

Chinese media engagement in South Africa What is its impact on local journalism?

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China's footprint in Africa's media sector over the last decade has reached dimensions that makes it impossible to go unnoticed. In South Africa, one of the countries where this imprint is most diversified, Chinese media have been engaged in a varied range of activities, including content production and distribution, infrastructure development, direct investment in local media, and training of journalists. Building on previous exploratory studies by the authors, this paper addresses an unresolved question in the study of China's media internationalization: the impact on journalism. Using data from twenty semi-structured in-depth interviews with editors, journalists and policy makers, we investigate how much influence Chinese media exercise on journalism in South Africa. We present responses along three dimensions: consumption of and attitudes towards Chinese media, impact on local journalism and views about South Africa-China relations. Our data offers evidence that, despite having substantially increased their presence, Chinese media are far from having a profound impact on media professionals. While some interviewees report the adoption of some Chinese media in their daily news consumption, scepticism towards China, and by extension its media, dominates. We discuss these findings in the context of Chinese state-owned media's attempts to increase their discursive power globally.

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In December 2014, South Africa's President Jacob Zuma was in Beijing for a third state visit to China. Accompanying him was a large delegation of more than a hundred businesspeople and ministers. Amongst them, Dr. Iqbal Survé, a medical doctor and investor with close ties to South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC). Survé was in China to sign a partnership between state-owned China Central Television (CCTV) and a company he had recently added to his portfolio, Independent Media, South Africa's second largest press group. The deal signed in Beijing's Great Hall of the People included plans to create an Africa-wide multimedia news platform. The two companies were no strangers in business. In 2013, CCTV, through its international operations branch, had participated in Survé's acquisition of Independent Media from its previous Irish owners. The presence of Chinese investors in the deal was the highest profile Chinese venture in South Africa's media sector, but it wasn't the first one, and it will probably not be the last one. It was the combined consequence of China's push to internationalize its media industry, South Africa's increasingly globalised communications sector and the growing relationship between the two countries after South Africa's accession to the BRICS bloc.

The relationship between South Africa and China should be viewed against the background of broader geopolitical shifts that impact on flows and contraflows in the media. South Africa and China are both members of the BRICS group of emerging states, which South Africa joined in 2010 at the invitation of China. Despite controversies about the analytical usefulness of the BRICS category (critics have pointed to the discrepancies in the sizes of the economies of the constituent member states, their different political and economic systems, and the fact that the member states are not only allies but also economic competitors), South Africa's claim to membership acknowledges its economic leadership on the continent (even though Nigeria has overtaken it as the African country with the largest GDP). The South African government has proclaimed the country's membership in BRICS as advantageous not only for the country's economy but also for its potential benefits for the entire continent (Nkoana-Mashabane 2014).

South Africa's membership in BRICS has, however, not only given the country a strategic advantage in terms of how it positions and brands itself (e.g., by hosting the BRICS summit in Durban in 2013) but also has prompted questions about how this new set of relationships will affect its own domestic and foreign policies. Among these new geopolitical relationships, the one between South Africa and China has become especially important and controversial from the perspective of global media studies. This is because this relationship has received the most media attention in comparison with South Africa's relations with all the other BRICS countries, and because it forms part of a much bigger engagement between China and Africa, but also because the relationship raised difficult questions about the influence it might have on media norms, freedoms and practices in South Africa and more widely on the continent.

China's investments in South Africa, be they in the mining sector or the textile industry, have not been exempted from controversy. In the information and telecommunication sectors, where China's presence goes beyond direct investment and also includes infrastructure development, training and content production and distribution, things are not different. After the agreement between Survé's Sekunjalo Investment Group and the Chinese consortium to acquire Independent Media, commentators in South Africa began raising questions regarding the possible long-term impact that having Chinese capital linked to state-owned companies could have on the editorial agenda. Fear and uncertainty dominated public reactions in the media (see, for example, Shevel 2013; Sole and McKune 2014). Summarizing the predominant feeling

at the time, Harber (2013) asked “how will their [China’s] media investments serve their interests, and will this impact on our [South Africa’s] media culture?” (p. 151). Building on previous exploratory studies (Wasserman 2012; Wasserman 2015a), in this paper we take up Harber’s question as we seek to understand how the presence of Chinese media in South Africa might impact the sector. We do so by looking at South African media professionals’ attitudes towards this recent development and by dissecting their views on the increased intensity of Africa-China relations. Data presented in this paper is based on twenty in-depth semi-structured interviews with editors, journalists, media scholars and policy makers in South Africa.

In an attempt to offer a richer explanation to the phenomenon than is often found in academic accounts of Africa-China media engagements, we first propose a new taxonomy of interactions that takes into account the multifaceted nature of China’s presence in the continent, which goes beyond traditional development cooperation and media assistance to include a commercial dimension, one that is particularly important in South Africa. We then proceed to reporting the findings of our qualitative survey of media professionals in South Africa. We organise responses along three thematic lines: (a) adoption of and attitudes towards Chinese media, (b) impact on the journalistic profession and (c) views on South Africa-China relations. Based on our findings, we conclude that China is struggling to increase its discursive power in South Africa; that penetration of Chinese media in the country is low, but not non-existent; and, we stress the need to understand the local context in order to be able to fully explicate perceptions towards China in African countries.

China in South Africa’s media landscape

In China’s return to Africa after the turn of the century (Alden, Large, and Oliveira 2008), the media and telecommunication industries have emerged as pivotal in both political and economic terms; even more so than they had been in the relatively long history of Chinese media in Africa. During the 1960s and 1970s, copies of the *Beijing Review* and other magazines were dispatched to African bookstores (Yu 1965), and content from Radio Peking reached cities such as Dar es Salaam, Cape Town or Cairo in Arabic, English, French, Hausa and Swahili, competing for attention with the BBC, VOA or Radio Moscow (Üngör 2009). Some time earlier, Xinhua, China’s official news agency, had begun establishing an extensive network of foreign bureaus in Africa (Chen 2001; S. Wang 2001). However, given the limited resources and training of those involved in propaganda activities throughout the Cold War, Chinese media in Africa were said to have limited impact (USIA 1973). Today, Chinese companies in the information and telecommunication sectors are making inroads in the continent, precisely because of their material capabilities (capital, know-how, technology...) and the determination of Chinese authorities that the media are to play an important role in Sino-African relations. Madrid-Morales (2016) has argued that two reasons are best suited to explain the current upsurge in Chinese media engagement with Africa: the willingness of media companies to widen their market share overseas and the desire of Chinese leaders to increase the country’s discursive power through the expansion of its leading media. The importance of the media in Africa-China relations has been institutionalised with explicit references in all FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) Action Plans, the political documents guiding the relationship. Clause 5.8.1 of the 2006 text, for example, reads: “Recognizing that increased contacts between their respective news media contribute to comprehensive and objective news coverage of the other side, the two sides encouraged their respective news media to play a

positive role in enhancing mutual understanding and friendship” (FOCAC 2006). Such references to the media are absent in other China-led multilateral forums.

Despite the niceties of the political jargon, the nature of Africa-China media cooperation is portrayed in very different terms in the general press. In an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, Mohammed Keita, a media advocate, alerted that “powerful political and economic interests tied to China’s investments [in Africa] seek to stamp out independent reporting” (April 16, 2012). Writing for the Center for International Media Assistance in Washington DC, Mosher and Farah (2010), concluded that “China’s moves pose troubling questions” and, therefore, “advocates of free media and democratic government should take note.” And, talking to *Foreign Policy*, former US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director, Michael Hayden, highlighted the “real dangers” in allowing Chinese telecommunication companies, such as Huawei or ZTE, to build information networks in Africa (Reed 2013).

In public debates, fear, uncertainty and danger dominate discussion on China’s media engagement in Africa in ways that other countries’ had not been subject to in the past. In academia, two strands exist in the literature. The largest number of studies approaches the phenomenon from a macro level of analysis, be through the lenses of political economy (Morin-Allory 2011; Rønning 2016; N. Wang and Li 2010; Wu 2012), critical theory (Banda 2009) or media studies (Ngomba 2012; Wekesa 2013). While the diagnoses tend to be in agreement (i.e. China is disembarking in Africa ‘big time’), the prognoses could not be more divergent, ranging from Ngomba’s very optimistic view on the health of Africa’s media systems, to Wu’s grim outlook. The second strand of studies focuses on content of either Chinese media’s in Africa or about China in African media (Wasserman 2012; Wekesa and Zhang 2014; Zhang 2013). With very few exceptions (Gagliardone and Pal 2016; Gorfinkel et al. 2014; Wasserman 2015a), micro levels of analysis are absent in the literature. We know very little about the production and reception sides of the phenomenon.

A common pitfall in analyses of Africa-China relations is to amalgamate African countries into a single unit forgetting local idiosyncrasies. In the case of the media and telecommunication sectors, a consequence of this is to understand Chinese involvement as being largely in the form of media assistance or aid. This is the case of the typology of China’s media engagement in Africa proposed by Gagliardone, Stremlau and Nkrumah (2012), which has been widely reproduced. The authors suggest that China has three profiles in Africa: persuader, when it tries to promote its own news narrative; partner, when it provides loans and aid to develop infrastructure; and, prototype, when it presents itself as a model for development. While this typology might work in countries such as Zambia or Ghana, where China’s focus has been on providing assistance, building infrastructure and training journalists, other countries, such as South Africa or Nigeria, where the involvement has been primarily of a commercial nature, call for a different framework.

Taking into account both the assistance and commercial dimensions, we propose instead an alternative five-item typology of China’s media activities in Africa: (1) **content production** refers to the establishment of Chinese media in the continent to produce content specific for African audiences, from news and current affairs to entertainment; (2) **content distribution** includes agreements with local companies to buy/distribute Chinese content and also the establishment of platforms (satellite, cable, digital TV, online) to circulate Chinese content; (3) **infrastructure development** in the telecommunication sectors in the form of aid, loans or competitive tenders; (4) **direct investment** in African media companies; and, (5) **training** of editors, journalists and government information officers in China or locally. In Table 1 we present a summary

of the framework including examples from South Africa, which is, alongside Kenya, the country where China's media engagement has been most diversified.

[Insert Table 1 around here]

The most opaque and least publicised aspect of China's media engagement in South Africa is the training of media professionals, which involves either providing scholarships to early and mid career journalists to study at Chinese universities, such as the Communication University of China, or by extending invitations to editors or more senior journalists to attend workshops in China that can last between two weeks and tens months and the costs of which are borne by China (Yang 2016). There is no detailed information of how many South African journalists have attended these, however, the 2015 FOCAC Action Plan stated that up to 1,000 African media personnel would benefit (FOCAC 2015). Much more openly publicised but largely gone unnoticed was the establishment in 2012 in Johannesburg of the Africa branch of *Beijing Review*, China's only weekly current affairs English language magazine, which also oversees the publication of *Chinafrica*, a French and English monthly magazine. As opposed to a regular overseas bureau, like other Chinese media have in South Africa, a private company under South African law (Pty Ltd.) was created, signalling the intention of publishers of going beyond usual foreign correspondence. *Chinafrica*, like *China Daily*, based in Nairobi, produces news content about Africa and Africa-China relations aimed primarily at local audiences.¹

Far more visible and controversial are the examples in the three other categories: infrastructure development, content distribution and direct investment, all of which provide a good example of how, in South Africa, China's presence has mostly been of a commercial nature rather than assistance. Controversy surrounded the contract granted to ZTE, China's second largest telecommunications company, to build Cell C's 4G network in 2010 amidst allegations of irregular hiring practices of Chinese nationals, instead of South African workers (Anderson 2010). As opposed to many other African countries, where China has either donated or provided soft loans to develop telecommunication infrastructure, this has not been the case in South Africa. In terms of content distribution, in 2013, Chinese-owned StarTimes rescued South Africa's ailing On Digital Media, owner of TopTV, to enter the pay-TV market under the brand StarSat, offering international and Chinese content, particularly news and entertainment (Mochiko 2013). StarSat's case bridges two categories in our typology, content distribution and direct investment. Another example of direct investment is the participation of Chinese investors in the acquisition of South Africa's second largest publishing group, Independent Media, by Sekunjalo Independent Media Ltd., owned by Iqbal Survé, a doctor and businessman with close ties to the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's ruling party (Wonacott 2013). The Chinese capital came from China-Africa Development Fund, a government-led investment group, and China International Television Corporation, the overseas arm of China's state-run broadcaster. The presence of Chinese investors in the acquisition of the group, which publishes influential newspapers like *The Star*, *Cape Times* or *Isolezwe*, triggered similar reactions (fear, uncertainty) to those presented earlier in the wider African context. One journalist wrote that the deal "raises questions over whether this creeping state-hold over newspaper groups could impact on media independence in South Africa" (McKune 2013)

Research questions and methods

This study builds on previous work by Wasserman (2012; 2015a; 2015b) that addressed the potential impact on South Africa's journalistic profession of China's increased media engagement. These studies found that journalists held a certain degree of uncertainty about the political dimension of the relationship, and harboured scepticism about Chinese media, but felt that South Africa's media are robust enough to resist any form of intervention. Several questions arising from these studies were left unresolved. Is there a relationship between journalists' attitudes towards China in general and their adoption of Chinese media? How do journalists in South Africa assess some of the news values promoted by Chinese media in Africa, such as the notion of 'positive news'? How do journalists' critical views of Chinese media compare to views about media in other countries? Taking up these unanswered questions, this paper proposes is guided by the following four research questions: (RQ₁) How often do media professionals in South Africa access content from Chinese media? (RQ₂) What are the attitudes of media professionals in South Africa towards Chinese media? (RQ₃) How much influence do Chinese media companies have on journalism in South Africa? And, (RQ₄) how do media professionals in South Africa perceive Africa-China relations in the short and long term?

To answer the questions above, we use data from 20 in-depth interviews. Given the modest sample size we do not attempt to claim that findings are generalizable to the entire journalistic profession in South Africa. However, we do aim at using the findings in this paper to build a typology of media professionals' engagement with Chinese media that can be replicated in future studies with larger representative sample sizes in different African countries. In the selection of informants, purposive sampling to achieve maximum variation was used. A comprehensive list of media houses and research institutes in South Africa was compiled. Media professionals at different levels and career stages were identified at each of these organizations and an initial list of over 40 potential interviewees was put together. After several rounds of contacting informants by email and phone, we conducted 20 interviews, which is within the same range of sample sizes found in similar studies (Bunce 2010, 23 interviews; Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen 2007, 20 interviews; Lecheler 2008, 14 interviews). Interviews took place in South Africa's Gauteng and Western Cape provinces between March and April 2015. One interview was conducted in Nairobi in August 2015. All, except for three phone interviews, were face-to-face interviews and lasted between 25 and 95 minutes, with an average length of 37 minutes. A list of people interviewed in this study including their professional role, medium they work for, gender and place of work is presented in Table 2. Our sample includes ten men and ten women, who work in print (9), broadcasting (3) and online media (3), as well as in universities (3), a think tank (1) and a government office (1). All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and, therefore, information that could lead to the disclosure of their identity is absent from this paper. For clarity and accuracy of reporting, we have assigned each interviewee a number instead of a pseudonym.

[Insert Table 2 somewhere here]

Interviews were semi-structured. All informants were asked similar questions, although the order in which questions were posed to them differed from interview to interview. The questionnaire was organised around six blocs and, following Kvale (2007), we identified several key questions in each bloc: media consumption (e.g. where do you usually get your news from?); Chinese media (e.g. would you like to work for a

Chinese media house?); opinion about the media (e.g. which news organization do you trust the most?); views on professionalism and journalistic norms (e.g. how important is it to you that media offer positive news about Africa?); attitudes towards China (e.g. is the coverage of China in South African media comprehensive?); and, views on South Africa-China relations (e.g. how important is China in South African foreign policy?). Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed in their entirety.

To analyse the data, interviews were thematically coded using QSR NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package that can assist in the process of making sense of and theorizing about large quantities of textual information (Bazeley and Jackson 2013). We used a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Based on the questionnaire and the notes taken during the interviews, a tentative list of codes was prepared and used in a preliminary round of coding during which other codes were noted down as they emerged. All transcripts underwent a second round of coding to identify passages where the emergent codes were present. In the end, we identified 60 codes, these were grouped into eleven sub-themes (e.g. China as a model, media consumption or influence on values and norms) and, then, condensed into three themes, in alignment with our research questions: (a) adoption of and attitudes towards Chinese media, (b) impact on the journalistic profession and (c) views on South Africa-China relations. We use these three themes in reporting of our findings.

Findings

Adoption and Attitudes

In RQ₁ we sought to measure the extent to which Chinese media have penetrated the news consumption habits of media professionals in South Africa and in RQ₂ we explored their attitudes towards Chinese media. Because these two issues were strongly connected in the responses, we opt to report them together. We found that informants in our sample were equally divided between those who consume Chinese media on a regular basis, oscillating from daily to weekly, (10 respondents) and those that do not (10), which offered a departure from previous studies (Gorfinkel et al. 2014; Wasserman 2015a; Wasserman 2015b). When crossing responses on consumption, which ranged from none to frequent, and attitudes, fluctuating from very negative to somewhat positive, four fairly distinctive profiles emerged: adopters, pragmatists, unconvinced and resisters (see Figure 1). A general description of each profile and some excerpts from the interviews follow.

[Insert Figure 1 somewhere here]

On the top right quadrant of the axis we find the *adopters*, whose views about the media in general are critical and who regard China as much of a reliable alternative source of information as any other. They are, generally speaking, heavy consumers of news and have partially incorporated Chinese media to their daily diet of news. The Chinese media house that was mentioned the most by this group was China Central Television (CCTV), which is available on pay-TV in South Africa. Several respondents praised CCTV's African coverage when compared to other international broadcasters:

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, I do watch CCTV.

(Interview #4)

For *adopters*, criticism of the strong connection between the State and Chinese media companies, which seems to be unavoidable in discussions on China-Africa media relations, is necessary, but tends to be relativized and explained in comparison to other global media. A representative view is that of an executive producer at an independent production company: “if you watch CCTV, you watch BBC, you watch Al-Jazeera, each one comes with a particular approach to their editorial line. That is how it works, it’s nothing that I am surprised about” (Interview #20). A recurrent idea in this and other groups is that Chinese media offer a different take on global issues and that this is a positive development. “I don’t have to agree with everything Xinhua says,” observed a senior editor, “but at least it is a Chinese perspective, as opposed let’s say an American one or a British one or a Japanese one or an Indian one, for that matter, and for us it’s the same” (Interview #12).

Also consumers of Chinese media, although much less frequent and somewhat reluctant are the *pragmatists*, who tend to have an unfavourable view of China’s political system and, by extension, are highly critical of its media, but, from time to time and in regards to particular issues, make use of Chinese sources to get acquainted with a different perspective. As opposed to the previous group, *pragmatists’* consumption is sporadic and mostly centred around Xinhua. Interestingly, only one of the dozen South African media companies surveyed here is subscribed to Xinhua’s copy. More recently, some of Xinhua’s wire gets circulated in South Africa through a newly created news agency, Africa News Agency (ANA), set up by the Independent Media. While some of the *pragmatists* praised the Africa coverage of Chinese media and the investment in African journalists, attitudes were generally critical with one respondent saying that they don’t “have any kind of credibility or independent status” (Interview #1) and another one suggesting that “there is an element of suspicion when it comes to Chinese media” (Interview #6). Elaborating further on this, a political commentator for an online publication uses the following example:

Let’s assume that there’s 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.

(Interview #5)

On the non-adoption side of the axis, the *unconvinced* are sceptical and distrustful of the news media be it local or international. They show indifference towards Chinese media as they do for the media in general. Because their work does not require daily contact with news, they seldom find the need to access Chinese media. When asked to describe Chinese media, the *unconvinced* used words such as “plain”, “not controversial”, “non-relevant” and “correct”. A researcher at a South African university acknowledged not having ever been exposed to Chinese media beyond *kung fu* movies on South African TV. And a China analyst recalled having watched CCTV once, “out of courtesy” to a friend. Even if anecdotal, these indicate a general apathy towards general media consumption, including Chinese media.

Finally, contrary to the *unconvinced, resisters* have a strongly negative view of Chinese media (and to a certain extent of China), even if some are not very familiar with it, and, because of that, they do not see a need to turn to Chinese media for news. Negative views are mostly concentrated on the restricted freedom of expression in China and the perception that Chinese media are mouthpieces of the Communist Party. Opinions in this group tend to be expressed in very absolute terms:

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.

(Interview #17)

In some cases, these views stem from a well-formed opinion based on previous exposure to Chinese media, like a freelance writer who, after watching CCTV over a prolonged period of time for an assignment, concluded that “there’s no chance that I’d switch on CCTV again to get a sense of what’s going on in the world. I mean that would just be ridiculous” (Interview #18). And other times, it comes out of lack of knowledge of Chinese media in general, like the editor of an Afrikaans publication, who could not name any Chinese media houses or a researcher who described CCTV, while referring to it as CNN (China News Network), as manipulative and not trustworthy.

Impact on the Journalistic Profession

In RQ₃, we asked how much influence Chinese news media exercise on the journalistic profession in South Africa. We operationalized the concept of influence in a broad way, thus including effects at multiple levels of analysis: macro level (system), meso level (values and norms) and micro level (content). We found that impact at all levels is perceived to be low, with one interviewee suggesting that “on the media front, my view is that they [the Chinese] have not yet started. We are actually putting petrol into something, fuelling something that is non-existent so far” (Interview #8). Although other informants did not verbalize this in similar terms, it can be inferred from the responses. A feeling of uncertainty regarding the motivations and goals of Chinese media in South Africa, with some elements of fear towards the possible negative impact of closer South Africa-China media relations, came up repeatedly in the interviews. However, the use of the conditional form and future tense reveals that, for many, the impact is yet to be felt, if it ever is.

At the micro level, Chinese media rarely shape content in South Africa. Similarly, public diplomacy efforts by the Chinese Embassy in Pretoria do not seem to be having an impact on the majority of professionals we interviewed. With Xinhua’s news wire only available at one of the main media groups in the country, Independent Media, it is just in individual and isolated cases that Chinese content makes its way to local newspapers and TV. This is despite the almost unanimous agreement that coverage of China is insufficient and that, as a consequence, knowledge of China among South Africans is described as “deficient”, “inaccurate” or “close to zero”. With the closure of eNCA’s Beijing bureau in June 2015, South Africa lost its only permanent foreign correspondent in China.² With an apparent demand for content about China and a lack of direct sources, it could be expected that Chinese media would be incorporated into newsrooms (more so given the low cost at which Xinhua is reported to be offered to news media in Africa), but this does not seem to be the case. As for the

reasons, one editor speculated, “maybe China just feels too far, too strange, too different, too difficult to communicate” (Interview #14), while another hypothesized that “there’s a perception that China is not particularly involved in South Africa particularly, that its attention is more focused on other parts of the continent” (Interview #6).

A more subtle, yet potentially important influence on content in the long term is the notion of perspective. Content might not be channelled directly, but China’s own take on global issues might get reverberated through those journalists who are exposed to its media, even if it occurs sporadically and outside their work environment. In our sample, *adopters*, and some of *pragmatists*, welcome the fact that Chinese news outlets offer a different perspective on global issues when compared to Western media such as CNN. To some, however, slant is precisely one of the reasons that can help explain the lack of success in engaging South African media professionals. “It doesn’t really matter whether it is Chinese audiences and Chinese paymasters, or if it is British audiences and British paymasters. The first problem is a perception problem and that’s, whether its the BBC, or CCTV or Al Jazeera... these are still foreign media organisations who have their own agenda” (Interview #6).

Where influence appears to be less evident is at the meso level. None of the informants referred directly to perceived or real changes in news values, newsworthiness or professional norms. However, an interesting mix of responses emerged when we probed interviewees about the notion of “positive news,” which is often reported to be at the core of Chinese media’s operations in Africa. For the majority, Africa needs to be reported in positive terms more often. Some representative samples of answers in this direction include that on an editor, for whom “there’s lots of negativity around Africa and between us, as Africans as well. We don’t, for me, 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” (Interview #3). Another veteran journalist agreed “it is important to celebrate success and celebrate positive issues; but it’s not just a case of trying to put a positive spin on African stories, it is about telling the story of Africa” (Interview #4). Some editors acknowledged that they do try, when possible, to highlight Africa’s achievements. There is, therefore, an overlap in this particular news value between Chinese media in Africa and some of the leading editors in South African media. However, very few associated Chinese media with positive reporting on Africa. Not everybody was equally welcoming to the idea, particularly those whose journalistic training is more anchored in the liberal tradition:

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.

(Interview #1)

It became evident in the interviews that it is difficult to separate the advent of Chinese media in the South African media landscape from local realities; foreign influence is repeatedly interpreted and decoded through the lenses of domestic politics. This is most evident at the system level. It was when discussing the direct consequences of the partial Chinese ownership at Independent Media that the most fragmented set of responses emerged. There are those who see the possibility of meddling by Chinese

investors in editorial policies, not at present times, but in a hypothetical future. One editor called the investment “worrisome” and added that interference, in the form of not scrutinizing those who are allies of the Chinese government, “is not immediate, but somewhere in the future” (Interview #3). A senior political journalist had a similar view:

It could also be, if you want to look at it more sinisterly, it could be that the Chinese have business interests here and that they have a line to push. But I haven’t seen any evidence of that. I haven’t seen any evidence of editorial interference at the Independent so far. I just think that maybe because they have more business here, they have more interest in the news.

(Interview #10)

A second group of respondents includes those that noticed a softer stance on China-related issues after the takeover: “the Independent Group is to some considerable degree engaged in what only can be described as a love affair with China and a fairly uncritical approach” (Interview #18). Criticism directed at the Independent for alleged lack of editorial independence was recurrent in interviews, but in most cases it was not over fears related to the presence of Chinese investors, but because of the close relationship between Iqbal Survé and the ruling ANC party. A good example of this opinion is this quote from a seasoned editor: “Survé is such an ANC follower that you can’t really tell the difference. I mean, if the Chinese are having some effect on the editorial policy in that group, you don’t see it” (Interview #1). A political reporter brushed off the question of political interference by categorically saying: “in the Independent Group they’re told what to write” (Interview #17).

Looking at the issue from a wider perspective, some respondents brought into the discussion the possibility of China being used as a model by the South African government in controlling freedom of expression. Speaking in hypothetical terms and bringing in a domestic dimension to the analysis, one respondent said:

I think what we are seeing is that, how China controls its media, particularly state owned media has become a model of how South African government would like to interact with local media and what is worrying of Chinese ownership of South African media, particularly the Independent, is that those kinds of practices become accepted, not just at government but within the media itself. I don’t see Chinese shareholders of the Independent raising much of a fuss about greater government regulation of the media.

(Interview #6)

In response to that, several informants rejected such a doomsday scenario by highlighting the maturity of South Africa’s media system, the agency of journalists and the rule of law: “if a Chinese company succeeds in becoming a big media house in South Africa, of course, they have a say in their publication, they have a say in this TV station. But if what they publish or broadcast infringes the rights of the South African people, we will hold them accountable for it” (Interview #8). Journalists working for the Independent dismissed accusations of political interference in the editorial policies:

The fear is misplaced and I think it’s also as a consequence of trying to portray China as a threat to the continent. And it’s interesting because those concerns are normally couched and framed by people who have traditionally been our kind of

ports of call on world affairs. 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.³

Views on South Africa-China Relations

In our last research question (RQ₄), we asked how media professionals in South Africa perceive Africa-China relations. There is a general understanding among those interviewed that China is an important partner in South Africa's foreign policy, particularly in economic terms. The recognition of China's prominence, however, is not accepted uncritically. In the words of a senior reporter, "you'd be a fool not to play with China, but I think we're too close to China. Sorry about this" (Interview #17). While attitudes towards Chinese media were easily positioned along the positive-negative spectrum, views on the relationship between Africa and China are more complex. It is also frequent that a comparison is drawn between South Africa-China relations and South Africa's historical ties to West. It is then that the more favourable views emerge:

I've lived in Europe and I am a beneficiary of European education, but my personal view is that the relationship with this country and with the rest of Africa with regard to Europe has been one-way and one of exploitation. And I think that the world has evolved to an extent that maybe we will relate to the Chinese as equal business partners and if that is the case, the relationship will be beneficial. We can't ignore the Chinese, the best we can do is to try and meet them as equals.

(Interview #4)

We see the ambivalence of positions clearly when analysing the way journalists assess the impact of China in the continent: there are as many mentions to positive elements (trade agreements, infrastructure development...) as there are negative one (impact of Chinese trade on local industries, environmental degradation...). Summing up this lack of definition, a freelance writer for an online publication described the multiple ways in which China's investment in South Africa can be framed at the same time:

You could argue it's really good because you're getting relatively state-of-the-art construction at lower than world prices; or you could argue that local competitors are being driven out of those markets with the kinds of skills they could have used to further their own export of skills in other parts of the continent.

(Interview #18)

Within this fuzzy set of opinions, however, it is possible to identify some correlation between views about Africa-China relations and attitudes towards and adoption of Chinese media. Generally speaking, if we revisit the four profiles of professionals we presented earlier, *adopters* speak the least critically of the relationship and *resisters* are the most reluctant to acknowledge any benefits of increased political and economic ties. Because data for this study is not longitudinal, we cannot determine whether there is a causal relationship between exposure to Chinese media and more favourable views of Africa-China relations. This is, nonetheless a relevant question that future studies should address. What can be inferred from our data, however, is the conundrum that Chinese media face. In South Africa, part of the audience of media

professionals is distrustful of China in general and this translates into suspicion towards the media. Because of this, efforts to influence the editorial agendas are hampered and, as a consequence, the goal of increasing China's discursive power in order to facilitate a softening of critical views remains unattainable.

Lastly, as we highlighted in the discussion about the impact of Chinese media on journalism in South Africa, media professionals tend to process the relationship through a domesticating lens. For example, a recurring idea is that South Africa's foreign policy is weak, that it lacks definition and clear goals. A political reporter talked about how South African "political leaders are being seen to bow to Chinese a lot" (Interview #10) and a senior editor acknowledged that "South Africa finds itself on the back foot a lot because it is often not strong enough" (Interview #11). This theme is then projected onto analyses of relevant episodes in bilateral relations with China (for example, South Africa's denial of a visa to the Dalai Lama in 2014 or China's record on human rights) in a way that allows journalist to emphasize the "demerits" of South Africa and to dismiss China's. A representative example is this quote from an online editor:

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.

(Interview #6)

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of increased South-South media exchanges, this paper looked at how China's renewed media engagement in Africa in general, and South Africa in particular, impacts media professionals. Building on and expanding previous exploratory studies on this issue, we sketched a complex relationship that transcends the simplistic dichotomies of positive/negative and menace/opportunity, which prevail, not only in the public opinion, but also in some academic accounts (Franks and Ribet 2009). Our focus has been on three dimensions: adoption of and attitudes towards Chinese media, impact on the journalistic profession, and views on South Africa-China relations. We have first shown that South African media professionals in our sample, from journalists and editors to public information officers and educators, have varying degrees of engagement with Chinese news media, which partially contradicts previous findings (Wasserman 2015a) This might be explained in terms of sampling methods, as we sought to include the widest range of cases possible, or by considering time as variable. This diversity in responses allowed us to offer what we believe is a more nuanced and accurate sketch of how South African media professionals interact with and position themselves in regards to Chinese media. Our four-item typology (adopters, pragmatists, undecided and resisters) can be the starting point for future studies that seek to understand attitudes of media professionals—and the general population—in other countries where China's media are increasingly present. Second, in terms of impact, we have confirmed what others had previously hinted: South African media professionals' work has seen limited impact from Chinese investment in local media companies. However, we have indicated that some journalists fear possible negative long-term consequences that can be derived from China's engagement in the sector. These are mostly related to the possible curtailment of editorial independence and the

adoption of China as a model in restricting media freedom. We have also demonstrated how local and global issues are intertwined in media professionals' views, by presenting the process of domestication—looking through the lenses of local politics—that China's presence goes through. Finally, we have demonstrated how issues at the professional level are connected to general attitudes towards China's presence in Africa.

With a sample size of 20 media professionals, this paper cannot claim to be representative of the entire media industry in South Africa. Although we have taken all measures to ensure a diverse sample, the only way to fully explicate the views of media professionals as a whole is through survey research. This said, we are confident to have set strong empirical foundations on which future studies can be built. Evidence presented in this paper should suffice to develop and implement a population-wide analysis of audiences, not only in South Africa, but also in other African nations, to provide a resolute answer to the most pressing question in the study of Africa-China media relations: who is on the other side? This paper also lacks a time dimension, which prevents us from being able to assess the actual impact that China's increased presence in the South African media sector is having on media professionals' attitudes and opinions. A long-term study, with measurements at multiple points in time could help in providing another important answer: are China's public diplomacy activities in Africa effective? This time dimension should also be applied in the future to studies that look at the way South African media, particularly those in which Chinese involvement has been the highest (i.e. Independent Media), cover China-related stories before and after changes in ownership. The FOCAC VI meeting in Johannesburg in December 2015 provides an excellent case study for further research.⁴

As Chinese media become increasingly global, communication scholars need to consider widening the scope of studies dealing with Chinese media engagement overseas. By providing a comprehensive framework to describe Chinese media involvement in Africa, which we believe can be applied to other geographical contexts, and using it in our study of media professionals' attitudes, we made an initial attempt at bridging multiple levels of analysis. Future studies should delve deeper into some the less researched engagements identified in our taxonomy (content distribution, direct investment and training). At the same time, it is becoming increasingly pressing to move beyond Africa-wide studies and to pursue country and region specific analyses. It is at this level that questions about audience and reception across geographic settings, linguistic communities and political regimes can be best addressed. With this paper we took a first step into one of the many untapped issues in Sino-African media relations, but many more need to come before we can fully understand new forms of South-South media interactions.

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¹ With a sizeable community of overseas Chinese, South Africa also has several Chinese-language publications. For a discussion of this kind of engagement, see Sun (2015).

² An informant reported that SABC, South Africa’s national broadcaster, is looking into the possibility of opening a bureau in China, which it closed some years back. Also, at the time of writing, a vice-editor with the *Cape Argus*, Yunus Kemp, was on a 10-month internship in China sponsored by the Chinese government.

³ In order not to give out information that could help disclose the identity of our informants, we opted not to identify the source of this quote.

⁴ Some exploratory work on how the media covered the event has been undertaken by Umejei and Wekesa (2015), but a more detailed analysis on how different or how similar coverage was between media owned by the Independent Media group and the rest of the industry would be illuminating.

Tables

Table 1. *Examples of Chinese engagement in South Africa's media landscape*

Type of Involvement	Company Name	Industry	Date	Description
Content Production	<i>Chinafrica</i>	Print	2012	Re-launch of <i>Chinafrica</i> magazine, a bilingual (French and English) publication 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.
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.
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
Training	--	Multiple	2015	South African journalists' participation in a workshop for media officials organised by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Figure 1. *South African media professionals' attitudes towards and adoption of Chinese media*

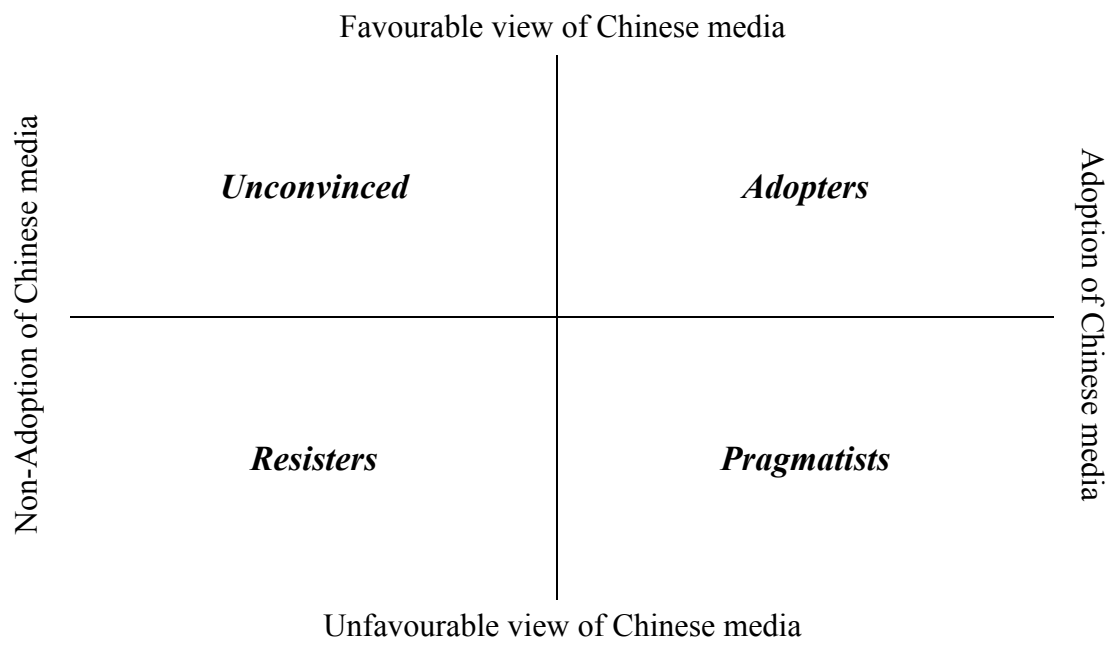


Table 2. *Informants' professional role, organization, gender and geographic location*

	Position	Organization	Gender	Location
#1	Journalist	Weekly newspaper	Male	Johannesburg
#2	Researcher	National think tank	Female	Pretoria
#3	Editor	Weekly newspaper	Female	Johannesburg
#4	News Manager	Broadcaster	Male	Johannesburg
#5	Journalist	Online publication	Male	Johannesburg
#6	Editor	Online publication	Male	Johannesburg
#7	Investigative reporter	National newspaper	Male	Johannesburg
#8	China analyst	South African university	Male	Stellenbosch
#9	China analyst	South African university	Female	Stellenbosch
#10	Senior Reporter	Weekly paper	Female	Johannesburg
#11	Managing Editor	National newspaper	Female	Johannesburg
#12	Executive Editor	National newspaper	Female	Johannesburg
#13	Media analyst	South African university	Female	Pretoria
#14	Editor	Afrikaans newspaper	Male	Johannesburg
#15	Media officer	Government office	Female	Pretoria
#16	Foreign editor	National newspaper	Female	Johannesburg
#17	Senior Journalist	National newspaper	Male	Cape Town
#18	Freelance writer	Online publication	Male	Johannesburg
#19	Correspondent	Broadcaster	Female	Nairobi
#20	Producer	Production company	Male	Johannesburg

Note: Details are arranged in chronological order based on the date of the interview.