

# **Who Set the Narrative on COVID-19? Assessing the Influence of Chinese Global Media on the News Content of 30 African Countries**

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International Communication Association Annual Conference

# Background

Source: <https://www.chinafile.com/china-africa-project/chinas-media-challenges-western-narratives-of-africa>



Increased presence  
of Chinese media in  
Africa

← Tweet

Chinese Ambassador to Zimbabwe Retweeted

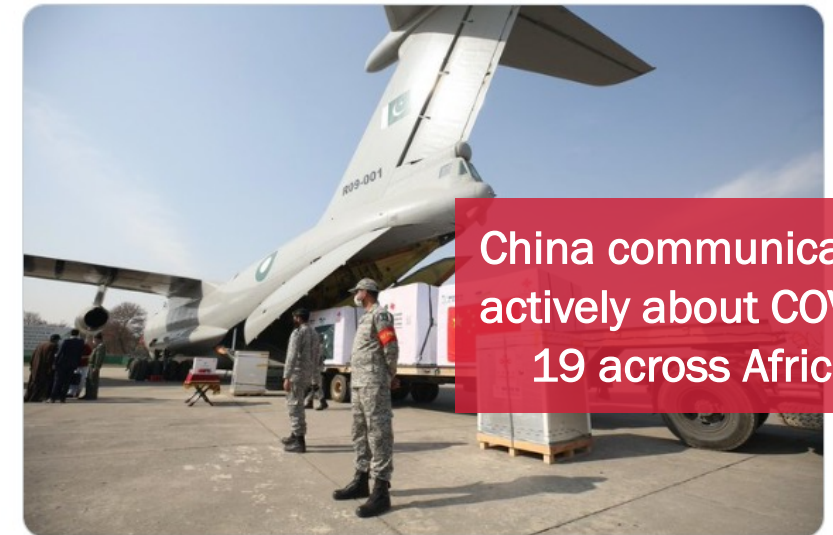


China Xinhua News

@XHNews

China state-affiliated media

China is providing vaccine aid to 53 developing countries: FM [xhne.ws/HUSy6](https://xhne.ws/HUSy6)



4:00 AM · Feb 8, 2021 · China Xinhua News

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# Global News Flows

- The **impact that global news agencies** from the Global North have on the news content of media in the Global South has long been a preoccupation of scholars of global communication since Cold War.
- Spurred by the arrival of Qatar's Al Jazeera in the 2000s, there's been an increasing interest in the **possible impact of State-owned media on global news narratives**.
  - These State-owned/backed media include China's and Russia's, but also France's and others'.
  - Chinese media's **actual influence** on African media is poorly understood.

# Intermedia agenda setting

- The ability of **well-established news organizations** to have an impact on the content of smaller or **less-established news organizations** (McCombs, 2004).
- Guo and Vargo (2020, p. 3) use the term “**transnational intermedia agenda setting**” to refer to
  - the ability of news media in a country to “transfer the salience of issues associated with their own country to foreign media, thus influencing how foreign media portray the country”
  - “the capability of a country’s news media to push their perspectives on international politics outside of their own country to the world”.

# Research Questions

- RQ1: How prevalent were news stories about China and COVID-19 in African media between January and May 2020?
- RQ2: How much content from global media did African news organizations reuse in their reporting of the COVID-19 outbreak?
- RQ3: To what extent was the reuse of Chinese media's content different in Francophone and Anglophone Africa?
- RQ4: How much of China's narrative during the crisis was reflected on African media's coverage of the pandemic?



# Approach

- Compiled 500,000 news stories from French & English language **digital sources based in Africa (16 French- and 16 English-speaking) & UK, France, US, China.**
- Used a combination of **computational methods** (text similarity algorithms & structural topic modeling)

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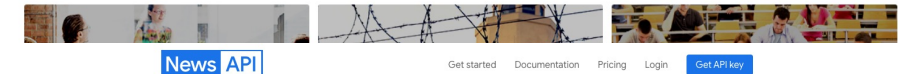
Search in all News for  
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ted by recent first

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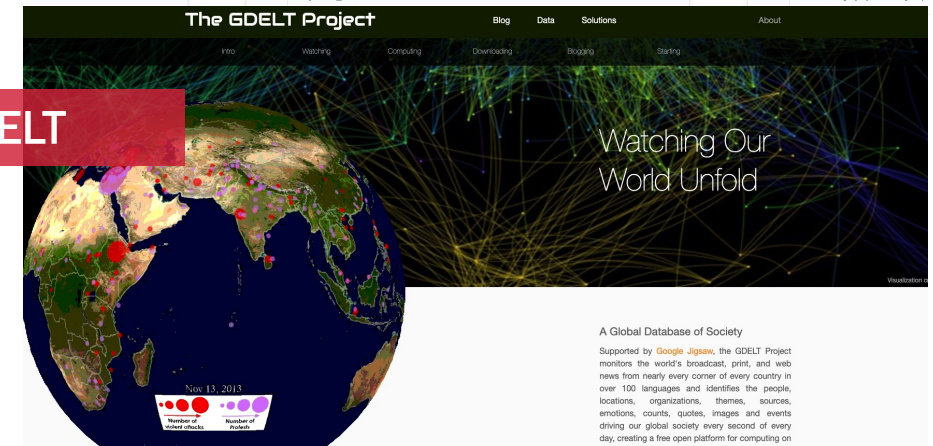
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All articles mentioning Apple f

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# Analysis

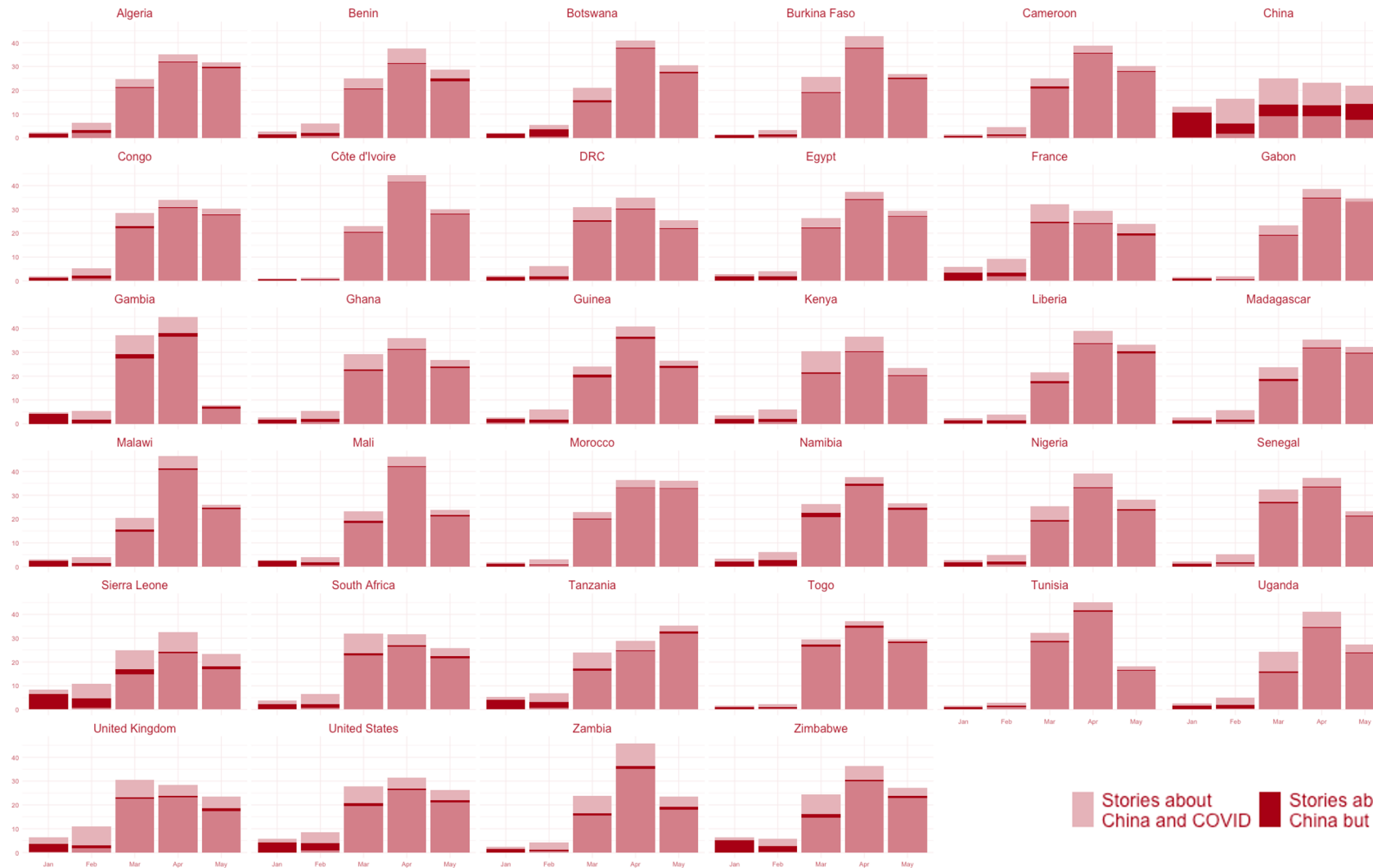
- Approach 1: Use **word frequencies** to compare texts and find how similar they are
  - RNewsFlow
  - Cosine similarity > .97

- Approach 2: Use word frequencies (and metadata) to **classify documents** into N topics.
  - stm

publish_date	source	country_iso	full_text	web_url	data_source	id	language_gdelt	count_china	cos
2020-04-07	abidjan.net	CI	Société Hamed Bakayoko déclaré positif au coronavirus...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/671218.html	GDelt	GDelt126371	FR	0	
2020-04-27	abidjan.net	CI	Société COVID 19: Un don en vivres et non vivres offe...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/672003.html	GDelt	GDelt126521	FR	0	
2020-04-20	abidjan.net	CI	Économie Covid-19: le directeur général de IOMS peu...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/671694.html	GDelt	GDelt126580	FR	0	
2020-04-22	abidjan.net	CI	Économie Hausse du coût de la viande : les acteurs in...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/671803.html	GDelt	GDelt126626	FR	0	
2020-04-29	abidjan.net	CI	Société Secteur du tourisme et des loisirs : les résulta...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/672090.html	GDelt	GDelt126639	FR	0	
2020-03-21	abidjan.net	CI	Économie Covid-19: Les mesures urgentes prises par ...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/670625.html	GDelt	GDelt126836	FR	0	
2020-03-23	abidjan.net	CI	Société Journée mondiale de l'eau 2020 toujours d'ac...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/670673.html	GDelt	GDelt126859	FR	2	
2020-03-27	abidjan.net	CI	International New York, nouvel épicerie de la pandé...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/670803.html	GDelt	GDelt126863	FR	0	
2020-05-06	abidjan.net	CI	Société Ramadan : Hamed Bakayoko offre des vivres a...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/672361.html	GDelt	GDelt127053	FR	0	
2020-05-12	abidjan.net	CI	Société Coronavirus : Le Premier Ministre met la minis...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/672617.html	GDelt	GDelt127165	FR	0	
2020-05-14	abidjan.net	CI	Société Reprise des travaux de la Nationale A3 à Niak...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/672735.html	GDelt	GDelt127209	FR	0	
2020-05-27	abidjan.net	CI	Politique Présidentielle 2020: la révision de la liste éle...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/673528.html	GDelt	GDelt127343	FR	0	
2020-02-27	abidjan.net	CI	■	https://news.abidjan.net/h/669714.html	GDelt	GDelt127411	FR	1	
2020-04-03	abidjan.net	CI	Économie Covid- 19 Des producteurs de café-cacao r...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/671048.html	GDelt	GDelt127456	FR	0	
2020-04-05	abidjan.net	CI	Société Le préfet de Korhogo appelle la population à s...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/671111.html	GDelt	GDelt127484	FR	0	
2020-04-10	abidjan.net	CI	Région COVID-19 : Agboville lance la phase répressiv...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/671331.html	GDelt	GDelt127504	FR	0	
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2020-04-15	abidjan.net	CI	Art et Culture Covid 19: Des artistes et journalistes se...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/671480.html	GDelt	GDelt127531	FR	0	
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2020-03-06	abidjan.net	CI	Société Social: Report du gala de la Fondation Childre...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/670091.html	GDelt	GDelt128005	FR	0	
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2020-03-17	abidjan.net	CI	Société Crise du Coronavirus : Les Abidjanais vident l...	https://news.abidjan.net/h/670484.html	GDelt	GDelt128104	FR	0	

[https://github.com/danimadrid/africa\\_china\\_covid19](https://github.com/danimadrid/africa_china_covid19)

# RQ<sub>1</sub>: Amount Coverage about China & COVID



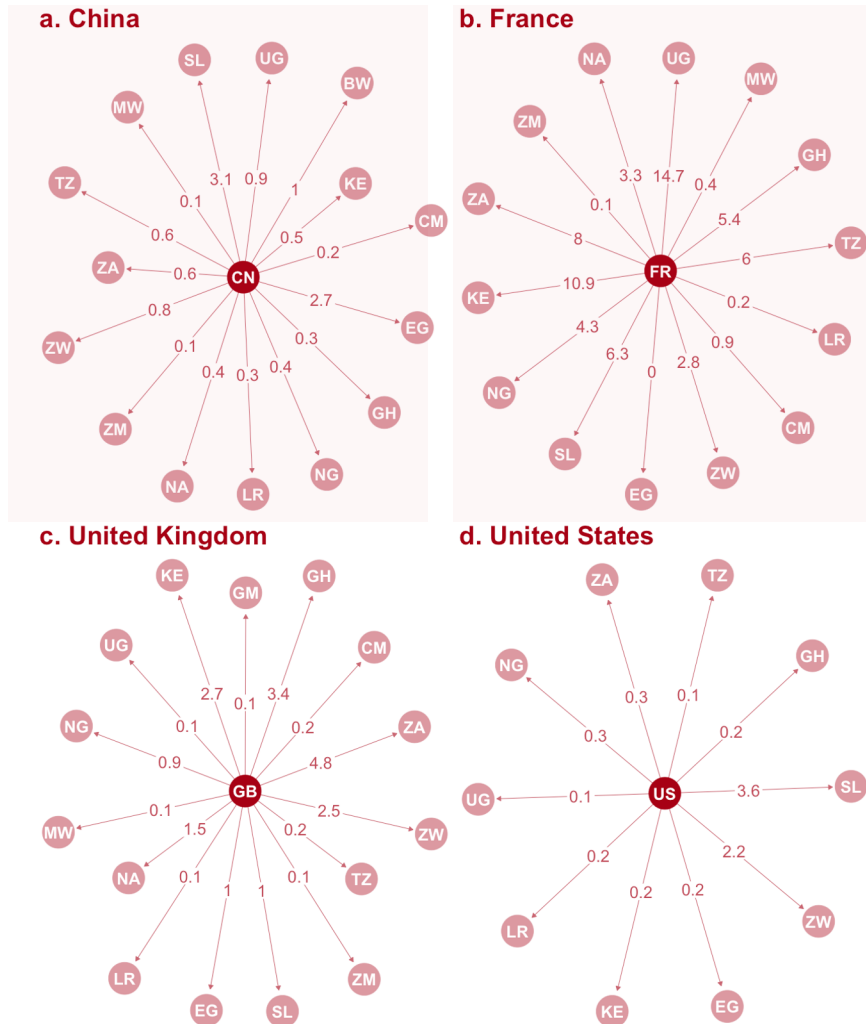
Limited news about  
China pre-COVID-19;  
peaked in April

Global media discuss  
China more  
XH 225 stories/day  
Reuters: 135/day  
Average: 1.2/day

Stories about China and COVID    Stories about China but not COVID    Stories about COVID but not China



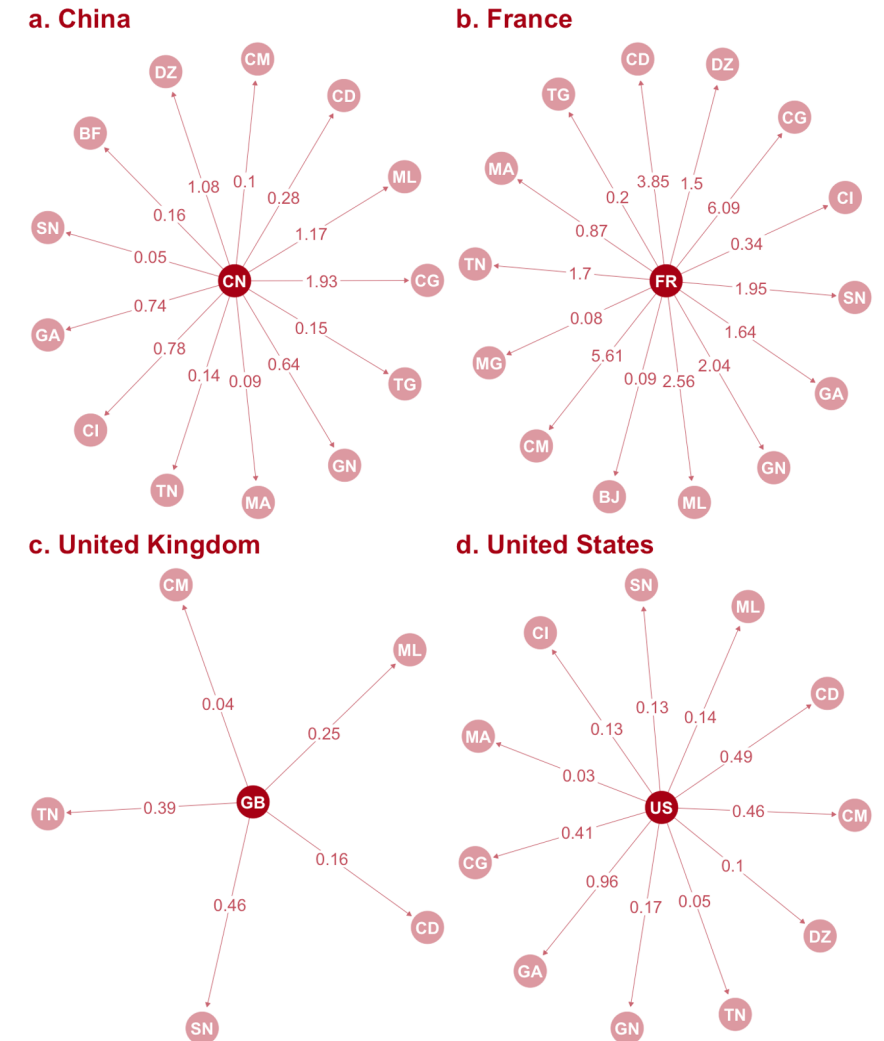
# RQ<sub>2</sub> & RQ<sub>3</sub>: Quantifying Text Reuse



Around 4% of stories were from foreign sources (AFP, 1<sup>st</sup>).

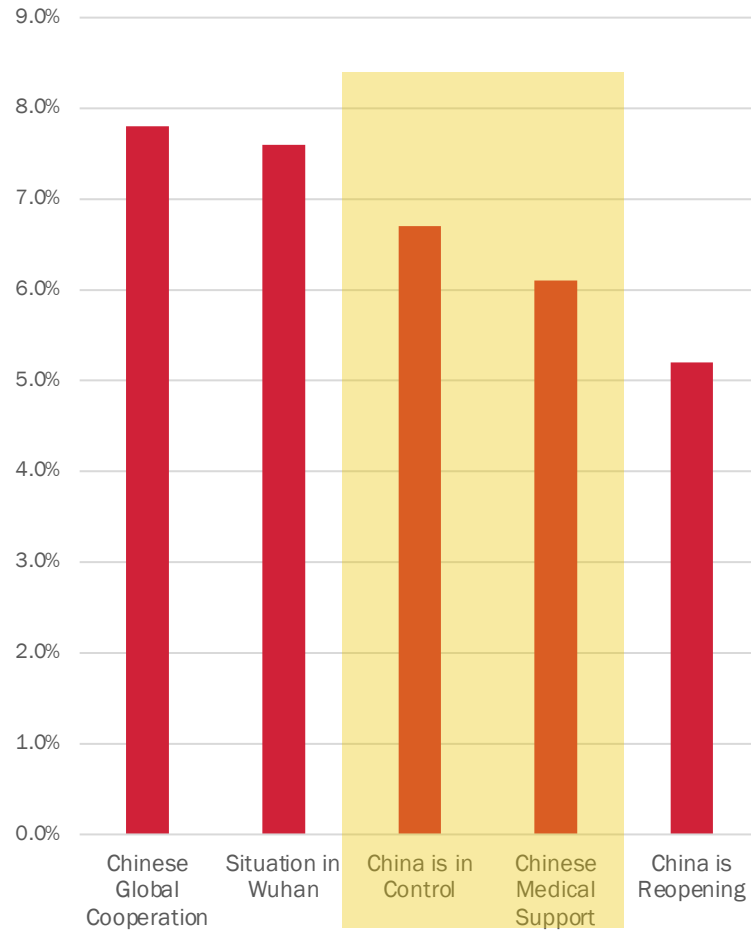
News on China and COVID came from FR (65%), UK (25%) & CN (7%) sources.

More reliance on text reuse on English (<=) that French (=>)

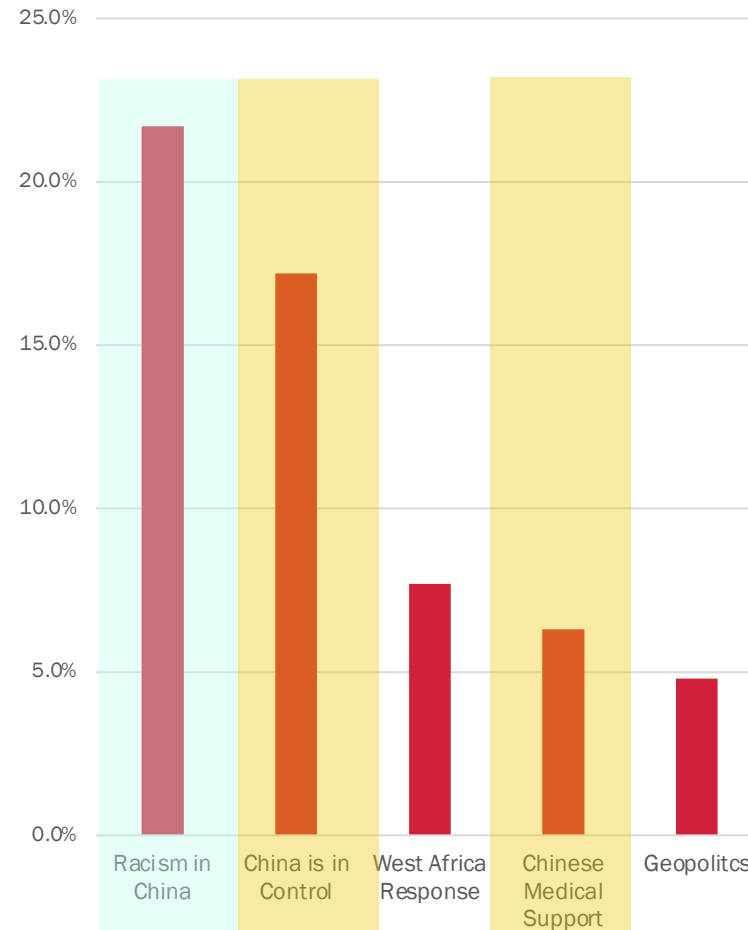


# RQ<sub>4</sub>: Narrative overlap

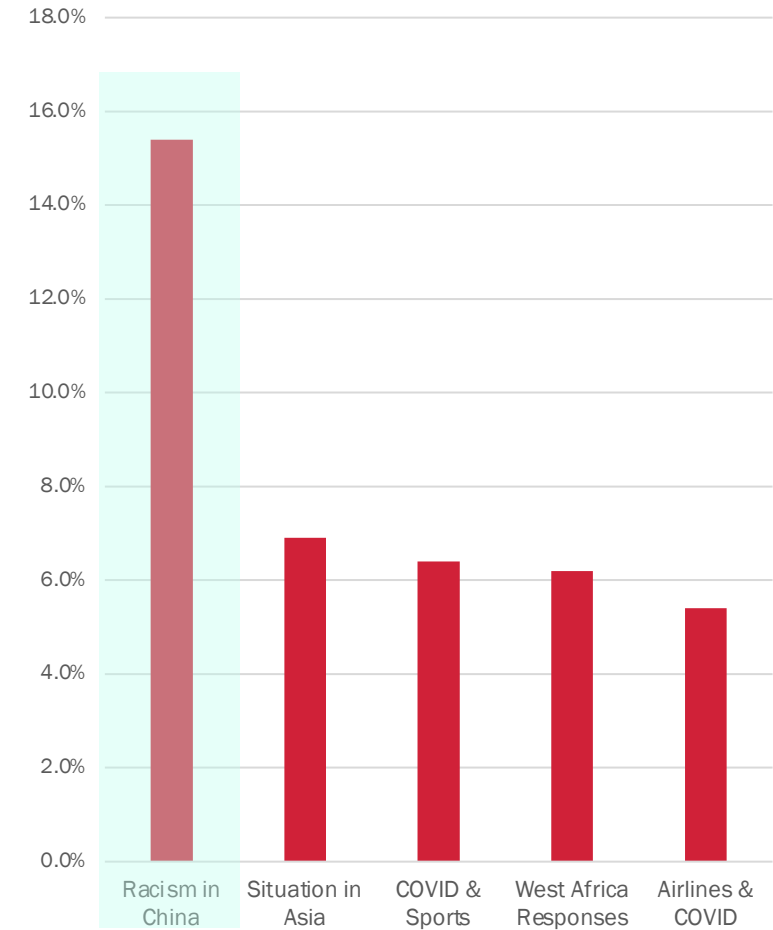
Chinese media



Gambian media



Kenyan Media



# Final Ideas

- This paper found limited evidence of **transnational intermedia agenda setting** :
  - News coverage of China in most African countries tends to be **relatively modest** when no significantly newsworthy “news event” is taking place
  - The use of content published originally by Chinese sources is **very marginal** in both English and French-speaking Africa
  - There is **a gap between the prevailing themes** found in news coverage about China and COVID-19 in Chinese & African media.
- Possible explanations:
  - Existing **mistrust among some journalists** in Africa towards Chinese media’s content (maybe increased during COVID-19)
  - Preference for **domestic issues** during a pandemic, which might not be covered by Chinese sources.

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