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The Role of Public Sentiment and Social Media in the Evolving China–Africa Relationship

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ABSTRACT

The demands of public diplomacy have shifted with the development of social media technologies. Increasingly, governments are required to gauge and respond to public sentiment over and above the one-way communication of broadcast media. The social media and accompanying elevated public role have complicated the decision-making process in China to the extent of potentially influencing its outward engagements. On the receiving end of China's diplomacy is Africa, which is undergoing its own important technological changes. South Africa's domestic circumstances, however, demonstrate that larger factors can override online sentiment. In two such important regions in the world, it is important to consider whether these domestic changes are likely to strengthen or undermine future China–Africa future relations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ANC African National Congress
CCP Chinese Communist Party
FOCAC Forum on China–Africa Cooperation

INTRODUCTION

China's diplomacy in Africa is evolving at a progressive pace. Relations have developed from early diplomatic ties – beginning in North Africa (Egypt) in 1956 – to the multiple points of engagement on the continent today. As state-to-state ties progress,[1] so does the steady rise of economic relations. Since 2009 China has been Africa's largest trading partner. In 2011 the total trade volume between China and Africa reached about $160 billion and currently over 2 000 Chinese companies have established business on the continent.[2] As China moves closer to regions in the world it considers strategically important through political and economic means, views over its real intentions remain divided, from exploitation and self-interest to creating new opportunities and partnerships.

To add to the debate is Beijing's launch of a global public diplomacy drive to communicate China's values, culture and foreign policy to the rest of the world. This has included the establishment of Confucius Institutes[3] abroad, university scholarships and think-tank exchanges, the establishment of state media broadcast centres and bureaus abroad;[4] all of which provide a glimpse into China's view of the world. Engagement with public citizens of other countries makes diplomatic sense and is regarded increasingly as a necessity, as state policies are influenced (directly or indirectly) by internal and global public attitudes. In order to carry out foreign-policy decisions successfully, states need to influence others to think of them in a favourable light and to ultimately get others to desire the same outcomes. This psychological and emotional influence is what Joseph Nye describes as 'soft power'.[5]

Since 2007[6] China's drive to capture and influence public attention in Africa has been predominantly top-down. For instance, the recent Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC V), established to co-ordinate China and Africa relations, announced that more resources would be committed to cultural and people-to-people exchanges.[7] Part of this material assistance was the proposal to establish a China–Africa Press Exchange Center that would host African journalists in China, observe, and report on Chinese affairs.[8]

However, elevated public sentiment has increased the complexities and sensitive nature of foreign policymaking all the more. Though gauging public attitudes is nothing new, the development of communication technologies, specifically social media platforms, has heightened the influence of and access to public sentiment.

The paper seeks to make sense of the evolving nature of public diplomacy and what the involvement of public sentiment means for the future of China–Africa relations. It is divided into two main sections. The first discusses public diplomacy in a digitised information age and how the increase in access to information and communication is diffusing foreign-policy decision making in China. The second section explores how the point of engagement between China and Africa, as well as the degree of possible influence, is also determined by Africa's own processes and developments (ie of communication technology). As a case in point, South Africa's public environment shows how government can be influenced into a state of non-action. As the China–Africa relationship strengthens through economic and political ties, it is worth contemplating the gaps in perceptions that still exist and the underlying factors informing these.

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

The broadcast and social media

The advent of mass communication in the late 20th century has dramatically enhanced the ability of governments to influence and communicate with the public. The political effects of transnational broadcasting are appealing for public diplomacy owing to its potential to reach the masses efficiently and inexpensively.[9] In the 1930s the UK and Germany sought to use radio to influence public opinion as far afield as the US.[10] Following the September 11 attacks in 2001, the US adopted mass communication as a 'weapon of war' to fight the rising cynicism against the West in the Islamic World.[11]

Although broadcasting government policy to the foreign public remains strong, governments are also making increasing use of social media in the form of 'web-based tools and services that allow users to [comment], create, share, rate and search content and information'.[12] The ability to connect users and their ideas across the most complex geographical divides means that social media is a 'fundamental game changer'.[13] Its capabilities will only expand as the Internet becomes progressively cheaper and more widely available. Such potential is already playing out as new technological developments are converging to create more possibilities, as seen with the online capabilities of handheld mobile devices. This means that users are increasingly able to access common social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and, in the case of China, Sina Weibo.[14]

The age of digital diplomacy and real-time diplomacy

The use of social media as a tool for public diplomacy originated in 2009, during the failed Green Revolution in Iran.[15] By 2011 the US foreign affairs department (followed by the UK and Australia respectively) led in the use of social media tools to promote its 'digital diplomacy'.[16] In the digital age, it is no longer sufficient for policymakers to partake in one-way speak. Instead they are required to continually interact and converse with the public at home and abroad. The 2012 US presidential election (also known as the 'social media election') attests to this. Unlike previous elections, in 2012 almost every US voter had a mobile phone that they made use of to access the Internet.[17] In response both presidential candidates, Mitt Romney and Barrack Obama, adopted online strategies to reach voting demographics.[18] As the digital director for the Romney campaign, Zachary Moffatt, said, 'the more people you [interact with…] the more likely you are to win'.[19] Social media amplified this interaction through sharing the candidates' most intimate details, from personal photographs to their favourite recipes and playlists.[20]

Communicating to the online public extends beyond open democracies to places where few other spaces for political interaction exist. In countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen the social media has become a platform to distribute uncensored public information among users. The social media aided Arab Spring activists in breaking down 'the psychological barrier of fear by helping many to connect and share information' – and, in some cases, in helping to organise physical protests.[21] Parallel to the creation of a new public space is also government response via social media platforms. Following the 2009

presidential elections in Iran, opinions among the country's Twitter users changed from anger directed towards the US and Israel (countries with traditionally tense relations with Iran) to negative feelings towards the government in Iran.[22] Instead of removing anti-government rhetoric, as would have been done in the past, Iran's government has begun responding to opposition voices with its own blogs that support the Basiji Resistance Force and promote nationalistic ideals.[23]

Beyond domestic political contestation, social media also has *real* implications for public diplomacy. Its instantaneous nature has made policymaking more haphazard, 'hesitant and reactive'[24] than before. For instance, in September 2012, large protests erupted across the Muslim world when a 13-minute trailer to an anti-Islamic film (titled *Innocence of Muslims*) was uploaded on YouTube. The video's rapid spread had diplomatic ramifications. It incited deep-seated feelings that led to assaults at the US embassy in Cairo and consulate in Benghazi; and eventually to the death of the US ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens.

The advent of social media has led to the propagation of power into unconventional hands, beyond those in positions of authority. These days breaking news is likely to occur online before it is broadcast on television, as seen in the case of the Arabic satellite network, *Al Jazeera*, which often relies on citizens to supply content[25] that the news media cannot usually access. At the push of a button, information and visual aids (that can determine political fates) are sent across the world in 'real-time'. This is made even more efficient with the advent of Internet tools like OnlyWire that allow the automation of content across various networking platforms. In addition, the world continues to use primarily US media sites, including users who have circumvented state media regulations in their home countries, which means the fate and choices of US technology firms hold larger implications for the world.[26]

Is the social media 'all powerful'?

Although the social media has far-reaching implications and creates new elements in the area of diplomacy, its ability to influence policymaking remains unpredictable and user-dependent. Its effects can either lead to large-scale protests and riots, as witnessed in the Muslim world, or generate a lack of meaningful response, as seen with the online appeals for a Chinese-style 'Jasmine Revolution'. These different cases suggest that social media influence on politics varies from case to case and at most it is a conduit tool in a larger pool of motivating factors.

Regarding the China situation, it remains to be seen whether social media provides government or the public with greater power. The new technology comes with highly sophisticated methods and tools (sometimes with the assistance of Internet companies) to filter and monitor public views.[27] Consequently, the rise of social media technologies and Internet penetration in authoritarian states does not necessarily mean the decline of such regimes.[28] Nevertheless, social media is changing Chinese society. This is evidenced in the 2003 SARS epidemic, during which online chat rooms overrode the tightly controlled traditional media and face-to-face interaction to inform the public about the disease.[29]

Online public opinion and its influence are difficult to measure.[30] It is challenging to pinpoint the geographic origins of online opinions and whether such views belong to individuals, groups or organisations.[31] Questions are also being raised on the authenticity

and influence of social media in informing the masses, as user-generated content still attracts fewer viewers than traditional media.[32] Using social media for accurate quantitative analysis is difficult. Although online public opinion is not easily measured, social media can reveal the direction of new trends, sentiments and reactions of ordinary users in real-life situations. With regard to China, a country where the decision-making process remains confined to the top leadership,[33] it is worth understanding the elevated potential of online public influence on policy process.

CHINA AND PUBLIC OPINION POLITICS

The three levels of China's public opinion

Fewsmith and Rosen identify three key levels of public opinion that affect China's foreign policy, namely elite, sub-elite and popular opinions.[34] Though this classification is not strictly 'public' in the Western sense, all three groups play an important, interrelated part in negotiating China's contemporary foreign policy.

Political elite

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, decision making tended to be characterised as highly centralised and led by a handful of powerful senior personalities who acted with limited domestic pressure.[35] However, since opening up to the world under Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China's policymaking process evolved to become increasingly practical and sophisticated (rather than ideological and personal) as the country became more globally involved.[36]

Political cleavages have always existed in elite politics.[37] Although this still holds true, the current global context coupled with the recent leadership transition in China[38] demonstrate a unique leadership involvement in policymaking. The 2012 leadership change has seen younger officials and the rising leaders from the 'Fifth Generation' take over most government seats as their predecessors reach the compulsory retirement age. Their unique backgrounds and experiences, compared with their predecessors, could influence their view of foreign policy itself. The post-Cold War context has already influenced the role and demands of the government.[39] In comparison to the leadership under Mao Tse-tung (1949–1976) – where foreign-policy decisions were determined by Mao, Zhou Enlai and a few party leaders – the complex international system has demanded more knowledge on global affairs and technical and specialised expertise in decision making. The new senior members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) provide an interesting dynamic, as they are generally educated to a higher level than their predecessors (particularly in the social sciences field), have experience in provincial governments, and have a more technocratic (as opposed to ideological) outlook.[40]

Furthermore, policy choices by the CCP are increasingly subject to support from bureaucratic structures. The elite in China provide an interesting negotiation process that in some ways is a form of 'public opinion'. For example, although major decisions are made by the CCP, state institutions have flexibility in how they interpret policy implementation.[41] Similarly, the 'Fifth Generation' of Chinese leaders comes from two

different backgrounds. One is the 'Princeling Party', which favours policies that maximise economic growth (particularly in the coastal regions) and promote the interests of China's professionals and emerging businesses.[42] The second group, drawing from the Chinese Communist Youth League Faction, identifies with the poorer, inland provinces and is more concerned with stability and socio-economic issues.[43] Though future policy decisions cannot be predicted, the preferences of the two factions will probably result in a negotiation for policy preferences.

Sub-elites

Non-government elites are a group made up of 'public intellectuals' and think tanks, and indirectly influence policy. The group's influence began to expand in 1998 when the Chinese leadership sought academic input to broaden its sources of ideas.[44] As China becomes increasingly connected to the world, so do the linkages between the domestic and international environments, thus requiring analysis that incorporates both elements to better inform China's reform process.[45] Today non-government elites are able to influence political, economic and cultural policies through their academic writing, briefings, internal reports and conferences.[46] A recent example is the request by the Chinese leadership for policy think tanks to draw up the 'most ambitious economic reform proposals', which could essentially limit the power of state firms.[47]

Despite their given power, the group remains incoherent, with differing motivations and objectives. Some individuals are influential owing to their close links to government, while others write for a larger audience and perceive themselves as articulators of public opinion.[48]

Popular opinion

The influence of the public as a whole, or popular opinion, in China is also growing. In 2001 Fewsmith and Rosen commented that public opinion (in the Western sense) had no real impact on the policy process; and it was up to government to gauge public sentiment to serve the purpose of maintaining stability.[49] Yet the role of the Chinese public is changing along with the development of communication technologies.

Three defining factors have influenced the unique advancement of China's media infrastructure: economic development, commercialisation of the mass media and the reshaping of power and interest groups.[50] China's progressive technological advancement began when it opened up to the world and underwent economic development in 1978. Rapid modernisation led to the Chinese public being granted access to the Internet by the mid-1990s. The introduction of the Internet and the sudden explosion of users (from 20 million in 2001 to over 500 million in 2011) has made policy formation all the more complex.[51]

The social media is enabling wide participation and diffusing influence to the public realm, beyond the traditional echelons of government. Although popular social media sites like Twitter and Facebook are barred, the public in China are using their local versions, like Sina Weibo, as a tool for engagement. These platforms allow users to participate and engage in and to criticise government politics when few other political forums existed previously.[52] Roles are also becoming blurred, as sub-elites infuse public opinion with active debate and the public have an opportunity to be elevated into the sub-elite group.

A clear example is the race-car driver and author, Han Han, whose writings (such as criticisms of the leadership) have made him the most popular blogger in China.[53]

In response to the elevation of public attitudes, the Chinese government is also actively participating in 'Wei-governance'.[54] Its own agencies are participating in the social media trend and communicating with the public. The Beijing police, for example, have three million followers.[55] Since 2009 China's own premier, Wen Jiabao, has conducted live web chats with Internet users and has responded to screened questions addressing national concerns. There is also the '50-cent army', whose mandate is to post favourable comments about the government, in order to change public opinion.[56] In some cases, however, users are barred from accessing information on politically sensitive events, such as the developments and discussions surrounding the 2011 anti-government protests in the Middle East and North Africa.[57]

National negotiation on government policy and future determinants

It remains unclear whether the increased public use of social media has in turn increased public influence on decision-making in China. Nevertheless, it is clear that public concerns have elevated to the point of receiving government attention – and even demanding a response. For example, in a *Xinhua* report, the authors claimed that between July and December 2011 authorities responded to about 72% of the issues widely discussed online, with half of the responses coming within 24 hours.[58] A Harvard study,[59] published in mid-2012, explained how the Chinese leadership *does* allow social media autonomy to criticise and praise government and policy; however, it is content that could generate collective action against government power which gets removed. Ultimately, the content that could potentially create instability is removed but general criticism remains as a means to measure performance. This suggests that government involvement in this new medium is both responsive and selective.

With respect to China's engagements abroad, the public are providing some influence in the way the government undertakes foreign policy. For instance, during China's accession to the World Trade Organisation, Internet users heatedly criticised the government for selling out the Chinese trade sector to multinationals. In response the government undertook a persuasive campaign using traditional media platforms.[60] How the online public respond to sensitive news informs the way leaders present themselves on larger platforms such as the traditional media and abroad.

Overall, although it is difficult to determine clear and coherent lines of policy influence by the public, there is compelling evidence of a process of negotiation between the state and the public over certain issues and under specific circumstances. This preliminary interaction in the policy sphere could, however, evolve due to three important factors, namely the changing youth demographics, technological innovation (mobile) and nationalism – all of which cut across social media. These variables could result in the rise or restraint of future public influence.

Technology

Mobile technology has spread more rapidly than Internet access, with about 986 million mobile users in China by the end of 2011.[61] Furthermore, technological developments mean more people will be able to access the Internet through their mobiles. The *TIME*

Mobility Poll found that Chinese mobile users made use of text messages and mobile Internet more than any other features; and 79% of those surveyed used the Internet primarily to access information and news.[62]

Mobile technology could potentially enhance user engagement in the policy process. However, this trend should be considered alongside other platforms. Although Internet users are progressively increasing, television (followed by print media) is still the most favoured source of domestic and international news.[63] This fact could also affect the way users and the public perceive certain issues. How users decide to use the technology is another factor, as seen in the youth demographic.

Changing youth demographic

The evolving youth population is likely to be (if not already) a significant public opinion influence on China's future policies. According to the National Intelligence Council, China's population will reach a median age group of 35–45 years by 2030.[64] This changing demographic is also currently the largest user group of the Internet and social media sites. A Pew survey found that most technology users are 18–29 years of age (followed by 30–39 years).[65] They also tend to be educated (college or high school) and wealthier than non-users.

The current youth are in an optimum position to persuade public sentiment, which could potentially put them at odds with the government. A study by the Unirule Institute of Economics found that in China, the youth under 25 years of age were consistently more suspicious of authority than their elders.[66] There is also growing political apathy among the youth, who have historically played a pivotal role in pushing reforms. Even though the Internet has grown as a place for political dissent, a study of Chinese college students showed that about only 10% participated in online political discussions; another 10% showed no interest in politics, and the majority remained politically silent.[67] There are various reasons for this, such as the fear of being criticised; the fact that this demographic is far more divorced from harsh realities; or because economic concerns override political ones: as Hoffman states, one such reason for connecting to the modern media is for a 'gateway to the globalised economy'.[68]

Questions over the youth's ideas of authority and level of interest in political issues, as a fairly well-connected demographic, could affect foreign policymaking in fundamental ways. For instance, regarding the recent tension between China and Japan over an archipelago in the East China Sea, Professor Zhou Weihong explained that young Chinese are not as anti-Japanese as those 20 years ago because they have a more rational understanding of foreign affairs.[69] This runs counter to perceptions that rising public sentiment in China inevitably leads to a hardening of Chinese nationalism (see the following section).

The potential influence of the Chinese youth demographic can thus curb future conflict; as part of the (rising and aging) middle class, they are becoming more concerned about the effects of economic interdependence and social security.[70] The aging demographic could effectively influence the ability of government to extend its power abroad and instead focus on human capital in order to maximise on the fading demographic advantage.[71] At the same time, socio-economic concerns as a basis for future foreign engagement raise the question of how leadership will motivate on issues of limited

public interest – especially those issues that could have large implications for China's image and reception in the world.

Nationalism – can the Chinese leadership say no?

Contrary to an 'apathetic youth' and ideas of an interdependent world is the 'nationalist sentiment' trend. Another study on Internet users in China[72] found that users are actually a politically salient group. When compared with non-Internet users, they are also more opinionated, critical and likely to have experienced collective action. Nationalism is not a new trend, but in recent years it has become an important supporter of government decisions (as seen in the case of US–China relations, China–Japan relations and the Taiwan question).[73] Appealing to national sentiment helps the leadership to strengthen their stance on tough policy positions abroad and it can be a useful tool in negotiation processes.[74]

Patriotism takes various forms. It is a sharp double-edged sword that can be directed against the outside world and even that of the inside (toward the national leadership). However, it is incumbent upon leadership to use or channel popular sentiment. For example, following the Chinese embassy bombing in Belgrade, the Chinese government understood that the frustrations of students needed to be vented and that they would inevitably participate in demonstrations.[75] The leadership thus provided buses for demonstrators to the US embassy (and away from their own compounds).

Sentiment is not only a government tool but also has the potential to influence the government agenda. For instance, following the global financial crisis in 2008, many people (online and offline) called for more leadership attention in China itself, to focus on citizens' welfare and social tensions. This is possibly one reason why 90% of policymakers' time is spent on domestic issues and only 10% on international policy.[76]

In general, governments are likely to respond to critical views even when the challenge is beyond their control – because no government wants a weak image.[77] The areas in which leadership is likely to react are the areas in which the public are most critical: foreign policy, unemployment and inflation.[78] Still, these shortfalls are not always under leadership control. Lagerkvist cautions that extreme nationalism exists in all countries; and, with the risk of online populism and influence, the social media can be both progressive and regressive in nature.[79]

Both government and public sentiment have the potential to direct policy. China's leadership faces a challenging environment in which stability is difficult to achieve – particularly in an age when mass protests, such as those seen in North Africa, can unpredictably go offline.

Recent political and technological developments and the unpredictable influence of emerging trends (mobile technology, youth and nationalism) are introducing greater complexity to Chinese foreign policymaking. It is important to keep in mind that the process of policy decision making is still in the hands of the leadership. The process could be realist in nature, where the public are either used to support policies or ignored altogether; or it could be liberal, where public opinion is coherent and can influence leadership into a 'reciprocal relationship'.[80] Thus the *possibility* of future determinants can only serve as general indicators or as a means to understand developments. Nevertheless, the dynamic negotiation within China will probably produce unpredictable results of policy being influenced to look inward or globally.

AFRICA'S OWN SOCIAL MEDIA FUTURE

Just as China's internal negotiations affect the manner in which it engages with the world, there are developing trends in each of the unique African countries that may probably affect how they too approach the world. One major trend that is sweeping across the entire continent is the technological leapfrog. It is predicted that by at least 2015, regions such as sub-Saharan Africa will have more people with mobile network access than electricity at home.[81] At the same time, there will be about 800 million mobile phone subscribers on the continent.[82] Owing to the lack of landline telephones and other types of infrastructure in remote regions, wireless technology is single-handedly causing Africa to leapfrog technological developments. The public are able to make use of affordable mobile technology to gain Internet access and, with it, audio and video information for business needs.

Social media is also taking to the African context at a rapid pace, as seen in the case of the microblogging site, Twitter. Thousands of people in less technologically advanced countries like Sudan and Cameroon are circulating information through this platform.[83] South Africa remains the African country with the largest number of posted tweets online (with an average of five million posts in the span of three months).[84] Social media technology has the potential to connect the African public and become a powerful political tool on the continent. In Zimbabwe, traditional communication channels have proved unreliable and expensive and, as a result, Zimbabweans have turned to Facebook as a medium of choice. The social media platform is providing two important services of connecting locals to the three million Zimbabweans residing outside the country, and enabling the public to access information and make their views known, in an environment with tight press restrictions.[85] The widespread access to social media among the citizens in Egypt and North Africa proved a successful tool in mobilising masses of people in a short space of time.[86]

Like the China experience, the youth are at the forefront of media communication technology. Regular Twitter users fall between the ages of 20–29 (which is below the global average age of 30), and more than half of the comments posted originate from mobile devices.[87] As the continent's population size grows along with the drop of infant mortality rates, so will the uptake of media technology.[88] Overall, although the median age across the world is rising, sub-Saharan Africa's median age will be 25 years or younger by the year 2030 (with some exceptions, such as South Africa, whose average age will be between 25–35 years).[89]

This trend will lead to implications beyond social media. The increasingly young and connected public have the potential to become a large negotiating force in Africa. Analysts caution that this unique window of demographic opportunity needs to be utilised to create wealth and growth. Otherwise, the trend could spell a 'blessing or a curse […] opportunity or risk, boom or bomb, and treasure or threat'[90] for the future of the continent. The question remains whether the African online public can sway foreign-policy decisions – particularly those related to China–Africa relations in the way that has taken place between the Chinese foreign-policy establishment and Chinese society. An examination of South Africa, one of Africa's most connected societies, suggests several intriguing answers to this matter.

DOES ONLINE PUBLIC OPINION INFLUENCE CHINA–AFRICA RELATIONS? THE SOUTH AFRICAN CASE

As witnessed in FOCAC V, the China–Africa leadership has committed to enhance public engagement and to raise interest and understanding on both sides. During the forum's opening speech, Hu Jintao called for a boost in media exchanges to strengthen China–Africa strategic relations.[91] The China–South Africa case demonstrates that there is room for progress. South Africa and China share relatively close bilateral ties. Although diplomatic ties officially started in 1998, relations were elevated to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' in 2010. This development has resulted in a wide range of agreements, such as multilateral co-ordination; addressing trade imbalances in the relationship; and possible co-operation on the peaceful use of nuclear energy.[92] During President Jacob Zuma's visit to China in 2010, the South African delegation included more than 350 business people.[93] Judging from the expansive areas of co-operation and the string of visits among high-level officials, relations are strong on both political and economic levels.

However, public influence on and interest in the bilateral relationship between China and South Africa remain arguably weak. This section will focus on two reasons for this:

- the general limits to the social media influence on policymaking in the South African context; and
- the selective focus of the respective citizens of China and South Africa regarding their interest in the relationship.

The limits to South African online public pressure

The South African case is an interesting one. Despite the rapid uptake of social media, there is limited online public pressure on policymaking. This is not an outcome of rigorous negotiation between the public and government but rather due to a lack of popular sentiment. Social media can either integrate strong opinions that motivate government action (as seen in the China case) or the lack thereof can serve as a reason *not* to act.

South Africa's communications technology is advancing rapidly. Since 2010 mobile technology access (virtually at 100% penetration) has surpassed television access (at 82%).[94] This suggests that future technology developments will consist more of upgrades than initial uptake of the technology. A recent study, *The South African Social Media Landscape 2012 Study,* found that the social networking gaps between age and the urban–rural divide have closed significantly.[95] Between August 2011 and August 2012, Facebook and Twitter users grew by 100 000 each month (the former has about 5.3 million users, excluding mobile-only users, and Twitter has about 2.4 million users).[96] Overall, 73% of South African Internet users are also using social media sites.[97]

Yet despite the rise and potential of social media, its use within the South African context as a policy negotiation tool remains untapped. The main impediment is the way the public uses this technology. Broadly speaking, Twitter users in Africa claim to use the

platform for communicating with friends, connecting with other Africans, and keeping abreast of the news.[98] Although Blackberry smart phones have declined in sales in North America, they still hold 70% of the smart phone market in South Africa.[99] This ownership is dominated by the youth, who prefer to use Blackberry Messenger to send pictures and voice messages. Although the uptake and participation in social media has occurred rapidly, users are still learning about the potential of the platform and thus prefer to connect to their immediate environments rather than to larger political links. Thus social media use remains superficial, while public pressure remains offline in the form of illegal workers' strikes.[100]

The social media has not been utilised widely by leadership to engage with the public. Following President Zuma's State of the Nation Address, the public raised their concerns over corruption and job creation on social media sites. Despite this, the social media for the presidency provided limited feedback and interaction with the public.[101] Individual public figures, however, have taken it upon themselves to engage in social media. The Minister of Public Enterprises, Malusi Gigaba,[102] is one of the few politicians on Twitter who utilise the platform to engage and receive dynamic feedback directly from the public. At the same time, it is the recognition of the limits to social media that requires more than just mobile technology but other requirements – like airtime and literacy. Overall, the African National Congress (ANC), the ruling party in South Africa since 1994, still reaches most of its voting demographic through conventional media means, such as radio. Although the party has acknowledged in its 2012 policy document that public education on South Africa's foreign-policy approach remains lacking,[103] social media can only hold command if it is recognised by the leadership as an imperative tool for engagement.

The larger national context also limits a coherent public opinion. Despite the narrowing communication technology gap, other divides exist, such as language (South Africa is home to 11 official languages), and geographic and socio-economic divides.[104] There also remains a general sentiment of public mistrust. The mining workers' strikes at Marikana and the much-reported massacre thereafter demonstrated the levels of general mistrust among business, government, trade unions and workers. Clear divisions within each interest group are also emerging, as rival unions and political leaders vie for popular support. Political analysts, like William Gumede, have expressed the loss of confidence and trust in political institutions among South Africans.[105] This is because the hopeful sentiment following the end of apartheid in 1994 has yet to be met with dramatic economic and social improvements.[106] When individuals are cynical about a political environment, they are generally less likely to take part in it.[107] It thus becomes difficult to create majority opinions in societies such as South Africa, which are both complicated and divided in opinion.

A range of factors have so far curbed the social media as a means to generate South African public sentiment – many of which exist outside of technology. Importantly, media theorists have emphasised that 'if we are to realise the dreams of the internet pioneers, then we need to challenge the context and demand a fresh set of proposals to empower public oversight of and participation in online networks'.[108] Therefore, the lack of recognition by all parties (government and society) restricts the utility of the social media as a political tool in South Africa.

What could selective public interest mean for the future of China–South Africa relations?

Individual South Africans and Chinese have exhibited narrow and limited interest in the bilateral relationship, in contrast to both governments' more proactive political and economic engagement. When China became South Africa's largest trading partner in 2009, critics raised concern over China's role on the continent and its purely economic intentions. However, South Africa's role towards China is also economically inclined. The South African corporate sector has a variety of representations in China, including mining, infrastructure and construction, finance and business – all of which are successful international investors.[109] For example, the South African media company, Naspers, owns an approximate 30% stake in China's Tencent Holdings, making the company the largest shareholder. This acquisition has helped the Naspers' Internet operations to grow despite the 2009 recession.[110]

Media coverage of the bilateral relationship continues to be reported through an economic prism. A study by Wasserman demonstrates that China regards South Africa as one of the leading African countries with which to do business; and South Africa views China in a similar light, as its media predominantly covers China as an economically and politically newsworthy topic.[111] A study by the Hong Kong University's Journalism and Media Studies Centre came to a similar conclusion. Global news articles on the China–Africa relationship (between June 2011 and June 2012) generally focused on economic issues and high politics.[112]

There is therefore selective interest in China–South Africa relations, which possibly reflects the basic national priorities on both sides. As the ANC stated in their policy document, 'the South African foreign policy is an expression of domestic public policy that projects national values and interests'.[113] These interests are addressing poverty and development, which will remain the core priority for leadership for years to come.[114] When national priorities such as the economy are the underlying basis for relations, there are constraints on the ability to address the larger gaps in perceptions among the countries' respective public.

However, it will become all the more pressing to address the sentiment among the Chinese and South African public, owing to underlying tensions between the pragmatic national priorities mentioned and larger public understanding. Beyond the political and economic headlines focusing on aggregate trade figures or commercial deals are other stories that rarely generate interest and debate until developments become locally relevant. Although there is limited information on public opinion on China–South Africa relations, online comments about news articles provide some indication of the degree of interest. An example is the execution of the South African national, Janice Bronwyn Linden, in China in 2011. In 2008 Linden was arrested for possession of drugs on arrival in China and was given the death sentence three years later. Following the story was dynamic commentary among the South African online community that ranged from a discussion of power relations between South Africa and China; human rights concerns versus the logic of differing legal systems; criticism of each government; to the basic socio-economic problems in South Africa that encourage people to turn to the drug business.[115]

Nevertheless, there is limited interest beyond online discussions of emotive cases, which suggests there are still too few avenues to address long-standing perceptions of China–Africa relations. Following the 2012 public outrage over the 455 rhinos that were

killed illegally for their horns in South Africa, the journalist, Julian Rademeyer (who is writing a book on the trade), commented that 'there's this stereotype being sold in South Africa of these evil, Fu Manchu Asians trying to kill our wildlife'.[116] Similarly on the China side, public participation is *reaction* to developments and government choices rather than proactive agenda setting. For instance, along with the increasing internationalisation of Chinese businesses has been the increase of Chinese workers moving abroad. In 2011, 35 000 workers had to be evacuated from Libya as the conflict began to escalate and in 2012, 25 Chinese workers were abducted in Sudan.[117] As a result, there is ongoing domestic debate between the government (which emphasises that China is not yet powerful enough to protect all its citizens) and the online pressure for leadership action (criticising China as weak compared with the US, and calling for a change in its non-interventionist policy). The challenge then is to raise awareness of and interest in the bilateral relationship, beyond the traditional spaces, stereotypes and temporary interest of news headlines.

There are also emerging developments offline that will require addressing relationship gaps sooner or later – in particular the increasing movement of people as a result of the growing economic ties between China and Africa. According to Yoon Park, there are close to one million Chinese migrants in Africa, almost half of whom reside in South Africa.[118] These migration trends suggest that the physical interaction between Chinese and Africans will only increase over time. It is thus necessary to understand and address the factors affecting the integration of both countries' citizens in the relationship. Already there are a number of non-government efforts to bring together Chinese and African researchers, journalists and students.[119] These help to raise the communication and interaction levels on both sides. These communications spaces are still new and therefore discussion topics tend to focus on 'getting to know each other' and dispelling common perceptions that still inform general points of view.

Although international migration is increasing the proximity of different societies, perceptions seem to be changing at a slower rate. There are underlying anti-foreigner sentiments in South Africa, as seen in the xenophobic violence that swept across townships in 2008, which continues to manifest sporadically in acts of violence against foreigners. Similarly when police in China announced that they would pursue immigrants who were illegally residing or working in the country, the general sentiment among a sample of the 114 000 comments on the news was both in support of the drive and overall anti-foreigner in tone.[120] These sentiments have been translated in China–African relations. In 2012 a Chinese mine supervisor was killed at the Collum coal mine in Zambia and a Cameroonian national was beaten in Shangdong province, later dying in hospital. The negative attitudes have also taken to social media. In June 2012 a protest among African migrants in China took place, following the death of a Nigerian national in a Guangzhou police station. In response, the sentiments on Chinese social media favoured the police and were critical of the estimated 200 000 Africans living in Guangzhou.[121]

Without engagement and interest among the citizens of both countries, it seems likely that the larger China–Africa relationship will remain mostly – if not overwhelmingly – determined by leadership, business interests and a reactive public whose understanding of the other side will remain superficial. Although public diplomacy has traditionally been applied to drive support for government decisions, it is also true that public sentiment

could be reversing the direction of influence – to the point that relations such as those between China and Africa are affected.

CONCLUSION: CAN LEADERSHIP SHAPE THE FUTURE?

The process of policymaking in the 21st century is a complicated one. There is rising recognition that communication technologies, particularly social media, are affecting the long-standing practice of public diplomacy. Governments can no longer only partake in one-way forms of communication but are required increasingly to interact with the public. However, the influence of online sentiment varies across countries. China's experience demonstrates that its influence over the foreign-policy process is complex and varied. Although decision making remains opaque, internal changes are producing an active negotiation process, including a change in leadership and the rising role of online public sentiment. Coupled with these developments are future trends that could affect the nature of public opinion. These include technological developments, the rising youth demographic and nationalism. On the other hand, it is Africa that is leapfrogging communication technology. Despite this trend, South Africa has demonstrated the limits of social media influence in decision making. In this inherently divided society, social media is not taken up as a policy negotiation tool but rather as a means for information and social interaction.

Although public opinion is difficult to measure online, sentiment (and a lack thereof) is able to provide an indication of the future direction of China–Africa relations. Both countries' larger public remains disinterested in the relationship unless it affects their immediate environment (which emphasises economic concerns). The future China–Africa relationship depends on public diplomacy on *both* sides. In order to inspire the public, leadership needs to balance reaching hearts and minds (the softer influence) with hard realities and needs; what Hillary Clinton describes as 'smart power'.[122] This is because people exchanges and broadcast media efforts interact with the public at a temporary level as they contest with the imbedded perceptions and everyday interactions of people. Perhaps the relationship can be built from the spaces that already exist. China Central Television's Africa broadcast centre in Nairobi demonstrates an effort to change perceptions. Behind the news stories focusing on China and Africa that they broadcast are the Chinese and African news workers who are increasingly learning about one another as they negotiate the shared working environment. In such partnerships, both sides are required to get to know the other – at times because their livelihoods simply depend on it. Nevertheless, the burning question of whether China and Africa are ready to see each other in a different light remains yet to be answered.

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