

A Critical Analysis of the Challenges Posed by China Global Television Network (CGTN) to the Traditional Dominance of Global Media by Western Outlets

Zhengqing Yan^{1, a, *}, Jiaru Tang^{1, b}, Xinlong Liu^{1, c}

¹School of Media and Communication, The University of Melbourne, Victoria Melbourne, 3010, Australia

^azhengqingy@student.unimelb.edu.au, ^bjiarut@student.unimelb.edu.au,
^cxinlongl@student.unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

Media and communication play an important role in the contemporary society with the acceleration of globalization. Under the influence of media and communication, citizens from various countries begin to connect with each other, which in turn gives rise to the content from non-Western countries occupying an increasingly critical position in the global media landscape. These media contents from non-Western countries are defined as contraflows. China Global Television Network (CGTN), as an important news media from non-Western countries, is a typical representative of the contraflows and plays a key role in promoting the transformation of traditional global media. Based on the globalization theory, contraflow theory, and public sphere theory, this paper conducts a critical analysis of CGTN, focusing on its overseas expansion, reporting strategy, and localization, probing into its influence on the global media landscape dominated by Western media outlets. This paper argues that CGTN, as a non-Western news media with increasing global influence, is challenging the traditional global media landscape dominated by Western news outlets, and its global influence is mainly driven by rapid overseas expansion, balanced and objective reporting strategy, and a high degree of localization.

Keywords

China Global Television Network (CGTN); Contraflows; Overseas expansion; Reporting strategy; Localization.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary society with the accelerating globalization process, media and communication are indispensable (Movius, 2010). Under the influence of media and communication, citizens of various countries around the world begin to connect with each other, which in turn leads to the content from non-Western countries occupying an increasingly crucial position in the global media landscape (Thussu, 2018b). Thussu (2006) defines these media contents from non-Western countries as contraflows. China Global Television Network (CGTN), as a momentous news outlet from a major non-Western country, is a typical representative of those contraflows, playing a pivotal role in promoting the transformation of the traditional global media sphere (Thussu, 2018b). Applying the globalization theory, the contraflow theory, and the public sphere theory, this essay conducts a critical analysis of CGTN, focusing on exploring the influence of this news outlet on the global media landscape dominated by Western news outlets from three aspects: the overseas expansion, reporting strategy, and localization of CGTN.

This essay argues that CGTN, as a non-Western news outlet with increasing global influence, is challenging the traditional global media landscape dominated by Western news media, and the rise of its global influence is mainly driven by the three aspects: rapid overseas expansion, the adoption of a balanced and objective reporting strategy and a high degree of localization. First of all, the background information of the case of CGTN is introduced in detail. Secondly, the three major theories applied in the critical analysis, namely the globalization theory, the contraflow theory, and the public sphere theory, are introduced and discussed successively. Thirdly, in the critical analysis section, this essay focuses on CGTN's overseas expansion, reporting strategy, and localization to analyze how this news outlet enhances its global influence so as to challenge the global media sphere dominated by Western countries. Finally, this essay also considers the counter-arguments and controversial issues caused by the expansion of CGTN in Africa.

2. Background Information of China Global Television Network (CGTN)

China Central Television (CCTV) has launched China Global Television Network (CGTN) on December 31, 2016, in order to effectively deal with the accelerating pace of globalization and promote Chinese news media to go global, and this news outlet was formerly known as the English language news channel CCTV 9 (Li & Wu, 2018; Sun, 2018). CGTN is a "multi-language and multi-platform media group" that consists of six television channels, including the "24-hour English news channel CGTN English", as well as "CGTN Español, CGTN Français, CGTN Arabic, CGTN Russian, and CGTN Documentary" (Sun, 2018, p. 1-2). CGTN is headquartered in Beijing, China, and has a host of overseas branches in Nairobi, Africa, Washington D.C., U.S., and London, U.K. (Li & Wu, 2018).

CGTN is committed to getting rid of its traditional image of speaking for the Chinese government and adopting a more balanced and objective reporting strategy to attract global users and improve its credibility (Li & Wu, 2018; Sun, 2018). Another important feature of CGTN is that it tends to report major global social and cultural events and attach less importance to some political current affairs, so as to minimize the negative impact of China's censorship on this news outlet (Sun, 2018). In recent years, many scholars in the field of media and communication believe that the global influence of CGTN has been steadily increasing, and it has launched a challenge to the global communication order dominated by Western countries.

3. Discussion of the Applied Theories

3.1. The Globalization Theory

According to the definition of globalization given by David Held and Anthony McGrew (2002), globalization represents the increasing scale and deepening influence of the patterns of transcontinental mobility and social interaction. Based on Held and McGrew's definition, Movius (2010) emphasizes the closely related and intertwined relationship between globalization and communication and suggests that "without media and communication, there is no globalization" in the contemporary world (p. 16). Movius (2010) further puts forward a pluralist model, which argues that the global flow of images and products gives rise to the development of multiculturalism, and globalization plays an important role in promoting communication and cultural exchange. In addition, the pluralist model proposed by Movius (2010) also has a similar view with Thussu's theory of contraflow, that is, both theories emphasize the existence of multiculturalism and deny that globalization is a process of homogenization. In this essay, the globalization theory and pluralist model are utilized to make a critical analysis of how CGTN, as a contraflow, improves its global influence through overseas expansion to challenge the global media landscape.

3.2. The Contraflow Theory

The theory of contraflow proposed by Thussu in 2006 is the most crucial theory of this essay, which is applied throughout the critical analysis section. Thussu (2006, 2018b) believes that the flow of media products is complex and multi-directional rather than merely one way, and therefore he emphasizes the existence of contraflow in the global media sphere. According to Thussu (2006, 2018b), contraflow is a flow of media content originating from non-Western countries and is contrary to the dominant media flow of Western countries. Similarly, Lagerkvist (2009) also notices the phenomenon of contraflow in the global media landscape and points out that the media content from Asian countries, such as Japanese animation and Indian music, are being accepted and consumed by the residents in the United States, which confirms Thussu's idea of contraflow, namely non-Western countries are exporting media products to the West. The theory of contraflow plays a pivotal role in analyzing the influence and challenges that CGTN brings to the global media landscape dominated by the West.

3.3. The Public Sphere Theory

The public sphere theory is firstly proposed by Jürgen Habermas in 1964. Habermas (1974) gives a detailed introduction to that theory and suggests that the public sphere is a realm of people's social life in which private individuals can gather to discuss public affairs and form public opinions. Habermas (1974) also emphasizes that citizens' participation in the public sphere is obliged to be guaranteed and unrestricted, and the public sphere should not succumb to government departments or legal restraints. This essay focuses on utilizing the public sphere theory to critically analyze the reporting strategy adopted by CGTN and to explore the role of its reporting strategy in enhancing the global influence of this news outlet.

4. The Critical Analysis of China Global Television Network (CGTN)

4.1. The Overseas Expansion of CGTN

The overseas expansion of CGTN has been accelerating in recent years. This news outlet has not only set up a host of overseas branches such as CGTN Africa in Nairobi and CGTN America in Washington D.C., as well as CGTN Europe in London which is under construction, but also launched a number of overseas channels such as CGTN Español, CGTN Français and CGTN Arabic (Sun, 2018). In order to adapt to the pace of rapid globalization in the contemporary world, CGTN has made the decision to expand overseas (Sun, 2018). Globalization denotes the increasing scale and deepening influence of transcontinental flows (Held & McGrew, 2002). The establishment of CGTN branches in the African, American, and European continent has promoted the increase in the scale and influence of transcontinental media flows. At the same time, CGTN, as a contraflow from China, is also increasing its output of media content in Africa, America, and Europe by means of overseas expansion, so as to enhance its global influence and challenge the traditional global media landscape. In addition, according to the pluralist model proposed by Movius (2010), globalization plays an important part in enhancing communication and cultural exchange. As a matter of fact, CGTN's overseas expansion in Africa has promoted the cultural exchange between China and Africa, which is of great significance to cultural globalization. To further understand the overseas expansion of CGTN, this essay illustrates the examples of CGTN Africa and the Spanish language channel CGTN Español.

CGTN Africa, with its production center in Nairobi, aims to deliver African stories to audiences in Africa and around the world (Sule, 2018). In order to change the global audiences' stereotype of Africa as a continent full of despair, loss, and disease, CGTN Africa has launched a TV program named Talk Africa to popularize the African continent through positive reporting to global audiences (Sule, 2018). A case study of Talk Africa conducted by Sule (2018) suggests that the TV program not only promotes the relationship between China and Africa, but also enhances

the communication of African culture around the world. Similarly, CGTN's Spanish channel, CGTN Español, established in 2007, aims to disseminate Chinese culture to Spanish-speaking countries and promote cultural exchange between China and Spain (Ye & Albornoz, 2018). This channel provides a variety of content, including current affairs news, entertainment programs, and documentaries, and most of the programs are dubbed in Spanish to meet the needs of audiences in Spanish-speaking countries (Ye & Albornoz, 2018).

As a matter of fact, both CGTN Africa and CGTN Español have made significant contributions to enhancing the transcontinental media flows and cultural globalization. They have facilitated the process of globalization and greatly increased the global influence of CGTN. In conclusion, the overseas expansion of CGTN figures prominently in improving its global influence to challenge the traditional global media landscape dominated by Western countries.

4.2. The reporting Strategy Adopted by CGTN

CGTN has been dedicated to getting rid of the traditional image that Chinese media is the mouthpiece of the Chinese government since its inception (Sun, 2018). It is suggested that CGTN tends to adopt a balanced and objective reporting strategy. For instance, CGTN has reported on China's military issues, the China threat theory, the Belt and Road Initiative as well as other major sensitive topics (Li & Wu, 2018). In addition, when reporting on these sensitive topics, CGTN will not solely stand on the position of the Chinese government and report the news that is beneficial to China. Instead, it tends to set up a research team to study the interests of foreign audiences and the relevant news reports released by foreign media so as to report on sensitive topics in a multi-angle and objective way (Li & Wu, 2018). As a consequence, the reporting strategy adopted by CGTN tends to be balanced and objective.

The main reason why CGTN can report the news objectively and from multiple perspectives is that the Chinese government has given looser regulation on this news outlet to help it go global (Sun, 2018). To some extent, this is in line with the interpretation of the public sphere given by Habermas in 1974, that is, the ideal public sphere is not subject to the regulation of government departments and legal constraints. The fact that CGTN is able to report on politically sensitive topics such as China's military issues and China threat theory proves that CGTN enjoys the privileges granted by the Chinese government to avoid the restrictions of censorship to the greatest extent. In fact, CGTN is one of the few media in China that can achieve diversified viewpoints in news reporting, and therefore it has attracted a wide range of global audiences to critically discuss all kinds of news reports released by this news outlet, thus promoting the benign operation of the public sphere. Consequently, the global influence of CGTN has been steadily increasing in recent years, and it owns the ability to try to compete with some mature global players such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Cable News Network (CNN) (Ye & Albornoz, 2018). To sum up, the balanced and objective reporting strategy adopted by CGTN plays an important part in assisting this news outlet to compete with Western media.

4.3. The Localization of CGTN

Many scholars hold that localization is a key step for the contraflows from non-Western countries to gain specific regional influence and enhance their global competitiveness. Thus, et al. (2017) point out that the localization of CCTV, the predecessor of CGTN, is immature in Africa, which hinders the increase of CCTV's influence in Africa. Drawing lessons from the past, CGTN attaches great importance to the localization of its overseas branches in continents such as Africa, America, and Europe (Sun, 2018).

It is suggested that the localization strategy adopted by CGTN in Africa has achieved great success. According to Gagliardone (2013), the branch of CGTN in Africa has employed a large number of local staffs, and more than two-thirds of CGTN Africa's employees are Africans. For example, CGTN has invited Beatrice Marshall who is Kenyan as well as the most respected

former host of Kenya's leading television network (KTN), to join this news outlet and become the new host of Talk Africa so as to enable this television show better disseminate African stories to the world (Sun, 2018). These local employees are more familiar with local culture and are more likely to establish a high reputation to attract local audiences as well as global audiences (Sun, 2018). As a consequence, CGTN Africa has developed rapidly in Africa and achieved great influence in this continent. In a nutshell, CGTN, as a representative of contraflows from China, actively implements its localization strategy on a global scale to enhance its global competitiveness and thus owns the ability to challenge the global media landscape dominated by Western countries.

5. Counter-arguments and Other Considerations

Ye and Alborno (2018) raise some doubts about the objectivity of the news reports released by CGTN in their paper and believe that the high evaluation of CGTN given by other scholars is somewhat inappropriate. Xinhua News Agency and CCTV are trying their best to transform themselves into competitors of BBC and CNN, but strict censorship and political propaganda make them fail (Ye & Alborno, 2018). It is obliged to admit the fact that the Chinese government grants CGTN privileges to protect it from the negative influence of censorship to the greatest extent, but it is still difficult for CGTN, as a product of the Chinese government's implementation of the media going-out policy, to be completely unaffected by the power of the Chinese government (Ye & Alborno, 2018). Therefore, Ye and Alborno (2018) tend to suggest that the objectivity of CGTN needs to be further studied.

In addition, this essay suggests that who will benefit from CGTN's rapid overseas expansion in Africa is also a research question worth considering. Some scholars tend to believe that China is a competitor rather than a partner for Africa, and the cooperation between China and Africa is purely for the benefits of China, while other scholars are prone to hold that both China and Africa can benefit from their cooperation. Umejei (2018) states that although the Chinese and African levels of gatekeeping co-exist in Chinese news outlets in Africa, the level of China owns the dominant power compared with that of Africa. Under the influence of Chinese media organizations, journalism in Africa largely depends on "what China wants" rather than "what Africa wants", which is detrimental to the development of African media (Umejei, 2018, p. 116). In contrast to Umejei's standpoint, Zeleza (2014) believes that the relationship between Africa and China has become an important representative of contemporary international relations. China has brought Africa "new economic opportunities and diplomatic breathing room" (Zeleza, 2014, p.165). China and Africa will benefit from their cooperation as long as China attaches more importance to addressing Africa's practical concerns and African countries make their policies coherent, implement democratic accountability, and clearly express their fundamental interests in their relations with China (Zeleza, 2014). Through the study of CGTN, this essay finds that although Chinese media occupy a dominant position in Africa, Chinese news outlets are trying their best to help publicize Africa and promote the culture of this continent to the world rather than repressing African development. Therefore, this essay tends to agree with Zeleza's view of point. As long as China and Africa are more united in strengthening cooperation and cultural exchange, both can benefit from their great relationship.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay utilizes the globalization theory, the contraflow theory, and the public sphere theory to critically analyze how CGTN enhances its global influence and poses a challenge to the traditional global media landscape dominated by the West. This essay argues that China Global Television Network (CGTN), as a major contraflow with increasing global influence, has posed a challenge to the traditional global media landscape dominated by

Western news media, and the rise of its global influence is mainly driven by the three aspects: rapid overseas expansion, the adoption of a balanced and objective reporting strategy and a high degree of localization. In addition, this essay also suggests that both China and Africa will gain what they need from their benign cooperative relationship and achieve a win-win situation. This study provides an example for exploring how the contraflows from non-Western countries challenge the global media sphere, and future studies can also focus on other non-Western news outlets with global influence, such as Aljazeera and Russia Today, so as to further improve the research in this direction.

References

- [1] Gagliardone, I. (2013). China as a persuader: CCTV Africa's first steps in the African media sphere. *Ecquid Novi*, 34(3), 25-40.
- [2] Habermas, J., Lennox, S., & Lennox, F. (1974). The public sphere: An encyclopedia article (1964). *New German Critique*, 1(3), 49-55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/487737>
- [3] Held, D. & McGrew, A. (2002). *Globalization and anti-globalization*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- [4] Lagerkvist, J. (2009). Global media for global citizenship in India and China. *Peace Review*, 21, 367-375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402650903099450>
- [5] Li A. & Wu M., (2018) "See the difference": What difference? The new missions of Chinese international communication. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 13(1), 41-47. <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.275>
- [6] Movius, L. (2010). Cultural globalisation and challenges to traditional communication theories. *Platform: Journal of Media and Communication*, 2(1), 6-18.
- [7] Sule, H. (2018). How the introduction of CGTN is popularizing the growing African continent through positive reporting: A case study of China Global Television Network in Nairobi, Kenya [Master's thesis, Simon Fraser University]. <http://summit.sfu.ca/item/19117>
- [8] Sun, L. (2018). Developments and new approaches of internationalizing China's media: A case study of China Global Television Network (CGTN) in witness perspective. *Global Media Journal*, 16(31), 1-5.
- [9] Thussu, D. K. (2006). Contra-flow in global media. *Media Asia*, 33(3-4), 123-129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2006.11726823>
- [10] Thussu, D. K., De Burgh, H., & Shi, A. (Eds.). (2017). *China's media go global*. Routledge.
- [11] Thussu, D. K. (2018a). A new global communication order for a multipolar world. *Communication Research and Practice*, 4(1), 52-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2018.1432988>
- [12] Thussu, D. K. (2018b). Contraflow in global media. *International communication: Continuity and change* (pp. 191-224). Bloomsbury.
- [13] Umejei, E. (2018). Chinese media in Africa: Between promise and reality. *African Journalism Studies*, 39(2), 104-120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2018.1473275>
- [14] Ye P. & Albornoz L., (2018). Chinese media "going out" in Spanish speaking countries: The case of CGTN-Español. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 13(1), 81-97. <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.277>
- [15] Zeleza, P. T. (2014). The Africa-China relationship: challenges and opportunities. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 48(1), 145-169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2014.946298>