

# Is positive news, news at all? The return of Chinese media to Africa and the impact on news values in Kenya and South Africa

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What's (the) News? Values, Viruses and Vectors of Newsworthiness

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## ■ Positivity as a news value

- While absent in Galtung and Ruge's taxonomy of "news factors", positivity (Bednarek & Caple, 2017) [or good news (Harcup & O'Neill, 2010, 2017) or feel-good (Conboy, 2002) or positive news (Bech Sillesen, 2014)] is now widely seen as a frequent news value.
- Nonetheless, most research in the Global North demonstrates that "negativity" (or conflict) remains the "basic news value" (Bell, 1991, p. 156).

## ■ Africa in the News

- There is a widely spread perception, partly supported by research, that news about African countries over the last decades has been predominantly negative (Hawk, 1992; Kalyango Jr. & Onyebadi, 2012; Obijiofor, 2009).

News about Africa deals with «crises such as coup d'états, civil wars, terrorism, and health pandemics» generally

(Kalyango Jr. & Onyebadi, 2012, p. 685)

(Brookes, 1995, p. 461)

## ■ Normative interventions

- To reverse the predominance of “bad news” about Africa (and the Global South), alternative journalistic models (or sets of practices) have emerged over the years.
  - Developmental journalism (Aggarwala, 1978; Jamias, 1975; Ogan, 1982)
  - Peace journalism (Galtung, 2003; Lynch, 2010, 2015)
  - Constructive journalism (McIntyre, 2015)
  - Public journalism (Rosen, 1999; Voakes, 2004)
- A common characteristic is their critique of journalists’ focus on conflict (& negativity).

# ■ Internationalizing Chinese media

- Since the mid 2000s, Chinese (state-owned) media have been on a quest to become more international.
- North America and Africa have been at the center of China's media internationalization.
  - In Africa, Chinese media are “returning” and not simply arriving out of nowhere (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

# ■ Chinese media in Africa

- Today, Chinese media engagement covers 4 areas (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2018)
  - Media assistance and cooperation.
  - Direct investment in African media companies.
  - Content distribution (news and entertainment).
  - News production for local and global consumption.
- Chinese media are said to be offering an “alternative” narrative of Africa that stems from “different” journalistic norms and news values (Gagliardone & Pal, 2016; Zhang & Matingwina, 2016).

## ■ Telling a “positive story” of Africa

«We have the news of what is happening in Africa. We tell a **positive story** of African people»

(CGTN Africa Managing Editor, Pang Xinhua)

«Some people from a few countries are always painstakingly distorting the facts of China-Africa friendly ties (...) [Chinese media] is bound to tell the whole world **the true picture** of China-Africa exchanges»

(Chinese Ambassador to Kenya, Liu Guangyuang)

# ■ Overarching research Questions

- How do journalists working for Chinese media in Africa construct the notion of “positive news”?
- To what extent “positive news” is applicable to news beyond the African continent?
- How receptive are media professionals working for Kenyan and South African news organizations to the idea of “positive news”?

## ■ Methods

- Semi-structured in-depth interviews with media professionals working for Chinese media (Xinhua, *China Daily* and CGTN) in Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Angola, Uganda, Tunisia and Zimbabwe (n = 37).
- Semi-structured in-depth interviews with media professionals in Kenya and South Africa (n = 40).
- Interviews were complemented with focus groups and a computational content analysis [not presented today].



**MEDIA**

**Constructing the idea of “positive news” in a global Chinese newsroom**

- **Journalists making sense of “positive news”**
  - “Positive news” includes stories of individuals achieving their goals, companies turning profit, solutions to long lasting problems and, more generally, **news about everyday life.**
  - Discourses about “positive news” are largely constructed in opposition to “Western media”, which are described as presenting Africa routinely in a negative light.
  - While journalists do not refer to any journalistic model, some rationale resonates with that of constructive journalism.

- **A Kenyan journalist's take on “positive news”**

I was in Abuja for the election. There is no Boko Haram in Abuja. Abuja is a bustling city. They were very concerned about security because it was election time.

So, we wanted to show the security measures the government has put in place to enable people to vote, as opposed to the security challenges that will not, that will make people not vote. Do you understand? The difference is like ‘So the government has done this, so guys go out and vote’.

## ■ A Kenyan reporter's take on “positive news”

We don't just talk about terrorist attacks. We also tell [you] about what businesses Kenyans are doing, despite the fact that there's been this terror attack. The view is not just about this one issue that has happened.

We try as much as possible get the angle of the authorities. What is being done about this? What's going on? We don't just concentrate on that incident alone. We also concentrate on the dialogue that is going on among the people, among the authorities. What exactly is the government doing about this?

- **Not all approve of “positive news”**

this thing of positive news [i]t was a very interesting agenda to try, because anybody in journalism, anybody working in journalism will tell you news is news. You cannot say I will not report on the crisis in South Sudan because it's not positive. It took three months, within three months after we started, we were already doing news is news.

The image features a wooden frame with the word "MEDIA" in large, white, block letters. The letters are set against a dark background within the frame. The frame is made of light-colored wood with visible grain and knots. The overall image has a slightly faded, artistic quality.

**MEDIA**

**“Positive news” about Africa and  
beyond**

- **“Positive news” is geographically limited**
  - There is a strong association in Chinese newsrooms between “positive news” and the narrative of “Africa rising”.
  - When it comes to reporting Africa, most journalists agree that they like to do “uplifting” and “feel good stories”
  - However, not all countries “deserve” a similar treatment. A certain hierarchy of news values operates in most global Chinese newsrooms.

## ■ Hierarchy of news

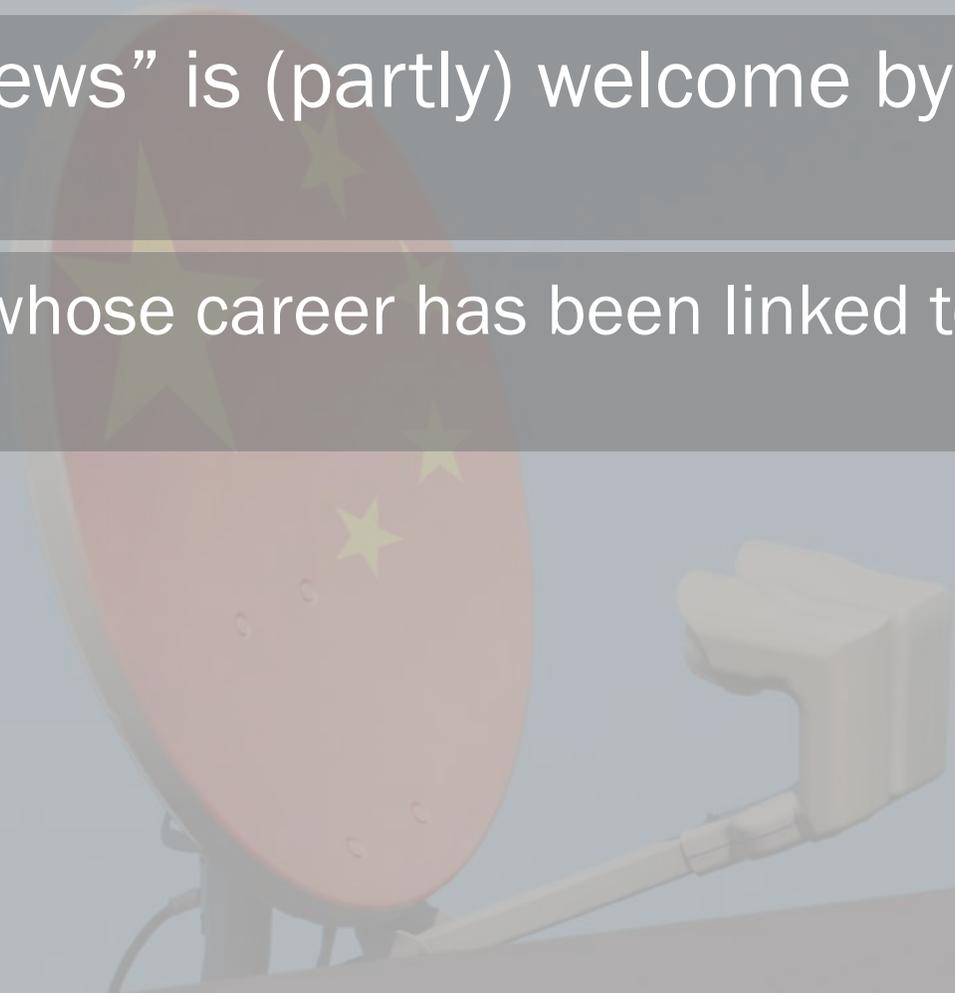
<b>Topic/Country</b>	<b>Control</b>	<b>Prevalent News Value</b>
China	High	Positivity
Sino-African ties	High	Positivity
African politics	Moderate	Positivity/Negativity
United States	Moderate	Negativity
African economy	Low	Positivity/Negativity
Africa features	Low	Positivity
African sports	Low	Positivity/Negativity



**MEDIA**

**Kenyan and South African media professionals views on “positive news”**

- **Divided views on “positive news”**
  - The idea of more “positive news” is (partly) welcome by half of interviewees
    - These are mostly journalists whose career has been linked to government-funded media.



- **A Kenyan reporter's take on "positive news"**

There's lots of negativity around Africa and between us, as Africans as well. The narrative [is] still the same that people are starving everywhere, that there's conflicts everywhere, but there's lots of good stuff happening on the continent.



- **A Kenyan editor's take on "positive news"**

Western media always tells negative news about Africa (...) Even locally, we have a problem of saying, 'How do we do the positives?' That's the gap the Chinese are trying to fill. Our duty is not to give people a permanent feel-good factor, but give them a mirror of what is happening. Only that it seems 90 per cent is always negative things. You rarely get a paper full of positive news.

- **Divided views on “positive news”**
  - The other half of the sample abhors the notion of “positive news”
    - These are firm defenders of the watchdog role of the press.
    - They are mostly trained in European/North American institutions.

- **A Kenyan editor's take on "positive news"**

There's no such thing as positive news, news is news. To put it rather harshly, they [Chinese media] are living in their own world, and it shows how many people choose them. News is news, it can be positive, it can be negative. The unfortunate thing is when news is sanitized, which is what CCTV is doing and journalism doesn't work that way, and audiences are not foolish, they are not.

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- **A South African editor's take on "positive news"**

We call it "sunshine journalism." Yeah, I don't take it seriously. I suppose the idea is that you were supposed to support the country's development efforts, you see, rather than... I mean, you're basically looking to hold people to account, that's what you're doing. And that kind of journalism is not popular in those countries [such as China].

## ■ Final ideas

- Chinese media's focus on "positive news" is to be understood in the context of a perceived "ideological" confrontation.
- The lack of definition, plus some contestation in newsrooms limits the uptake of "positivity" as a dominant news value.
- "Positivity" does not appear to be close to being a prevalent/enduring news value in Kenya & South Africa.
- There can be a downside to the predominance of "positive news" in countries with media systems in transition (Sparks, 2008).

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