10 Supporting relevance: countering China's global information challenge through service journalism

David Bandurski

This chapter examines how China's state-directed media diplomacy challenges democratic media systems worldwide and argues that the most effective response to this and other authoritarian challenges to media lies in empowering service journalism that genuinely serves and engages audiences.

While China promotes a model of media as instruments of state power through hundreds of forums and training programs globally, independent journalism connected to communities possesses a crucial advantage: the ability to build sustainable relevance and trust by responding to what people actually need. Meeting this challenge requires rethinking how international media development aid is conceived and delivered.

Introduction

In October 2025, more than 100 media representatives, government officials, and academics gathered in Nicosia, Cyprus, for the China–Cyprus–Europe Media Forum (Lingua Sinica Database, 2025). Organized by China's embassy and the Chinese Communist Party's flagship China Media Group, the event concluded with a declaration calling on media to help build "a community with a shared future for humanity" — a signature foreign policy concept introduced by China's top leader, Xi Jinping. The declaration framed media not as truth-seekers working in the public interest, but as "promoters of inter-civilization dialogue" whose role is to "build consensus" and strengthen bilateral relations. The forum's timing was strategic: it came just ahead of the 55th anniversary of China – Cyprus diplomatic relations and Cyprus's assumption of the EU Council presidency in 2026.

The Nicosia forum is hardly unique. Right on its heels was the Seventh China–Arab States Broadcasting and Television Cooperation Forum, hosted by a ministry-level agency directly under China's Central Propaganda Department (Lingua Sinica Database, 2025). Representatives from Egypt, Mauritania, and other Arab nations issued a joint declaration laden with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) terminology, signaling China's influence over the forum's framing, and announced more than 50 cooperation outcomes — part of China's media partnership efforts with Arab states dating to 2011. The forum emphasized "content cooperation" and "exchanges between civilizations" to strengthen the China – Arab strategic partnership. Once again, media were positioned solely as instruments of state diplomacy.

The scale of China's media engagement efforts is remarkable, and they have accelerated over the past year, as media support and engagement from the United States and other donors has gone in reverse. These forums, training programs, and partnership initiatives offer just a glimpse of a vast program of state-directed media diplomacy globally, promoting a vision of journalism as an instrument of

state power and narrative control. China, it must be noted, is not alone in this effort to redefine the role of the media. A 2024 study by the State Media Monitor found that government control of the media was generally on the rise, and that the independent public media sector faced a range of new threats (State Media Monitor, 2024). Over the past decade, scores of governments have adopted or amended laws and regulations to limit press freedom online and offline. Over the past year, U.S. President Donald Trump's actions against American news outlets have mirrored authoritarian moves elsewhere across a troubled global media landscape, with sharp cuts in funding to media outlets such as National Public Radio, Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and the U.S. Agency for Global Media.

But China's ambition stands out for its scale, resources, and global reach. Preliminary data from the China Media Project's Lingua Sinica database, which logs People's Republic of China's (PRC) media engagements globally, show that at least 133 media summits, forums, official tours, and cooperation agreements were concluded in the 22 months through October 2025 — averaging six events per month (Lingua Sinica Database, 2025). Through exchanges like these, China's leadership is actively promoting a vision globally of media not as independent voices but as agents of national interest seeking global concord. As the Cyprus declaration affirmed: "We are of the view that the media need to act as active builders of China–Cyprus and China–EU relations, helping to enhance mutual trust and understanding, foster consensus, and lay a sound foundation of public support for the steady growth of bilateral relations. The media are expected to foster an objective and reasonable public opinion environment" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Cyprus, 2025).

At first glance, reason and objectivity may seem to be shared values. And elsewhere, the Declaration further affirms that "truthfulness, objectivity, fairness, and service to the public interest" are core elements of a shared global media vision. Observers tempted by such claims must beware the larger principles set down in the fine print.

The text follows by making clear that the public interest is served "by fostering a reasonable and stable public opinion environment, preventing information fragmentation, social polarization, and divisive narratives." This language in the Declaration aligns with China's official propaganda policy called "emphasizing positive news" (All-China Journalists Association, 2020). It is fundamentally about compliant and non-critical media — the kind positioned to serve the broader state-to-state interests defined by the CCP.

Over the past decade, even as funding to the media sector as part of official development assistance (ODA) from the world's established democracies has stagnated, China's state-directed media diplomacy has expanded rapidly — even accelerating since 2021. This chapter examines the potential impact China's media outreach has on media and journalism worldwide, and explores how donors committed to supporting independent journalism, information integrity, and open societies can respond most effectively.

This chapter proceeds in several sections. The opening sections examine the CCP's "discourse power" framework and how this policy manifests through global media engagement activities that position journalism as an instrument of state diplomacy, with a look at the case of Southeast Asia. A subsequent section identifies critical weaknesses in how international media development aid has been conceived and delivered — including grant dependency, disconnection from audience needs, and top-down approaches that have left independent media vulnerable. The final section explores several possible solutions and argues that the most effective response lies in empowering service journalism: supporting media that genuinely engage with and serve their communities. Unlike authoritarian models that seek to manipulate audiences, independent journalism connected to communities can build sustainable relevance and trust by responding to what people truly need — a crucial advantage state propaganda cannot replicate.

The "discourse power" framework

China's state-directed media diplomacy has its roots in an evolving official vision of how the CCP must project power through global communication to offset what it views as a critical deficit of public opinion impact that might affect China's development in key areas like trade and security. The concept of "discourse power," or huayuquan, has emerged since the late 2000s as a key organizing principle for how the Chinese Communist Party approaches global communication. At the 17th Party Congress in 2007, Hu Jintao introduced "cultural soft power" as a policy priority, marking the adoption for the first time in CCP official discourse of Joseph Nye's notion of "soft power" (People's Daily, 2007). Hu called on the Party to build China's state media system to compete with powerful media in the West, emphasizing the need to bolster China's "discourse power" as a component of comprehensive national power. The CCP's focus in the latter Hu era was on central state-run media outlets such as Xinhua News Agency, China News Service, China Daily, and the then newly launched China Global Television Network (CGTN). These outlets were to "go out" and expand their international reach (China Media Network, 2006).

Xi Jinping's rise to power in late 2012 ushered in a greater sense of urgency to the bid for international discourse power, conceived as part of a project of "national rejuvenation" (Wang, 2013). At a national conference with propaganda officials in August 2013, Xi introduced a defining concept for China's external communication: "telling China's story well, effectively transmitting China's voice." While this discourse superficially suggested a softer and more narrative-driven approach, it appeared alongside the longstanding language of "external propaganda" — making clear this was a tactical shift only. Driving home the gravity of the task ahead, Xi referred to a "public opinion struggle," a phrase bearing hardline echoes of the Cultural Revolution, to describe the nature of the CCP's information challenges at home and abroad (Xinhua News Agency, 2013).

Xi Jinping's bid for global discourse power as "national rejuvenation" was deeply invested with a sense of national victimhood. The West and its historical information dominance were primarily to blame for China's continued marginalization. Xi spoke of the drive for discourse power as a bid to overcome what he termed the "third affliction" (Xin, 2021). The framework divided China's modern history into three periods. Foreign military aggression was an "affliction" overcome by Mao Zedong from the 1950s onward, while economic weakness and underdevelopment had been resolved by Deng Xiaoping's reforms from the late 1970s. The "third affliction," the "suffering of criticism" from Western discourse hegemony, was a problem to be addressed once and for all in the Xi era, throwing off challenges once and for all to the legitimacy of CCP rule (Thibaut, 2022).

A closed model opens out

The fundamentally defensive nature of the Party's push to win the "public opinion struggle" at home and strengthen its international discourse power abroad has brought the strangling of voices internally. This can be seen in the cowing of domestic Chinese media, to an extent unprecedented in the reform era, reinforced by comprehensive, multilayered controls over cyberspace that primarily target domestic expression but also restrict cross-border information flows.

In 2013, months before Xi Jinping's major speech on "external propaganda" and storytelling, the CCP leadership released Document 9, a directive that drew a hard line against liberal concepts that had gained limited traction in previous years. Known unofficially as the "Seven Unspeakables," the document banned the use of such concepts as "constitutionalism" and "civil society" in both Party and popular discourse (BBC News Chinese, 2013). Among the taboos was "promoting the West's idea of journalism," which the directive equated with challenging the Party's control of the media (ChinaFile, 2013).

It was also during the first two years of Xi's term that the Party implemented more aggressive controls over cyberspace, establishing the

Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) in 2014 to oversee what researchers have termed the "Locknet" — a sophisticated system of censorship (historically called the "Great Firewall") that shapes information flows both inside China and, increasingly, beyond its borders (Batke & Edelson, 2025). The attack on "the West's idea of journalism" and the CCP's efforts to impact and restrain global information flows stemmed from a growing consensus that the external conditioned the internal. No longer was it sufficient, particularly as China's economic and political fortunes were enmeshed with the world through signature programs like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to prioritize domestic information control in isolation.

The need to advance China's external communication is today inextricably linked in CCP discourse with the country's overall advancement within the global system. During a collective study session of the CCP's Politburo dealing specifically with China's international communication strategy in May 2021, Xi explicitly linked external communication to internal regime security. International discourse power, he said, was necessary to "create a favorable external public opinion environment for our country's reform, development, and stability" (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). Again, invoking the "three afflictions" framework, he framed discourse power as essential to the Party's survival: "Backwardness leads to beatings, poverty leads to hunger, and losing one's voice leads to being scolded," he said. Echoing these sentiments more recently, a commentary in the CCP's flagship People's Daily stated that "Party and state affairs cannot develop without a favorable external public opinion environment" (Qiushi Journal, 2024).

Building this favorable external public opinion environment is the goal toward which media engagement activities like the China–Cyprus–Europe Media Forum in Nicosia are directed. In fact, the 2021 politburo session marked a turning point for China's strategic deployments on this front globally. Since 2021, responding to Xi Jinping's call to remake the country's system for external propaganda, provinces and cities across China have established interna-

tional communication centers, or ICCs, harnessing the resources of regional and local media groups, under the direction of local propaganda offices, with the goal of amplifying state messaging (Zhejiang Publicity, 2024). The country's first ICC, the Chongqing International Communication Centre (CICC), was piloted in 2018. By the end of 2024, more than 100 ICCs had been established across China (Thorne, 2024).

China's global media push from all levels of the national bureaucracy, from the center down through the provinces and cities, is an appreciable expansion of the country's external propaganda efforts and media engagement outreach. Consider that estimates more than a decade ago on China's annual budget for external propaganda, which was focused at that time on the above-mentioned central media groups, were around 10 billion USD (Nye, 2015). For perspective, total official development assistance (ODA) from the OECD to media support over this same period, from 2008 to 2012, hovered between 400 million and 500 million USD annually (González Cauhapé-Cazaux & Kalathil, 2015). While figures for investment in ICCs over the past five years are not available, support for external engagement from particularly wealthier provinces and cities likely represents a substantial increase in outlays from China. Moreover, this support is qualitatively different, involving — beyond support for central-level broadcasting and news overseas — much deeper engagement with media outlets and journalists, as well as with foreign governments.

To understand how this engagement is established on the ground, we need only look at the recent example of Southeast Asia, which in the past year has been struck by the precipitous withdrawal of USAID (Conley Tyler & Trinh, 2025), and declining aid from other sources, including Sweden's SIDA, which will be phasing out its strategy for Asia and the Pacific region by June 30, 2026 (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2022). Analysts warned in early 2025 that the withdrawal of USAID — which alone provided 860 million USD in aid in 2024 — and other funders "may

create vacuums that China can fill" (Hale, 2025). On the media front, this is already evident. And ICCs are playing a crucial role.

In the four months to November 2025, Yunnan provincial authorities held at least eight media engagements with Southeast Asia, while further events were hosted by Guangxi, Guangdong, and Fujian provinces. In a clear pattern of engagement, these wealthy Chinese coastal and border provinces with strong geographic, trade, and cultural ties to Southeast Asia were all deeply involved in media outreach activities to the region. In several cases, these events had even broader reach, framed as media gatherings for the Global South. This is a concept connected to the region's post-colonial history and building on shared discourse "advocating for a more representative and equitable international order" (Hoang & Cha, 2024) — but that China uses to advocate key foreign policy frames of peace and mutual development over values of media independence. The Yunnan South and Southeast Asia Regional International Communication Centre, an office founded in May 2022 under the propaganda office of the Yunnan Provincial Committee of the CCP, was central to these activities, including a five-day training seminar in August for more than 20 journalists and influencers from China, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Indonesia. During the event, training sessions on video production and AI were combined with ideologically driven historical tours on China's positive role in the region (Lingua Sinica Database, 2025).

The next month, the ICC joined the central-level Xinhua News Agency and the Yunnan Provincial Committee of the CCP in hosting the 2025 Global South Media and Think Tank Forum, which gathered more than 500 journalists and media representatives from more than 260 media outlets across 110 countries. The event was an occasion for a top Central Propaganda Department official, Hu Heping, to promote Xi Jinping's Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) as "important guidance" for reforming global governance. Addressing the Kunming forum by video, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications Melissa Fleming, herself an experienced

journalist appointed to the post in 2019, seemed to legitimize China's official position on inequities in global media representation by urging participants — according to state media reports — to "restore balance to the global information ecosystem" (Lingua Sinica Database, 2025). The forum offered China a platform to release what it called the "Yunnan Declaration," which positions media and think tanks as the "main force" in building autonomous discourse systems to counter Western narrative dominance, explicitly charging them with amplifying China's four global initiatives as solutions for Global South development and governance. The declaration perverts the whole notion of media trust by stating that "the most effective way to transmit this information [about Xi's initiatives for the Global South] is precisely through trustworthy media." This cynical weaponization of the language of media credibility as a matter of bilateral or regional constructivism — the declaration specifically references "constructive narratives" — is core to China's official media engagements globally (Global Times, 2025).

Also in September, Yunnan's propaganda office and its ICC hosted the 2025 South and Southeast Asian Media Network Annual Meeting, which brought together representatives from 11 countries including China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, India, and Sri Lanka. The event promoted a deepening of cooperation within the so-called South and Southeast Asian Media Network, a Chinese government-led alliance of 40 overseas and 50 domestic media institutions formed in January 2024 by the Yunnan ICC along with China's government-run China Daily — an illustration of how regional media engagement efforts are proceeding with central-level coordination.

Moving east to neighboring Guangxi, the province's international communication center hosted more than 100 young journalists and researchers from Indonesia in August 2025 to discuss AI and media convergence under the theme "Partners with a Shared Destiny" (Lingua Sinica Database, 2025). In November, capping off a series of media engagement events in the second half of the year, Guangxi's

provincial broadcaster, directly under its propaganda office, hosted the Lancang–Mekong Media Event, during which 10 collaborations were announced with participating media from China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam (Lingua Sinica Database, 2025). These included distribution of Chinese video and broadcast content through regional media partners.

Assessing the actual impact of China's media engagement is challenging, as measuring the effects of information influence operations remains notoriously difficult. Yet recognizing the sophistication of China's approach is essential. China's strategy extends beyond state-to-state approaches to state-directed engagement that operates through seemingly grassroots channels — what has long been termed, sometimes too simplistically, "united front work." Provincial ICCs, media exchanges, and earlier initiatives like Confucius Institutes present state narratives through interpersonal connections, making them more persuasive than top-down propaganda. Research by Brazys and Dukalskis (2019) demonstrates measurable impact. The authors found that proximity to an active Confucius Institute significantly improved the tone of media reporting about China-relevant events in that locality. This ground-level, relationship-based approach can genuinely shape media perceptions and coverage in host communities.

This change in tone of coverage owing to engagement with Chinese state-driven narratives can be documented even in contexts of broader skepticism about China, helping — as the authors of the above-mentioned paper note — to "improve China's image locally amid a general context in which opinions about China are worsening." Improved media tone does not necessarily translate to wholesale acceptance of Chinese narratives or governance models. Research on China's media influence in Africa reveals persistent skepticism among journalists and audiences despite extensive engagement. As one African analyst notes, while Chinese media investment has been substantial, "the effectiveness of Chinese messages continues to be mixed," with the vast majority of African audiences

remaining "focused on advancing their democratic struggles." One Kenyan journalist who participated in a China fellowship summed up this resistance: "If the Chinese brought me to Beijing to influence my journalism, they failed" (Nantulya, 2024).

Despite this skepticism and agency, China's media engagement in Africa and beyond remains extensive and impactful. Concerns about China's efforts to shape media and information spaces are given greater urgency by the push for global dominance in AI development. China's strategy has been to advance open-source AI models like Alibaba's Qwen and DeepSeek, making their code freely available for adaptation in developing countries. While this enables localization for languages neglected by Western tech firms, research has found that AI models built on Chinese systems maintain pro-China biases even when customized for local use. Uganda's Sunflower chatbot, built on Qwen, deflects criticism of China's human rights record and presents Chinese investment in Africa positively despite local concerns from citizens and NGOs. As AI increasingly replaces search engines as primary information sources, such models could give governments enhanced control over narratives, particularly in languages where alternatives are scarce.

As the U.S., Sweden, and other donors step back from support in the strategically critical Indo-Pacific region, China is stepping in. At the annual Global Investigative Journalism Conference held in November 2025 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, funding for independent media dominated the agenda. During a session hosted by the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), a network of 219 media member organizations exploring policies and programs to sustain journalism, participants from Africa and South Asia noted that rising media engagement and investment, not just from China but also from Russia, had been evident in their regions in the wake of the retreat of Western donors (Bandurski, 2025). The investment side of this equation is far more difficult to grasp. Establishing transparency around substantial Chinese state investments in entities like Independent Media, one of South Africa's leading multi-platform

media companies, often requires the very types of critical and investigative reporting that are suffering amid funding shortfalls for journalism more broadly — which brings us to the question of media development aid in support of such work.

New principles for media development aid

Given the sheer scale of China's media engagement and information operations globally, there has been understandable concern about combating the rise of disinformation and what the European Union now terms Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). The European External Action Service (EEAS) has documented a growing "threat landscape" of coordinated campaigns designed to undermine democratic processes and institutions (Hénin, 2023). These campaigns are real, and the concerns are well-founded. And yet, countering FIMI alone is not sufficient. The most direct challenge arises from the resilience of media spaces themselves, and whether they are fit to inform communities about immediate risks and concerns.

Research supports the conclusion that professional and independent news media result in greater social cohesion, fuller transparency, and greater citizen engagement (Larizza, 2017). Vibrant and professional media spaces are the best protection against the erosion of democratic values as well as disinformation, misinformation, and interference. It is crucial, therefore, to acknowledge that the direct challenge mounted by China and other states and actors against professional journalism and independent media is happening against the backdrop of a crisis facing journalism globally. China may have ambitious plans for media influence across the globe — but it is also stepping into a widening gap left where media donors have withdrawn, or supported programs are failing to make a lasting difference.

The resource gap is stark. While China's state-directed media diplomacy has expanded rapidly, funding from established democracies has stagnated. As an OECD report noted in 2024 as it outlined de-

velopment cooperation principles for "relevant and effective" media support, total official development assistance allocated annually to media and the broader information environment averages only 0.5 percent of total development assistance — and this drops to a meager 0.24 percent when infrastructure spending is excluded (OECD, 2024). Only up to 8 percent of that minuscule allocation directly supports media organizations in partner countries. Between 2010 and 2019, just six DAC members provided 68 percent of all media development funding, according to the report. In May 2025, Sweden announced that it would increase its support for independent media by SEK 70 million, solidifying its top three position among international donors in the field (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2025). But funding remains a critical issue, even more so given the dramatic funding cuts to USAID in January 2025, which hit independent media globally hard, casting "a long shadow over journalism around the world" (Fenster, 2025).

At risk of stating the obvious, the first step in meeting the challenge posed to independent media globally by state actors like China is to ensure sufficient support from donor countries and organizations committed to the value of media independence and professional journalism. The numbers cited in the 2024 OECD report already make clear that development aid for the media sector has been severely inadequate — and that situation has only worsened in the past year with the withdrawal of support from sources like USAID.

The OECD Development Co-operation Principles for Relevant and Effective Support to Media and the Information Environment, released in 2024 following advocacy by the Global Forum for Media Development and the Centre for International Media Assistance, offer donors an effective roadmap. The principles emphasize increased financial support, local ownership and leadership, improved coordination among donors, and — critically — investment in understanding local contexts. This final point is particularly relevant: the need to develop "solid and up-to-date diagnostics and thorough analysis of the media and information environment in each country," includ-

ing the "specific needs of the people, particular audiences and public interest media organizations in each context" (OECD, 2024). This emphasis on understanding audience needs and local contexts points directly to how media support can build sustainable resilience against authoritarian influence — through genuine service to communities.

Building relevance into media development

These key points in the OECD principles bring us to a final crucial point that must be underlined to ensure the impact of media support once it is applied — and that is the core question of audience relevance. The relevance of journalism and media to audiences, the imperative that they serve real needs, is not just the answer to how media can survive and be sustainable — it is also the most basic advantage that free and independent media have in competing globally with China's expanding model of state-controlled information.

Traditional journalism support has tended to focus on "public interest media" in ways that prioritize normative understandings of what constitutes public interest reporting and professional news coverage, without sufficient regard for how content is reaching real communities, or in ways that incorporate their needs or priorities. In an article provocatively titled "Your Suffering Isn't a Public Service," researcher Patrick Boehler writes about how "suffering became currency" for grant organizations supporting journalism, rewarding precariousness and abstract heroism over utility, while funding work that informs elites rather than communities. He advocates instead for support tied to demonstrable service: who journalists help, how, and what communities would miss without them (Boehler, 2025b).

Boehler's criticism, which is echoed by others such as Madison Karas who advocate a focus on service-oriented journalism, touches on a key point about the nature of media support, and the expectations of donors, that must be seriously addressed — particularly in view of the cratering consumption of the news more broadly among consumers (Karas & Boehler, 2025). When it comes to public interest

news, it seems, the public cannot be interested. Research published in 2025 by the Reuters Institute exposed a decade-long trend of public disengagement from the news (Robertson, 2025). According to the study, weekly online news consumption fell 13 percentage points among young adults between 2015 and 2024, while general interest in news dropped sharply across all demographic groups. Respondents increasingly found news coverage irrelevant, feeling, as research three years earlier found, that it's just "not for me" (Newman et al., 2022).

Examples of effective service journalism demonstrate this advantage in practice. In the United States, community-centered newsrooms have built sustainable audiences through projects addressing concrete local needs — from Public Good News's Spanish-language WhatsApp health newsletter to the Texas Tribune's voter guide magnets distributed at community centers (Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute, 2024). In the Global South, outlets like India's CGNet Swara and Brazil's Agência Mural have built lasting community engagement by prioritizing relevance overreach. As Paraguayan researcher Jazmín Acuña notes, successful media must move away from the mindset that "we deserve to exist because what we do is inherently valuable" toward an impact-oriented approach where change is deliberately created and measured (Acuña, 2025).

Beyond increasing support for media development, donors should work closely with journalists and media organizations to better understand audiences and their needs across various markets and contexts. With more support for research, strategic thinking, and shared insights on the media and audience needs in specific contexts globally, and with sharing of tools, resources, and technology to lower the costs for media (whatever their scale), we can better enable journalists and media to connect in new and innovative ways with local audiences. This path is already defined, though in abstract, in the call in the OECD principles to support "solid and up-to-date diagnostics and thorough analysis" of media contexts globally.

While our commitment remains to independent media that work in the public interest, we can do much more to better understand and

enrich what this means for concrete, engaged audiences as opposed to donors. With new and effective ways to re-engage audiences around substantive, credible, and relevant information, media and journalism will become more rooted and sustainable — and in many cases less dependent on direct donor support.

Meeting real information needs is not just about sustainability — it represents independent media's most powerful advantage against the expanding global media engagements and investments from authoritarian actors like China. State-directed media can deploy vast resources for forums and partnerships, but they cannot replicate the trust built through genuine service to communities. As Boehler argues in another article, "Resisting Oppression," mundane, actionable information about daily needs — which schools accept migrant children, which hospitals treat without bribes — threatens authoritarian control more than dissident broadcasts because information essential to daily life becomes impossible to restrict without visible harm (Boehler, 2025a).

Responding to the challenge posed by China's state-directed media diplomacy requires not just increased funding for independent media, but a fundamental shift in how that support is conceived and delivered. Donors must invest in broader sharing of information, tools, and resources that enable journalists to understand and respond meaningfully to audience needs in their specific contexts. By empowering media to provide genuine service — answering the questions people actually have, helping them navigate systems that affect their daily lives — we build sustainable relevance that no amount of state-directed forum diplomacy or partnership agreements can replicate. This is where independent media rooted in service to communities possess an advantage that authoritarian competitors fundamentally cannot match: not through strategic communication, but through trust earned by responding to real information needs rather than projecting geopolitical interests disconnected from audience realities.

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