



# **Chinese media engagement in South Africa: what is its impact on local journalism?**

Dani Madrid-Morales, City University of Hong Kong  
Herman Wasserman, University of Cape Town

ICAfrica – Nairobi, October 2016

# Outline

1. Overview of South Africa-China media relations
2. Assessing China's impact – the research project
3. Background
4. Findings
  1. Typology of journalists' attitudes towards and adoption of Chinese media
  2. Impact on the journalistic profession
  3. Views on South-Africa China relations
5. Conclusions

# New geopolitics of information

- Changes in **media flows and contraflows** in South Africa after joining BRICS in 2010.
- Although the concept 'BRICS' is **contested**, it has served South Africa to rebrand itself globally.
- South Africa's membership raises questions about the **consequences** on domestic and foreign policies.

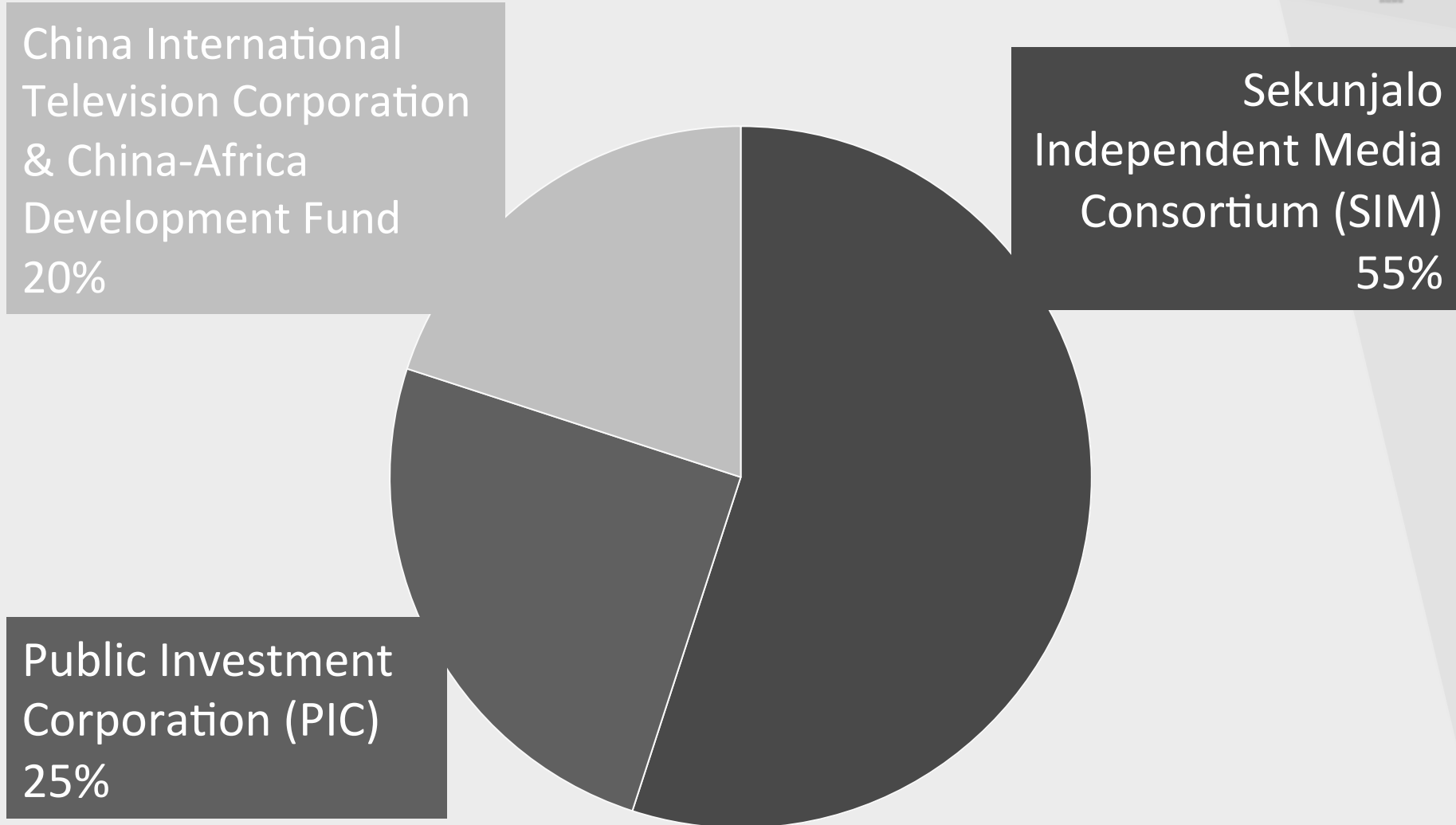


# Chinese media in South Africa

Type of Involvement	Company Name	Industry	Date	Description
Infrastructure Development	Cell C & ZTE	Telecom	2010	Chinese telecommunications company ZTE awarded a USD378 million dollar contract to expand Cell C's GSM/UMTS network.
Training	--	Multiple	2015	South African journalists' participation in a workshop for media officials and senior editors organised by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
Content Production	<i>Chinafrica</i>	Print	2012	Re-launch of <i>Chinafrica</i> , a bilingual (French and English) magazine edited by China International Publishing Group, and establishment of a regional bureau in Johannesburg.
Content Distribution	StarSat	Broadcast	2013	Chinese-owned StarTimes acquisition of On Digital Media's TopTV and establishment of StarSat, a subscription based satellite platform offering Chinese and non-Chinese TV content.
Direct Investment	Independent Media	Print	2013	A Chinese investment holding acquisition of 2% of Independent Media South Africa. The acquisition eased content exchange between the South African group and Chinese state-owned media



# Independent Media | Shares



# Critical reception of the deal



“Has most of the Sekunjalo consortium’s stake been financed by the local and Chinese state companies? If so, they would effectively own most of Independent, which would be worrying given that South Africa’s and China’s rulers are hostile to critical media organisations.”

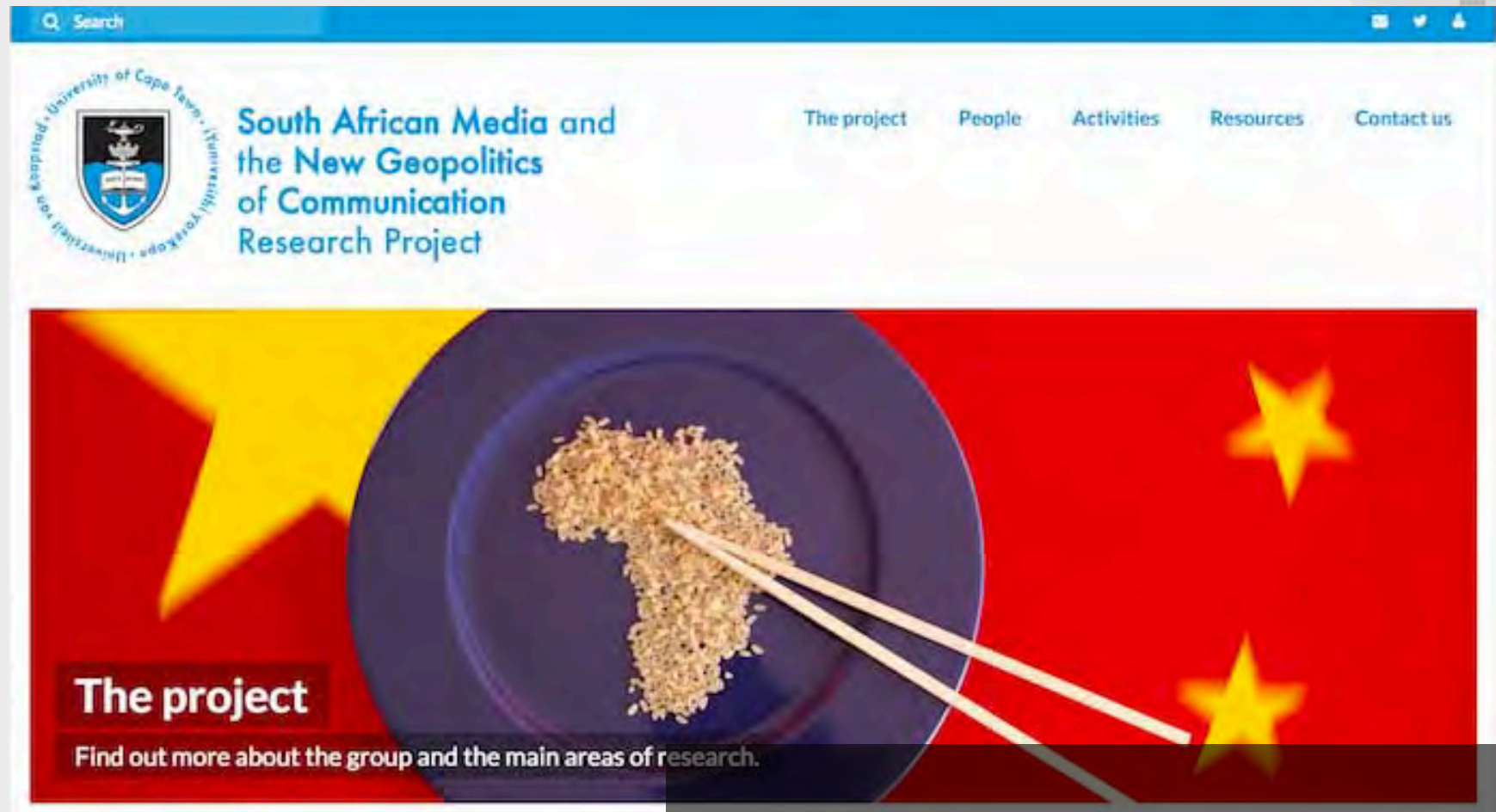
[Craig McKune, August 30, 2013]



“It is going to be important to track the growing Chinese presence. Is this just investment, or is it colonialism with Chinese characteristics? How will their media investments serve their interests and will this affect our media culture?”

[Anton Harper, 27 June, 2013]

# Research Project



<http://www.sachinamedia.info>



# What impact on South Africa's media

- Content analysis of South African media on China related topics (Dalai Lama, environmental issues...)
- Focus Groups across South African universities
- In-depth interviews with media practitioners and policy makers



# Method

- We conducted 20 interviews in Gauteng, the Western Cape and Nairobi over a period of 2 months.
- Semi-structured face-to-face interviews, except for two phone interviews, lasting between 30 to 120 minutes.
- Interviews were divided into four blocks:
  - Awareness and use of Chinese media
  - Professional influence
  - Long-term impact of South Africa-China relations



# Interviewees

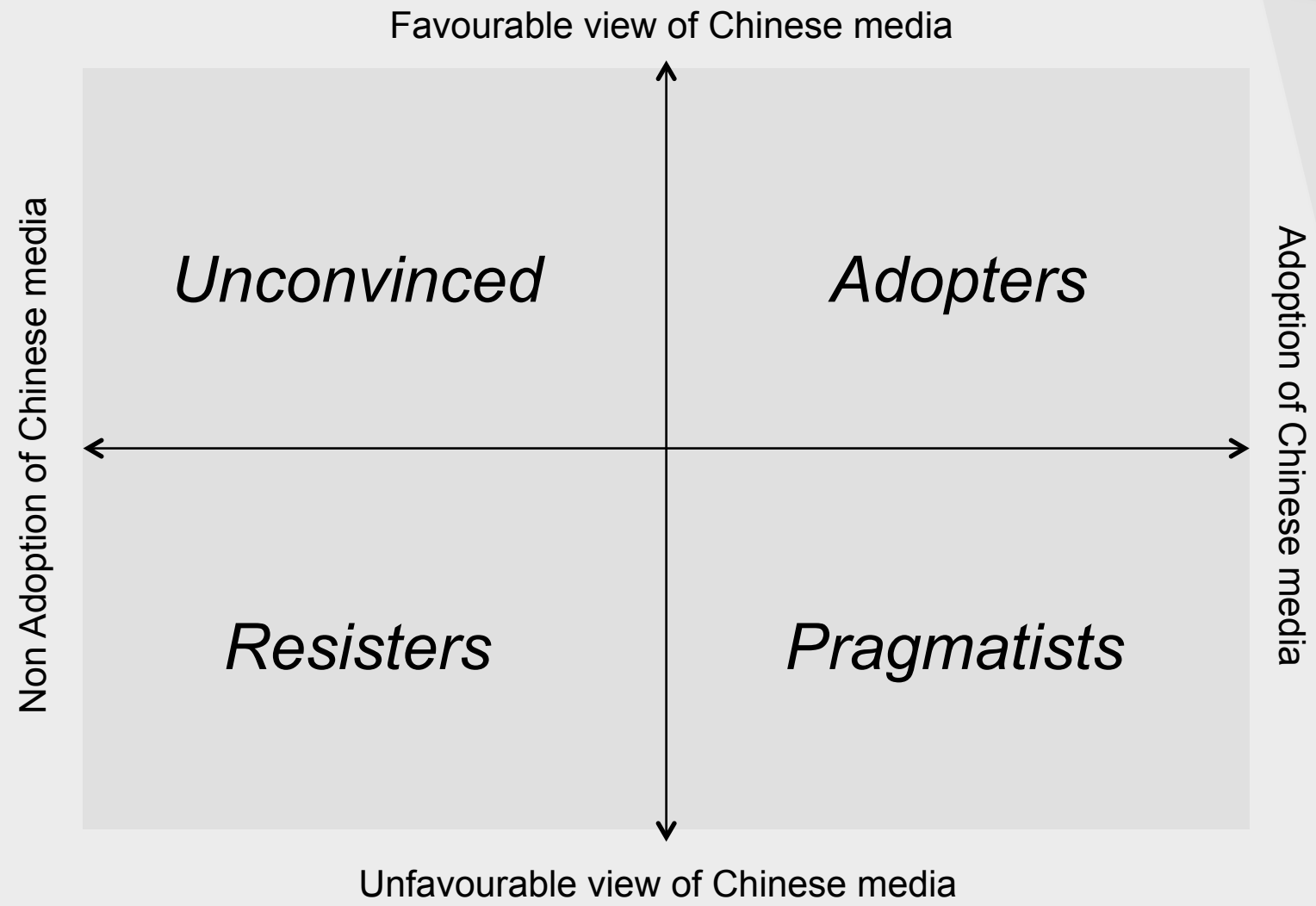
<b>Position</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Journalist	Weekly paper
Policy maker	National think tank
Africa Editor	Weekly paper
Senior Manager	TV station
Journalist	Online publication
Correspondent	Online publication
Journalist	Weekly paper
China analyst	SA university
Freelance writer	Online publication

<b>Position</b>	<b>Organization</b>
China Analyst	SA university
Senior Reporter	Weekly paper
Editor	Media group
Editor	Media group
Media analyst	SA University
Editor	General daily
Media officer	Government office
Foreign editor	National newspaper
Senior Journalist	English daily

# Research questions

- RQ<sub>1</sub> : How often do media professionals in South Africa access content from Chinese media?
- RQ<sub>2</sub> : What are their attitudes towards Chinese media?
- RQ<sub>3</sub> : How much influence do Chinese media companies have on journalism in South Africa?
- RQ<sub>4</sub> : How do media professionals in South Africa perceive Africa-China relations?

# A framework of analysis





# *An Adopter*

«I do [watch CCTV] actually. Mainly, not as much as I ought to. I do, I think that their Africa coverage is very good. I think it is good from the point of view that they clearly are investing. They have, I think, a stronger commitment to using local people than, say, CNN or BBC. And they tend to do stories that are not necessarily on the main agendas. So, no no, I do watch CCTV.»

Senior Manager, TV Station

# *A Pragmatist*

«Let's assume that there's a growing criticism of a land grab in Mozambique, and two or three Chinese business people were driven out of the country as a result of this, and there's a demonstration in front of the Chinese embassy in Maputo. CCTV and the various newspapers in China, how would they react to that? They would be fairly relentlessly one-sided about it. »

Commentator, Online publication



# *A Resister*

«There was a lot of contact with Chinese media. And I made it very clear to my employer that I did not care for the way in which that country is governed. I do not believe that it believes in human rights, and I do not believe in supping with the devil. So no, I have nothing to say to them.»

Editor, Weekly paper



# *An Unconvinced*

«I don't exactly know their agency and how it works...

[It's called Xinhua]

I think I've heard, read about it.»

« [T]he Chinese channel I haven't really watched. I don't know why. It is an interesting question... Maybe there's a perception that [it] is government biased, propaganda as well, but I haven't checked it out as well to have an informed view about it. »

Editor, Daily Newspaper



# Impact on journalistic work

- At the **micro level**, Chinese news media rarely shape content in South Africa.
  - Xinhua is only present at one large media group.
  - Perception that China is under-reported.
- Indirect influence through *adopters* and *pragmatists* who crave for a “**Chinese perspective**” on global affairs.

# Impact on journalistic work

- At the **meso level**, none of the informants referred directly to perceived or real changes in news values, newsworthiness or professional norms.
- However, the self-declared preference of Chinese media for **positive news**, particularly when talking about Africa, resonated with many.

# Impact on journalistic work

- At the **macro level** opinions are divided on the impact of Chinese ownership of South African media
  - Some describe it as “**worrisome**” although the threat is “not immediate, but in the future.”
  - Some say that the Independent has already adopted a **softer stance** on Chinese issues.
  - Others refute that such influence will occur and appeal to **journalists’ agency** and the robustness of South Africa’s media sector.

# Impact on journalistic work

«The fear is misplaced and I think it's also as a consequence of trying to portray China as a threat to the continent. [...] All I'm going to say is that we don't see the Chinese as a threat. We do believe in our culture at Independent, which is rooted in our very rich tradition of media freedom and standing for media ethics. »

# South Africa-China relations

- Scepticism dominates opinions about the nature of South Africa-China relations, but they **influence perceptions about the media.**
- China's presence is decoded through **domestic frames/lenses**, and it is used to criticize what most informants perceive as weak South African foreign policy.



# South Africa-China relations

«We are in a position to set our terms and China... and to make them mutually advantageous. Will we do so? I am not so sure. I think that China is very effective at steam-rolling its way across governments and getting what it wants. Again, this is not necessarily China's problem, it is just sensible diplomacy, it's South Africa's problem.»

Freelance writer, Online publication

# Conclusions

1. South African media professionals have varying degrees of engagement with Chinese news media, which partially contradicts previous findings.
2. South African media professionals' work has seen limited impact from Chinese investment. Some journalists fear possible negative long-term consequences in editorial independence.
3. Local processes influence the way China is perceived and it is routinely interpreted through domestic lenses.

# Way forward

- The replicability of the research design allows for **multi-country** comparisons:
  - Data already collected in Kenya.
  - Framework can be tested in other countries.
- Exploring ways to assess impact of Chinese media on a wider audience through survey research are needed.





dani.madrid@my.cityu.edu.hk  
herman.wasserman@uct.ac.za

<http://www.sachinamedia.info>

University of Cape Town