

# Speaking truth to power? Public diplomacy and the soft power of Western media in Africa

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“There is no such thing as objective reporting”

Alexey Nikolov, RT’s managing director (Pomerantsev 2014).

THERE is a tendency to be cynical about media outfits in the developing world that are funded by Western governments that extends beyond the realm of conspiracy theories emanating from the haven of misinformation that is Russia Today. In spite of their claim to balanced and unbiased reporting, the British Broadcasting Service, Voice of America or Radio France International carry their country of origin in their very name and maintain institutional links to the metropolitan centre of operations in London, Washington or Paris.

Hence, it is tempting to conceive of their reporting and presence across a multitude of countries, especially in the developing world as a tool of foreign policy. As such, these media organizations could be construed as part of Western governments’ “soft power” (Nye 2004) approach to international relations that seeks to complement

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or even replace military “hard power” bullying with less tangible yet no less effective means of indirect public diplomacy. In this paper, I am going to argue that international media that are active in developing countries can indeed be considered as part of Western states’ soft power diplomacy. The key question for the present and future will be how the mobile revolution in news and communications will affect media consumption in those parts of the world that at present still look and listen to the large international outlets.

### **Media as Means of Foreign Policy**

In the 1990s following the demise of the Soviet Union and the brief advent of a unipolar new world order under the stewardship of the United States, the idea of a media-led or even media-driven foreign policy gained hold. According to proponents of this CNN effect, the US-led intervention into the Somali civil war in 1991-92 could be interpreted as having been in no small part triggered by CNN’s reporting of the plight of the Somali people.

Domestic public opinion then drove the U.S. government to spearhead a humanitarian blue-helmet operation by the United Nations which failed to curb the violence and bring stability to the country. Instead, the mission’s end was precipitated by images – yet again broadcast by CNN – of American soldiers’ bodies being dragged around Mogadishu by a mob of enraged Somalis. In contrast, Livingston and Eachus, finding no evidence of the CNN effect, argue that the decision to send troops to Somalia was a deliberate choice of the diplomatic-bureaucratic complex. It was this choice by the government that then triggered the media interest in the issue of Somalia.

As Neuman however writes, the CNN effect “suggests that crisis coverage evokes an emotional outcry from the public to ‘do somet-

hing' about the latest incident, forcing political leaders to change course or risk unpopularity" (Neuman 1996, pp. 15-16). A similar claim has been advanced about the First Gulf War in 1991 and the failed Kurdish uprising in Northern Iraq. Shaw believes that the media's vivid depiction of human suffering alerted global civil society to such an extent that the U.S. felt compelled to halt its retreat and install a no-fly zone over Northern Iraq (Shaw 1996).

In many ways, this period marked the high-point of a school of thought going back to the Vietnam War during which media coverage of atrocities and the senselessness of the struggle served to undercut support for the war effort at home (Hallin 1989). The run-up to the Second Gulf War in 2003 which saw the deliberate leaking of faulty evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Saddam Hussein's possession to the press as well as the embedding of journalists in army units in Iraq and Afghanistan (Aday, Livingston & Hebert 2005) were characteristic of the continued relevance of an older form of state-media relations: the submission of media to the government's position on foreign policy (Mermin 1999) and the instrumentalization of media as an extended arm of foreign policy.

This identification of national media companies with their country of origin's national interest and foreign political objectives has a long history but has returned with added force as the United States' unipolar moment has come to an end. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th 2001 not only changed the Bush administration's foreign policy outlook from a more isolationist stance toward interventionism, it also brought about a change in media policy. Voice of America's broadcasting in the wider Middle East expanded, Dari and Pashto services were added to Radio Liberty while the "longer-term response was an effort to create the Middle East Radio Network" (Brown 2003, p. 93).

Non-Western and non-democratic countries have contemporaneously gained ground in global standing and economic weight and come to clash with Western interests as well as amongst themselves. As Russian President Vladimir Putin freely admitted, the quick expansion of the Kremlin-backed channel Russia Today, launched in 2005 and today broadcasting as RT Television (according to its own claims) in more than 100 countries, was meant to “try to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams” (Russia Today, 12 June 2013). In the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, RT’s propaganda operations in Eastern Europe and the Balkans have alerted the West to the point that both the European Union and the American administration are preparing countermeasures (McGreal 2015).

China, the other non-democratic great power besides Russia, is also trying to accompany its conquest of world markets in industrial goods by expanding its global reach in the news market. The state-run CCTV-9 has been available on American cable networks since the early 2000s and opened a studio and production facilities in Kenya in 2012 (Shambaugh 2013, p. 231). But bridging the conceptual ravine between open reporting and a closed political and social system is not foolproof. Al Jazeera, which broadcasts a highly successful international news programme in both Arabic and English from its headquarters in Doha, has been identified to such an extent with the Islamist foreign policy of Qatar’s leadership that its journalists have been imprisoned in Egypt for allegedly aiding the Muslim brotherhood (Kirkpatrick 2014); a clear case of going after a soft proxy target.

Alas, the shape that the media-state relations takes is more subtle and indirect than often assumed (Hocking 2005, p. 31) and – as evidenced by the British government’s decision to substantially cut funding to the BBC World Service’s radio operations in 2011 – not even fully understood or valued by the governments that fund them. Noteworthy is that the Conservative government imposed a spen-

ding cut of 16% on the World Service which meant that programmes in five languages as well as all shortwave radio transmissions would be discontinued (The Guardian, 28 January 2011).

### **BBC and VOA in Africa**

Western media have helped to spread the idea and ideal of democratic accountability and popular representation as well as participation to such an extent that it is now a key component of political rhetoric in much of Africa (if not necessarily political reality). To be clear, other factors have contributed as well: access to foreign media, domestic democratic movements, movies, expansion in education, and it is notoriously difficult to impossible to quantify the BBC or VOA's effect. Therefore, what I am arguing here is that they had *an* effect and that it is this effect that constitutes their major achievement from a foreign policy perspective. In order to substantiate this argument, I will look more closely at the work of the BBC World Service and Voice of America in a number of Sub-Saharan African countries, and in particular assess their relevance in the world's newest state South Sudan.

An essential element of BBC and VOA claim to respectability are their perceived high standards of reporting and their independence in the face of local potentates and big men. It is important to recall, however, that this independence conflicts to a certain degree with the self-proclaimed aims of at least the VOA. Not only does the Voice of America strive to enrich the 'information impoverished' in the world but it is also consciously part of U.S. soft power at a time where the 'war on terror' has blighted the U.S.'s global image. In the words of its former director Geoffrey Cowan, the VOA is "probably the least expensive way that America has of helping to introduce models of freedom, democracy, and the diversity of cultures in a world in which people from different religious and ethnic and national backgrounds are at war" (Heil 2003, p.428).

The place of VOA and BBC is also fascinating because it does not accurately reflect the actual hard power, economic power or diplomatic might of the two countries that back them. The UK's global role is drastically diminished today even compared to the 1990s as the fallout from the global financial crisis and the disastrous-to-underwhelming interventions as junior partner in Iraq and Afghanistan have left the island nation on a more isolationist trajectory than arguably for centuries. Yet, it is the BBC World Service that remains the most prestigious news corporation and the standard-bearer of quality journalism in many parts of Africa. VOA meanwhile still suffers in African publics' estimation for its decade-long association with anti-communist public relations campaigns that only gradually made way for a more balanced outlook and a focus on freedom of expression in the 1990s (Tudesq 2002, p.124).

At this point there is a need to distinguish between the international broadcaster and the individual journalist who works for the broadcaster. The individuals working at and for the BBC and VOA are first and foremost citizens of their own countries and as such also beholden to national legislation. More importantly, it is these individual journalists and not the channel itself that will most directly feel negative repercussions when content they have produced falls foul of elite sensibilities. A radio journalist working for Voice of America in South Sudan told me that preemptive self-censorship was an everyday part of their work and limits to their freedom to engage with certain topics was widely understood, if rarely made explicit. Some of the topics that were off hands were corruption allegations against members of the government and anything regarding the president and his kin (Frahm 2014).

This finding chimes with other studies that found, for instance, that the fact that all of Al-Jazeera's correspondents in Iran were themselves Iranian and thus would have to continue to live in the co-

untry markedly impacted on its reporting of the 2009 elections and subsequent popular protests (Kasmani 2014). In Africa, even many democratically elected governments' relations with the press are shaped by domination and subservience; news organizations are either cowed or voluntarily submit to a regime of limited self-censorship (Tettey 2001). Moreover, self-censorship does not have to arise out of fear for one's personal safety but oftentimes is tied to more banal pecuniary interests. In most of Africa selling advertisements comprises the largest chunk of media revenues and the lion-share of advertisements are commissioned by governments and government-affiliated enterprises (Rhodes 2014). Under such circumstances, it takes a strong and principled editor-in-chief to run stories that uncover government misconduct when doing so might run the risk of undercutting the newspaper's or radio station's financial well-being.

Yet, the example of corruption among the South Sudanese political leadership is equally an illustration of the rapidly declining clout and leeway of national governments anywhere but especially in authoritarian regimes to impose a news blackout on issues it considers an embarrassment. Sudan Tribune, by most accounts the most frequented online news source for South Sudan (it also has plenty of content on and readership in Sudan), operates from Paris and the editors are thus out of the reach of aggrieved officials in Juba. For the time being, radio remains the most widely available and utilized medium of information and entertainment in the country. But even amongst a drawn-out civil war and a clamp-down on local newspapers, the times they are a-changing.

Liberation of the media sector in the 1990s has paved the way for a more diverse media landscape in a number of African countries like Nigeria, Benin or neighbouring Ethiopia (Grätz 2009). Here, private media enterprises provided with better infrastructure, capital and production know-how have taken advantage of the steep drops

in the (formerly prohibitive) costs of gadgets ranging from high-definition cameras to graphics and cutting software to distribution channels and developed their own national media channels that successfully compete with their foreign-funded competitors. In addition, China has pursued a dual-pronged strategy of buying-up African media conglomerates, including in South Africa, while using good bilateral links with governments like Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF and payments to "national broadcasters to run CCTV content, in some cases squeezing out the BBC" (Zhang 2014).

Yet, BBC and VOA remain an important corrective due to their ability and willingness to occasionally speak truth to power. Oftentimes, the BBC World Service in particular is also still perceived as a standard of quality reporting that other members of the press are measured against. This is, somewhat paradoxically, shown by the repression occasionally wrought upon it by authoritarian regimes with sufficient capacity and willingness to stand up to the BBC. A case in point is Rwanda where the regime under Paul Kagame, once hailed by Tony Blair as the success story in Sub-Saharan Africa for its economic growth and stability in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, reacted indignantly to a BBC documentary of said genocide. In response to 'Rwanda's Untold Story' that challenged the state's official account of the course of the genocide, the BBC's radio programme in the local Kinyarwanda language was banned indefinitely (The Guardian, 1 June 2015).

As a matter of fact, recognition of the limits of its own role in public diplomacy has long been a part of the BBC's self-assessment. Already in 1967 long before the global revolution in communication technology, it stated that "the aim of external broadcasting cannot be to achieve quick changes of opinion but to contribute to a climate of opinion, and for the BBC at least opinion based on an assessment of facts" (quoted in Webb et al. 2014, p.5).



An additional element that comes into play for the BBC's reception in most African countries is not only the British present-day politics vis-à-vis the continent but the history of colonial rule that in most places only ended roughly half a century ago. For those politicians or social groups displeased with a certain line of reporting or commentary regarding their country can readily turn to a time-tested defence and relate the broadcaster's perspective to a neocolonial outlook tainted by colonial and possibly racist misconceptions of local affairs. Robert Mugabe, a former liberation fighter who has been Zimbabwe's president since 1980, has repeatedly answered international criticism by labeling journalists as imperialist 'media terrorists' fighting in the name of 'bourgeois democracy' (Secka 2013).

In South Sudan at least, the trend is clear. Media organisations are taken hostage for policies pursued by their country of origin's governments. As relations between Washington and Juba have deteriorated since the outbreak of the civil war and Secretary of State John Kerry has threatened sanctions against members of the South Sudanese regime while calling for an international tribunal against human rights abusers, the Juba government shut down three independent media outlets in August 2015 (CPJ 5 August 2015). One of the three was the local branch of Voice of America.

### **The Mobile revolution – a global challenge**

Mobile phones may not have toppled autocratic leaders across the Arab world and the strong reliance of the state department under Hillary Clinton on linkages with the country's tech elite was surely overblown (Lears 2015). However, in less flashy but more substantial fashion, mobile phones with internet access are altering the dynamics of national media policies and exponentially increase the costs of restricting access to critical coverage. In Nigeria's parliamentary elections a few years back, for instance, mobile phones were already

used to collect and collate observations from polling stations to local and international observers (Etzo and Collender 2010, p. 664).

Moreover, whereas one of the very first steps upon seizing power has traditionally been to get one's hands on the national TV and radio channels – not coincidentally Egypt's Ministry of Information was specially targeted during the Tahrir Square Revolution (Guaaybess 2015, p. 167) – this is no longer sufficient to control the flow of information. The young but not only the young now own mobile devices that enable them to access foreign media sources as well as independent alternative sources of news. A crucial shortcoming of the latter, however, is that oftentimes the veracity of news reports cannot be verified. Thus, the deliberate or accidental spread of false pieces of news, for example a picture purporting to depict violence against protesters, can damage the credibility of all reports delivered through this medium. As such, while established media may be supplemented by first-hand accounts from individuals on the ground without any journalistic training – the BBC's *World Have Your Say* programme comes to mind – the reliability and high standards of verification characteristic of international media like the BBC World Service make the latter more rather than less valuable and essential in transformation countries.

And of today, there are still major obstacles to access in the mobile field, especially once you venture out of the growing urban spaces into rural Africa. Reports like that on South Sudan where a third of respondents claimed to possess a mobile phone (IRI 2013) need to be taken with a grain of salt. In Kenya, for instance, the leading newspaper *The Star* had to cancel an SMS news service because there simply were not enough customers willing or able to pay even a very small fee (WAN-IFRA and AMI 2012, p. 34). For the time being, radio and, in more developed countries, television remain the dominant modes of entertainment and information for the majority of the population in Africa.

## Conclusion

To conclude, Russia Today is clearly wrong in its assertion that its own editorial agenda as well as the BBC's are essentially two sides of the same coin. It is in fact an entirely different currency. The intriguing aspect of international news outlets with a worldwide audience such as BBC World and Voice of America is that they contribute much more to their countries' diplomatic clout and, more importantly, to the spread of their values (multi-party democracy, liberalism, free-trade capitalism) by credibly proving high standards of reporting. By abstaining from interference into the editorial output – at least as far as can be observed – the British and American governments actively uphold the principles of good governance that many millions living under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes aspire to. These people and their convictions are thus the targets of Western 'soft power' public diplomacy (Hill 2003, p. 279). BBC and VOA and other independent outlets like Radio France International and Deutsche Welle actually are means of their states' foreign policy; just not in the nefarious manner insinuated by Mugabe and others.

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