



Jenny Gordon



IS CHINA CAUSING AFRICA'S FREE PRESS PROBLEM?

BY DEBORAH BRAUTIGAM

On 15 April 2012, the *New York Times* published an op-ed by Mohamed Keita on Africa's free press problem, arguing that press freedom was getting worse in Africa – because of China.

Keita's piece makes a lot of good points. Investigative reporters have a very tough road in many parts of Africa and there are many examples of courage under impossibly tough conditions.

However, his opinion oversteps his evidence in linking increased Chinese economic activity in Africa with increased repression of the media.

Asking "Why this disturbing trend? (of media repression)" Keita points to (inter alia): "the influence of China, which surpassed the West as Africa's largest trading partner in 2009".

To illustrate, Keita wrote: "The volume of trade between Rwanda and China increased fivefold between 2005 and 2009. During the same period, the government has eviscerated virtually all critical press and opposition and has begun filtering Rwandan dissident news web sites based abroad."

Trade and repression may be correlated but, as any student of statistics knows, one has to do far more than this to establish causation.

Keita actually does make a good point in his observation that with growing trade, "China has been deepening technical and media ties with African governments to counter the kind of critical press coverage that both parties demonize as neocolonialist".

Rather than training African reporters to be like *Xinhua* reporters, the Chinese goal in stepping up training and PR activities is to present a different picture of Chinese activities in Africa to counter the negative reporting emanating from "the West". Here's where Keita gets it right:

"More than 200 African government press officers received Chinese training between 2004 and 2011 in order to produce what the Communist Party propaganda chief, Li Changchun, called 'truthful' coverage of development fueled by China's activities."

It is easy to understand why both the Chinese and African governments might want a more balanced picture of their activities. In 2008, Cambridge (UK) academic Emma Mawdsley wrote the classic piece on negative media coverage of China in Africa, juxtaposed with positive reporting on the West's engagement: "Fu Manchu versus Dr Livingstone on the Dark Continent? Representing China, Africa, and the West in British Broadsheet newspapers".

A new report on "China's Global Media Image" launched by Renmin University and Sweden's 21st Century Frontiers (and spearheaded by Dennis Pamlin) analysed 100 major media magazine covers featuring China. More than 60% clearly pictured China as a threat, and not open to dialogue.

As for Africa, while Keita rightly emphasises many African governments' reluctance to hear criticism, it is also clear that Africa has long been

presented to outside audiences as the dark continent of chaos, child soldiers, famine, etc.

It's not just the 54 African governments that are tired of outsiders determining their global image. France is also tired of Anglo domination of the TV media, hence they've launched their own English media service: France 24. The launch of Al-Jazeera was underpinned in part by a perception of Western bias in coverage of the Middle East, Islam, etc.

As a Chinese reporter put it, "Although they are geographically far apart, China and Africa have long learned about each other through Western media". Farooq Sulehria, a Pakistani writer, added: "We largely view the world through the media. It is our window on the world. If we see the world through the eyes of the West, we will be siding with Tarzan instead of blacks without asking: what is Tarzan, a white man, doing in African jungles."

This "media balancing" is far more important for the Chinese than any effort to get African reporters to modify or soften their reporting on African governments, as implied by Keita. In fact, with their reluctance to intervene in internal affairs of other countries, I would be surprised if the Chinese training includes anything to do with African journalists vis-a-vis their coverage of African governments.

Instead of these general op-eds that are only, after all, opinions, wouldn't it be better to have some actual investigative reporting on this issue? What about an in-depth study of the Chinese media training programmes, or interviewing a random sample of the press officers and African journalists that have attended them?

For more on this topic, see "Comments on 'Winds from the East', a National Endowment for Democracy study" by Deborah Brautigam.

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