



**Book review: Seeking truth in international TV news. China, CGTN and the BBC**

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## Book Review

Vivien Marsh.

2023. *Seeking Truth in International TV News. China, CGTN and the BBC.*

Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp 214. ISBN 9780367558529

For over a decade, China's international media strategy has been subject to a lot of speculation without substantial empirical evidence. Instead of being a window to the 'real' China, the assumption shared by many critics is that Chinese international news media offer nothing more than a carefully scripted account of how Beijing would like the world to believe China is. However, Vivien Marsh's work, *Seeking Truth in International TV News. China, CGTN and the BBC* stands out among the very few studies that examine China's global media, by systematically testing the journalistic soundness of this endeavour. Marsh not only provides an insightful analysis of how China's international news channel CGTN (formerly known as CCTV-News) presents the country to the world, but also scrutinizes Western media's own shortcomings in living up to their own journalistic principles.

While the title may suggest a simple comparison of the journalistic styles between two international channels, CGTN and the BBC, the focus of the analytical frame is encapsulated in one key word: China. Marsh's main aim is to establish whether CGTN has been successful in positioning itself as news channel that provides an authentic alternative vision and thus living up to its official slogan "see the difference". The verdict is merciless: "Selective fact-sharing on CGTN has resulted in less than credible images of China as a *Truman Show* paradise of authoritarian capitalism, while its robust pushback against Western reporting is often more about destruction of the Western narrative than any credible creation" (p. 197). To reach this conclusion, Marsh provides a wealth of evidence supported by a rigorous research design.

The book is divided in eight chapters. The introduction, *A battle for global influence*, explains the need for China's media to 'go out' by describing the context of the global media landscape that has become a battleground of competing narratives. In so doing, this first chapter reviews some of the most relevant academic debates around key concepts such as soft power, propaganda, impartiality, and balance. Chapter 2, which the reviewer commented on in a draft form, provides an historical overview of the development of both channels and defines the comparative perspective that is subsequently applied to highlight the differences of their respective journalistic styles. Chapter 3, tests how CCTV-News/CGTN lives up to its commitment to that slogan by contrasting its coverage of sensitive political cases as well as seemingly innocuous cultural events to that of the BBC. Chapter 4, examines both channels' response to disaster focusing on the 2015 Yangtze capsizing and the 2019 Jiangsu explosion, and reflects on the balancing act that journalists and editors working for CCTV-News/CGTN must deal with, i.e., adhering to journalistic principles whilst minimising the risk of censorship. Moreover, Chapter 5 on covering political unrest goes even further to illustrate how both channels not only follow distinct journalistic traditions but also display a certain degree of cultural bias that undermines their efforts to remain objective.

By moving the focus of analysis away from events taking place in China, Chapter 6, *Redefining African news*, shows how CGTN is striving to re-frame conversations about Africa in a way that is revealing of Beijing's ambitions to gain partners and garner support across the global south. In Chapter 7, which looks at Islam, terror and national identity, Marsh argues that CGTN manufactures context on behalf of the Chinese state to delegitimise Western criticism of human rights in China. The final chapter *A Trojan Dragon and its Achilles heel* nicely wraps up the discussion around China's battle for discourse power by highlighting how CGTN's news content reveals an apparent hierarchy of information control

either imposed or seemingly voluntary that runs from the higher echelons on power to the individual practices of journalists, which differs according to the nature of the news in relation to its level of political sensitivity.

The author's BBC background may give the impression that the level of scrutiny placed on CGTN is not reciprocated onto the BBC. However, Marsh does not shy away from critiquing the BBC as an institution that unapologetically reflects a Western outlook even if it arguably adheres to (ostensibly) universal values in its international reporting. In her view, "BBC News could benefit from looking afresh at core ethical assumptions with a more global mindset, and accepting that not all alternative viewpoints are politically or economically beyond the pale" (p. 198). As representatives of two very different ways of 'performing' journalism, CGTN and the BBC both paint partial pictures of reality, no matter how accurate, professional, or impartial they consider themselves to be.

Despite being an example of robust scholarship, this book is not exempt of limitations. First, these two channels are the product of two very distinct cultural contexts and readers may misinterpret them as being representatives of an East/West divide in journalism cultures. Future research could expand the comparative framework to include broadcasters from other parts of the world (particularly the Global South, such as Aljazeera), which might share elements with both the CGTN and BBC, but also diverge in other aspects due to substantial societal differences, which would help further contextualise the findings of this study. Second, in a time when social media platforms appear pervasive throughout the world, the relevance of comparing live/linear broadcasters might be questionable. Future studies would do well to examine the strategies of international broadcasters on social media networks, probe their journalistic practice and test whether they display a differentiated approach to cater to young generations that are less keen to consume news content on live television.

Overall, *Seeking Truth in International TV News* provides an incisive analysis of the operations of international broadcasters and contrasts their output to their own journalistic standards not just in one moment but throughout different stages in their development. This diachronic perspective allows the author to summarise the challenges of CCTV-News/CGTN and the BBC as follows:

"Competition among global news outlets bounced CCTV-News out of its silence on negative news in China, but has tipped its successor CGTN into bouts of disinformation. That, in turn, has pushed BBC correspondents into a highly assertive, open corroboration of their sources of information, turning neutral chroniclers of world events into borderline politicised warriors for truth" (p. 198).

This seemingly discouraging assessment is a reminder of the complexity of the journalistic profession and the difficulty of disentangle itself from cultural and geopolitical influences. In conclusion, Vivien Marsh's book is an invaluable companion for both scholars and journalists seeking to understand the implications of China's rise for international journalism.