
EDITORIAL

Re-Evaluating China's Global Media Expansion

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As China continues its global economic rise, Chinese media have been tasked with making Beijing's official voice heard and understood in the world. Nine years after the launch of an accelerated 'media going-out' policy, however, the nature and impact of that policy are still contested even though by 2018, China's international media offering is vastly more sophisticated than that of 2009. As China becomes more assertive internationally, President Xi Jinping has reaffirmed the requirement for state media to act in the interests of the government and Communist Party at home and abroad. How much has changed?

This editorial to the WPCC issue 'Re-Evaluating China's Global Media Expansion' outlines how contributors have extended the debate about China's media expansion focusing on the act of communicating the 'going-out' message and how it has been received by residents of Latin America, the USA and Africans studying in China. It considers the focus of these inquiries extending from television news to radio, from Twitter to the financial structures of Chinese internet firms along with book reviews of publications on Chinese and global media politics as well as noting opportunities for further research on China's global media expansion.

Keywords: China; media; global; news; soft power; China 'going-out'

Where are China's external media heading, nearly a decade after the multi-million-dollar boost for the project to send them out into the world? The decision to increase their funding was taken during the presidency of Hu Jintao. He aimed to portray China as a 'harmonious society' and promote 'cultural soft power', while in the process altering Western perceptions of China that Beijing considered biased and wrong (Hu & Ji, 2012). In 2018, as Xi Jinping consolidates control during his second term of office, a markedly different China is emerging: economically more powerful, geopolitically more assertive. China has already overtaken the US to become the world's largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity (a calculation that takes account of lower prices in the East than in the West). China has spearheaded the creation of institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to provide a counterweight to established international bodies which, it believes, primarily serve the interests of developed (and mainly Western) countries. China has substantial trade and investment interests in Africa: Chinese peacekeepers are stationed – and some have lost their lives – in

Mali and South Sudan. In the second decade of the 21st century, what China does and says matters.

In the Hu Jintao era, investigative reporting was tolerated and social media gave citizens a new means of holding power to account, most notably by exposing corrupt officials. Under Xi Jinping, digital technology has proliferated but journalists and other information providers are clasped ever more tightly to the bosom of the ruling Communist Party and instructed to further its aims. Xi's high-profile visits to the main official media newsrooms in 2016, during which he enjoined media-workers to 'have the Party as their family name', also bore a message for the outside world. China's strategy was not simply to launch a 'charm offensive' (Kurlantzick, 2007) or try to engender 'soft power' (Nye, 2004): What it craved above all was equality of discourse with the West, and in particular the means to convey its viewpoints as its global influence and responsibilities grew.

China's media now find themselves at perhaps the most delicate juncture since their 'going-out' policy began. A digitally driven globalisation of values is pulling them in one direction even as national and geopolitical imperatives dictate that they follow another. Sometimes the intention to convey the idea of a 'China Model' is clear, such as with the planned merger of leading broadcasters into the 'Voice of China'. At other times Chinese media appear to be 'going out' almost by stealth, borrowing foreign faces and customs to transmit their messages, and using existing global capitalist structures for the Communist Party's ends.

This edition of *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* does not intend to go over the ground so comprehensively covered by the recent volume, *China's Media Go Global* (2018), edited by Professors Daya Thussu and Hugo de Burgh of the University of Westminster and Professor Anbin Shi of Tsinghua University in Beijing. It concentrates instead, with one exception, on the act of communicating the message: how Chinese media are shaping their external-facing factual output in the digital era and how this output is received. Tensions and disconnects between intent and practice are revealed in the pronouncements of media managers and a wide range of empirical work.

Overview of research articles

Chinese state media have no compunction about joining battle for global discourse power on a social media platform that is banned in China itself. A big-data analysis of Twitter traffic by Joyce Nip and Chao Sun of the University of Sydney charts China's attempts – among other things – to influence public debate on the South China Sea. The data also permit them to investigate how much communication involving Chinese official outlets on this 'social' medium is purely one-way.

Two papers on CCTV's Spanish-language television channel (rebranded in late 2016 as CGTN Español) deal with two different aspects of the transmission of messages from China to the rest of the world. For Peilei Ye and Luis Albornoz from Carlos III University in Madrid, the concept of 'going out' is less important than that of 'going in'. 'If soft power consists of the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion,' they argue, 'then CCTV, as a soft power institution, will only be able to deliver what the Party-state has tasked it with when there are people actually watching, listening and believing.' This theme is picked up by Pablo Morales of the University of Westminster in his focus-group study of the channel's reception in Latin America in comparison with two other Spanish-language channels, the more opinionated RT of Russia and HispanTV of Iran. Morales sees multiple challenges for the Chinese channel, especially (but not solely) in viewers' perceptions of its capacity for objectivity and impartiality.

A more theoretical trajectory is taken by Yu Xiang of Shanghai University in her investigation into how African students in China interpret the news reporting of CCTV's network

centre in Nairobi. She employs a structural perspective to explain instances of oppositional decoding of CCTV's upbeat, solution-focused reporting of African issues. The research indicates why, despite the efforts of its media to change the African news agenda, China can still be seen as exploiter rather than benefactor of the continent.

A related conundrum, seen from a different angle and a different medium, preoccupies Sheng Zou of Stanford University, who reports on China Radio International's attempts to gain relevance abroad through localisation. His ethnographic study of a Chinese-language radio station in the United States reveals how China's message misses the mark when its delivery is entrusted to local media-workers far from the Chinese headquarters. Zou observes that propaganda logic and market logic – for two decades the twin drivers of Chinese media (Zhao, 1998) – interact here to deleterious effect.

Lianrui Jia of York University in Canada departs from the world of journalism to tackle the economic facts of China's 'media going-out' policy. Through painstaking document analysis, she demonstrates the extent to which Chinese internet firms are enmeshed in global capitalist structures. The way China retains control over the firms while affording them licence in international markets calls to mind Thussu's 'cyber-capitalism with Chinese characteristics' (2018, 26). It is equally an extension of the practice of 内外有别 *nei wai you bie* – treat insiders and outsiders differently – designed to extract for China the maximum possible benefit.

Commentaries and book reviews

Commentaries from two different hemispheres reflect on the direction of Xi Jinping's media policy through two recent buzz-phrases for Chinese media – convergence and the 'internet way of thinking'. Vincent Ni of the BBC World Service in London looks at how the Chinese authorities have responded to the lure of social media and changing news consumption outside China. His commentary dwells on the recent success of the Western-friendly English-language internet news startup, *Sixth Tone*, a sister publication to 澎湃 *Pengpai* (*The Paper*), finding that it fills in some of the blanks in coverage of modern China but ultimately cannot outwit the censors. From Beijing, meanwhile, Aike Li and Minsu Wu of the Communication University of China chart the evolution of traditional, 'legacy' media in the digital age. Through the words of senior CCTV management, they outline the strategy for change at CGTN's English-language news operation and contend that the channel is making inroads into credibility with its viewers. As Joseph Nye himself argued (2012), the best propaganda is not propaganda: credibility is a scarce resource.

Two substantial book reviews also engage with the theme of this edition. Paul Gardner of the University of Glasgow reviews Maria Repnikova's 2017 book, *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power under Authoritarianism*, in which she examines Chinese journalists' continuing attempts to carve out space for critical reporting. Dani Madrid-Morales of City University of Hong Kong analyses John Lloyd's *The Power and The Story: The Global Battle for News and Information* (2017). While not exclusively about China, the book serves to place Beijing's 'going-out' project in context by depicting the fractious world of competing 'truths' and interests in which China's media are trying to find their place.

Despite the above, much remains to be written about China's external media expansion. While all eyes will be on the output of the forthcoming 'Voice of China', some of the major international languages in which Beijing communicates – such as Russian and French – have been given short shrift academically thus far. As the 'internet state of mind' permeates official Chinese media, the balance of attention may tip towards state-backed online publications such as *The Paper* and *Sixth Tone*. How the authorities tackle propaganda work and information control in a fragmented digital age is of the utmost significance for the Chinese Communist Party's continued hold on power.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Vivien Marsh is in the final stages of a PhD at the University of Westminster comparing the English-language news output of Chinese state television (CCTV) with that of BBC World News TV between 2014 and 2016. At the BBC she spent over 25 years as (variously) a news editor, writer, producer and reporter, in the BBC's local, regional, national and international news operations mainly for the BBC World Service. In addition she spent several years as the London-based World Service News Asia-Pacific editor/reporter.

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