

Preferred citation: Madrid-Morales, D. (2017). China's digital public diplomacy towards Africa: actors, messages and audiences. In K. Batchelor & X. Zhang (Eds.), *China-Africa Relations: Building Images through Cultural Co-operation, Media Representation and Communication* (pp. 129 - 146). London: Routledge.

China's digital public diplomacy towards Africa: actors, messages and audiences

By Dani Madrid-Morales

Introduction

In June 2015, the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of China's Communist Party (CCP), reported that its Facebook page had received more 'Likes' than the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* (People's Daily, 2015). By the beginning of 2016, its 'fan base' had surged to 17 million and the paper ranked among the top ten most popular print media on the platform.ⁱ While the Chinese government has been relatively successful in blocking access to popular social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter inside its borders (Yang, 2009), outside, these are becoming important tools in the development of an incipient digital public diplomacy strategy. Africa and North America have been, for different strategic reasons, the top two priority areas in China's recent efforts to modernize its public diplomacy: China Central Television (CCTV) opened its first overseas production and broadcasting centres in Washington and Nairobi in 2012; China's flagship English-language newspaper, *China Daily*, curates specific editions for North America and Africa, and several state actors have launched initiatives to be more prominent on social media in both regions. China's digital public diplomacy might be just emerging, but taking into account the speed at which it is developing, it is rapidly becoming a subject worthy of academic attention.

Public diplomacy is defined as a nation state's attempt to influence the opinions and attitudes of foreign publics (Heller & Persson, 2009). Throughout history, countries have tried to achieve these goals with different tools: from international broadcasting and cultural diplomacy to

global advocacy and people-to-people exchanges. The advent of the Internet not only offers an entire new platform for implementing these activities, but it also opens new possibilities for a more direct engagement with audiences. Cowan and Arsenault (2008) have described this shift as moving from monologue to dialogue. Traditionally, states engaged in unilateral and unidirectional communication with foreign audiences (monologue), but in recent years, more countries have adopted a multidirectional communication approach, allowing audiences to talk back (dialogue), sometimes online, sometimes offline. The Chinese government has little experience in dialogue-based approaches and only recently has it begun testing these online. In many ways, Chinese authorities see Africa as a testing ground: a favourable environment in which to roll out new diplomatic initiatives, such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) or Nairobi-based CCTV-Africa. While most African countries lag behind other parts of the world in landline connectivity, mobile access is booming, particularly in urban contexts, leaving ample room for growth of online-based public diplomacy activities. In a globalized world characterised by a media industry that is drifting away from the physical borders of nation-states, establishing the boundaries of China's digital diplomacy towards Africa, or those of any other region, is not a clear-cut task. However, as this chapter tries to show, China's public diplomacy provides examples of content and strategies that specifically have African audiences in mind.

This chapter looks at three aspects of China's online public diplomacy towards Africa. First, it offers a description of its structure and a discussion on how the four major actors involved (State agencies, diplomatic missions, State-owned media and other media) interact and operate online. Second, by combining social media analytics and data from in-depth interviews it provides insights into the target (and real) audience of China's online public diplomacy. Third, it includes a quantitative description of Twitter and YouTube content that helps understand what messages are being conveyed online. The evidence presented here suggests that, being a novice player, China does not yet excel at these new forms of engaging foreign publics. Based on these findings, in the last section of the chapter, I argue that online and offline, Chinese

public diplomacy fails in at least six dimensions: overall strategy, cohesive narrative, real dialogue, control and supervision, capacity and resources, and depth.

China's public diplomacy strategies

Despite China's relatively low profile in world politics during the Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping eras, the country kept an active public diplomacy portfolio, sometimes with conventional practices and sometimes in more unconventional ways. For most of the 1960s and 1970s, Chinese artist troupes and representatives of the CCP travelled the world or, at least, to countries with left-leaning governments (Ratliff, 1969). Throughout those years and well into the 1990s, Chinese radio programming and magazines, such as the *Peking Review*, were seen as an important way to engage foreign audiences (Üngör, 2009). Alongside cultural and exchange diplomacy, over the last three decades, China has practiced so-called 'ping pong diplomacy', which paved the way for Henry Kissinger's historic visit to Beijing and, eventually, the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China (Hong & Sun, 2000); 'panda diplomacy' or the lending of panda bears to amicable countries (Hartig, 2013); and, Olympic and Expo diplomacy, events that have a long history of being highly successful foreign policy instruments (Huang & Fahmy, 2011; Svensson, 2013). Conventional or unconventional, successful or not, all of the above share a common goal: reshaping the perception of the People's Republic of China (PRC) outside its borders, a major foreign policy objective for the Chinese leadership since the fourth generation of leaders took office in 2002.

As China's military and economic power has grown over the last two decades, its leaders have become increasingly concerned with the way the world perceives the country. According to Wang (2011), the rapid prominence that China has gained internationally since the reform and opening up period has created three fractures in the way the country is seen abroad. There is a gap between the way China sees itself and the way the rest of the world sees China; there is a split between perceptions of Chinese culture and perceptions of Chinese politics; and, finally,

there is a mismatch between the way most Western nations perceive China (mostly negatively) and how China sees these countries (mostly positively). Since 2007, the idea that China needs to build up its soft power, the power to shape the preferences of others by means of attraction and appeal (Nye, 2008b), has been fully incorporated into policy documents. It was precisely in 2007 that Chinese President Hu Jintao told the Seventeenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party: ‘enhancing cultural soft power is a basic requirement for realizing scientific development and social harmony. It is necessary for satisfying rising demands for spiritual culture and national development strategy’ (Xinhua, 2007). Public diplomacy is one of the most important tools available to nation-states to increase their soft power (Nye, 2008a). Currently, China’s public diplomacy is based on four principles: pragmatism, particularism, traditionalism and continuity. Its current policies are an extension of a long history of public diplomacy — even if it did not go by that name most of the time. It is traditional and particular, in that it still employs practices that are considered out-dated by many countries, and it infuses new practices with “Chinese characteristics” making them distinctive. Finally, it is pragmatic as it adapts to local contexts and circumstances even if this requires sacrifices in the promotion of certain values, norms and ideas. Ideology might have been pivotal in China’s engagement with the outside world from the 1950s to 1980s, but it is no longer so.

An often-remarked shortcoming in China’s public diplomacy activities is the dispersion of practitioners and policy-makers across ministries, offices and bureaus. Nowadays, the planning and implementation of China’s public diplomacy activities is handled by three political bodies (D’Hooghe, 2011).ⁱⁱ The State Council Information Office and the CCP’s Office of External Publicity are at the forefront of policy development. While the former is a government body under the direct supervision of the Premier’s office, the latter is under the auspices of the Party. In this, as in many other cases in China’s political decision-making, the boundaries between the Party and the State are blurred. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), responsible for China’s overseas diplomatic missions, is mostly in charge of policy implementation. Within the MoFA there is a Public Diplomacy Office (*Gonggong Waijiao*), which is nested under the

Information Department (*Xinwen Si*). Among the activities that fall under the responsibility of the MoFA are advocacy campaigns, such as the holding of press conferences; some parts of exchange diplomacy, including the training of foreign diplomats and public information officers; and, a limited number of listening activities. Other ministries involved include the Ministry of Culture, responsible for the promotion of Chinese culture overseas, and the Ministry of Education, which oversees the work of the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, popularly known as Hanban, that runs the Confucius Institutes. The international broadcasting component, including CCTV's activities, is supervised by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), which is under direct control of the State Council. The Xinhua News Agency, which also plays an important role in international broadcasting, listening and advocacy strategies, is directly under control of the State Council.

Some of these agencies went digital at an early stage, particularly in advocacy campaigns. In 2000, the State Council Information Office launched the China Internet Information Centre (www.china.org.cn), a multilingual web portal offering information about China that covers everything from Chinese language learning and ethnic minorities to sports, investment opportunities and political statements. China.org.cn is a good example the monologic nature of the PRC's core outreach strategies, both online and offline. In China.org.cn, as in other similar websites maintained by central, provincial and municipal agencies, content comes from state-owned media such as Xinhua or CCTV and the objective seems to be conveying as much officially-sanctioned information as possible, without much attention being paid to whether it resonates with audiences or not. Online, Chinese agencies engage in an information overflow, with Xinhua and CCTV at the vanguard. The news agency is online since 2000, and CCTV created an online division in 2009, CNTV, operating independently from other CCTV bureaus and departments. It handles the multilingual domain www.cntv.cn, functioning as a massive database of CCTV content, a large part of which is aimed at non-Chinese speaking audiences.

Dialogue and collaboration, which characterize online public diplomacy, only occur sporadically. Arguably, China's most successful online campaign to date, at least in terms of publicity, given how difficult it is to quantify the actual audience impact, was implemented in late October 2015 when CCP leaders began discussing the 13th Five-Year Plan. Xinhua, in collaboration with a Shanghai production company, created a short animated video with a catchy English song to explain the main contents of the plan titled "Pay Attention to the 十三五 (*shi san wu*)," in reference to the Chinese name of the Plan: *Shisanwu guihua*.ⁱⁱⁱ The video was uploaded on the vide-sharing platform YouTube, widely circulated on social media and featured in international media (see, for example, Horton, 2015; Plucinska, 2015). Leaving this video aside, the use of non-Chinese social media, such as Twitter, YouTube or Facebook (all of which are banned inside China) remains limited. Some state-owned media have become active online but other actors, such as diplomatic missions, have been slow to take up these tools. By the end of 2015, the only Chinese embassies/missions with active Twitter or Facebook accounts were the ones in Yangon (opened in October 2011), Brussels (September 2013), Geneva (September 2013), Tokyo (April 2014), Ottawa (August 2014), Pretoria (February 2015), United Nations (April 2015), London (June 2015), Prague (July 2015) and Ankara (November 2015).

China's public diplomacy towards Africa

Shortly after taking office in 2013, President Xi Jinping embarked on his first trip overseas, which included three African nations (Tanzania, South Africa and the Republic of Congo) and Russia. In diplomacy, no small detail is trivial, and so Xi's visit to Africa was full of significance: Sino-African relations (as much as Sino-Russian relations) are a priority for the current leadership. It could be argued that they have been important for decades, all the way back to Mao Zedong's Three Worlds Theory, Zhou Enlai's 1963 visit to Africa and the formulation of the Eight Principles of Foreign Aid (Yu, 1968). However, as Alden (2007) and Taylor (2010) argue, China's renewed engagement with Africa has taken new dimensions. The African continent is a priority for China, not only because of trade, but also because it provides

political legitimacy, is full of affine governments and offers fertile ground for cultivating new relationships that transcend the somewhat confrontational, not necessarily belligerent, nature of China's relations with other parts of the world. The health of Sino-African relations is routinely checked at FOAC, where African countries and China seemingly agree on everything in order to take their relationship to new levels. However, outside views are more often than not mired in suspicion about China's ultimate goals and intentions (Cardenal & Araújo, 2013).

Misconceptions and lies, most of which have been empirically refuted by scholars, abound: China does not send prisoners to work in Africa (Hairong & Sautman, 2012); China is not buying parts of Africa to feed its own population (Brautigam, 2015) and China is not only investing in Africa's natural resources (Brautigam, 2009). These rumours are not only found in the media, but many have also sunk in deep among Africans. Faced with yet another image problem, Chinese authorities have made it a priority to offer their own take on Sino-African relations through a multifaceted public diplomacy effort.^{iv}

The most visible of China's outreach projects in Africa are those involving the mass media. China has widened its footprint in the African mediasphere since the mid-2000s when a trilingual FM radio station in Kenya, the first of its kind in the continent, was launched. Since then, Xinhua has increased the number of foreign bureaus in the continent to more than twenty; the English-language newspaper *China Daily* has launched a weekly African edition; *Chinafrica*, a bilingual current affairs magazine, has opened an office in Johannesburg; and, in 2012, CCTV established its first overseas production centre (CCTV-Africa) in Nairobi. The role of these organizations in China's public diplomacy is crucial. Not only are they a vehicle for propagating a Chinese narrative, but their content is also circulated elsewhere. For example, some national broadcasters in Africa, such as Kenya's Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), have agreed to relay CCTV-Africa's content instead of that of other international broadcasters, used in the past. Through international broadcasting, be it radio or television, China engages foreign audiences in at least two ways: it offers a Chinese perspective on current affairs and it showcases China's cultural productions.

Cultural diplomacy is another important facet. As of early 2016, Africa was home to 46 Confucius Institutes (CI) and 23 Confucius Classrooms (CC) in 36 countries. CIs are Chinese language learning centres and the first contact with Chinese culture for many. They are set up as partnerships between African universities, Hanban and Chinese universities, which supply personnel and resources. Both Hanban and the Ministry of Education also offer scholarships to African students to pursue their studies in China. In the 2015 FOCAC Action Plan, China pledged 30,000 government scholarships for university students and offered to train 200,000 African vocational and technical personnel (FOCAC, 2015). These exchange opportunities coexist with others targeting specific groups such as media professionals. On the cultural front, Africa is home to five China Cultural Centres (CCC) in Benin, Mauritius, Tanzania, Nigeria and Egypt. Agreements have also been reached to open centres in Tunisia and Morocco. The CCCs in Benin and Mauritius date back to 1988 and were the first to open in the world. Managed by the Bureau for External Cultural Relations in the Ministry of Culture, they are in charge of promoting (a specific set of) Chinese cultural expressions overseas. Also in the cultural domain, since 2012, several Chinese television dramas have been dubbed into African languages and broadcast in different countries, from Tanzania to Senegal and Egypt.

The intensity and breadth of China's outreach activities in Africa make the continent the perfect case study. In many ways, Africa is China's sandbox when it comes to public diplomacy. China feels at ease in Africa, it has found a politically welcoming environment; it has avoided the kind of controversies with civil society that it has faced in the past in places like the United States, Australia or France; it is able to match the narrative of win-win relations at the core of China's foreign policy jargon with real actions; and, more importantly, it has been able to experiment with new forms of outreach and engagement. Africa is the place of many 'first times' in China's public diplomacy: the first Cultural Centre, the first FM radio station, the first overseas broadcasting centre... When it comes to digital outreach activities, China is barely taking its first steps, but Africa offers enormous room for growth. According to the World Bank, the average

Internet penetration rate in the continent stood at just over 28 per cent in 2015, way below the world average of 49.7 per cent. The speed at which the online population in Africa is growing, however, surpasses most countries. Africans are increasingly going online on their mobile phones, particularly in urban settings.

As an emerging phenomenon, no comprehensive study on China's digital public diplomacy has been published to date. In this exploratory study, I address four questions related to China's digital outreach activities towards Africa: how is it structured, who is the audience, which goals are being pursued and, which messages prevail? Most of the data used here refers specifically to CCTV-Africa. There are three reasons for this: it is the single most active agent in digital outreach activities, there is abundant data available and, given the dispersion of actors in China's online public diplomacy, it would be otherwise unfeasible to study the practices of each and every one of them. This chapter employs a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. I use publicly available information to outline the structure of China's online public diplomacy towards Africa. This is complemented with information from half a dozen semi-structured in-depth interviews with CCTV-Africa's staff. Interviews were conducted between March and November 2015 in different locations in Nairobi. Finally, I use quantitative data in the analysis of messages and audiences. I collected data from CCTV-Africa's Twitter and YouTube accounts and gathered data about audiences using Socialbakers.com, an online marketing tool to track and analyse social media platforms.

Structure and actors

Individuals and private organizations aside, actors involved in China's online public diplomacy can be grouped into four categories: diplomatic missions, state agencies, state-owned media and small media organizations. Some of their online activities towards Africa are summarized in Table 1. Given the fact that MoFA is responsible for implementing most of China's public diplomacy programmes, one might expect that diplomatic missions would be at the forefront of

digital outreach campaigns. However, this is by no means the case in Africa. China has established diplomatic relations with 51 African states and currently maintains embassies in 49 of them, all of which keep active websites, although some are poorly updated, include broken links, or provide information that is out-of-date. These websites, carrying mostly MoFA statements, news about the activities of the embassy and some content from the media, are the most basic form of online public diplomacy. Most pages are bilingual (Chinese and another language), although African languages are rarely employed. All websites include a section with four to fifteen small banners linking to external pages that deal with critical issues in China's foreign policy. Each embassy decides the banners that appear on their website. The most frequently found banners are China.org.cn (on 33 websites), the information portal of the State Council Information Office; Tianshan.com.cn (36), a news portal about Xinjiang; Showchina.com (27), a website about Tibet; CRI Online (34) and Tibet.cn (21). The only link to a page with relevant information about Sino-African relations, the FOCAC website, appears on 25 embassy websites. Some of the embassies also offer information about Taiwan or the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands; topics on which China has been struggling to impose its own narrative. Online, advocacy is the sole form of public diplomacy in which embassies engage. The mission in Pretoria is alone in having a Facebook page allowing users to comment on posts. However, by the end of 2015, none of the public comments had received a reply from the embassy.

<TABLE 1 HERE>

Chinese State agencies and small media companies' engagement with African audiences is indirect, either through the websites of diplomatic missions or central media. Nonetheless, their presence online is significant and usually goes unnoticed. Links to websites with information about Xinjiang (www.chinaxinjiang.cn; www.ts.cn) or Tibet (www.showchina.org; www.tibet.cn), two Autonomous Regions in West China that have seen restive movements for increased independence from Beijing, feature prominently on the homepages of embassies in Africa. These websites copy the design of news portals, provide information that is aligned with

the official policy of the PRC and tend to disguise ownership and authorship, which most of the time is linked to State agencies. For example, China Intercontinental Press (*Wuzhou Chuanbo Chubanshe*), a Beijing-based company created in 1993 under the supervision of the State Council Information Office to produce content for foreign publicity, runs Showchina.org. Two embassies (Addis Ababa and Lusaka) also provide links to Facts.org.cn, an English-language page providing very critical information about Falun Gong, a religious group banned in China. Although the website is presented as being manned by a private citizen, it appears to have the backing of Office 610, a paralegal security agency responsible for the prosecution of Falun Gong.

The most active agents in China's online public diplomacy are, by far, the three largest central state media: Xinhua, China Radio International (CRI) and CCTV. They all have regularly-updated websites about Africa, they are active on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Google+) and all of them use digital channels to distribute content for free. While international broadcasters have long targeted African audiences, radio and television access has been uneven across the continent. Radio content in languages such as Amharic, Kiswahili, Hausa, Kirundi, Kinyarwanda, Ndebele or Somali is available today from VOA, BBC, CRI or RFI, but signals reach limited areas. Now, online, users can access content 24/7 everywhere. Apart from offering news and commentary online, Chinese international broadcasters are also involved, minimally, in listening activities, with CRI having considerable experience in this area. Until the mid-1970s, the station collected letters from its Hausa and Swahili listeners. According to Üngör (2009), in 1976 alone, CRI received over 6,000 letters in Hausa. Today, feedback takes place online. As of early 2016, CRI's Hausa Facebook page had close to 60,000 likes and a good number of comments. CRI and Xinhua also have Swahili Facebook pages. Taking a step further into localizing content, in 2015, Xinhua began creating video news in Swahili, originally produced for Kenya's KBC and later posted on Xinhua's YouTube channel.^v

CCTV-Africa's online presence is managed from Kenya and China. In mid-2013, a year into the launch of the station, a consultant was hired in Kenya to put together a digital media team in the Nairobi newsroom staffed with half a dozen people, whose duties include updating social media platforms, producing content for CCTV-Africa's website (www.cctv-africa.com) and editing and uploading videos on the station's YouTube channel. According to a member of the team, the idea of improving CCTV-Africa's online presence did not come from the headquarters in Beijing, but it was a decision of the management team in Nairobi: 'CCTV-Africa had been around for some time and they knew [that] to reach African audiences, they had to do it digitally.'^{vi} After the departure of the consultant from the newsroom, a Chinese supervisor, with no prior training in digital journalism, took over. The online branch of CCTV, called CNTV and based in Beijing, is also responsible for posting Africa-related content on the English and French-language versions of the website. CNTV is also in charge of the "I Love Africa" multimedia platform launched in 2012. The platform works as an aggregator of content (travel shows, Chinese television dramas, Chinese language learning courses and documentaries) tailored to Africans living in China and abroad. "I Love Africa" has a mobile app and a relatively popular Facebook page (1,867,739 likes by January 2016).

Audiences and impact

Assessing the impact of all the activities detailed above is not only beyond the scope of this chapter, but it also surpasses the audience research tools available to Chinese public diplomacy practitioners. When asked about audience data, a member of the management team at CCTV-Africa conceded that no information is available to them^{vii} and a CCTV-Africa producer referred to YouTube views when asked about how well local audiences had received a particular show.^{viii} Because most of China's outreach actions in African countries are aimed at the long-term, a proper assessment of the impact will only be able to be carried out several years from now. However, even at this stage of development, there are, at least, two valid questions to pose: how many people are these digital strategies reaching and how does Chinese digital

diplomacy do compared to that of other countries? With this in mind, in this section I present some data that is available to Chinese public diplomacy practitioners. Second, because it is necessary to assess the short-term impact of China's outreach activities in a comparative perspective, I explore how Chinese digital platforms fare when compared to other similar actors. For this, I make use of data compiled by Socialbakers for three social networks, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. The focus of this section and the next is on CCTV-Africa. Even if data cannot be generalized to all of China's activities in Africa, it does give us a first glimpse into the current impact of state-sponsored public diplomacy in the continent.

Upon request, CCTV-Africa provided the author a summary of Facebook analytics, which are not publicly available, for a week (January 6 to January 12, 2016). Out of 588,034 users who had liked the page by that week, 78 per cent were men and 22 per cent, women. The number of users who actually engaged with the page over the same period of time stood at 414,536.

Followers came mostly from Nigeria (13.3 per cent), Egypt (9.7), Ethiopia (7.5), Tanzania (6.6) and Kenya (5.5). These countries altogether account for 42 per cent of the total likes in the page.

When complementing this data with that available from Socialbakers, we see that there are 28 African countries among the top 45 countries where followers are located.^{ix} Based on this,

CCTV-Africa's Facebook penetration rate in Nigeria can be said to stand at 0.5 per mil of the population. Of all the countries in the list, the largest penetration rates are found in Tunisia (3.2 per mil) and Libya (1.6 per mil), with an average of 0.66 per mil for all 28 countries. In the case

of BBC Africa's Facebook page, the average penetration rate is 2.4 per mil (based on 23 African countries), with Zambia, a former British colony, having the highest rate at 6.3 per mil.

Data provided by CCTV-Africa also included information about the most popular posts and videos. Over that one week-period, the favourite topics included soccer, South Sudanese politics, the building of a new marina in Kenya and one of the African proverbs that CCTV-Africa publishes every morning on social media: 'Love has to be shown by deeds not words.'

<TABLE 2 HERE>

Today, CCTV-Africa and other Chinese media in the continent need to compete with a myriad of news providers. Since CCTV launched CCTV-Africa in 2012, the BBC has increased its news coverage of Africa, Al Jazeera has expanded its bureau in Nairobi and a new 24-hour news channel about Africa, Africanews, was created in 2016. Most content from these broadcasters is also available online and, particularly, on social media platforms. Apart from CCTV and Xinhua, other international broadcasters with a strong online presence in African countries include the BBC, Deutsche Welle and RFI. In Table 2, I present a comparison of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube audience data for a selection of these media outlets at two points in time, October 2015 and March 2016. The most evident pattern across cases is the upward trend: all media outlets surveyed increased the number of followers, users and likes during the six-month period. The highest increases are those of Xinhua's and China Plus's (CRI's online brand) Facebook page: users doubled in six months. While there is a lot of endogamy among media houses in following each other on different social media platforms (i.e. BBC Africa follows the AFP Africa and Reuters in Africa accounts, and vice versa), Chinese news organizations are not part of the club. By the end of 2015, no big news media organization based in Africa or abroad followed Xinhua, CCTV-Africa or China Plus. Chinese media seem to lag behind their international counterparts in reputation among other media houses and in the overall number of followers, users and likes. In the case of Africa, BBC Africa surpasses by a large margin CCTV-Africa across platforms (by 261,387 followers on Twitter, 1,735,236 users on Facebook).^x However, as latecomers online—CCTV-Africa has only been online since 2012—the room for growth for Chinese news outlets online is large.

Messages and themes

As shown above, Xinhua, CCTV and CRI have an active presence on social networks, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter being the most commonly used. Some have specific versions for the African market, such as accounts in Swahili for East African audiences. The primary

uses of these platforms online are self-promotion and content distribution. Engagement with audiences is rare and so is using social media as feedback channels. According to a member of CCTV-Africa's digital team, the station is primarily online 'to promote CCTV-Africa.'^{xi} The element of promotion features prominently in my analysis of Twitter messages. Between September 2015 and April 2016, CCTV-Africa tweeted 6,043 times, for an average of 28 tweets per day (the largest number of tweets in one day was 75 on September 25, when Xi Jinping visited the US and on January 29, during the 26th AU Summit). Of all tweets, 11.5 per cent were used to promote a specific story or topic on one of the station's five programmes (*Africa Live*, *Talk Africa*, *Faces of Africa*, *Match Point* and *Global Business*) with cues such as 'Coming up on #AfricaLive...' or 'Join us at 1700GMT...' Open audience engagement online is absent. Over the period of eight months that I analysed, CCTV-Africa was mentioned in over 2,000 tweets, but community managers engaged with users' comments only 27 times. In all of the cases the engagement consisted in liking a positive comment about the work of CCTV-Africa's journalists. There were no instances of engaging in dialogue, responding to questions or facing criticism. When asked about how this interaction was handled, a member of the digital team said: 'sometimes we hide the complaints. But sometimes we let them stay there because they are funny and then we just laugh and then delete them.'^{xii}

In terms of content distribution, there are two approaches to examine what messages are circulated: the messenger's perspective (i.e. what stories and topics are most often posted by CCTV-Africa?) and the audience perspective (i.e. what are the most popular topics and themes?). I will use data from Twitter in the first case and YouTube data in the second. With fewer than 30 messages a day on average, the digital team is rather selective in the topics on which it tweets. One way of making sense of the selection of stories is to look at the use of hashtags, which are keywords chosen by the author of a tweet to highlight the most relevant theme. I present a selection of the 30 most often-used hashtags by CCTV-Africa and their frequency in Table 3, out of a total of 880 hashtags used between September 2015 and April 2016. Among the most frequent, the large majority refers to countries/regions (15 hashtags; 978

occurrences) followed by references to CCTV-Africa shows and other self-promotion keywords (7; 1,511). The remaining eight hashtags can be classified in two groups, those that refer to Xi Jinping (3; 345) and those that address a one-time event or topic (5; 173). Four specific African events, the 2015 elections in Tanzania, the 2015 Ebola outbreak, the 26th AU Summit and the 2015 FOCAC meeting are on the list. If we take a look at the wider picture, of all 880 hashtags, the most frequently used are those referring to a geographical location, such as a country or a city (1,778 occurrences; 223 hashtags); followed by those used for self-promotion (1,618; 27), those referring to an event (612; 191) and those mentioning Xi Jinping (370; 12). Locations in Africa are the most frequent (89 per cent), while locations in China are rare (3.7). If we exclude locations and hashtags for self-promotion, the predominant themes are politics (856; 166), terrorism and security (175; 48), sports (159; 87) and social issues (107; 45).

<TABLE 3 HERE>

There is some degree of correlation between Twitter data (messenger-centred) and YouTube data (audience-centred). For the latter, my analysis is based on the 500 videos with the highest number of views by the end of 2015. The sample includes videos uploaded between April 2013 and December 2015. The total number of views for these 500 clips was 14,677,582 ($M = 29,355.16$; $SD = 242,816.92$; $Max = 5,343,431$; $Min = 3,613$). The majority of videos (85.8 per cent) are short clips (less than five minutes) from CCTV-Africa's current affairs programme, *Africa Live*, followed by longer clips (around 25 minutes) from the station's documentary show, *Faces of Africa* (9.2 per cent). The clip with the highest number of views features exclusive CCTV-Africa footage from the terrorist attack at the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi in November 2013. This is followed by a feature story of a 2-year old DJ in South Africa and a documentary about traditional healers in Nigeria. Generally speaking, viewership is higher for videos related to politics and diplomacy (15.6 per cent), economic matters and infrastructure (23.2) and security and terrorism (16.4). These are followed by videos about sports (9.6), social issues (6.4) and entertainment (6.8). In terms of the geographic distribution of videos, the

largest number is related to Ethiopia (18.2 per cent), followed by Somalia (15.6) and South Africa (11.4). There are only three videos in which China is the central actor. Videos about Sino-African relations, in which China is a secondary actor alongside an African country, are more common (35 videos; 7 per cent).

When CCTV-Africa was launched, a lot of attention in the media and in academia was centred around the idea that the new channel was going to offer a new take on African current affairs and, particularly on Sino-African relations (Genet, 2012; Gagliardone, 2013). The first premise was that CCTV-Africa would focus on positive stories about the continent (McKenzie, 2012). However, online, as is the case offline (Zhang, 2013), the number of negative stories is almost the same as positive ones. Of the 500 YouTube stories analysed, 27.6 per cent are about negative issues such as war, famine or terrorism, while the number of positive videos stands at 38 per cent. A second observation from the data above has to do with the relative prominence of Xi Jinping related messages in CCTV-Africa's Twitter feed (7 per cent). Particularly striking is the fact that, although Xi visited several African countries during the period of analysis (Egypt, Zimbabwe and South Africa), the largest number of mentions are of his official visit to the UK and US. A third element that stands out in CCTV-Africa's messages online is the considerable presence of retweets or RT (13 per cent), messages that are initially posted by one user and reposted by another. Among the users that CCTV-Africa has retweeted we find the BBC, Reuters or AFP, which are some of the media outlets whose narrative CCTV-Africa is supposed to challenge.

Conclusion

Even though China's digital public diplomacy towards Africa is at a very early stage of development, it probably offers the most comprehensive case study of how China is adopting online tools to enhance its management of foreign publics. This chapter has shown that several actors, loosely coordinated, are involved in the implementation of public diplomacy goals

across Africa. At the forefront of these efforts are State-owned media and overseas diplomatic missions. These actors predominantly engage in unidirectional communication activities, particularly advocacy campaigns and international broadcasting. And, even though only one embassy in Africa is present on Facebook, the active use of social networking sites by other actors, such as CCTV, Xinhua and CRI, has opened new avenues for listening to audience feedback. However, evidence shows that this is done sparsely and that criticism is removed from online platforms, failing to engage in dialogue with dissenting voices. In terms of audiences, Chinese media in Africa—the only public diplomacy actors about which data is available—trail behind other international broadcasters such as the BBC. In the case of CCTV-Africa, which I used as an example in this chapter, social media analytics are the only source of audience data available. Because of this, they are being used by managers to inform decisions on content and hiring practices. In terms of content, two central ideas emerge from the analysis. First, the use of Twitter at CCTV-Africa neither contributes to building a new Chinese narrative on Sino-African relations nor to engage audiences. Instead, it is primarily used for self-promotion. Second, data from YouTube shows that topics and issues that are popular among audiences are not necessarily aligned with China's public diplomacy goals.

This chapter has provided evidence that China is beginning to embrace digital public diplomacy. However, there are several factors hampering its development and impact. First, China lacks a clear strategy in dealing with foreign audiences. In fact, it could be argued more generally that, as Christensen (2013) puts it, in foreign policy 'China needs something akin to a grand strategy but currently lacks one' (p. 23). This is also the case in China's public diplomacy towards Africa. There are plenty of actors engaged, but they operate without a clear direction or goal. Second, China lacks coordination in the implementation of its policies. There is a gap between the objectives stated in policy documents and the actual implementation. In the case of CCTV-Africa, for example, although one of the main goals is to shape views on Sino-African relations, the reality is that little attention is paid to these specific issues online. Third, China lacks a clearly defined narrative that challenges existing ones. Fourth, China lacks depth in its

public diplomacy activities. The tendency in China's go out policy has been to prioritize quantity (or breadth) over quality (or depth) of engagements. With too many activities running simultaneously, guaranteeing that the outcomes are those expected becomes a very difficult task. Fifth, China lacks the know-how and the human resources to fully implement its public diplomacy online. Teams are understaffed and the digital competence of those in charge of supervising digital diplomacy is limited. And, sixth, China lacks willingness to engage in dialogue online. Cull (2011) refers to this as the 'broadcast mode.' When describing US online public diplomacy, he cautions: 'the fixation with "broadcast mode" in US online diplomacy is a major faux pas. It is the equivalent of going into a party and shouting about one's self and leaving: a behaviour which is intolerable even if one is buying all the drinks, which the United States no longer is' (p.15). China might be the one who is currently buying all the drinks, but the failure to take full advantage of the multidirectionality of online communications is hindering the effectiveness of its incipient digital diplomacy.

China's commitment to playing an active role in Africa in the future means that it can only be expected that Chinese online public diplomacy in the continent will grow. As both African audiences and Chinese public diplomacy practitioners move forward, two important questions on the future trajectory of the relationship emerge. As outlined above, new forms of public diplomacy favour dialogue and cooperation over unidirectional flows of communication. However, to date, offline and online, China has been reluctant to engage in any real form of dialogue beyond the diplomatic pleasantries of FOAC meetings. The nature of the relationship is still today largely asymmetrical. China is not open to being a recipient of other countries' public diplomacy and, in the long-term, this is prone to create resentment. How will China transition to a relationship of equal partners is the first open question. China's distribution of information in Africa, and in the rest of the world, can only be an effective means of managing foreign attitudes if it is received as credible and reliable. In a context of information overload, it is difficult to predict which voices are going to stand out. China has decided to bet on saturation; making as much information available as possible with the hope that it will reach

audiences. But in the current cacophony of voices online, how successfully this strategy will enable China to increase its discursive power overseas is also a lingering question.

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Tables

Table 1. Structure of China's digital diplomacy towards Africa

| | Diplomatic Missions | Central State-Owned Media | Other Media Organizations | State Agencies |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| Listening | Facebook page of the Chinese Embassy in Pretoria | Swahili and Hausa Facebook Pages of CRI; YouTube accounts of CCTV-Africa and Xinhua; "I Love Africa" Facebook account | --- | --- |
| Advocacy | Speeches and diplomatic notes online; webpages about Tibet, Taiwan or Falun Gong; reposting content from website such as China.org.cn | CCTV-Africa's online content on CNTV; Xinhua's commentary and Op-Ed; CRI's multilingual online content | Websites such as China-Africa Cooperation Net (www.zfhz.org); online version of <i>China Daily</i> or <i>Chinafrica</i> | Content creation for China.org.cn and similar websites under the auspices of the State Council |
| Cultural diplomacy | --- | "I Love Africa" web portal; Chinese TV drama available on CNTV; CRI cultural shows | --- | --- |
| Exchange diplomacy | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| International broadcasting | Reuse of video news and content from CCTV-News & CCTV-Africa | Website and YouTube channel of CCTV-Africa, Xinhua & CRI in multiple languages | Reuse of video news and content from CCTV-News & CCTV-Africa | Reuse of video news and content from CCTV-News & CCTV-Africa; Facebook and Twitter accounts for China.org.cn |

Table 2. Number of ‘Likes’ and followers of selected international broadcasters on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (October 2015 – March 2016)

| | Date of creation | October 2015 | March 2016 | Increase (per cent) |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| Facebook | | | | |
| CCTV-Africa | 01/2012 | 453,863 | 740,745 | 63,2 |
| BBC Africa | 01/2010 | 2,060,356 | 2,475,981 | 20,2 |
| CCTV-America | 08/2012 | 504,073 | 773,033 | 53,4 |
| CCTV-News | 08/2013 | 15,866,874 | 21,672,148 | 36,6 |
| New China News (Xinhua) | 01/2012 | 2,271,499 | 4,775,498 | 110,2 |
| China Plus (CRI) | 03/2013 | 971,391 | 2,016,518 | 107,6 |
| BBC News | 04/2010 | 24,409,119 | 28,505,778 | 16,8 |
| RT (Russia Today) | 04/2012 | 3,032,196 | 3,401,171 | 12,2 |
| YouTube | | | | |
| CCTV-Africa | 04/2013 | 28,160 | 36,918 | 31,1 |
| BBC Africa | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| CCTV-America | 06/2012 | 12,868 | 19,050 | 48,0 |
| CCTV-News | 01/2013 | 36,217 | 50,204 | 38,6 |
| New China TV (Xinhua) | 05/2012 | 63,479 | 69,119 | 8,9 |
| China Plus (CRI) | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| BBC News | 04/2006 | 562,976 | 725,273 | 28,8 |
| RT (Russia Today) | 03/2007 | 1,604,214 | 1,761,694 | 9,8 |
| Twitter | | | | |
| CCTV-Africa | 06/2012 | 32,291 | 43,204 | 33,8 |
| BBC Africa | 09/2009 | 950,738 | 1,212,125 | 27,5 |
| CCTV-America | 06/2012 | 43,711 | 63,955 | 46,3 |
| CCTV-News | 01/2013 | 237,694 | 290,684 | 22,3 |
| New China News (Xinhua) | 03/2012 | 2,897,009 | 3,830,473 | 32,2 |
| China Plus News (CRI) | 04/2009 | -- | 2,235 | -- |
| BBC News (World) | 02/2007 | 11,694,870 | 13,802,257 | 18,0 |
| RT (Russia Today) | 08/2009 | 1,620,603 | 1,933,238 | 19,3 |

Source: Socialbakers.com

Table 3. Most frequently used hashtags by CCTV-Africa on Twitter between September 2015 and April 2016

| Hashtag | Frequency | Overall percentage (N = 5,165) |
|------------------|-----------|-----------------------------------|
| #africalive | 1,197 | 22.86% |
| #xijinping | 227 | 4.34% |
| #africa | 133 | 2.54% |
| #kenya | 113 | 2.16% |
| #nigeria | 105 | 2.01% |
| #southafrica | 86 | 1.64% |
| #businessnews | 78 | 1.49% |
| #globalbusiness | 75 | 1.43% |
| #breaking | 74 | 1.41% |
| #burundi | 73 | 1.39% |
| #egypt | 69 | 1.32% |
| #uganda | 65 | 1.24% |
| #xiusavisit | 62 | 1.18% |
| #xiukvisit | 56 | 1.07% |
| #burkinafaso | 49 | 0.94% |
| #zimbabwe | 49 | 0.94% |
| #china | 47 | 0.9% |
| #somalia | 45 | 0.86% |
| #tanzaniadecides | 45 | 0.86% |
| #focac | 38 | 0.73% |
| #coted | 36 | 0.69% |
| #mali | 36 | 0.69% |
| #southsudan | 36 | 0.69% |
| #tanzania | 36 | 0.69% |
| #26thausummit | 35 | 0.67% |
| #matchpoint | 31 | 0.59% |
| #sportsnews | 28 | 0.53% |
| #talkafrica | 28 | 0.53% |
| #parisattacks | 28 | 0.53% |
| #ebola | 27 | 0.52% |

ⁱ Some media analysts, such as Olesen (2015), have suggest that the fast growth in ‘Likes’ of the *People’s Daily*’s Facebook page can be explained by the use of click-farms, companies that provide large numbers of ‘Likes’ for a set price.

ⁱⁱ Only in recent years have individuals and non-state actors begun to be minimally involved in the process of engaging foreign audiences. A good example of this, in the context of Africa, and particularly Kenya, is the NGO China House (Li, 2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ The video is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHL-0N07rxo> [Accessed: 14 July 2016].

^{iv} For a more detailed description of China’s public diplomacy in Africa, see D’Hooghe (2015, pp.206–219).

^v Interview #5, November 2015, Nairobi. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity, thus they are only identified here with a number.

^{vi} Interview #6, May 2015, Nairobi.

^{vii} Interview #1, September 2015, Nairobi.

^{viii} Interview #4, October 2015, Nairobi.

^{ix} Facebook only makes available data for the Top 45 countries and aggregates into one whole sum data for the rest of countries.

^x For YouTube, data is not available for BBC Africa.

^{xi} Interview #3, November 2015, Nairobi.

^{xii} Interview #2, November 2015, Nairobi.