Partner, prototype or persuader? China's renewed media engagement with Ghana

Iginio Gagliardone, Nicole Stremlau, Daniel Nkrumah

Abstract

This article provides an empirically grounded assessment of China's increasing role in the African mediasphere. It examines the strategic importance of Chinese media assistance to Ghana along three dimensions: the potential appeal of the Chinese approach to information regulation for countries struggling to balance development and risks to political stability; the direct intervention of Chinese companies in the media and telecommunication sectors through the provision of loans, equipment and technical expertise; and the stepping up of China's public diplomacy strategy through the expansion of international broadcasters and the increase of exchange and training programs targeting African citizens.

The study is based on fieldwork conducted by the authors in Ghana, and on the analysis of semi-structured interviews with Ghanaian journalists, policymakers, journalism educators, civil society players and Chinese journalists and media entrepreneurs in Ghana. Problematising the alarmist scholarship that suggests a strategic Chinese invasion of Africa and the potential reversal of media freedoms, the study indicates that the Chinese presence in Ghana seems to be grounded in a more pragmatic and less uniform approach anchored on mutual interests. It concludes by suggesting the need for a shift in the debate that tends to be polarised by images of China as either a neo-colonialist power or as a benevolent partner. To understand whether the Chinese approach to the media could have resonance beyond China, greater attention must be paid to how the ideology and political culture characterising individual African countries, as well as the elites who establish partnerships with Chinese political leaders and companies, resonate with the Chinese approach to governance and the media.

Keywords: China-Africa, Ghana, international communication, media and development, Chinese media.

Introduction

The 49th assembly of the African Union (AU), held in Addis Ababa in January 2012, received extensive coverage in the international media. The reasons for this unusual attention were not political or policy debates, or the absence of figures like Muammar al-Gaddafi or Hosni Mubarak as result of the revolutions that transformed Northern Africa a year earlier. It was the setting in which the assembly took place that made the news. For the first time, African leaders were meeting in the newly inaugurated AU headquarters in Addis Ababa, one of the most impressive buildings on the continent and, more importantly, the most striking

symbol to date of the renewed relationship between Africa and China. The building cost approximately US$200 million, paid by the Chinese government as a gift to the AU, and was erected by Chinese and Ethiopian workers in just two years.[1]

To represent African unity and pay tribute to one of its most important advocates, a statue of Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana's first president) was placed at the entrance of the new compound.[2] Nkrumah was one of the founding fathers of the AU, originally known as the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and in the 1960s he was also one of China's closest allies, a champion of the idea that postcolonial Africa should be united in socialism. Since then, however, much seems to have changed in China–Africa relations.

During Nkrumah's time, ideology was one of the main forces shaping China's interests in Africa, and countries like Ghana were considered a training ground from which to launch the socialist revolution in Africa (Chau 2007a). Today, most observers point to resources and geopolitical influence as the main drivers of China's increased presence on the continent (Holslag 2006; Taylor 2006; Jacques 2009). But is this really the case? While aid relations between the West and Africa are ostensibly rooted in an ideologically focused approach to development modelled on the path pursued by leading liberal democracies advocating good governance and free markets as drivers of development, is China's strategy free from political ideology? To what extent is China's approach to Africa different from other donors'? Most importantly, who is benefitting the most from China's renewed interest in the continent?

Examining contemporary Ghana through the lens of the increasing role China is playing in the media and telecommunication sectors, this article seeks to provide answers to these questions. Our analysis follows a structured approach, offering a framework that can further the understanding of China's increased presence in the media sector in Africa and applying it to the case of Ghana, where semi-structured interviews were conducted with Ghanaian journalists, policymakers, journalism educators, civil-society players and Chinese journalists and media entrepreneurs. Additional data was collected on some key projects China has been sponsoring in the media sector. First, however, we provide context to the complex and varied relationship between China, Africa and the media.

Continuities and discontinuities in China–Africa media relations

The Chinese-funded AU headquarters represents a significant step in the long history of China–Africa relations, which experienced a marked acceleration in the mid 2000s. In 2006, China celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic ties with Africa, declaring it the 'Year of Africa', and the government launched a strategic campaign to mark its growing engagement. President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao visited 10 African countries, and later that year 48 African heads of state gathered in Beijing for the third conference of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) where the Chinese government unveiled a massive

aid and assistance package that included debt cancellation, preferential loans and several other initiatives, totalling more than US$5 billion (BBC News 2006). The cooperation in the media sector (which dates back to the 1950s when the first Africa bureaus of the Xinhua News Agency were established and delegations of Chinese journalists visited Africa and African delegations visited China) received unprecedented attention and was framed as one of the axes of the renewed China–Africa relations (FOCAC 2006). The FOCAC action plan emerging from the meeting encouraged Chinese and African 'news media to play a positive role in enhancing mutual understanding and friendship' (ibid.). While refraining from suggesting that support to the media was a form of aid, China pledged to 'continue to host workshops for African correspondents and invite heads of press authorities and media groups as well as correspondents from Africa to China to exchange views, cover news and explore ways of conducting effective cooperation' (ibid.). As the main proponent of this new strategy, China has increased its support to its international broadcaster and news agency, has offered large loans to governments for projects in the media and telecommunication sectors, and has continued to expand its conference, training, and fellowship programs.[3]

The current emphasis on the media presents both signs of continuity and discontinuity with the past. On the one hand, Chinese authorities have persisted in stressing equality and mutual benefit, as well as respect of sovereignty and independence as the drivers of their relationships with African countries (Brautigam 2009; Manji 2007). These are the same principles that were originally enunciated by Premier Chou En-lai in Ghana in 1964 when he first articulated China's policy towards Africa (Hevi 1967). On the other hand, the recent engagement in media cooperation differs from earlier experiences with regard to its goals, its scale and pace.

During decolonisation, it was socialism and the ambition to support an 'anti-imperialist' revolution in Africa that forged the main bond between Chinese and African counterparts. Focusing on supporting insurgency groups, China used countries such as Ghana and Angola as outposts from which to galvanise socialist support and export the revolution elsewhere on the continent (Chau 2007a, 2007b; Tan-Mullins, Mohan & Power 2010). While leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah actively embraced this strategy and looked at China as a model to follow, many African intellectuals remained sceptical that 1960s China had anything to teach Africa. As Ghanaian Emmanuel Hevi, who studied in China as part of one of the first exchange programs established to strengthen China–Africa relations, wrote in 1963:

> I am aware [that] China's propaganda services beam daily radio broadcast to Africa [and] I know also that vast quantities of their magazines and periodicals reach Africa. […] I have been the target of such false propaganda, and I am all too well aware of its effects on persons who have no alternative and reliable sources of information. My account is meant as a counter blast to the falsehoods you have heard about China in the past and are likely to hear in the future. (Hevi 1963, p. 10)

While Hevi was one of the privileged few to have the opportunity to travel to China and gain first-hand experience, his ambivalence reflected a deeper scepticism that the Chinese version of communism could apply to Africa. This period was blighted by the tensions of the Cold War, and different countries—some within the same bloc—were trying to export their own versions of development. Propaganda was an important component of this strategy, and cooperation between African and Chinese journalists was facilitated so that 'they [could] use their news media as a weapon to support the oppressed nations in their just struggles, to expose imperialists, as well as new and old colonialists' crimes and their true colours' (Xinfeng 2010, p. 5). But Chinese propaganda often failed to resonate, as many African leaders were preoccupied by the far more aggressive competition of the US and USSR (Chau 2007a, 2007b). While the Chinese government continued to support Xinhua's bureaus, to use China Radio International (CRI) as an instrument to reach foreign publics, and to promote exchanges among journalists, the influence of these interventions remained negligible in Africa and progressively faded (Ngomba 2011).

After the failure of these early experiments with media cooperation, China's renewed engagement at the turn of the millennium appears to have dropped most ideological connotations, and to respond to the larger strategy inspiring China's opening and 'going out' efforts. Chinese authorities have publicly stressed this difference, referring to the media not as tools to export the revolution, but as channels that can facilitate 'mutual understanding' (FOCAC 2006) and promote 'social harmony' (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2010). The trustworthiness of this new course, however, has not remained unchallenged. Both scholars and policymakers have questioned China's 'real intentions', stressing, for example the 'emphasis […] placed on forming alliances that are anti-Western and on promoting an anti-Western media model to combat what the Chinese regularly portray as part of an imperialist plan to distort the truth' (Farah & Mosher 2010, p. 4) or indicating how China's 'charm offensive' in Africa undermines Western interests on the continent (Kurlantzick 2007).

One of the problems affecting these and similar claims is that they are little informed by thorough empirical research and are largely based on the assumption that China will behave similarly to Western powers, trying to export its model of society while affirming its interests on the continent. But no studies to date have proved this to be the case and more empirical research is needed to practically examine the repercussions of China's undoubtedly bold interventions in media and telecommunications on the African continent.[4] Our article seeks to offer a contribution in this direction.

A framework to look at the role of China in Africa's media sector

China's increasing involvement in the media in Africa can represent a critical entry point to understand the broader political implications of the China–Africa relationship and how China's approach to the continent differs from those

practised by other donors. Here we adopt an extensive conception of the media, including print, electronic and digital media, as well as telecommunications. This approach is justified both by an increasing tendency in the literature on global media and communication to address these different areas together (see, for example, Mansell & Raboy 2011) and by the fact that Chinese interventions are already blurring media boundaries, as exemplified by Africa's first mobile newspaper, launched as a partnership between Xinhua, the Chinese news agency; Huawei, China's largest telecommunications and service company; and Safaricom, Kenya's leading mobile operator, allowing Kenyan mobile subscribers to receive news from China's Xinhua News Agency via Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) (Xinhua News Agency 2011).

In the West, the idea of 'media assistance' has typically been associated with the goals of democratisation and media liberalisation. The formula prescribed to developing countries to shape their media systems has been based on the experience of established Western democracies. 'Rolling back the influence of the state and pushing the privatization of state services' represented the pillars of these strategies, supported by the 'belief that the growth of private media is central to developing a media structure that advances democratic values and development' (Putzel & Van der Zwan 2006, p. 5). As a corollary, the principles and the models that informed the evolution of media systems in the West became standards against which to measure how free or how developed a country and its media were.

Contrary to the strategy of Western democracies, which have clearly and proactively advocated the values inspiring their own models in their media assistance to countries in Africa, China has been more ambiguous about its intentions. In this emerging phase, understanding China's involvement in the media sector in Africa still requires in-depth empirical research and innovative frameworks to assess its significance and implications. We have attempted to provide such a framework through identifying three dimensions along which the Chinese influence in the media sector in Africa can be captured, looking at China as a *prototype*, a *partner*, and a *persuader*. This framework emerged as part of a collective effort among scholars from Africa, China and Europe who gathered in Oxford in 2010 to explore ways to approach the study of China's emerging role in the media in Africa, balancing out different perspectives and building a shared research agenda.[5] The framework was tested and further refined through fieldwork in Ghana that is presented in the following sections.

Prototype

China's economic success and impressive growth of media outlets and users have quietly promoted an example of how the media can be deployed within the larger political and economic strategies of developing states, beyond the democratisation paradigm promoted in the West. The Chinese approach has shown that heavy investments in the media can go hand in hand with tight control, posing a lesser challenge to local governments and to political stability. China's media system has thus progressively emerged as a *prototype*, an example other states can follow to develop their own systems. Some would call it the 'Chinese media model' (Farah &

Mosher 2010) if it was not for the fact that 'China does not do models', as Rod Wye, Associate Fellow at Chatham House and a long-serving British diplomat in China, pointed out.[6] China's approach to the media, while certainly inspired by principles such as 'state security and social harmony' (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2010) does not necessarily represent a coherent set of norms and practices ready to be exported. But this lack of a unitary character does not prevent specific practices that have informed the development of the media in China from possibly influencing the approach other states adopt to develop their own media. This can be particularly the case in countries that are struggling to find balance between the increasing pressures to liberalise media systems and the risk that social and political tensions will find new forms of expression in 'independent' news channels. It is only through empirical research that those practices can be identified and China's role and intentions can be assessed. Is China a passive actor other states are trying to emulate, or a more active player trying to legitimise aspects of its own approach by actively encouraging other states to appropriate them?

Partner

A second dimension along which China's influence over the media in Africa can be studied involves looking at China as a *partner*, as an actor providing resources to African countries to implement projects that are deemed important for social and economic development. Since the mid-2000s the Chinese government and Chinese companies have enhanced their direct involvement in the telecommunication and media markets in Africa. China's Exim Bank, for example, in 2006 provided a US$1.5 billion loan to overhaul Ethiopia's telecommunication system, a project later undertaken by Chinese telecom giant ZTE. Similarly, China has offered significant support to state broadcasters in selected countries such as Kenya and Zambia (Banda 2009). Even if China has traditionally felt uncomfortable with the term 'donor' (Brautigam 2010; Mawdsley 2012), the activities it sponsors in this area are those usually funded by bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, and, in some cases, China has offered an alternative to traditional donors for African countries willing to develop projects in this area. But while the role of Western donors as partners has been closely linked to their status as 'examples to be followed', and funding for media development has usually been conditional upon the acceptance of at least some of the elements characteristic of Western media systems, China has stressed its intention to maintain a separation between these two dimensions and its willingness to simply respond to the demands of its African partners. While this 'no strings attached' policy may be consistent, this does not mean that it is neutral or free of impact. For example, while Western donors have tended to favour media projects benefitting the private sector and the civil society, or projects creating incentives for the state to open a dialogue with other forces in society, China has displayed a tendency to privilege government actors, thus increasing governments' capacity vis-à-vis other critical components in the development of a media system. Within this dimension, assessing who benefits from China's increased role as a partner in the media sector becomes particularly important.

Persuader

Finally, China's role in Africa can be assessed according to its modality and ability to act as a *persuader*, shaping opinions in ways that favour either its image abroad or a particular agenda it supports. This third dimension is in the realm of public diplomacy, which China has recently stepped up through expanding the reach and content of its international broadcasters, including China Central Television (CCTV) and radio broadcaster CRI, and of its news agency, Xinhua. Furthermore, cultural diplomacy has grown through the continued establishment of Confucius institutes, and programs that offer scholarships for foreign students and journalists to study in China have been expanded.

In order to broaden its international outreach, China has followed the experience of other international broadcasters, entering in competition with channels such as Al Jazeera English while avoiding the more aggressive tones of investigative journalism that could upset relationships with foreign governments. As the few publicly available audience studies have shown, these initial attempts have not proved very successful (Cooper 2008), with China's channels lagging behind their more established competitors, such as the BBC and VOA, both in terms of audience share and trust. The launch of CCTV Africa in January 2012, however, has potentially long-term effects on this balance. By offering a one-hour daily broadcast focusing on African news and business, as well as weekly feature programs, CCTV Africa represents a bold attempt to provide news from the continent to African and global audiences alike.

Rather than simply channelling resources to its outlets in an already crowded market alongside a multiplicity of new competing players, such as Iranian Press TV and Russia Today, China has also shown its ability to innovate and exploit new niches. This is exemplified by the aforementioned 'Mobile Newspaper' launched by Xinhua, Huawei and Safaricom in Kenya, as well as the giant LCD screens Xinhua is installing in strategic locations in Africa (such as in the AU compound) to facilitate access to news and information about China provided by official Chinese sources. China has pursued a distinctive strategy in this regard, maximising the symbolic value of some of the projects it sponsors in Africa, such as roads, theatres and buildings like the AU headquarters, letting them act as symbols of China–Africa friendship and of China's new might.

The three dimensions illustrated above are not mutually exclusive though. China's international broadcaster, for example, could be employed to highlight particular aspects of Chinese media in order to increase both their appeal among foreign audiences and the likelihood that policymakers will be interested in replicating some of their features. Or, a partnership between Chinese and African universities may lead to incorporating some of the principles inspiring Chinese journalism into the curriculums taught in journalism schools in Africa. But disaggregating the analysis of China's role in the media in Africa allows empirical evidence to show, for example, whether or not China's role as a partner is facilitating the diffusion of some aspects that characterise China's media systems, rather than assuming this will be the case. It also helps de-ideologise the debate over Western versus Eastern developmental models, enabling research findings to

show, for example, how the partnership between China and a given African country may enhance some aspects of the local media that fit within a Western liberal framework while they do not belong to China's media system. This approach may also have practical implications, highlighting areas of collaboration between different development actors, where their relative strengths can enable common goals to be reached.

Ghana–China Media Relations

Ghana represents a critical vantage point from which to examine China–Africa relations. After decolonisation, it was the second country in Sub-Saharan Africa to establish diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China, in 1960, and because of Kwame Nkrumah's political ambitions and proactive approach to development it was one of the earliest examples where the benefits of China–Africa relations were theorised and put into practice. Today, Ghana has become the recipient of one of the most generous packages China has ever offered to an African country—it has the potential to profoundly affect Ghana's development and politics at local and international levels. In 2011, the Ghanaian parliament approved a US$3 billion loan from China as part of a larger US$13 billion agreement between Ghana, China Development Bank and Exim Bank, aimed at developing infrastructure projects. The size of the assistance package is connected to the recent discovery of oil reserves off the Ghanaian coast and China's ambition to secure the rights to exploit them. But it is also part of a progressively close collaboration between the two countries that preceded the discovery. As we explain in the following sections, the media has emerged as an increasingly important part of this relationship.

China as a prototype

Since the promulgation of the new constitution in 1992, and the repeal of the Libel Law in 2001, Ghana has evolved into one of the freest media systems on the African continent.[7] Yet Ghana's media landscape is still both fragile and volatile. Margaret Amoakohene, Acting Director of the School of Communication Studies at the University of Ghana, noted that the Ghanaian media

> …have vacillated between intrepidity and cowardice along a continuum of revolutionary, confrontational legitimacy, and supportive roles depending on the prevailing political atmosphere—their roles determined by the unstable, complex social and political environments in which they function (Amoakohene 2006, p. 33).

As in other countries such as Kenya, the liberalisation of print and electronic media has come at a cost. While the most established outlets have maintained a certain degree of professionalism, some of the less resourced radio stations and newspapers that have proliferated in the past decade have often fallen prey to political interests and, in some cases, have exploited existing tensions within society as a way to attract audiences. In the increasingly dense Ghanaian media environment, political entrepreneurs have learnt how to exploit the ability messages now enjoy to travel

across various media and reach different publics. Gabby Otchere-Darko, former editor of *The Statesman*, a private newspaper, and now head of the Danquah Institute, a right-wing think tank, provided an example of this strategy:

> A lot of them [newspapers] do not make money. They are there just to influence the political agenda. Some sell as little as 100–200 copies, but the news they publish goes further. Many are started by politicians, so their messages can reach beyond them. The whole idea is working on the front page. And there is basically nothing beyond that, just news from the Internet. What they want to do is to get their messages on other platforms, on the radio. They are radio-papers. Nobody buys them but the people get to know what these papers say through the radio. Because the radios are lazy, they do not have reporters. So it is also how the media system works here that contributes to this game.[8]

The Ghanaian media system is characterised not only by an unprecedented availability of media outlets, but also by the increasing ability citizens enjoy to communicate through radio and raise voice. The diffusion of mobile phones, with an estimated penetration rate of 72 per cent in 2009, and the proliferation of radio stations, listened to by 86 per cent of Ghanaians on a weekly basis (AudienceScapes 2010), have created new spaces where citizens can express their concerns, participate in the public debate and have their opinions heard. But these new opportunities have come with new challenges. As it has been documented in the case of other countries, such as Uganda (Brisset-Foucault 2009) and Kenya (Gagliardone 2012), and has started to be reported in other research on Ghana (Bob-Milliar 2011; Selormey 2012), the Ghanaian airwaves are increasingly characterised by the phenomenon of 'serial callers'—people who have transformed calling talkback radio programs into a profession and whose presence and behaviour have been judged by other audiences as 'killing' other people's opportunities for a fair debate. Serial callers not only regularly occupy spaces created by the radio stations for discussion, but they are often paid by politicians to skew the debate on air (Bob-Milliar 2011). As one government minister admitted:

> There are fault lines. We have phone-in sessions with people who are both supporters of a party and supported by a party. It is the party that pays for them to say certain things. So you cannot select real public opinion from fabricated one.[9]

These are relatively new and understudied phenomena, but their emergence can tentatively be attributed to a process of liberalisation of the media as advocated by a Western model, in a climate where the lack of institutionalisation of the journalistic profession and the existence of tensions and partisanship in society have failed to make the media a strong fourth estate and have allowed them instead to be part of the political game. These challenges could arguably be addressed through increased control and regulation of the media, by filtering out extreme voices and those that harm 'state security and social harmony', in other words, by mimicking some of the strategies that countries such as China have adopted to prevent the

opening up of the media from increasing social tensions. However, informants across the board, from the two main political parties—the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP)—as well as from the state-owned and privately owned press, stress the lack of appeal of such an approach. They have indicated that the Ghanaian media system is too rooted in a Western model of journalism and have shown confidence that the media system will be able to cure itself of these excesses. As Bernard Avle, a young reporter working at Citi FM, a popular radio station in Accra, explained:

> I think that a lot of stations will eventually die out. I think there will be a consolidation of the market where only the strongest radio and the most professional will survive. I don't think there should be any attempt to regulate the content.[10]

The fact that Western values still largely inspire Ghanaian media and the actors regulating them does not mean that Ghana's media system does not display unique characteristics that are the result of the history of the nation and of its politics. As David Newton, the Rector of the Ghana Institute of Journalism, explained:

> For us, the concept of journalism was imported from the West. If you go to a journalism school here you learn that bad news is good news. But some people argue that mixing this rule with the kind of facts we get in Africa created a bad combination. We have to realise that many countries in Africa have been going through dramatic processes of nation-building and so it may be the case that we need a different concept of what is news. News should not be events, but phenomena, processes. There is need for a balance. You can talk about scandals, and this is always going to interest people, but you also need to focus on positive aspects to build a nation.[11]

An attempt to merge Western ideals of journalism with the aspiration to promote nation-building and social cohesion can be found in Ghana's leading newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*, which is owned by the state but is independently run. Differently from other state-owned papers in Africa, the *Graphic* is by far the most popular publication in the country (AudienceScapes 2010). Many of the journalists working for the *Graphic* are trained in the Ghana Institute of Journalism in the principles of Western journalism. But as Jennifer Hasty has shown through her ethnographic work in the *Graphic*'s newsroom, once in the job, it is a different set of principles that guides journalists' everyday choices and informs their reporting. As she explains:

> Meaning is not objectively embedded in an event and uncovered by the autonomous individual, as in the Western logic, but rather meaning is collectively generated by the participants in an event—including the journalist. And the social meanings of events are not rooted in conflict, impact and novelty, but rather emphasise cooperation, legitimate authority and redemptive development. (Hasty 2006, p. 85)

The structure of the *Graphic,* and a style of reporting that privileges cooperation and authority, both show interesting similarities with some of the organisational and normative principles characterising Chinese media.

In China, newspapers are publicly owned but independently run and great emphasis is placed on 'positive reporting', which stresses the importance of focusing on collective achievements and offering citizens tools to contribute to national development rather than reporting on divisive issues or sensational negative news (Brady 2007; Yuezhi 2008). Ghana's former president, John Kufuor, hailed a similar concept as a principle that should inspire African media, when he urged that:

> We need to highlight more of the positives instead of always harping on the negatives […] We must by all means talk about the wrong things that happen on the continent. Where there is corruption or bad governance we need to expose them; but it is important that we highlight success stories with equal, if not much greater emphasis.[12] (see Ghana News Agency 2010)

Ghanaian journalists and other actors involved in the media, however, stressed that these similarities should not be read as the result of an attempt from China to export the principles guiding its style of journalism or as the consequence of a renewed interest of Ghanaian journalists in the ideas coming from the East, as had been the case at the time of Nkrumah. Instead, it can be argued that there is resonance between some of the principles emerging in Ghana and in China as part of their distinctive traditions of media development. This resonance may be seized in the future to justify new forms of collaboration between Chinese and Ghanaian media, but there is little evidence to suggest that this has been the case so far.

China as a partner

As elsewhere in Africa, an area in which China has made an impact in Ghana is infrastructure development. After having funded the largest power-generating project in the country, the Bui Hydroelectric Plant, China has more recently moved to other strategic sectors, and communication represents one of the most important. It is because of China's renewed engagement that Ghana could secure the resources for its ambitious e-government project, designed to connect all public institutions, from the centre to the peripheries of the state, to a single shared communication and computing infrastructure, to improve coordination and the delivery of government services. Issah Yahaya, Director of Policy Planning in the Ministry of Communication, has been following the project from its inception and clarified that China was not the first partner to be approached to support the government's idea, but it was the only one that accepted the project as the government had envisioned it:

> We approached the EU and USAid, but there was a problem with the financing because they wanted the company owning the backbone to be private, while for us it had to be government owned. They did not understand that in Africa the government is the prime actor in development. […] For us, the problem was that

the private would not provide the social services. But the Chinese were okay. They accepted to support Ghana's broadband infrastructure facility to promote our information society.[13]

Among the government actors we interviewed, there was a sense of frustration towards traditional donors. The Ghanaian government has been responsive to principles that emerged from international forums such as the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and has been willing to develop infrastructure to improve the government's performance, but Ghanaian officials have at the same time lamented Western donors' attempts to influence the processes leading to these shared goals. As Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa, Deputy Minister of Information in the Republic of Ghana, indicated, China offered an alternative approach:

> There is an honest desire on the side of many African countries to lift themselves from poverty. From the West the funding options are limited and there are also a lot of conditions. But in the case of China it is different. China is more willing to engage. They have fewer conditions.[14]

Ghana's e-government project is one of the most ambitious in Sub-Saharan Africa. The envisioned cost was US$180 million, provided by China's Exim Bank through two concessionary loans of US$30 million in 2008 and US$150 million in 2010. The Chinese telecom giant Huawei was awarded the technical realisation of the project, while Ghana's National Information Technology Agency (NITA) was tasked with overseeing the project's implementation. The e-government project uses a combination of solutions to adapt to the different conditions characterising Ghana's topography and infrastructure development. While connections among the main cities, as well as the network in the capital, consist largely of fibre optics, other metropolitan areas are based on a WiMAX technology (a wireless broadband access technology), and remote areas rely on satellites and other leased terrestrial circuits. The six Regional Coordinating Councils have been equipped with teleconferencing facilities that, according to NITA, 'are all connected to the presidency to provide communication links with the presidency promoting effective and efficient governance'.[15] A national data centre, built in a secure location in Accra, has been placed at the centre of the system, to coordinate all communications and provide secure data storage facilities.

As it stands, Ghana's e-government system largely resembles another ambitious national project that has been developed by the Ethiopian government, initially with resources from its own treasury and later through Chinese financial and technical support. Using some of the latest technologies to connect the centre of the state with its peripheral nodes, the Ethiopian project, known as WoredaNet, employs fibre-optic and satellite communications to allow ministers, civil servants and trainers in the capital to communicate and videoconference with the regional and district administrations and instruct local officials on what they should be doing and how.[16] WoredaNet has been at the centre of controversies connected to the 'political use' that has been made of it, allowing figures in the incumbent party to use this privileged channel not only to improve the efficiency of the state, but to

mobilise political support on the ground in critical moments such as before an election (Gagliardone 2009).

While suspicions of political uses of e-government systems are justified in Ethiopia, where the distinction between party and state has become increasingly blurry, they are less of a concern in Ghana, where the project was envisioned and initiated by an NPP-led government and was subsequently extended by a government led by its opponent, the NDC. Both projects, however, indicate how financial and technical resources from China are allowing African governments to develop projects they have independently envisioned, even if these partially contradict the Western consensus on the means and modes that should be employed to use new media for governance purposes. China's support could arguably be unleashing a new 'age of experimentation' in Africa, where local actors have access to more resources and can test new solutions for their needs, combining ideas and artefacts emerging from different contexts, hybridising African ambitions with Chinese expertise and Western concepts. At the same time in this age of experimentation, China has tended to focus on incumbent governments, avoiding sponsoring initiatives driven by civil society or the private sector, which have traditionally found greater support from Western donors (Brautigam, 2010).

This raises at least two sets of problems. First, the balance between the state and other actors that have usually been instrumental in promoting innovation, such as civil society organisations, may risk tilting too sharply towards the former, preventing the latters from fully participating in a country's innovation or in political processes that are increasingly enriched by the use of new media. The second problem is more familiar, and depends on the fact that, if in the Chinese approach to aid, the state is the only filter through which resources are channelled, state–society relationships become increasingly relevant. If China is not actively trying to export authoritarianism in the same way that Western donors are actively trying to export democratisation processes, the fact that it supports authoritarian governments developing their own version of the information society may have real consequences on citizens' ability to fully participate in it on their own terms. If China's support, with its lack of conditions, can be a positive contribution to African agency, it becomes increasingly important who the agent is with whom China decides to entertain its relationship and how representative it is of society at large.

China as a persuader

According to a BBC World Service poll, which has been tracking how key countries are perceived at the international level, China's global image has deteriorated in the past few years.[17] While the 2008 poll showed that 47 per cent of respondents indicated China's influence as positive, in 2009 this figure dropped to 39 per cent, slowly recovering to 44 per cent in 2011. In the same period, negative perceptions of China increased from 32 per cent to 38 per cent globally. Africa, however, has shown an opposite trend. Polls conducted in Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya indicated that the percentage of respondents recognising China's role as positive increased from 66 per cent in 2008 to 74 per cent in 2011, while negative

perceptions dropped from 16 per cent to 10 per cent. Ghanaians, while still considering China's role as largely positive—and increasingly so over time—tended to be less enthusiastic than citizens polled in the other two African countries. In 2008, 56 per cent of Ghanaian respondents saw China positively, and 16 per cent negatively; in 2011, the same questions produced 62 per cent positive and 9 per cent negative responses (BBC World Service 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011).

From the interviews we conducted with journalists, policymakers and other actors involved in the media sector in Ghana, the positive perception of China's global influence did not seem to depend on China's attempts to influence global publics through the media. Despite a substantial budgetary increase for overseas operations, including the international broadcasters, CCTV and CRI, the launch of a new satellite channel, CNC World, and a push to encourage Chinese diplomats and businesses abroad to be more engaged in projecting a positive image of China, this strategy seems to have produced little results to date.[18] According to Halifax Ansah-Addo, a journalist working for the *Daily Guide,* one of the leading private newspapers in Ghana:

> The Chinese entertain a good relationship both with the *Guide* and the *Graphic*. But the Chinese, I have to say, are less proactive than others. They do not issue press releases. The Chinese do not have a strong PR strategy. Yes, they appear in the paper because of the projects they do. There can be, for example, a piece on a school that has been built by the Chinese, but we report the event not because the embassy issued a press statement. The Americans, for example, do both; they support development but they also spin it through PR.[19]

Similarly, Fiifi Mensah, the *Daily Graphic*'s Foreign Editor*,* indicated that there is a lack of clarity about Xinhua's strategy towards local papers in Ghana, and, despite the interest in Xinhua's perspective, most papers continue to rely on sources such as the BBC and Associated Press. As he explained:

> We tried to enter into an agreement with their [Xinhua's] representatives in Ghana to use their stories but it stalled. I like the Xinhua stories because they deal with issues from a Third World perspective and their stories are not biased and slanted as [they are in] most of the other agencies.[20]

China also broadcasts directly into Ghana. CRI reaches the country through shortwaves, while CCTV and CNC can be accessed through satellite and through cable as part of a package offered by Cable Gold, a company owned by a Chinese entrepreneur. Cable Gold, however, is not part of a coordinated strategy supported by the Chinese government to reach foreign publics, but is simply the result of the initiative of a young Chinese graduate who visited Ghana in the late 1990s and decided to invest in the country.[21] Cable Gold offers not only content from China, but also many other channels as part of its package, from CNN to Cartoon Network. In the Ghanaian market and in Africa more generally, however, news content produced in China still struggles to find audiences and to gain their trust. According to a survey conducted by the research organization Intermedia UK in a

selected number of African countries to assess the reach and popularity of CRI (Cooper 2008) in 2006, only two per cent of Ghanaians were aware of the existence of CRI. Figures were higher in Kenya, where CRI had struck a deal with the local broadcaster, KBC, to have its content relayed over FM, but CRI still ranked as the least trusted international broadcaster, after the BBC, VOA and Deutsche Welle. When compared with other studies on China's 'going out' strategy and international outreach (see for example Chen, Colapinto & Luo 2010; Sun 2010), Ghana's case seems to confirm how China is struggling to act as a persuader through traditional media and that its strategy is developing through a series of trials and errors. Backed by substantial resources, China can do what many other international broadcasters cannot, opening new offices in Africa, launching initiatives such as CNC World, and trying to fit in new niches. But, as long as the style of their reporting continues to carry the burden of the party's strict guidelines, it is unlikely that it will attract international audiences.

In contrast, China appears to have had greater success in defending and improving its image abroad through means that are at the same time more visible and subtler than news programs and cultural showcases. On the one hand, projects such as Bui's Dam or the National Theatre of Ghana are powerful symbols of China's new engagement in Africa. While in the past few years many Western donors have preferred channelling aid in ways that may be less visible, through program rather than project support, China has privileged initiatives that are grandiose and attract citizens' attention. On the other hand, China has been able to challenge in practice some of the stereotypes characterising its image abroad, especially in the technology sector. As an employee of Ghana Broadcasting Corporation reported on his return from his visit to China where he attended training and assessed some of the products Chinese companies were offering to support Ghana's digital switchover:

> Before going to China I thought they were not very advanced. The image we have here of Chinese products in general is that they are not of very good quality. But during my trip I realised that they are doing very well. In the past, we were thinking of just going to the West for those kinds of deals, but China has become a strong competitor.[22]

China seems to be progressively moving beyond the image of an exporter of cheap-quality products, in a drive that may also positively impact its image as a more trusted actor in supporting innovation in developing countries.[23]

Conclusion

As with every new, or renewed, phenomenon, China's growing role in Africa's media space is being met with both scepticism and confidence. This reflects broader debates about Chinese cooperation on the continent more generally, between those who stress how China's deepening engagement represents a threat to both Western and African interests (Kurlantzick 2007; Taylor 2006; Jacques

2009) and others who are hailing it as an economic and developmental opportunity (Alden & Alves 2008; Marks 2007; Moyo 2009; Rocha 2007).

One practical reason for China's appeal in Africa is its historical achievements in economic reform and national construction, and its successful leap to a rapidly developing nation (Wenping 2007). China is not developing by following the rules of the Washington Consensus (Brautigam 2009) and its trajectory in the past two decades has been cited as holding important lessons for Africa's development (Moyo 2009). Africans' disillusionment with centuries of European colonialism and five decades of post-independence relations with the West contributes to making China's renewed engagement with the continent even more appealing for some (Cheru & Obi 2010). Others, however, have raised concerns about China's 'real' ambitions in Africa, stressing its thirst for natural resources and threat to the established world order. These arguments have largely been put forward by Western leaders, as exemplified by Hillary Clinton's remarks in Dar Es Salaam about the risk of 'new colonialism' in Africa (see Krause-Jackson 2011), and David Cameron's warning in Lagos about China's 'authoritarian capitalism' (see Groves 2011). They have also become part of the academic debate, where it has been argued that it is not only Western countries, but also African countries that have opened their natural reserves to China, that will be worse off as a result of this relationship, and, more critically, the relationship is likely to derail efforts to foster good governance on the continent (Taylor 2006; Kurlantzick 2007).

To date, the debate over the Chinese influence in the media sector in Africa has largely represented an extension of these latter arguments. China's poor records with media freedoms at home and resistance to making commitments to democracy and respect for human rights components of its development assistance have been cited as risks that China could export authoritarianism and censorship abroad (Farah & Mosher 2010). We have sought to provide an empirically informed response to these claims and to offer a framework to facilitate a more nuanced approach to understanding China's growing role in the media in Africa.

Focusing on the case of Ghana, our research has considered how China as a *prototype* of media development has held little appeal for Ghanaian media professionals and policymakers. China has not actively offered its media system as a model, or as one to draw lessons from, nor have Ghanaian journalists looked at strategies employed by Chinese media outlets with greater interest than in the past. While there are elements that are shared by both media systems, they have not been actively embraced as foundations on which to build an alternative model of media development. The references made by both Ghanaian and Chinese policymakers to 'positive reporting' and to greater cooperation between countries in the Global South to redress a Western dominated flow of information appear to have found little resonance among journalists in Ghana.

In contrast, China's support to the Ghanaian government's attempts to use new communication technologies to increase the efficiency of its apparatus and its presence on the ground appears to be encouraging greater transformations. China's role as a *partner* of large-scale projects of the kind the Ghanaian government has been developing since 2008, backed by the availability of large concessionary loans

and competitive implementation costs, presents both opportunities and challenges to African citizens. On the one hand, the greater availability of financial resources and expertise that are not tied to specific templates for media development, coupled with an increased readiness of African countries to make use of new technologies, can lead to a new 'age of experimentation' in Africa, letting original solutions emerge to address local challenges. On the other hand, China has tended to build the capacity of the state, while disregarding other actors involved in innovation processes, making it critical to ensure that those in power are representative of society at large.

Finally, China's experience as a *persuader* seems to have produced mixed results. While both Ghanaian citizens and actors more deeply involved in the media sector consider China's influence positively, this appears not to depend on how China communicates to foreign audiences through its international channels. According to the interviews we conducted with actors involved in the media and policy sectors, it is more the high-impact projects China is sponsoring, as well as the transformations in China's economy and in the products China exports worldwide, that are contributing to promoting a positive image of the country abroad.

Analysed through the lenses of its experience in the media sector in Ghana, China's role emerges as less problematic than is commonly feared, and can lead to new experimentations in the media and telecommunication sectors that can reinforce the ability both of the state to operate and of citizens to have greater access to public services. However, two caveats need to be raised. First, as this discussion has also illustrated, China's experience in the media sector has emerged through trial and error and may easily change in the near future, promoting new strategies to approach African leaders and publics. Second, Ghana is one of the countries in Africa that has some of the strongest institutions on the continent, as well as the freest media. In order to fully understand China's role in the African mediasphere it will be necessary to develop more comparative research into both African democracies and autocracies. If China seems to have refrained from actively exporting its approach to the media, this does not mean that other actors in Africa will not try to learn from China, particularly in terms of how to balance media expansion and control.

Notes

1. The gift was saluted with gratitude and appreciation by most African leaders. Only Rwandan President Paul Kagame expressed criticism, stressing that 'China donated this to the continent for the use of the Continent—but it is very pathetic … the continent of Africa is very rich in terms of all kinds of resources and Africa being where it is today is a problem'. (Namata 2012)

2. The decision caused controversy, mostly among Ethiopian citizens who wanted the statue of Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, another father of the AU, erected next to Nkrumah's. See, for example, Howden (2012).

3. One of the authors of this article, Daniel Nkrumah, a former journalist of Ghana's *Daily Graphic* is currently a recipient of one of these fellowships, as a PhD candidate at Fudan University in China.

4. Among the very few studies conducted to date on China–Africa cooperation in the media sector are Banda 2009; Franks & Ribet 2009; Gagliardone, Repnikova & Stremlau 2010; Nan & Xinfeng 2010; and Ngomba 2011.

5. More information about the workshop's program, participants and outcomes can be accessed via the University of Oxford 'China and Africa Media Policy' webpage: http://pcmlp.socleg.ox.ac.uk/research/project/china-and-africa-media-policy (University of Oxford 2012).

6. This remark was made during the conference 'China as a Development Aid Actor: Rethinking Development Assistance and its Implications for Africa and the West', organised by the Oxford University China–Africa Network (OUCAN), 14 March 2012.

7. The 2011–2012 Press Freedom Index ranking by Reporters Without Borders (2012) placed Ghana 41st globally in terms of free media while China ranked 174th. The full list can be viewed at http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2011-2012,1043.html.

8. Interview with Gabby Otchere-Darko, Accra, Ghana, 21 August 2010. Otchere-Darko is former Editor of *The Statesman* and Director of the Danquah Institute.

9. Interview with Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa, Accra, Ghana, 24 August 2010. Ablakwa is Deputy Minister of Information in the Republic of Ghana.

10. Interview with Bernard Avle, Accra, Ghana, 25 August 2010. Avle is a reporter and talk-show host on Citi FM in Accra.

11. Interview with David Newton, Ghana Institute of Journalism, 26 August 2010.

12. Kufour was contributing to a panel discussion on 'African Media on the Global Development Agenda' at Rhodes University (see Ghana News Agency 2010).

13. Interview with Issah Yahaya, Ministry of Communication, Accra, Ghana, 26 August 2010.

14. Interview with Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa, Accra, Ghana, 24 August 2010.

15. This was just one aspect of the project that was highlighted by Hon. Haruna Iddrisu, Minister of Communications, in a statement issued 3 October 2011 (Government of Ghana 2011). See www.ghana.gov.gh/index.php/information/meet-the-press/7853-statement-by-minister-of-communications-hon-haruna-iddrisu-on-monday-3rd-october-2011.

16. For more information, see Gagliardone (2009) and Gagliardone and Stremlau (2012).

17. The BBC Global Views Poll has been conducted since 2005. The number of countries surveyed and of informants polled has varied over time, but a number of tracking countries have remained the same over time. The sample polled has varied from around 15 000 to around 29 000 informants. For more information about the methodology, see BBC World Service 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011.

18. The information that commonly circulates is that China is spending US$8.9 or US$9 billion on soft power. See Joseph Nye's discussion of soft power in China at www.nytimes.com/2012/01/18/opinion/why-china-is-weak-on-soft-power.html (Nye 2012). But there is lack of clarity about what this figure refers to, whether it is

an annual budget or a lump sum that was invested in the launch of initiatives such as Xinhua's TV channel CNC World.

19. Interview with Halifax Ansah-Addo, Accra, Ghana, 24 August 2010.

20. Interview with Fiifi Mensah, via Skype, 28 March 2012.

21. Michael Jang, Chief Engineer for Cable Gold, actually lamented that the Chinese government is not supporting Cable Gold's operations abroad. As he explained: 'The Chinese government should help us with this because we are offering a service. There is a dedicated channel to teach Chinese. The Chinese government has a lot of money and it should invest in businesses like ours'. (Interview with Michael Jang, Accra, Ghana, 28 August 2010)

22. Interview with GBC employee (anonymous), Accra, Ghana, 27 August 2010.

23. The change in China's image seems not to be occurring yet at the level of experts. Ehi Binitie, Director of Product Management at Rancard Solutions, a successful IT company based in Accra, highlighted some of the problems connected to China's approach to new technologies: 'They approach the business holistically. But the problem is that if one specific product is mature and works well, others may not be, but they will still be part of the package. Their strategy is to keep working on it and fixing it until it works fine. But there must be a balance between quality and responsiveness. Their model is to come with a lot of people who can work on a project. Also, from a market perspective, they throw many things hoping that one will stick. They flood the market with products and services hoping that some will pick up. Our strategy instead is more about focus.' (Interview with Ehi Binitie, Accra, Ghana, 27 August 2010)

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Author note

Iginio Gagliardone is Research Fellow in the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, University of Oxford and Research Associate of the Centre of Governance and Human Rights, University of Cambridge.

Nicole Stremlau heads the Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy (PCMLP) at the University of Oxford.

Daniel Nkrumah is PhD Candidate in Communication at the School of Journalism, Fudan University and a former journalist of Ghana's newspaper *The Daily Graphic*.