

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

Here we go again: the contradictions in China's international media strategy ^[1]


On 1 July 2010 Xinhua, the news agency of the People's Republic of China (PRC), will launch a global 24-hour English-language television channel called China Network Corp (CNC). Trial broadcasts began on May 1.

Upon announcing this development, Xinhua's president, Li Congjun stated that 'CNC will offer an alternative source of information for a global audience and aims to promote peace and development by interpreting the world in a global perspective.'

This sentence loses clarity in translation from the Chinese; not only is it confusing, but it is characteristic of the sentimental official rhetoric that Chinese officials use to mark landmark events. For further evidence, one need only refer to the largely meaningless speeches delivered at the opening of Expo 2010 in Shanghai.

It is difficult to identify what China will gain by investing in yet another international television station: what will CNC do that CCTV9 is not already doing? Does the launch of CNC English reveal internal competition within the state system for control of China's public diplomacy strategy? Perhaps it indicates that the Chinese have finally acknowledged CCTV9's shortcomings and have decided it really is not up to the job. But will CNC fare any better?

The launch of this television station confirms that the leadership in Beijing is confident that it is possible to influence international public opinion and media coverage of China. The government has long criticized the way 'Western' media report on China, accusing them of bias by focusing on human rights, Tibet and democracy, choosing to ignore differences in news values between Chinese and 'western' news organizations.

Li's announcement comes on the same day that the BBC World Service published its latest poll (pdf)  of 30,000 adults in 28 countries which reveals that views of China have declined sharply. In 2005, 49 percent of people surveyed thought that China's influence was mostly positive (a striking 11 points higher than that of the United States). However, in the most recent survey China's standing has dropped to just 34 percent, 6 points behind the US. The official Chinese media responded as expected, alleging that public opinion is shaped by western media organizations which 'are unsuitably seasoned with misunderstanding, misinterpretation or even bias or enmity'. That old chestnut ...

China Daily is of course correct to state that the media can affect public opinion, but the downturn of opinion is not just in 'western' countries; the surveys reveal that several Asian countries are also responding more negatively to China than in the past. Besides, when China was 'more popular' than the US, the western media did not report news from China any differently. This suggests that Chinese policy – for example, the brutal Chinese handling of

disturbances in Tibet and Xinjiang – may have helped to turned public opinion against China.

All in all CNC, CCTV9 and Chinese public diplomacy have a hard job ahead; and more information or channels of distribution does not necessarily mean better communication, especially when CNC and CCTV9 are embedded within the state system and are thus viewed with suspicion by international audiences.

As I have stated in previous dispatches, just because you have a message and a means to deliver it, it does not mean anyone is listening. If few people outside China or outside Chinese-speaking communities (besides those who wish to improve their English) are watching CCTV9, what makes Xinhua think they will turn to CNC instead? CCTV9 is accessible via satellite to some 85 million viewers in 100 countries; what proportion of the 85 million possible viewers are actual viewers?

Rebranding CCTV9 as CCTV News is not going to offer much help in converting these potential audiences to regular viewers. Rebranding rarely succeeds without careful market research and, if necessary, modification of the product. Given that China's international media are government owned and follow an agenda decided by the state, such a radical transformation of content is unlikely. So viewers will no doubt get more of the same under a different name (does it really matter if the chocolate bar is called Snickers or Marathon?).

The most interesting developments are taking place in China's international print media. The English-language Global Times (a tabloid attached to the Communist party's mouthpiece, *People's Daily*) is attracting attention for its sometimes critical coverage of some sensitive issues that are rarely reported in the official media.

However, the reason *Global Times* is able to report such stories is precisely because it does so in English (the Chinese version continues to behave, *ad nauseum*, as a newspaper under state control) and because it enjoys the patronage of the *People's Daily*. Journalists are not testing the boundaries of state censorship or creating new norms and routines of Chinese journalistic practice; they are following directives or clearance to report otherwise topics deemed sensitive for domestic consumption. Again, it raises the question: besides the illusion of media pluralism, what public diplomacy value is there in publishing the English-language *Global Times* and *China Daily*, both of which are connected to official organizations? More does not necessarily mean better ...

At the end of the day the possible influence of China's international media will be offset by the actions of its government at home and abroad. Issues of democracy, human rights, Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan will continue to mar China's public diplomacy for as long as Beijing continues to avoid resolving them sensitively and to the satisfaction of the people living in these areas.
