

“Manufacturing Consent” revisited. China’s image in selected South African media in the opening phase of the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

As the Covid-19 pandemic reached South Africa in early March 2020, fear and distress gripped the nation. In the various debates, discussions, and narratives, one notable absence was any substantial critique of China in South Africa media. This is odd given the ample evidence concerning the origins of the virus. With so much of the pandemic narrative shaped by the media, what constitutes truth and fiction became opaque and murky. Added to this malaise are allegations that China is exporting its authoritarian press censorship culture abroad. In developing a methodology which asks if “China is crafting its image”, this research examines a sample of South African media between March and June 2020 to ascertain if negative critiques of China are being censored within South African media. Two dailies, *The Star* and *The Citizen*, as well as a number of online media publications are used as the study’s sample. The data collected is cross analyzed against the five filters of Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model to determine if China is *Manufacturing Consent* within South Africa media. There is conclusive evidence that censorship is taking place within South African media.

Keywords: Censorship, Manufacturing Consent, Media analysis, South Africa, Covid-19

1. Introduction

By April 2020, an estimated 3.9 billion people, or half the world's population were in lockdown so to contain the spread of Covid-19 (Meo et al. 2020). With so many people virtually under house arrest, the appeal and agency of the news grew considerably with breaking news becoming highly sensationalized. As radio, television, and online media flooded the world's attention at the hourly rate with morbid statistics, the threat of second and third waves, causality modeling, or possible vaccines, Covid-19 came to occupy a large amount of space in our collective imaginations.

In the fury of so many voices, opinions, and editorials, what came to constitute fact and fiction became unclear. Contributing to this opacity was an aggressive narrative pushed by mainstream media which only put forward regurgitated information without critical analysis nor did tolerate alternative views. In a study by Kashdan (2020), a psychologist by profession, he questioned the consequences of suppressing alternative ideas and perspectives during the Covid-19 crises. To Kashdan, there is something profoundly wrong in claiming a "single right approach" in lieu of the absence of reliable data to derive courses of action. The mis-information surrounding the Covid narrative led in part to Rapeli and Saikkonen (2020) to call reporting on Covid-19 as the "biggest disinformation crises we have ever faced".

The above observations helped to inform the basis of the 2020 *Freedom House Annual Report*¹ which remarked on the stifling of independent media during the pandemic making accountability difficult, and hampering the dissemination of vital information (Freedom House 2020). 91 of 192 countries (47%) experienced restrictions on the news media as part of the response to Covid-19 and Government restrictions on free speech and criticism were imposed in at least 72 states (Ibid). In the Czech Republic, Serbia and Italy, journalists were prevented from attending press conferences, accessing information from health authorities or documenting the operations of law enforcement officials. In Turkey, several journalists were detained in reprisal for reporting on the pandemic. In Slovenia, a journalist who filed an information request about the measures adopted by the government to fight the pandemic was the target of a smear campaign by media close to the ruling party. In South Africa and the DRC journalists were attacked and in Rwanda a journalist spent 11 months in jail for reporting on Covid. In

Zimbabwe, the Comoros, and Tanzania, reporting on Covid issues has proven difficult if not impossible.

Throughout the world independent journalism is being stifled and one example which highlights this point is the case of hydroxychloroquine. Touted by the former US President Donald Trump as a possible remedy to Covid-19, the mainstream media were quick to paint the claim as lunacy, suggesting that the drug would “enhance” the effects of Covid-19. Using studies published in the prestigious academic journals of the “*Lancet*”² and the “*New England Journal of Medicine*”³, mainstream media successfully persuaded public opinion on the dangers of the drug (Joseph 2020, Piller & Servick 2020). Resultantly, research trials on the drug were abandoned as the focus of Covid-19 zoned in on “lockdowns.” However, in June, both journals retracted their study’s after it was found that the data collection process was faked. The readily available, affordable, and easy to manufacture aspects of the drug could be a reason why a narrative on its controversy was pushed. Whatever the case maybe, reporting on Covid-19 appears to follow one mainstream narrative.

In a cursory analysis of South African media, one alternative view notably absent from the Covid-19 debate was critique of China. While an international discourse developed concerning an inquiry into the origins of the virus, South African media gave no attention to this. Given the virus’s massive impact on the South African economy, it is natural to inquire on the origins of such a devastating event. The lack of such a narrative within South Africa points in the direction of censorship. Thus this research sets out to find if China is censoring negative reporting of itself. This question will be answered with the help of the Manufacturing Consent theory (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Manufacturing consent refers to the elites, governments, and big finances stranglehold on what is perceived as “independent media” (Herman & Chomsky 1988). In the media’s role of defending social hierarchies of capitalism, they create propaganda to protect the ruling classes. This is achieved through reporting through a narrow, biased lens which ensures that audiences or “the public” accept their position in the unequal and unfair structure of society.

To ascertain whether censorship is occurring, a sample of South African print and online media between the months of March and June 2020 is analyzed for critiques of China. While the lack of critiques proves nothing, the research frames its aim by asking if China is crafting its image? Censorship is not only about

removing information deemed harmful, but about replacing that potential negative information with something “newsworthy.” This analysis, will be cross-analyzed against Manufacturing Consent’s “Propaganda Model” to ascertain if China is censoring South African media.

The research topic is important because growing evidence shows that China is exporting its censorship values effectively weakening global rights mechanisms (Link 2002: 7, Mackinnon 2008, Cook 2013, Xu 2014, HRW 2020). King (2013) noted that China’s efforts are tantamount to the “most extensive efforts to selectively censor human expression ever implemented”. The 2019 edition of *Reporters Without Borders* ranked China’s press situation as very serious, the worst rank on the five-point scale (RSF 2019). What was previously known as the *Great Firewall* which prevented Chinese citizens from seeing foreign criticism, has evolved into the *Great Cannon* which is attacking critics themselves, whether they represent a foreign government, are part of an overseas company, or join real or virtual avenues of public protest (HRW 2020). Elizabeth C. Economy differentiated the concepts noting where the *Firewall* blocked, the *Cannon* is able to adjust and replace content as it travels across the internet (Economy 2018, Hern 2015). In its totality, this research advocates how free speech, a vital component of democracy, is cleverly being impacted on. Democracy needs a healthy and free media to hold government accountable, cover and promote a wide range of ideas, serve as a forum for a spectrum of voices, highlight and investigate problems, and encourage active citizenship and informed decision-making (Lovaas 2008: 36). As noted by Prasad and Flier (2020), more lives may be lost by suppressing or ignoring alternate perspectives, some of which may at least in part ultimately prove correct.

2. Manufacturing Consent

The 1986 “Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media” by Michael Parenti brought attention to the subtle but profound ways in the which the media influence and manipulate the public’s perception of reality. A key to this manipulation is disguising the fact that the media is the controlling institution of capitalism, which serves the interests of the rich and powerful elite. To Parenti, the persistent media failure when taken in the aggregate, serves as a conscious reification of the political and social status quo in America, that the media are a

conservative force rather than a liberal one (Berlet 1987). He argues that the mass media “exert a subtle, persistence influence in defining the scope of respectable political discourse, channeling public attention in directions that are essentially supportive of the existing politico-economic system” (Berlet 1987). Parenti writes:

the most important effect of the news media is that they set the issue agenda for the rest of us, choosing what to emphasize and what to ignore or suppress, in effect, organizing much of our political world for us. The media may not always be able to tell us what to think, but they are strikingly successful in telling us what to think about (Parenti 1986: 23, Lovaas 2008).

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky took the work of Parenti further in the 1988 *Manufacturing Consent* which provided a searing critique of media and their relation to power. The authors described the mass communication media as “effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, self-censorship, and without overt coercion”

In developing a “propaganda model” (PM), the authors traced the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public (Herman and Chomsky 1988). The central tenet of the PM thrashed the idea that the media are not the “check” on political power that they portray themselves to be. The PM was described by Shemeli (2016) as an “analytical framework that attempts to explain the performance of US media in terms of the basic institutional structures and relationships within which they operate.”

The PM consists of five filters. Each filter helps to distort the reporting of news and creates an agenda which suits the powerful. The first filter refers to the ownership, profit orientation and size of the media. As a business, media owners are first and foremost interested in profitability and the welfare of their stakeholders. They envision growth to reap higher profits. Their evolution into mega corporations, trans-national corporations and conglomerates has an impact on what is then considered to be “news.” Effectively big finance trumps critical journalism as journalists (employees) often end up defending the interests of elites, governments, and institutions. Journalists are not normally kept under

control through top-down intervention, but by journalist's internalization of priorities and definitions of news worthiness that conform to the institutions policy (Herman & Chomsky 1988). As journalism becomes run like a business, news is diminished as profit takes center stage (Lovaas 2008: 62).

The second filter; advertising, implies that media corporations generate very little revenue from sales and subscriptions and instead the bulk of their income is derived from advertising. According to Lovass (2008: 89), "advertising is the life blood of newspapers." Because media corporations are not commercially viable without the support of advertisers, they must tread carefully and diligently so not to disturb the sensitivities of big business. The power that advertisers have over media is seen in the June 2020 boycott of Facebook (FB). Citing concerns over its indecisiveness on hate speech, 400 advertisers boycotted the social media giant. As 98% of FB's revenue (\$70 Billion in 2019) is derived from advertisers, FB CEO Mark Zuckerberg lost \$7 Billion dollars from his net worth virtually overnight as a result of the boycott (Dato 2020).

Media corporations thus must cater to the political affiliations and economic imperatives of their "funders." Critical analysis, neutrality, and impartiality then become less valuable. Products which pay the most to be advertised then become prioritized effectively promoting an economic way of life. Media corporations are effectively businesses which sell other businesses. By this understanding, and using the classic print newspaper as an example, a newspaper effectively sells "space." Advertisers buy space within a newspaper to flaunt their products and the people who read this newspaper can then be considered "products".

The third filter refers to the "special access" that the elite, government, and institutions have to the media. These actors know the ins-and-outs of the media game and have a major say in the news narrative. For example, if a mining company is in conflict with a local community, it is more than likely that the newspaper will interview the mines PR official while ignoring local community leaders. Hypothetically, to return the favor, the mine could take out a series of advertisements. The *New York Times* for example, one of the most powerful media corporations in the world charges an average of \$150,000 for a full page ad. The business of the news is thus a highly political game, with the highest bidder winning.

In its sum, the third filter exemplifies how the media represents certain privileged echelons of society while suppressing the voices of others. To Chomsky,

“the general population doesn’t know what’s happening, and it doesn’t even know that it doesn’t know” (Aljazeera 2017). This “editorial distortion” results in an over-reliance on powerful sources to inform its view. Journalists and editors then must constantly “toe-the-line” and be careful not to offend those who can make or break it. This phenomenon applies to both national and local media, with the elite media setting the agenda. Elite media would include major corporation media, national television and country-wide radio which set the general framework. They will determine, select, shape, control, and restrict information with the purpose of serving the interests of dominant elite groups. Local media will adopt to this structure and report little on news of substance (Aljazeera 2019).

The fourth filter, “flak” refers to the media’s insistence that it avoid negative responses in the form of letters, complaints, lawsuits, or government action in the way it handles its business. The fear of flak hinders independent journalism because certain kinds of facts or opinions could instigate flak. The aim of flak is to put free-thinking media on the defensive, fostering an image of an unfairly critical media with a ‘liberal bias.’ Well-directed and funded flak generates fear in media companies, creating another important filter in the propaganda model (Lovass 2008). This shapes an agenda where targets are constructed and others camouflaged. In doing this, the media is forced to protect itself, by discrediting sources, crashing stories, and diverting the conversation. The media will emphasize certain issues, frame issues which suit it, filter information, and bind the debate to its own limits.

The fifth and final filter refers to the point that in manufacturing consent, the public requires an enemy and a target. On either side of the 1990s, communism and the war on terror have provided the *newspeak* to which the US mainstream media follows without second thought. The purpose of creating an ideological target is to support the major social control mechanism. Social control is the study of mechanisms in the form of patterns of pressure, through which society maintains social order and cohesion. Social control is typically employed by group members in response to anyone it considers deviant, problematic, threatening, or undesirable, with the goal of ensuring conformity (Carmichael 2014). In creating an enemy or target, other news worthy topics are deflected.

In their entirety, the five filters help to make big finance media into a creator of history. Chomsky notes that by shaping history in a certain way it (media)

will “...(make) certain things appear, certain things do not appear, certain questions be asked, other questions ignored, and issues framed in a particular fashion” (Aljazeera 2017). In the 1997 *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, Chomsky claims that “it’s also necessary to completely falsify history.” Using the Vietnam war as an example, he states that there has been a huge effort to reconstruct the history of that war. Elaborating on this censorship, Chomsky notes;

If people try to enter the system that do not have that point of view they are likely to be excluded along the way, after all no institution is going to happily design a mechanism to self-destruct, that’s not the way institutions function. So they all work to exclude, marginalize or eliminate any dissenting voices or alternative perspectives, because they are dysfunctional to the institution itself.

In sum, if George Orwell’s 1984 novel was fantasy, *Manufacturing Consent* is the real life version of Orwell’s dystopia. Orwellian dystopia denotes an attitude and a politics of control by propaganda, surveillance, disinformation, denial of truth (double think) and manipulation of history. Orwell’s observations on thought control, doublethink, newspeak, and Big Brother, are terminologies deployed by Chomsky more than often.

3. Methodology and Definition of Terms

The study aims to find out if China is censoring South African media. The easiest way to solve this would be to ask the editors in the sample study directly. This however is unlikely for two reasons. Firstly, the scope of the research can be easily construed as unpalatable. Secondly, editors represent the highest authority or final say in a publication. They thus would not admit to their editorial powers being diluted.

The research’s chief challenge is how to prove censorship. How does one analyze variables which are unknown? To solve this debate, the research purports that the lack of negative critiques concerning China are being replaced with something positive. We often think that censorship as the act of removing, but it can entail the act of replacing. The research question of, is “China crafting

its image?” will be deployed to ascertain censorship. Crafting its image refers to positive stories in the press instead of negativity. The timeframe for this is between the months of March and June 2021, when the Covid outbreak had erupted in South Africa.

Regarding the sample, the study examined printed press media and online media. Two printed press publications formed the bulk of the study, *The Citizen* and *The Star*. The researcher’s location, and ease of access to the two printed publications offered, is the main reason for this choice. Both papers can be considered both popular and cosmopolitan. Online media sources were found via a google search of “China South Africa,” and clicking on the News option. Access to old newspapers was provided by local shopping centers.

This examination will be cross-analyzed against the five filters of *Manufacturing Consent*. The research hypothesizes that China is censoring negative content of itself in South African media and replacing it with a positive image of itself. A political analysis conceptualization is deployed while borrowing terminologies from both media and propaganda studies.

The study will deploy a content analysis framework which is beneficial when taking into account political developments, categories or themes of coverage on selected media in a selected time period. Also referred to as “thematic analysis,” this framework gives the researcher scope to observe, inquire, correlate and make assumptions on data. In framing the information and events into interpretable themes, a “reality” will be constructed for the reader. As defined by Entman, framing means to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Lechman & Brighton 2019).

The media, media corporations, media conglomerates, big finance media, and mainstream media all refer to the same thing. These different typologies all denote ownership by large corporations controlled by elites and oligarchs in tandem with government. The study does not differentiate between online media, social media or print media because they are all in one form or the other regurgitations of one agenda. Like many large corporations, these publishers—or “owners”—share resources with other South African papers. As a result, similar if not exact stories can often be found within another paper from the same publisher. For example, *The Business Report* can be found in all the papers of

Independent News around the country (Lovaas 2008:17). Another example, is the *Sowetan* and *Timeslive* who share the same articles and *News24* and *SABC* which share the same articles word for word. To Lovass this “decreased competition and diversity of opinion” and the “homogenization” of news and media contents results in part because of the high cost of entry into the market (Lovaas 2008: 68).

South Africa media is on the dissection table using American tools (terminologies). This is not over-reaching as there is no avoiding Pax-Americana and its system of hegemonic capitalism. The majority of South African newspapers “world news” sections, copy and paste heavily from AFP (Agence France-Presse) based in Paris, AP (Associated Press) based in the US, and Reuters which is based in the UK. Thus, the Propaganda Model is apparent in South African English daily newspapers (Lovaas 2008).

China, refers to the political state of China PRC (Peoples Republic of China). China and the Chinese Government are perceived as the same entity in this paper. China is viewed as a superpower in this research.

4. Discussion

The Western backed “inquiry” into the virus is one component of the larger hegemonic struggle between *Pax-Sinica* and *Pax-Americana*. The April US withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) is one, in some recent tit-for-tat reactions between the two superpowers. As the metaphorical microphone of the inquiry, the White House suggested that the WHO is a puppet of China (BBC 2020). This was because as late as January 2020, China was confident that Covid-19 was non-transmissible from human to human; a message the WHO was relaying. Indeed, on January 30th 2020, WHO Head Dr Tedros Adhanom stated that “the Chinese government is to be congratulated for the extraordinary measures it has taken to contain the outbreak” (WHO 2020). He further noted that “China is actually setting a new standard for outbreak response and it’s not an exaggeration” (Ibid).

Based on the above comments, the US accusation has merit. This narrative though, one critical of China, has been ignored in the South African media. Is it possible that China has exported its authoritarian press censorship culture to South Africa?

What would be the reason for doing such? The most obvious reason is that

where China invests heavily, such as in South Africa, the investments need to be protected. Statistics show that China is South Africa's principal trading partner over the past decade with a 11.18% year-on year increase. In 2019 South Africa exported to China \$10 billion worth of goods while importing a massive \$16 billion worth of Chinese goods (Trading Economics 2021). The surge in trade between the two countries has resulted in a quarter of the entire Africa-China trade. This overwhelming trade reliance coupled with massive loans such as the recent \$2.5 billion Eskom loan gives China a profound authority and legitimacy within South African executive structures and poses a threat to South Africa's sovereignty (Khumalo 2018).

Where Africa's previous colonizers disseminated their knowledge in the form of a religion and language, China never sought to enforce its culture, instead choosing to restrict so to control information. This statement sheds light on why instruments of global communication such as *WhatsApp*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Youtube*, and *Google* are banned in China (Doffman 2020). *Pax-Sinica* not only bans these communication devices but has exerted its influence within these instruments. For example, a mid-April Covid-19 documentary which analyzed the origins of the virus was banned from *Facebook*. Similarly, *Youtube* said on May 26th 2020 that it was investigating the removal of comments critical of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from its platform, saying that the filtering approach appeared to be "an error."

Controlling, banning or restricting information is only one element of how censorship works. Potential space which criticism would occupy need be filled. South African media has chosen to fill space concerning China with a public agenda of goodwill. Such a sentiment corroborates with what *Freedom House* President Mike Abramowitz said; "many governments are finding that on social media, propaganda works better than censorship" (Ingram 2019).

The issue of how public agenda is shaped by in the media was put forward particularly well by Robin. In analyzing television coverage in the aftermath of 9/11, he noted how the overwhelming majority of the coverage was pro-US (Robin 2006). Robin describes how network executives later admitted to tailoring their coverage in order to avoid the appearance of criticizing US foreign policy which would have had disastrous effects for the journalists, reporters, or media houses involved in the reporting. To Robin, public relations campaigns are designed not simply to arouse public awareness, but also to influence government action.

China's public agenda of goodwill can be seen in the following headlines;

- “Africa needs China’s aid now more than ever”
(IOL, March 29th)
- “SA receives medical supplies from China”
(SANews.gov, April 14th)
- “A friend SA can count on”
(The Star, April 15th)
- “China is a friend indeed to SA in fight against Covid-19”
(IOL, April 15th)
- “McDonalds sorry for sign”
(The Citizen, April 15th)
- “China in pound seat”
(The Citizen, April 15th)
- “Racism must not strain SA’s Sino ties”
(IOL, April 25th)
- “China says it’s ready to help SA fight spread of COVID-19”
(EWN, April 17th)
- “South African expert lauds China’s information sharing”
(CGTN-Africa, April 20th)
- “South Africa: Time to Make South Africa’s Relationship with China Mutually Beneficial”
(Daily Maverick, April 20th)
- “Coronavirus: how China plans to restore its image in Africa”
(The Africa Report, April 20th)
- “Coronavirus diplomacy: China’s opportune time to aid Africa”
(The Africa Report, April 24th)
- “There are lessons for SA from China’s successful battle against Covid-19”
(IOL.co.za, May 4th)
- “Lessons for Africa: 5 key interventions made by China in combating Covid-19”
(IOL, May 5th)
- “China is lending Africa a hand during the Covid-19 pandemic”
(IOL, May 7th)
- “Opinion: China-Africa solidarity in action amid Covid-19 fight”

- (IOL, May 13th)
- “Ramaphosa expresses gratitude for China’s unwavering assistance”
(IOL.co.za, May 18th)
- “Undeterred by Covid-19 pandemic, China and Africa hold hands, building a community of a shared future for mankind”
(M&G, May 29th)

From the above headlines, there is no denying that China is a generous partner. In highlighting the above examples, the criticism is not against the attributes of the “goodwill” but rather why “goodwill” is the only narrative about China. One example which exemplifies this is the case of the goodwill Chinese doctors.

On April 3rd, *The Citizen* ran a front page headline entitled “China, Cuba to the rescue of SA docs.” The ensuing article, however, focused entirely on the upcoming Cuban deployment. Within the article, South Africa’s Health Minister, Dr Zweli Mkhize requested Chinese and Cuban doctors. On April 3rd, *The Star* published a statement from Sello Mashao Rasethaba, chair of the South African United Business Confederation and chair of the State Information Technology Agency. In it, Rasethaba declares that the “South African government should with immediate effect invite Chinese and Russian doctors” (Rasethaba 2020).

With the arrival of Cuban doctors 24 days later on April 27th, *MoneyWeb* published an article about the arrival entitled “SA asks China for doctors as Cuba sends medical staff.” Within this article, Dr Mkhize again requested foreign doctors. The article, however, focuses on Chinese doctors, when in fact there are no plans to send Chinese doctors to South Africa.

The absence of critical reporting and a public agenda of Chinese good will suggests that China is crafting its image in South African media. This in foreign policy analysis can be considered an exertion of soft power in support of its economic hard power. A decade ago, China’s leverage within South Africa became clear when South Africa refused to issue a visa to the Tibetan dissident the Dalai Lama. More recently, in 2018, Azad Essa’s weekly column was promptly cancelled after writing about the persecution of Chinese Muslims. He linked this to the fact that Chinese corporations own a 20% stake in the South African publishing house *Independent Media*.

According to *Independent Media*’s website, it’s combined readership across different platforms totals 17.1 million local and international readers. The

website declares that some of its “quality publications” include 20 of South Africa’s “most prominent newspapers” such as the *Star* in Johannesburg, *Cape Times* and *Cape Argus* in Cape Town and the *Mercury* in Durban. One of *Independent Media’s* biggest shareholders is *Interacom Investment Holding Limited* which comprises of China International Television Corporation (CITVC) and China-Africa Development Fund (CADFUND). *Naspers*, another top South African publishing house with popular titles such as *News24*, *City Press* and *Die Burger*, is heavily intertwined with the business prospects of *Tencent*, a Chinese social media corporation. In *Naspers* 2020 interim results announcement, *Naspers* generated \$2 billion from its ecommerce sector, and \$8 billion from its social and internet platforms, \$7.8 derived from *Tencent* (*Naspers* 2020). *Media24*, which is one of the top 4 media houses in South Africa, and is a different entity on its own, shares the same offices with *Naspers*.⁴

In the last 15 years, China has been targeting African viewership via the “10,000 Villages” project which has brought modern digital satellite TV networks to many parts of the continent. Dubbed as a philanthropic gesture, the project gives Beijing a tight grip on Africa’s communication infrastructure and control of how it is portrayed in the media there. The benefactor of this project is China’s “*StarTimes*” which now controls TV networks in Malawi, Kenya, Rwanda and Zambia. In the latter, *StarTimes* entered into a joint venture with the Zambian National Broadcaster (ZNBC). The deal gave the Chinese player a 60% share in the broadcaster for 25 years.

China thus crafts its image so to ensure it can continue to execute the power behind the scenes without interference. As noted by Huntington;

The architects of power in the United States must create a force that can be felt but not seen. Power remains strong when it remains in the dark; exposed to light it begins to evaporate (Barsamian & Chomsky 2001 :8, Lovaas 2008)

An example of this “execution behind the scenes” is seen in the diplomatic spat of China recalling its South African Ambassador Lin Songtian. The case was only picked up by Peter Fabricius of the *Daily Maverick*.

Withdrawing an Ambassador is one of the highest forms of political protest a country can enact which is the diplomatic message of unhappiness. Beijing’s decision to withdraw their Ambassador according to Fabricius was due to

Pretoria's failing to appoint a South African Ambassador to China for over a year. It appears that the Chinese want only Siyabonga Cwele, a former South African Intelligence Minister (2008-2009), Minister of State Security (2009-2014) and Minister of Telecommunications and Postal Services (2014-2018). South African authorities have refused to issue Cwele with a security clearance thus preventing his appointment. From Cwele's previous Ministerial postings, it is quite evident why China are adamant on Cwele only.

Even the case of Cwele aside, why China would want to withdraw its highest government representative in South Africa in the week prior to the South African lockdown is a definite flex of its political muscle. By removing its "go-to-guy", the possibility of direct links with China in a time of crises were out of the question.

5. Findings

Application of the five filters against the above narrative reveals that China is manufacturing consent in South African media.

In terms of ownership there is clear evidence that China is a major stakeholder of one of South Africa's biggest Media conglomerates; the *Independent Media Group*. *The Star*, is a subsidy of this corporation. Another top heavyweight of South African Media, *Naspers*, receives the overwhelming majority of its revenue from its China operations. There are only four "big" media corporations in South Africa. With two under the yolk of China, there is a reason for concern here.

In terms of advertising, the notion of "Chinese good-will" appears to be a well-placed advertisement. This repetition of good-will is propaganda. A working definition of propaganda is the "spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person (Manzaria & Bruck 2013).

In terms of elites, governments, and institutions, Chinese elites have considerable interests in the South African private sector and government state operated entities. How these elites are perceived by the South African public cannot be left to chance. As noted by Rosenberg (2020), elites control of the mass media and education institutions helps to guide the national political discussion and frame issues. Confucius Institutions are now at South Africa's top Universities including the University of Cape Town, University of Johannesburg, University of the Western Cape, Rhodes University, Stellenbosch, Wits, and

Durban University of Technology. According to Chomsky, “state propaganda supported by the educated classes and when no deviation is permitted from it, can have a big effect” (Chomsky 1997).

In terms of flak, the case of Azad Essa stands out. Furthermore, the lack of critique against China is overwhelming which suggests there is a coordinated response to “manage information.” This is a cause of concern for a neutral media and informed citizenry.

Lastly, regarding target, despite US ideological hegemony in South Africa, China is not an enemy or target as it is in the US press. In June 2020, both the FBI director and US Secretary of State both denounced China as a “great threat to the US” and a “national security concern.” These topics are not present in South African media.

6. Conclusion

As China comes to control more resources and power over South Africa’s domestic elites, there will be less need to use a benevolent form of hegemony. With time China will be able to confidently wield a harder type of hegemony. The ongoing Chinese-Australian trade war is a perfect example of how China, when provoked can retaliate. China’s May 2020 decision to stop accepting beef from Australia’s four largest abattoirs and slapping tariffs of more than 80% on Australian barley imports highlights the changing face of war. As a result, Australia’s 2020 exports to China fell by \$2.3 billion. South Africa’s national power utility, Eskom has been encouraging municipalities which are in arrears to trade it municipal land to shave off debt (Mabuza 2020). At the same time, Eskom keeps accepting massive loans from the Chinese government. This relationship requires deeper analysis.

There is a clear correlation between propagandistic messages sponsored by state actors, and changes in the political rhetoric of those targeted (Lechman & Brighton 2019). As the South African mind becomes programmed for Chinese propaganda, democratic rights will naturally erode. Lack of critical thought and debate will also be hindered, as Chomsky remarks, “as long as people are marginalized and distracted and (they will) have no way to organize or articulate their sentiments” (Chomsky 1997). As noted by Shemlis (2016), realities are preferred to be fabricated and disseminated to the masses.

While the use of internet for strategic disinformation predates the 2016 US Presidential election, the disruption of that election, along with others in Africa, India and the Brexit Referendum, has brought into sharp relief the scale at which online political propaganda is now being deployed (Lechman and Brighton 2019). As the actors behind it acquire more resources and learn from their successes and failures, and as more “innovation” is piled on our current systems of ubiquitous information, we are likely to see a continuing evolution of disinformation strategies and tactics.

Lastly, a further cause for concern is the migration of censorship to other parts of life. Already, censorship is targeting academia. According to Steve Tsang, Director of the School of the Oriental Studies China Institute at the University of London, the Chinese government is interfering with academic life in the UK (Maxwell 2019). In North America, the pressures exerted by Beijing have led to self-censorship at American universities, which is hampering debate and driving researchers away from topics likely to offend the Chinese leadership (Maxwell 2019). Maxwell gives an example of the case of the University of California who after inviting the Dali Lama to speak, saw Beijing freeze funding for Chinese scholars wishing to attend the school. If this pattern continues where the press and academia are increasingly being censored, then there is really no safe space left for critical reflection.

8. Disclosure

No conflict of interest.

(Endnotes)

- ¹ Freedom House is an US based non-profit focused on democracy, political freedom and human rights. Their annual report in part assesses the health of the World's democracy.
- ² Mehra, M. et al. 2020. Retracted: Hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine with or without a macrolide for treatment of COVID-19: a multinational registry analysis. *The Lancet*
- ³ Mehra, M. et al. 2020. Retraction: Cardiovascular Disease, Drug Therapy, and Mortality in Covid-19. *N Engl J Med*. DOI: 10.1056/NEJMoa2007621.
- ⁴ Naspers and Media24 both list 40 Heerengracht, Cape Town as their offices.

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