

Policy Brief 26 JUL 2024

Chinese Media Engagement with Africa and the Role of African Agency

The Cases of Kenya and Ethiopia

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This policy brief reveals the complexity of Chinese media engagement with African countries, highlighting involvement from both state and private actors through a variety of forms. At its core, China aims to champion its development paradigm as a viable alternative to Western models, augment its soft power, strengthen economic links, and sway public opinion to counterbalance prevailing Western narratives. Furthermore, this policy brief highlights the critical role of economic conditions and the political economy of the media in shaping the agency of African media organizations. It demonstrates that media entities with robust commercial strategies, situated in environments with relatively independent media regulations (e.g., Kenya), exhibit a more assertive agency compared to those in settings characterized by restricted press freedoms and scarce commercial opportunities (e.g., Ethiopia). To effectively counter authoritarian media influence, it is crucial to strengthen cooperation mechanisms within European media and development organizations, and to support African media organizations by improving their economic conditions and assisting them in developing comprehensive evaluation frameworks.

State propaganda, fake news, misinformation and disinformation are challenging the ecosystem of news production worldwide. Within this context, China has frequently been portrayed as having the intention to spread authoritarianism, disseminate fake news and propaganda, and challenge liberal democracy – especially in countries where democratic institutions are fragile.¹ In this regard, one particularly relevant field is China's engagement in the media sector in Africa. Beijing's substantial investments in the African media sector coupled with its growing economic influence on the continent have garnered considerable attention from both academic and policy-making circles. This scrutiny is amplified by Xi Jinping's consolidation of power, prompting questions about the intentions of China's media pursuits in Africa and their implications on the African media landscape. Despite the heated debates, there remains a gap in research on the motivations of Chinese media actors in Africa and particularly on the role of African media organizations in responding to China's offers for media cooperation.

¹ Benjamin Young, "China is already exporting authoritarianism to the developing world," *Nikkei Asia*, Dec 5, 2021, accessed Jun 14, 2024.

What are the motivations, forms, and actors behind China's media activities in Africa and how do African media organizations respond? This policy brief examines the nature and goals of China's media engagement, highlighting the diverse array of Chinese actors involved, from state to private sectors, and their various initiatives, including but not limited to content partnerships and training programmes. It links the analysis of Chinese media influence with an examination of African agency, namely the ability of African stakeholders to navigate their relationship with Chinese media and related stakeholders (e.g., Chinese embassies and companies). Drawing on empirical evidence from Kenya and Ethiopia, this policy brief highlights the rationales, reactions, approaches and resistance of African media organizations to Chinese media and other related stakeholders. It challenges the prevalent notion that such engagements are mere manifestations of external manipulation driven solely by China's geopolitical interests. The policy brief is based on the analysis of secondary literature, official documents and over 100 in-depth interviews with Chinese, Kenyan and Ethiopian journalists, media managers, and officials. Field research was conducted in Beijing, Addis Ababa and Nairobi between 2019 and 2023.

The policy brief emphasizes the importance of grasping the complex dynamics of media interactions between China and Africa, and calls for a deeper appreciation of African journalistic agency, especially the concerns and roles of African media organizations in dealings with their Chinese counterparts. It emphasizes how economic conditions and the political economy of the media sector emerge as critical factors influencing the extent to which African media organizations can exercise their agency when interacting with Chinese stakeholders. Empirical evidence suggests that media organizations with a robust commercialization capacity and operating in countries with an independent media regulatory framework that helps strengthen professionalism and accountability, exemplified by Kenya, manifest a discernibly more assertive form of agency in their external engagements. In contrast, countries where press freedom is limited and the commercialization capacity is low, as typified by Ethiopia, demonstrate less agency and often tend to acquiesce to requests emanating from Chinese media entities. The analysis underscores that to cultivate a professional and accountable media landscape in Africa, it is necessary for European policymakers to grasp the complexities of Chinese actors involved in the media sector, African agency and the needs of African media organizations.

Key Actors and Forms of Media Engagement in Africa

Chinese media engagement in Africa involves a variety of participants, including both state actors like China's "national media champions" (e.g., state-owned media such as China Media Group and Xinhua News Agency) and private entities such as StarTimes and Huawei. Following the FOCAC meeting in 2006, Chinese state media's footprint expanded significantly, highlighted by Xinhua's move of its overseas headquarters from Paris to Nairobi and the establishment of China Radio International's (CRI) inaugural overseas FM station in Nairobi. Subsequent efforts include the promotion of Chinese TV series in Africa since 2011, the introduction of Africa-specific programming by China Central Television (CCTV) in 2012, and the launch of China Daily's Africa edition in 2012. China also undertook a strategic restructuring in 2018, merging its three major media entities – China Central Television (which includes CGTN), China National Radio and China Radio International – to form China Media Group (CMG), also known as the Voice of China. This merger is interpreted as a

response to Xi Jinping's directive for enhanced resource integration, aimed at fostering more effective collaboration among state media actors.

Beyond Chinese state media, private enterprises are also shaping the African media landscape. A prime example of private sector involvement is StarTimes, a digital TV operator that, despite being initially marginalized in China's state-dominated cable TV market, strategically expanded into the African market in the early 2000s. Since 2002, it has established subsidiaries in more than 30 African countries, attracting more than 13 million digital TV subscribers and 20 million mobile subscribers throughout the continent.² Despite its private status, StarTimes maintains close ties with the Chinese government and holds a unique position as “the only Chinese private company in the radio and television industry authorized by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce to undertake projects abroad.”³ In tandem, telecommunication giants like Huawei have emerged as key contractors in the development of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) sector.⁴ Unlike state-owned media which receive significant annual government subsidies, private companies like Huawei and StarTimes, despite their government connections, are primarily driven by commercial interests, including but not limited to selling equipment, securing Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) contracts, and expanding their market presence.

The key forms⁵ of Chinese media engagement with Africa include:

1. **Content distribution and partnership:** including paid and sponsored content, and content-sharing agreements with African media;
2. **Direct investment and joint venture:** engaging in direct investment and establishing joint ventures with African media entities;
3. **Equipment donations:** donating media equipment to African outlets;
4. **Infrastructure development:** supporting the development of African media infrastructures (e.g., building broadcasting facility), usually through aid projects;
5. **ICT development:** building ICT infrastructure and executing digital migration programmes in numerous African countries;
6. **Training programmes:** conducting professional development for journalists, media managers and government spokespersons with over 3,000 African broadcasting professionals trained by 2022.⁶ In Kenya and Ethiopia, for instance, Chinese media organizations like Xinhua News Agency, CMG and China Daily have cultivated partnerships with national TV stations and leading newspapers, establishing robust content distribution networks to broaden their influence in the local media landscape.

² Interview with a senior manager of StarTimes, Beijing, February 2021.

³ Alessandro Jedlowski, "Chinese television in Africa." *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 7-8 (2021): 236.

⁴ For an in-depth examination of Chinese telecommunication companies' roles in Africa and the influence of China on the continent's ICT sector, please refer to a separate, detailed analysis provided in another policy brief: Daouda Cissé, "Chinese telecommunications companies in Africa: alignment with African countries' interests in developing their ICT sector?," *Megatrends Afrika*, Nov 28, 2022. Also, see: Stephanie Arnold, "Africa's roads to digital development: paving the way for Chinese structural power in the ICT sector?," *Review of International Political Economy* (2023): 1-25.

⁵ While Chinese media engagement with Africa extends to social media trends, including TikTok's influence on the continent, this policy brief does not focus on these aspects.

⁶ Jingxi Mo, "Xi: Teamwork of China, Africa media crucial," *China Daily*, Aug 26, 2022, accessed Jan 30, 2024.

Impacts of Chinese Media Engagement in Africa

Despite considerable financial and administrative resources China has spent in Africa, the influence of Chinese media remains limited, albeit showing a gradual increase over the years. Research indicates that Chinese television networks lack accessibility and sustained interest among audiences, and are less popular than their Western counterparts.⁷ African audiences generally view CGTN less favourably than CNN, BBC and Al-Jazeera.⁸ Audience research suggests that while Chinese media's impact on Kenyan and South African students' information habits is minimal, there is an observed alignment in news values (e.g., non-confrontational tone and a preference for positive news), suggesting a potential influence on future media professionals.⁹ This indicates a possibility for China's media efforts to have a more profound impact over time, especially as pro-Beijing coverage and content sharing with African media increase.

Furthermore, it is imperative to closely examine how China deploys its training programmes to enhance its public diplomacy by enlarging its media and journalistic network. The accumulation of *guanxi* (关系) – a term connoting personal or social connection (social capital) – between Chinese and African journalists plays a significant and enduring role in creating what is referred to as “relational productive power”.¹⁰ These programmes serve not only as skill-enhancement platforms, but also offer opportunities for African trainees to be socialized into Chinese values and norms, as well as expert knowledge.¹¹ During the training trip and after their return, a number of African journalists were approached to craft positive news stories pertaining the Belt and Road Initiative, Xi Jinping's thought on “a community with a shared future for Mankind” – topics that undeniably lean towards propaganda.¹² Some of these journalists served as focal points in fostering connections between Beijing and newsrooms in Africa and some even persuaded their colleagues to publish positive news on China or to incorporate more content from Chinese media, although not always successfully. The decisions made in the African newsrooms is closely link to “African agency”, which is explored below, drawing on empirical evidence from Kenya and Ethiopia.

Africa Agency in Shaping Relations with Chinese Media Actors and Institutions

Scholars are concerned about the potential impact of Chinese media engagement with Africa. Some argue this could engender a hybrid form of journalism, where Western and Chinese journalistic traditions, concepts, norms and practice coexist,¹³ potentially diluting or overshadowing African media traditions. Others suggest that China offers an alternative approach and that the interaction may lead to the socialization of Chinese journalists into

⁷ For instance, see: Lauren Gorfinkel et al., “CCTV's global outreach: Examining the audiences of China's ‘New Voice’ on Africa,” *Media International Australia* 151, no. 1 (2014): 81-88.

⁸ Dani Madrid-Morales and Herman Wasserman, “How effective are Chinese media in shaping audiences' attitudes towards China? A survey analysis in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa,” *Online Media and Global Communication* 1, no. 4 (2022): 671-696.

⁹ Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales, “How influential are Chinese media in Africa? An audience analysis in Kenya and South Africa,” *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 2212-2231.

¹⁰ Lina Benabdallah, *Shaping the future of power: Knowledge production and network-building in China-Africa relations*. University of Michigan Press, 2020.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Multiple interviews with journalists who participated in the training programmes provided by China in Beijing, Nairobi and Addis Ababa in 2017, 2019 and 2023, respectively.

¹³ Emeka Umejei, “Hybridizing journalism: clash of two ‘journalisms’ in Africa,” *Chinese Journal of Communication* 11, no. 3 (2018): 344-358.

the African model of journalism.¹⁴ However, this view overlooks the absence of an existing single journalism model in Africa into which Chinese journalists could be seamlessly socialized.¹⁵ Moreover, the persistent asymmetry in China-Africa media interactions, marked by disparities in media personnel, organizations, training, resources, capital and audience reach, indicates a likely perpetuation of this imbalance.¹⁶ Critical questions arise about whether such asymmetric collaboration leads to long-term dependency, especially regarding capacities and know-how, and whether it ultimately serves or undermines the interests of African media entities.¹⁷

To address these pivotal questions regarding the impact of external media engagement, it is imperative to delve deeper into the concept of 'African journalistic agency': the ability of African organizations to proactively manage specific journalistic goals and navigate interactions with foreign media and relevant stakeholders through strategic collaboration, negotiation or resistance to external influence.

African journalistic agency varies significantly across country contexts, influenced by varying levels of press freedom as well as the financial and human capacities of media sectors. Empirical evidence suggests that viewing China-Africa media interactions solely as external manipulation driven by the superpower's geopolitical interests overlooks African journalistic agency. The political economy of African media significantly shapes journalistic agency and the ways in which African organizations navigate their relationships with Chinese counterparts.

Both Kenya and Ethiopia are ranked towards the bottom in terms of press freedom. In 2024, Reporters without Borders ranks Kenya 102 and Ethiopia 141 out of 180 countries for press freedom. Despite Kenya's drop in the rank from 69 in 2022, it still maintains a better position than Ethiopia in terms of media freedom, considering political, economic, legislative and social factors affecting journalists' operation and autonomy.¹⁸ Kenyan journalists, though constrained by the concentration of media ownership and political ties, have a tradition of investigative reporting that exposes corruption, government malpractice and social injustices.¹⁹ This resilience fosters a degree of accountability, empowering media organizations to scrutinize the influence of Chinese media, despite ongoing political and economic challenges to media autonomy. For instance, the Media Council of Kenya and various journalism associations promote ethical standards and critically examine foreign propaganda. These entities have engaged in discussions and devised measures to counteract the reach of Chinese propaganda, fortifying resistance against the covert strategies employed by Chinese media. For instance, when the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation spreads information about the Chinese government's success in poverty reduction in Xinjiang without explicitly mentioning the source as Chinese state media, independent organizations, such as the Media Council of Kenya, publicly admonished the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, which eventually deleted the content.²⁰ Additionally, journalist

¹⁴ Teke Ngomba, "Differing paradigms of media systems development in contemporary Africa: does the 'Chinese model' have a place?," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47, no. 1 (2012): 52-67.

¹⁵ Bob Wekesa, *China's Footprint in East Africa: Pessimism versus Optimism*. Springer Nature, 2023; Terje Skjerdal, "The three alternative journalism of Africa," *International Communication Gazette* 74, no. 7 (2012): 636-654.

¹⁶ Dani Madrid-Morales, "Sino-african media cooperation? An Overview of a Longstanding Asymmetric relationship," In *It's about their story: How China, Turkey and Russia try to influence media in Africa*, eds. Dani Madrid-Morales, Deniz Börekci, Dieter Löffler, and Anna Birkevich, 9-70. Johannesburg: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Regional Media Programme Sub-Sahara Africa, 2021.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ For further information regarding the index, please refer to the Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index, available at: https://rsf.org/en/2024-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-under-political-pressure?data_type=general&year=2024.

¹⁹ Wilson Ugangu, "Election Reporting and Githerinization of Kenya's Media," *Journal of African Media Studies* 12, no. 3 (2020): 255-266.

²⁰ "Who authored KBC's China Story", *The Media Observer*, Nov 25, 2019, accessed Jan 30, 2024.

associations design strategies to shape relations with foreign actors, contributing to a collective approach in safeguarding journalistic integrity and independence of the Kenyan media.²¹ Jerry Rawlings, the then president of the Political Journalists Association in Kenya, said:

Various journalist associations in Kenya, including the Political Journalists Association, are actively developing coping mechanisms and organizing workshops and meetings to discuss strategies for tackling foreign propaganda and disinformation, including that from China. Although there are still challenges, raising collective awareness is important.²²

The challenges Rawlings mentioned include profitability pressures, political patronage and concentrated ownership, leaving gaps that external influences can exploit. For instance, Kenyan media covering the Standard Gauge Railway occasionally encounter pushback from their editors, triggered by complaints from the Chinese government to Kenyan authorities. This situation in Kenya highlights a complex dynamic: While there is a clear demonstration of persistent African journalistic agency, it also reveals the influence of China, posing a threat to media autonomy in Kenya.

In Ethiopia, media organizations struggle with stricter government control, restrictive legislation and limited economic opportunities,²³ especially compared to Kenya where the commercial environment for media is more vibrant. Despite some progress before the civil war, the suppression of critical and independent journalism remains common due to stringent government regulations and self-censorship, as journalists often face threats, imprisonment or violence. The economic vulnerabilities of both state and private media make them susceptible to external influence, as they seek alternative funding or align with the ruling government to avoid backlash. Consequently, the Ethiopian media faces significant challenges in maintaining autonomy and providing comprehensive and critical reporting. In managing its relationship with its Chinese counterpart, Ethiopian state media has been proactive and collaborative, aiming to gain more economic capital, equipment and training opportunities from the Chinese. For example, in May 2019, the Ethiopian News Agency (ENA) submitted a project proposal to the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA), aiming to develop its own institutional capacities. According to the proposal, the ENA aims to improve its journalists' skills and acquire better equipment (e.g., video cameras and photo cameras) from the ACJA.²⁴ Ethiopian media organizations have maintained strong partnerships with Chinese media organizations such as the Xinhua News Agency, which has become the primary source of news for Ethiopian state media such as the ETV (Ethiopian Television).²⁵

Unlike in Kenya, where media organizations have exhibited greater resilience against external influences, Ethiopian media organizations have been more susceptible to Chinese influence, resulting in a constrained capacity to critically evaluate media collaborations with China. This divergence underscores the limited opportunities and attention within Ethiopia for a comprehensive and critical evaluation of the agreements Chinese media provided. Consequently, there exists a discernible gap in the ability of Ethiopian media to independently scrutinize and assess the nature and impact of collaborative partnerships with their Chinese counterparts. The Ethiopian Media Council (EMC) occupies a much less prominent position when juxtaposed with the Media Council of Kenya. This discrepancy can

²¹ Interviews with various journalist associations and the Media Council of Kenya in Nairobi, July and August 2019.

²² Interview with Jerry Rawlings, Nairobi, July 29, 2019. As of 2023, Rawlings has taken on the role of Chairperson of the same association.

²³ Menychle Meseret Abebe, "The historical development of media in unconquered Africa: A historical review of Ethiopian media," *Media History* 26, no. 4 (2020): 373-390.

²⁴ Interviews with Ethiopian journalists in Addis Ababa, September 2019.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

be attributed to multiple intertwined challenges confronting the EMC, including strong government interference, financial constraints, insufficient commitment and cooperation, media polarization, conflicts of interest and a pervasive atmosphere of distrust.²⁶ These formidable obstacles significantly impede the EMC's endeavours to advance media freedom and freedom of expression within the Ethiopian media landscape. Furthermore, the absence of a robust and credible journalists' association further complicates the situation, posing a substantial hurdle to the establishment of any effective self-regulatory mechanism within the country. Given the prevailing media norm of developmental journalism in Ethiopia, which asserts that journalists play a "positive role" in the country's development scheme,²⁷ content provided from Chinese media also emerges as the default editorial choice.

Compared to Kenya, Ethiopian media organizations also exhibit a greater willingness to accommodate requests from Chinese stakeholders, be it the Chinese embassy, Chinese State-owned enterprises or Chinese media organizations. For instance, in 2019 after the Chinese embassy in Ethiopia organized a reporting trip, an official at the Chinese Embassy mentioned that all invited Ethiopian media participated, and subsequently, a substantial majority published positive stories about Chinese-funded projects in the country.²⁸ Several media managers in Ethiopia have expressed their desire to foster strong relationships with the Chinese embassy and companies. Their hope is that these connections will facilitate assistance in upgrading their equipment – an urgent and challenging issue faced by many media outlets in the country. It is, therefore, crucial to contextualize this approach within the broader socio-economic realities of Ethiopia.

Empirical evidence from Kenya and Ethiopia indicates that media interactions between China and Africa are more of a dynamic negotiation than a one-sided influence. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that in countries with a restrictive media climate and limited space for civil society, African journalistic agency might be further constrained and increasing susceptibility to and dependent on external influences. While scholars still debate over whether the field of journalism is a craft, profession or trade, economic conditions greatly influence journalism practices and news production in African newsrooms. In Ethiopia, for instance, challenging financial conditions make journalists and media outlets more inclined to collaborate or engage with Chinese media entities.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Despite grappling with both practical and systemic obstacles on the ground, China is likely to continue enhancing its media engagement with African countries in the coming years. This persistence highlights China's determination to bolster its international media influence and presence. In the years to come, how can the West best respond to China's growing influence on the continent? As Sinologist Kerry Brown advises, first "it must stop panicking"²⁹ – a calm and strategically thoughtful approach is essential.

²⁶ Abebe, 2020. Also, see: Terje Skjerdal and Mulatu Alemayehu Moges, *The ethnification of the Ethiopian media: A research report*. Fojo: Media Institute, 2021.

²⁷ The development journalism model asserts that journalists should play a "positive role" in the country's development agenda, prioritizing economic growth over liberal values such as democratization, citizen participation and human rights. See more discussion in: Terje Skjerdal, "Development journalism revived: The case of Ethiopia," In *Press Freedom in Africa: Comparative perspectives*, ed. Herman Wasserman, 75-91. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013.

²⁸ Interview with an official from the Chinese embassy in Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, September 2019.

²⁹ Kerry Brown, "How can the west best tackle the threat from China? First, it must stop panicking," *The Guardian*, Aug 2, 2023, accessed Jan 20, 2023.

German media experts emphasize the need for comprehensive resource allocation to counter propaganda and misinformation campaigns in Africa and the growing influence of Chinese media. They observe that significantly fewer exchange programmes exist compared to those organized by Chinese institutions.³⁰ More efficient resource coordination and stronger, more frequent media engagement with African organizations are crucial for achieving a balanced and inclusive media ecosystem in the region. Collaborative mechanisms among European media organizations and institutions are also necessary to counter Chinese media influence. For instance, DW Academy could expand its efforts and collaborate with other European actors.

The impact of Chinese media influence in Africa is significantly shaped by the political economy of the African media, as seen in countries like Kenya and Ethiopia, which illustrate considerable variability across the continent. African media organizations must exercise greater caution to strike a balance between reaping the benefits of Chinese media and maintaining their independence and freedom. Attention to objectivity and credibility is essential regarding information from China and internal mechanisms must ensure editorial independence is not compromised. For example, the Media Council of Kenya effectively monitors and critiques foreign media propaganda, providing a valuable learning opportunity for other African media organizations, especially those with limited experience. The creation of a comprehensive evaluation framework becomes paramount, especially in scenarios involving increased content agreements with China (e.g., in Ethiopia), as there is a concomitant risk of unintentionally spreading Chinese propaganda. There is no silver bullet, yet fostering collective dialogues and crafting shared strategies among media organizations in various African countries could be beneficial.

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