As the public becomes more involved in world affairs, the media has become a major site for shaping public opinion. Western media corporations such as CNN, BBC and Sky News have revolutionised and monopolised the flow of global media for decades. While some of the players in the international news market are private entities, most have been state-funded, which has perpetuated a monolithic Western perspective of developing countries to international audiences. China-Africa relations have been negatively portrayed in the media as neo-colonial and exploitative. The influence of China's culture and values, which are in many ways embedded in political, social and economic activities have been received negatively by the public because of Western biases. As a result, image building is an increasingly important strategy to solidify legitimacy in China's foreign policy ambitions and promote Chinese culture and values. In 2010, China's Premier Wen Jiabao allocated US$ 7 billion in media investments over the next ten years for international broadcasting in order to disseminate a more accurate portrayal of China to the world. China's media engagement in Africa focuses on the development of media institutions in order to enhance the international public opinion on China-Africa relations.

The challenges of seeing China through Africa's eyes

Since the launch of the Forum on China-Africa Co-operation (FOCAC) in 2000, media infrastructure has gained momentum in facilitating co-operation between China and Africa. For example, China provided technical support such as broadcast transmitters in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2003; Chinese media agencies, Xinhua and CCTV launched satellite televisions across Africa in 2011 and training exchange programmes between Chinese and South African journalists in 2016 were established. Media diplomacy is becoming instrumental in reorienting international reporting towards positive perspectives on China's political and social progress in Africa. However, critics have argued that the Chinese media model is based on a state-centric system of partnerships between governments, which is grooming the next generation of journalists to institutionalise the same monolithic flow of controlled media narratives they are opposing from the West. According to Anne Nelson, author of the 2013 report, CCTV's International Expansion: China’s Grand
Strategy for Media?, the Chinese media model guarantees that "African leaders are assured that they can practice censorship with impunity."

Consequently, Chinese media engagement in Africa has struggled to secure legitimacy with the African public. Business and political elites have been the main demographic responding positively to media engagement around China-Africa relations. This suggests that the economic perspective prevails with little being internalised about Chinese culture and values through media exchanges. However, various factors such as access to internet, the costs of satellite television and the lack of Chinese engagement on the radio for low-income groups have also made it difficult for Chinese media to fully penetrate established local media markets in Africa and reach a wider demographic.

The China-Africa Media Co-operation Forum

The third Forum on China-Africa Media Co-operation held earlier this year has strengthened commitments to enhance media co-operation and exchanges between China and Africa. In June 2016, 350 media representatives and government officials came together to realise common objectives on media-related matters, which aim boost China and Africa ties. Established in 2012, the media forum has brought together China with ministers and media organisations from over 42 African countries to collaborate and exchange views on the film and broadcast sectors. The forum aims to create a platform to share content, media policies and sector regulations to develop global communications capabilities and create content that shows the history and diversity of Chinese and African cultures.

The forum has made significant progress in enhancing the broadcast sector for many Africa countries. For example, both Nigeria and Tanzania have introduced regulatory frameworks to facilitate the transition from analogue to digital terrestrial television (DTT). With Tanzania having completed the first year of its digital transition, the forum has managed to engage policymakers in the development of broadcast and films sector in order to secure political will with private and public stakeholders to expand access to local and foreign television services. Media engagement through training and investments in infrastructure has facilitated a top down approach to allow African governments the autonomy to make decisions that suit the needs of their citizens and level of development. However, in order to support the progress in media development in Africa, there needs to be an increase in investments and regulations in the energy sector to overcome insufficient capacity and ensure wide-spread and sustainable access to new media services.

Conclusion

Much progress is being made to limit the dependence on Western media for entertainment, news and information sources through the exchange of content between China and Africa. But where does Africa's influence fit into these ambitions? The Forum on China-Africa Media Co-operation provides important platform for African countries to enhance media institutions and create avenues to influence and even challenge traditional Western dominated media systems. Mutual development between China and Africa through media co-operation will play an important role in encouraging investment and tourism for many countries by re-introducing the positive side of China and African relations to the world. Nevertheless, the future remains uncertain. As media co-operation continues to grow in strength, China’s influence appears to follow suit. Without a strategy by individual governments, Africa risks losing its voice once again.

Tichafa Chidzonga
Research Assistant
Centre for Chinese Studies
Stellenbosch University

"Commentaries are written by Research Analysts at the Centre and focus on current and topical discussions or media events with regard to China or China/Africa relations. Occasionally, the CCS accepts commentaries from non-CCS affiliated writers with expertise in specific fields. Their views do not necessarily reflect those of the CCS. Commentaries can be used freely by the media or other members of the interested public if duly referenced to the author(s) and the CCS."

For more information, please check the CCS website: www.sun.ac.za/ccs or contact us under ccsinfo@sun.ac.za