laptops ⁹³
2013	Uganda	Bilal FM	Modernisation of two FM radio stations, TV channel ⁹⁴
2014	Guinea-Bissau	National Channel	Technical equipment ⁹⁵
2014	Sao Tome and Principe	State Television & Radio, News Agency	Camcorder, air conditioner, teleprompter, editing computer, wireless microphone ⁹⁶
2014	Senegal	Senegal Radio & Television (RTS)	18 computers, 2 printers, 1 server and 2 projectors for a vocational training classroom ⁹⁷
2014	Somalia	Mogadishu University Radio	Broadcasting equipment ⁹⁸
2015	Mauritania	Radio Mauritania	Technical equipment ⁹⁹
2015	Uganda	State FM Radio Station	Extension of the coverage area ¹⁰⁰
2015 – 2016	Namibia	Walvis Bay Municipality Media Education Centre	Materials and equipment for vocational media training ¹⁰¹

Year	Country	Media Organisation	Equipment
2016	Zambia	National Broadcasting Cooperation, Zambia News and Information Services	Six camera packages with camcorders and tripods, computer editing system, monitor, sound system ¹⁰²
2017	Ethiopia	Ethiopian News Agency	News and image production equipment ¹⁰³
2018	Gambia	Gambia Radio & Television (GRTS)	Technical equipment to television ¹⁰⁴

Enlightening information about the reasons for this help can still be found for two early projects. In 2013, Shaban Mbuaje, Chief Mufti of Uganda and President of the Uganda High Islamic Council, stayed in Turkey at the invitation of the Turkish religious authority. During his visit, he asked TİKA for support in setting up three FM radio stations and a television channel. TİKA proposed modernising two studios of Radio Bilal in Kampala, as only three of 220 radio stations in Uganda are Islamic radio stations, while the rest are run by Christians.¹⁰⁵

Support for the African Media Initiative (AMI) 2013 was provided because TİKA saw the organisation, which also organised the African Media Leaders Forum, as the largest potential influence multiplier in Africa's media landscape, which could be helpful in developing relations with the media in Africa. Amadou Mahtar Ba, then AMI Chairman, declared he hoped that this was just the beginning and the cooperation with Turkish media institutions would continue increasing, whereupon Hüseyin Avni Aksoy, the Turkish Ambassador in Nairobi, promised further assistance in the technical field and in building up media personnel.¹⁰⁶

Another project stands out. In 2014, Sao Tome and Principe asked for support for health infrastructure. A technical delegation of TİKA visited the country and decided instead to support the State television and radio as well as the news agency. An explanation for this change of plans was not published.¹⁰⁷

TİKA also organises training courses in the media sector, some of them with external partners such as Anadolu Agency (AA) and Turkish Radio and Television (TRT).

Media Training Programmes

Year	Country	Media	TİKA Partner	
2013	Mauritania	Journalists Union	AA	Five days' war correspondent training for 12 journalists at the Middle East and Africa News Service / Istanbul Regional Office ¹⁰⁸
2014	Guinea-Bissau	National Channel	-	Training on TV broadcasting ¹⁰⁹
2015	Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast	Various radio stations	TRT & Türkmeç ¹¹⁰	Lectures about programme production, live broadcast techniques, technical equipment maintenance and repair, news techniques and programme presentation, and training in computer management, office applications ¹¹¹
2015	Ghana	-	-	Training on radio broadcasting ¹¹²
2015	Somalia	Mogadishu University FM Radio	-	Sponsorship of radio personnel's visit to Turkey ¹¹³
2015	South Sudan	-	-	Media capacity building programme ¹¹⁴
2015	Uganda	State Radio	-	Vocational training for the radio's personnel ¹¹⁵

Year	Country	Media	TiKA Partner	
2015	Union of the Comoros	Comoros Radio	-	Improvement in human resources ¹¹⁶
2016	Kenya	Various media	AA	Twelve media employees visited AA in Turkey and got information about AA's activities, broadcast languages and goals. ¹¹⁷
2016, on-going	Namibia	Walvis Bay Media Education Program	-	Vocational media training for young people ¹¹⁸
2017	Chad	Chad Journalists Federation	Chad Ministry of Information	Workshop, "Implementation of Media Ethics", with 80 Arabic-speaking journalists ¹¹⁹
2018	South East Africa	-	AA	Twelve days' training in diplomacy journalism, 78 hours of practical and theory lessons on foreign policy, diplomacy, energy, practical interview techniques and photo shooting ¹²⁰

Year	Country	Media	TİKA Partner	
2018	Somalia, Sudan	-	AA	Ten days energy journalism training, 78 hours of theoretical and practical courses on energy economy, diplomacy, security and law, regional energy policies and energy reporting ¹²¹
2018	South Sudan	General Directorate of Radio & Television, Presidential Press Unit	TRT	One-week training programme for 12 participants on camera use, lighting, sound, montage, news writing techniques, and programming in Ankara ¹²²
2018	Ethiopia, Gambia, Namibia, South Sudan, Zambia	Namibia State Broadcasting Corporation & others	TRT	Training in camera operation, lighting direction, voice direction and visual-media information technologies for 75 participants in Ankara ¹²³
2019	Kenya		TRT	Four-week training for 4 journalists with courses in video, audio and photo production and editing ¹²⁴

In addition to these individual projects for the further training of African media people, TİKA also finances their visits¹²⁵ and the participation of media employees in further training programmes in Turkey, such as MEP (see section 'AA' above), UMEP and METEP (both see section 'TRT' above) and is also involved in the current African Media Representatives Training Program (AFMED, see section 'YTB' below).

Two facets of Turkish politics are reflected in the projects of TİKA: On the one hand, TİKA acts as an extended arm of the Turkish Foreign Ministry and implements projects within the framework of political agreements with African states. On the other hand, TİKA, which as an organisation is directly subordinate to the Office of the President, addresses African citizens directly, without the detour via the State institutions of these countries.

A project from 2017 shows that TİKA is not only looking for economic, cultural and social cooperation, but is also directly used for political propaganda abroad. To mark the anniversary of the attempted coup on 15 July 2016 in Turkey, TİKA organised panels, press conferences and exhibitions about this incident. The Annual Report 2017 states: "The horrific coup attempt was explained to the people of the concerned countries in the newspapers, newsfeeds and billboards."¹²⁶

Presidency for Turks Abroad and related communities (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı, YTB)

The YTB was originally founded in 2010 to provide scholarships to Turks and Turkish speakers abroad. In 2012, the institution, which is attached to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, was entrusted with the Turkey Scholarship Program and awards all of Turkey's international scholarships.¹²⁷ These scholarships also resonate with many Africans. Between 2010 and 2019, according to YTB, 5259 students from 52 African countries studied in Turkey; a breakdown by country is not published.¹²⁸ At the moment there are no courses in journalism offered within the scholarship programme, but it is possible to study radio, television and cinema.¹²⁹ As the example of Natural TV shows (see section 'Private Media Companies' above), several academics from other fields also transferred into journalism in Turkey.

In 2019, the YTB, together with Anadolu Agency (AA), the African Researchers Association (*Afrika Araştırmacıları Derneği, AFAM*), and the African Coordination and Training Centre (*Afrika Koordinasyon ve Eğitim Merkezi, AKEM*) launched the African Media Representatives Training Program (*Afrika Medya Temsilcileri Eğitimi Programı, AFMED*). YTB is the sponsor and AKEM the coordinator of the project.¹³⁰

AFMED is a three-week training programme for people who are already professionally active in the media sector in their countries, but are still under 40 years old. The training takes place in Ankara and Istanbul. It includes theoretical and practical courses held in English, as well as opportunities for internships at

AA and TRT.¹³¹ The training programme that YTB offers on the AFMED website does not reveal what content the courses cover. However, the costs of flight tickets and accommodation, as well as city tours and other cultural events are covered by the programme. Participants only have to pay for visa fees.

The application is made using a relatively short online form that asks for your personal data, employer and motivation for the application.¹³² In addition, an application video of up to five minutes in length must be submitted. From sub-Saharan Africa, applications from the following countries were accepted for the first training course: Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa, and Sudan.

According to an AA report, the first and so far only training course in 2019 was attended by 20 participants from Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Liberia, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, and Tanzania. You can also find out about the content in the report: experts held presentations on topics ranging from internet journalism to data journalism, from crisis reporting to interview techniques. As the content of training, another report mentions social media, agenda and resources in journalism, the world media economics, media effects on social transformation, training in subjects such as photo and video applications and Turkey's image. AA and TRT studios were also visited.¹³³

Turkish Maarif Foundation (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, TMF)

After the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016, the State-run Turkish Maarif Foundation, which was founded in June 2016, took over many of the private schools run by the Gülen movement, also in Africa. It continued to expand this network of Turkish schools and now operates 144 schools and 17 student dormitories in Africa.¹³⁴

The Maarif schools also offer journalism clubs in their programme in addition to normal classes.¹³⁵ More important, however, is its function as an advertising medium for the AKP government and as a stepping stone to the Turkish universities.¹³⁶ In an article in *Insight Turkey*, a political magazine of the government-affiliated think tank SETA, it is said that the foundation,

promotes Turkish universities ... and thus contributes to the internationalisation of the Turkish educational system by attracting appropriately qualified students to Turkey for further education. In addition, the educational activities of the foundation constitute an

important example of cultural and educational diplomacy, which enables the positive promotion of Turkey's image abroad.¹³⁷

What are Turkey's intentions in Africa's media landscape?

If one reads texts by Turkish politicians, publicists or scientists on the subject, two terms stand out: 'win-win' and 'public diplomacy'. The former claims that Turkey's Opening to Africa policy is beneficial for both Turkey and Africa, in contrast to the relations that African countries have with Europe, particularly the old colonial powers. Many see these as harmful to Africa. Accordingly, 'win-win' appears above all in the statements made by Turkish politicians and government officials which are directed towards Africa, or in press releases intended to convince the domestic audience of the moral superiority of their own Africa policy.

The second term 'public diplomacy' appears primarily in political analytical texts.¹³⁸ In the case of Turkey, this soft power approach includes, among other things, all activities in the emergency aid and development sector, but also the Maarif schools, the awarding of Turkish scholarships or the training of journalists on site or in Turkey, as well as the technical support of media organisations in Africa. It describes the attempt to establish close relationships with parts of the African population and to actively influence public opinion in African countries outside the official political channels, in the interests of the government in Ankara, above all through influence multipliers, such as journalists or public figures who shape general opinion.

Public diplomacy has become a component of foreign policy in many countries. For the AKP government, it has become the central approach to gain influence in the targeted countries and to achieve its foreign policy goals.¹³⁹ Three common topics show what the real policy of the AKP government looks like, which has become increasingly Islamist, nationalist and aggressive in recent years.

Operation Peace Spring

Mehmet Korkut, the coordinator of the AFMED programme (see section 'YTB' above) said in an interview with the newspaper *Daily Sabah*: "We started to arrange the training programme a few months ago in cooperation with YTB and 200 people applied for training. We know that the selected journalists are important people in their country and they are effective people in their field."¹⁴⁰

These journalists would be influential for the ideas about Turkey in their countries, he continued, according to *Daily Sabah*.

Cihangir İşbilir, who spoke for Anadolu Agency at the kick-off event for AFMED training in 2019, said: "Turkey and African countries have established progressively stronger political and economic relations and deepened the diplomatic ties. ... Without any doubt, AFMED and similar programmes will move Turkey-Africa relations forward."¹⁴¹

He describes the AA News Academy as an important tool to break up the notions of Africa created by the global media by strengthening local media in Africa and building sustainable and strong cooperation. Through this, true news could be used to combat the double standards, distortions and lies of global media organisations.¹⁴²

By that, he means less the reporting on Africa, as is regularly put forward by the Turkish side, but rather the international reporting on Turkish politics, as becomes clear by an example that is intended to substantiate his statements:

*'Operation Peace Spring' carried out by Turkey in order to combat terrorism, was described as 'occupation' by some global media organisations. They reported the operation which targeted PKK/ YPG as an attack on the Kurds. They insist on these kinds of fake news. They propagated the most recent fake news as 'Turkey used chemical weapons', although the Turkish Armed Forces owns no chemical weapons. Turkey neither invaded Syria nor was carrying out an operation against Kurds or using chemical weapons. We can duplicate these examples. In order to eliminate the damages of these fake and distortional news, we have to grow strong media organisations that are reporting accurate news and bring up brave journalists. I believe that the AFMED program we initiate today will serve this purpose. I hope that these kinds of programs will be extended and deepened.'*¹⁴³

Abdullah Eren, President of YTB, played the same tune at this event:

Turkey's struggle in 'Operation Peace Spring' was rightful. Here, there are 20 young journalists from 13 different African Countries. While they are being trained here, they will also receive information about Turkey's Peace Spring Operation and foreign policy and they will spread this information in the places they go or in their own

*countries. Therefore, we also describe this programme as efforts of explaining and illustrating Turkey's position in the Operation Peace Spring.*¹⁴⁴

YTB also published on its Facebook page a propaganda poster of the Turkish government, which explains the Turkish governmental view on Operation Peace Spring.¹⁴⁵

Nevertheless, at the end of the event, the trainees were presented with a well-balanced package: Metin Mutanoglu, the agency's Deputy Director-General and Editor-in-Chief, presented to the visiting group of AFMED trainees two books published by Anadolu Agency, *Rising Africa* and *Operation Peace Spring*.¹⁴⁶

FETÖ

By the end of 2013 at the latest, a political struggle for supremacy broke out within the AKP between two factions: the members of the Gülen movement and the faction around Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. When parts of the Turkish military attempted a coup in July 2016 and parts of these putschists turned out to be members of the Gülen movement, Erdoğan and his comrades-in-arms used this to brand the entire Gülen movement as a terrorist organisation under the name of FETÖ and to persecute all its members. To this day, what happened on the night of the coup attempt and who organised it is only partly known to the public. A transparent, public enquiry did not take place.

At that time, the Gülen movement was operating in numerous countries around the world, including many African countries,¹⁴⁷ companies, schools and the media. Therefore, the AKP government took its fight against the Gülenists to Africa too.¹⁴⁸ In the years after the coup attempt, the AKP government urged the African countries with Gülen schools to expropriate these private schools and transfer them to the State-run Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMF), which had been established only one month before the coup attempt.¹⁴⁹

Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu ended his greeting message on Africa Day on 25 May 2017, which was also printed in African newspapers:

I would like to acknowledge the support and solidarity displayed by our African friends after this attempt against our democracy and basic freedoms. FETÖ has numerous networks in Africa, and poses an imminent threat not only to Turkey, but also for African

countries and their current leadership. Several African countries have swiftly and wisely taken action against FETÖ, by either closing or transferring FETÖ-affiliated schools to the Turkish Maarif (Education) Foundation or banning affiliated organisations. We call on all our African friends to follow suit.¹⁵⁰

In September 2017, Minister of Education Ismet Yilmaz once again urged the African ambassadors in Ankara, according to an AA article, that:

FETÖ's activities focus on education and the economy and that it uses hospitals, media organs, public and private institutions, and NGOs as a mask. Their private schools employ terrorists and pursue FETÖ's goals under the cover of education, Yilmaz added. 'FETÖ-linked schools pose a threat not only to Turkey's security but also to the countries they are active in,' he explained. 'So we want our African counterparts, who are friendly countries, to rid these schools of FETÖ elements.' he said.¹⁵¹

The pressure had an effect. In November 2017, five countries had already transferred the former Gülen schools to Turkey,¹⁵² without any evidence that the former operators and employees there had been involved in the coup attempt, let alone posing an obvious threat to their African host countries.

However, not only politicians and diplomats were 'enlightened'. TİKA too started a press campaign at least on the first anniversary of the coup attempt, among others in Africa (see section 'TİKA' above). When a South African media delegation visited Anadolu Agency's headquarter in Ankara in June 2018 on a trip with the Yunus Emre Institute, the Turkish cultural institute, Hasan Oymez, the editorial director of the Turkey News Department informed the visitors about FETÖ and the attempted coup. According to AA news, he said the terrorist organisation gives an impression abroad that it is as an "army of education." Finally, he handed the delegates the AA book *Minute by Minute FETO coup attempt*, which covers the chronology of the defeated July 15 coup and its aftermath.¹⁵³ Furthermore, lately TRT World showed itself once more as the government's mouthpiece. İbrahim Kalın, Spokesperson to the President, explained to the world on 14 July 2020 in a TRT World programme the impact of the coup attempt on Turkey's politics.¹⁵⁴

Neither TRT nor AA have to offer critical analyses and research on the background and causes of the attempted coup, let alone any form of criticism of

how the government was dealing with and coming to terms with this crisis. All that can be found is reporting that is completely along government lines.

'The Anti-Colonial Battle'

Africa's huge potential for sustainable development will be realised only when new forms of modern slavery, exploitation and dependence come to an end and instead Africans are allowed to develop their own potential in ways that are in tune with the spirit and traditions of the African continent in the 21st century. Turkey's win-win approach to Africa should be seen as a humble yet important contribution to this precious goal.

Thus the official website of the Turkey Africa Forum quotes the spokesman for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Ibrahim Kalin.¹⁵⁵

In Turkey's eyes, the Europeans, above all the old colonial powers France and Great Britain, are to blame for the fact that the African continent cannot fully realise its great potential. They maintain the colonial structures and only seek their own advantage on the continent, a win-lose situation for Africa.

This is completely different regarding Turkey. Fortunately for Turkey: "Unlike for past colonial powers, history is on our side. On the one hand, there is the human element, Turkey has deep-rooted historical and cultural ties with the continent dating back to the Ottoman Empire."¹⁵⁶ This was written by the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in a greeting message on Africa Day on 25 May 2017. Because, with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into North Africa, "the Ottoman Empire prevented colonial expansion in North Africa. Similarly, the Ottoman Empire, an African State, played a major role in preventing the penetration of colonialism in East Africa. In the 16th Century, the Ottoman Navy commanded by Admiral Seydi Ali Reis defended the people of the Zanzibar Island against the occupying forces", states a current document on Turkish-African relations from the Turkish Foreign Ministry that adds, "In the lands where it was once present, the Ottoman Empire has built the infrastructure, water systems, bridges, madrasahs, mosques, hammams for the benefit of local peoples."¹⁵⁷

This close and unselfish relation to African countries, which were partially included in the Ottoman State, such as Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Niger, and Chad, ended with the colonial era.¹⁵⁸ Turkey, now strengthened again, will help them to loosen the colonial fetters. The Turkish

media is part of that fight. Anadolu Agency, for example, not only wants to win new customers in Africa, but — according to Kemal Öztürk, Director General of the Agency — also wants to create a new information order and break the dominance of the 'global media organisation' with its negative reporting on Africa.¹⁵⁹

Ibrahim Tıǧlı, the head of the AA office in Addis Ababa, wrote about this in a plea for a radio station TRT Afrika:

It is a fact that Europeans exploited Africa (colonialism), but now let's leave this aside. If we want to exist in Africa with a non-colonial mentality, as we have been before and if we do not want to shut our eyes to the imperialist attitudes of the Europeans, then we have to be present in Africa. Being present in Africa cannot be achieved with only drilling water wells or distributing aid al-adha meat. Of course, these are necessary, however, above all we have to do all of these with press coverage. We have to announce the great things we have done in Africa to the world. If these people learn what we are doing, then awareness could be increased and they feel more protected against colonists.¹⁶⁰

A current example shows what this support can look like in reporting. On 23 June 2020, TRT World published a fast-paced video on its Twitter channel entitled *Africa's French Problem. We break down France's legacy of colonialism, political, economic, and military hegemony over Africa* and tweeted: "France has always been interested in Africa, but for all the wrong reasons. Here's a quick lesson on colonialism in less than 5 minutes."¹⁶¹

In it, in a self-righteously smug tone, right things are mixed with distortions, twists and polemics, and the whole thing is then garnished with factual errors. The young presenter declares Ghana to be an ex-colony of France — the map in the background generously adds the Democratic Republic of Congo too — and claims that the two CFA-Franc zones are controlled by the French Ministry of Finance;¹⁶² the French never withdrew from Africa even after colonial times; France still maintains military bases in Africa and wages numerous wars there; with a clique of politicians and businessmen who were subservient to France, they would continue to rule; this system would be kept running by bribing African leaders, working with dictators such as Idriss Déby (Chad) and Ali Bongo (Gabon); the aim is to procure energy, money and raw materials such as uranium, gold, diamonds, oil and gas there. The undertone of the whole sermon

is Turkey is different; Turkey is better; Turkey is on the side of the oppressed peoples.¹⁶³

A win-win situation?

What about the 'win-win partnership' that Turkish politicians and media proclaim anytime and anywhere?¹⁶⁴ In addition to the search for new political and military partners, the economy was one of the driving forces behind the Turkish Opening to Africa policy. Has it been worth it for Africa so far? In 2001, Turkish exports to sub-Saharan Africa amounted to only US\$0.371 billion, but Turkish imports from this region amounted to US\$0.704 billion. By 2008, Turkey had already reversed this ratio with US\$3.212 billion in exports and US\$2.503 billion in imports. Since then, the gap in trade has widened in favour of Turkey, with the ratio of US\$5.794 billion exports to US\$1.811 billion imports in 2019.¹⁶⁵

And what is the situation in the media sector? Nairobi Ambassador for Turkey, Hüseyin Avni Aksoy, stated in 2013 in a TİKA report that the media play a significant role in promoting peace and achieving democratic governance in Africa. He added that Turkey has decided to support the increase in human resource capacity in Africa in the media sector, as well as in other areas, and said that Turkey will continue these kinds of technical projects within a 'win-win principle', without expecting something in return.¹⁶⁶

The Turkish series exported to Africa seem to have a positive effect on Turkey's image. When *Kara para aşk* (Black Money Love) ran in Ethiopia in 2016, the young people quoted in a report by Anadolu Agency were enthusiastic:

Female teenagers like Bethlehem Tilahun, Megdelawit Daniel, and Hawi Yadessa, are hooked to Turkish TV serials dubbed in Amharic and broadcast by a private television, Kana. ... 'From what we came to know, Turkey and Turks are infinitely creative,' said teenager Daniel. His friend Yadessa also said that dramas have brought Turkey closer to his generation.¹⁶⁷

In the same article, communication expert Henok Mekonen explains:

The positive perceptions which begin with a section of society becomes a general opinion and belief over time. 'Positive attitudes about nations is a foundation of trustworthy all-rounded relations. Turkey and Ethiopia shall protect the growing positive perceptions from actions that invalidate the attitudes,' he said.¹⁶⁸

The training of journalists seems to work even better in this respect. Anadolu Agency interviewed African participants after the AFMED training course in 2019, one of whom said: "Through this program, journalists in Africa are informed about Turkey's economy, politics and culture. We return from the program as ambassadors to our countries. When someone in our country will say something bad about Turkey, we are Turkey's advocate." And participant Fatma Daura from Nigeria said: "Turkey has done a lot for Africa and without knowing much about Africans. If a country does a good job for Africa, then I think you should tell the people. Turkey is not like other European countries; the Turks do not come to Africa to exploit us."¹⁶⁹

TV series and journalistic training courses thus develop the desired effect of making Turkey better known as a country in Africa and draw the positive image of a Turkey that strives for an equal partnership with Africa.

On the African side, the 'winners' are not only the young people who watch the Turkish series with enthusiasm but also, for example, the recipients of the technical equipment donated by Turkish institutions or the numerous students who are able to study in Turkey on scholarships. But what about the journalistic training?

The two most important media players in Turkey, TRT and AA, are both firmly in State hands. With a decree in July 2018, TRT has been tied to the Directorate of Communications, which means it is directly under the control of the Presidency.¹⁷⁰ AA is a joint stock company founded by the state of Turkey and formally owned by the Undersecretariat of Treasury. On 17 January 2018, AA and the AKP-affiliated think tank SETA signed a contract in which they agreed to cooperate. SETA is to provide consulting services and to contribute to the training of AA staff in the production of reports, analyses and news.¹⁷¹ The two state-owned media houses have degenerated into mere mouthpieces of the AKP government.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's family and allies in the private sector control more than 90% of the news channels and newspapers in Turkey.¹⁷² The World Press Freedom Index ranked Turkey number 157 out of 180 countries in 2018. Since the anti-government Gezi protest in 2013, media freedom in Turkey decreased continually and the government today largely controls the publishing of any news. Reporters without Borders writes:

Many journalists who were critical of the government were fired from once-mainstream media outlets; owners of critical media

have been threatened with tax suits that could bring down a whole company, while owners of outlets that seem to support the government have made better and better in their investments in other sectors.¹⁷³

A journalistic education in and through a country with such conditions in the media sector promotes journalism that serves only as a propaganda instrument of the rulers, and does not report critically and truthfully. In this respect, it is more than questionable whether Africa's media sector actually benefits from Turkish engagement.

Christopher Kayumba of *The Chronicles* from Rwanda aptly summarises it in an analysis:

Countries like China, UK, Turkey and Russia are investing in media because they are outward looking, seek global influence and power and have clearly defined economic and strategic interests to secure on the continent. In other words, these states not only recognise the soft power media wields to win heart and minds but also know that controlling the airwaves on the continent is one of the best ways they can achieve their articulated goals ... these states have even defined the general message or narrative their media are wiring stories around.¹⁷⁴

Epilogue

Unfortunately, Turkish state institutions are not very willing to provide information today. We tried to get information from several institutions by phone and email about their projects in the African media sector, but were either turned away or passed on from one employee to another who was supposedly responsible for such information. In the end, we did not get any information from there.

The information in the publications of these institutions is generally more of a propagandistic rather than descriptive or even analytical nature and is primarily aimed at highlighting and praising the work of the institutions and the Turkish government. Details on individual projects, for example, on the content of training courses and advanced training courses, are only disclosed in summary form. Unfortunately, figures on the financial scope of individual projects cannot be found either. Reports on these projects from AA, TRT or in

Turkish newspapers do not differ substantially from these publications in terms of content.

One possible explanation for this is that all Turkish actors in the African media sector are state or state-affiliated institutions and for the most part are directly subordinate to the presidential office. *The Presidential 9th Decree on the Procedures and Principles of Endorsement of International Treaties* of 2018 shows how this relates to transparency and openness.

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Weaponry, raw materials and propaganda

Russia's new arrival on the continent

By Anna Birkevich

Introduction: Mali's 2020 coup d'état leaves traces to Russia

Jubilant crowds in Bamako holding up signs saying, "Mali, Russia, Thank you" after the ousting of President Boubacar Keita in August 2020 could not have been clearer.¹

For a while it was rumoured the junta leaders, Colonel Malick Diaw and Sadio Camara, were trained in Russia. They are allegedly the chief architects of the coup d'état on 18 August 2020. Both of them took part in a year-long military training programme in Russia. Some experts trace back Russia-Mali relations to the 1960s, following the independence of the West African nation.

"When Malians took to the streets last January to demand the departure of foreign forces in Mali, their goal was [to call for] Russia's return," Fatoumata Coulibaly, a professor at the University of Bamako, told Deutsche Welle.

Research by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington shows that Moscow's influence on the African continent has been growing, especially after international sanctions following Russia's takeover of Crimea in the Ukraine. Russia is looking for new markets and partners to position itself as a global power.²

"One of the reasons why Russia is so interested in Africa is to compete with the West. The more influence it has in Africa, the less control of the West", Irina Filatova, Research Professor at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, told Deutsche Welle.

The Russia-Africa Summit: Moscow and the liberation of African countries from Western narratives?

The location could not have been more symbolic. Moscow chose to host the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi where the 2014 Winter Olympic Games were held. The sporting event was celebrated in Russia as a decisive step towards becoming a global power. On 23 February 2014, during the closing ceremony for the Olympics, Russia carried out a military operation in the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea.³ Was it a coincidence?

Russia's takeover of Crimea and the Winter Games in Sochi highlighted Russia's new ambitions on the world stage. And Moscow did not stop there. Russian military involvement in Syria followed in September 2015. After years of economic troubles, domestic consolidation and crackdown on anti-government protests in 2010-2011, Moscow believed it was poised to return to the world stage as an assertive superpower and increasingly popular alternative to the club of Western liberal democracies.

In October 2019, the former press centre of the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi became the venue for another high-profile international event, the first Russia-Africa Summit. Moscow did not spare a penny. It was one of the most expensive conferences the Russian government had funded in a decade. State agencies spent more than 4.5 billion rubles (an estimated 64 million euros) for the two-day summit that hosted 43 African heads of state and government.⁴

The focus of the two-day summit was economic cooperation. The combined volume of Russia's exports to Africa from 2009 to 2018 reached an estimated \$100 billion. It is one of the main suppliers of military equipment and arms, accounting for 36% of total arms imports in sub-Saharan Africa from 2015 to 2019.⁵ Russia's trade interests in Africa have been rising. Exports reached \$17 billion in 2018. This growth in trade is not linked to natural resources. Africa is now the main destination of non-oil exports from Russia. The continent is not buying Russian fossil fuels. Only two countries are accounting for nearly two-thirds of the amount: Egypt (\$37.5 billion) and Algeria (\$25.8 billion). The other countries were far behind (Morocco – \$8.4 billion, Tunisia – \$4.7 billion, Nigeria – \$3.2 billion and South Africa – \$2.1 billion). The overall breakdown of Russian exports is very different from the post-industrial age. In 2018, approximately 80% of exports fell into the following five categories: "secret code" (mostly weapons) – 25%, cereals (wheat) – 23%, oil products – 17%, black metals – 8%, ships and "other vessels" – 5%.⁶

The summit was an opportunity for Russia to do more business with Africa. In Sochi, Russian state agencies and companies signed deals worth 800 billion rubles (around 10 billion euros).⁷ But the event was not just about selling more to Africa. For Russia and its African partners, there was another important topic on the table — fighting Western narratives in media and public opinion. One panel discussion at the summit was dedicated to mass-media cooperation between Russia and African countries. African speakers lamented and criticised the “very negative” coverage of Africa in “Western media” on one hand and the lack of “credible” information on Russia on the other.

“We should stop seeing the things through the eyes of others — through the eyes of Reuters or Associated Press,” said Khalil Hashimi Idrissi, the director of Moroccan news agency Maghreb Arabe Presse agency.

African countries get news about Russia from “Western and American” media, and that distorts the perception of Russia.⁸

“We should build a [Russian-African] partnership, which will allow us to *change the narratives on the whole continent*,” said Albert Kofi Owusu, the director general of the Ghanaian news agency.

State-run Russian news agency TASS is more than happy to help. At the summit, its CEO Sergey Michailow announced it would intensify cooperation with African counterparts with the aim of granting the continent’s population access to “another view on world news and affairs,” one that is different from “most western media.”⁹

Russia has attacked “too negative” and “too critical” coverage of the country, in particular its government, and turned it into one of the signature issues for criticising Western media.

“We journalists shouldn’t just report deaths, murder and mass protests, we must also show success and achievements,” said Alexej Vasilyev, editor-in-chief of *Asia and Africa Today* and co-chairman of Africa Institute of the Russian Academy of Science.

The African media all too often reproduce one-sided narratives and sometimes anti-Russian clichés in Western media, he said.¹⁰

In an attempt to improve coverage and help readers and viewers get a more positive view of Russia and its activities in Africa, state news agency TASS plans

to open offices in some African countries, with the support of the Russian Ministry of Foreign affairs. The initial phase includes Senegal, Nigeria and Ethiopia in 2020. Then Angola, Madagascar, Tanzania and Guinea will follow.¹¹

Meanwhile, Russia's Ministry of Communications announced initiatives, from offering content produced by State-run media (RT and Sputnik) to African media to training journalists from the continent. Both RT and TASS said they were ready to host African journalists. Russian experts are more likely to travel to Africa to provide training workshops, due to high airfares, because it's cheaper to bring Russians to Africa.

RT (formerly Russia Today) will play the key role as content provider. The broadcaster is ready to provide a full package of video content — news, analysis and documentaries in three languages: English, French and Arabic.¹² The video news agency RUPTLY (a subsidiary of RT, headquartered in Berlin, Germany) is planning to distribute video content produced by TV stations in Africa. Less than a week after the summit, RT France declared it would open a subsidiary in a Maghreb country.¹³

The Russian government gained expertise in bringing the “right narratives” to the independent (or Western minded) media. After replacing Boris Yeltsin as President, Vladimir Putin had the state take over electronic media (TV stations) to bring public opinion in line with official propaganda. Then, over the years, the system of carrot-and-stick oppression has been perfected.¹⁴

Soft power: Russian players in Africa

RT, Sputnik and Ruptly are all officially registered State-funded media entities. That means they are obliged to adhere to local media laws and to be “objective,” or to at least try. Non-state actors are the second part in the, “liberation of Africa from Western narratives.” While they may pretend to act independently, they have obvious links to people and companies close to the Russian government.

Russia's non-military arm is coordinated by the Foundation for National Values Protection. Its president is journalist Alexander Malkevich. He began his career at a local newspaper in St. Petersburg. The foundation was set up in 2019 with the goal to spread the “Russian ideology of good” without being limited to national media laws, journalistic ethics or international standards. Among those present during the press conference at which the new foundation was presented was Vitaly Milonov, a Member of the Russian Duma (parliament)

and author of the scandalous law prohibiting “homosexual propaganda,” which led to an increase in homophobic attacks across the country.¹⁵ The foundation’s self-declared goal is “to defend against the activities of the foreign non-governmental organizations that are trying to impose the wrong values on Russians. Russia lacks soft power, and we confront Europe with all the lies which are being spread about us.” This fits with the general line of Russia’s pushback against US- and EU-sponsored efforts to support regime changes through mass demonstrations (so-called “colourful revolutions”). After the “Orange Revolution” in Kiev, Ukraine, from late 2004 to early 2005, Moscow introduced legislation limiting foreign support for non-state organisations. In 2014, it restricted foreign involvement in Russian media and introduced the label of “foreign agent” for NGOs and the media or any actors receiving financial support from abroad.

The founder of the Foundation for National Values Protection especially emphasised that it will act independently of entities like RT because mass media must remain objective, and a non-governmental organization has more freedom to communicate its positions.¹⁶ A month after its launch, the Foundation transferred 5 million rubles (nearly 62 500 euros) to Maria Butina — a Russian woman convicted of espionage in the US.¹⁷ The funds were to be spent appealing Butina’s conviction by the US courts and getting her prison conditions improved. It is unclear where the money came from. Alexander Malkevich, who has declined to name the foundation’s financial backers, coordinated the website “USA Really,” which was linked by Russian media to the “troll factory” in St. Petersburg. As a result, he landed on the US sanction list for his role in USA Really, which the US government says “engaged in efforts to post content focused on divisive political issues but is generally ridden with inaccuracies.”¹⁸

Alexander Malkevich attended the Russia-Africa summit. The foundation hosted a panel discussion titled, “Africa’s future — Sovereignty and traditional values as key elements of development.” The Russian government is pushing African “traditional values” as an alternative to Western liberal democracy, and this is not just limited to LGBTIQ rights. Part of the backlash aimed at the opposition movement, which followed the 2011-2012 anti-government mass protests, was directed at the LGBTIQ community. The group is considered one of the main players spreading liberal ideas to Russia. Promoting “traditional values” can be used as a rationale for the state to defend itself against the Western (and liberal) narratives.

The foundation will be collecting “trustworthy news” in African countries and spreading it. Such “objective” information would help balance the news field,

overcrowded with “unverified” news from the West, Malkevich said at the summit.¹⁹

African “projects” represent a third of the portfolio of the foundation, according to Malkevich.²⁰

“We have understood that there is a niche in the market of political consulting in Africa,” he said. “We want to help Russian companies to evaluate the situation on the ground.”

One such “political consultant” was arrested in Libya in May 2019. Russian sociologist Maxim Shugalei and his local translator were imprisoned for allegedly manipulating the elections in Libya. The Russian sociologist’s team was on assignment for the Foundation in Libya. Its goal was to collect “sociological studies and data” ahead of the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi.²¹ The anti-government forces did not believe they were conducting sociological studies in the middle of a civil war. Shugalei and his team were arrested.

“Africa is a huge market, which is interesting for Russian companies. They need an overview about domestic issues in their countries of operations,” Malkevich said in an interview that shed more light on how he thinks. In his opinion, Russia and African countries share a wish to prevent “liberal sexual lessons in schools, imposed by foreigners.”²²

But the main focus of the foundation lies not at the opposing Western standards of sexual education, but in pushing back on US-backed “regime changes” worldwide. The Foundation for National Values Protection published the results of an opinion poll in Libya during the first half of 2020.²³ The majority of respondents in the phone survey did not support foreign military intervention, and they were against Turkish intervention in their country. “The crisis in Libya was provoked by foreign players, which are preparing a similar plan for Russia [sic], for that reason it is important to watch the results closely to prevent such a scenario in our own country”.

“The democratization from abroad which was brought to Libya in 2011 has transformed a rich and blossoming country into what we see today — a fragmented country, with foreign players fighting for resources and criminals running the government in Tripoli,” Malkevich said. The poll shows that foreign intervention leads to domestic consolidation where citizens overcome political divisions and differences within the country in the face of a foreign power.

Foreign informational campaigns are spreading fake news on the conflict in Libya (Malkevich). While it may not come as a surprise, the polls, studies and other findings by the Foundation's experts often overlap with the activities of the Wagner Group, a private army which has had activities that can be traced to eastern Ukraine, Syria, Libya and even some sub-Saharan African countries. The group has been linked to Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin. He is a good example of a person involved in Moscow's stealth operation, in which non-governmental actors push the interests of the state. While the group's private army is not part of the Russian armed forces and has no juridical status, it is estimated to have as many as 1300 to 2500 members. Moreover, it has allegedly carried out Vladimir Putin's dirty work abroad.

The Wagner Group's interests in sub-Saharan Africa grew in 2017 after Moscow's involvement in the negotiations with governments in Sudan and the Central African Republic. The group's involvement in Sudan can be traced to 2017, according to BBC reports. Some 100 Russian military instructors trained the military in Sudan.²⁴ During that period, two Russian companies, M Invest and Meroa Gold, were granted concessions for gold mining in Sudan. In summer 2020, both firms were placed on the US government's sanctions list.²⁵ Sudan is one of the key countries of Russian involvement in Africa.

Russian specialists drew up a political and economic reform programme designed to keep President Omar al-Bashir in power, according to reports by *The Guardian*. This included a plan to smear anti-government protesters. The tactics were not dissimilar to those used in Russia against the anti-Putin opposition. One ploy was to use fake news and videos to portray demonstrators as "anti-Muslim," "pro-Israel" and "pro-LGBTIQ." Russia also allegedly advised the Sudanese government to raise the price of print media, thereby making it harder for the regime's critics to get their message out, and to discriminate against them as "foreigners" at anti-government rallies.²⁶

Meanwhile, Russian firm Lobaye Invest was granted a mining licence for gold and diamonds in the Central African Republic. Its CEO, Yevgeny Khodotov, started a career in the department for organised crime at the police department in St. Petersburg. He worked for a company owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian businessman known to have close ties with Vladimir Putin.²⁷

Russia was supposed to deliver weapons and ammunition to the armed forces of CAR free of charge and send military trainers from Russia. Since 2018, they supposedly fight on the side of General Haftar in Libya.²⁸

'Putin's chef' expands operations to Africa

Russian media have identified businessman Evgeny Prigozhin as one of the main players to whom Moscow may be outsourcing "dirty work" linked to military and information operations abroad. He has been dubbed "Putin's chef" by the press but his job is more dubious than it sounds. He is thought to be one of the main Russian players beyond its borders, helping Moscow's efforts to involve non-state contractors in military work and field operations, a strategy that could have been copied from the US. Washington has been known to hire private firms to work in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Prigozhin is considered one of the "30 most influential people in St. Petersburg," at least according to one newspaper.²⁹ The level of his proximity to Putin remains unclear, but his biography provides some insight into his personality. Prigozhin was born in 1961 in St. Petersburg (then called Leningrad during Soviet rule). He did not take the law seriously during his youth. At the age of 18, he was convicted for the first time for stealing. He was fortunate enough to evade prison and was placed on probation. Two years later, Prigozhin was sentenced to 12 years in prison for fraud and robbery. He spent nine years in a Soviet working camp before being released in 1990, a year before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

He started up a hot dog chain in St. Petersburg and later became a manager for a supermarket chain. He opened a bar, a restaurant, and a catering company. One of his businesses was a luxury floating restaurant, to which then Russian President Vladimir Putin invited France's President Jacques Chirac and US President George W Bush on their visits to St. Petersburg. Putin also celebrated aboard the floating restaurant in 2003.

Yevgeny Prigozhin finances the St Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency, which is better known as the "troll factory." It was first mentioned by the Russian media in 2013 after a wave of postings and comments on social media, which targeted the opposition in Russia. Later, the agency redirected its focus abroad on the US presidential election campaign. In 2019, Washington placed the Internet Research Agency on a sanction list for its repeated efforts to influence US politics, especially elections.³⁰

In 2015, Yevgeny Prigozhin's companies received contracts from Russia's Ministry of Defence of around \$1 billion.³¹ In 2018, Russian President Putin told US TV network NBC and Austria's ORF that he knows Prigozhin personally

and that the businessman had no links to the government. He then went on to compare Prigozhin to the Hungarian-American billionaire and investor George Soros.³² That is another sign of how Moscow sees the role of non-governmental actors that are pushing its national agenda on the global scale.

In 2019, Prigozhin became the chairman of the board of trustees of a newly founded media holding called "Patriot". Its goal is to "maximize the spread of information about events in Russia for the creation of positive information fields and push back on mainstream media that promote negative information and do not see any good that happens in our country."³³ While that may sound like a bad PR gag from an ad agency, it makes a perfect sense from the Russian point of view. There is a general perception in the country that foreign press and independent domestic media are overly critical of the new Russia.

Russian media started to report on Prigozhin's activities in Africa in 2018. They found links between the Russian businessman's companies and their work with African governments on security issues, political consulting and weapon imports, in addition to receiving access to natural resources and mining exploration activities as compensation. Prigozhin's companies are known to operate in Algeria, Libya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Angola, Madagascar and the Central African Republic. His political consultants were involved in the election campaigns in the DRC and Madagascar in 2018.³⁴

Political consultants with links to Prigozhin are working in at least 20 African countries, according to Russian media. Their goals are to push anti-Western rhetoric and inflame local conflicts during election campaigns.

Another report by the independent Russian TV channel Rain put the number of Russian political consultants with potential links to Prigozhin at 200.³⁵ Several reports have been written about the involvement of the businessman's companies in Rwanda, Chad, Benin, South Africa, Zambia and Cameroon. In some cases the political consultants and experts receive support from members of paramilitary groups.

In April 2018, Russian business daily *Kommersant* reported that Russian political consultants would be monitoring the political situation in Madagascar, Kenya, South Africa and a few other African countries which had elections scheduled in the coming two years. The experts' work was organised and paid for by Yevgeny Prigozhin, according to the newspaper. Most of the consultants came from St.

Petersburg, and the job openings in Africa were only open to male applicants. They were not allowed to talk to the media about their work.³⁶

Prigozhin's companies may have spent up to \$15 million on their political consulting activities in Madagascar alone. The businessman coordinated his international activities personally with President Putin, according to Russian publication "Project," which quotes a high-ranking Russian official who spoke anonymously.³⁷ Prigozhin's companies have been linked to dubious deals in several countries. In summer 2020, Washington announced it was adding more of the businessman's companies from Russia, Sudan, and China to its sanctions list.³⁸

The scope of Prigozhin's activities in Africa remains unclear, but there is evidence that the media projects are now up and running, albeit with limited impact. The news website Africa Daily Voice is headquartered in Morocco and a French-language news service, Afrique Panorama, is based in Madagascar's capital Antananarivo.³⁹

Moscow offers free content to African media partners

In February 2015, Russian state news agency Sputnik signed an agreement to exchange content with Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram*. Translated stories from Sputnik and RT are published on the newspaper's website *Bawaba Al-Ahram*, alongside news from Reuters.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Sputnik also signed a similar agreement to swap content with Algeria's state-run news agency, Algeria Press Service.⁴¹ "Algeria and Russia are working together to create a multipolar world," said Oleg Osipov, deputy editor-in-chief of Russia Today Media Group, which owns Sputnik.

In early 2017, Sputnik signed an agreement with South Africa's State-run news agency SAnews.⁴² In a press release, Sputnik was described as "a modern multimedia news agency with hubs in dozens of countries. It points the way to a multipolar world that respects every country's national interests, culture, history and traditions". A similar agreement followed with the Moroccan state news agency Agence Maghreb Arabe Presse (MAP) in December 2018.⁴³ And the following May, Moscow signed an agreement with the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo to establish connections between their countries' state-run news agencies and national broadcasters — with the aim of exchanging content and educating journalists. In addition, Russia said it would deliver technical assistance to the DRC to support its transition to digital

broadcasting.⁴⁴ Another deal was also inked between Sputnik and Congolese national broadcaster Radio-Télévision Nationale Congolaise (RTNC). The contract includes content exchange in English and French and also for radio programmes.⁴⁵

Sputnik also delivers content to another media company, in neighbouring Republic of Congo, Africanews. The Euronews subsidiary, which is headquartered in Pointe Noire, is majority-owned by Media Globe Networks, managed by Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris.⁴⁶ In May 2019, RT signed an agreement with the state broadcaster Eri-TV to provide education for journalists and financial support to the state TV network. Russian company TV Novosti, which owns the Russia Today Media Group, provided Eri-TV with the technical equipment to broadcast RT in all of Eritrea. It uses RT content in English and Arabic.⁴⁷ Sputnik also signed a similar agreement with Ivory Coast's State-run news agency in August 2019.

What is Sputnik?

It is one of the biggest content providers across the globe, named after the world's first artificial satellite which the Soviet Union launched in 1957. The media company Sputnik, which is a subsidiary of the Russia Today Media Group, was founded in 2014.⁴⁸ It is headquartered in Moscow and provides online and radio news in 33 languages, delivering content in English, Arabic, Spanish, Chinese and Farsi to its international partners.

Fighting Islamists in Mozambique

Russian guns-for-hire, with links to the Kremlin, sustained casualties while fighting Islamic militants in Mozambique, according to CNN reports. This is just another example of Russia's growing reach in Africa. Dozens of private military contractors are supporting the Mozambican army against an insurgency in its northmost province, Cabo Delgado. Mercenaries in the resource-rich southern African country appear to be associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin, "Putin's chef."

Doing politics in Zimbabwe

"The Russia-Africa Summit has overhauled the whole political agenda in Africa and brought new expectations to many countries, Russia is on the way back!", a reporter of the Russian tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* wrote after a visit to

Zimbabwe. Her article discussed growing enthusiasm for Russia as a player on the continent. While the good old days of friendship with the Soviet Union are gone, the memories are not. And Russia can benefit from them today. Putin's popularity is on the rise. "Our guys are coming as military and political consultants — serious guys. And they are here not only as bodyguards. It's an all-round approach, freed of Soviet ideology. That was our mistake," a man named Sasha is quoted as having told the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reporter. Sasha apparently lived in Berlin for ten years before moving to the continent: "Africa is waiting for us and we will be idiots if we are afraid to come back. The future is here."⁴⁹

Russian experts played a significant role in the July 2018 presidential election campaign in Zimbabwe. It may be the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union that Russian political consultants took part in an election campaign in Africa. According to Carnegie Moscow Centre, "The geography of Russian interests is becoming broader and broader."⁵⁰

Russia's strategy in African countries initially focused on raising anti-Western sentiment and then renewing old territorial disputes, according to Russian investigative startup *Project*. It obtained internal documents from the offices of political consultants working for Yevgeny Prigozhin. The Russian expansion in Africa faces three major obstacles: non-professionalism, corruption and alcoholism.⁵¹ According to the publication, French-born Kemi Seba is one of the key figures of Prigozhin's "Pan-African Project." Seba is the founder of Urgences Panafricanistes (Urpanaf), a political movement that fights against "French neocolonialism and imperialism." The movement's plan is to form a union of a couple of countries. Russian political consultants should help pro-Russian candidates win elections. The second phase would involve the acceptance of one leader, Kemi Seba, one of the possible candidates for the role. "The joint fight against western imperialism makes us stronger," Seba told BBC in an interview.⁵²

The levels of cooperation between companies associated with Prigozhin and African governments vary by country, as shown by a map from *The Guardian*. Journalists at the daily had seen a map of Africa in December 2018 with various symbols indicating military, political and economic ties, police training, media and humanitarian projects, and "rivalry with France." The level of cooperation was ranked from five to one: five is the highest level and one the lowest. The closest relations are with the Central African Republic, Sudan and Madagascar at five. Libya, Zimbabwe and South Africa are listed as four, according to the map, with South Sudan at three, and the DRC, Chad and Zambia at two.⁵³

A beginning in Madagascar

Russia's expansion in Africa began in 2018 in Madagascar where "Putin's chef", Yevgeny Prigozhin played a key role.^{54,55} Russian consultant helped some candidates during the presidential elections, which were held in November 2018.⁵⁶ Local witnesses told the BBC they saw Russians with "suitcases full of cash."⁵⁷ The current president of Madagascar, Andry Rajoelina, won the 2018 election with Russian support, concluded British daily *The Guardian* in an investigation in which they found Russia "produced and distributed the island's biggest newspaper, with 2 million copies a month." Rajoelina denies receiving Russian support.⁵⁸ "The secret of Prigozhin's success lies in the fact that he was able to sell a dream to Putin — a dream of increasing Russian influence in the world," an insider familiar with Prigozhin's structures said, as quoted by Project Media. The Russian businessman's international activities began in 2014 during the war in Eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile, other people told Project Media that the Russians "had no clue" of Madagascar. The whole operation cost a "gigantic sum." At some point the Russians flew 50 risographs (semi-professional printing machines) to Madagascar to print 500 copies of election materials. The Russian consultants were guarded by Wagner Group, owned by Prigozhin. Ferrum Mining, a Russian company registered in St Petersburg, now has a mining concession for chromium in Madagascar.

A Russian troll factory in Ghana

A CNN team discovered a Russian troll factory in a very unlikely place, Ghana.⁵⁹

While much of the trolling aimed at the 2016 US presidential elections may have been operated from an office block in St Petersburg, things could not have been more different later on. A months-long investigation by CNN found that part of the trolling for the 2018 US midterm election campaign had been outsourced to contractors in the West African nations of Ghana and Nigeria. They focused almost exclusively on racial issues in the US, promoting black empowerment and often displaying anger towards white Americans. Their goal was to inflame divisions within the American population and provoke social unrest, according to experts who track Russian disinformation campaigns.

Facebook and Twitter had already been looking into some of the troll accounts when CNN notified the two social media firms of its investigation. In a statement, Facebook said that its "subsequent assessment benefited from our collaboration with a team of journalists at CNN" and it had "removed 49

Facebook accounts, 69 Pages and 85 Instagram accounts for engaging in foreign interference.”

The world’s largest social network went on to add, “this network was in early stages of audience building and was operated by local nationals — wittingly and unwittingly — in Ghana and Nigeria on behalf of individuals in Russia. It targeted primarily the United States.” About 13 200 Facebook accounts followed one or more of the accounts in Ghana and around 263 200 people followed one or more of the Instagram accounts. An estimated 65% were in the US. Twitter told CNN that it had removed 71 accounts that had 68 000 followers. “Most were tweeting in English and presented themselves as based in the United States,” it said in a statement. “The accounts — operating out of Ghana and Nigeria and which we can reliably associate with Russia — attempted to sow discord by engaging in conversations about social issues, like race and civil rights.”

The activity uncovered by CNN had striking similarities to the 2016 Russian troll campaign in which hundreds of accounts designed to pass as American were created.

In October 2019, Facebook closed a network of accounts that were actively targeting a total of eight African countries. “Although the people behind these networks attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation connected these campaigns to entities associated with Russian financier Yevgeny Prigozhin,” the social network said.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Some experts believe newspaper headlines about Russia’s involvement in Africa have led many to overestimate the extent of Moscow’s influence by exaggerating the reality and sensationalising the topic. Russian ambitions in Africa are quite modest and its plans remain unclear.⁶¹ Nevertheless Moscow’s efforts to influence public opinion on the continent should be seen as a part of a broader strategy to push back on US attempts to spread liberal democracy on the one hand and promote the business interests of Russian companies (with links to the government) on the other. What Russia lacks in resources — compared to Washington and Beijing — it can compensate for through information campaigns abroad. Moscow sees them as a legitimate tool of foreign policy in trying to push its own agenda on the global stage, much like Western countries do with their foreign language, state-sponsored broadcasters. With RT, Sputnik and Ruptly, Russia created tools for spreading

its narratives worldwide and establishing an alternative view of the world that is not always limited by Western standards of media ethics. In the global fight of narratives and the competition for people's minds, Western democracies may face a dilemma of either significantly increasing their resources for international broadcasting or losing the competition to other, less democratic regimes.

Russian efforts to push back on western ideological narratives and to promote its business interests are partially rooted in the Soviet past. The USSR and African countries signed numerous agreements on cultural cooperation. Based on those, the USSR opened cultural centres promoting Soviet culture, ideology and way of life. At the same time Moscow sold weapons to armies in many African countries.

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the new Russian government lost focus on Africa as it needed to deal with other more urgent domestic problems. Some trade representations and even embassies were closed.

But since 2013-2014, as a part of broader effort to re-establish itself as a global superpower, Russia and its State-run media started signing partnership agreements with African media. Most recently RT and Sputnik signed agreements with national broadcasters in Eritrea and the DRC, among others.⁶² Under those agreements, content and sometimes even broadcasting equipment are provided. The strategic goal of such agreements is of course to re-establish its position as a global superpower by disseminating Russia's view on global politics and regional conflicts via both classical media channels, such as television, but also on social media, which are increasingly important.

In contrast to the Soviet aim of promoting the communist ideology, modern Russia wants pragmatic influence based on economic interests.⁶³

Notes

- 1 <https://www.dw.com/en/was-russia-behind-the-coup-in-mali/a-54705282>
- 2 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-africa>
- 3 Russian laws prohibit to put in question the territorial integrity of the country, the usage of the word “annexation” may end in the criminal investigation.
- 4 <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/10/2019/5db1b8179a79474dfdd8da41>
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