

Rethinking China's global 'propaganda' blitz

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Falk Hartig

Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Abstract

China's global communication activities are mainly perceived as sinister propaganda to mislead international audiences, and related discussions exemplify Western unease about China's global communication efforts. While not trivializing these efforts, this article objects to some of the assessments and argues in favour of a critical but open-minded engagement with China's global communication activities. Such an approach should pay attention to potential audiences and should closely scrutinize the real-life circumstances of China's communicative practices and put them into perspective for its audiences. The article highlights these aspects by analysing the screening of a video in New York City's Times Square in Summer 2016 and one version of the *China Daily* supplement, *China Watch*.

Keywords

Audiences, China, *China Daily*, propaganda, public diplomacy, Times Square

Introduction

Backed by an estimated annual budget of US\$10 billion, Chinese media organizations are expanding their global presence in response to Chinese President Xi Jinping's call to 'tell China's story well' (AP, 2016); in doing so, they frequently cause a stir abroad. One such event was the screening of a video in New York City's Times Square in Summer 2016 presenting China's take on the South China Sea, and a deal, concluded in Spring 2016, between *China Daily*, China's official English-language newspaper, and Australian Fairfax Media to include an eight-page English-language supplement produced by *China Daily* in Fairfax newspapers once a month. China's intentions were again called to question at the turn of 2016, when China's state broadcaster Central China Television (CCTV)

Corresponding author:

Falk Hartig, AFRASO, Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, Juridicum, Postfach 21, Senckenberganlage 31, 60325 Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

Email: falk_hartig@yahoo.com

rebranded its international networks and digital presence under the name China Global Television Network (CGTN) as part of a push to consolidate its worldwide reach (AP, 2016).

While not trivializing China's global communication efforts and clearly not white-washing the critical conditions under which journalists have to operate in China (Luqiu, 2017; Marsh, 2017; Nieman Reports, 2014), this article objects to some of the blanket judgements that have passed on China's moves and argues in favour of a critical but open-minded scrutiny of China's global communication. This, it is argued, includes the necessity to pay attention to potential audiences and to look at the real-life circumstances and relating factors of China's global communication. Taking these factors seriously, I argue, presents a partially different picture of China's communication activities: while some hasty judgements label them as 'sinister' propaganda which manipulate the global public, reality checks suggest that China's messages fizzle out more often than not. To make my point, I discuss the findings of two case studies analysing the Times Square video and one version of the *China Daily* supplement. Before turning to the empirical part, I will briefly outline the conceptual debates surrounding government-led forms of communication described as public diplomacy and the question of public diplomacy audiences.

Conceptualizing public diplomacy as international political communication

Nowadays, almost all countries are 'eager to develop positive images of themselves among foreign publics, because such images are considered important for achieving a range of objectives in foreign relations' (Goldsmith et al., 2014: 88). The means to develop those positive images is described as public diplomacy, a country's engagement and communication with foreign publics for the sake of communicating certain narratives and images of that country to promote its soft power and thereby national interests (Park and Lim, 2014). According to Hachten and Scotton (2012), public diplomacy is one component of international political communication, the other being 'overseas information programs, cultural exchanges, propaganda activities, and political warfare' (p. 103). According to Cull (2009), public diplomacy can be described by analysing its instruments which include listening and advocacy, international broadcasting and international exchange, cultural diplomacy and other aspects of strategic communication such as media and psychological warfare. These two definitional approximations exemplify one dilemma of public diplomacy research, namely ambiguity and confusion regarding its definitions, instruments and approaches (Fitzpatrick, 2010).

What researchers, however, can agree on is the simple but crucial fact that public opinion and perception are crucial in contemporary international relations, which is why communication becomes a vital means of generating influence and an ever-more powerful aspect in the conduct of foreign affairs. This is especially true for China and some argue that 'China's greatest strategic threat today is its national image', and 'how China is perceived by other nations [. . .] will determine the future of Chinese development and

reform' (Ramo, 2007: 12). Whether its national image is China's greatest threat remains undecided, but it is true that few countries in the world 'are as sensitive to their image in the eyes of other nations as China' (d'Hooghe, 2015: 2; Fan, 2015; Rawnsley, 2012; Thussu et al., 2018; Xu and Huang, 2016).

The case of China is important for another reason as it blurs the conceptual differentiation between public diplomacy and propaganda (Rawnsley, 2015).¹ China's communicative practices are either described as a means of public diplomacy (d'Hooghe, 2015; Hartig, 2016), a soft power push (Barr, 2011), or as propaganda activities (Brady, 2015). Public diplomacy, as indicated above, can be understood as the communicative undertaking to wield soft power, to present a favourable image of a country and to help win hearts and minds (Gilboa, 2016). The ultimate aim of influencing people leads to the debate about whether those activities 'are manipulative "propaganda" or valid "public diplomacy"' (Zaharna, 2004: 219). With regard to China, Rawnsley (2013) notes that one may suspect

that the Chinese do not separate clearly their understanding or their practice of propaganda and public diplomacy, and that often the activities are so blurred that the cynic might suggest that, in the Chinese world, public diplomacy is merely a euphemism for propaganda. (p. 148)

In this article, propaganda is understood in the popular sense and thus in a 'highly negative' way (Walton, 1997: 383), equating it with 'lies, distortion, deceit, manipulation, mind control, psychological warfare, brainwashing, and palaver' (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2006: 2–3).

Taking Rawnsley's (2013) observation into account, one could then argue that it is in the eye of the beholder whether China's communicative practices are 'sinister' propaganda or 'benign' public diplomacy (or something else) and it seems that the judgements say, to borrow from Barr (2011), as much about those who make them as they say about the communicative practices themselves. While one may discount those semantic distinctions as merely academic quibble, they clearly have real-world implications. For one, media tend to describe China's international political communication as a means of propaganda, understood in the sinister sense of the word.² This approach does not only frame China's global communicative practices in a certain way, but it also attributes – intentionally or otherwise – a certain role to the audiences of those practices, as 'passive and often unknowing recipients of persuasive messages' who should be protected 'from foreign effects' (Bratich, 2005: 251).

This aspect brings us to one of the most challenging aspects of public diplomacy: does all this communication have any effect? Evaluation in this regard is a tricky business as it is difficult to establish a direct causal link between a certain communicative instrument and its desired impact on a target audience, often framed as a positive attitude or behaviour change, both of which are highly intangible concepts (Banks, 2011). The degree of complexity grows exponentially when the desired impact only begins to manifest itself years, even decades, later, if at all. This, it seems, may be the reason why 'outputs are privileged over impact' (Rawnsley, 2012: 132) and 'evidence of reach is taken to be synonymous with influence' (Flew, 2016: 285) – a trend that is clearly not limited to China.

In order to judge any such communicative practices, it is important to take into consideration the aims and goals of specific instruments. It may, for example, be correct that Confucius Institutes and ‘other paraphernalia of soft diplomacy [. . .] have not gained China international trust and respect’ (Brown, 2016: 191), but if ‘outcomes are measured solely in terms of quantitative leaps [. . .] the achievements of the CI project are very remarkable’ (Lo and Pan, 2016), as the ever-growing number of institutes and students indicates. Lo and Pan’s statement points to perhaps the most important problem research into China’s public diplomacy (and other public diplomacy initiatives) is facing: the simple but crucial fact that we know far too little about audiences and their perception of China’s public diplomacy initiatives (one of the very few exceptions here is Zhang, 2011).

The starting point for what follows therefore is the insight that so far only very little attention has been given to how audiences actually engage with China’s public diplomacy instruments and the content they provide.³ In the remainder of this article, I not only want to turn my attention to the audience, but I also want to argue that it is crucially important to consider the real-world circumstances in which such communication takes place in order to judge such communication.

China’s ‘public opinion warfare’ in Times Square: Facts and assumptions

Since August 2011, Xinhua Gallery Media Co. Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of China’s official Xinhua News Agency, has been leasing a huge LED billboard sign on 2 Times Square, the building that is the northern anchor of the district and overlooks Duffy Square between 45th and 47th Streets, Broadway and Seventh Avenue. The sign, which is 60 feet (19 m) high, 40 feet (12 m) wide and also known as the China Screen, is underneath a billboard for Prudential, a US financial company, and above billboards for Samsung, Coca-Cola and Hyundai. While the details of the deal remain unknown, it is estimated that similar signs in similar locations can rent for as much as US\$300,000-US\$400,000 a month (Elliott, 2011).⁴

The screen displays videos from Xinhua and its various corporations as well as advertisements for companies, cities, regions and provinces in China. While most of these videos are classical commercial ads, which is not surprising bearing in mind the location, which is the ‘commercial and semiotic heart of capitalism’s global nerve center’ (Eeckhout, 2002: 156), the videos also occasionally address China’s politics in order to bring about understanding of those politics and to shape perceptions of China.⁵

From 23 July to 3 August 2016, the China Screen aired 120 times a day a video presenting China’s understanding of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea.⁶ The screening of the video came 2 weeks after an international tribunal ruled China’s claim to most of the waterway was inconsistent with international law.

In its first segment, the 3-minute video shows the impressive natural beauty of the region and explains, via English subtitles, the history of that region as China interprets it.⁷ It notes that ‘China is the first to have continuously, peacefully, and effectively exercised sovereignty and jurisdiction over Nanhai Zhudao (the South China Sea Islands)

and relevant waters'. It also notes that in February 1948, 'the Chinese government officially published the map of the administrative districts of China including [. . .] the South China Sea Islands' and 'For a long time after that, not a single country ever challenged that [the South China Sea Islands] were China's territory'.

The second part of the video shows short interview sequences with Chinese and foreign individuals referring to the South China Sea arbitration and more or less clearly backing China's official narrative. A Chinese scholar says (in Chinese with English subtitles) that 'whether in terms of historical or legal perspective China is the only true owner of the Nansha Islands'. John Ross, presented as the former policy director of Economic and Business Policy of London, says, 'Arbitration is between two parties who want to participate. You can't have arbitration if one side says it doesn't participate'. Mentioning Ross's former position is clearly intended to lend weight to his statement which is in line with that fact that China, as the video outlines, 'did not participate in the illegal South China Sea arbitration'. Interestingly enough, the film does not mention that Ross is a senior fellow at Renmin University in Beijing and 'a frequent defender of China's policies in state-run media' (Leavenworth, 2016). The video also features Catherine West, a UK Labour MP, described as shadow secretary of state and foreign affairs, saying that 'talks are crucial' and that 'we need to resolve something very locally and have a grown-up approach to dialogue'. Shortly after the release, West issued a statement saying her views were misrepresented, that she 'was unaware that these comments would be used in this manner' and that she was also misidentified as shadow foreign secretary (Leavenworth, 2016).

Taking into account these inaccuracies – it is anyone's guess whether these happened unintentionally or not – and the harsh language used, it comes as no surprise that various English-language media described the video as 'propaganda' (Beech, 2016; Fang and Zhang, 2016; *Hindustan Times*, 2016; Leavenworth, 2016; Mollman, 2016; Worley, 2016); on Twitter, it was described as 'public opinion warfare in the heart of the heart of America',⁸ and a few news items labelled it a 'PR campaign' (Johnson, 2016) or a 'PR blitz' (*Sputnik International*, 2016).

The Times Square video not only made global waves, it exemplified an issue that is normally not considered when discussing China's global communication activities: in order to tell China's story to foreign audiences, or to manipulate foreign minds, China has to reach those audiences because 'if the target is never exposed to the sender's message, then it obviously cannot be influenced by it' (Kroenig et al., 2010: 414). While this may seem as plain as a pikestaff for a researcher, in reality it is not.

Reality check in Times Square: Looking at people who do not look up

When I was in New York in the last week of July 2016, I spent considerable time at Times Square in a quasi-ethnographic manner watching the video and talking to visitors.⁹ Based on those observations, I argue that the video neither explained China's stance on the issue nor manipulated foreign minds. Why? Mainly because the message fizzled out and did not reach its audiences due to several related real-life circumstances, including the location and the styling of the video.

The location, the video and its audience: How the message fizzled out

As a visitor you are simply steamrolled and stunned by Times Square. It is loud, it is noisy, in the summer, it is hot and it is packed with people. Over 300,000 pedestrians enter Times Square on average, while another 115,000 pass through by car and bus each day. On busy days, over 4,600,000 people populate the area. While those numbers seem perfect for advertisement, the gleaming, flashing array of huge LED screens on every side sending out all kinds of commercial messages, the famous electronic news ticker and countless promoters for shows of all kinds lead to a complete sensory overload.

Fang and Zhang (2016), two of the very few journalists who covered the story by actually going there, observed that most of the Times Square visitors 'had not even noticed the South China Sea message'. Six out of nine people I talked to were not even aware of the China Screen and only saw it when I pointed it out to them. One of the three colloquists who noticed the China Screen without my intervention had seen 'some Chinese stuff up there', but thought it to be 'some Tourism advertising'. One had realized 'some western faces' and 'aircon ads'. The third noticed 'something with an Ocean and a high speed train [and] some political message'. While the third person was the only one who noticed the political dimension, she confused the South China Sea video with another short video introducing China's most recent foreign policy campaign, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹⁰

The constrained perception was amplified by the fact that the China Screen is not in the visual field of most pedestrians as it is placed some 50 m above the heads of people and, depending on where one stands, it is too far away to see or understand what it is saying.¹¹ This meant that eight out of nine randomly approached people had a problem reading the subtitles because of the dazzling sun, because the font size of the subtitles was too small or because they were too far away. Two more technicalities hampered the effectiveness: first, there were too many words to outline the arguments. Most of the written statements in the video are very long (up to eight lines, covering half of the screen), thus making it hard, if not impossible, to read everything, taking into account the glaring sun, the heat, the surrounding bustle, niggly kids and partners. Second, all nine people noted that the 3-minute film was too long.

Two onlookers who had spotted the South China Sea video before I approached them, both admitted that they did not watch it completely, and only one of all my interlocutors remained in the square and watched the video loop after we finished our conversation. None of the six who had not seen the China Screen could say anything about the South China Sea video content while we were looking at it together because they were not familiar with the issue. One of them told me she was 'not interested in politics', one noted that it might be 'good to learn more about the issue' and that it might be good to know what China thinks, but the other four were generally uninterested. The person who had noticed 'some western faces' told me that 'the film did not help me better understand the issue', mainly because of the technicalities outlined above. The one who mixed up the campaigns said that it was good that China was explaining its point of view 'if this is such a critical issue for them'.

Fang and Zhang (2016) report similar indifferent reactions from people, ranging from confessing that they did not notice the display, just wondering about the price and rather

unimpressed Chinese people. One visitor noted that there ‘are too many other things mixed in there with the important things so the message is unclear’ (Fang and Zhang, 2016). *China Daily* (2016) quoted a law student from China saying: ‘I’m very moved to see this video, which shows our country’s effort on introducing and explaining to the world its position on this issue’, and another Chinese student as being ‘proud that my country is presenting her voice in the busiest district in New York’. The newspaper also quoted one US citizen who felt ‘educated about the issue after seeing the clip, especially about China’s standpoint’ (Fang and Zhang, 2016).

While the China Screen is clearly one instrument in China’s public diplomacy toolkit as it clearly conforms to Xi Jinping’s call to ‘tell China’s story well, spread China’s voice well, let the world know a three-dimensional, colourful China, and showcase China’s role as a builder of world peace’ (quoted in AP, 2016), it is special only in that it targets one group of people, namely visitors to New York’s Times Square, even though media around the world reported about the screen, and especially about the South China Sea video, and therefore provided people elsewhere with the theoretical chance to get a glimpse of Chinese public diplomacy. But, essentially, the reach of the China Screen is limited to the Times Square area.

China Daily and its global supplement, China Watch

The newspaper, *China Daily*, on the other hand, has a potential global reach; *China Daily* forms, together with Xinhua News Agency, CCTV/CGTN and China Radio International (CRI), the ‘Big Four’ government-owned Chinese media organizations that are most actively involved in China’s global media campaign.

China Daily was founded in 1981 and is the major English-language newspaper in China. It is owned by China’s principal Chinese-language newspaper and the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, the *People’s Daily (Renmin Ribao)* and is thus described as the ‘mouthpiece for the Party in its efforts to communicate with the wider world’ (Chen, 2012: 309). Due to its close connection to the *People’s Daily*, the *China Daily* not only draws on many of the same sources of information and adopts the same line on major news items (Chen, 2004), but also party control is exerted on the *China Daily*, as on other Chinese newspapers, through the CCP’s Publicity Department (Chen, 2004). This leads some to describe *China Daily* as a ‘propaganda effort by the central government’ (Lanigan, 2015: 506), while others note that the editorial policies of *China Daily* ‘are considered to be slightly more liberal than other Chinese-language newspapers’ (Liu, 2011: 138) and that *China Daily* ‘often covers delicate issues in China that receive little or no coverage in the Chinese-language media’ (Hartig, 2018; Hays, 2008).

Next to the ‘mother’ newspaper in mainland China, the *China Daily* Group also publishes editions of its newspaper in Hong Kong, the United States, Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. The group also publishes *China Watch*, which is covered in the second case study.

In May 2016, Australian Fairfax Media Ltd signed a deal with *China Daily* after which Fairfax’s most reputed newspapers – *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and *Financial Review* – would issue an eight-page English-language edition of *China Watch*

once a month. *China Watch* is a multilingual publication produced by *China Daily* and distributed globally as a supplement together with *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* (the United States), *The Daily Telegraph* (the United Kingdom), *Le Figaro* (France), *Handelsblatt* (Germany), *The Nation* (Thailand), *Jakarta Post* (Indonesia), *Uno* and *El Cronista* (Argentina), *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (Russia). According to *China Daily*, the supplement ‘reaches more than 50 million readers from political and business circles’ and ‘plays an important role in explaining China to the world and ensuring that the country’s voice is heard’ (Wang, 2016).

China Watch: Between news diversity and propaganda coup

According to Fairfax, the supplement would ‘enrich the content’ of its newspapers and ‘Australian readers will be interested in reading in-depth coverage on China and Sino-Australian ties’, whereas *China Daily* quoted an Australian academic as saying the ‘publication is a really welcome development in the Australian media landscape [as it] introduces news diversity to Australian media audiences’ (Wang, 2016). Most comments in Australia and elsewhere, however, were highly critical, describing the deal as a ‘propaganda coup’ for Beijing (Pearlman, 2016). Other Australian media stated that Fairfax had ‘agreed to take money from the Chinese for spreading their propaganda’ (*Media Watch*, 2016), while analysts highlighted the possible negative implications for ‘Australian standards of journalism’ (Fitzgerald and Sun, 2016) or detected a plan by the Chinese Communist Party to ‘shift domestic public opinion in Australia on sensitive issues such as the South China Sea’ (Pearlman, 2016).

Those arguments referred to a *China Watch* article with the headline, ‘Manila has no leg to stand on’, condemning the Philippines for taking China to an international tribunal over Beijing’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. The lead story of the same edition was less frightening, headlined ‘Trade deal’s benefits are already flowing’, and promoted the benefits to Australia of a free trade deal between Canberra and Beijing (Pearlman, 2016).

Label requirements also raised critics’ eyebrows. The lift-out notes on the front page: ‘This supplement, prepared by *China Daily*, People’s Republic of China, did not involve the news or editorial departments of [the respective Fairfax newspaper]’. The remainder of the lift-out did not, as critics pointed out, include ‘such notices to readers. Typically, such lift-outs feature banners on each page notifying readers that it contains sponsored content’ (Fitzgerald and Sun, 2016; Pearlman, 2016). Confronted with this, Fairfax noted: ‘The lift-out is clearly labelled and it is not dissimilar in nature to other agreements we have entered with other clients’.¹²

China Watch: Justified doubt or exaggerated fuss?

The accusation of deliberate fuzziness turns the attention to the readers of *China Watch* and the fear they would confuse Australian editorial content with Chinese propaganda. While *The Guardian*, somewhat smugly, assumed the difference ‘may well have felt unclear to casual readers’ (Meade, 2016), the *New Zealand Herald* noted, also somewhat smug but self-soothing: ‘The good news is that *China Watch* features so much heavy

handed PR and boosterism, only a moron in a hurry would confuse it for editorial' (Drinnan, 2016). More nuanced voices put the whole issue into perspective and guided the attention to two crucial aspects: the technicalities and the (potential) readership of *China Watch*. While one academic noted that 'few people would read it anyway [and] *China Daily* is not that high quality in terms of story-telling' (Clark, 2016), a former Australian journal similarly argued that the lift-outs were unlikely to have a tangible effect on Australian readers who 'have strong enough immune systems to withstand the Chinese government's lies and half-truths' (Cai, 2016).

To highlight the importance of taking real-world circumstances into serious consideration again, I present findings from a case study dealing with the German edition of *China Watch* distributed with the *Handelsblatt*, Germany's leading business newspaper, which did, interestingly enough, not face any criticism like that faced by Fairfax in Australia.

The supplement status: You know it when you see it

Below the *China Watch* label, potential readers were informed – in German – that 'China Watch is published monthly by *China Daily*. China Watch reports from modern China'. At the bottom of the page, a disclaimer reads: 'This paid supplement is enclosed in *Handelsblatt*. Responsible for its content is solely the editorial office of *China Daily* (People's Republic of China). The *Handelsblatt* editorial office is not involved in the preparation of this paid supplement'. While this disclaimer, as in Australia, is only printed on the first page, the format of the lift-out is smaller than the *Handelsblatt* compact format and every page carries the *China Watch* logo.¹³

In order to find out more about what potential readers have to say about *China Watch*, I approached potential readers in first-class coaches of Germany's high-speed trains, which provide passengers with free copies of several German newspapers, including the *Handelsblatt*. Three out of five randomly selected *Handelsblatt* readers¹⁴ told me that they realized that the lift-out was not produced by *Handelsblatt* which was, in their opinion, easily recognizable 'due to the layout' and 'due to the placement in the middle of the paper where all the other inserts can be found'. Precisely because of this particular placement in the middle of the paper, the two other passengers did not see the supplement at all and 'would have thrown it away', assuming it to be 'just another advertising'.

From the three people who recognized the supplement, one told me she would not read it as she was not interested in China. Another passenger half-jokingly assumed it to be 'brainwashing from China', but also noted that he was 'not sure whether Chinese brainwashing is worse than Springer brainwashing', referring to Axel Springer AG which produces Germany's biggest and most influential tabloid *Bild*, which is also given out for free to first-class travellers. The third person was the only one who knew the supplement from before and noted that he reads one or two articles occasionally, depending on the topic: 'I am working in business, so it's fundamental to stay current regarding China'. He also said: 'Of course, one has to keep in mind where the information is coming from, but at times I see interesting topics I would not have read about otherwise'. Referring to the edition from late November 2016, he noted that the story about the Aixtron case was 'highly interesting because it gives me China's take on this hot issue'.

He referred to the story on page 3 entitled ‘Berlin should rethink its approach towards investments’, which discusses China’s concerns about the decision of Germany’s Ministry of Economy to temporarily halt the takeover of a German company which supplies equipment to the semiconductor industry by a Chinese company.

China Watch’s content and style of reporting

The November 2016 edition had a cover story entitled ‘The two-child-policy works’, and the second article on the front page, entitled ‘The Chinese dream of a German student’, introduced a German high-school graduate who volunteered in rural Guangxi. Page 2 featured several small news items and the only story on page 4 explained the growing demand for private dental treatment in China. The story on page 5 introduced new rental systems for bikes in China developed by private providers; page 6 had a piece about Chinese authors participating in the world’s largest book fair in Frankfurt and the story on page 7 described how a European *au pair* programme was taking root in China. The supplement finished on page 8 with a profile of a German physicist and Nobel Prize laureate talking of how he ‘not only enthralles Chinese scientists, but also plays table tennis with them’.

While it is left to the reader what to make of these stories and what story of China they actually tell, one striking aspect becomes obvious which refers back to the issue of technicalities. My interlocuter who knew *China Watch* from before noted that even though some stories were interesting, ‘they are quite boring and terribly written’. In the case of the German edition, this is aggravated by the fact that a native speaker immediately wonders whether the stories were written by non-native speakers. The stories are both complicated and stilted, quite unlike the regular German news item. The reason for this may also be the fact that some of the stories are mere translations from pieces that have originally been published by *China Daily* in English.

Discussion and conclusion

Contemplating the role of social science in the 2016 US presidential election, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen called for more qualitative research in political communication and noted that ‘doing this might mean more social scientists have to actually talk to and spend time with the people they study’ (Nielsen, 2016; see also Karpf et al., 2015). Both the cases of the China Screen in New York’s Times Square and the South China Sea video as well as the German edition of *China Watch* illustrate the necessity to talk to people – in these cases, the audience, or the imagined audience, of China’s public diplomacy efforts. Both cases also exemplify that it is crucial not only to consider the role of the audience but also to consider the real-world circumstances in which those communicative practices take place.

The Times Square case illustrates the importance of the setting in which communication takes place and thus directs our attention to the aspect of noise, a central component of information processing theory. While not central to contemporary media and communication studies, ‘the term is nevertheless useful for communication practices’ (Hartley, 2011: 191) such as public relations or government-led external communication. Noise refers to any interference that might disrupt the communication by distracting the

attention of the receiver (Hackley and Hackley, 2015; Hartley, 2011). As pointed out, the China Screen displaying the South China Sea video is confronted with noise in both a metaphorical and literal sense. And this, in turn, complicates the already complex process of influencing the audience as the noise reduces the audiences' exposure to the sender's message which, due to the poor presentation, is hard to get anyhow.

The *China Watch* case illustrates the importance of the audience which, in contemporary public diplomacy research, is assumed as not being passive, but being active participants (Fisher, 2013).¹⁵ This refers to the uses and gratification theories which understand audience members as non-passive consumers, and argue that the audience has power over their media consumption and assumes an active role in interpreting content (Hartley, 2011; Ruggiero, 2000). While the uses and gratifications approaches have been rigorously criticized (Leung, 2015), the fundamental idea of audiences being active is of crucial importance for public diplomacy research. This being active means that the audience not only interprets messages and thereby is not at the mercy of the sender, but it may also actively look for as well as select or refuse information.

Again, it is not the intention here to trivialize some of China's harsh messages or to whitewash the problematic circumstances under which Chinese journalists have to work (Simons et al., 2016) as they are urged to 'adhere to the correct political direction and to do politically determined journalism' in order to 'serve the overall interests of the party and the state' (Party Committee of the All-China Journalist's Association, 2017). But in order to critically engage with China's global communication efforts, it is crucial to look at these practices more closely to get a better understanding. This critical but open-minded approach should include an evaluation of China's messages and the simple but critical question of if and how those messages reach potential audiences. This approach should furthermore refrain from treating global audiences in a paternalistic manner and assuming that they have to be 'protected' from sinister Chinese propaganda.

While the two case studies presented here raise no claim to completeness, they give a glimpse into the real-world circumstances of China's communication blitz and the impression that China faces, for the different reasons described here, serious problems in getting its message across. More research is necessary to either confirm or disprove this impression. Right now, however, it seems that the harsh critics in the West should cool down a bit, and officials in Beijing should worry a bit and ask themselves whether it is worth spending the Chinese tax-payer's money for such limited results.

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Notes

1. Similar discussions can be observed with regard to the case of Russia (Kragh and Åsberg, 2017; Rawnsley, 2015; Simons, 2014).
2. Randomly selected news items describing the above-mentioned CGTN as a propaganda tool of the Chinese Communist Party would be: AP (2016), Osborne (2016), Holtz (2017).
3. By far, the most comprehensive treatment of this issue can be found in Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2018).

4. Xinhua journalists based in New York, whom I asked about the screen, were not able to provide any figures. Interesting enough, *China Daily* – next to Xinhua, one of the ‘Big Four’ government-owned media organizations most actively involved in China’s global media campaign – was also not able to get any information regarding the financial aspects (see Cheng and Ma, 2012).
5. In early 2011, before Xinhua started to lease its China Screen, Times Square was the location for the screening of a 60-second image film entitled ‘People’ which highlighted prominent Chinese figures such as former basketball star Yao Ming, pianist Lang Lang, and similar figures from science and business. In January 2011, the film ran 300 times a day across six giant screens in Times Square. The video quickly flashed through a series of themes, including athletics, wealth, design, space travel, art, supermodels, agriculture and award-winning talent. Each theme was prefaced as ‘Chinese’ (i.e. ‘Chinese Athletics’, etc.) and each had in the background numerous smiling Chinese personalities who have made it big in their fields, with their names written in English next to them (Barr, 2011, 2012).
6. The South China Sea disputes involve island and maritime claims among several states within the region as a high proportion of the world’s trade passes through the South China Sea and the region is rich in natural resources.
7. The video can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XI2s-2vjr7o>
8. For the Twitter entry, see here: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/07/xis-external-propaganda-machine-overdrive/>
9. I have been on site three different days, twice in the morning from about 10.00 to 11.30 and one afternoon from about 14.30 to 15.30. I watched the video, observed the scenery and talked to randomly selected people. I approached about 25 visitors and 9 were willing to talk. I was mainly interested whether they had noticed the China Screen and what they thought of the South China Sea video. The interviews/conversations were 10-15 minutes long and I took notes after each semi-structured interview/conversation.
10. The China Screen displays an endless video loop of about 20 minutes, consisting of about 15 different short videos. Next to the South China Sea film, the loop showed a short film about the Belt and Road Initiative (which included pictures of a high-speed train); it also introduced the provinces of Shandong and Jiangsu, the city of Suzhou, a Science Park in Beijing, the Shanghai Tower and Chinese companies (including Gree, a producer of air conditioners).
11. A short film about the video gives the reader a rough impression of the overall surroundings. The first 5 and the last 15 seconds, in particular, illustrate the setting: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-07/27/content_26239494.htm
12. http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/1619_fairfax.pdf
13. The *China Watch* edition of 5 September 2016 was only four pages long and printed on high-gloss paper, which made it even easier to differentiate between *Handelsblatt* and *China Watch*.
14. I conversed with them for 10–20 minutes and took notes during and after the conversation.
15. The crux of the matter, however, is that even though the audience is *assumed* as being active participants, only very little research, if any at all, actually engages with audiences in public diplomacy research.

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Author biography

Falk Hartig was until recently a postdoctoral researcher at Goethe University in Frankfurt and is now an affiliated researcher with the Ilmenau Center of Public Diplomacy Research and Training. He is the author of *Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of the Confucius Institute* (Routledge, 2016) and has published articles in *Politics*, *International Studies Review*, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, *Journal of Communication Management* and the *Journal of International Communication*, among others. His research focuses on international political communication and China's communicative engagement with the world.