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A Chink in the Charm? A Framing Analysis of Coverage of Chinese Aid in the Ghanaian Media

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ABSTRACT

Much recent scholarship focuses on China's growing global influence. Of note is China's recent charm offensive on Africa through the soft power of aid and trade. With development assistance being key to asserting global influence, it would seem that by pursuing a no-strings-attached approach to aid, China has propositioned itself to Africans as a benevolent development partner. Yet China's business activities in Africa may represent a chink in its image. In Ghana, there is a palpable Chinese presence in nearly every facet of life (including energy, construction and trade). Across these spheres, Chinese elements are the object of criticism. For instance, their involvement in illegal mining ("*galamsey*") is blamed for the degradation of lands and pollution of water bodies. The question evoked by these cross-purposes of aid and trade is: how is China's influence in Ghana reflected in its image as a development partner? We argue that the media is key to answering this question, given that they reflect and affect the opinions of citizens on national interest issues. The study thus explores how the local Ghanaian media frame "China in Ghana" to their audience as a means to shape local opinions and discourses on the matter.

KEYWORDS

China; media framing; country image; Ghana; China–Ghana relations

Introduction

As part of efforts to assert her newly found global influence, China has since the early 2000s been on a continent-wide charm offensive to sign up trade/development partners in Africa (Wasserman 2012). Heralded by the Forum on China–Africa Co-operation (FOCAC), which seeks to foster partnership and mutual benefits between China and Africa, China's diplomatic and trade expansion in Africa has steadily deepened (Enuka 2011). For instance, under the auspices of FOCAC, China has cancelled debts owed to it by several African nations and facilitated opportunities for increased export from Africa to China (albeit in raw material form). Indeed, in just a decade after the launch of FOCAC, China became the continent's largest trading partner, having surpassed the European Union and the United States (Buthelezi 2011).

As a major power block on the continent, it is not surprising that Ghana is an object of China's overtures in this growth and global expansion agenda. Ghana is one of the first sub-Saharan African countries to have established diplomatic relations with China. China and Ghana formalised diplomatic relations in July 1960, soon after Ghana's

independence in 1957. Following this, a strong diplomatic bond was nurtured between the two countries, with Ghana's first president, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, even lobbying for China's re-instatement in the United Nations and also supporting China in her border conflict with India in 1962 (Idun-Arkhurst 2008). China has reciprocated this affection by providing varied forms of assistance to Ghana, including the construction of Ghana's National Theater, offices of the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs, schools, hospitals and a hydro-electric dam.

Records from the Chinese Embassy in Ghana position China as Ghana's biggest trading partner with trade volumes averaging \$6 billion (gh.china-embassy.org) since 2014. China is a major financier of Ghana's aggressive economic transformation agenda, starting with its cancellation of Ghana's substantial debts (Danquah 2017). China has also signed several loan agreements with Ghana, including a \$13 billion agreement with the China Development Bank in 2012, a \$9 billion China Export-Import (Exim) Bank deal for transport infrastructure development, a \$250 million deal for the rehabilitation of the Kpong water works (Amanor 2017) and a \$15 billion investment in the economy (Segbefia 2017). Indeed, so important is China to Ghana's developmental efforts that oversight of its economic relations with the country is vested in the second highest office in the land, the Office of the Vice President (Myjjoonline.com 2017).

Besides development financing, China is also a major exporter of consumer goods to Ghana, supporting the rising spate of consumerism in the country. With Chinese migrants having made their first entry into the country in the late 1950s (Ho 2008), Ghana presently registers a palpable Chinese presence in nearly every aspect of social and economic life. There are Chinese nationals and firms in mining (Crawford, Agyeyomah, and Mba 2017), trade (Giese 2017), construction (Yankson et al. 2017) and even prostitution (Aidoo 2016). With most of these activities being facilitated by loans/grants from the Chinese Exim Bank and China Development Bank (Varrall 2016), there are few limits to the areas in the Ghanaian economy in which China can participate. On the reverse side, China also serves as a major destination for Ghana's raw material exports. Clearly, China is a key player in Ghana's development agenda.

Yet China's advances in the continent, and in Ghana in particular, have not occurred in a vacuum, being subject to criticisms from differing interest blocks. Rather, China's advances in Africa (Ghana) have occurred within the context of competing interests and opinions both locally and internationally. On the one hand, China is the object of praise by several African leaders and citizens who applaud her efforts to support the continent's transition out of poverty via a south-south collaboration (Mensah 2012). On the other, China is heavily criticised for its *modus operandi* of development assistance to Africa. Players in the development assistance and global trade world accuse China of being overly aggressive in its competition with countries such as the USA to win African hearts (markets and raw materials) (Paterson and Nothias 2016). It is often accused of deploying a "no-holds-barred" approach in its dealings with African countries, enabling corrupt African leaders to side-step good governance conditionalities by European and Western donor nations (Curran 2016). Continent-based criticisms have also emerged, including that by the former Nigerian central bank governor (Lamido Sanusi) accusing China of perpetrating a new colonialism (Simmons 2014).

Locally, Chinese business people have been accused of widespread illegal mining activities, pirating local textile designs, retailing goods in contravention of local laws

and disregard for workers' rights (Modernghana.com 2011). Resistance to the Chinese influence in the local economy has been championed mainly by local trade unions, which insist that Chinese influence is stifling local entrepreneurship. For instance, the Ghana Union of Traders Association (GUTA) has constantly decried Chinese infiltration of local retail trade leading to the collapse of several retail businesses. Similarly, the Textiles Garment and Leather Employees Union (TEGLEU) of the Ghana Federation of Labour is up in arms with the government to curb Chinese pirating of local textile products, which is blamed for the collapse of several indigenous textile manufacturing giants resulting in an estimated 23,000 job losses (Acheampong 2015).

In the midst of these competing and often conflicting conceptualisations of China's interests and activities in Ghana, it remains to be understood how the local media frames China's cross-purposes of aid and trade in Ghana. As the main platform for providing the information that serves the organising framework of citizens' understanding of China's activities in Ghana, the media is influential in shaping opinions of Sino-Ghana relations. How is the relationship between China and Ghana portrayed by the media? How is the local audience invited to view China in Ghana? Is China characterised in local news content as friend or foe? This article explores these questions. To understand the context within which the relationship between China and Ghana has been portrayed to Ghanaians, we begin with a brief overview of the Ghanaian media environment and its place in the information exchange and opinion formation ecosystem within the country.

The media in Ghana and the opinion process

Ghana has perhaps one of the most buoyant media and communication landscapes in Africa. Following her return to democracy in 1993 and subsequent liberalisation of the airwaves in 1995, Ghana has seen the development of a very vibrant media landscape. Presently, there are over 350 operational FM stations, 51 TV stations and about 25 active newspaper titles dotted across the country (Yeboah-Banin and Amoakohene 2018). Most of these media outlets are online either in the form of websites or social media pages. Internet penetration levels pegged below 40% are still low but on a steady increase (ITU 2016). But internet adoption is closely linked to a widespread use of mobile telephony, which presently stands at around 130 mobile handsets for every 100 people. With such an active plural media, audiences have a lot of options on where to go for news and information on anything, including China. At the same time, the pervasive nature of the media presence also means that the audience is constantly surrounded by and exposed to mediated information on various matters, including China's aid and trade activities in Ghana. Most Ghanaians admit to consuming media daily (Afrobarometer 2014) at home, at work, on the journey to and from work and even while shopping (Yeboah-Banin and Amoakohene 2018). In this high media consumption ecology, radio enjoys the most patronage, followed by TV and increasingly online media. Newspaper readership is generally on the decline, yet newspaper (and to some extent online media) content remains very relevant as it serves as the basis for most morning radio and TV content (Thompson and Yeboah 2013).

Important to note here, too, is the trend of re-broadcasting news across different radio stations operating under the same umbrella either by ownership or affiliation arrangements. By this trend, topical issues that gain prominence in the national capital, Accra,

which hosts most political and economic activity, often also assume prominence at the grassroots. All this happens in the context of a very liberal environment, which is ranked even freer than that of the UK and USA (Reporters Without Borders 2017). Journalists are free to actively interrogate and query any issue they consider to be important to the development of the country, including China's activities in Ghana.

It is within this context of free and active media that China's activities in Ghana are to be situated. There is ample opportunity for people to become informed about China's dealings in the country given the extent of media pervasiveness. Yet the onus to leverage this opportunity to inform the public on China rests with the media. Given their access to the populace, the media is best positioned to affect people's opinions on any issue, including China's dealings in Ghana. By the issues covered, and given their access to people's minds, the media are equipped to effectively engage with China and ensure they are neither taken advantage of nor ill-positioned to leverage any benefits. It is with this in mind that this study sought to understand how the local media frames China's cross-purposes of aid and trade in Ghana.

Methodology

Sampling strategy

To gauge how China's interest and activities in Ghana are framed, we analysed the manifest editorial content published between November 2016 and October 2017 by four leading local news media. The *Daily Graphic* (public) and *Daily Guide* (private) were selected as the two most widely circulated newspapers in the country. Similar considerations drove our choice of the two online news portals given their trail blazer roles in their respective industries. First, myjoyonline.com was selected due to its position as the online portal of the first, and until recently the most popular, private radio in the country *Joy FM*, while peacefmonline.com is the online version of *Peace FM*, the nation's most popular and first local language private radio station. Beyond their affiliations with these traditional media, however, both websites have established reputations as very popular within the Ghanaian media landscape.

We chose the November 2016–October 2017 time frame because at its centre (May–June 2017) lies, on the one hand, extensive news coverage of China's provision of 50 million Chinese Renminbi of aid to the Ghana armed forces (the charm), and, on the other, Chinese immigrant involvement in illegal mining (the chink). To sample from this period, we constructed a week's worth of content published by the selected media to represent each month in the period. Both newspapers are published six times each week (Monday–Saturday). Accordingly, 72 news days were sampled for each (6×12). The online news sample was slightly bigger ($84 = 7 \times 12$) given that the selected outlets publish throughout the week. Overall, therefore, the study's sample included 312 news days with 144 representing the two newspapers and 168 representing the online news portals.

Given, however, that the study's unit of analysis was the China-related individual editorial content (news stories, features, editorials and letters excluding adverts and other commercial content) rather than the day of publication, we proceeded to identify such stories in the content published on each of the selected days. The basic criterion used

was that each content sampled must have China at its centre. In other words, the story needed to be about China; activities of Chinese firms and immigrants in Ghana; events taking place in China but having direct implications for or direct mention of Ghana, among others. The strategy used in selecting such stories from the newspaper sample involved a keyword search (“China”, “Sino”, “China-Ghana”, “Sino-Ghana” and “Chinese”) in the headline, lead or main body of stories. For the online media, we applied the keyword search to the respective monthly archive files hosted on the websites (taking care to select only stories returned after the search whose publication dates were within the sampled days).

Data instrument

Two main considerations guided the development of the research instrument. First, we sought to glean from the technical devices used in news coverage and presentation (e.g. headlines, photographs, placement and sources) how news about “China in Ghana” is presented to the Ghanaian news-consuming public. Secondly, we also sought to establish from rhetorical devices (e.g. metaphors, phrases and adjectives used to describe China) what imageries are potentially invoked about “China in Ghana” in the minds of the audience. To achieve these intentions, the instrument made provision for coding the variables as shown in Table 1.

Inter-coder checks

The data for the study were collected by multiple coders drawn from the 2017–18 graduate class of the Department of Communication Studies of the University of Ghana. To

Table 1. Coding protocol.

Variable	Definition and categories coded
Name of media	Newspaper: 1. Daily Graphic 2. Daily Guide Online: 1. myjoyonline.com 2. peacefmonline.com
Publication date	Please specify the date of publication of story
Story placement	Newspaper: 1. Front page 2. Page 3 3. Back page 4. Spread 5. Editorial page 6. Other pages Online: <i>Not applicable</i>
Enhancement	Newspaper: 1. None 2. Picture 3. Illustration (charts) 4. Illustration (cartoon) 5. Other Online: 1. None 2. Picture 3. Illustration (charts) 4. Illustration (cartoon) 5. Video 6. Audio 7. Other
Story type	1. Straight news 2. Feature 3. Editorial 4. Letter to editor 5. Opinion 6. Other
Source of story	1. Routine 2. Enterprise (Journalist’s initiative) 3. Press release 4. Inter-media sourcing 5. News agency 6. Not indicated
Framing	1. Episodic (event-based/one-off reporting) 2. Thematic (adds context)
Story topic	1. Political (diplomatic relations; political interference/tensions etc.) 2. Economic 3. Social 4. Other
Story tone	<i>What potential perception(s) does the story invoke about China in the reader’s mind?</i> 1. Positive 2. Negative 3. Neutral
Story tone (Language)	<i>Quote any adjective, metaphors or phrases used to describe China that illustrates the portrayal as negative of positive as coded in ‘Story tone’.</i>

assure that the data did not suffer biases from the coding process, we conducted a comprehensive training session during which the meaning and measurement of each variable in the study was thoroughly discussed. As a further robustness measure, we tested the extent of inter-coder agreement across the coders. Five coders were assigned the same stories from each of the selected media and asked to code using the instrument. A test of agreement using Cohen's Kappa formula and the ReCal3 inter-coder reliability software returned 100% agreement among them.

Findings

Story characteristics

Overall, 88 stories were assembled from the newspaper ($N=44$) and online ($N=44$) samples. Initial analysis showed that these tended to predominantly report routine (ready-made) news about China's activities in Ghana. As shown in Table 2, for both the newspaper and online samples, stories were largely the result of coverage of routine events or culled from other media. The majority of newspaper stories reported routine events on China's activities such as launches of projects and infrastructure, while most

Table 2. Sample characteristics.

Variable	Newspaper sample		Online sample	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Story source				
Routine (event)	31	70.4	16	36.3
Enterprise	4	9.1	2	4.5
Inter-media sourcing	5	11.4	26	59.1
Not indicated	4	9.1	–	–
Total			44	100.0
Story type				
Straight news	36	81.8	39	88.6
Feature	3	6.8	1	2.3
Opinion	1	2.3	2	4.5
Other	4	9.1	2	4.5
Total	44	100	44	100.0
Story topic				
Political	15	34.1	15	34.1
Economic	17	38.6	21	47.7
Social	11	25.0	4	9.1
Other	1	2.3	4	9.1
Total	44	100.0	44	100.0
Story enhancement				
None	7	15.9	2	4.5
Picture	36	81.8	38	86.4
Illustration	1	2.3	2	4.6
Other	–	–	2	4.5
Total	44	100.0	44	100.0
Framing				
Episodic	27	61.4	31	70.5
Thematic	17	38.6	13	29.5
Total	44	100.0	44	100.0
Placement				
Front page	3	6.8	Not applicable	
Page 3	1	2.3		
Spread	4	9.1		
Other pages	36	81.8		
Total	44	100.0		

stories in the online sample were sourced from other media organisations including news agencies. Either way, the local media does not appear to be keenly interested in interrogating the China–Ghana relationship enough to initiate their own inquiries into the issues therein.

It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the stories followed a straight news format, to the neglect of analytical story forms such as features and opinions. Four out of every five stories were presented in the straight news format, reporting the “who, what, when, where, why and how” of events. This evidence corroborates our other finding regarding how stories were framed, episodically or thematically. We found that in both the newspaper and online samples, at least three out of every five stories were framed as one-off episodes with little effort to contextualise the issues in stories to bring into focus the bigger picture of which they are a part.

With regards to the subject matter of issues on which China’s activities in Ghana are presented to the Ghanaian media audience, the study finds that the emphasis is on issues of an economic, political and social nature (in that order). Both samples had the majority of the stories focusing on China’s economic activities in Ghana, followed by a substantial volume on political news, which we found interesting given the oft-touted claims of China pursuing policies that favour non-political interference. Of the three categories coded, stories exploring the social dimensions/impacts of China’s activities in Ghana are the least covered, suggesting the local media’s seeming disinterest in interrogating these dimensions in pursuit of their watchdog roles. This may be linked to the tendency within our sample for stories to be routinely generated and packaged as straight news rather than resulting from journalists pursuing investigative reports to present comprehensive reports that inform Ghanaians about China’s activities in Ghana.

Framing of China’s interests and activities in Ghanaian news

Beyond understanding how the local media present news about China’s activities in Ghana, this study has as its primary concern an understanding of how such activities are framed for the local audience. The premise is that the media, by their access to the minds of audiences, are able to shape the latter’s opinions on any given issue. Accordingly, how news about China’s activities in Ghana is framed reflects, to some extent, how the media invites (whether deliberately or not) the local audience to think about issues of China–Ghana relations.

To explore this, we assessed the tone of stories in the sample by applying the question, “What potential perception(s) does the story invoke about China in the reader’s mind?” to each story analysed. Then, we proceeded to analyse the language with which such perceptions were invoked by identifying adjectives, metaphors and phrases used with China as referent. We found that, generally, stories in the sample used frames with the potential to make Ghanaians think positively rather than negatively of China’s activities in Ghana. Across newspaper (46%) and online (39%) samples, we found stories to be dominated by positive frames, followed by those with negative frames (34% and 32% respectively). The data suggest a tendency for the sampled media to communicate posture (positively or negatively) in China–Ghana news rather than toeing the objective middle line. This is because, of the three tone categories coded (positive, negative and neutral), the least occurring category was “neutral” (Table 3).

Table 3. Attitudes invoked towards China in local news content.

Tone	Newspaper		Online	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Positive	20	45.5	17	38.6
Negative	15	34.1	14	31.8
Neutral	9	20.5	13	29.5
Total	44	100.0	44	100.0

When China is framed positively, it is described with language that highlights the benefits of its presence in Ghana to Ghanaians. Examples include metaphors describing the China–Ghana link as bearing “fruits” and accounts of China’s recent achievements as signposts “worth emulating” that should guide Ghana’s developmental agenda. Other such frames cast China as a no-strings-attached “sincere support(er)” of Africa or as a benevolent giver from whose largesse Ghanaians “are benefitting”.

In contrast, China is also the object of uncomplimentary framing expressing worry at its growing influence in Ghana, notably the impression that it is “taking over” the country and sometimes making Ghanaian leaders have “to beg”. China is also frequently used in proximity to words such as “risk”, “political price” and “illegal mining”. There are also references to Chinese overtures to dilute Ghana’s democratic and free media credentials by seeking to “gag the local media”. There are also common references to Chinese immigrants’ illegal activities and unethical business practices in the country. Examples of such frames are reflected in headlines such as “Chinese woman grabbed with guns”.

A key tool used in framing the news is the prominence with which a news item is presented. Where a story is placed in a bulletin signals how important media gatekeepers deem the issues raised in it. For instance, a story on the front page of a newspaper is deemed to have been assigned more prominence than that appearing on inside pages. Likewise, stories appearing on the same page may be differentiated in their prominence by the size of the headline and even the amount of space dedicated to it.

Here, we sought to establish whether any differences attend the prominence with which positive and negative stories about China’s commercial and development assistance interests in the country are treated. To do this, we explored the relationship between story placement and tone in the sample. However, we were constrained to focus this analysis on only the newspaper sample considering that the online news sample was drawn from archived stories for which reason we had no means of determining their prominence levels (e.g. through headlining).

As expected, most of the stories about China appeared on the generally non-prominent inside pages. Only two of the 44 stories about China appeared on the front page and these were both framed to leave a negative impression about China in the minds of readers.

Table 4. Relationship between tone and placement.

Placement	Tone			
	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Front Page	—	2 (13.3%)	1 (11.1%)	3 (6.8%)
Inside pages	20 (100%)	13 (86.7%)	8 (88.9%)	41 (93.2%)
Back page	—	—	—	—
Total	20 (100%)	15 (100%)	9 (100%)	44 (100%)

Given the small sample, we admit the data show little nuance with regards to the question posed. However, one cannot help but notice the fact that they were both negatively toned (Table 4).

Factors shaping the framing of China in Ghanaian news

Beyond understanding how China is presented to the local audience and the language with which this is done, the study sought to explore the foundations of such framing. First it sought to establish whether framing of China-in-Ghana news has anything to do with how the stories are sourced by the sampled media. Is the positive framing of China linked to the fact that most of the stories were sourced from routinised sources, including public relations events by Chinese firms and diplomatic entities in the country? Would the framing of China in local news look any different if the local media initiated their own stories on the issue?

According to the data, the question may be answered in the affirmative, although to a very minimal extent. In both samples, the few instances where stories were generated out of reporters' enterprise and initiative were accompanied by negative frames of China's activities in Ghana. In fact, none of the enterprise stories in either sample framed China in a positive light. Thus, it appears that the generally positive image of China's growing influence in Ghana may be linked to the low levels of enterprise journalism. A cross-tabulation of the tone frame (negative: positive), presentation frame (episodic: thematic) and story sourcing further corroborates this conclusion. It suggests that China would suffer in portrayal should the Ghanaian media produce more enterprise stories with context that tell a big-picture story about China's business and donor activities in the country (Table 5).

We explored the issue further to ascertain whether ownership type has any implications for how positively or negatively China is framed in local news. This is because past research suggests a tendency for private media to be more critical on such issues than public and state-owned media. Given that both online media platforms sampled are privately owned, we excluded the medium from this analysis as there was no basis for comparing them on this variable.

While on the face of it there does not seem to be an obvious critical note to how the private newspaper frames China's influence in Ghana, a closer look at its positive–negative frames ratio belies this point. We find that this newspaper was just as critical as it was

Table 5. Relationship between tone and mode of story generation.

Story sourcing	Tone: Newspaper sample			Tone: Online sample		
	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Routine	13 65.0%	10 60.7%	8 88.9%	8 47.1%	4 28.5%	4 30.8%
Enterprise	0 .0%	4 26.7%	0 .0%	0 .0%	2 14.3%	0 .0%
Inter-media sourcing	5 25.0%	0 .0%	0 .0%	9 52.9%	8 57.1%	9 69.2%
Not indicated	2 10.0%	1 6.7%	1 11.1%	---	---	---
Total	20 100.0%	15 100.0%	9 100.0%	17 100.0%	14 100.0%	13 100.0%

complimentary to the image of China. This is in sharp comparison to the *Daily Graphic*, which framed 50% of its news on China positively and 32% negatively. Thus, by considering the within-group weights of the frames, we find that the public newspaper generally frames China's activities in Ghana more positively than does the private newspaper. Besides, the weighted effect of neutral stories in the *Daily Guide* (25%) is substantially higher than that of the *Daily Graphic* (18%) (Table 6).

Discussion

This study attempted to discover the manner in which the Ghanaian media frames news about China's development assistance and trade activities in Ghana. This is based on the premise that what the media says about China and how it says it are critical for shaping public opinion about China's interests, activities and growing influence in Ghana. We argue that China's growing influence in Africa has made Chinese people very visible on the ground, creating a need for the local people to frequently engage and interact with them. More importantly, concerns about China's soft power approaches to global dominance mean that citizens may be ill-positioned to interrogate and challenge any imperialist exploits. For this reason, the media becomes a key avenue for people to inform and educate themselves about China's activities and position themselves to leverage benefits without sacrificing their opportunities/rights unduly. It is against this background that we sought to understand the framing with which China is presented to Ghanaians.

Primarily, we find that China was generally framed positively in the sampled news. In contrast to Mawdsley (2008, 523), who found China to be represented as "amoral, greedy, and coldly indifferent ... battling over a corrupt and/or helpless Africa", our sample tended to paint a positive picture of China. In her analysis of China in Africa as represented by British newspapers, she concluded that Western nations are framed positively while China is the object of stereotypic framing that pits her against the interests of Africans. Here, we find the opposite; China is largely framed positively, with phrases/words such as "bearing fruit" (describing dividends of China–Ghana relations) and "support" (capturing the essence of what China gives to Ghana) being quite common. This supports Paterson and Nothias' (2016, 116) finding that China is sometimes framed as a partner "transforming Africa". The evidence also converges with Wekesa's (2013) finding of a positive framing of China in East African media.

Yet one may argue that this evidence nonetheless supports Wasserman's (2013) assertion that China is not represented altogether negatively or positively in local African media. While our data point to the binary framing logic advanced by Mawdsley (2008), we also find that quite a substantial volume of the sample presents a negative framing of China. Thus, we find support also for the notion of a balanced view of China in local

Table 6. Ownership and framing of China in the news.

Tone	Media ownership	
	<i>Daily Graphic</i> (public)	<i>Daily Guide</i> (private) (%)
Positive	14 (50.0%)	6 (37.5%)
Negative	9 (32.1%)	6 (37.5%)
Neutral	5 (17.9)	4 (25%)
Total	28 (100%)	16 (100%)

media put forward by Wasserman (2013), by which he argues that framing of China is neither starkly positive nor negative. For instance, we found words and phrases such as “taking over”, “risk” and “illegal” to be commonly used in close proximity to “China” in the news, supporting Paterson and Nothias’ (2016) finding that China is framed as predator. Perhaps, as Wasserman (2015) says of the South African media, our sampled media are “cautiously optimistic” in the effort to both communicate the benefits of China in Ghana while at the same time remaining the battleground for contesting the Chinese influence and rallying public opinion against any imperialist take-overs (Paterson and Nothias 2016).

Over and above this finding, though, is the evidence that the sampled local media does not appear to actively engage the subject of China’s activities in Ghana. Most of the stories sampled were based on routine events where journalists are invited to cover ready-made news. Only 10% of the sampled stories were the result of investigative and enterprise journalism. To the extent that routine news events (e.g. press conferences) only tell organisers’ side of the story, an over-reliance on them may result in a skewed view of things. For instance, where the Chinese Embassy in Ghana holds a press conference to make an announcement, we do not expect the platform to be used to project negativities about China’s engagements in Ghana. In contrast, where journalists initiate and investigate their own stories, there is more opportunity to explore varied angles to the issue and to use diversified sources including ordinary people (Hansen 1991). Enterprise news also signals that the media deems an issue worthy enough to devote resources to developing a story on it. Accordingly, we argue that the low level of enterprise news on China’s activities in Ghana is worrying as it signals low media surveillance of the Sino-Ghana relationship. In contrast to Olorunnisola and Ma’s (2013) finding that some African media actively police China’s activities, our sample reveals that the local media may be failing in this aspect of its watchdog role.

We find support for this argument in evidence on how news about China’s activities in Ghana is packaged for presentation. We explored whether news about China’s activities in Ghana is presented using thematic framing to critically assess the issues and invite the public to approach such news with a critical and questioning mind. According to Aarøe (2011), when news is presented thematically rather than episodically, the broader context surrounding an issue is brought into perspective through evidence. In contrast, episodic framing treats issues in the news as one-off events, denying the audience their connection to other events. Thematic framing suggests a keener interest to explore issues implicated in a story by providing context that shapes audience engagement. Thus, should our sample have been predominantly framed thematically, it would suggest an interest to rally public attention towards actively interrogating China’s activities in Ghana. As it stands, this does not appear to be the case.

Indeed, a look at the links between China’s representation in the news, the framing perspective (thematic or episodic) and the mode of story generation corroborates this perception. China’s image is markedly negative in enterprise as well as thematically framed news, suggesting that the generally positive framing is mainly the result of inertia in interrogating China’s activities in Ghana. To deliver on its surveillance oversight on the Ghana–China link, the local media must dedicate more resources to generating their own stories rather than collecting them in ready-made form from political actors and Chinese elements in the country. In a democracy, the media has a duty to hold duty-bearers to account by questioning their trans(actions) on behalf of the people. If, as Olorunnisola and Ma (2013, 41)

report, Africa (Ghana) is “yet to mount an audacious response to China’s ‘grand strategy’”, it would take “media practitioners’ conscientiousness in terms of their surveillance role” (Olorunnisola and Ma 2013, 57) to provide backup through their coverage. The media must ensure that coverage of China moves beyond routine news to active interrogation of the balance of benefits and threats presented by Ghana’s relations with China (and any foreign nation seeking to assert its global influence through engagements with Ghana, for that matter). For, if indeed Africa (Ghana) is the battleground for the imperialist project (Paterson and Nothias 2016), and the media is a venue for contesting such moves and motives, then the local Ghanaian media need to adopt a more critical approach to how it engages the subject of China’s presence, activities and influence in Ghana.

Study limitations

The study makes important findings that China is framed positively in the local news, and that is a function of a general disinterest in actively surveilling China’s activities in Ghana. However, the implications are limited by the small size of the sample both in terms of media (four out of over 500 local media platforms) and stories sampled ($N = 88$). Secondly, we relied solely on content analysis and therefore cannot present any evidence from media practitioners on the considerations that go into gate-keeping practices governing coverage of China’s activities in Ghana. Accordingly, our claims on the local media’s seeming disinterest in interrogating and policing Ghana’s increasingly close links with China are based solely on manifest content they published rather than any information on latent motives and methods. We therefore admit that while the study’s findings are insightful, they should be taken with the knowledge that they do not include actual contact with media practitioners’ opinions and attitudes towards China, although these, admittedly, will shape their coverage of its activities in Ghana.

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