

# Soft Power, Hard News: How Journalists at State-Funded Transnational Media Legitimize Their Work

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## Abstract

How do journalists working for different state-funded international news organizations legitimize their relationship to the governments which support them? In what circumstances might such journalists resist the diplomatic strategies of their funding states? We address these questions through a comparative study of journalists working for international news organizations funded by the Chinese, US, UK and Qatari governments. Using 52 interviews with journalists covering humanitarian issues, we explain how they minimized tensions between their diplomatic role and dominant norms of journalistic autonomy by drawing on three – broadly shared – legitimizing narratives, involving different kinds of boundary-work. In the first ‘exclusionary’ narrative, journalists differentiated their ‘truthful’ news reporting from the ‘false’ state ‘propaganda’ of a common Other, the Russian-funded network, RT. In the second ‘fuzzifying’ narrative, journalists deployed the ambiguous notion of ‘soft power’ as an ambivalent ‘boundary concept’, to defuse conflicts between journalistic and diplomatic agendas. In the final ‘inversion’ narrative, journalists argued that, paradoxically, their dependence on funding states gave them greater ‘operational autonomy’. Even when journalists did resist their funding states, this was hidden

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or partial, and prompted less by journalists' concerns about the political effects of their work, than by serious threats to their personal cultural capital.

### **Keywords**

state-media relations, censorship, comparative research, global news agencies, journalism, satellite television

## **Introduction**

How do journalists working for state-funded transnational news organizations justify their relationships to the governments that finance them? When might they try to resist the diplomatic strategies of these governments, thus modifying the operation of state influence abroad? Are there any common patterns in journalists' approach to state-media relations that cut across Western and non-Western news organizations?

In this article, we explore these underresearched and important questions. In so doing, we illuminate how journalists imagine their relationships to funding states, as well as the limits of their willingness to cooperate with them. Discussing these issues necessitates attending to multifaceted diplomatic struggles (Seib 2009), involving notions of state "propaganda" (Bakir et al. 2018; Freedman 2020) and "soft power" (Nye 1991, 2004, 2008). However, it is very difficult to neatly divide coercive "propaganda" from the noncoercive, persuasive communication commonly associated with "soft power." Instead, a "grey" spectrum seems to exist between the two, involving different kinds and degrees of selectivity, deception, incentivization, and coercion (Bakir et al. 2018).

Even Nye's (1991, 2004, 2008) classic work makes a notoriously unclear distinction between "soft power" and "propaganda." He stressed that governments should prevent state-funded media, like Voice of America, from being dismissed as "propaganda" by taking steps to support journalists' credibility: These include refraining from intervening in editorial matters and allowing journalists to criticize the state (Nye 2008). But Nye (2004) also suggested that states may accrue "soft power" by using international media to develop a sense of "shared values" across borders (p. 7). As Rawnsley (2015) has observed, this description could easily apply to Chinese and Russian approaches to international broadcasting, which are often regarded in the West as state propaganda.

It may, therefore, be more useful to consider how "soft power" and "propaganda" are deployed strategically by different actors, including the journalists who work for state-funded transnational news organizations. These journalists must engage in numerous position-taking strategies to negotiate their relationships to funding and host states, to dominant journalistic

norms, to one another, news audiences, and media markets, in order to compete effectively for material and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). These complex and different forms of positionality cannot be reduced to organizational differences. Indeed, the growth of freelancing in transnational news (Hellmueller and Konow-Lund 2019) means that some journalists frequently work for multiple outlets, thus adding another layer of complexity to previous research that highlighted flows of editorial staff between different kinds of news organizations (Kraidy 2007; Seib 2012).

A nuanced relational approach is also required to assess the cumulative impact on transnational news of several significant shifts in state–media relations that took place during 2015–18. During this period, the Chinese and American governments restructured their relationships to the transnational news organizations they fund, and the U.K. government discursively reframed its relationship to BBC World Service Radio. Although the Qatari government does not appear to have pursued either of these courses of action, its relationship to Al Jazeera has been seriously threatened by a major diplomatic crisis with its Gulf neighbors, which demanded that Qatar close the TV network down.

This article examines how state-funded journalists responded to these pressures using fifty-two semistructured interviews with staff and freelancers working for Al Jazeera English, BBC World Service, China Global Television Network (CGTN, previously known as CCTV), Voice of America, and Xinhua. Using Bourdieusian field theory, we demonstrate that the ways in which journalists experienced and coped with such tensions were shaped by their particular position in the field. However, we also show that journalists tended to use similar kinds of legitimizing narratives, involving the strategic deployment of “soft power” and “propaganda.” We then go on to interrogate the circumstances in which journalists ceased to find their previous legitimizing narratives convincing, and explain why their resistance to funding states tended to be limited. Finally, we conclude by discussing the theoretical implications of this study, including the extent to which transnational news is “fielded.”

## **Western Transnational News**

Initially, it was hoped that “global” satellite TV news, like CNN, would shape more progressive forms of cosmopolitan politics (Berglez 2008; Chouliaraki 2008; Volkmer 1999), breaking away from domination by domestic political elites (Bennett 1990; Entman 2003) and domestic news values (Galtung and Ruge 1965). Yet, analyses of CNN’s output have shown that it tends to be uncritically supportive of U.S. foreign policy (Thussu 2000). Other forms of commercially funded transnational journalism practiced in Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom have also been found to be powerfully shaped by the staff, cultural perspectives, and political interests of news organizations’

states of origin (Christin 2016; Denčik 2012, 2013; Van Leuven and Berglez 2016).

Yet, journalists working for Western transnational news organizations have been portrayed as failing to critically reflect on their diplomatic function, even when they work for state-funded news organizations. For example, ethnographic research carried out at the BBC World Service (BBCWS) (Baumann et al. 2011) found that, despite the network's origins in the BBC Empire Service, BBC producers did not seem to realize that their cultural and linguistic translation practices reproduced asymmetrically structured "diasporic contact zones" (Baumann et al. 2011). The construction of such contact zones, the coauthors argued, indirectly served British interests, without disturbing the radio network's "long established reputation for cosmopolitan openness, fairness and impartiality" (Gillespie and Baumann 2006: 1; see also Ogunyemi 2011).

However the U.K. government's framing of a new, generous funding package for BBCWS in terms of British strategic and defense interests (The National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015) has prompted some journalists to engage in public, critical reflections about their diplomatic role. A former BBCWS managing editor, Burnett (2015) has criticized the U.K. government for breaking the unwritten code about the "soft power that dare not speak its name," thereby endangering the BBC's reputation for impartiality. By contrast, a presenter, Bennett-Jones (2018), has attacked the BBC's senior managers for what he sees as their uncertainty about whether the BBCWS "exists to advance British soft power or to do journalism." He challenges the "stifling" managerial controls which he says were introduced after the Hutton Inquiry in 2003, including alleging that BBC managers refused to allow him to broadcast important details from a ministerial interview, following a conversation with Foreign Office officials.

Similarly, a series of legislative changes appears to have forced into the open journalists' internal disagreements about the extent to which the Voice of America (VOA) radio network operates independently of the U.S. administration (Bennett cited in Al Jazeera 2018; Robinson 2017). Historically, VOA has had a rather "incestuous" relationship with the U.S. administration (Zelizer 2018: 12), and has not been permitted to broadcast domestically under "antipropaganda" legislation passed during the Cold War period. The decision to revise this legislation, thereby allowing the network to broadcast within the US, is highly controversial (Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012, discussed in Hall 2017). Further legislation passed in 2016 removed the regulatory power of the bipartisan Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which had provided a structural firewall between the U.S. administration and state-funded international media (Hall 2017). The "liberal press" became seriously concerned about both changes following President Trump's nomination of the new head of the BBG: Michael Pack, a close associate of Steve Bannon, the former chief

executive of the Far Right media outlet, *Breitbart News* (Gramer 2018; Mahdawi 2018).

Like BBCWS, VOA has a legally binding charter, which is supposed to protect it from political influence, along with the Hatch Act (1939), which restricts the political activity of federal employees. However, unlike BBCWS, debates about VOA's independence (or lack of it) have not been framed in terms of "soft power." Instead, critics of President Trump have speculated about his potential wish to engage in state "propaganda" (Al Jazeera 2018; Robinson 2017; Smith 2019), thus alluding once more to the policy discussions that took place during the Cold War era (Rawnsley 1996).

## **Transnational News Funded by Qatar and China**

Discussions of journalists' awareness of their involvement in diplomatic struggles, and their efforts to square this with dominant norms about journalistic autonomy (Hanitzsch et al. 2011), occur more often in research about the transnational news funded by China and Qatar. These forms of transnational news are portrayed as being involved in a multifaceted struggle for diplomatic influence around the globe (Seib 2009). But such forms of news have also been shaped by the interactions of multiple local, national, regional, and global factors, often producing complex forms of transcultural hybridity (Kraidy 2007). Thus, the transnational news funded by Qatar and China tends not to be portrayed as being wholly controlled by these authoritarian governments.

Research into the private/state-sponsored network, Al Jazeera, provides an excellent example of this. Maziad (2018) argues that in Egypt, the interactions between Al Jazeera journalists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the interactions between journalists working on the network's Arabic and English output, led to an Islamist takeover of selected channels. Although Qatar had previously supported the Muslim Brotherhood, she says that this situation does not appear to have been engineered by Qatari officials and was not in the country's strategic interests (Maziad 2018). Indeed, the situation in Egypt enabled Qatar's enemies to claim that Al Jazeera was nothing more than a vehicle for Qatari "propaganda" (*Qatar Crisis News* 2017), thereby providing the final trigger for the Gulf diplomatic crisis, which commenced in 2017.

Previously, Al Jazeera had enhanced Qatar's international status by forging pan-Arab and other solidarities (Cherkaoui 2014; Seib 2012). This was enabled by the network's journalistic credibility, which was achieved through its adoption of dominant journalistic norms, including objectivity and balance. This approach was influenced by the network's recruitment of Western-trained journalists from the failed BBC-Saudi enterprise, BBC Arabic (Seib 2012). However, Qatar's deteriorating relations with Saudi Arabia, following the "Arab Spring" in 2011, appears to have shaped strong correspondences between Qatar's foreign policies and the output of Al Jazeera Arabic during

crises (Al Nahed 2015; Cherkaoui 2014; Samuel-Azran 2013). Yet increased managerial pressure to endorse Qatari policy was rejected by some journalists at Al Jazeera Arabic, several of whom resigned in protest (Samuel-Azran 2013).

The output of Al Jazeera English corresponds less clearly to Qatari foreign policy (Al Nahed 2015; Samuel-Azran 2013), retaining its credibility with Western audiences by positioning itself as a liberal, pro-democratic “voice of the voiceless.” However, earlier claims that an empowering “Al Jazeera effect” would reduce government and mainstream media monopoly on information (Seib 2011) seem to have been somewhat overstated. This is because the station’s elite sourcing practices (Figenschou 2010) and adoption of Western news frames (Bebawi 2016) mean that its output tends to be characterized by the mixture of sameness and difference, rather than radical alterity.

Chinese transnational media are less obviously cultural hybrids (Kraidy 2007). They generally serve Chinese diplomatic interests by framing China as promoting global order and harmony, or as an equal partner in mutually beneficial exchanges with other non-Western governments (Madrid-Morales 2017; Marsh 2017). The former premier, Hu Jintao, saw these representations as helping to counter negative, Western news narratives about China, thereby building particular kinds of “soft power” (Boyd-Barrett 2015; Zhang et al. 2016). However, the extent to which transnational news funded by China corresponds to the country’s foreign policy seems to vary according to media organizations, topics, and locales concerned.

An especially rich body of research explores the practices and perspectives of journalists working for Chinese transnational news in the strategically important region of Africa (e.g., Wasserman 2016; Zhang et al. 2016). African journalists are often acutely aware of Chinese managers’ domination within story selection, framing, and approvals processes (Umejei 2018). However, even Xinhua, which is one of the most tightly controlled outlets, changed its journalism to conform with dominant Western news values, introducing greater “timeliness” to improve the uptake of its content by other transnational media, as well as domestic African outlets (Xin 2009, 2012).

African journalists working for the TV network CCTV (now CGTN) have been able to exercise greater editorial freedom than those at Xinhua, although they still self-censored, particularly in relation to “controversial” political topics (Madrid-Morales 2017; Marsh 2017; Umejei 2018). The network’s focus on solutions-oriented “constructive” approaches (Marsh 2017), and efforts to represent both China and Africa in a positive, uncritical light (Gagliardone 2013), mean that its journalists have struggled to gain credibility within more media-literate African countries, like Kenya and South Africa (Maweu 2016; Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2018). Journalists’ concern about this issue (Gagliardone 2013) is likely to have been exacerbated by the approach taken by the current president, Xi Jinping, who has stressed the need for journalists to exhibit absolute loyalty to the party (Repnikova 2017). He has also restructured

all international broadcasters under a single umbrella, tasked with “spreading the party’s guiding principles and policies” (CGTN News 2018).

## This Study

We analyze how journalists working for state-funded transnational news outlets coped with the changes that took place between 2015 and 2018. Specifically, we ask,

**Research Question 1:** How did these journalists conceptualize and legitimize their relationships to the governments that finance them?

**Research Question 2:** In what circumstances did journalists try to resist the diplomatic strategies of their funding governments?

Our analytical framework was influenced by managerial research which demonstrates that workers construct legitimizing self-narratives to deal with the instability involved in organizational transitions (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010), and/or to negotiate the tensions involved in hybrid roles (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). We have also been influenced by sociological research into the “boundary-work” conducted by professionals to manage the division between their own occupational field and that of others (Gieryn 1983). This includes the ways in which professionals use fuzzy, multivalent “boundary concepts” to sustain cooperation with those in other fields (Allen 2009; Star 2010), and how they demarcate distinct boundaries between different fields of activity (Gieryn 1983). In particular, we draw from a rich vein of research into how journalists articulate “who counts as a journalist, what counts as journalism and what is appropriate journalistic behavior, and what is deviant” (Carlson 2015: 2). This includes our own previous work in which we used Bourdieusian field theory (Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) to illuminate how other kinds of funders—private foundations—changed journalists’ perceptions of appropriate forms of journalistic work and output (Scott et al. 2018a).

In this article, we analyze how state-funded transnational news journalists used legitimizing narratives to accommodate changes in state–media relations, and to cope with related tensions pertaining to their professional autonomy. In so doing, we address broader questions about the extent to which transnational news constitutes a distinctive field, involving shared “rules of the game” (*doxa*) and struggles over common stakes (*capital*) (Christin 2016). To discuss these issues, we draw from a broader, mixed-methods study about reporting on humanitarian issues (Scott et al. 2018b), which found that the majority of regular, original coverage in the English language was provided by state-funded transnational news organizations. These organizations were the wire agency, Xinhua, and the broadcasters, Al Jazeera English (AJE), BBC World

Service Radio (BBCWS), CGTN (formerly CCTV News), and Voice of America (VOA).

The data analyzed here was drawn from fifty-two semistructured interviews with forty-seven state-funded journalists employed by these organizations, who were active in humanitarian reporting. (Shorter follow-up interviews were sometimes necessary to check whether planned actions had taken place.) Data from eight interviews with other journalists who worked for commercial news organizations, including Thomson Reuters and Associated Press news wires and CNN, were included to add context (Tables included in Appendix).

These interviews were conducted by the coauthors during 2017–18. They lasted one to two hours each and took place in the major hubs of transnational news production, Bangkok, London, Nairobi, New York, and Washington. Skype interviews were used when security or confidentiality issues prevented meeting in person. Participants were sampled on the grounds of content analysis or colleague referral. Although just more than half were born and raised in Western countries, journalists often discussed more complex identities, including dual ethnic/cultural heritage and/or formative experiences of living in non-Western countries as a young adult.

## **Sample Data**

The topic of state–media relations was raised spontaneously by journalists when asked about the resources available to them, as well as the practices, relationships, constraints, and opportunities shaping their practice. The terms “soft power” and “propaganda” were introduced by study participants, not researchers. Transcripts were coded using NVIVO and analyzed thematically. Data analysis was conducted by the lead author to ensure consistency, and regular team meetings were held to discuss emerging themes. Due to the sensitive nature of these interviews, we have removed participants’ names, as well as interview dates.

## **Legitimizing Narratives: Propaganda and Soft Power**

The changes in state–media relations that took place during 2015–18 exerted an external “shock,” which made it more difficult for journalists to avoid reflecting on the role of transnational news in international diplomacy. Commercial news journalists, particularly those at CNN, were acutely aware of the greater material capital available to their state-funded peers. They frequently mentioned colleagues who had previously moved to AJE for its greater resources, and many were keen to move to BBCWS because of its new, generous state funding.

However, those working for state-funded news outlets tended to find their relationship to funding governments more troublesome. Journalists employed by CGTN and Xinhua reported increased managerial censorship, which had previously been quite rare (Madrid-Morales 2017; Marsh 2017; Umejei 2018). Those at AJE spoke of the travel restrictions caused by the Gulf blockade of Qatar (Maziad 2018), which limited their ability to report on the war in Yemen, as well as triggering increased bureaucratic obstacles and legal threats by other countries opposed to Qatar. Journalists working for AJE, VOA, and BBCWS all decried the ways in which funding governments controlled their budget, as well as exercising power over organizational strategy.

These tensions were not uniformly distributed but were experienced differently by journalists according to their positionality. Journalists' geographic positioning was an especially important factor, shaping specific legislative/regulatory environments, local labor pools, and forms of industry competition, as well as different sociopolitical sensitivities (Youmans 2017). Regarding the latter, a seismic analogy may be used, as the external "shocks" exerted by changes in state-media relations tended to be felt most acutely by journalists covering events in geographic locales where the interventions of their funding governments were already hotly contested. Such countries included Egypt, Kenya, Myanmar, Sudan and South Sudan, as well as Syria and Yemen. But journalists' efforts to cope with these external "shocks" were also shaped by other kinds of positioning, including their seniority, employment security, and cultural background.

Broadly speaking, journalists sought to reassure themselves (and others) by utilizing three legitimizing narratives, involving interrelated kinds of "boundary-work" (Gieryn 1983). These legitimizing narratives cut across organizational boundaries, including those between news outlets funded by democratic and authoritarian states. The first narrative, which was commonly used by all kinds of journalists, involved them justifying their work by differentiating it from state "propaganda." Journalists defined "propaganda" narrowly, as involving the deliberate dissemination of falsehood. This narrow definition had an instrumental use: allowing participants to position themselves as journalists, rather than state propagandists, because of their commitment to truth-telling. As one top executive at AJE put it, reporters at the channel were committed to "searching for truth in the ocean of lies" created by powerful regimes and self-serving elites in the region. Likewise, regional editors at VOA stressed that their output was not propaganda because they did not publish "fake news" or "bullshit," and BBCWS reporters and producers all stressed that they disseminated "accurate news" not "propaganda."

This legitimating narrative involved classic forms of *exclusionary* boundary-work, in which specific actors and practices were symbolically expelled as "non-

journalistic” (Carlson and Lewis 2015). Journalists’ definition of “propaganda” solely in terms of falsehood enabled them to avoid reflecting upon the potential existence of “propaganda with facts” (Nicholas Pronay quoted in Rawnsley 1996: 10), including state officials’ indirect influence over journalists’ selection and framing of events (Bakir et al. 2018; Bennett 1990; Entman 2003).

Journalists further justified their own work by excluding a commonly recognized “Other.” This was RT, the cable TV network funded by the Russian government, which was widely regarded by participants as producing untrue “propaganda” and “not news” (Yablokov 2015). Indeed, even CGTN staff regarded RT as so lacking in journalistic credibility that one producer even called it a “joke of a network.” Yet, the same participants had previously expressed serious concerns about increased managerial pressure to promote “positive” stories about China and Chinese allies (discussed in Gagliardone 2013), as well as increased managerial censorship (discussed in Madrid-Morales 2017; Marsh 2017). For instance, one CGTN editor said that they had been repeatedly told to remove online stories that attracted negative audience comments about China. Another said they were worried that President Xi’s more centralized, directive policies might be gradually pushing CGTN journalists “towards the point of propaganda.”

The second legitimizing narrative was less widespread, as it was only used by the most senior staff at Al Jazeera and BBCWS. It involved journalists deploying the loose, ambiguous concept of “soft power” (Nye 1991, 2004, 2008) to gloss over potential conflicts between the priorities and values of journalists and politicians. Some of these senior journalists were top executives who had been personally involved in funding negotiations with government officials. But others were close to such negotiators because of their formal rank, long-standing organizational service, and/or accumulation of cultural and social capital. These senior actors used “soft power” as a kind of loose, multivalent “boundary concept” (Allen 2009; Star 2010) to sustain ongoing cooperation with funding states, by making it appear that neither journalists nor diplomats needed to compromise their identities, values, or objectives to satisfy the other.

News executives tended to use this “soft power” narrative to deflect criticism by others. When they defined “soft power” at all, they defined it very simply, in terms of states’ accumulation of international prestige. For example, a senior managing editor at AJE explained that Western audiences at public talks sometimes challenged him by asking what the Qatari government “got out of” funding the network. He responded by saying,

I point to this concept of “soft power” and I say, “It’s the same reason why countries want to host the World Cup, or host the Olympics, or fund football teams. It’s about prestige in the world, reputation, giving a country some standing.”

Thus, the executive diverted attention away from difficult questions about the extent to which Al Jazeera's output maps onto Qatar's foreign policy (Samuel-Azran 2013), as well as avoiding any consideration of the political effects of enabling an authoritarian state like Qatar to be associated with a network branded as the progressive "voice of the voiceless" (Figenschou 2010).

Fuzzy notions of "soft power" were also used by other kinds of high-ranking journalists to gloss over their own concerns about threats to their political impartiality. One senior figure began this discussion with a troubling reflection, saying that,

I mean Caversham [the BBC Media Monitoring Service] was a *spy* agency, which we made the use of, and still do. I am sure the intelligence services like to get all these [reports] on their desk every morning, as I do in my inbox. That is the why you get the money, isn't it?

However, this participant rapidly reassured himself about the legitimacy of his journalism by deploying the notion of "soft power" in ways that portrayed journalists' and British diplomats' interests as overlapping in odd—but roughly compatible—ways. As he put it,

I mean, what is the point of BBC language services? What is the justification now for taxpayers to pay for them? . . . It is soft power. That is the reason these services are being set up. That is why we are trying to broadcast into Ethiopia, into Eritrea, into North Korea, or expanding in areas which were traditionally British colonies.

[For the BBC] it's about growing audiences . . . Where do you go for that? You go for places where there is an appetite for what we are giving and what we are giving is fair, accurate, balanced news that you don't get from more dictatorial regimes.

So I guess [the aims of the BBC World Service] do go hand-in-hand with what the [British] government wants in terms of "soft power," but it's also what the BBC wants in terms of growing its audiences, and providing a service to people who can't get that balanced [news] service in another way.

The conceptual "fuzziness" of "soft power" allowed this journalist to portray the objectives of journalists and politicians as having equal weight within a mutually beneficial relationship. Thus, the journalist's strategic deployment of "soft power" enabled him to avoid dwelling on two profoundly problematic issues: the impossibility of separating "soft" power from "hard" coercive power, and the co-structuring of the BBCWS in relation to state security and intelligence systems (Rawnsley 1996, 2015).

## Legitimizing Narratives: Operational and Allocative Autonomy

The first two legitimizing narratives tended to be underpinned by the way in which journalists reframed their “independence” in terms of the *operational autonomy* they were exercised in their day-to-day work (Murdock 1983). In this way, they minimized (their own and others’) concerns about their lack of *allocative autonomy* over the distribution of resources, and related organizational strategies (Murdock 1983). Some of these participants were senior staff, who were nationals of the state funding their news organization. For example, American managers at VOA were deeply worried about anticipated budget cuts, as well as the erosion of the organizational firewalls between the U.S. administration and state-funded international broadcasters, in the context of the Trump administration. As one put it,

We all saw what happened during the [election] campaign and the various different attacks on the media that the president, as a candidate, was waging.

There was a concern amongst journalists . . . that there would be some sort of real focus on how VoA can reach audiences around the world, and a look at, perhaps, how the White House can take advantage of that.

These journalists also reflected on profound tensions within VOA’s Charter, which obliged them to offer accurate, objective, and comprehensive news while also, as one editor put it, reporting “through the prism of United States’ government policy” (discussed in Rawnsley 1996). Yet, journalists minimized their concern over such issues by emphasizing their ability to engage in editorial decision-making free of overt “interference” from government officials. As an American editor at VOA stressed,

We don’t get pressure to take a certain line, to stick to the US government agenda. I have been running X desk at central news [for 15 years], and I can’t think of a time when somebody has said “You need to cover this, or you need not to cover this. This is very important for such-and-such a senator or [a specific US agency].” It has been left to my judgement.

None of the journalists at VOA reflected upon the potential ideological implications of the station’s appointment of a right-wing anchor from Fox News, whose presence resulted in rare interviews with some of the U.S. administration’s most notable “hawks,” including the national security advisor, John Bolton, the vice-president, Mike Pence, and even the president himself. When directly asked, a senior manager simply stated that it was “very nice to get some top-level people being interviewed on a consistent basis.”

Journalists who were not nationals of their funding state also legitimized their work by stressing their operational autonomy. Many of these participants were employed by AJE and BBCWS. But intriguingly, even journalists at Xinhua—who experienced the most regular and explicit censorship—justified their work by stressing their ability to engage in some forms of day-to-day editorial independence. They used this approach to refute allegations made by diplomats from other countries that they were “propagandists,” arguing that they were personally committed to “independent” forms of journalistic work, and it was not their fault if their managers forced them to modify stories in accordance with Chinese policy (discussed in Umejei 2018). For example, one reporter stressed the journalistic “investigations” they carried out on nongovernmental organization (NGO) field trips, without the knowledge of his Chinese managers. An editor spoke proudly of the way in which he smuggled stories on human rights reports past the censors by leading with government rebuttals. A third correspondent, who was a freelancer, explained that they wrote for Xinhua most of the time because it paid better. But they pitched their more “controversial” investigative stories to Al Jazeera.

Clearly, these forms of operational autonomy were limited and individualized, but they had great symbolic importance for local Xinhua journalists, enabling them to claim that they were “real” journalists, rather than the mouthpieces of the Chinese state. Other position-taking strategies designed to maximize journalists’ autonomy were found at CGTN. For example, some local staff and freelancers maximized their editorial discretion by waiting to pitch stories until late in their shift, when differences in time zones meant that their line management switched from Beijing to the more lenient team in Washington. Other journalists engaged in longer-term strategies, such as opting to work on documentaries, where they could benefit from CGTN’s generous resources, but escape what they said was the stricter editorial oversight involved in news output.

In addition, journalists’ focus on their operational autonomy was important because it tended to be shaped by a third legitimating narrative, which appeared to be the most common of all. At the heart of this narrative was a form of “boundary-work,” which differed to those discussed in previous scholarship, as it did not involve constructing a symbolic boundary between occupational fields (Carlson and Lewis 2015) or fuzzifying boundaries using multivalent “boundary concepts” (Allen 2009; Star 2010). Instead, this legitimizing narrative inverted journalists’ concerns about their lack of autonomy, suggesting that dependence on their funding state was, paradoxically, a powerful source of journalists’ operational autonomy.

Staff at AJE and CGTN discussed how warm diplomatic relations with their funding state enabled them to gain access to war zones and other hostile areas, which other journalists were unable to reach. Their counterparts at BBCWS and VOA said that state resources enabled them to pursue less popular or more time-

consuming stories, including those involving extensive travel to non-elite countries and rural areas. This, they explained, gave them far greater “freedom” than colleagues at commercial news organizations, who were constrained by audience ratings and the need to generate advertising revenue.

In a sense, this finding is unsurprising: State funding is often seen as providing journalists with some kinds of greater freedom. But such issues are usually discussed in relation to the principles of deliberative democracy, public service, and the need to protect news organizations from political influence (e.g., Benson and Powers 2011). What was interesting here was not only that journalists consciously weighed one kind of autonomy against another, but also that journalists minimized their concerns about the diplomatic function of their work in these terms. Moreover, this legitimizing narrative was used frequently by journalists funded by democratic and authoritarian states.

### **Practical Boundary-Work: Resisting Funding Governments**

Although these three narratives were commonly used by journalists to justify their production of state-funded transnational news, there were times when some began to question their relationship to their funding state more rigorously. These journalists sometimes engaged in other forms of “boundary-work” (Gieryn 1983) that challenged or moderated the diplomatic influence of their funding state. A key focus of this research was the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, which is the main production “hub” of transnational news about Africa. Nairobi’s positioning as a kind of “port of entry” for such organizations (Youmans 2017) not only shaped the nature of journalistic labor, industry competition, and sociopolitical tensions, but is also (re)shaping the built environment of the city. For example, during fieldwork, the Chinese government was building an impressive sixteen-story international news center, at the same time as the BBCWS was using funding from the U.K. government to turn its Nairobi office into its largest international bureau (*BBC News* 2018).

Journalists claimed that what caused them to re-evaluate their previous legitimizing rationales was not this material manifestation of foreign powers’ struggle for influence within Africa (discussed in Wasserman 2016; Zhang et al. 2016). Instead, they were more concerned about the unequal distribution of material capital within their news organizations. At CGTN and BBCWS, Kenyan staff were paid far less than international staff. Because most “international” staff were either Chinese (at CGTN) or British (at BBCWS), many Kenyan journalists and their colleagues from other sub-Saharan countries viewed this disparity in pay as evidence of an imperialistic mindset (discussed in Boyd-Barrett 2015; Umejei 2018).

African journalists’ concerns about Kenyans’ lower rates of pay were exacerbated by their frustrations about what they saw as their limited ability to compete for other “stakes in the game,” namely, their personal career prospects.

CGTN staff said that it was not possible for them to be promoted: once appointed to a job, that was where they stayed unless they left the organization. Meanwhile, BBC journalists said they despaired of the way in which newly recruited Kenyan staff (funded by the recent windfall from the U.K. government) were appointed even farther down the pay scale than existing local staff. In addition, African staff employed by the BBCWS and CGTN argued that bureau chiefs were almost always nationals of funding governments, so journalists “like them” would never rise that far up the career ladder.

Such grievances were exacerbated at the BBCWS by the extra financial allowances given to the corporation’s international staff for housing, health care, and schooling. But CGTN staff were more concerned about their unequal access to other kinds of material capital. Several African journalists alleged that they were not allowed to use the staff minibus to travel home until after Chinese managers had completed their own journeys: a situation that these journalists experienced as being so discriminatory that one reporter even said it felt like “apartheid.”

African journalists’ concerns about unequal access to material capital within their organizations appeared to give greater force to the niggling qualms that some said they had previously felt about their diplomatic role. Some African staff at CGTN explicitly reexamined their complicity in legitimizing the rapid expansion of Chinese presence within the continent. Kenyan staff and freelancers who worked for the BBC also voiced discomfort about their role in promoting an attractive vision of British culture (Nye 1991, 2004, 2008), which created what one producer called a kind of “warm fuzziness” toward the United Kingdom, and a questionable “trust” in “all things British” among older generations in East Africa.

This combination of normative and self-interested concerns prompted three African journalists to leave their jobs at state-funded news organizations, a fourth withdrew from a regular and longstanding freelancing arrangement. Several other journalists in this study were considering following suit. Thus, it initially appeared that local journalists’ unequal access to material capital could be as significant a cause of resignation among state-funded journalists as increased managerial intervention in editorial decision making (discussed in Samuel-Azran 2013). However, a year after the study was completed, only one participant had stopped working for state-funded transnational news organizations altogether, by making a complete career change. The others had since moved (or were seeking to move) to new positions at other state-funded transnational media organizations. These journalists argued that they had little alternative, as work for domestic media in Kenya involved working much longer hours for less money, and frequently involved greater government intimidation and censorship.

Moreover, we found little evidence of journalists uniting to resist the diplomatic strategies of funding states, either in terms of formal, unionized action, or in terms of informal group collaboration. The exception to this was one

occasion, in 2017, when Chinese managers at CGTN Nairobi introduced a rule that every program had to begin with some “positive” African news, in accordance with Chinese diplomatic directives. This policy was later retracted because of the collective resistance of African staff, including senior editors and correspondents, as well as their more junior colleagues. African journalists’ opposition to the policy was grounded in their commitment to *doxic* practices relating to newsworthiness. As one editor put it,

We had weird stories taking the top slot just to stay positive. But you realize it can’t work because you can’t talk about, for example, a flower farm or something, but there is an explosion that has killed dozens of people, and everybody is talking about that.

However, as in Gagliardone’s (2013) study, this journalist was less concerned about the prospect of losing credibility with news audiences than with losing cultural capital in the eyes of other journalists. Indeed, a key factor in African journalists’ decision to resist this diplomatic strategy was their conviction that being seen to prioritize Chinese interests over dominant news values would make it impossible for them to secure positions at other transnational news organizations in future. Nevertheless, CGTN journalists were acutely aware that they benefited from far greater job security and better pay than their colleagues working for domestic media in Kenya. This seems likely to have shaped their decision to avoid a heated confrontation with their Chinese managers. Instead, they took a more conciliatory approach, offering a compromise that involved “look[ing] for the positive,” even in very negative stories. As one of the editors explained,

[We said to our Chinese managers]? ‘How about let’s be realistic? At the same time, even as you are covering the conflicts, the violence, if you see any positive aspect, you can bring it into the story?.

[For example] just going even to a refugee camp and just seeing children smiling, trying to be children in the midst of that calamity and difficulty, children trying to learn even under a tree; that desire for education . . . You kind of show the positive aspects. So, it’s all in the mix.’

Therefore, collective resistance to funding states seems rare, even among journalists with relatively secure staff contracts. When such resistance occurred, it was partial, involving African staff negotiating a mutually acceptable compromise with senior managers. We did not find any occasion when journalists united to defend a distinct border between the journalistic and political fields. Indeed, it is illuminating to compare the negotiating strategy employed by these African journalists with the instrumental use of “soft power” by the most

senior journalists at AJE and BBCWS. Although the power dynamics clearly differed, both sets of actors defused conflict by creating the appearance of a fuzzy, ambivalent overlap between the journalistic and political fields, which could benefit both sides.

## Conclusion

In this article, we analyze the legitimizing narratives that state-funded transnational news journalists used to resolve tensions between their diplomatic role and dominant journalistic norms, especially notions of autonomy. Despite important differences in their positioning, we found that these journalists tended to utilize three key legitimizing narratives, which (re)negotiated the symbolic boundary between the journalistic and the political field (Bourdieu 1998; Carlson and Lewis 2015; Gieryn 1983). These narratives cut across divides between news organizations, including those funded by authoritarian and democratic governments.

The first *exclusionary* narrative, used by all kinds of journalists, involved justifying their work by differentiating their “truthful” reporting from the false “propaganda” disseminated by symbolic Others, especially the Russian cable network RT (Yablokov 2015). The second “fuzzifying” narrative was only used by the most senior journalists at AJE and BBCWS. These participants used “soft power” (Nye 1991, 2004, 2008) as a loose, ambivalent “boundary concept” (Allen 2009; Star 2010) to make it appear that the journalistic and political fields could overlap in mutually beneficial ways, without either journalists or funding governments having to abandon their identities, values, or objectives. Both of these narratives tended to rely on a third *inverted* narrative, which involved journalists arguing that, paradoxically, their dependence on funding states served as a powerful source of operational autonomy (Murdock 1983), enabling them to pursue time-consuming and expensive stories about the suffering of marginalized groups in remote or hostile areas.

These findings contribute to media sociology by showing that there are different forms of journalistic “boundary-work” in operation within transnational news, which involve journalists accommodating changes in state–media relations, rather than resisting state interests and directives. Journalists funded by democratic and authoritarian governments are often prepared to consciously “trade off” different forms of autonomy against one another, compromising on one to gain greater advantages in another. We also help develop political communication theory by showing that although “soft power” and “propaganda” are often criticized for being multivalent critical terms, this is precisely why they are of such strategic importance in the legitimizing narratives of state-funded journalists. By deploying deliberately narrow definitions of “propaganda” as well as the conceptual of “soft power,” journalists were able to sidestep more complex and troubling questions about the relationship of their work to the

operation of state security and intelligence, so continuing to justify their employment by state-funded news organizations to themselves and others.

Indeed, what is perhaps most important about the “boundary-work” discussed in this study is how rarely it prompted journalists to resist the diplomatic strategies of their funding state. Local journalists critically reexamined their legitimizing narratives when angered by their unequal access to material capital within their news organizations, in terms of pay, promotion, and job-related perks. Then, these journalists began to wonder if they might be serving the imperialistic strategies of funding states, rather than working as “independent” journalists (Boyd-Barrett 2015). However, the lack of better career options within domestic media meant that even the most cynical tended to go on to apply to other state-funded transnational news organizations. Indeed, the only occasion when journalists collectively resisted the diplomatic strategies of their funding government was when they feared that failing to do so would damage their cultural capital so badly in the eyes of other journalists that they would be unable to secure positions at other transnational news outlets.

These findings have implications for broader arguments about the extent to which transnational news is “fielded.” Our research supports the findings of others who have pointed to the ongoing dominance of domestic perspectives and personnel (Christin 2016; Denčik 2012, 2013; Van Leuven and Berglez 2016). The doxic practices of transnational news journalists also involved the news value of negativity, which shapes the production of foreign news in domestic media (Galtung and Ruge 1965). In addition, African journalists’ concern about the paucity of opportunities available to them in the domestic job market was clearly a crucial factor in their decision making. Together, these findings seem to suggest that transnational news journalists occupy the same journalistic field as their domestic colleagues, rather than belonging to a distinct field of their own.

However, the structuring of the job market meant that the “stakes of the game” or what mattered most to these journalists was their cultural capital in the eyes of those employed by other transnational news organizations. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of this study was the frequent circulation of staff and freelance journalists between state-funded transnational news outlets (Hellmueller and Konow-Lund 2019), including those supported by authoritarian and democratic governments. This mobility appears to have enabled the diffusion of certain ways of legitimizing media–state relations within state-funded transnational news.

In addition, journalists’ boundary-work in the first two legitimizing narratives hinged upon concepts such as “propaganda” and “soft power,” which are specific to the boundary with international diplomacy, rather than to politics in general, or public relations. Likewise, the third legitimizing narrative, which stressed the importance of journalists’ operational autonomy, depended upon journalists’ sense of normative obligation to cover the suffering of distant

others, in ways that do not seem to be fully explained by domestic news values (Chouliaraki 2008). For these reasons, we think that it is worth exploring whether transnational news may be (very) weakly fielded using a more generalized sample of journalists.

Nevertheless, it was important to research how the transnational news journalists who cover humanitarian issues understand their relationships to funding governments, as this analysis helps to explain why journalism these kinds of may be particularly vulnerable to domination by states' diplomatic interests. This finding is significant because of the multivalence of "humanitarianism" itself, discourse about which is used as a "political resource" by state and nonstate actors to legitimize many different kinds of intervention (Fassin 2010: 239).

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