

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Could Chinese News Channels Have a Future in Latin America?

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China's global media expansion has entailed the creation of a series of multilingual media outlets targeting different regions of the world. With Latin America being one of them, Spanish has arisen as a key language within China's international media strategy. Nevertheless, as the region is also targeted by other competitors from Western countries and beyond, China faces serious challenges in both trying to convey its message and earning the approval and acceptance of audiences. By looking at how Latin American viewers perceive CCTV's Spanish language channel (rebranded in 2016 as CGTN), compared to Russia's RT and Iran's HispanTV, this article seeks to evaluate what factors may be undermining the effectiveness of China's international media strategy in this particular region and how this affects its *soft power* ambitions. This study is based on a series of focus groups conducted in Mexico and Argentina between September and October 2016, whereby participants were shown video excerpts from these broadcasters and encouraged to discuss an array of different topics. This paper shows that besides lagging behind in terms of viewership, CCTV-E faces multiple challenges such as changes in news consumption patterns, scarce availability and accessibility across Latin America, and issues of credibility and trust in the media. As CCTV-E faces competition from other broadcasters, its survival depends on how well it can align its services with the audiences' needs and preferences, such as perceived objectivity and impartiality.

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**Keywords:** soft power; CGTN; CCTV; China; RT; HispanTV; Latin America

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## Introduction

During the last decade, China has been investing heavily in creating international media networks including radio stations, television channels and even magazines and newspapers for a number of foreign languages. By using international media as tools to spread *soft power*, Beijing seeks to expand its sphere of influence worldwide (Zhang 2008) and reportedly counter the often negative image of China portrayed by other international media (Duan 2007). This public diplomacy strategy aims to influence the perception of audiences in different regions of the globe by producing multimedia content in an array of foreign languages besides

English. As such, one of the targets has been the Spanish-speaking world. The focus is not only Spain, but also most importantly (in terms of population and resources) Latin America.

This paper analyses a range of factors that may be limiting the efforts of China Central Television to reach viewers in Latin America through its Spanish-language channel. As China is not the only country pursuing such a strategy, this study will draw comparisons with the experiences of Russia and Iran, and their respective Spanish-language channels: RT and HispanTV. Based on a series of focus groups conducted in Mexico and Argentina with viewers of international channels, this article discusses aspects of this phenomenon. Firstly, it is necessary to understand why Beijing is pursuing such a communications agenda by looking at issues surrounding China's international image and how it is often perceived in a negative light. By setting up international media, China wants to be able to shape its own image and create *soft power* – power exerted through attraction rather than coercion (*hard power*) or even money (*economic power*) (Nye 2004). Secondly, it is important to familiarize ourselves with some of the central features of China's global media strategy and particularly how it has targeted Latin America. However, since CCTV is not the only international broadcaster present in the region, it is also vital to identify its main competitors. Thirdly, before discussing the findings of this research, details about the methodology employed are provided, as well as the rationale behind it. Finally, the main findings are presented and discussed in light of their implications for CCTV's effectiveness in targeting Latin American audiences.

### **China's international image and soft power**

This study is based on the premise that the Chinese government intends to use international broadcasting as a tool of public diplomacy. By communicating directly with audiences abroad, rather than being filtered by other international media and the domestic media of the target regions, Beijing aims to counter the narrative spread by Western media, to ultimately improve its international image and arguably to create *soft power*. However, even before *soft power* had become a focus, China's *national image* had frequently been the focus of research internally, particularly when analysing how the country is perceived internationally. In a comprehensive definition, Duan Peng refers to '*country image*' as:

how the foreign public understands and assesses the political (including the government's reputation, diplomacy, military power, etc.), economical (including financial power, features and quality of its products, its citizens' income, etc.), social (including social cohesion, security and stability, national morale, national character, etc.), cultural (including technological power, level of education, cultural heritage, customs, values, etc.), and geographical (including environment, natural resources, population, etc.) situation of a certain country<sup>1</sup> (Duan 2007, 8).

In the context of China, Duan recognizes three layers in the concept of national image: the real national image (国家实体形象 *guojia shiti xingxiang*), the virtual national image (国家虚拟形象 *guojia xuni xingxiang*), and the image perceived by the general public (公众认知形象 *gongzhong renzhi xingxiang*). The last is defined as the subjective image of a country – which results from the perception via the media by people outside that particular country. It identifies differences depending on the level of perception by:

the elite (including the political leaders, the economic elite and scientists, who often travel internationally and have a deeper and more authentic understanding of another country's image) and the general public (whose understanding of another country's

image is limited and who mainly know about a country through the mass media, but whose view is also vulnerable to be influenced by the elite's opinion, including the media) (Duan 2007, 9).

China's main concern regarding its international image derives from how it is portrayed by the international media, which it accuses of deliberately vilifying it. In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Chinese scholars have elaborated on a number of theories such as the *demonization of China* (妖魔化中国论 *Yaomohua Zhongguo Lun*), which was first mentioned in 1996 by Li Xiguang, then a Xinhua News Agency journalist and later a journalism professor. In *Behind the Demonization of China* (1996), Li considers that the demonization practised by the media is a strategy to destroy opponents and is closely related to the theories such as Samuel P. Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. Huntington (1993) argued that in the post-Cold War era, the primary source of conflicts would not be economical or ideological differences, but cultural instead. Thus *demonizing* an opponent is a strategy to legitimize any action against it in the eyes of the general population. Closely related are two additional theories that explain how China sees itself as being perceived internationally: *China as a threat* (中国威胁论 *Zhongguo weixie lun*) and *China's collapse* (中国崩溃论 *Zhongguo bengkuai lun*). The former relates to China's rise being considered a threat by other countries, including economically and militarily (Wu, 2009). The latter predicts China's collapse due to domestic political, economic and social contradictions, or other issues (Duan 2007). Apparently distinct, both exemplify the rhetorical strategy allegedly used by foreign media to oppose China's rise as a superpower (Lu and Guo 2004).

Worried about this negative portrayal of China in the international media, Beijing desires to promote a more positive image by showing China as a country in development (发展的形象 *fazhan de xingxiang*); in constant reform (改革的形象 *gaige de xingxiang*); open to the world (开放的形象 *kaifang de xingxiang*); stable (稳定的形象 *wending de xingxiang*), democratic and protective of human rights (民主和维护人权的形象 *minzhu he weihu renquan de xingxiang*); and peaceful (和平的形象 *heping de xingxiang*) (Duan 2007). This is the international image China intends to project so as to expand its *soft power* around the world.

To provide a comprehensive account of the academic debates around *soft power* is certainly not the intention of this article. However, it is indeed imperative to understand how instrumental it is for China's rise as a superpower. First coined by Joseph Nye (2004) to illustrate a dimension of US American power distinct from the hard power of its military (but with potentially similar persuasive capabilities) soft power soon caught the attention of academics, politicians and policymakers around the world, particularly in China. The idea of *soft power* was used to explain how a country's institutions, cultural values and political system, among other aspects, could be viewed as attractive even by its perceived enemies. As such, *soft power* became an asset coveted by many governments around the world.

Although Nye's work has received numerous critiques, how media audiences fit into the overall equation is an aspect of the idea that has been less frequently explored. Nye believes that an understanding of the target audience is crucial. 'By definition, soft power means getting others to want the same outcomes you want, and that requires understanding how they are hearing your messages, and fine-tuning it accordingly' (Nye 2004, 111). This suggests that one of the ways to measure the effectiveness and degree of success of a country's soft power is by analysing the degree of acceptance by an audience and how it engages with messages received. This becomes even more important because what policymakers may think is *soft power*, audiences may perceive as *propaganda*. Without delving too much into the debate about whether these are distinct concepts or *soft power* is just a cosy rehabilitation of the word *propaganda*, it is essential to appreciate how Nye distinguishes between the two. According to him, the fine line between soft power and propaganda is credibility, thus 'when

governments are perceived as manipulative and information is seen as propaganda, credibility is destroyed' (Nye 2011, 83). In other words, if viewers regard content as lacking credibility, it will be discarded as propaganda. In this aspect, broadcasters may have a limited space to manoeuvre. As Gary Rawnsley points out, the way messages will ultimately be decoded is beyond the control of international broadcasters and their interpretation will depend greatly on 'the prevailing cultural, social and political beliefs, attitudes and norms among individual audience members' (2015, 280). If audiences struggle to decode these messages or, even worse, if the messages are interpreted in a different way from the broadcaster's intention, this could further damage the international image of a country – the result being the overall effectiveness of news media as tools for spreading *soft power* may need to be reconsidered.

### **China's global media strategy**

Although China has been broadcasting internationally for decades, it is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that its global media strategy has become increasingly visible. One of the most prominent platforms is China Central Television (CCTV), which broadcasts in English, Spanish, French, Arabic and Russian. Other traditional players such as *People's Daily* and China Radio International (CRI) have also been increasing their foreign language offering. In fact, formerly known as Radio Peking, CRI has grown into a multimedia outlet, which by operating in more than 60 languages has become 'the world's second biggest radio station after the BBC' (Yang 2015). Besides offering their services in foreign languages, China's news agencies have been expanding their presence around the world, particularly Xinhua (Xin 2012).

China's global media strategy has attracted the attention of many observers and scholars internationally and continues to do so (see de Burgh, 2017; Thussu, de Burgh, & Shi, 2018). Whereas some academics have linked the strategy to Beijing's increasing efforts to expand its sphere of global influence (Farah and Mosher 2010), others have analysed China's need to improve its international image by spreading soft power (Wang 2011) and using international news outlets as a way to counter the influence of Western news networks. Some studies have focused on the increasing visibility of Chinese media in the developing world, particularly in Africa (see Wekesa and Zhang, 2014; Wu, 2012, 1–31). However other regions such as Latin America have received less attention. While some researchers have focused on the policies and the *modus operandi* of such strategies compared with other countries (see Rawnsley, 2015, 273–86), and others have analysed the content and reporting style of these media –sometimes even comparing them with established Western news organisations (see Marsh, 2015) – little research has taken into account the perception of audiences overseas and how this compares with other news organisations around the world. Even in studies that have considered this aspect (see Geniets, 2013), Latin America has often been overlooked.

### **CCTV in Spanish and its competitors in Latin America**

China's need to convey its message to the world through audio-visual media and the internet considerably increased after the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. China Central Television's first foreign language channel was created in 2000 and the natural choice was English. A bilingual Spanish-French channel followed four years later (Zhu 2012) and in 2007 was split into two separate channels, a Spanish and French, becoming CCTV-E and CCTV-F respectively (CCTV 2007). Arabic and Russian followed later. In 2011 the Spanish channel readjusted its logo and changed from CCTV-E to CCTV Español until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2016, when it was renamed CGTN Español, as the result of a complete rebranding of China Central Television's international broadcasting as China Global Television Network (M. Wang 2016). On 21 March 2018, it was announced that CCTV (including CGTN), CRI and CNR (China National Radio), would merge into a new outlet called *Voice of China* (Xinhua 2018). However it is still unclear when this change will take place. The rebranding to CGTN introduced an international television

network composed of six channels in five different languages and production centres located internationally. Aside from its headquarters in Beijing, CGTN has production centres in Washington and Nairobi, and plans for a new centre in Europe are being prepared (Wang 2016). Just like CRI, CCTV has established its Latin American regional offices in Brazil, but unlike CRI, it opted for São Paulo (Stenberg 2016).

Available online, and via satellite and cable in a few countries in Latin America, China's Spanish-speaking channel broadcasts an array of programmes round the clock ranging from news bulletins and documentaries to cultural magazines and cooking shows. In addition, one of the key elements of CCTV's<sup>2</sup> strategy to target Latin America has been the production of drama series, in order to take advantage of the popularity of the *telenovela* genre in the region (Silva-Ferrer 2012). Nevertheless, China's ambition to gain the hearts of Latin Americans has to confront the challenge of having to compete with broadcasters long established in the region.

### **Other international broadcasters in Latin America**

One of the traditional players among the international news networks broadcasting in Spanish (see **Table 1**) is *CNN en Español*. Amongst the European news networks, Spain has been one of the traditional leaders broadcasting with *TVE Internacional* since it was launched in 1989 (RTVE n.d.). TVE does not expressly target Latin America to advance a government agenda of spreading *soft power*, but it is often referred to as a source of international news in the Spanish-speaking world, together with the Spanish news agency EFE. Apart from Spain, Germany was until recently the only other European country to set up a news channel broadcasting in Spanish, first as part of a multilingual channel, *Deutsche Welle* (DW) and later with a 24-hour channel dedicated to Latin America. This situation changed when *France 24* launched its Spanish language channel on 26 September 2017 (France24 2017).

**Table 1:** International News channels in Spanish.

	<b>Channel</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Year launched/ rebranded</b>
<b>Western</b>	TVE Internacional	Spain	1989
	(CNN International) CNN en Español	USA	(1992) 1997
	(Deutsche Welle) DW Latinoamérica/DW Español	Germany	(1995) 2012/2017
	France24	France	2017
<b>Non-Western</b>	(CCTV E&F) CCTV-E/CGTN Español [Voz de China]	China	(2004) 2007/2016 [TBD]
	RT	Russia	2009
	HispanTV	Iran	2012
<b>Latin American</b>	Telesur	Venezuela	2005
	NTN24	Colombia	2008

Note: Names and years in round brackets show multilingual channels, in which Spanish is one of the languages used. Name changes are separated with forward slashes. Square brackets are used to denote the announced rebranding of China's international channels to 'Voice of China'.

International broadcasting in Latin America has not exclusively been the preserve of news organisations from outside the region. With the expansion of cable and satellite television providers during the 1990s, channels from several Latin American countries became available throughout the region. Moreover, political developments throughout the last decade have also led to the creation of regional news channels with distinct narratives and agendas, TeleSUR and NTN24 being two of the most prominent examples. TeleSUR was created by the Venezuelan government in 2005 to counter the influence of *CNN en Español* (Galindo et al. 2015), and to broadcast news from a Latin American point of view. Based in Colombia, NTN24 was launched in 2008 as 'The Channel of the Americas' and unlike TeleSUR it is privately owned. According to Ómar Rincón from the Universidad de los Andes (Colombia), the difference between TeleSUR and NTN24 is that the former reports from a perspective originating in the 'South', that of the Chávez' Bolivarian project of anti-American ideological independence with populist tones, whereas the latter aligns itself with former Colombian president Álvaro Uribe's intrinsically anti-Chavez perspective with a horizon set in the 'North' (Rincón 2015). Both channels tend to focus on Latin America, but TeleSUR sees itself as an anti-hegemonic news network (Thussu 2007) in effect siding with Venezuela's government (Painter 2008) (despite Chávez' death in 2013), whereas NTN24 often matches the news selection of *CNN en Español* (Cushion 2010).

The start of the new millennium witnessed increasing visibility of television broadcasting efforts stemming from countries beyond the industrialized West. China was among the first to target the Spanish-speaking world in 2004, followed by Russia in 2009 and Iran in 2012. Russia's RT is a multilingual news network that was already broadcasting in English, Spanish and Arabic with an online platform in German and French. According to its official website, RT is available to 700 million people in more than 100 countries (RT n.d.). *RT en Español* was officially launched in December 2009, its third foreign language channel after those in English (2005) and Arabic (2007). In January 2012, the Islamic Republic of Iran started *HispanTV*, the Spanish-language sister channel of *Press TV* (English) and *Al-Alam* (Arabic), all three belonging to the state-owned broadcasting corporation IRIB (Ricco 2012). Available in 17 countries across the Americas (*HispanTV.ir* n.d.-a), *HispanTV* reportedly vows to promote the rapprochement between the peoples of Iran, Hispanic America and the Middle East, but also considers the need to create greater ties between all the peoples of Latin America (*HispanTV.ir* n.d.-b).

### Research questions and hypotheses

While the original motives for the creation of China's global media strategy may be clearly linked to soft power ambitions, the ultimate success of its implementation depends greatly on how target audiences decode messages and whether these help change preconceived images of China or not. Part of a broader research project that aims to find out whether international news channels – particularly those backed directly or indirectly by governments – are conducive to creating soft power, the first research question posed was:

RQ1: What are the factors that may be hindering CCTV's effort both to reach viewers in Latin America and to make a meaningful impact on them?

This is a rather general starting question, and many lines of inquiry could here be pursued. This article will focus on only two aspects. Statistics on overall news consumption patterns around the world suggest that audiences are shifting towards online content, particularly social media. Therefore, the first hypothesis (H1a) posits that Latin Americans are increasingly diversifying their sources of news and therefore consuming less traditional television (i.e. on a TV set). If verified, this would suggest that traditional television channels may prove unsuccessful in

advancing a *soft power* agenda. The second hypothesis (H1b) is that CCTV is less known to Latin Americans due to scarce availability throughout the region. This factor may be closely related to accessibility in terms of the costs of viewing international channels, including subscription fees.

As these channels can be considered not only international by nature, but also transcultural, other challenges relate to cultural differences between the countries where these broadcasters are based and those where target audiences reside. These differences have influenced the way the media systems in these countries have been shaped and the attitudes audiences have towards news organisations. Taking this into account, a second research question was:

RQ2: Would Latin American viewers trust CCTV-E compared with other news media?

Although there are many layers to consider here, one initial hypothesis (H2) posits that viewers would be less inclined to trust international media outlets backed by governments, mirroring mistrust towards domestic media that had perceived ties to governments. The implications of this hypothesis would be that if news channels are perceived to be controlled by governments, they would hardly be seen as objective sources of news, therefore jeopardising any attempt at *soft power* creation.

## Methodology

The focus of this study is on understanding viewers' perceptions of CCTV-E (instead of attempting to measure impact by assessing only audience ratings) therefore the nature of this research is somewhat qualitative. As such, conducting focus groups was deemed the most appropriate method of collecting relevant data.

Whilst the creation of international television news channels that broadcast in Spanish has been prolific – CCTV-E, RT, HispanTV, DW Latinoamérica, CNN en Español, TeleSUR and TNT24 amongst others – Portuguese equivalents are practically non-existent to this day. Therefore, even though Brazil is arguably the rising superpower in Latin America, it has been excluded from this study. Two Spanish-speaking countries were chosen to carry out the focus groups due to their economic and political relevance in the region: Mexico and Argentina. In terms of population, Mexico ranked first in the region after Brazil with around 127 million inhabitants in 2015, followed by Colombia with approximately 48 million and Argentina with over 43 million (World Bank, no date). In terms of nominal GDP, according to statistics from 2015, Mexico and Argentina occupy the second and third positions among Latin American and Caribbean nations respectively (World Bank, no date), with Brazil at the top. Argentina shows the highest human development index in Latin America (Hdr.undp.org, 2015): Argentina and its neighbour Chile are the only countries in the region that are in the Very High Human Development band. Geographically located in two extremes of a North-South axis, both Argentina and Mexico are active members in various supranational bodies in the Americas that operate with the separate goals of cooperation and integration. Regarding their participation in international politics beyond the continent, they are the only representatives from Latin America at the G20, together with Brazil.

A total of 13<sup>3</sup> focus groups were organized in Mexico and Argentina between 1 September and 15 November 2016. A total of 75 participants were recruited among undergraduate, graduate and research students of International Relations and Political Sciences from seven different universities: El Colegio de México (Colmex), Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM), in Mexico; and Universidad de Congreso (UC), Universidad Torcuato di Tella (UTdT), Universidad de Belgrano (UB) and

Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), in Argentina. With the exception of one PhD student, all participants were less than 30 years old.

It could be argued that the ultimate goal of any soft power strategy is to influence policy-makers more than any other section of society. However, it could be problematic to recruit incumbent policymakers to focus groups as they may already hold strong opinions and therefore be less susceptible to the influence of broadcasters. Enquiring into the news consumption habits of university students of degrees such as politics and international studies may prove valuable to understand how their opinions about the world are being shaped. This profile seems to strike the right demographic balance between participants being young and malleable, and at the same time being cultivated enough to be considered as having the potential of becoming – or at least holding positions close to – policymakers in their respective countries.

During the focus groups, participants were first queried on their consumption of news (H1) and especially about their sources of international news (H2). This second aspect relates to the level of recognition of international news channels (compared to domestic and local channels) and how that may be connected with their availability and accessibility across the region. Although both terms seem to be almost identical in meaning, *availability* looks at whether a specific channel is broadcast and available within a specific geographical area (or not); whereas *accessibility* refers to the ease with which viewers can tune into a specific channel. In turn, the degree of accessibility will depend not only on their availability through an array of carriers and platforms (e.g. freeview, cable, satellite, IPTV, online) but also on the corresponding access costs, both for hardware and fees to service providers.

In the second and main part of the focus groups, participants were encouraged to analyse and share their impressions of a series of video excerpts (H3) from CCTV-E, whilst comparing with similar videos from Russia's RT and Iran's HispanTV. These channels constitute interesting cases to assess in tandem because they are not only directly or indirectly sponsored by their respective governments, but also broadcast from culturally distant countries, which are arguably striving to contest the 'hegemonic' Western-centric narrative of mainstream international media. Since this study focuses on these channels as potential source of news for viewers across Latin America, the videos used in the second part of each focus group session were taken from news related formats, such as news bulletins, interviews, debates or magazine programmes, rather than from fiction, entertainment or documentaries. They were selected from their respective YouTube channels, where part of channels online content were showcased. The idea behind the selection of the video excerpts was to condense and reflect the variety of content of these channels in short videos of around 5 to 6 minutes each. Each video was composed of segments taken from different programmes that were considered representative, not only regarding the type of content but also showcasing each channel's overall audio-visual style. Excerpts were chosen from videos broadcast between April and September 2016 and were edited with an *in medias res* effect, i.e. in such a manner that it would mimic how one would turn on the television and start watching a channel live, when a programme has already started. In the same way, most of the excerpts would end abruptly. The aim of this method was to find out if the content would attract the participants' attention and possibly awaken their interest to continue watching these programmes.

Whereas the structure of the sessions remained unchanged between countries, minor adjustments were required in the sets of videos shown to the participants. In order to explore the reaction to seeing news about their home-countries covered by these broadcasters, videos relating to Mexico and Argentina were chosen respectively. Although the compilation of excerpts shown in Mexico lasted 15:34 minutes, compared to 16:42 in Argentina, the reason behind this significant difference being that each excerpt was edited separately. Following the principle that content needed to present a sufficient degree of coherence, this was achieved



using variable lengths. As seen in **Table 2**, most excerpts were shorter than one minute, with the exception of RT where some videos were considerably longer. Therefore the number of excerpts included was lower than with HispanTV and CCTV-E. **Table 2** also shows a brief description of the rationale behind the selection of those excerpts, indicating their potential to generate a debate around different topics.

After the focus groups, transcriptions were made using pseudonyms, in order to preserve the participants' anonymity. Finally, the data were analysed and coded using NVivo to identify leading themes.

## **Findings**

The findings suggest that international broadcasters such as CCTV and its competitors need to take into account a series of factors that will influence the degree of their impact. These include, but are not limited to, changes in news consumption patterns (H1a), availability and accessibility across the region (H1b), and the perception of media outlets in the region in terms of credibility (H2).

### ***News consumption and social media (H1a)***

The data suggest that news consumption patterns in the region have been shifting in a way that mirrors overall worldwide trends. With every new development in communication technologies, audiences are compelled to adjust their news consumption habits. As reported by participants in both countries, traditional media have neither become completely obsolete nor been displaced by social media. In fact, many participants still get their daily dose of morning news from television. However, as their day advances, mobile technologies such as smart phones reportedly become the most important source of information, due to accessibility of social media and the mobile applications of traditional media outlets. This finding is in line with previous research stating that audiences tend to consume news media on multiple platforms. Rather than settling for just one kind, participants reported combining traditional media with online sources. However, an exact ratio for such offline/online combinations may be difficult to ascertain, as they vary from individual to individual. Despite exceptions, older generations seemed to be more inclined to consume more traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television, compared to online news or social media. Younger participants, however, appeared to be fully immersed in the online world, devoting a considerable amount of attention to social media, with some exceptions. These trends indicate a variety of fluctuating habits and, as such, would need to be carefully taken into account by news media outlets wishing to expand their reach and impact across the world.

### ***Recognition: availability and accessibility (H1b)***

Although an overwhelming majority had never heard of CCTV-E, participants in five different groups across both countries reported having heard of and/or watched CCTV. While they knew the channel was from China, none reported having watched the Spanish version, which is the focus of this study. In Mexico, Ana<sup>4</sup> said she had seen the channel in English as it was part of the grid offered by her cable company. However, she also confessed to not knowing what the acronym stood for and could only tell it was 'Asian'. Others like Andrés and Carlos knew the channel was Chinese and even had knowledge of Xinhua, the Chinese news agency. In Argentina, Lautaro had spent some time living in Thailand and had seen CCTV in Chinese on the television. During the same session at UTdT, two other students, Laureano and Luis, recognised the channel and had seen it online, either in English or Chinese. Both of them had studied Chinese at some point in their lives. Among the group in UB, Martín only recognised it by name and knew it was Chinese. Nevertheless, at another session at UBA a

**Table 2:** Video compilation shown to participants.

Channel	Excerpt Number	Content	Original programme	Length	Reasoning behind selection
<b>RT</b>	1	Trump and Peña Nieto exchange tweets about border wall	News Bulletin	01:07	US-Mexico relations. Controversy over Trump's wall plans during election campaign. One of the presenters is not a native speaker of Spanish.
	2 (M)	Clash between police and protesters in Oaxaca	News Bulletin	00:42	Focus on Mexico. Conflict in Oaxaca State where protesters died during demonstrations. Protester is interviewed.
	3	Debate criticising the financial system	In-depth analysis: 'Keiser report'	02:10	Critical of the West. Analysis of the financial system from a perspective that criticises the role of Western governments. The video originally in English but with voiceover in Spanish, was not completely simultaneous.
	4	Native Americans protest against Dakota Access pipeline	In-depth report: 'Detrás de la noticia'	00:39	Native Americans. News anchor is not a native speaker of Spanish and speaks with a strong US American accent.
	5	Censorship and the media	In-depth analysis: 'El zoom'	00:51	Criticism of freedom of speech in the West. Russia is mentioned. The presenter speaks European Spanish.
<b>HispanTV</b>	6 (A)	Vatican declassifies documents about Church involvement during Argentinian dictatorship	News Bulletin	00:40	Focus on Argentina. The news anchor speaks European Spanish.
	7	Hillary Clinton part of the establishment	Debate format: 'Fort Apache'	00:46	The presenter is a famous young politician in Spain. Presenter and guests speak European Spanish.
	9	Arms sales to Saudi Arabia and Israel	News Bulletin	00:42	Critical of the USA and Israel.
	10	Female car racers in Iran	News Bulletin	00:33	Reports about women in Iran often talk about oppression. This report goes against that misconception. The reporter is not a native speaker of Spanish.
	11 (M)	Kidnapping in Mexico	News Bulletin	00:29	Focus on Mexico. It is not clear whether sources may be credible or not.

(Contd.)

Channel	Excerpt Number	Content	Original programme	Length	Reasoning behind selection
	12 (A)	Demonstration in favour of former president Cristina Fernandez Kirchner	News Bulletin	00:45	Focus on Argentina. The decision to report on this event may be linked to the ideology of the channel.
	13	Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's declarations about hostilities between Iran and the West	News Bulletin	00:35	Religious leader criticising the West. Religious component.
	14	Uncertain future of undocumented migrants in the USA	News Bulletin	00:27	Latin American migrants in the USA.
	15	Facebook's collaboration with Israeli occupation	News Bulletin	00:21	Critical of the West. It is unclear whether the reporter is Muslim or she only wears a hijab as a requirement of the channel.
	16	Latin American artists in Teheran	News Bulletin	00:32	Latin Americans in Iran. The reporter is not a native speaker of Spanish.
	17	Indigenous communities in Chile and Bolivia	News Bulletin	01:04	Native Americans. Title of the video may be misleading. Interviewees are Latin American experts.
	18	China publishes report about human rights in the USA	News Bulletin	00:43	Human rights are a sensitive topic in China. Critical of the USA. The news anchor is not a native speaker of Spanish and speaks with a strong accent.
	19	Election polls in Peru	News Bulletin	00:23	Latin American News. The news reader is Mexican.
	20	Angolan Designer	News Bulletin	00:41	Reports about Africa often talk about poverty or war. Voiceover in European Spanish.
	21	Survey about reading habits in China	News Bulletin	00:34	Report about China that does not involve politics or economy. The news anchor is not a native speaker of Spanish and speaks with a strong accent.
<b>CCTV-E</b>	22	Earthquake in Ecuador	News Bulletin	00:23	Latin American news. The news anchor is a native speaker of Spanish, but it is not clear if she is of Chinese descent.

(Contd.)

Channel	Excerpt Number	Content	Original programme	Length	Reasoning behind selection
	23	Contemporary Chinese women and gender imbalance in China.	Debate format: 'Puntos de vista'	01:14	Demography is a considerable challenge for China. However, the discussion may seem superficial. Besides, one of the guests speaks with a strong accent and viewers may have difficulties in understanding
	24 (M)	Reports about Latin America	Magazine format: 'América Ahora'	00:36	Report about Latin America. The presenter is not a native speaker of Spanish and speaks with a strong accent.
	25 (A)	Reports about Latin America. One report about Mendoza, Argentina.	Magazine format: 'América Ahora'	01:00	Focus on Argentina. The presenter is not a native speaker of Spanish and speaks with a strong accent.

Note: The edition was made as one video compilation with most excerpts shown in both countries, with the exception of those marked with (M) and (A), which indicate excerpts shown only in either Mexico or Argentina respectively.

few participants knew the channel. Nahuel immediately recognised it as being the ‘Chinese channel’ and said he had only watched it online. A different case was that of Nancy who had studied Chinese and had watched the channel on television in Peru, where there were ‘3 or 4’ CCTV channels in Chinese.

Compared with CCTV-E and HispanTV, RT was by far the most recognised channel among participants in both countries. Furthermore, a few participants recognised it by its former name *Russia Today*. Some participants had come to know RT through recommendations or comments from other people such as teachers and friends. Mexican participants who knew the channel reported having seen it online and particularly on YouTube, and only one person mentioned watching it on television. Other participants reported consuming RT through social media and in one case in particular, the participant knew RT from social media but had also seen RT advertisements on the streets in Mexico City.

While less popular than RT, HispanTV seemed to be known to more people than CCTV, and some even knew it was from Iran. One of the participants found out about HispanTV online and noticed that some of its programmes seemed to have been recorded in Spain, while another reported having watched it on YouTube. In Mexico, Hector had seen it on social media, whereas in Argentina, Martín was even aware that Pablo Iglesias, the leader of *Podemos* – a Spanish political party – worked as host for a HispanTV programme and even recalled that Iglesias was involved in a row about accusations that the Iranian government had funded *Podemos*. At the UBA session, Nahuel reported having watched a documentary made by HispanTV about migration.

### ***Credibility, trust in the media and links to governments (H2)***

As trust can be fundamental to the success and the sustainability of CCTV in the long term –not necessarily as a commercial enterprise, but rather as the soft-power engine that Beijing wants it to be – the aim of the research was to identify factors that inspired trust or generated distrust amongst the participants and ascertain whether there were any differences between opinions from Mexico and Argentina. Trust in the media can be a thorny issue to discuss and first impressions are certainly less than ideal to carry out such an analysis. Nevertheless, they can ignite a spark of curiosity, which can eventually grow and turn occasional viewers into loyal audiences.

#### **CCTV-E**

Very few participants considered CCTV-E trustworthy. Those who did, however, linked it to the formality of the presenters. An interesting insight in this regard came about during the focus group session at UBA, where participants expressed contrasting opinions about CCTV:

**Natalia:** Regarding the Russian [channel], I got the impression that most of the presenters would talk to each other, as though it was a conversation that we could have with any friend. None of them was looking at the camera, for instance. In fact, during the first video, the camera goes in circles, looking for the (female) presenters’ faces. But the (female) journalist is only focused on her interlocutor and on the screen to her side. The Chinese channel instilled more confidence, [especially] the last [video] where they were looking straight to the camera, (inaudible) positive. I thought that, among those three [channels, the Chinese] was the most impartial one ideologically, because they were showing news about other countries, cultural stuff too, not just political and economic, but they were also promoting tourism and culture.

**Nadia:** In my case, it was the contrary. That is what I did not like from the Chinese channel. I thought it was too superficial and frivolous, compared to the kind of news that we saw on the other two channels, that were dealing with politics, economy and

current affairs. The fact that [the CCTV-E programme] *América Ahora* was about wines from Mendoza and about art, it is like ... I don't know, [maybe] it is okay. Perhaps that is the kind of content they wanted to show on their clip, but I think there are more interesting stuff to say about the Americas, than [just] a winery here in Mendoza.

**Nancy:** Yes, that is something characteristic of CCTV, [that is] the fact that it puts conflict aside, and tends to focus on maintaining that vision of a social balance. And that is something that, for instance on the Russian TV [channel] they tend to give more opinion about the current situation. It is more charismatic. We could say CCTV's style is rather formal, and the way they present the news tends to be very clear. Something that seemed to lack at least on HispanTV. Even though there is some richness in the content they (HispanTV) present, they tend to give a little more priority to public opinion over those of experts, which is good. However, there should be a mix of both [aspects] in order to show many perspectives in the news and not only something biased.

Comparing CCTV to RT and HispanTV, Nancy argued that it did not offer any 'additional content'. While the other two channels would provide more opinion, she argued, CCTV stayed rather on the surface and did not present any meaningful insights. In the case of social issues, Nancy thought that CCTV only provided statistics but would forget to mention how a particular phenomenon was affecting the general population – that is to say, how seemingly cold statistics would translate into ordinary citizens' lives.

**Carlos:** [...] I was thinking about what the purpose of each of these [news] companies is. And at least I don't know who finances RT and HispanTV. I don't know whom they belong to. But at least I know that CCTV has a clear pro-government stance.

Carlos also had the impression that CCTV was a channel more focused on showing how the Chinese people see what is happening around the world whereas, in his opinion, RT and HispanTV seemed to follow a strategy of wanting the audiences to identify with them and therefore their style appeared to be more 'interactive'.

Another view was that CCTV looked 'auto-referential' – that is, news was either about China or at least compiled according to Chinese sources. This was related to one of the main factors that would undermine the viewers' trust in CCTV: the link to the Chinese government. For Ignacio, the fact that CCTV appeared to be 'more controlled' did not instil trust. Similarly, Jimena said she would doubt content more when CCTV presented Chinese statistics. Javier, on the other hand, admitted not having any proof for his assertions but said: '[...] I don't trust China's statistics agency. Any source. I more believe an international source or in fact a journalist that I follow on Twitter, rather than the Chinese government'.

**Cristian:** No, the one that annoyed me the most was the Chinese. Why? Because all their information quoted sources from China. [...] Maybe many don't take it into account, but when I heard that all the sources they quoted were studies inside China, the first thing that provoked in me was mistrust [...] If they had told me, for example: 'the Chinese [news] agency, [the Mexican newspaper] *Reforma*, and *The Guardian* all agree that ...', then [in that case] more or less [I would have believed them], but all the news agencies and all the information was generated inside [China].

Cristian thought that this aspect really undermined CCTV's credibility. 'If they say there is an attack in China and the first thing the Chinese reporter says is: 'according to a report from X government agency', I would switch it over immediately', he explained. Similarly,

Marcelo mentioned CCTV quoting 'sources that were not the best known to us, nor the most trustworthy'. Other participants held the opposite view and did not necessarily question the quality of the news just because journalists used government sources. Manuel from UB thought that 'probably the data was gathered in a good way and it was compiled well, so I cannot say they are lying'. Some participants like Francisca in Mexico thought that the fact that there were presenters from Latin America did not change her perception. In fact, 'sometimes I feel that when they are too well-dressed, like in the case of the Chinese, it generates more mistrust in me', she explained, comparing it with RT whose style was more 'pleasant' and 'interesting'.

#### RT

The participants who identified RT as the most credible of the three channels reported having different reasons for their opinions. While some had a good impression of the channel, in other cases, a rather negative impression of the other two channels would make them choose RT. One opinion was that, besides taking sides or having a clear ideology, RT would also give an account of the news first and then provide analysis.

**Natalia:** If I had to choose one, I would choose RT, but because it was easier for me to identify and separate the news from the ideology of the presenters. Just because of that, I would choose RT.

**Nancy:** With regards to RT, at least you can see that they present facts, besides their opinion. So, when you watch the news, it is simpler to have the 'raw' news and then access what others are saying.

In other cases, participants such as José from UTdT would not blindly believe everything RT said: he, would place his trust on a case-by-case basis. However, in his opinion RT would be more valued overall than other channels, because they would provide analysis before trying to advance their agenda:

**José:** It depends, [regarding] some [news], yes [I would trust] RT. For instance, the news about the native Americans, I would trust it. But there were other that no, [I would not trust]. [...] Because they showed what was happening and they were showing the reaction of the government. I mean, they were showing the facts. Besides sending a message against the USA, they were showing what had happened. In other [news], specially the interviews, I feel that RT's journalists do a commentary and then a question. In other words, they were not doing an interview, they were just talking. Regarding HispanTV, I felt that when they ask a question, they are expecting a specific answer. It is like saying something like: 'What's your opinion about the disaster done by the USA?'. Obviously waiting for an answer in that line.

**Javier:** [In my case] I mean, I trust more RT than CNN, for instance, and [overall] I put (i.e. consider) the USA as more credible than Russia.

Regarding the way news was presented, other participants also compared RT favourably to HispanTV in terms of usage of sources as an element that would instil trust.

**Gisela:** Well, I paid attention to the statistical tables presented by HispanTV, and (inaudible) sources. So, they showed data, but I don't know where it came from. Nothing. And even the presenters didn't mention it, so that was a shock to me, and that explains my mistrust. On the other hand, RT, well they always include sources. Therefore, if we compare it [with HispanTV], I trust more RT.

Related to the same aspect, other participants praised RT for being on the front line, interviewing the people involved in the stories – in other words, the direct source of seemingly reliable information.

**Héctor:** What I thought was that... not so much the sources, I did not pay attention to that. [But what I realised] was that the interview was at the point where the events were taking place. So, it was not an interview in which you interview someone walking and they tell you any opinion, instead they were really asking the actors (i.e. the people involved in the news). So, they were really there and they were not behind their desks giving their opinion.

While participants showed themselves more hesitant to declare which of the three channels they found most trustworthy, they were rather vocal at pointing out what generated mistrust towards any particular channel. When RT was distrusted by some participants, it was often related to the content, in particular to perceived bias when reporting on international politics. In two different sessions (one at UNAM in Mexico and the other at UB in Argentina) some participants who had previously watched the channel pointed out that RT seemed to be more critical when reporting on international affairs, but less so in news related to Russia. Francisca from UNAM reported feeling that RT would show a certain degree of bias when reporting about domestic issues and especially about Crimea. During the time of the unrest in Ukraine and the subsequent independence referendum and annexation of Crimea by Russia, Martín from UB also reported being interested in RT 'precisely to have a different point of view [about what was happening in Ukraine] and it was practically television from the Soviet Union', Martín explained. He elaborated by saying that RT's reports were 'totally against the Ukraine, they said that the people protesting on the streets in Ukraine were practically paid by the USA'. Martín appeared to be consciously interested in knowing RT's point of view even if he thought it was biased. Similarly, even though Martín was critical towards RT, he would also criticise American channels such as Fox News for being 'blatant propaganda from the Republican Party'.

#### HispanTV

HispanTV was better received by people interested in the Middle East. Regarding news from that specific region and particularly about Saudi Arabia, some participants said they would trust HispanTV more than any channel from the USA, 'because I know that the USA cannot criticise Saudi Arabia publicly', Luis from UTdT explained. In this case, HispanTV was trusted to recognise opinions different to those on Western media. Other participants expressed similar views, especially during the session at UBA in Argentina.

**Nadia:** [I would trust] HispanTV also (inaudible), but to see explicitly the other point of view. I mean, I would not watch it to keep informed, but rather to compare it with other media, because I did think it was very biased and that it was very evident.

**Nancy:** [...] Regarding HispanTV, it is more about their opinion. It is true that the way they conduct debates is conducive to see contrasting opinions and live. But with (inaudible) [regards to the] news, I think that (inaudible) [I would trust them] much less.

Pablo Iglesias' programme (*vide supra*) made a positive impression on some of the participants such as Helena, whose attention was not only caught by the debate between the host and the guests, but also by the overall content of the different clips which she described as 'trustworthy' or even 'looking more credible [than others]'. Apart from the aspects in common



with other channels as mentioned above, participants such as Daniel from Colmex 'would not question the quality of the news in terms of veracity, but would indeed question the channel (either CCTV-E or HispanTV) when trying to find out what problems China has or Muslims have'. In this sense, Daniel felt he would trust these channels less when they are reporting domestic news than international affairs. Hortencia from UAM said RT looked more trustworthy than HispanTV and CCTV, whose content 'appeared very *conducted*'<sup>5</sup>.

### Discussion and conclusion

As far as China's international image is concerned, the starting point for China's global media strategy seems to be grounded in the behaviourist belief that international media have the power to shape perceptions of countries, akin to communication models such as the one-step flow or hypodermic needle theory (Lasswell 1927) and the two-step flow (Gold et al. 1956). The media constitute one of the channels through which Beijing wishes to change the way the international community and audiences around the world perceive China's accelerated economic growth in the last few decades and what that means for the political arena in the emerging world order (de Burgh 2017). In order to counter widespread narratives portraying China's rise as a threat to the world, *soft power* has been placed at the heart of this communicational strategy of geopolitical significance. However, by looking at the specific case of how CCTV is targeting Latin America, this paper argues that understanding local particularities of audiences across the globe constitutes one of the key factors that will determine the degree of success of such an endeavour.

This paper has helped identify three of the many difficulties CCTV faces in reaching and having an impact on viewers in Latin America. The first relates to changes in news consumption patterns, and the findings support the hypothesis that Latin Americans are diversifying their sources of news to include online platforms, particularly mobile and social media. Although the findings suggest that younger people are indeed engaging more with the online world, further evidence would be needed to prove that overall, audiences in the region are consuming less direct broadcast television and shifting towards online content, i.e. online streaming on mobile devices. This would help re-evaluate whether television has remained an effective medium for spreading *soft power* in the long term, particularly when viewership of international news channels seems to have reduced. Closely related to this, the second aspect of the research looked at the recognisability of CCTV by the participants of the focus groups and how this could be associated with its scarce availability across the region. Although CCTV started broadcasting in Spanish in 2004, it was the least recognisable to participants, compared with Russia's RT which opened five years later but appears to be the most easily recognisable of the three. The reason seems to be closely linked to their different distribution strategies. RT is available on freeview in Argentina, Venezuela and Ecuador, whereas in Bolivia and Colombia, it is broadcast through state-operated satellite systems (RT n.d.). In Mexico, RT started broadcasting in 2016, after being included by the cable operator *Izzi Telecom* in its international package *Hazlo internacional* (RT 2016b). Thus, distribution through cable, satellite and digital networks, together with a strong online presence, particularly through social media, seem to have helped RT become available and easily accessible to audiences in Latin America. Also, compared with RT and HispanTV, whose websites clearly indicate their availability in different countries, CCTV (and particularly CGTN's new updated website) fails to provide this information in detail.

The third aspect discussed in this paper is the perception of CCTV in terms of credibility and trust. In this case the comparison with the experiences of RT and HispanTV was also particularly revealing. CCTV's apparent formality seemed to be one of the few elements praised by the participants. However, others saw this aspect as linked to control by the

government, therefore undermining perceptions of the channel's trustworthiness. In comparison, RT's informality proved more appealing to most participants, who were reportedly more inclined to trust it. Furthermore, RT was also seen as being actively involved with the news, especially when reporting on location. These may be among the reasons why in 2010, less than a year after its opening, RT's Spanish channel won PromaxBDA (Promotion, Marketing & Design) Latin America Awards in six categories (Promaxbda n.d.) and in 2016 it received for the third consecutive year the International Journalism Prize for best multimedia news coverage by the Mexican Press Club, mainly due to its coverage of the war in Syria (Fierro 2016; RT 2016a). CCTV, however, was regarded as only providing information predominantly from Chinese sources and without offering any additional analysis. Moreover, this contributed to the perception of China as being 'auto-referential', in other words more preoccupied with self-promoting rather than providing objective news, thus weakening credibility and contributing to audiences' perception of it being propaganda, which further jeopardised CCTV's *soft power*-creation capabilities.

As international players face competition from local and domestic media, their survival depends on how well they align their services with the audiences' preferences. Being perceived as credible and trustworthy is just one of the ingredients in the recipe that can help CCTV become more accepted by audiences and in the long term assist China in consolidating *soft power* not only in Latin America, but also around the world. Finally other factors (such as *cultural proximity*) that potentially play a decisive role in the viewing public's choice between different international channels may also contribute to understanding why CCTV-E (now CGTN Español) is struggling to catch the attention of viewers across Latin America, particularly in Mexico and Argentina.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This and all translations from Chinese sources are the author's own work.
- <sup>2</sup> As the empirical part of this research was carried out before the rebranding, the name CCTV-E is used throughout this paper. The distinction from CGTN is only made when appropriate.
- <sup>3</sup> An event organised at Colegio de Mexico proved unsuccessful because the number of participants was not sufficient. However, these were turned into in-depth interviews and the comments made by the interviewees were screened and compared to overall findings from the focus groups.
- <sup>4</sup> This and all subsequent names referring to participants are pseudonyms.
- <sup>5</sup> In the original Spanish rendering, Hortencia used the word *dirigido*, which in this context can mean 'conducted', 'aimed at' or even 'supervised', as if it had been purposely scripted and directed to a specific aim.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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