

CCTV's International Expansion: China's Grand Strategy for Media?

A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

By Anne Nelson

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CCTV
AMERICA



The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The Center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

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Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance at the National Endowment for Democracy commissioned this study of China's international broadcasting operations. The report traces the rise and spread of CCTV and analyzes China's strategy of advancing its foreign policy objectives through media.

CIMA is grateful to Anne Nelson, a veteran journalist, journalism educator, and international media consultant, for her research and insights on this topic. We hope that this report will become an important reference for international media assistance efforts.



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Executive Summary

In recent years, China has achieved a dominant position in many reaches of the global economy. Now it has set its sights on the global information system.

Some date this initiative to 2001, when Chinese broadcasting official Xu Guangchun announced a new “going out” policy to expand state broadcasting into Western languages. Over the past decade, this idea has grown into an ambitious plan to expand China’s global broadcasting footprint. This effort has been designed to enhance China’s image and convey its perspective to the world, taking advantage of the disruptions affecting Western state broadcasters and Western media markets in general.

China Central Television has come a long way since its founding as a domestic party propaganda outlet in 1958. The domestic service has been supplemented by an international service, boasting three major global offices in Beijing, Washington, and Nairobi, and more than 70 additional international bureaus.¹ The quality of CCTV’s journalism depends on both the region in which it’s produced, and the subject matter’s sensitivity in Beijing. On one hand, CCTV produces sophisticated long-form reports on complex international issues such as climate change; at the same time, its reporting on the Chinese Communist Party echoes the party line.

CCTV’s biggest impact may be in regions where China is directing its international investments. The Nairobi operations complement extensive investments in African infrastructure, many of them in communications; China is also pursuing critical investment in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

CCTV’s Washington bureau illustrates its ability to hire world-class international journalists and to allow them to do their jobs, as long as their reporting does not cross party lines. CCTV effectively reports to the Chinese Communist Party (via the state broadcasting agency), and the party will determine both its initiatives and its no-go areas for the foreseeable future.

In an era when Voice of America and BBC World Service budgets are battered by funding cutbacks and partisan politics, China is playing the long game. CCTV’s content is defined by the same ideological directives and limitations that govern the country’s university debates, feature films, and microblogs. The limitations have been exercised for decades; what’s new is their implication for global media markets.

Introduction

In April 2013 the Beijing International Film Festival made headlines when prize-winning director Feng Xiaogang used his acceptance speech to denounce government censorship. But the bigger story was the growth in China's burgeoning media industry and its impact on global markets. Movie box office receipts in China grew 30 percent in 2012, elevating its ranking to one of the highest in the world.

Chinese companies are currently exploring partnerships with Hollywood powerhouses such as Paramount and DreamWorks, hoping to marry the economic might of the Chinese marketplace with the appeal of American culture.

The Chinese initiative is unlikely to dislodge American popular culture from its global dominance. U.S. music, film, and television benefit from a melting-pot culture that melds international influences and connects to the rest of the world. In contrast, the representations of Chinese culture that are transmitted through government channels are still too insular and provincial to translate on a mass global basis. Over the twentieth century, the United States also established primacy in the realms of media technology and infrastructure and in marketing and distribution.

But that dominance may be challenged in regions of Chinese influence. As China rolls out its grand strategy to advance its global political and economic position, there are signs that it is making media a critical part of the package. In this integrated approach, media infrastructure is married to investment in the developing world, and news and entertainment content is distributed through channels designed to further public diplomacy.

International news may be a linchpin in this effort, and it is one in which China's Western competitors work at a disadvantage. The twenty-first century free market has been tough on international news production. Foreign reporting—especially television—requires money, and China is among few countries that are expanding their investment in the field.

The small group of countries that maintain a strong investment in international broadcasting include Qatar, whose al-Jazeera network has become a familiar player on the international broadcasting scene and is currently rolling out a massive new U.S. operation with former ABC newswoman Kate O'Brian at the helm. Another example is Russia, whose RT (the network formerly known as Russia Today) was founded in 2005 to improve the country's image abroad. It is financed by the Russian government and currently broadcasts in Arabic, English, Russian, and Spanish. Iran's Press TV, launched in 2007, presents a highly politicized English-language 24-hour



news service. (Sample headline: “Zionists seek clash of civilizations.”²) TeleSur, based in Caracas, is available in Spanish and Portuguese. It is owned by a consortium of Latin American governments, the largest shareholder of which is Venezuela. It has served as a mouthpiece for the policies of Hugo Chavez, and its future will depend on the direction of post-Chavez Venezuela.

Many Americans are familiar with U.S. international broadcasting, which are managed by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the best-known of which are the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe (RFE). Some European nations have their own international information services, notably France 24 and Deutsche Welle. The BBC’s World Service, long considered the gold standard of international broadcasting, has undergone massive cutbacks in recent years. (The BBC encompasses both the national broadcaster, which has an independent board of governors and a budget based on license fees for radio and television sets, and the BBC World Service, which is underwritten and directed by the British Foreign Office.)

Within this crowded field, CCTV is unique in its extensive resources and its ties to the Chinese government: the most dynamic economic power in the world today, and one with an ever-growing appetite for global influence.

CCTV in the Americas

The new China Central Television headquarters for the Americas occupies several floors of a sleek new office building on New York Avenue in the heart of Washington, DC. The CCTV offices are elegant expanses of glass and chrome that hum with an energy only found in thriving enterprises—increasingly rare in U.S. newsrooms.

Sharp, young reporters and producers peer into their screens in the vast, light-filled newsroom. In one area of the facility they generate stories in English; in another, in Chinese. The English-language staff has gravitated to CCTV from world-class news organizations—including ABC, CBS, CNN International, and the BBC—working



CCTV America studio, Washington DC

alongside interns from leading U.S. universities. For those seeking a career in television news, CCTV is an enchanted isle of hiring in an ocean of lay-offs.

CCTV's English-language broadcasting operations have gone by a number of different names, including CCTV International and CCTV-9, and the confusion isn't surprising. The path to international expansion has not been entirely smooth, with various stages of growth, retrenchment, and rebranding along the way. Some of CCTV's promotional material refers to its international channels—currently broadcasting in English, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and French—collectively as "CCTV International." In April 2010 the

English channel was rebranded as "CCTV News (English)." CCTV functions with resources of time and money that haven't been seen in U.S. broadcast news for decades. U.S. broadcasters have been cutting staff, closing international bureaus, shrinking sound bites, and virtually abandoning the documentary form. This has been true of domestic networks and international broadcasters alike. Over the past two years, CNN cut dozens of staff positions and closed its documentary unit, moving towards an "acquisition model," purchasing an increasing amount of content produced outside the organization.³ In the realm of U.S. state broadcasting, a combination of restructuring and budget sequestration sharply reduced broadcasts by the Voice of America in Asia, Latin



America, and other regions.⁴ In Britain, the BBC World Service announced in 2011 that budget cutbacks would result in the loss of 650 positions, anticipating that this would cost the service 30 million listeners worldwide.⁵

But for China Central Television, the sky's the limit, and nowhere is that more evident than in its new Washington office. One eyewitness is Jim Laurie, an independent consultant who was recruited to help shape the new Washington bureau. Laurie was previously an award-winning ABC News correspondent and a professor at University of Hong Kong's prestigious Journalism and Media Studies Centre. In a recent interview, Laurie described CCTV's weekend current affairs budgets: "American television tends to produce two-to-three minute segments. We produce 20-minute pieces. We don't have budget problems, we've got the cash. We just sent people to Greenland for a story on global warming, and did 12 minutes on gang violence in Central America."⁶

In December 2012 CCTV–America aired *Greenland Melting*, a 40-minute documentary on the impact of climate change. The investigators featured in the program created a companion website that features scholarly articles, graphs, and NASA data sets.⁷ CCTV's field reports on Latin American gang violence ran up to 12 minutes, ranging from an investigative piece on prison conditions in El Salvador to a human-interest story about a Brazilian girl killed in crossfire. Laurie acknowledges that CCTV has a ways to go to build a credible English-language news service, but he believes it is moving in the right direction.⁸

CCTV's Washington bureau has a staff of 30 covering its Chinese-language service, and more than 100 in its English-language operation, 70 of them non-Chinese. It currently has 12 Latin American bureaus—doubled over the past year—at a time when no U.S. television network has any.⁹

The network's home base is a sprawling Rem Koolhaas skyscraper in Beijing, a shiny Erector Set of a building whose odd shape won it the local nickname of *dà kùcha*, or "the big boxer shorts." These headquarters oversee the regional centers for the Americas in Washington, and for Africa in Nairobi. CCTV now boasts some 70 international bureaus of varying sizes, a number that has been increasing by the month.¹⁰

CCTV's budget is the product of domestic advertising, fueled by the booming Chinese economy. This makes CCTV answerable only to the Chinese Communist Party, which determines the allocation of its profits. With no need to satisfy owners, investors, or shareholders, the party decided years ago that these profits would be harnessed to an international broadcasting enterprise.

CCTV and the Chinese Communist Party: Parallel Paths

The history of CCTV has closely tracked policy trends in the Chinese Communist Party. Beijing Television made its first propaganda broadcast in 1958 at the outset of the disastrous Great Leap Forward. It was renamed China Central Television in 1978, a year of sweeping economic reform. Over time, CCTV evolved to include more and more news. Public expectations of a more independent approach to news also rose, but progress was slow. A 1993 report by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) found that “Censorship is embedded in the entire process of producing a news story.”¹¹

CCTV personnel have publicly chafed at state control and joined calls for reform on various occasions; CPJ noted that in 1989, CCTV staff appeared among the protesters at Tiananmen Square. CCTV journalists were chagrined by the government’s response to the 2003 SARS outbreak, when it eroded their credibility by blocking attempts to report on the epidemic. As a recent CCTV article pointedly observed, “As dangerous and new as SARS was, it was the government and people who made the disease more serious. The government, in particular, was criticized for failing to alert the public in a timely fashion.”¹²

Media scholar Ying Zhu, author of “Two Billion Eyes: the Story of China Central Television,” links the expansion and improvement of state broadcasting to the SARS epidemic.¹³ But Laurie believes that earlier events were equally important, including the entry of Phoenix Television from Hong Kong into the mainland market and CCTV’s difficulties in covering the September 11 attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

CCTV operates under the supervision of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), which in turn answers to the *xuānchuán* department of the Chinese Communist Party. The department title was formerly translated as the “propaganda department,” but that has changed in recent years. “Chinese people don’t like the word ‘propaganda,’ because they associate it with Nazi Germany,” commented one Chinese journalist. “So the English translation is now usually ‘Department of Publicity.’ But that’s not what it really means. ‘*Xuānchuán*’ has the sense of ‘leaders sending linear messages to the masses.’”¹⁴

One of the architects of CCTV’s global expansion was Li Changchun, an electrical engineer who served as propaganda chief of the Chinese Communist Party from 2002 until January 2013. John Jirik, a professor of journalism at Lehigh University and a former editor at CCTV, writes that Li envisioned the global CCTV not as a rival to the Voice of America and the BBC World Service, but rather as a challenge to CNN. “Li was not arguing that CCTV-9 should be developed as a global news channel with editorial subjection to commercial oversight but independence from direct political oversight. On the contrary, from what is known about how the PRC

leadership views media like CNN, apparently it views them as little different from PRC media, i.e. as incidents of direct political power.”¹⁵ Jirik describes the PRC’s goal as providing “an oppositional discourse to the dominant hegemony” of, presumably, both Western nations and Western news organizations.

Ying Zhu writes, “Shows need to be both ideologically inoffensive and commercially successful.” She reports that the SARFT provides the central government’s daily administrative oversight, including censorship of sensitive content, while the propaganda department issues guidelines and “thought directives.”¹⁶

On a domestic level, this guidance can be calibrated to create events, cover them as stories, and then make them go away. This is particularly the case when the government seeks to generate “popular protests” in response to international events. According to one prominent Chinese journalist, “The party asks news outlets, mostly state-owned to ‘look at the big picture’—Japan and the island controversy, for example—and give hints when it’s time to quiet down a story; say if you’ve got too many protesters on the street and workers aren’t showing up for their jobs in the factory.”¹⁷

Although the Communist Party regularly takes advantage of its ability to manipulate the CCTV news agenda, there are also signs of growing emphasis on journalistic professionalism. In late 2011, Hu Zhanfan, the editor of the *Guangming Daily*, was appointed to head the network.¹⁸ The official he replaced, Jiao Li, was a party functionary without a professional background in journalism, who was abruptly ousted amid accusations of corruption and complaints about his penchant for heavy-handed propaganda.¹⁹ For some, this was exemplified by the “Go Grassroots Campaign,” which sent journalists to cover ways in which rural villagers’ “lives were transformed due to certain policies.”²⁰ Some CCTV journalists hoped Hu’s appointment would open the way to improving the quality and independence of their reporting.

However, the supervisory bodies in charge of CCTV are still deeply entrenched in traditional party culture. Liu Qibao was appointed as head of the Party Propaganda/Publicity Department in November 2012. Qibao, almost a decade younger than Li Changchun, is an economist by training.

CCTV’s financing differs from the Voice of America and BBC World Service radio, which are funded by taxpayers. CCTV was initially an entirely government-funded domestic service. It began to experiment with advertising in 1979, amid the government’s program of marketization. Now CCTV (including its international service) is almost entirely supported by domestic Chinese advertising. Clients include both domestic businesses such as Bank of

China and e-commerce giant Alibaba, and international advertisers such as Proctor & Gamble and Volkswagen.²¹ Domestic Chinese ad revenues peak during the “golden hour” of the 7 p.m. *Xinwen Lianbo* news broadcast.²²

CCTV advertising revenues hit a record high of \$2.5 billion in 2012. Reuters reported that ad spending has been rising about one-and-a-half times the rate of growth in gross domestic product in recent years.²³ In fact, CCTV’s extraordinary domestic revenues are cited by insiders as one motivation for the international expansion: “The domestic market is almost saturated, so we’re seeking growth points in the global market.”²⁴

By comparison, U.S. television network CBS reported \$2.7 billion in ad commitments for 2012.²⁵ But whereas U.S. commercial networks channel advertising dollars towards shareholders, CCTV’s growing profits are placed at the disposal of the party hierarchy, which deploys them to fuel its global strategies on the economic and political fronts.

However, China’s media strategists may be staring at some handwriting on the wall. State broadcasting has evolved from a narrow propaganda outlet to an advertising bonanza, but digital media are offering audiences a broad new range of options, which are bound to erode CCTV’s domestic revenues over time. This was reflected in the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television’s 2013 annual report on the development of China’s audio-visual new media. There has been a demographic shift, concentrating broadcast viewership in the population over 40; younger audiences are more likely to watch online. The impact on advertising has been striking. The report found that online advertising grew 120 percent for three straight years over the past five years, “significantly surpassing the increase in the television market.”²⁶

The Chinese have an obvious interest in building overseas markets in many sectors, and their entry into movie production and distribution shows they have added culture to the list. Global broadcasting is surely in the mix, but its capacity to generate revenue is not yet apparent.

CCTV's Evolution in the International Sphere

CCTV made its initial foray abroad in 1990, when it opened a new channel directed at East Asia. Its early efforts were directed at Taiwan and overseas Chinese.²⁷

This coincided with improvements in programming. The 1990s have been called the “golden age” of CCTV under the leadership of president Yang Weiguang, who was “tasked with overseeing the first decade of CCTV’s transformation from state-funded proselytizer to commercial broadcaster.”²⁸ Innovations abounded, especially in the realm of documentaries and current affairs programming, and both the party and the public responded with enthusiasm.

In 1992, Yang decided to establish CCTV-4, an international Chinese-language channel that enjoyed critical support and satellite services from the Propaganda Ministry. According to Laurie, “Initially English channel 9 was distributed in the U.S. as part of a Chinese package of channels including CCTV-4” through cable operators, with the assistance of Rupert Murdoch and the News Corporation. “That meant that if Americans wanted to see the English channel they would have to pay for a higher tier on many cable or satellite systems. Beginning in 2010, CCTV began to negotiate deals to make the rebranded CCTV News a stand-alone channel on the basic service.”

John Jirik dates the current blueprint for CCTV’s global expansion to 2001, when SARFT director Xu Guangchun announced the new “going out” initiative, designed to convey China’s perspective to the rest of the world. As the plan took shape, Chinese television was expected to expand overseas as “China’s CNN, only cleverer.”²⁹

Chinese multi-language global and regional broadcasting services grew over the next decade. Spanish and French channels were added in 2004; Arabic and Russian in 2009.³⁰

A 2011 government blog listed the government’s ambitious expectations for state broadcasters, who were asked to:

- enter into cooperative agreements with overseas broadcasters;
 - develop strong overseas marketing and distribution teams and agencies;
 - improve their understanding of media laws, regulations and policies in target regions and countries;
 - and study the culture and audience tastes, the politics, history, economy, etc. of target countries and regions to “help with the government’s policy-making.”³¹
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One test of such policies came in 2008 with the Sichuan earthquake. Whereas CCTV coverage of the 2003 SARS epidemic had been discredited by the limitations of government censorship, the 2008 earthquake established CCTV-International as a global player. CCTV had preferential, and often exclusive, access to the affected zones, and its footage was rebroadcast by many other networks, among them BBC and CNN.

According to Ying Zhu, “CCTV now broadcasts around the world through ten transponders on eight satellites, and in collaboration with a number of overseas TV organizations, CCTV-4 has ‘infiltrated’ local cable networks in many countries and regions in Asia, Africa, North America, Europe and Oceania.”³²

CCTV’s English-language service is now available in the U.S. and other markets on a number of cable and satellite systems and has a live-streaming feed on the Internet.³³

The grand strategy propelling CCTV’s international development has been prompted by China’s economic expansion, as described in an influential speech by then-Party Secretary General Hu Jintao to the 17th Party Congress in 2007.

Hu held office from 2002-2012, cautiously navigating political waters and presiding over a period of rapid global expansion. It can be hard to characterize the individuals who make up the Chinese Communist Party’s top leadership—they are overwhelmingly middle-aged men with short black hair and glasses, who favor dark suits and red ties. Their careers also move in lockstep, from municipal offices to regional posts and on to the national level, many of whom lack experience in the world beyond.³⁴ Among his peers, Hu was known as a circumspect technocrat who believed in soft power and promoted it by ornamenting party rhetoric with traditional aphorisms.

As China scholar Orville Schell pointed out in 2007, “Hu quoted Confucius to party officials, declaring that ‘harmony is something to be cherished.’ He and Premier Wen Jiabao regularly proclaim an aspiration to *hexie shehui*, or a harmonious society. And they often use another slogan, *heping jueqi*, or peaceful rise, a phrase designed to soothe foreigners worried about the double threat of China’s fireball economy and rapidly modernizing military.”³⁵

In contrast, Hu’s remarks at the Party Congress addressed the government’s pervasive fear that China’s economic expansion had been undermined by negative public perceptions. Both at home and abroad, critical aspects of the country’s image were slipping out of party control. CCTV was a serious concern. The government

broadcaster was increasingly regarded as out-of-date, known for its staid production values, inept presentation, and aging demographics. Some young Chinese even ridiculed it as “Hee Hee TV.” Chinese audiences were gaining ever-greater access to Western media, and viewers balked at the censorship of information that could be obtained otherwise through social or foreign media.

The party leadership also wanted to see its economic muscle reflected in international prestige and influence, and sought tangible results in settings ranging from public opinion polls to votes in the UN Security Council. This desire struck a chord in the Chinese public, where many believed that the Western media conducted a conspiracy to smear China through unsympathetic or inaccurate reporting. Students even launched a website in 2008 called “Anti-CNN” to protest perceived Western bias in reporting the government crackdowns during the Olympics.³⁶

Hu took the party’s defensive posture even farther in a 2012 essay stating, “We must clearly see that international hostile forces are intensifying the strategic plot of Westernizing and dividing China, and ideological and cultural fields are the focal areas of their long-term infiltration ... The international culture of the West is strong while we are weak.”³⁷

The policy came to be known as “soft power”—a concept developed by Harvard professor Joseph Nye to describe the influence the United States and other nations exercise through the reach of their popular culture.³⁸

Hu called for a two-pronged effort. First, the government should reinforce Chinese cultural values at home to bolster party ideology in the face of growing foreign influences. The party would need “to step up the development of the press, publishing, radio, film, television, literature and art, give correct guidance to the public and foster healthy social trends.”

Second, Hu called for a media export strategy, tying the international development of “the cultural industry” to an effort to “nurture key enterprises and strategic investors, create a thriving cultural market and enhance the industry’s international competitiveness.”³⁹ In other words, what was good for the Chinese media business would be good for Chinese business.

The initiative included a number of non-media elements as well, such as the establishment of hundreds of Confucius Institutes to teach Chinese language and culture abroad, and growing the number of foreign students in China—which has multiplied almost sevenfold over the past decade. According to CNN, the number of international students in China grew 10 percent in 2011 to 290,000.⁴⁰ In the United States, the *Wall Street Journal*

reported, there were about 190,000 Chinese students in 2011-2012, a 23 percent increase over the previous year, representing 25.4 percent of all foreign students in the United States.⁴¹

The film industry was another priority. In 2012, China became the second largest movie market in the world, and the Chinese media conglomerate Dalian Wanda bought the U.S. theater chain AMC Entertainment, creating the world's biggest chain of movie houses. Dalian Wanda has now set its sights on additional chains in Europe.⁴² These acquisitions could alter the balance of international movie distribution, as Chinese companies enter into international coproduction and the Chinese government subsidizes Chinese movie production and limits foreign films in China to 20 a year.⁴³

But broadcasting lies at the heart of the soft power initiative. According to Nye, China has invested \$8.9 billion in "external publicity work," much of it focused on the new 24-hour news operations. (This figure is hard to confirm, and appears to include the costs of hundreds of international Confucius Institutes as well as media operations.)

On January 8, 2011, CCTV's director of research and development, Li-Sheng Zhang, laid out a detailed blueprint for China's five-year plan for the media industry.⁴⁴

The problem, he argued, is that more than 70 percent of the news consumed by viewers worldwide is produced by Western media. China's rising status has established China's "right to speak," but that right was not reflected in the international news agenda: "The West is strong, while we are still weak."

CCTV needed to "thoroughly implement the scientific concept of development" and "strive to build a world-class media ... Our country can't just compete in the international economic market, it must also enter the international ideological and cultural market."

To accomplish these goals, Zhang said that China needed to advance in its

- channel coverage;
- dissemination of results;
- agenda-setting ability;
- and the internationalization and industrialization of the media.



The China Daily for sale in New York City

Zhang reported that CCTV based its work on the central government’s “2009-2020 Master Plan for the Construction of China’s Major Media as an International Dissemination Force.”

At the same time, several related programs—namely the “Cultural Industry Promotion Plan” and the “National Intellectual Property Strategy Outline”—were designed to promote the establishment of export-oriented leading cultural enterprises, and encourage . . . full media convergence as an important direction of development.”

The dissemination takes place across many different media platforms, both old and new. It includes the U.S. distribution of the *China Daily*, as well as the paper’s ambitious “China Watch” paid supplements. The *China Daily* website describes China Watch as “a monthly publication distributed to millions of cosmopolitan readers as an insert in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* in the US, and across Europe with *International Herald Tribune* and *The Daily Telegraph*.”⁴⁵

The media program in developing countries has been broad and diverse. The Chinese government has bankrolled a “Professional Program for Caribbean Journalists” to tour China, courting editors and reporters from countries such as Jamaica, Suriname, and Grenada.⁴⁶ President Xi Jinping’s 2013 visit to the Congo was preceded by journalist exchanges between the two countries and marked by the donation of a new library from the China State Council Information Service to Ngouabi University. The collection includes more than 300 videos and 10,000 books—all of them relating to China—that will be regularly updated.⁴⁷

Although Chinese digital platforms have been slower to take off internationally, Zhang promised they would play a central role in the plan, highlighting the importance of Internet Protocol Television (IPTV), which combines video access with voice telephone service and broadband Internet access, as a tool for leapfrog development: “Process reengineering has become a new focus of media competition. To seize this opportunity, CCTV will also usher in a period of rapid development.”

The new master plan has required some major restructuring of the state broadcasting agency. In 2009, CCTV undertook a number of steps to reduce costs, improve efficiency, and expedite newsgathering, including the creation of a news center and the unification of its management structure. The number of correspondents expanded from 19 in 2009 to 50 in 2010.

At the same time, Zhang issued a challenge to international competitors. "CCTV is not high status among international media. World-class media is evaluated by four indicators: international influence, ability to run operations, ability to scale, and new media influence. CCTV is only beginning to influence international public opinion, and it cannot yet set the international agenda."

Zhang kept revenues in sight, stating, "In 2008-2009, Time Warner's overall income was 320.9 billion yuan, the News Corporation 207.8 billion, NBC 177.9 billion. CCTV's domestic income is relatively large, but it is still only 24 billion."

The plan, he explained, would require a firm grasp of markets and media convergence:

To strengthen external communication for overseas audiences, we need more research to understand the needs of the audience ... While building the perfect high-end services, including Internet TV, mobile TV, IPTV, video-gaming, and an e-commerce platform, thereby actively building a mature profit model, the effective integration of industry resources, a bigger and stronger television industry, and further optimize the industrial structure, changes in capital market growth, and the implementation of the overseas strategic plan to expand overseas business.⁴⁸

The Paradox of Chinese Journalism

It's not difficult to find old-style party propaganda on CCTV. A viewer in mid-2013 could watch extensive coverage of the Pyongyang Marathon and be fed an ample diet of flag-raising and ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

Yet it would be a mistake to perceive CCTV as limited to such fare. CCTV's English-language news and documentaries are dramatically improving. A new generation of broadcast journalists has emerged, such as senior U.S. correspondent Wang Guan. These reporters, some trained in China and some in the United States, often approach their stories with far more independence and professionalism than their predecessors—even if they do have to respect certain “no-go areas.”⁴⁹

New hires from Western broadcasting companies are making their mark, such as Anand Naidoo, the Peabody Award-winning reporter from CNN, who has broadcast important stories on industrial pollution and climate change,⁵⁰ and former BBC correspondent Stephen Gibbs, who offered nuanced reporting on the 2013 Venezuelan elections.

The quality of the reporting on any given story appears to correspond to its relationship to Beijing and the Communist Party. Environmental reporting fits in to the Chinese Communist Party's current emphasis on building a green export economy. Reporting on Taiwan is clearly more sensitive than stories from South America. Venezuela may receive special treatment, given its relationship with China's ally Cuba, but it is not a major subject of interest.

Editorial content is influenced by other factors as well. By all accounts, Beijing pays less attention to—and exerts less censorship on—the foreign-language service than to Chinese-language broadcasts. CCTV insiders question whether this could change with the ascension of Li Keqiang, the first premier to speak English. It is rumored that he watches English-language news, and there is nervous anticipation as to what he will make of CCTV's English-language news stories.

Another factor concerns an internal divide. The rifts in the power structure are many and complex (and beyond the scope of this report), but one pertinent split can be observed between two camps in particular: the Western-looking (and often Western-educated) sector that dominates the international business class, the Foreign Ministry, and the international press corps; and the far more provincial and inward-looking cadres that control the army and the Communist Party. The two sectors seem to have reached an accommodation in which the internationalists are allowed to liberalize in certain areas, as long as the process does not conflict

with the Communist Party elite's economic interests and medium-term goals. This tension explains many of the paradoxes one can observe in CCTV and other Chinese institutions. The signs of liberalization may be real—but so are the limits and the backlashes.

These factors have all contributed to CCTV's many facets. Ying Zhu quoted a journalist from the domestic side who joked that he served a "trinity of masters: the party-state, the market, and an increasingly lively public." CCTV's international programming is, for the moment, exempt from advertising pressure and audience ratings. It may serve the party-state, but this is a master whose attention is often turned elsewhere.

CCTV may be able to experiment in its international coverage, but in the end, its reporting has to conform to the network's core values. According to Ying Zhu, specific guidelines were laid out for *Newsprobe* (*Xinwen Diaocha*), a leading investigative news program. Journalists were expected to display "a spirit of questioning, a perspective of equality, a sense of balance, and an attitude of equilibrium."

Equality and balance, Zhu noted, "refer to qualities—objectivity, impartiality, fairness, thoroughness, accuracy—generally understood as crucial for journalists, but 'equilibrium' is something else. Equilibrium, in the Chinese lexicon, is about promoting unity, order, and a fundamental faith in the national project."⁵¹ These guidelines are applied to the Chinese news programs but, according to Laurie, have not been communicated to the English channel.

It can be easy to detect which subjects have a direct impact on Beijing's political or economic agenda. One example is the coverage of the Chinese Communist Party's 18th Party Congress. On a November 16, 2012, CCTV Washington reporter Mike Walter, a former CBS local anchor in Washington, contributed a historical timeline to a package called "What the Party Congress Really Meant." Walter's assessment of the Great Leap Forward in 1958 was that "it failed," while the 1966 Cultural Revolution "caused chaos." But he avoided the mention of "Tiananmen Square" altogether, stating merely, "following some domestic turmoil in 1989, Jiang Zemin takes over soon after the Shanghai stock market will open."^(sic)⁵²

China is developing genuine new liberalization measures (many of them in the economic and cultural spheres), but information and intellectual development in China are still severely constricted by the Communist Party.

There are suggestions that these constrictions are tightening. In May 2013, Chinese professors began to report that the Communist Party had recently informed them that they were banned from holding classroom

discussions on seven topics: “press freedom, universal values, civil society, civil rights, judicial independence, historical mistakes of the Chinese Communist Party, and the authoritarian-capitalistic class.”⁵³ Many China experts see these trends as part of a broad effort to tighten controls over information and the media. As David Wertime, founder of the online magazine *TeaLeafNation*, points out, “Academics are also the same folks who tweet on [the Chinese social media platform] Weibo, write op-eds, etc., and the academic restrictions have a more widespread chilling effect.”

According to an Associated Press story, the ban on the subjects—called the “Seven Don’t Mentions”—coincided with the closing of the microblog accounts of liberal intellectuals and human rights lawyers critical of government corruption and detentions.

According to the AP:

[V]eteran journalist Gao Yu said that an edict, or the rumors of one, could be related to a broader ideological strategy laid out by the party’s new leadership in an unpublicized meeting earlier this year that identifies seven key “problems” propaganda officials should tackle. She said they include the concept of democracy and constitutionalism, civil society, neoliberalism and the Western concept of the press. The strategy was laid out in a document issued by the general office of the party’s central committee, the contents of which were briefly leaked online, Gao said. She said she verified details of the document with retired, high-ranking propaganda officials. Measures recommended in the document include efforts to “‘better broadcast’ the party’s voice and “strengthen the party’s leadership of the media.”⁵⁴

These developments suggest that the party’s control of CCTV content will not diminish for the foreseeable future.

Where—and Who—Is the Audience?

In the meantime, who's watching? The answer is not entirely clear, since no reliable rating systems appear to be in place. Much of the language applied to CCTV's audience is misleading, intentionally or otherwise. In 2009, for example, the *South China Morning Post* reported, "CCTV says its channels reach 838 million overseas subscribers in 137 nations." But "reaching subscribers" can be a different metric than "viewership": Manhattan's Time-Warner



CCTV newsroom in Washington, DC.

cable placed CCTV on Channel 134 (sandwiched between CNN International and Russia Today), on a roster of nearly 2,000 channels. CCTV has devoted little effort to informing potential U.S. viewers that its service exists, or where to find it. (CCTV's additional branding challenge in the United States is the common use of its initials to signify "closed circuit television" surveillance.)

In 2011 Thomson Reuters reported that it had reached an agreement to "distribute China Central Television's (CCTV) content and scripted footage to more than 700 broadcasters across the US, Europe, Asia and Africa ... and will span political, economic, social, cultural, sports, and

entertainment news categories. 'The extension of this relationship allows CCTV to broaden its reach into the global broadcasting community while simultaneously satisfying our clients' increasing appetite for news from China,' said Christoph Pleitgen, managing director, Reuters news agency. 'We hope these mutually beneficial relationships continue to present themselves in all corners of the world.'⁵⁵ There are now indications that the Thomson Reuters project has stalled (reportedly because Reuters sought to distribute CCTV content as raw video under the Reuters brand). Various international partnerships have been floated, but they are still in an experimental stage.

Surprisingly, most of CCTV's English-speaking audience is in China. It is estimated that there are some 10 million mainland Chinese who know English well enough to understand a basic broadcast (and hundreds of millions more who are learning English), and they provide a ready-made audience for CCTV English content. CCTV News (English) is one of 42 channels that are widely available in China, of which 34 are Chinese-language, available in most, if not all, mid-size to major markets. When Chinese cities remove the English-language channel from their cable systems, it's usually on the basis of ratings rather than censorship.

CCTV is concentrating its efforts on expanding audiences outside China, but insiders acknowledge that few resources have been devoted to measuring international audiences. “YouTube gives some idea of our analytics,” said one. “The audience is mostly in the U.S., then Canada, then Europe, then Africa, then the Philippines.” Tallies of YouTube viewers and Facebook “likes” are still recording negligible results.⁵⁶ This is a problem across the international broadcasting spectrum. There is no global equivalent of the domestic Nielsen ratings system, and international broadcasters who commission sophisticated audience research often keep the findings closely guarded.

CCTV has ties to more than 20 channels online. It has also created a number of CCTV YouTube channels. But it is not always easy to tell which of the channels labeled CCTV are official projects of the network, and which are posted (or pirated) by users. The CCTV-9 Travelogue Channel, for example, is linked and branded to cctv.cntv.cn, with some 4000 subscribers.⁵⁷ The CCTV-13 Chinese Music Channel, with over 5,400 subscribers, appears to be a vehicle for segments of Chinese entertainment programs, music videos, and recordings of traditional music.

The big numbers for CCTV content on YouTube appear on individually posted content, such as the blockbuster Spring Festival broadcast, a national event that could be compared to the Thanksgiving Day Parade and the Super Bowl rolled into one. Estimates of the viewership start at 400 million and range upward (compared to the Super Bowl’s peak of 111 million) –though the Festival broadcast’s audience has been declining in recent years.⁵⁸ The 2013 event featured Celine Dion singing “Jasmine Flower” in phonetic Chinese with popular singer Song Zuying, with a corps of dancers in neon green tutus. Several of the uploads received more than 150,000 views, with ads appearing from Walmart, Pantene, and Prudential Insurance.⁵⁹

At this point, CCTV is not receiving significant income from YouTube ad revenue, and it has fallen behind al-Jazeera and RT in exploiting YouTube as a platform.

Foreign Policy Priorities

CCTV's international footprint—both in terms of coverage and outreach—corresponds to a menu of China's foreign policy priorities.

In the United States the primary CCTV objective is U.S. coverage for a global audience; far fewer resources have been devoted to promoting the programming and building the U.S. audience. The Washington bureau had about 100 employees as of March 2013, 30 Chinese and 70 non-Chinese (largely U.S., plus British and other nationalities).

The Washington center oversees bureaus in New York, Toronto, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Houston, and Miami, with another slated to open in Atlanta. CCTV bureaus in Latin America include Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Bogota, Lima, and Havana, with more on the way.⁶⁰ By way of contrast, none of the U.S. broadcast networks maintain a bureau in Latin America, and CNN has three (in Buenos Aires, Havana, and Mexico City).⁶¹

Based on sporadic viewing over March and April 2013, it can be said that CCTV's Latin American programming consists of a fairly bland menu emphasizing news from China, Chinese culture, sports, and food, combined with cursory coverage of the region and world affairs, and some Chinese-language entertainment programs with Spanish subtitles.⁶² The coverage emphasized two favored partners in Latin America: Cuba and Chavez-era Venezuela. Chinese programming is among the scant foreign news fare that is available on Cuban television, and Cuban viewers report that in the post-Soviet era, Russian programming has almost disappeared from Cuban broadcasts, while Chinese content has risen sharply.⁶³ Cuba is China's biggest trading partner in the Caribbean, but its value is more strategic than economic.⁶⁴

According to a recent report by McKinsey, China's clout as an investor—both in Latin America and on a global scale—is unlikely to diminish: “The value of the country's domestic financial assets—including equities, bonds, and loans—has reached \$17.4 trillion and now trails only that of the United States and Japan. In cross-border capital flows, China has defied global trends: foreign direct investment (FDI), cross-border loans and deposits, and foreign portfolio investments in equities and bonds are up 44 percent over their 2007 level. Since 2009, Chinese loans to Latin America have exceeded those of both the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank. Total foreign investment into China reached \$477 billion at the end of 2011, exceeding the 2007 peak of \$331 billion.”⁶⁵

Chinese trade and investment in Brazil and Mexico rose over 30 percent in 2012.⁶⁶ Chinese companies are also investing heavily in Latin American mining operations. It is still early to discern the connections between CCTV's Latin American operations and its investments in the region, but they may emerge with time.

The Scramble for Africa

China is already a major player in Africa, and the region has been identified as a media priority. CCTV opened its third global bureau, after Beijing and Washington, in Nairobi. CCTV's African activities are tightly woven into a well-publicized, sweeping plan to consolidate China's influence over African natural resources and economic policies.

China's role in African media development was outlined in the Beijing Action Plan of 2006, and developed over the next six years. The plan described a broad arena of political and economic cooperation, including the news media. It called for China and its African partners to encourage their national media to "play a positive role in enhancing mutual understanding and friendship," enable journalists' exchanges and workshops, and offer Chinese support for the training of African broadcast journalists.⁶⁷

China initiated its media presence in Nairobi in 2005, when it opened the Nairobi office for China Radio FM. CCTV Africa's Nairobi center was opened in January 2012, with programming in English, Chinese, and Swahili.⁶⁸ The programming began with an hour of original content a day and soon expanded to three, anchored by prominent local journalists covering African politics, environment and wildlife, and business and economics.⁶⁹ The Chinese began to raid Kenyan newsrooms for large numbers of anchors and journalists; according to some reports, doubling local salaries.⁷⁰ As of 2012, the Nairobi center employed about 60 people, 50 of them Kenyans, and oversaw a dozen bureaus across the region.⁷¹

The Nairobi center coincides with a much larger African media initiative. According to a 2012 CNN report, the Xinhua news agency has opened 20 bureaus on the continent, launched a China African news service, and joined forces with Safaricom to launch a mobile newspaper in Kenya. Analyst Jinghao Lu from the research firm Frontier Advisor told CNN: "CCTV's expansion in Africa is mainly one step of this whole national engine into Africa." According to CCTV local anchor Mark Masaai, the mission of the project is to "change the narrative about Africa ... to show the potential and the solution [to Africa's problems] and not just point out blatantly the bad side, the problems, the crises that we have."⁷² This philosophy is not so distant from the CCTV principle of "harmony"—and could appeal to autocrats in the region who seek to avoid challenges to the status quo.

China has an increasing stake in the African status quo. The Economist Intelligence Unit reported: “Between 2007 and 2012 the value of China’s annual exports to the continent more than doubled, from U.S. \$37.3 billion to U.S.

\$85.3 billion. Its imports from Africa meanwhile rose even faster, surging from U.S. \$36.3 billion in 2007 to U.S. \$113.2 billion in 2012.”⁷³ These imports were principally oil and a few other commodities. China is also seeking offshore low-wage labor, and has created special economic zones in countries that include Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Zambia.

But China has experienced public relations problems in Africa, many based on the practices of importing low-paid Chinese workers, and bundling development projects with Chinese construction and finance packages to undercut Western rivals. This is especially the case regarding large infrastructure projects.

The best-known examples of this are in energy projects and port facilities. But there is evidence that China is building out African communications infrastructure as well. This is particularly critical in the realm of last-mile technology. In July 2012, the Kenyan media reported the Chinese government’s offer of a “concessional loan of \$72 million, for the National Optic Fibre Backbone Infrastructure Project and E-Government, which will provide optic fibre, linking all urban areas of Kenya,” along with a package of road construction and power projects.⁷⁴ The Chinese



The world through China’s eyes, Kampot, Cambodia

construction firms ZTE and Huawei have been named as two of the three foreign contractors involved. (The third is French company Sagem.)⁷⁵ China has also provided broadcasting infrastructure, such as the 10,000 kilowatt FM transmitter installed to boost radio signals—and carry China Radio International programming—in Liberia.⁷⁶

China's outreach extends to African journalists, such as the March 2013 "Experience China" program in the Republic of Congo, corresponding to the final stop of President Xi's four-nation tour. The program, which reflects parallel programs in other countries, invited reporters from Congolese media to China for interviews and sponsored a Chinese-Congolese collaboration for a "China Special Edition" in the *Brazzaville News*, the country's leading paper.⁷⁷

China's Back Yard: The Asian-Pacific Region

China's approach to Southeast Asia differs radically from its media production in Africa. CCTV's African service is experimenting with the use of local languages and talent. So far, there is no suggestion that these practices extend to Southeast Asia. Cable systems in Cambodia and Thailand carry various CCTV channels, but these are in Chinese, and appear to be directed at the overseas Chinese audience.

Instead, the emphasis is all on infrastructure, which has its own far-reaching implications. Chinese companies with ties to the government are signing agreements to develop large-scale communications projects. In April 2013 Cambodian head of state Hun Sen announced that Cambodia was in talks with China to buy a telecommunications satellite for \$300-400 million.⁷⁸

In June 2013 the government of Papua New Guinea signed a \$300 million deal with the Chinese telecommunications corporation ZTE, to design, build, and launch a new satellite.⁷⁹ As in Africa and Latin America, these agreements usually fit within a broader context of mining, lumber, transportation infrastructure, energy, and agricultural investments.

One expert with long experience in the region noted that the Chinese investments arrive with hidden agendas. "Chinese investment brings with it a long-term expectation that business associates/beneficiaries will therefore look favorably on any new ventures or initiatives. Their practice often revolves around early softening with lots of investment and few conditions and eventually a time will come that reveals what they are really looking for—the right to install telecommunications infrastructure and return significant investment over longer period of time."

He added that the problems in transparency and government leave some countries especially vulnerable to this approach. "Pacific nations such as Papua New Guinea and other countries don't have the same level of diligence systems in place to fully appraise whether there are other dimensions, besides commercial, to Chinese

investment that they need to be taking into account.”

These agendas might include anything from surveillance technology to the direct provision of programming promoting China’s economic and foreign policies. (This feature is common to many nations’ international broadcasting, but it could be especially sensitive in areas where China is making vast investments and acquisitions of natural resources.) There is no bright line between investment in communications infrastructure and entry into the field of content. In Liberia, the Chinese acquisition of a radio station was a prelude to developing a full menu of programming for the Liberian public. It will be important to see whether a similar pattern evolves in the Asia-Pacific region.

CCTV English and CCTV-America: Contrasts in Editorial Process

The programming on CCTV News (English) and CCTV-America is fairly new and evolving rapidly, so is too early to define. But based on reviewing its broadcasts over the winter and spring of 2013, it appears that it has several salient characteristics.

1. CCTV’s services stress coverage of major international stories, especially as defined by the U.S. media, with the addition of the “Beijing angle.” For example, on April 15, it gave heavy coverage to the Boston Marathon bombing, with a follow-up story on the Chinese government’s expression of sympathy.
2. CCTV has chosen to focus on several spheres of influence, notably regions in which China has extensive economic interests and in which Western news coverage has been diminishing. These are principally Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Asia-Pacific region.
3. CCTV provides additional—and largely favorable—coverage to individual countries of strategic interest to China. These include Cuba, and Chavez-era Venezuela. There have also been “soft” stories on North Korea, though the coverage may be growing more critical as relations with Beijing chill.
4. CCTV’s content has a common template, which features traditional breaking news (elections,

bombings, and natural disasters), business and economics, plus an emphasis on nature and environmental documentaries (such as one recent CCTV Africa program on a campaign to rescue South African vultures from extinction).⁸⁰

But the editorial approach also appears to vary with the region. CCTV's Washington office includes a large number of journalists from respected U.S. and British news organizations, some of whom occupy influential editorial positions. Jim Laurie is one; another is Humberto Duran, a senior producer from CNN International and CCN Español who oversees *Americas Now*, which covers Latin American news in English. The English-language broadcasts out of Washington often have the look, feel, and subject matter of CNN International (although insiders say that al-Jazeera is regarded as the favored model), and their journalists are subject to far less pressure from Beijing than their Chinese-language counterparts. These factors present a convincing argument that the Chinese media are capable of creating adept Western-style news productions.

CCTV-Africa productions, on the other hand, include more overt propaganda content, much of it highlighting Chinese aid, development projects, and exchange programs in Africa. In 2012, CCTV-Africa's bureau chief Song Jianing explained the mission to Agence France Presse: "We opened this bureau in order to be able to tell the real Africa story, the real story of China and the real story of Sino-African relations." Both CCTV managers and their African counterparts have been critical of what they consider the Western media's tendency to depict Africa as "the continent of endless calamities."⁸¹ CCTV Africa is also copying the success of al-Jazeera's African coverage by hiring prominent Africans to cover Africa, an approach that was pioneered by al-Jazeera, though Western news organizations have been slow to follow.

Digital Limitations

Despite Beijing's official emphasis on digital media, CCTV staff complain that the operation has been slow to adapt to new technology. It has fallen far behind on the development of mobile platforms for news, they say, and there is a chronic lack of coordination between CCTV's digital operations, based in Beijing, and its overseas broadcasting outlets. CCTV's online operation is "typically staffed by young graduates of the foreign language schools with no background in journalism," stated one insider. "Our biggest problems involve finding stuff online and finding our audience."⁸²

The CCTV English site (<http://english.cntv.cn/01/index.shtml>) illustrates the problem. The design is out of date, and the English is often ungrammatical, editorially far below the standards broadcast on CCTV News. The program highlights can be questionable, such as this sample:

"In 2012, CCTV will produce a series of high-standard documentaries with the international horizon, modern communication methods and large investments which can enter the international market. Currently, ten topics have been selected, such as South-to-North Water Division Project, the Journey of Chinaware, Peking Opera, the Original Voice of China and Charming Slovenia."⁸³

In the summer of 2013, CCTV Beijing confirmed that it would expand Washington's programming to five hours per day by the end of the year, and new online initiatives, mobile applications, and other aggressive new digital measures will also be rolled out by January 2014.⁸⁴

Conclusion

Foreign policy analysts have been talking about China’s “grand strategy” for years, noting the country’s deliberate integration of political, economic, diplomatic, and military agendas in the international arena. There can be little doubt that Beijing considers news dissemination and media development to be two more pieces on the board. Whereas Beijing makes long-term strategic investments in media, many Western countries have left their news industries to the mercies of brutal economic conditions and technological disruption. Western news broadcasters that only recently set the global agenda are now struggling to survive under hostile market conditions. U.S. networks have closed most of their foreign bureaus. Global broadcasters such as CNN and the BBC are cutting staff and international reporting. State broadcasters, including the Voice of America, the BBC World Service, and Deutsche Welle, are under increased pressure to defend their services. In some cases, abrupt shifts to digital platforms have left millions of broadcast audience members in the lurch.

At the same time, few local markets in developing countries can provide an advertising base that can support quality local news production—to say nothing of regional and international coverage.

What’s at stake? Will China’s massive investments in international news operations translate into gains in political, economic, and diplomatic influence? There is no clear answer to this question, but it does appear that the Chinese have given it far more consideration than their Western counterparts. As one U.S. military officer with long experience in Africa commented, “The U.S. government can’t plan past six months from now. The Chinese think a hundred years in advance.”⁸⁵

As Western news operations are buffeted by the winds of economic uncertainty and technological disruption, the Chinese are playing the long game. It won’t take a century to see which approach—improvisation or strategy—gains the upper hand.

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