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## Covering Ebola: a comparative analysis of CCTV Africa's *Talk Africa* and Al Jazeera English's *Inside Story*

Shubo Li

Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway

### ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative analysis of how *Chinese Central Television (CCTV) Africa* and *Al Jazeera English's* current affairs talk shows, both in English, have covered the 2014–2015 West Africa Ebola outbreak from March 2014. The purpose of this study is to broaden the knowledge on the presence of the two international broadcasters that are emblematic of the so-called 'media of the South', through comparing them. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, this research project finds that *Talk Africa (CCTV)* seems to have adopted a stabilizing role towards a panicking audience during the Ebola crisis, through reassuring the audience, pitting development against disease, providing the example of successful interventions in Nigeria, and showing the direction to a brighter future. The *Inside Story (Al Jazeera)* episodes are structured in a way that is more problem-centred, as most of the scrutinizing questions and discussions are organized around the problems such as the lack of trust from local people, shortage of trained medical personnel and the social cost of the deadly epidemic, leading to straightforward technical explanations and factual or individual observations, leaving the journalists little room to mould any ideological opposition.

### KEYWORDS

China-Africa relations; media of the South; international broadcasting

### Introduction

This study sets out to analyse how two news talk show programmes, *Al Jazeera English (AJE)'s Inside Story* and *Chinese Central Television (CCTV) Africa's Talk Africa* covered the 2014–2015 West Africa Ebola outbreak. Both *AJE* and *CCTV Africa* distinguish themselves from other global TV networks by developing an alternative market positioning, which alludes to a promise that their coverage of African news will be less affected by Eurocentrism or Americanocentrism. The article seeks to examine how they report major event in Africa and whether their approaches are different. This article intends to understand the strategies of the two 'media of the South' in mediating events of general public concern, both locally and globally, through comparing how *Talk Africa* and *Inside Story* covered the Ebola outbreak in 2014.

*Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA)*, a subsidiary of the state-owned Qatar Media Corporation, was launched in 1996 by the Emir's decree, as an Arabic news and current affairs satellite TV channel, with the expressed aim of providing a different perspective and a public voice

in a highly Westernized global news market (Geniets 2013, 65). Its parent company, the *Al Jazeera Media Network (AJMN)*, developed into a fully fledged television network consisting of over 20 channels, with its English Channel *AJE* established in Doha in 2006. The global expansion of *AJMN*, in particular in regions of conflicts, has contributed to its growth in reach and popularity.

According to its founding document, the *AJMN* is an 'independent public institution'. It is state-funded in terms of financial resources, but independent operationally, and the 'editorial line and policy is set independently from any governmental interference' (Figenschou 2014, 27). Figenschou (2014) argues that this independence is relative and conditional, and that *Al Jazeera* has to be understood in terms of a dialectic of autonomy (organizational and journalistic) and dependency (economic and political) resulting from a complex interplay between national, regional and international factors and aspirations. As a public diplomacy tool, the *AJMN* serves Qatar's foreign policy objectives. These policy objectives are largely in line with those of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to ensure an interlinked survival among the GCC members that they can rely on each other's support in the face of serious domestic crisis (Figenschou 2014, 35), and, on the other hand, also to protect the country from its powerful Gulf neighbours. She argues that as long as the *AJMN* 'maintains its editorial independence, or at least is perceived to be editorially independent by the outside world', its reputation for the professionalism of its coverage and its capacity to set agendas on the global stage will contribute to the growth of Qatar's influence in regional affairs, and hence serve its foreign policy objectives (Figenschou 2014, 44–45). A journalist from a British Newspaper *The Guardian* remarks that the *ALMN* 'helped put Qatar on the map, politically and diplomatically' (Whitaker 2011).

While the 'domestic services' agenda manifests its allegiance to an Arab political entity, the international services agenda identifies with a wider range of concerns. *AJA*, in its profile, claims to be 'a broadcasting service with Arab affiliation and global orientation' (Geniets 2013, 70). The corporate profile of *AJE* goes further to highlight its 'counter-hegemonic' mission to represent a view from the South. It says that the channel 'aims to balance the information flow between the South and the North'. Self-proclaimed as 'a voice of the South' (*AJE* 2014), the area of central importance for *AJE* is set as the Middle East and Africa, where it has unique access to some of the world's most troubled and controversial locations in terms of media coverage due to its 'non-Western media' outlook which relates to its middle-eastern identity as an *AJMN* member (Figenschou 2014).

*AJE* featured *Inside Story*, a daily half-hour discussion show, which was launched at the news channel's very beginning in November 2006. *Inside Story* broadcasts every day at 17:35 GMT, or 19:35 Doha time. The programme is modelled after the sister channel *Al Jazeera Arabic's* news programme *Ma Wara al Khabar (Behind the News)*, and will go 'beyond the headlines' to analyse and investigate news stories in a fresh light (Reeve-Cook 2006).

Before the launch of *AJE*, only a few of the contemporary satellite news channels had a global reach, and all of these are major English-language international players: *CNN*, *BBC*, *CNBC*, *Bloomberg TV* and *Fox News*. Although there is a 'strong trend of regionalism in the international media since the 1990s and an unprecedented growth of more localized transnational satellite channels since the mid-1990s in the Arabic-language market, Spanish-language Latin American market, and the English-Language market' (Figenschou

2014, 6), the voices of major English-language international broadcasters dominate the global public sphere. Since the launch of *AJE* in 2006, it has been available free-to-air through satellite and cable providers around the world (Al Jazeera 2009) and has become a mainstay in Africa because of the extent of *AJE*'s Africa coverage. In 2011, both African audiences and media observers were expecting the arrival of an Al Jazeera news channel in Swahili that will be headquartered in Nairobi (*Variety* 2011). What they met was the disappointment that this plan was dropped in 2012, while *Al Jazeera* reportedly invested the money in European football broadcast rights (Nairobi-wire.com 2012).

Both *AJMN* and *CCTV* have been dependent on the rulers of their countries, the former economically, and the latter politically. As China's largest television network, *CCTV* is a public institution, owned by the state and run by a group of executives, who are not only appointed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) but also have positions in the party-state bureaucracy. *CCTV* enjoys certain privileges, including exemption from revenue tax. Taking one-third of the national television advertising market, *CCTV* is financially self-sufficient, earning 70% of its revenue from advertisers (Mi et al. 2014). Politically, *CCTV*'s role as 'an important news & Public Opinion organization' and 'the voicing organ of the Party, the government and the people' has been made explicit in its statement (*CCTV* 2009).

While *CCTV* generally adheres to the role of being instrumental to state propaganda, its international arm, *CCTV NEWS* (formally known as *CCTV-9* or *CCTV International*), which was launched in 2000, defines itself as 'China's contribution to greater diversity and wider perspectives in the global information flow' on its English-language website *English.cntv.cn*. With a special focus on China, the English-language channel prioritizes events with relevance for Asia and, more generally, all developing countries. *CCTV News* provides 'international audiences with a window into understanding China and the world at large' (<http://english.cntv.cn/>). The Spanish and French programmes on *CCTV 9* later developed into separate channels, *CCTV-E* and *CCTV-F*, in 2007. *CCTV International Arabic* and *CCTV International Russia* were launched in 2009, to serve China's diplomatic objectives in China–Arab and China–Russia relations. With the exception of *CCTV Africa* and *CCTV America*, the Overseas Programme Centre (OPC) produced all the contents of the *CCTV* international channels in Beijing (Mi et al. 2014). Unlike *AJMN*, which had broadcasting Centres outside Qatar from early in its history, it was not until the launch of *CCTV Africa* in 2012, that *CCTV* made its first major step into overseas expansion.

The launch of *CCTV Africa* in Nairobi, in stark contrast to the aborted launch of Al Jazeera Swahili, came as a surprise to African and international communities. Gagliardone points out that such a feat would not have been possible without the visit to Nairobi in April, 2011, of Li Changchun, the head of the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP. In 2010, journalists from *CCTV NEWS* were sent to Nairobi to set up a small newsroom, which was to become the continental hub for Africa. *CCTV*'s modest operation in Nairobi was quickly scaled up into the largest initiative of an international broadcaster in Africa, presumably with the boost, backing and strategic adjustment from the CCP leadership, which was generated from Li's visit to Kenya (Gagliardone 2013). *CCTV America*, the more ambitious and well-resourced experiment of *CCTV*'s expansion abroad, was expected to be the first, but it was launched a month *after* the launch of *CCTV Africa* in Nairobi. This is just one example to illustrate that the international mediascapes in

Africa is shaped by the ebb and flow of international might and the complex interplay between national, regional and international factors and aspirations.

Both *AJE* and *CCTV Africa* distinguish themselves from other global TV networks by developing a market positioning of being 'the voice of the South' or 'the Voice for Africa'. Positioning itself as 'A new voice for Africa' (*CCTV Africa* 2013), *CCTV Africa* has approximately 150 staff in Nairobi. It produces one and a half hours of news programme each day and two and a half hours of weekly news magazine, all in English. In an interview with *CCTV Africa's* manager in June 2013, he disclosed the prospect of *CCTV Africa* developing into a full channel with news broadcasting in French, English and Kiswahili within two years, a plan that has yet to be materialized. During the period of the study, *CCTV Africa* consisted of three programmes in English that reflect its focuses on African news, perspectives and personalities, respectively: *Africa Alive*, a one-hour news programme; *Talk Africa* – a 30 minute weekly talk show that mainly discusses politics and current affairs in Africa; and *Faces of Africa*, 30-minute documentaries that feature: 'people in Africa, either prominent or ordinary, who have great stories to tell about Africa' (*CCTV* 2015).

Even though it is not clear to what extent *Inside Story* was an inspiration for *Talk Africa* at the latter's beginning stage, the two programmes have many elements in common. The formats of the two programmes are almost identical. Both start with several minutes of short video clips offering briefing on the news event that will be the centre of the upcoming discussion, and then the anchor recaps the situation and opens the discussion from the studio in Doha or Nairobi and presents the guests of the day. Video clips sent back by reporters dispatched to the field are to provide more information that can help to make sense of the situation, before the anchor and panellists in the studio begin to give their opinions. The anchor will talk on line with guests and correspondents from far away, when necessary. In both programmes, the style of conversation resembles a group interview, where guests speak only when they are asked to do so.

In each show, *Talk Africa* would invite one or two wired guests or correspondents, in addition to the two guests sitting in the studio, while *Inside Story* regularly invites three guests, either in the studio or online. Both shows invite primarily academics, representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), journalists, and other types of professionals. Despite the fact that politicians were not often participants in the two shows, bureaucrats were invited when their positions were suitable. The absence of interactions with the audience in both shows suggests the austere style of one-way communication in the two programmes.

Why pick the Ebola coverage as the subject of this study? Because the case presents a vivid example of how current affairs talk shows can, on the one hand, inform the public about what they should know about an epidemic that presented immediate threats to the African and even global audience, and on the other hand, could ease people's apprehensions about it through talking with those who were on the frontline of fighting Ebola. Both *Inside Story* (hereafter *IS*) and *Talk Africa* (hereafter *TA*) dedicated considerable airtime to this public health crisis, which was of great regional and international importance, with, however, different time lines and frequency. This is the largest and most complex Ebola outbreak since the Ebola virus was first discovered in 1976 and has claimed the lives of 11,284 people (World Health Organization, hereafter as WHO 2015).

## Methodology

Why compare media contents, and are they comparable? Hallin and Mancini (2004) justify the use of comparative media studies in social studies with their classic book *Comparing Media Systems*, that comparative studies sensitize us to variation and to similarities, and this can contribute powerfully to concept formation and to the refinement of our conceptual apparatus. The merits of a comparative study, as Hallin and Mancini (2004, 2) suggest, are that:

it enables us to notice things we did not notice and therefore had not conceptualized, and it also forces us to clarify the scope and applicability of the concepts we do employ. Secondly, it allows us to test hypotheses about the inter-relationship among social phenomena.

While this study does not compare *AJE* and *CCTV Africa* as two media systems, it supplements what is lacking in Hallin and Mancini's analysis: the process of meaning production in media organizations.

Comparing media content by treating them as discourses with embedded ideological judgments is nothing novel. A typical example is Liebes' (1992) study comparing Israeli television's coverage of the Palestinian *intifadeh* and American coverage of the Gulf war ('our' wars) with American coverage of the *intifadeh* ('their' war). The study reveals widely different framing mechanisms, that in 'our' war coverage, television journalists tend to demonize the opposite side, sanitize the suffering inflicted on it, personalize 'our' side, and decontextualize its aggressive actions. News media clearly are responsive to major events, but how they report a particular issue is significantly influenced by their own agenda. Keeplinger and Lemke (2015) test this hypothesis by examining press coverage in Germany, Switzerland, France and the United Kingdom on the 2011 Japanese seaquake, the *tsunami* it caused, and the nuclear disaster of Fukushima. German and Swiss media concentrated on Fukushima and stressed its relevance to domestic nuclear plants, whereas French and British media placed a greater emphasis on the *tsunami* and rarely related the nuclear catastrophe in Japan to domestic nuclear programmes. The bias of statements on nuclear energy presented in the news is found to be related with the views of journalists. This kind of bias can be more salient when the broadcasters are closely aligned to government policy.

Both *AJE* and *CCTV Africa* position themselves as representing an alternative perspective remarkably different from those of Western television networks. This study aims to bring to light the nuances and variations on this side of international media spectrum. The case of Ebola outbreak presents a pertinent example for discerning the possible difference between the news agenda of the two networks when reporting the story. It shall shed light to the nuances that had previously been ignored, and then discuss what implications those nuances may have for the two so-called alternative media.

*IS* produced 10 episodes, starting from 29 March 2014, when the Ebola disease reached a major city, Conakry, for the first time, followed by four episodes in July and August, when the outbreak was gaining momentum, three episodes in September and October, when the effort to contain the outbreak was seemingly winning, especially in Nigeria, where the public health system has been effective in enforcing quarantine procedures and containing the virus. Its last episode on Ebola was produced in March 2015, provoked by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)'s harsh criticism against the World Health Organization

(WHO) and to review the collaboration of international communication in the battles against Ebola, and the work that lay ahead in order to be prepared for the next outbreak.

*TA* ran its first episode on the outbreak significantly later, on 17 August 2014, possibly triggered by China's sending medical teams and equipment to Liberia and Sierra Leone. Once it began to cover the outbreak as an important topic, *TA* produced three consecutive episodes on 17, 24 and 31 August, on the topic, followed by one episode in October discussing international aid to the countries affected, and one in November praising the triumph of the Nigerian government. *TA's* last episode on Ebola, 'Africa after Ebola' (24 May 2015) discussed the vision of a pan-African solution for containing Ebola, and was triggered by Liberia's declaration of being Ebola free on 9 May. Although the number of *TA* episodes on the outbreak is half of that of *IS's*, this does not mean that *Talk Africa* took the outbreak less seriously, given that *IS* runs six episodes each week, while *TA* produces only one episode per week. As shown in Table 1, in 2014, the Ebola outbreak was unmistakably the most important story for both *Al Jazeera English* and *CCTV Africa*.

In Table 1, I numbered the 16 episodes of approximately 25 minutes in length each, as *IS1–10* and *TA1–6*. This table documents all the episodes dealing with the coverage of Ebola by the two programmes.

The discursive nature of mass media communication predisposes media studies to qualitative analysis. As Stuart Allan puts it, 'the "moment" of the broadcast news text is a fluid one; its meanings are dispersed in ways which analyses of actual newscasts as static constructs or artefacts cannot adequately address' (Allan 2004, 90). The news programme is made to present an intelligible, codified definition of the reality, which is regarded as most 'natural' and representative of 'the world out there' (Allan 2004). This ideological process happens through the translation of the known facts of a situation into intelligible audio-visual signs arranged into discourses. Hence, a qualitative method is used, not only to provide plausible interpretation that can capture the practice of meaning creation in the content production, but also to allow the reflection on the interpreting process in the research. Given the relatively small size of the corpus, it is possible to combine qualitative paradigms, code analysis and quantitative content analysis of the corpus. The use of a quantitative method is to measure effectively and to compare the vector of making geographical reference in the reporting. It supplements the qualitative

**Table 1.** Overview of *Inside Story* and *Talk Africa's* coverage of the Ebola outbreak.

Timeline	<i>Inside Story</i>	<i>Talk Africa</i>
29 Mar. 2014	Ebola: How far away is a cure? (IS 1)	
4 Jul. 2014	Ebola epidemic: Global responsibility? (IS 2)	
31 Jul. 2014	Ebola: A disease out of control? (IS3)	
5 Aug. 2014	Stopping the world's worst Ebola outbreak? (IS4)	
17 Aug. 2014		Ebola crisis (TA1)
24 Aug. 2014		Ebola's cost (TA2)
28 Aug. 2014	Ebola response: Self-preservation? (IS5)	
31 Aug. 2014		Ebola crisis: Liberia, Sierra Leone still fragile (TA3)
17 Sep. 2014	Confronting Ebola (IS6)	
5 Oct. 2014		Fighting Ebola (TA4)
15 Oct. 2014	Are we losing the race against Ebola? (IS7)	
23 Oct. 2014	Ebola: Winning a battle, but losing the war? ((IS8)	
2 Nov. 2014		Nigeria beating Ebola (TA5)
3 Mar. 2015	How effective will the Ebola Summit be? (IS9)	
24 Mar. 2015	Is the world prepared for another Ebola Crisis? (IS10)	
24 May 2015		Africa after Ebola (TA6)

analysis by both corroborating and contradicting it, ushering in a dialectic synthesis by the end of discussion.

By quantitative analysis, I refer to the systematic analysis of the locations and identities of the informants mentioned in the episodes, so as to examine the intertextuality that the narratives of these episodes have with other social contexts. I codified all the visual references to geographic locations in the 16 episodes, first by marking them from the following occasions until no new location emerges:

- (1) the whereabouts of the correspondent/interviewee/informant, as indicated by the caption and the anchor;
- (2) the location of wired expert/guests, as indicated by the caption and the anchor and
- (3) the location where the video clips had been filmed, as indicated by the caption and the anchor.

Then I counted the frequency with which each location appears in both programmes, and calculated the ratio of the appearances of one location against the entire appearances of all locations. Finally, I grouped the data under four categories: Africa, North America, Europe and Asia for comparison.

Paradigm and code analysis have been applied to the televised textual contents of the 16 episodes. The paradigm analysis of a text describes a method searching for a hidden pattern of binary oppositions that are embedded in it and that generate meaning, as the most important relationship in the production of meaning in language is that of opposition (Berger 1991, 18). To conduct the analysis, I transcribed the 16 episodes and took notes when the audio-visual narratives seemed to elaborate on certain ideas. Then, the synopses of these narratives were compared to see if they were supposed to construct oppositional contrast. It turns out that pairs of contrasting meaning do emerge in some of the corpus but are absent in others. I return to the interviews with the personnel from *CCTV Africa* so as to verify the result of the textual analysis, and to reveal the complexity of covering the topic of an African epidemic from Africa by two international broadcasters.

Not unlike its sister TV news programmes, the format of the news talk show is regarded as being authoritative, and its discourse is 'composed of language and visual images, organized by codes and conventions which the news viewer has to perceive and recognize in order for the viewer to construct sense' (Bignell 1997, 113). How the meaning is constructed in the talk show narrative lies in the process of how reality is mediated through the establishment of relationship among various factors and actors mentioned or represented in the talk. I have examined how the programmes use signs connoting authority, such as news clips or contributions from a reporter who functions as an 'institution voice' (Bignell 1997, 120), or infographics that connote 'technological sophistication and contemporaneity' (Bignell 1997, 116) to create the focuses of the discourse and thus to structure it.

Another focus of this analysis is the encoding/decoding of social texts in the two programmes. Berger defines codes as being highly complex patterns and secret structures of associations that we all learn in a given society and culture. It would be interesting to examine what happens when different cultures meet, interpret and misinterpret each other, as staged in the studios of the two programmes. The audience, or the decoder,



as Hall (1980, 163) argues, has a significant role in being able to interpret the message in different ways, and 'the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical'. Umberto Eco suggests the idea of 'aberrant decoding' that echoes Hall's argument. According to Eco, 'codes and subcodes are applied to the message (...) in the light of a general framework of cultural reference, which constitutes the receiver's patrimony of knowledge' (Quoted in Berger 1991, 24). The theorization about codes and the process of encoding and decoding assumes a culturally homogenous social space. My study aims to test the models in the real sociocultural field centred around the action of covering the 2014 Ebola outbreak. As it is obviously impossible to talk about the decoding process without proper audience research, this research aims to reflect on the codified social meaning in the television narratives: the title sequences of the programmes, the structure of the talk shows, the rituals and norms in the studio, the way the host questions the guests, and, of course, the visual signs and narrative codes. Such information may hint to whom the programmes communicate, and may give us an idea about the initial strategic purpose of the communication.

Last but not least, I visited the headquarters of *CCTV Africa* in Nairobi in June 2013, and interviewed the director of *CCTV Africa* and its star journalist, Beatrice Marshall. Their accounts of the market positioning and operation routine of *CCTV Africa*, when synthesized with what I learned from other Kenyan journalists and researchers, provide important context for my understanding of the channel's road map in Africa and its content strategy.

## Still a long way from being the 'media of the South'

### *Different geographic references*

As already mentioned, the two discussion shows have a lot in common in terms of structure. This is evident in the episodes on Ebola as well. As observed from the episodes, in both programmes, four groups of voices play crucial roles: the voice of the reporter *framing* the topic; the voice of the informants in the video clips *fledging* the observational conclusion by the reporter; the voice of the host *representing* the interests of the public; and the voice from the guests *elaborating on* and *debating* the issue.

In his study of media semiotics, Jonathan Bignell argues that immediacy is a key mythic meaning<sup>1</sup> of television news. Bignell (1997, 116) considers the use of signs, like the on-screen caption 'Live', to denote the simultaneous occurrence. This could be done by a spoken linguistic syntagm from the news presenter, like 'joining me now from Sarajevo is our correspondent there, Jeremy Bowen', that serves as a connotation of immediacy. As the voices and/or images of the reporter and the informants from the ground connote a mythic meaning of 'immediacy', the voices of the host and guests connote another mythic meaning of 'authority', as the guests are invited because they are either experts or representatives of an authoritative organization. Both programmes use captions indicating the location and identity of the people who are speaking to emphasize the mythic meaning of 'immediacy' and/or 'authority', through highlighting the role of the person speaking as a witness of what was happening. As the outbreak occurred in several countries and involved various international organizations, geographical references that were made in the programmes carry considerable significance. I coded all

the indications of geographic locations of the reporters, informants and guests, as these indicated locations (Freetown, for example) are places where the programmes strategically reached out with their budget, regarded by the producers as the centres of happenings, rendering either the sense of immediacy and/or authority, around which the narratives and discourses should unfold.

The research finds drastic differences between the two programmes in deploying their geographical focus throughout their Ebola coverage. *IS* depends almost exclusively on researchers from British research institutions as sources of authoritative scientific information (five guests), in addition to its strong links with London-based NGOs (four guests) and media circles (two guests). *IS*'s penchant for British sources contributes to the centrality of London in its news source network. This can be proportionally matched by the centrality of Nairobi in *TA*'s network, as all the guests functioning as analysts with professional backgrounds are from Nairobi-based institutes. For instance, Dr Kizito Lubano from the Kenya Medical Research Institute was invited to four of the six episodes.

*IS* deployed more resources to the three affected countries than *TA* did. Footage and interviews sent back by *AJE* reporters on the ground from Liberia, together with the wired discussion with staff from MSF in Monrovia and Freetown, make up 50% of the geographical references emerging from the episodes. In comparison, *TA* made significantly less contact with the affected countries.

The geographical deployment shows a strong bond between *IS*'s studio in Doha and *AJE*'s broadcasting centre in London, and between *TA*'s studio in Nairobi and *CCTV*'s headquarters in Beijing, and the Washington DC Studio of *CCTV America*. This suggests that the globalizing strategy of the two networks is effectively leveraging resources among their branches worldwide, and their reporting on African affairs can be piggybacked on production teams elsewhere.

The 91 pieces of coded geographical references are extracted from three types of access to information: interviews, conference talks and the studio guests' comments. *IS* has a remarkably high rate (25.4%) of getting information from interviews conducted by its journalists, if compared to *TA*'s 7.5%. The latter is more reliant on conferences as a major source of information (22.5%) than is *IS* (15.6%). Eleven of the 13 informants quoted in *IS*'s coverage are Africans from the affected countries, ranging from government ministers to market traders, contributing to the coverage's vividness and an enhanced sense of immediacy. *TA* had only one African interviewee in its coverage, while most of its information sources from Africa, other than the invited guests, are non-Africans or taped conference talks. *CCTV Africa*, as a newcomer in the region, may yet have to foster its rapport with the key informants. That being said, its capacity in reaching out to the privileged members of the African élite is impressive. *TA* invited more African guests than did *IS*. Sixty-one per cent, or 8 of the 13 guests presented in *TA* episodes are Africans, while 3 of the 29 guests (10.3%) from the *IS* episodes are Africans. The contrast suggests a hierarchy of sources that is embedded in the production of *IS*'s Ebola coverage, that African people are predominantly used as informants, but not as guests who can participate in public debates staged by the programme. *TA*, on the contrary, seems to host a forum where African voices are taken as a primary source of authority and expertise. Given the overwhelming majority of the production team in *CCTV Africa* is Kenyan, the team might continue to exploit their network established from their previous professional

career in Nairobi. More importantly, keeping a dominant presence of African experts in the studio accentuates the overall appearance of 'Africanness' that is so pronounced in the channel's mandate.

### **Putting things in perspective: stabilizing versus scrutinizing**

Both *TA* and *IS* in their Ebola coverage tackled some salient concerns and themes: the soaring death toll, the spreading of the fatal virus, the lack of resources in the affected countries, the damage to local and regional economies, and the preparation for a possible return of the virus. The ways in which they frame their narratives around the above themes are fundamentally distinct from one another.

In their first episodes on the outbreak, both *IS* and *TA* familiarized their audience with the current situation. In the first episode 'Ebola: How far away is a cure?' (*IS1*), *IS* highlights the high fatality rate of the disease. The host and guests talked about the nature of the virus, the way that the virus spreads, and the length of its incubation period. The host, Mike Hanna, was persistent in wanting to know 'how contagious is the virus?' and 'why does the disease have greater movement than in the past?' and 'how far away [it can go] before we know something about the virus?' To such questions, the guest scientists were unable to give optimistic answers, using the metaphor of 'a scientific hunt' to describe the challenges to understanding the Ebola virus. (*IS1*)

*TA's* first episode on Ebola, 'Ebola crisis' (*TA1*), was produced in mid-August when China dispatched its first cargo carrying medicine and equipment aid to Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. The opposition between *disease* and *development* is built up in the discourse, using China and Africa as two contrasting examples. This episode predominantly focused on the Chinese medical aid, starting with a video interview in which the Chinese ambassador in Liberia emphasized 'the community of China and Africa'. Then the hostess, Beatrice Marshall, asked a Chinese public health expert from Beijing (by wire) to elaborate on Chinese medical aid to Africa. The latter explained that China has gained experience in handling public health emergencies through dealing with SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) and avian influenza, and the growth of the Chinese economy has given China more capacity to aid others. Between the hostess and the two guest African experts, the style of question and answer in this episode can be described as being 'solution-oriented', as the guests identify the cause of the slow reaction from local and regional governments as being a feature of 'low level of development' and 'not much investment in building the health system', and they suggest that 'the government must be held accountable for the service', and that the 'African Union should be leading and must be very visible and effective', and 'investment in the social system can lead to economic growth' (*TA1*).

In *TA's* third and special issue on Ebola (*TA3*), *CCTV News English* sent its star journalist, James Chau, to interview his old acquaintance, Prof. Peter Piot, who co-discovered the Ebola Virus in 1976, in Zaire. The main message of this half-hour interview is, in Piot's words, that the 'solution can only come from within'. In spite of the bleak development of the epidemic then (August 2014), more good news than bad news was disseminated, as is evident in these sound bites whose meaning was accentuated by captions such as 'Renewed interest in search of a cure', 'Mortality rate dropped to 50%', 'Nigeria, Congo and DRC worked in a quite prompt way', 'Travel bans don't make sense' and

'Compassionate use of trial drugs can be justified' (TA3). Not many factual aspects relating to the virus were discussed in addition to the retrospective account about the discovery of the virus.

In defining the fight against Ebola, *IS* invited predominantly guests representing Western organizations, in particular MSF, whose voice was presented in 8 of the 10 episodes. *TA*, on the contrary, staged no personnel from MSF, or from any other Western aid organizations that were working on the ground. This meant that audiences lacked first-hand information about what was going on in the field.

*IS* gathered more observations, and therefore understanding, about the difficulties in the field. *IS2* and *IS3* discuss the challenges, such as 'people are very mobile in the areas', 'the misinformed communities hid dead bodies and infected people, so that they were not taken away by strangers', 'the ignorance from both the developed world and local society' and 'the lack of human resources on the ground' (*IS2*), 'the non-existent national Medicare system in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea' and 'the lack of understanding of the virus, due to its complexity' (*IS3*).

*TA*, in its third and fourth episodes, discussed the challenges of containing Ebola in general terms. The adversity was mainly ascribed to social problems: 'the countries affected have hardly recovered from civil war, resulting in dysfunctional systems, a lack of trust in the authorities, poor housing' (*TA3*) 'slow reactions from the national government' and the lack of leadership by the African Union (*TA4*). In its fifth episode, 'Nigeria beats Ebola: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone ravaged', Nigeria's success story is juxtaposed with the distressing conditions in the other affected countries (*TA5*).

Both programmes discussed Ebola's economic and social cost. *TA* had an episode entitled 'Ebola's cost' (*TA2*), which, instead of deliberating on the damage caused, is centred on an IATA conference held in Sandton, Johannesburg, South Africa. The argument established through this episode was that an aviation ban in West Africa was not necessary, and hence should not be enforced. However, the hostess did ask a cost-related question to David Owiro, a Kenyan economic analyst, about whether the economy in the three countries could recover. David Owiro answered with reassurance: 'Certainly. They have huge extractive sectors, even if the agriculture sectors are out, they will still generate income. They have to think about internal economic enhancement' (*TA2*).

The *IS* episodes made persistent efforts to establish the financial and social cost of Ebola. In *IS3* on 31 July 2014, the host asked the medical director at International SOS about the economic impact and human cost that Ebola will have on the area. The latter replied that to give:

the absolute cost is difficult. It is a full blown blow on the economy, the working force, and the soft side of social living such as tourism, leisure. Investments will be fewer. Increased medical needs, protection equipment (...). The true cost is much higher than the cost of treating patients. (*IS3*)

In mapping the costs of Ebola, issues such as food shortages and spiking prices (*IS4*), the suffering of the children deprived of their parents and of six months of school education, and the stigma associated with local medical personnel who have fought against Ebola (*IS10*) were discussed in the *IS* episodes. The cost of rebuilding the social system was

estimated at 350 million U.S. dollars (*IS10*), which raised the question of how that amount of money could be raised as well as best used.

In the wake of the outbreak, both *TA* and *IS* discussed the imminent issue of what could be done before the next Ebola outbreak. *IS* staged a talk in March 2015 that was triggered by an MSF excoriation slamming the governments of the affected countries and the United Nations and WHO for their failure to react until a Spanish doctor died. The issue of accountability is central in the talk, which turned into a semi-public hearing between the hostess Daren Abughaida, Christopher Stokes from MSF, and Christopher Dye, the head of the WHO's Ebola Epidemiology team. Facing the pungent criticism by Stokes, Dye admitted that WHO 'would have responded in January' but had to wait for a definitive diagnosis of Ebola, which only emerged in March. Stokes went on to accuse governments of withholding crucial data under political pressure and of causing the delay in the general response. He also criticized the upcoming WHO agenda for confusing its own responsibilities with those of the governments. Dye responded that there was a plan to create an independent panel to assess the situation and to direct further actions.

*TA* aired its post-Ebola episode (*TA6*) on 24 May 2015, after Liberia was declared Ebola-free on the 8th of May. This episode casts a different light on the role of WHO. It begins with a video clip in which Margaret Chan, the Director-General of the WHO, was delivering a speech at the WHO conference. Chan assured that WHO 'will learn the lesson and make the right changes' and she promised new approaches 'to ensure [that the] necessary resources are available, to use the proper methods and accountable funding, and to establish a global workforce'. The *TA* studio neither challenged the WHO leader's rhetoric, nor made further inquiry into the implementation of the new approaches, before the microphone was given to Margaret Harry, the spokesperson of WHO. Her status of authority was validated by the hostess asking her to introduce the situations in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and to comment on Nigeria's success. When she was asked, 'What is WHO's future response to the next outbreak?' Harry offered some self-critical comments, saying that 'we didn't work well with the local communities', but she did not come up with Margaret Chan's line about the promised change inside WHO, but answered rather ambivalently that '... nature will come back; many other infections in the animal can come to the human world'. A more explicit suggestion about future solutions came from Dr Lubano from Kenya, who advocated that Africa needs to develop its own mechanism of disease prevention, a process in which the African Union needs to play a more proactive role (*TA6*). In comparison with the more critical approach of *IS* towards the WHO, *TA* asked no harsh questions nor caused any verbal confrontations, but asked easy questions that did not target or criticize the WHO.

In reviewing the handling of the outbreak, one recurrent issue was whether the fact that the Ebola disease was from remote, poor countries has marginalized research on the virus, and hence hindered the development of a vaccine, as well as the reaction from the international community and organizations following the outbreak. The question about whether the handling of the virus, the disease and the outbreak, has been politicized by the central-peripheral power relations, to use a term Wallerstein used for his World-System theory (Wallerstein 1974), was put forward many times in both programmes. The host on *IS1* asked frankly whether it was because the disease was from an underdeveloped country, and hence attracted less resources to understand it. The scientist guest answered, 'That's true, in part' (*IS1*). The *TA* hostess, Beatrice Marshall, also raised the

ethical question: ‘why are the drugs given to one American and two Spanish persons, while thousands of Africans were dying’ (TA2). She questioned whether, had the outbreak been in Europe, the WHO would have reacted differently, to which Harry answered: ‘no, but if so, it would have been picked up early’. ‘Diagnosis might come earlier. International organizations are under international health regulation’ (TA6). African guests, who felt disillusioned by the West, expressed their resentment. A Kenyan economic analyst remarked: ‘The West is not interested in Ebola, because it was not affected. We have to put money and to address the concern over Ebola; we need to set our own solutions and agenda’ (TA2). Dr Lubano stressed that ‘Africa’s self-reliance and self-governance need to be strengthened’ (TA2).

Throughout TA’s Ebola coverage, several pairs of oppositions have emerged from its narratives (see Table 2). However, such salient oppositions are not to be found in the IS episodes, whose narratives are structured differently and more or less problem-centred. Most of its scrutinizing questions and detailed discussions are organized around severe issues and challenges, leading to straightforward technical explanations and factual or individual observations, leaving little room to mould any ideological opposition.

Berger notes that the criticism of semiological analysis holds that such analysis does not discover a system of relationships but, instead, invents them (Berger 1991, 19). Berger argues that the binary oppositions that are encoded in such a way as to be ‘naturally’ realized, which is partly corroborated by the analysis of the TA episodes here. The three pairs of oppositions that have been detected so far stand out as conspicuous captions, the framing by the host, and the prepared questions posed by the host, and these work in tandem to achieve the effect that the audience are expected to actively make the association between a pair of oppositions by themselves. These associations consistently built up through the episodes. Not coincidentally, the finding upholds the argument that Chinese media in Africa are practising a sort of ‘constructive journalism’, which ‘can be both positive and negative, with the purpose of finding solutions’ (Wan 2015). Zhang, a Chinese media professor who stresses the importance of constructive journalism in China-Africa media reporting, argues that such journalistic practices are solution-

**Table 2.** Pairs of opposition that have emerged from *Talk Africa’s* Ebola coverage.

Disease	Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The spreading of the fatal disease</li> <li>• The soaring death toll</li> <li>• No known cure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The example of China in dealing with a public health crisis</li> <li>• Investments in social infrastructures is the key</li> <li>• Solution from within</li> </ul>
Challenges on the ground (in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paralysed public service system</li> <li>• Lack of trust in authorities</li> <li>• Misinformed local communities</li> </ul>	The exemplary success of Nigeria <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technology used to track contacts</li> <li>• Better public awareness resulted from effective public communication</li> <li>• Effective surveillance</li> <li>• Better public health administration</li> </ul>
Negligence of Western countries and international communities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slow reaction from WHO</li> <li>• Lag in development of Ebola vaccine</li> <li>• Using experimental drugs on Western, but not African, patients</li> </ul>	Self-reliance by African people <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African governments should invest in R&amp;D of vaccines</li> <li>• African Union should take leadership</li> <li>• African governments should re-evaluate their public health systems</li> </ul>

focused in a journalistic context, pushing the public and institutions to find solutions by offering the necessary information, and setting media agendas that stimulate the public's concerns and debates (2014). In the case of the Ebola outbreak, the *Talk Africa* programme seems to adopt a stabilizing role that tends to pacify its audience, through pitting development against disease, providing successful examples, and showing the direction for the future. Whether this strategy has served the needs of the African public is questionable, as not much contextual knowledge was delivered in these episodes. The idea of solution-oriented reporting and constructive journalism can be simultaneous alternative and mentally inhibiting. On the one hand, it does contribute to mitigating stereotyping of the Third World in the First World media discourses as places of crisis and failed states, but on the other hand, the risk of attaching ideological tasks to journalism that can eschew critical journalistic investigations of vetting tough challenges and exploring into inconvenient situations is evident in *TA's* Ebola coverage.

### Discussion: is there a 'real' voice of the South?

The launch of *CCTV Africa* in 2012 is the first case in which sufficient resources were invested to guarantee a continental reach, in terms of content, coverage and audience, leading the way for competitors to follow. *BBC World* responded by launching *Focus on Africa* and *Al Jazeera English* 'followed suit by launching new programmes with an emphasis on Africa, including *South to North* and the series *Tutu's Children*, which were added to the existing feature programme *Africa Investigates* (Gagliardone 2013, 31). Gagliardone sees *CCTV's* vast resources as a decisive advantage, which liberates editorial decisions from financial constraints (2013, 32). My own visits to *CCTV Africa's* headquarters in Nairobi in 2013 confirmed the impression that financial concerns did not worry the executives.

China may lead in taking the strategically important positions, but not necessarily redressing the challenges in the African mediascape and taking the standard of pan-African television journalism to another level. Three years after its creation, the production of *CCTV Africa* has yet to be in a position to compete with *AJE* in terms of immediacy and professionalism, as has been suggested by this comparative study. Many of the African journalists that I talked with during the fieldtrip admitted that their first choice for regional and international news is *AJE*, and 'if something happens, I will first switch to *AJE*, because they are always fastest', Mohammed Ali, a Kenyan television investigative journalist commented. *CCTV Africa's* news desk is staffed by a team consisting primarily of African and international journalists. Beatrice Marshall, the host of *TA*, told me that she and her team have full control over what they produce; that the supervision from the management in Nairobi and Beijing is seldom more than nominal.

Censorship may not be necessary if the African-led production team has already identified with *CCTV Africa's* official goal of 'strengthening a positive image of Africa in Africa and worldwide' (Gagliardone 2013, 32). The new image of Africa is that the continent 'while still consumed by intractable problems, also offers a vast array of opportunities to African citizens and to those who believe in the continent' (Gagliardone 2013, 32). Having paid a close examination of the media discourse *CCTV Africa* produced on the Ebola outbreak, this study asks a new question: is the new image of Africa to be produced

at the cost of overt social criticism in the journalistic practice? If the answer is going to be a YES, then it can herald a hazardous development.

In her pioneering study of *Talk Africa*, Zhang Xiaoling points out that many recurring themes that have emerged from the programme reinforce China's stand, such as 'Condemnation of Western Intervention in African affairs', 'stressing the importance of stability in reporting elections and democracy movements', 'reforming international systems' and 'Chinese support without conditions'. (Zhang 2013, 80). These themes allude to the idea of 'constructive journalism' described by Zhang Yanqiu. *CCTV Africa* can be viewed primarily as a flagship of Chinese official media, that not only aims to guide global views on contemporary Sino-Africa relations, but also to create a discourse on international affairs, as an alternative to a 'Western' discourse (Zhang 2013).

However, as my comparative study has shown and as I have argued here, the influence of the Chinese agenda is deeply embedded in the superficial construction of the 'African-ness' of *CCTV* in Africa's media discourse. On the one hand, the Chinese management distances itself from the channel's daily operation, which has been delegated to a team of African (more specifically Kenyan) journalists and anchors. On the other hand, the channel is serving China's diplomatic objectives of maintaining stability and order and of legitimating China's presence in Africa, a mission that cannot be achieved if the channel is not widely accepted as Africa's own TV channel. This strategic concern leads to a non-interventionist attitude towards the channel's editorial autonomy and an unmistakably African outlook in its staffing profile. This instrumentalism can pre-empt a more critical approach and prevent the channel from serving a broader range of public interests, as demonstrated by *TA's* Ebola coverage, which omitted or underrepresented many major aspects and controversies of the outbreak.

*AJE's* challenge in fulfilling its role as 'the voice of the South', as shown by *IS's* Ebola coverage, comes from their persistence in their 'mainstream journalistic framing, terminology and worldview', if in Figenschou's word (2014, 70). In the case of Ebola coverage, the problematic underrepresentation of African voices at the roundtables is alarming, but it does not come as a surprise, as the source hierarchies in *AJE* that were identified by Figenschou have always existed. She underlines the internal criticism within the *AJE* newsroom, particularly from those with a professional background from Arab or other southern news channels, concerned that the channel has been too cautious and unwilling to move outside what they see as a Western oriented narrative, and consequently that controversial voices are denied access on *AJE*, a channel that is predominantly run by former managers of the British channels *ITV* or *ITN* (Figenschou 2014, 99). The case of Ebola coverage is another example that *AJE's* source hierarchies may have jeopardized *AJE's* self-proclaimed role as the Voice of the South or 'the Voice of Voiceless' (Figenschou 2014, 99).

*CCTV Africa* and *AJE* represent the emerging powers in the trend of localization of global news and global production of local news (Geniets 2013; Figenschou 2014; Thussu 2007; Orenge 2005). In this historical process, the two channels' existence in Africa has annexed a new sense of importance to the continent's media market, which may boost the job market for local journalists and help to strengthen national and regional media. Viewing Africa as a mature market for news consumption and a resource-rich field for news production, both *CCTV Africa* and *AJE* dedicated extensive coverage to the continent, which have augmented Africa's voices in the global arena but far from being Africa's own voice. Instead of representing the voice of the South, the two international broadcasters



bring along their unique business models and their own perspectives and objectives into the construction of African discourse. This case study of their Ebola coverage exemplifies how their predispositions, be it source hierarchies or embedded solution-oriented rhetoric frame, can inflict on their representation of African affairs, and possibly feed into the production of a new kind of Africa's Otherness.

## Note

1. By 'mythic', he means the making of myth, drawing on the work of Roland Barthes. Myth here refers to ways of thinking about the media product, or ideas that are structured to send a particular reader or viewer of the text (Bignell 1997, 16).

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