

Chinese investment in our media: What does it mean?

 By [Anton Harber](#)

28 Jun 2013

China's move into direct investment in South African media is a new phase in its "soft diplomacy" strategy.

In recent weeks, there have been two significant Chinese investments in this country. The private company Star Times bought TopTV, the troubled pay TV channel, and the Chinese state has part-funded the purchase of Independent News and Media by the Sekunjalo consortium, including an option to take up 20% of the country's second largest newspaper publisher.

Sekunjalo said mysteriously that their funding partner was "a Chinese consortium", but I am told that it is CCTV, the state-owned broadcaster, with backing from the China-Africa Development Fund, which promotes Chinese interests on the continent.

The Chinese have been growing their media presence in Africa in recent years as part of a "soft diplomacy" strategy - using culture and information to spread its influence and counter what it views as unfair treatment in global media.

Using 'soft power' to achieve objectives

An excellent paper on this topic by Yu-Shan Wu at the SA Institute of International Affairs describes soft power, or *ruanshili* to use the Mandarin term, as an "important instrument to help a state achieve its most desired goal with the least objection".

To this end, they opened Confucius Institutes across the world, increased their participation in academic and cultural exchanges, and put up a giant billboard in New York's Times Square.

Chinese media expanded rapidly, just as Western media was cutting costs. They launched CNC World in 2010 as a 24-hour English-language channel to "bring Chinese perspectives on international events to emerging markets".

Chinese Central Television (CCTV), which broadcast to the Chinese Diaspora, launched an English channel in 2000, followed by French, Arabic, and Portuguese. It now covers 98% of the world with 45-million subscribers.

A growing presence

CCTV Africa was launched in Kenya in 2012 and has a growing presence across the continent. It has shifted from the crude propaganda of an earlier era into something which competes with the likes of CNN, though with particular "sensitivity" to subjects such as Tibet.

Xinhua, the Chinese news agency, and China Radio International have also grown their presence. Of the 200 overseas bureaux that Xinhua plans, more than 20 are in Africa.

Wu quotes figures of between US\$6,6bn and US\$8,7bn for how much Beijing has been throwing at this strategy. The second phase was to contribute significantly to help grow media infrastructure: such as giving US\$9,6m for the building of a broadcasting network in Guinea and a loan of US\$14m for radio transmitters in Zambia.

Of course, the Chinese are not the only one to use soft power to gain influence. And it would be intriguing to know if the Chinese loans have the same kinds of conditions that accompany, for example, USAID grants from Washington. I doubt it.

Picking partners carefully

But it is by no means clear that any of this has helped China's image on the continent, which is still largely driven by old-fashioned stereotypes.

Most of China's work in Africa has been state-to-state, made possible by their policy of strict non-interference in domestic issues. Now Chinese state institutions are moving into investment in our private media sector, leading one to ask how it fits with China's foreign goals.

I had heard earlier that the Chinese were backing another ANC faction trying to get Independent group, but they switched allegiances after the Mangaung conference on the advice of Luthuli House. This would fit with the way the Chinese authorities tend to operate: in partnership with the ruling party.

The Chinese make no bones about their purpose: to serve their own national interests. There is no pretence at charity or aid, and the benefits for Africa depend on us driving a hard bargain with Beijing.

Some would welcome the Chinese because they counter the dominance of Western media. But the authoritarian Beijing media model would not sit easily in a country like ours.

It is going to be important to track the growing Chinese presence. Is this just investment, or is it colonialism with Chinese characteristics? How will their media investments serve their interests, and will this impact on our media culture?

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

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