African News with Chinese Characteristics: A Case Study of CGTN Africa
有中國特色的非洲新聞：中國環球電視網非洲分台的案例分析

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Abstract

Starting in the mid-2000s, Chinese media and telecommunication companies, particularly those managed by the State, began expanding operations in Africa as part of Beijing’s “going out policy” (zouchuqu zhuanliüe) that encouraged the internationalization of Chinese corporations. In the media sector, China’s main news agency, Xinhua, operates a multilingual African news service from Nairobi since 2004, and, in recent years, has opened or strengthened bureaux in more than twenty Sub-Saharan African countries; in 2012, China Daily, a State-owned English-language newspaper, launched a weekly African edition; in 2006, China Radio International (CRI) created its first FM radio station in Sub-Saharan Africa; and, in late 2011, China Central Television (CCTV) established in Nairobi its first production and broadcasting centre overseas. Initially known as CCTV Africa, it was renamed CGTN Africa on December 31, 2016.

Building on the concepts of media flow and contraflow, this dissertation uses the case of CGTN Africa to examine the engagement of Chinese State-owned media companies in Africa between 2012 to 2015. Theoretically, this study contributes a multi-layered typology of media flows that updates that proposed over a decade ago by Daya Thussu. To the original two layers (geography and power), I append an additional one that differentiates between flows of capital, flows of content and flows of values and norms. Methodologically, this dissertation adopts a mixed-methods case study approach that facilitates an in-depth understanding of the interplay between global communication, journalistic practices and the social, political and economic factors that affect them. I use qualitative data from more than 80 interviews and seven focus groups to analyse the news production process at CGTN Africa (chapter 3), and to explore the way CGTN Africa’s content is received by Kenyan and South African media professionals (chapter 5). I also employ manual and computer-assisted
quantitative content analysis to describe CGTN's content and compare its output to that of three other international media: Xinhua, The Guardian and Reuters (chapter 4).

In line with literature that describes post-reform China as a fragmented authoritarian State, first, I argue that there is a disconnect between the objectives of CGTN Africa as outlined by its top management (i.e. to change the way China-Africa relations are depicted in the media and to provide an “alternative narrative” on contemporary Africa) and the everyday practices in the newsroom. Both structural and organizational reasons are identified. Second, I present a hierarchy of topics in CGTN’s news coverage of Africa that determines the degree of supervision, valence and sourcing of each news item. Third, by comparing over one million news items from four global media organizations I am able to identify differences in valence, topics and geographic scope between CGTN’s coverage of Africa and that of other media organisations, including Xinhua. And, fourth, I confirm that, as predicted, consumption of CGTN and other global Chinese media organisations remains limited in Kenya and South Africa, even though some media professionals have begun incorporating Chinese media to their regular information sources. Furthermore, I present evidence that, to some degree, some of the journalistic norms and values embraced by global Chinese media find a receptive audience in the two African countries selected for this study.

Taken together, data presented in this dissertation suggest that, while still at an early stage of development, CGTN Africa’s content as well as the journalistic values and norms associated with it amount to a global media contraflow, which I call African news with Chinese characteristics.