Out of the Spotlight: Xinhua Shies Away from Covering Chinese Foreign Aid Recipients

Existing research on the role of news media in the formulation of foreign policy remains restricted to democratic polities. This study treads new ground by examining an authoritarian context: the role of Xinhua (China's leading state-run news media provider) news coverage in Chinese foreign aid policy. We ask: Is the Chinese government as eager as the democratic counterpart to promote their aid-giving agenda to impoverished countries? Contrary to the conventional wisdom in democracies where more coverage and higher salience of the aid-recipient countries usually justify the foreign aids flowing into those countries in need, we expect the opposite in China. We expect more aids to recipient countries are followed by lower news coverage in the subsequent year. Using newly available data on bilateral Chinese foreign aid flows from 2000 to 2014 and the total millions of Xinhua news articles on aid-recipient countries, we use machine-learning algorithms to find more Chinese aid to a given country, leading to future coverage suppression of that country in Xinhua. Future work should consider why Chinese elites want to keep aid recipients out of the media spotlight.