

Book Review

Seeking Truth in International TV News: China, CGTN and the BBC

Marsh, Vivien (2023). *Seeking Truth in International TV News: China, CGTN and the BBC*. Routledge. 232 Pages. ISBN 9780367558529

Lu Wei Rose Luqiu

Author information:

Lu Wei Rose Luqiu is an associate professor at the School of Communication at Hong Kong Baptist University. She researches censorship, propaganda, and social movements in authoritarian regimes. Her book *Propaganda, Media, and Nationalism in Mainland China and Hong Kong* (Lexington, 2018) focuses on the Chinese government's propaganda strategy. Her latest book *Covering the 2019 Hong Kong Protests* (Palgrave, 2021) surveys the challenges frontline journalists have faced while covering protests.

For more information: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3772-9148>

Email: roseluqiu@hkbu.edu.hk

To cite this article: Luqiu, Lu Wei Rose (2023). Book review of Marsh, Vivien (2023): Seeking Truth in International TV News: China, CGTN and the BBC. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 13(2), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60678/gmj-de.v13i2.284>

In this book, the author takes readers on a comprehensive exploration of CGTN (China Global Television Network), a state-owned news channel targeting global audiences, and skilfully compares it with the renowned British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service, which focuses on international news reporting and is also targeting global audiences. With a unique perspective by providing insider information about CGTN and a detailed look at its internal workings, which is not available to the general public or other researchers, the author delves deep into the intricate role and operations of CGTN, unravelling its complex relationship with the Chinese government's international propaganda campaign. The book compellingly addresses a puzzling question that arises from CGTN's behaviour — why does it vacillate between presenting itself as a news outlet and functioning as a blatant propaganda tool? Through meticulous analysis and valuable insights, the author guides readers through the intriguing intricacies of CGTN, shedding light on its multifaceted nature and leaving them eager to uncover the truth behind its contradictory impressions.

The author's frustration with the Western dismissal of journalism from authoritarian regimes as lacking legitimacy fuelled her doctoral research, leading her to conduct extensive interviews with people of CGTN for her PhD thesis. This book, aimed to challenge the prevailing view and reveal how such media, particularly CGTN, can offer profound insights into a nation's identity as shaped by its ruling party. The author posited that CGTN serves a critical function by reflecting the current Chinese *zeitgeist* as interpreted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). To establish a baseline for her analysis, the author selected the BBC World Service as a benchmark due to its journalistic integrity, reputation, and status as a state-funded but editorially independent broadcaster. This comparison was intended to provide a clearer understanding of journalistic practices within different types of state media.

In her examination of CGTN, the author sought to disprove the notion that journalistic efforts are absent in state-run media. She found evidence of journalistic work within CGTN, suggesting that, despite the network's state affiliation, individual journalists continue to pursue their profession, albeit within the constraints imposed by the Chinese government's media policies. However, while some editors and journalists at CGTN may still hold onto their aspirations of journalistic work instead of disseminating pure propaganda, CGTN also needs these staff members to provide news reporting to compete with other news organizations like BBC and CNN. News content is crucial for increasing CGTN's audience and enhancing China's international influence. This allows CGTN to cover stories that CCTV, aimed at domestic audiences, would not be allowed to report.

The core attributes of CGTN shape the nature of its content production. While it may superficially resemble news, its underlying objective does not align with the principles upheld by conventional news organizations, which prioritize the public's right to information. Instead, CGTN operates to exert influence over its audience. A significant moment highlighting this perspective occurred in 2016 when Xi Jinping,

the General Secretary of the CCP, visited CCTV headquarters in Beijing. The welcoming slogan displayed during his visit boldly declared, “Party media serves the Party,” echoing Xi’s directives regarding the mission and responsibility of Chinese journalism. Functioning as a media outlet for the Party, CGTN serves the Party’s interests and functions as a mouthpiece for the CCP’s propaganda machinery, positioning itself more as an apparatus than a genuine news organization. Thus, it ultimately contravenes the BBC’s editorial independence as stated in article 3 of the Royal Charter.

While it may not be the primary objective of this book, the comparative analysis between BBC and CGTN yields valuable insights into the workings of Chinese international propaganda. A notable revelation from the content analysis conducted in Chapter Three is that CGTN devotes more than one-third of its airtime to reporting on China, whereas the BBC, despite being a British broadcaster, assigns only thirteen percent to stories about Britain. This stark contrast in coverage of their respective homelands arises from CGTN’s overarching mission to enhance China’s visibility and cultivate a favourable international image — an objective that aligns with the vision set forth by Xi Jinping. By examining these aspects, the book offers readers a deeper understanding of how Chinese international propaganda operates and the strategies employed to achieve its goals.

The author’s exploration of anchor composition on CCTV and CGTN unveils an intriguing shift over time. In 2019, all the anchors on CGTN were identified as Chinese, whereas in 2014, nearly one-third were foreigners. The author posits that this transformation could be a deliberate strategy employed by CGTN to reinforce its Chinese identity. However, an alternative explanation emerges, suggesting that the requirement for news anchors in China to be party members may have influenced this change. CGTN, with its global strategy, previously enjoyed special privileges in employing foreign anchors to foster trust among international audiences. However, replacing these foreign anchors with Chinese counterparts in 2019 may indicate shifting priorities within CGTN. This adjustment could signify a greater emphasis on promoting a distinctly Chinese perspective and aligning the network more closely with the CCP’s values and objectives. By examining this shift in anchor composition, the author uncovers an additional layer of complexity within CGTN’s operations and the interplay between media, politics, and global perceptions.

In the book’s seventh chapter, the author compares the contrasting approaches of BBC and CGTN in their coverage of the Xinjiang issue. It is noted that both CCTV and CGTN journalists and editors are hesitant to discuss Xinjiang during interviews. In reality, for those with knowledge about China, it becomes apparent that reporting on the Xinjiang issue is tightly controlled by the CCP’s Propaganda Department. The level of freedom in reporting is zero, and as employees of CCTV and CGTN, expressing dissenting views on the Xinjiang matter would be considered a political misstep. Consequently, maintaining silence becomes the most effective means of self-preservation. The referenced international employees, using the term “abominable” to

describe CGTN's editorial policies in Xinjiang, further emphasize that when the CCP needs to address international criticisms, CGTN serves as a tool for propaganda. Despite having personal aspirations and a commitment to journalistic principles, individuals within CGTN find themselves constrained. Thus, the statement made by the international employee, "The reason I work for a Chinese network is not to sell the Chinese idea but to include it," is an attempt to distance themselves from the perception of being mere propagandists.

Marsh's work is particularly relevant to current debates on media freedom, the role of journalism in authoritarian societies, and the strategies of state-run international broadcasters. By documenting the presence of journalistic endeavours within CGTN, the book contributes to a nuanced understanding of how such media outlets operate under governmental constraints, simultaneously offering insights into the propaganda objectives of the CCP. One of the book's strengths is its comparative method, juxtaposing CGTN's approach with that of the BBC, which allows Marsh to tease out subtle operational differences and editorial policies influenced by political ideologies. However, while the book excels in its comparative analysis, it might need to improve in offering a broader global context that situates CGTN and the BBC within the wider landscape of international broadcasting.

The book is most appropriate for scholars and students of journalism, media studies, international relations, and Chinese studies, as it delves into technical nuances and complex political contexts that may assume a certain level of pre-existing knowledge. However, practitioners in journalism and informed members of the general public interested in media dynamics and Chinese politics would also find it enlightening.

In conclusion, this book provides a comprehensive exploration of CGTN and its comparison with the BBC, shedding light on the inner workings of CGTN and its role as an international propaganda tool for the Chinese government. The author's unique perspective challenges the tendency to dismiss news from authoritarian countries and highlights the journalistic work that still exists within CGTN. However, it becomes evident that CGTN's primary aim is not to adhere to journalistic standards or prioritize the public's right to know but rather to influence its audience and serve the interests of the Chinese Communist Party. The book's analysis of CGTN's content, anchor composition, and coverage of sensitive topics like Xinjiang further illustrates the extent of control and propaganda. Ultimately, this book offers valuable insights into the operations of CGTN and the complex dynamics between state media and journalism in the international landscape.