Interview with BBC Action Media, Tunis, March 18, 2025

Terminated first on six feb and again 26 of feb and they made no reference to eachother, from different sources. First was reactive, mu… misinformation, originated from third party database that described database, a us but not usg, a third party source that tracks gov contracts for clients who are contractors. Start date, end date, size, implementer and brief description, five sentences and opening sentence used the term diversity. Project was to reflect diversity in the Libyan society. I didn’t write that and embassy didn’t write that. We do a lot to make sure different voices are heard but that is security and stabilization bc the south and west need to know eachother. The different elements that could conflict need exposure to eachother. Control f diversity came up though it is not a diversity project. That then appeared as the BBC is implementing a project on Libyan diversity. All of those words are wrong and that is what musk picked up and they say the bbc is funded by usaid. Two minutes of research, we are independent from bbc.

I’m an employee of the bbc, was OTI is part of usaid or not? We are employees of the same entity but bbc action created bc the bbc charter defines carefully what the bbc can or cannot do. But also defines the bbc editorial independence from the gov, it sets down the rules how the bbc can function. If you live in the uk and own a television, you pay 150 pounds to bbc. That money could not be used to understand disinformation flows in Libya. Bc the purpose is to pay for radio and television in uk. So we opened up a charity that allows us to do work like this.

We work with developmental practitioner and define a humanitarian problem and then look at the different audiences or beneficiaries, the different populations in the problem and how they consume media. Look at participation in elections, Libya has flawed attempts in elections.

It is not stratcom until you have the strat. We did survey of 3k ppl across Libya and we asked what media do you consume and what time of day, who are you, and what you feel about the media and do you trust it. And final question, which media would you like to see it on. What it allows us to do is to say how significant are different platforms. Print? 0. Radio, drive time for middle aged men. If public affairs guys offered free airtime on Tuesday afternoon not worth the contract. Tv? Yes, esp during ramadan, big time for drama. Several year

Two years ago drama about two men living the desert, they were clowns and conflict running through the drama were ngos, ngos coming in to destabilize their community and last episode they received blankjets, they open it up and there is star of David. Big media projcts can be influential…

Big finding about social media, solidly dominant, older ppl defimnitely use it but particularly young men and young men with time on their hands. We combine that with a study of attitudes and experiences of mis/disinformation. We study mis and disinformation flows in Libya… to … what … we ask the audience what do you think your receiving and how confident would you know if it was disinformation. Key finding was overconfidence, particularly young men. We asked how confident you in spotting disinformation and others and in Libya the confidence in others was lower and algeria it was steps lower. Then we showed them exampes of disinformation from covid and they were no worse or better so no relationship between …

So we put together a project to learn more. We tried to deepen the study to get more granularity… really helpful to kno… one of the first things we were going to do is… ll

We were going to do a study

Mirsal study was Sept 28, 2024. Mirsal stands for media, integrity and resilience. Word mirsal in Arabic is messenger. Mirsal to be five year project that would have research component, how is the media working, who owns it (they are basically all aligned to Qatar, turkey, Russia). China is still building up its infrastructure. Also look in mis/dis that is flowing, working with undp on studies of what might work or the extent to which things work to counter disinformation.d

El kul is one of the columns, one column research to understand information space and what works to counter it. Inoculation theory, studies with undp showing positive results in Libya of inoculation science to pre-bunk.

Rct, 1k respondents, for computer assisted interviews, they take a small incentive, voice calls, researchers call them, get 45 minutes, asked questions, given a stimulus, a video, that either is intended to counter act flows of disinformation. We then asked ppl whether they feel the following examples … about different manipulation strategieds. Both people given an example of manipulation or not. Given five such examples and asked… may see techniques like this. Media action doing o

May or June will release. So far evidence is it is working. If look at google stuff around the world they are looking at 5-10percent impact. Libya, no digital media literacy at all. Ll… in Libya no prior training…. Statistically significant. Reduces overconfidence, increases the chances it will pause. So we do this research, build on this.. this is for UNDP. Mirasal would have had ability to build on those findings.

Second stream on incubator, we would incubate examples of public interest in digital media literacy. This is findings from undp. You find something works, now we have evidence and reason to do more of it. The incubator would have helped someone dot aht, this provably works but not a silver bullet, how we incubate that prebunking into dramas and curriculum, whole stream of work. Lets give you small grants, keep this going.

Third stream, el kul. El kul started as bbc action project and purpose was to fill the gap in Libya for accurate, impartial public interest media. What is in the public interest is not always immediately interesting to the public. Understanding flows of migration, understanding the upcoming elections, what can be done to combat it, understanding the agreements forming, understanding the risks from sahel, properly analyzed and explained all in the publc interest and no media in Libya that would do such things. That is what el kul is for, to fill that gap and… el kul is media brand, the platform is facebook…. We use facebook as our broadcast tool, we make for facebook video and infographics that go out to very large audiences. El kul has 1.3 million followers on facebook page.

The direct relationship between follower and reach is harder to tell, our job is to interpret the algorithm and the algorithm is to interpet the interest of the user. The main thing is reach and engagement. We would post 35 posts a month on el kul, 20% videos and info graphics and interviews, comedy sketches, 100% original material. We have 25 freelancers across Libya, all former trainees… when british funded project it was a training project. International standards of editorial principels and production quality. They gather the content on public interest… tribes in the south who have reconciled. Very important story for the rest of Libya. No one else would cover it. Not catchy enough for news bait. How did we find out tribes in the south were reconciled or in process. The tribal conflict is cooling and getting back to gether, very important story. So our job is not to go out and say usaid did this, our job is to say ppl of Libya, in Murzek, we find out tribes are reconciling bc we are part of implementing team and we as independent media house send reporter to tell the story to Libya. Our reach on that story would be 50,000 to 750k, possibly over a million on one 90 second video. We make 35… reach 75,000, enagement 15-20k on average. So 3 million to four million reach per month and 300k engagement per month. No silver bullet but quite a big deal. Top five media sites in Libya consistently. We are tiny in comparison, el kul costs 700k per year. Peanutes. Look at the money that turkey and Qatar and Saudi and Russia, I don’t have the data but guys say yea, they are putting in more than that.

So the global fragility act comes along, for stability sake Libya needs examples of trustworthy info that emerge and work at scale, have the media landscape data, work strategically, and allow ppl in Libya to understand eachother. Listening with some level of respect. El kul’s audience listens to eachother with respect. We had to take down very little, Libya is rife with hate speech and doesn’t happen on el kul. We did story on woman peacemaker who resolved conflict. One guy says woman should be home and not involved but no hate speech and a lot of other ppl saying brilliant, go for it lady. Space for debate and catalized by ppl who know how to tell stories. That would be five years and by fifth year it would be an indepdnent entity that could be funded directly without bbc action.

Status? In a 90 day termination phase. It is horrible, stoping a project of that scale on the spot is just brutal but we are in the process… in the terms of Tunisian law, how can we separate ppl fairly but legally and we have to find a way that does not tie us and ourselves in lawsuits. We need to sever clinically and fairly enough. We end the story then, severances go out next week. We are not making el kul content. We had some content already made we post time to time. The dutch were a parallel donor, funding was through December. Reporting for June. So still under contract so can make posts on el kul under the dutch contract.

El kul is creaking the research never went out. No incubator, no research unit.

Zero chance usg changes mind? No, not zero chance. A review looking at it would find mirsal is excellent. We got massive turnover… Libyan market worht 70m in advertising to meta if look at their data and average value per user so pretty big ad market.

Any reaction from other big media?

What are journalists going to do? Extremely important question, we had 8 staff and 25 freelancers who are extremely skilled for the Libyan market in interpreting algorithm, producing content and understand behavioral science. Russia is hiring. China yea, I am sure. China and Russia other geopolitical influencers will hire these people.

Both, throw stuff at wall and see what sticks. That was general langly first question too. I met him two months ago and he said right, we sat in sofa and he said this is why the French thrown out of sahel. They lost social media war and public said throw them out. He asked what makes stuff stick? Algorithm is a black box in meta, so complex, so keep throwing stuff out and see what works. Opening with a smiling face on video, we found that works, but you got to know what time of day.

Mirzuk, we told three videos about an old lady, she was in mirzuk just saying I am at this peace fair run by usaid, I am at this peacefair and I can sell my crafts again. But the face was lovely old lady how she weaves her hats, 500-750k views on each video. Barely edited, just had to be there and find the right person, she had to know you and laugh and smile. We throw stuff out.

Russian stuff not sticking? A lot of stuff sticks, we track it. Right now social media in Libya is saturated with hate speech against migrants. I can’t say aforeign backer but minister of interior is involved in it and a coordinated campaign bc same text and images used repeatedly that suggest coordinated approach. Suggests how migrants ruining Libya. Great displacement theory, how pure bloodine of French blood diluted by migrants. Migrants are subsaharans but here it is Bangladeshis. This is sticking, international ngo supported centers, irc (international refugee comitee), drc (Danish refugee council) (doctors without borders), they are closing their centers this week bc of hate speech. So direct impact of bullets…

We are not in position to know where stuff originates. We see stuff circulating and impact.

Coordinated campaigns can work but they often don’t. we have tracked memes that look dangerous but have no effect, no long term consequence.

We track colors in our infographics. If you do a story. Red does better.

Inoculation in Africa? I don’t think it is a silver bullet, if a 90 second extremely carefully made basedon latest social psych can shift the dial by 5-10 percent. Cambridge keeps boosting. Need to regularly remind ppl that these are the techniques used to trick us.

The mabnipulation technique we are testing this week is scapegoating. Emotional manipulation, very difficult in arab world bc all media is highly emotional. If you show arab audience emotional and factual headlines they don’t recognize the second. So emotional manipulation is harder to explain. Conspiracy theories hard to explain, my concern about prebunking is if you know a specific post is going to go out you can prebunk it effectively. We were told by the media that the Russians wil make it look like Ukraine invaded them. Russia set up the… when you see it it will be … so Russia never did it. If you know the actual post that will come out prebunking is great. If prebunking stratgegies you are in the terrotiroy of crigical thinking. That could be integrated into curriculum, could be interegrated into dramas… you integrate it into mass media, vastly more effective than a stand alone fact checking site. I work in this sector and I don’t follow it. You have to go to it. So you need el kul to be there, doing stories and makes you want to be following it. Digital media lit has to be taken serious and got to support the emergence of public interest media nd you have got to be patient and have years to develop and what could pop out the other side is Libya version of novigazette, won the nobel peace prize three years. Rappler.

My aspiration is that it could emerge as independent truth teller. And for what it is worth, supporting truth telling has bipartisan support. So I don’t think this is about being partisan, it is about impartiality and accuracy.

Look at social psych, talk to countries taking digital media literacy seriously.

Incoming head of el kul, reo. Very canny, he was going to be deputy chief of party, media producer, drama producer, strategist and indpenendent. Worked for 6 weeks before let go.

Moomkin, local ngo that is competent at everything so they do nothing.

One message: mirsal was solidly logical and in line with global fragility act so had a review taken place that looked at the evidence, mirsal would have kept funding. Public affairs could pick up the research component, incubator stand alone project and el kul could be independent media, usaid not actually closed yet. If usaid was to keep 10 percent of projects

Two million a year for five years.

Truying to find short term production, may lose the guys as staff. If I can get money in for production on el kul, the audience won’t forget about us. Y

El kul cultivated since 2013, started as training project, by 2015 el kul created. Was a facebook page for trainees that didn’t have a facebook page. Page will stay inert. Copuld rebuild it and huge loss of momentum.

The research component is a sad loss, but could be reinstated. The incubator could be restarted. But the clock is ticking on el kul. Will lose the team unless restarted in august.

L4?