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How can disinformation and manipulation be prevented and countered?¹

II Forum de Dialogue Sahel Europe

Introduction

On the 14th, 15th and 16th of July 2022, the International Security Centre of the Francisco de Vitoria University (CSI - UFV) organised the 2nd edition of the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum. Several workshops, conferences and master classes allowed international experts to examine and discuss the situation and stability of the Sahel.

During the workshop entitled "How to prevent and counter disinformation and manipulation?" moderated by Beatriz Mesa, Africa specialist, Seidik Abba, journalist and writer, analyst of current affairs in West Africa; Mohamed Ag Ahmedou, director of Mehari Consulting and Mehari Post; Wassim Nasr, journalist for France 24, terrorism specialist and Africa analyst; and Javier Fernández Arribas, director of Atalayar, discussed the keys to journalism in the Sahel, the context of disinformation and the manipulation of information in the Sahel, while proposing concrete recommendations.

¹ This analysis is part of a series of research studies conducted by the International Security Centre on dialogue with the Sahel. Following the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum held in March 2021, the speakers belonging to the [Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum's](#) panel of experts have deepened the themes of their conferences, analysing the shared challenges, and the opportunities for cooperation on our common challenges. This analysis was carried out by Beatriz de León Cobo, Director of the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum, based on the notes of the conference of the same title with the collaboration of Julie Bonin, French Army Reservist. Photo FLORENT VERGNES / AFP.

Historically, Sahelian states began to open up to the media in earnest in the 1990s, following the decline of military and authoritarian regimes that had maintained a monopoly on information through censorship. However, the Sahelian media landscape has changed since then. The media has a decisive influence on the perception of reality. Disinformation, a real threat to security and stability in the Sahel, is defined as a communication process that consists of using the media to transmit partially erroneous information in order to mislead or influence public opinion. While this is not a new challenge, the internet is contributing to the spread of disinformation faster than ever before. In this sense, combating the spread of disinformation and the potential threats it poses has become a critical challenge. In an armed conflict where information is equal to a weapons system, the possessor of information has the power to contribute to security.

This article reviews the current context of disinformation and manipulation in the Sahel, examining the value of journalistic responsibility, the challenges facing journalists and the phenomenon of social media and *fake news*.

1. The journalist's responsibility

Journalists are currently stigmatised in the Sahel, where they are unjustifiably considered irresponsible by the military. This preconceived idea, conveyed without reflection, is in fact the antithesis of the rigour required by this profession, where investigative work is essential to verify the veracity of information. Journalists must therefore develop a critical spirit. This involves, for example, determining whether a person is interested in providing information and verifying the information given. However, false information may circulate, either through opportunism on the part of some journalists or by mistake. However, it is unlikely that after much searching, research and verification, after cross-checking information, such an error would occur. Therefore, we must put an end to the "argument" of the irresponsibility of the journalist, which is illogical since there are ethics and deontology in the treatment of information. Journalists and the media are indispensable actors, especially because they take responsibility and assume the consequences of what they publish in their name.

There are several communication challenges for journalists. Firstly, the use of local languages in communication should be prioritised, which would allow the population to be addressed more effectively, while opening up possibilities for research in the region. Media communication would benefit from being complemented by non-media communication, which could, depending on the country, be more effective using local languages. Moreover, it is necessary to be known to be understood. Thus, interactions between journalists, but also with other actors such as governments, defence and security forces and civil society, remain a challenge for journalists and the media. The fight against disinformation therefore requires the creation of forums and meetings², which help to improve mutual understanding, facilitate joint work and contribute to the construction of a new information reality.

However, the journalist's responsibility also imposes the exercise of a certain pedagogy, because his or her mission is not only to investigate, but also to inform. In this age of mass information, information management becomes crucial. Therefore, the journalist must also organise the information, especially since not all of it is publishable. While these precautions are essential to avoid fuelling certain phenomena, withholding information remains complicated in the digital age. Governments must therefore be aware of the importance of the role of information and communication. As journalists also have a duty to the people they investigate, it may be necessary to publish shocking images, as was the case in Sarajevo, in order to shock and outrage

² Such as the "open days" of some editorial offices or military headquarters, for example..

international society into action. To avoid the use of this type of information strategy, the Spanish initiative known as the Africa Plan³, as well as similar initiatives by other Western governments, should prioritise investments for the development, progress and industrialisation of the countries in the region, thus allowing for greater stability and security.

2. The challenges

In order to rethink communication strategy in the Sahel, it is necessary to understand the challenges facing journalists and the media. Since 2009, Boko Haram has evolved from a movement based primarily on religious proselytising (2002-2008) to a group that clearly embraces armed violence. This change has been accompanied by a clear media interest in its activities, with an increased presence of the jihadist group in the national, pan-African and international press. This media interest has even increased considerably due to the internationalisation of the movement in 2015, with the first Boko Haram attacks in Niger, Chad and Cameroon. The international media, as well as the national and pan-African press, then expanded their coverage of the security situation in the sub-region with the installation, in 2016, on the bed of Lake Chad of the wing led by the duo Habib Yusuf alias Al-Barnawi and Mahamat Nur. This wing, a rival to the one led by Abukar Shekau in his lifetime, was born out of the split of Boko Haram in 2016, just a year after its allegiance to the Islamic State and the emergence of the name Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).

Our paper questions the media's treatment of the security situation in the Sahel, using the case of Boko Haram and the example of the partnership concluded in March 2017 between Le Monde Afrique and Oxfam France. The national press covered these issues from their headquarters in the capitals of the Sahelian states. The international press has had to rely on special envoys sent from Western capitals on an ad hoc basis, in the hope of getting closer to the realities on the ground. In both cases, the media face the risks of covering a situation from afar and the challenges of gaining regular and satisfactory access to credible and diversified sources, especially in an area as sensitive and new as national security and defence. This particular context therefore forces journalists and the media to invent new forms of journalistic practice. Media coverage of the security situation in the Sahel is obviously an essential issue, as it can (if done well) promote a better understanding of the complexity of the problem and contribute to an adequate response. Conversely, approximate or even caricatured media coverage of the security situation can undermine social cohesion and coexistence, and thus delay the return to a definitive and lasting peace.

³ III Africa Plan. Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Available at: <https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/PoliticaExterior/Paginas/Africa/III-Plan-%C3%81frica.aspx>

Press Freedom Index 2020 in Africa

Source : Reporters Without Borders

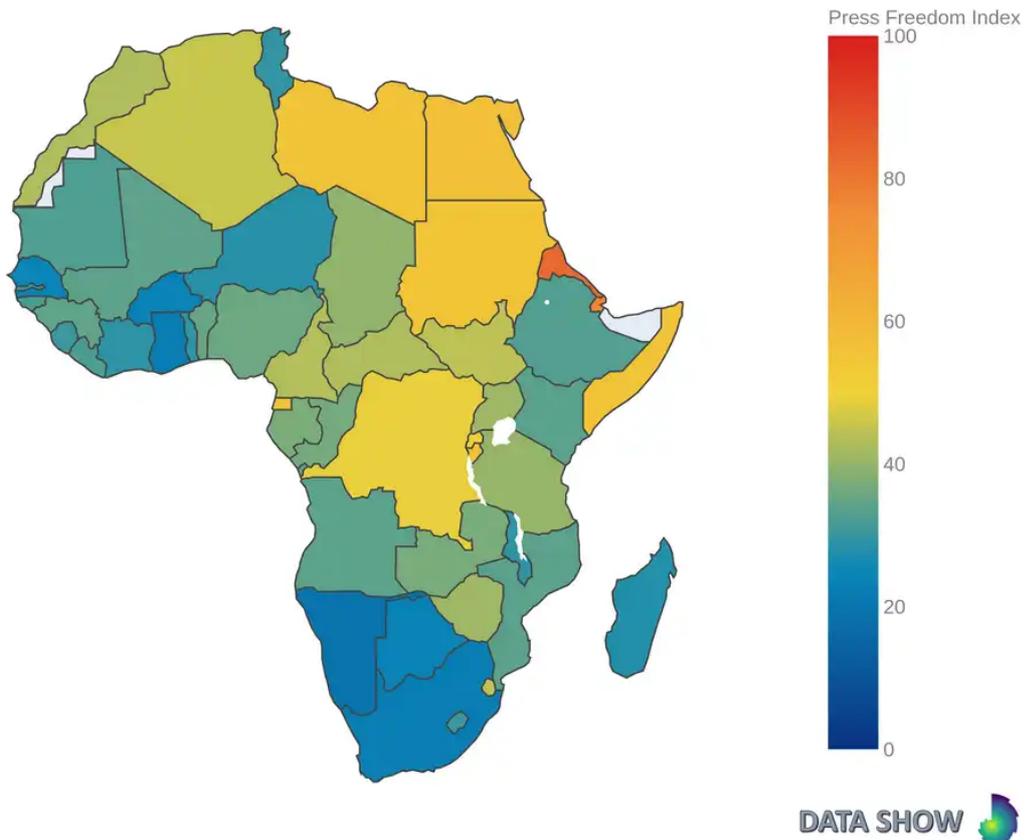


Illustration 1: Press Freedom Index for the African continent (Reporters Without Borders, 2020)

Firstly, it is important to be aware that the population has easier access to information from jihadists, despite the absence of a contact person, than to official and institutional information. This lack of information therefore generates disinformation, which is encouraged by states. Moreover, there is no effective state crisis communication. For example, two days after an attack, no press release had yet been issued, fuelling rumours among the population. It is therefore imperative that mechanisms are put in place to prevent the absence of information, especially in emergency situations. The lack of crisis communication in the Sahel has considerable consequences for society, and good information coverage of affected areas could contribute to crisis resolution.

Another challenge is access to sources, especially because of the veto imposed by the military on journalists, whose independence is thus frustrated. To improve communication capacity, there is a need to improve joint work and mutual respect so that everyone retains their independence. For example, while countries such as Senegal, which integrates journalists into its military operations, have made great efforts in terms of communication strategy, this is not the case in the rest of the Sahel region. The weakness of the communication services, but also of the military's communication skills, is a problem. Adaptation of the working methods imposed by the military is necessary, especially in a worrying reality where terrorists communicate better than we do.

Thus, journalism has to adapt to new contexts and the changing security situation, while the terrorists themselves demonstrate their ability to adapt and master the media. The latter use a variety of strategies that they adapt. In terms of the design of the videos they publish on the networks, between 2015 and 2017, the jihadists' strategy was to show videos with very explicit images of extremely violent battles, in a framework of open propaganda. However, in the following years there has been a change in approach in the face of the pressure exerted on cyberjihadism. For example, videos posted on the Internet were subjected to a camouflage technique⁴, so that the message was transmitted in a way that was difficult to intercept.

In this new context, the deterioration of the security situation is a fact that affects several aspects of journalists' work, especially their independence and the opacity of their environment. According to RSF's report on Mali, "the deteriorating security situation, combined with the hardening of the junta that came to power in 2020, compromises journalists' safety and access to information".⁵ a situation that is repeated in several Sahel countries.

At present, the independence of journalists in the Sahel is conditioned both by growing insecurity and political instability. Indeed, journalists cannot travel without authorisation from the authorities, which is not always sufficient to allow travel. Working outside the capital, Bamako, remains very risky, as the risk of kidnapping is high. In addition to the risks involved in displacement, local journalists report feeling constantly threatened by the authorities, some of whom are "afraid of words". These difficulties have led to constant attacks on journalism: last year, two Spanish journalists were killed in Burkina Faso; Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon were also killed in 2013; French reporter Olivier Dubois and other local journalists were kidnapped by armed terrorist groups in Mali; and several journalists have been expelled from Benin, Mali and Burkina Faso.

On the other hand, the Sahel is permeated by a culture of information opacity that does not allow for the evolution of communication. For example, the military world is strongly linked to the notion of secrecy of all security-related information, which makes it difficult to control information. There is therefore an overly broad conception of secrecy, which leads to a failure to communicate properly, thus contributing to disinformation. Better information could prevent "intoxication", especially because the media and professionals can pass this information on to society.

That is why trust is essential in this profession, not only with partners, but also between interviewers and respondents. However, it is also necessary to know the subject well in order to avoid being manipulated and to have accurate and correct information, with a professional opinion. This professionalism is not always present due to the bias of some journalists, which is not a problem specific to the Sahel and is increasingly prevalent throughout the world.

In addition, some foreign actors, whether state or non-state, engage in disinformation campaigns, deliberately spreading false or misleading information. Behind these difficulties linked to the political context, Malian media and journalists live in a very precarious economic situation, which exposes them to corruption.

⁴ Renaut, Laurène. On social media, an evolving jihadosphere. *The Conversation*, 12 November 2020. <https://theconversation.com/sur-les-reseaux-sociaux-une-djihadosphere-en-constante-evolution-149754>.

⁵ Mali page. Reporters Sans Frontières website. <https://rsf.org/fr/pays/mali>

3. The phenomenon of social media and *fake news*

Fake news can be defined as false and often sensationalist information disseminated with the aim of misleading, manipulating and confusing public opinion through any media (social networks, websites, parody sites, misleading press articles or even newspapers posing as real media). They are growing rapidly, becoming a plague on political systems and society. Indeed, the development of the Internet, which offers total freedom, has created the conditions for the widespread dissemination of false information aimed at manipulating public opinion: anonymity, lack of regulation, instantaneousness and the search for an audience (number of views, likes and shares).

Disinformation has always existed, but social networks allow for its instantaneous and massive dissemination in the age of globalisation, where information technology is present in almost all areas. The latter can be an excellent tool, but it can also become a "rubbish pit", used by many individuals and institutions, organisations and terrorist groups, for their own unscrupulous benefit. Even a terrorist organisation, fundamentally opposed to any kind of technical progress, will be forced to develop a part of its communication and recruitment strategy dedicated to the Internet in order to spread its fight all over the world.

There are two main types of institutions, individuals, media, etc. that poison the networks: those who, if caught spreading false information, will have to take responsibility and will be brought to justice; and those who act with impunity because they have a false identity or because public opinion does not control them, as is the case of dictatorships that are not accountable to anyone, not even to their own people.

Disinformation is therefore a major challenge for Sahelian social media users. Much of the disinformation in the Sahel circulates in the form of videos manipulated to highlight stereotypes and identity divisions, targeting a larger part of the population with low literacy and limited access to traditional sources of information. Among the social networks used by the associative and non-commercial sector in the Sahel, the population is particularly attracted to the Tik Tok application. This extremely popular digital tool (more than a billion users worldwide) is indeed increasingly followed by young people in the Sahel. This example demonstrates the important influence of social networks on society. Control measures are therefore necessary: it is not a question of censorship, but of taking responsibility for regulating by mutual agreement what can be published on the networks.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Disinformation is a reality that affects society in general and journalism and the media in particular. The role of professionals and the responsibility that the journalistic profession itself has in this area are recognised worldwide. For the proper development of information in the Sahel, disinformation and manipulation must be taken into account in order to prevent their further increase. This responsibility implies that journalists must verify the veracity of information, take responsibility for what they publish and conduct their investigations as thoroughly and professionally as possible.

It is therefore necessary to build more spaces for communication, to avoid partisanship and to select the information that is published. On the other hand, we were able to observe many challenges⁶ faced by

⁶ Such as insecurity, the new context to which they have to adapt, the difficult access to sources of information, the lack of independence, the omnipresent opacity in the Sahel, the lack of economic resources (among others) and, above all, disinformation caused by opportunists, terrorists, governments, etc.

journalists in the exercise of their profession. Finally, we can conclude that digital acceleration has transformed the media, narratives, news consumption and the formation of public opinion. We are experiencing a change of prescribers, with a multiplication of content, sources and stories, often contradictory or simply false. *Fake news* is growing unchecked on social media and is a serious problem for society as a whole. However, the media remain resilient and dynamic despite the difficulties. An uninformed or misinformed society becomes a great danger, as manipulation and the creation of biased opinion trends result in a malleable, docile and manageable citizenry for the few. The absence of information, or good information, creates disinformation, as ethical and rigorous investigative journalism plays a fundamental role in whistleblowing.

A number of concrete recommendations can be put in place to combat the phenomenon of disinformation and manipulation of information.

- **Create spaces for communication:** by sharing knowledge and communicating regularly with each other, journalists will be better informed and more effective in their daily work. They will be able to find common solutions to avoid misinformation by withholding information.
- **Supporting and strengthening Sahelian journalists:** Given the low income of journalists, who are then exposed to manipulation and bad work, this recommendation is essential. To this end, the concrete implementation of Western strategies for Sub-Saharan Africa would make it possible to provide financial assistance to journalists, or to help them in their professional development, for example by offering them quality training.
- **Awareness of disinformation:** Awareness-raising about propaganda, disinformation and fake news is critical from an early age. In addition, strengthening digital literacy, responsible media consumption and the use of conflict-sensitive online tools among the Sahelian population includes the digital empowerment of women, youth and children.
- **Regulating social media:** Without contributing to censorship, establishing laws and regulations for social media would allow users to be held accountable for sharing *fake news*. Defining the content that can be posted on social media is even more important, as it drastically influences the population and events in the Sahel.