

Nov 04, 2016 by Adam Clayton Powell, III

Chinese TV extends its reach into Africa [1]

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Is Africa becoming part of the Middle Kingdom?

That is a popular question in the news recently: The week began with a Council on Foreign Relations report describing Africa's strategic importance to the United States. The report was comprehensive, but most American media accounts focused on one chapter, about energy, and how the Chinese were cultivating African oil, gas and other resources.

The week ended with the publication of Andrew Neil's remarks at the Institute of Economic Affairs, in which he detailed China's economic growth and worldwide expansion.

But here in Africa, you did not have to read either report to see how China has expanded its influence. All you had to do was turn on a television set.

In the 1980's and 1990's, in addition to CNN, the U.S. WorldNet television channel brought a 24-hour service to Africa that included the PBS NewsHour, C-SPAN excerpts and public affairs programming from Washington. But the Cold War ended, and WorldNet was dismantled, along with much of the rest of the U.S. public diplomacy effort. Al Snyder, a senior fellow at the USC Center on Public Diplomacy, said that the United States believed that CNN was sufficient to show the flag. This was the first indication that American dominance in broadcasting in Africa was weakening, which allowed networks from other countries to establish themselves.

CNN is still on throughout the continent, joined by Bloomberg News, but now they are just two of several 24-hour English-language television news channels. There is the BBC and Sky from London, SABC Africa from Johannesburg, and, live from Beijing, China's English-language Channel 9, which has particularly benefitted from the United States' scaled back influence. There are also news channels in French and Arabic, and NHK News from Tokyo is a factor.

ESPN might be the worldwide leader in sports in the United States, but in Africa, it is just one of at least half a dozen 24-hour English-language sports channels from London and Johannesburg. Al Jazeera has also added a similar sports channel to its repertoire of news and children's networks.

MTV is here, but then again, so are other music video channels, including East Africa TV from Dar es Salaam and Kampala, which features a high-tech Web site.

The American Discovery and Hallmark channels are widely available, but there are dozens of entertainment channels, including several from South Africa, London, India and a Middle East channel that features old American movies subtitled in Arabic (this week's highlight: Grease).

Those are just the English-language channels; there are also 24-hour channels beamed here in other languages from Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and the Middle East.

However, all of these are only available on multi-channel satellite platforms. The services are expensive and therefore have very little market penetration in Kenya. The name of the game here is free, terrestrial, over-the-air channels, which can be watched by anyone who has a television set. Here is where the Chinese expansion becomes clear.

There are only a few terrestrial channels, and as expected, their primary news and public affairs are locally produced and focused. But as in much of the continent, the terrestrial channels' broadcast schedule has gaps, because it is not cost-effective to produce local programming for the entire day. During these gaps, local broadcasters turn to the satellite channels, cherrypicking programs to drop into their schedules.

Look at the newest additions: Every day at 10 a.m., The government-run KBC-TV picks up the CCTV Chinese news channel in English, running it live from 30 minutes to three hours. News, documentaries and travel programs from Beijing are now a daily staple of Kenya's most popular television station.

The United States is undoubtedly still a force: on KBC-TV's most popular channel, CNN programming airs every day from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. and Oprah Winfrey is shown Thursday at 6 p.m. KBC also broadcasts an occasional half-hour feature from Voice of America. The rest of the U.S. television presence is light entertainment: daytime reruns of "Walker Texas Ranger" and "21 Jumpstreet," late night showings of "Hill Street Blues" and "Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman," and that hit from Cairo to Cape Town, seen here on Sunday nights, "The Bold and the Beautiful."

Over at the independent commercial KTN network, which is seen in only a few cities, U.S. programming predominates: CNN fills part of the day, and the prime-times schedule features *24* and *Friends*. But as is so often the case on this continent, there is the unexpected. According to Nixon Kariithi, head of the Media Studies Program at South Africa's University of the Witwatersrand, KTN actually taped CNN news programs and edited out any stories that might offend the Nairobi government before playing it back on the air.

There is also Kenya's Family Channel, part of U.S. religious broadcaster Trinity Broadcast Media's Africa-wide terrestrial network. It features American religious programs including TBN's Paul Crouch in the afternoon and T.D. Jakes every Saturday at 8 p.m.

But China is the new power in Africa, on television and around the capital. During an assignment in South Africa a few months ago, it was clear CCTV9 was also widely distributed in that country (it is also available on satellite and online in the United States). It is highly professional and often visually quite striking, but sometimes is not yet quite as polished as BBC World.

There is no doubt China has the resources to sustain its push into Africa. The Center's own Peter Herford provides dispatches from Guangdong Province. And Andrew Neil, in his remarks, described China's reduction of Africa's poverty rate from 64 percent to 17 percent.

At week's end there was still more evidence of China's public diplomacy and economic expansion here. In an interview published on Dec. 15, Zambian trade minister Dipak Patel said, in passing, that the Chinese government had offered every country in southern Africa

funding for a new sports stadium or a new government headquarters building.

"Most countries chose the stadium," Patel told the Financial Times. He said he chose the office tower.

So, barring a cataclysm, Beijing's initiatives can easily be sustained and increased, and Africans can expect to see more programs with the discreet CCTV logo in the lower right-hand corner of the picture.

America's broadcasting supremacy might be down, but given it's light entertainment exports, it is not out. Despite China's media expansion in Africa, American entertainment stars are still the most prominently featured. Smiling out from the cover of the current television guide here, promoting the African debut of her new talk show, is a woman identified on the cover as "role model Tyra Banks."
