

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gary D. Rawnsley](#)

China's English-Language Media: A Case of Over-Confidence ^[1]

When will China ever learn? It's not how loud you speak, or how many times you say something, but what you say that counts. Reports that the Communist Party of China (CPC) has launched a new English-language newspaper, the *Global Times*, should be greeted with the usual mixture of delight (yet more evidence of the Chinese jumping on the public diplomacy bandwagon) and cynicism (yet more evidence of the Chinese jumping on the public diplomacy bandwagon). The launch reveals, however, that no matter how much we observe and analyze the renaissance in China's public diplomacy, we cannot but stand by and watch as China and its champions seem to misunderstand public diplomacy- what it is and how it is/should be practiced.

First, let's clear up a misconception: Reporting the launch of the *Global Times* English edition, AP's Christopher Bodeen wrote that this "reflects China's recent "soft power" drive to build its global reputation, muffle foreign criticism and broadcast the leadership's particular views on issues such as democracy, human rights and Tibet". If "soft power" means the attempt to win hearts and minds by projecting culture and values (which is, I think, what Joseph Nye intended) then this is not the way to go about it. Instead China is engaged, at best, in public diplomacy, at worst, in good old fashioned propaganda. The *Global Times's* promise to present "news from a Chinese perspective, in a fair, insightful and courageous manner" and then publish the usual accusations against the western media as being part of a large conspiracy against China does not auger well for the future of the newspaper in terms of attracting its intended audience. I have talked elsewhere, most recently in a chapter in Nancy Snow and Philip Taylor's edited collection, *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, that there is inconsistency between what China says and what China does. (China is not alone in this, of course; how else can we explain the failure of American soft power?) In other words, the message of the public diplomacy must be credible; and if there is one thing lacking in China's English-language media, it is credibility. China's media are no longer the butt of jokes they once were – my favorite (and the favorite of most Chinese who know it) is "The only thing you can trust about the *People's Daily* (the official party newspaper) is the date" – yet credibility remains a serious problem when there is a serious inconsistency between policy and message, and when foreigners (and increasingly Chinese) have access to a range of non-Chinese media and sources of news.

The *Global Times* joins *China Daily*, and the *Shanghai Daily*, in trying to capture the English-language market. For those who watch TV rather than read newspapers, there is always CCTV 9, China's English-language channel. These are all parts of China's public diplomacy armoury, communicating China's story and culture and to a world eager to hear the authentic voice of the nation, its people and its government ... at least that is what Beijing likes to believe.

Why does China always get it so wrong? The English-language media are rarely consumed

by their intended international audience, but are rather used as tools by Chinese to improve their own English-language ability. Stories from the *China Daily* regularly crop-up in school and University English-language examinations. Few foreigners regularly watch CCTV 9 unless they have no other option (i.e., they are not staying in five-star hotels where BBC World is available) or they wish to improve their own understanding of Chinese by watching programmes hosted by the Canadian Mark Rosewell (known in China as *Da Shan* – Big Mountain) teaching Mandarin. Moreover, even internet-savvy Chinese can leap over the Great Chinese Firewall and access foreign news websites; why bother with the *China Daily* or news on CCTV 9 (hosted now by non-Chinese in a bold move by CCTV to boost its public diplomacy credibility) for your daily news when you can read *The Guardian* online?

And yet the CPC and CCTV remain over-confident in these media's public diplomacy potential, as brought home to me during a visit to Beijing in 2007 when I was lucky enough to be invited to tour CCTV. Well, having been prohibited at the last minute from speaking at a conference, I needed something to pass the time. Most thrilling for me was seeing how the youthful directors and producers – no-one who worked there looked more than 15 years old – faced the obligatory bank of monitors displaying different television channels, one of which was showing CNN, a station that ordinary Chinese are unable to access. CNN is a model and a template, if not an inspiration to these young Chinese media-types for how to package the news.

My friend guiding me on the tour pointed out to me at every available opportunity the apparent lack of censorship at the channel: "Look," she exclaimed at every foreign face working for the station. "A foreigner. And no-one is standing behind him to censor him." Ho hum! It doesn't quite work like that...

Then my friend was dismayed when I actually questioned the public diplomacy potential of CCTV 9. "CCTV 9 has an audience of 45 million all over the world," she declared proudly, repeating a mistake that can be found on the station's website. "No," I pointed out politely. "It has a *potential* audience of 45 million all over the world provided they subscribe to the satellite or cable package that subscribes to it." CCTV is now also available in French (CCTV-F) and Spanish (CCTV-E) increasing further the potential but not the actual audience.

The *Global Times* has a future; it will survive, like the *China Daily* and CCTV 9 for two reasons: these media are state owned, and therefore do not face competition. Their political agenda and support mean they do not have to do things differently, and no matter the size of the audience, they will continue to appear. The Communist Party cannot lose face by letting them disappear.

The second reason is the most disturbing – the Chinese genuinely believe they are effective tools of public diplomacy. When will they ever learn?
