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We have been doing, working with Jake not a public facing initiative. In depth analytical product, state for activities, covering Iran, China and Russia and over the last year focused on Russia. Reflected Russia the more active state there. Interesting that your piece is focused on Russia, feels myopic when you look at Sahel and west Africa it is a very competitive information landscape. Turkey, Iranian, Chinese influence. Everyone is focused on Russia. They think China is too big and scary. So the moment we have just focused on Russia. **We focus on influence broadly, IO space but also looking at soft diplomacy, grass roots civil society engagement, security influence, Wagner and PMC influence.** Also, based on those analysis what are the opportunities for H and G to do something about that. Jake can speak to strategy around that.

When I look at Sahel. I am not sure mis/dis is most helpful framing of it. **When you see Russian influence being projected, is it integration of junta increasing control of information space and censorship with media and alignment with narrow part of junta and Russian state and then that opens out bc state media channels pro Russian aligned and opens platform for massaging on Ukraine, wager, and aligned with Russian interest**. Africa initiative. What is quite amorphous network of grass rootsy type of influence of NGOs affiliated with junta and some openly coopted by Africa initiative and possibly funded by Russians and you got ppl in western countries funding influence in this space that not talking about publicly. So hard to disentangle who is working for who. Some of these countries… one of messages from Russia we stress, not so much incredibly controlled top down coming from kremlin but setting up system whereby incentives align to support these countries messaging. Both Junta and pro-Russia.

Money is coming from the same place sometimes.

So slightly random reflections on info landscape.

True that with Mali and Niger and BF, in those three states it is controlling info and where it comes from is not clear. Got one way info goes through it, it is reusing narratives that are not necessarily wrong. Obviously anti French narratives, ppl don’t like the French. That is being used by Russia and junta to promote weirder things. **One message is that France stealing everyone’s penises.** Ties to conception of manhood. Came out of central African republic. We call it the **disappearing penises campaign**. Weird things like that but when you go back it is rooted into in…. why disinfo framing is not ideal bc Russian disinformation/messaging often relies on true things. The sentiment is something most ppl can relate to in these countries.

**Russia working with influencers**

It is interesting that over the past years, doing a landscape analysis, you had fairly clear lines well these are pro junta activists. Even in Burkina Faso and Niger, Mali, they all got their influencers. Sometimes set up in really formal groups, the **Transition Influencers**. I can find the name. that one is in Mali, a group set up and big influencers are a part of it. They meet up with certain members of the gov. over the past year suddenly had these ppl start getting coopted into grassroots org that are not grass roots org but set up by Russian NGOs as they present themselves.

**Russian networks in west africa:** Starting BF with African initiative, they started their media org African initiative in Russia and African initiatives set up in Burkina. Set up by a Russian guy, he used to work with Wagner five years before. Victor Vasil or Luka Vanco. Big name on Russian telegram, own channel called smiling wave and he went to set up operation. He cares about Africa in general. On Russian payroll? He says he is not. He is a “humanitarian”. And then you go these other grassroots orgs showing up in Niger and Mali that are officially headed by Malians and Nigerians and Burkina ppl but they have Russian guests and Russian members. In Niger you have l… hand in hand Russia and Niger. (French name). (can send it). And then you have Sahelian perspective in Mali. Same system. Malian guy at the head and some guests that show up. Opaque? They don’t hide themselves so you can follow them. They are employed by the Russian initiative so we know they do work for them. Fairly efficient, they manage to show their faces by we are going to fix this road or give first aid courses in schools and universities. And they speak to local ppl, women and children and that way they make their way into ppl’s homes. What they say in school goes back home. That is interesting development. You have Russian security organization. Assoc… martial arts. Those peppered around and they are mostly dormant but head of organization used to work for the gru. But they go around to different countries doing martial arts and special forces a

You got those orgs peppered round. **In Ghana they started inviting journalists to Russia under African initiative.** They invite different journalists from those countries, definitely Ghana, bf, Mali. Come to Russia we will show you how great they are. They bring them to Ukraine to show great things we are doing. They show how they are helping. And then they come back and have a brand new studio. Ghandi Malian, he is an influencer invited by African initiative to go to Russia. Then he came back to Mali. He had a standing Russian guest on his show that works for African initiative. They enter that sphere. Before you had radio shows but now you have them plugging stuff on popular local stuff disseminated on Facebook and WhatsApp.

What is different, so much of the misdisinfo work done online; the online env plays a disproportionate effect goes beyond its listenership bc stuff gets picked up on WhatsApp and radio. But still the minority of what Russia does. Hard to monitor. Monitoring WhatsApp groups, such a core info flow in the region.

We never think about gender in Russian disinformation. Particularly bc doing it for military. So gendered. Putin is the strong man, masculinity, conflict context where gender norms being challenged and ppl retrenching bc they are not able to provide for families. So looking for conceptions of how to be a man. In the west we have been bad, we see it as something you check off but it is part of what makes them effective. Why macron did black and white pics of him boxing.

Tom: I Ecco a lot of what’s been said. I also do work in west Africa and east Africa. Better to talk about other still democratic states. Those who seem to be relatively prowestern Ghana and Kenya. Specifically Russia but China as well didn’t have a strong foothold and more recently pushing on open doors quite impactful. Even in countries like Nigeria. Russian disinformation is so predictable and frustrating the west is behind. Values. Russia doesn’t care about… take Ghana, through various proxies, managed to put quite a lot of effort into anti gay stuff but pitching that as as west being gay and Russia and China closer aligned to African values, family conservative values. Very powerful in Ghana in way Russia has not had for a while. Nigeria my favorite currently. A lot of chatter following on from Niger, saying they kick out the French colonizers. Of course they weren’t in Nigeria. It doesn’t m… penetrating far into society. Us historical relationship with Africa. A lot to be said about online. Democratic countries very good, free media, Russians pumping huge amounts, RT, but not exclusively. They train journalists on how to report properly on international affairs and provide funding. And obviously talking about… the thing is… the west provides ppl who do a little training and assume they will be self sufficient while media owned by one or two conglomerates. Online radio and others. Other stuff, my particular obsession, their willingness to after much more xx interests. …. They are recruiting very disaffected populations or sometimes protestant and catholic Christians and provide housing and schools and churches. That kind of thing is poorly understood and responded to.

Then when we move away, whether mis/dis doesn’t matter. Influence broadly. Ppl try to disaggregate military, information, civil… all shte same actors.

Primary efforts in Chad, good ex, using Wagner to traffic weapons from uae into Sudan to provide to the RSF. They see it as a much bigger picture.

One of things we tend to do is put in boxes, this what Russians doing and how we will counter. And Russians happy to learn from Chinese. Borrow tactics. So want to counter what they are all doing. Russian spiked up idea of China of whole of society. They get the orphanages, radio stations and anything. Not to push a message but associate good things with their message.

**The Furher never gave orders but set broad conditions for victory. They are not longer doing soviet line but give…. Russian messaging will change from one city to another. By being hyper local and disputes they can adapt quickly and the locals believe the Russians get it. Talking bout issues that matter and ppl think Russians are helping. Over 5-15 years feeling ppl get is that they are listening and the west isn’t.**

**Not being helped by… sense we need to control everything, you have to agree and use strict parameters rather than have more flexible approach. We demand complete uniformity of message. If we support this regime everyone can’t say anything about it. Russia fine to have two different cells attack each other. One gets an anti message and another pro message but come that Russia on their side.**

**Need to do better messaging Aid activities**

In terms of communication type responses. West has been bad in terms of messaging good stuff its done. Look at development investments from west and concrete results on populations are far greater but we are never good talking about . not integrated into aid strategy to … need comms arms to support activities. And how that is helping. Been done really badly.

When we went to Kenya, everyone talking about chinese building a railway, Chinese doing something. Go through Mombasa has words built by ukaid and big thing below. But the uk never talks about that bc also easy to point out that original railway also built by the British and killed 3 ppl miles per mile and it is thousand miles long. Called the lunatic line. Runs next to eh new railway. British never talk about what doing now bc don’t want what they did before.

All sorts of open source could do on Chinese labor abuses, real concrete arms done through community.

They use a different labor source, brought in Chinese ppl so no local ppl got jobs and paid local women… and we don’t put… do open source on what countries doing. Doing it on issues to local populations and not issues. Not to matter to us.

Drone factory, getting African ppl to work there. Alabuga. But if you communicate about it, it is bad bc those drones deployed to Ukraine; Africans won’t care. But if highlight that trafficking underage women to work in unsafe conditions. That is a wedge issue.

It is a macro problem. West thinks if we deliver aid it is great. But we don’t sell the story of it.

Everyone does exposure of kremline interference. I don’t know if they done much damage to Russia yet. Problem with what Russia doing present day is egregious and it shouldn’tb e difficult to engender outrage but its not. The historical is more impactful. We can say what Russia doing well and they can say well what about 200 years ago. It has not been cracked yet. There is this connection of western support to day to day life (not). What macron has come out recently is shocking bad. You should be grateful.

You can be very cynical about it… Russians are for what… those are the kinds of things assumption it needs to be a constant drumbeat about Russia but that is not working. Need very targeted very occasional efforts that resonate on society level. Ppl bc used to it. If everything about Russia is negative that can’t be true.

They also want us to see it is propaganda. Historically in… either VOA known to be us outlet or same four or five NGOs that work with western gov.

**Resilience building?**

**Working with local influencers:** We are doing some stuff b. **Benin and mali hyper focused influencers, comedians, magicians, ppl who run whats app radio.** You manage a WhatsApp group and do a voice note as your broadcast. Very low cost way of doing radio. We are not working messaging but underlying social vulnerabilities that Russia taps into. Say Mali and Benin, Russian message is security is deteriorating and need a strong military response and Russia can provide. Trying to support those voices at the local level. We don’t need another foreign power coming to kill our ppl. Actually there is an alternative we can have and try to fill some of that hyper local info void that exists where disinfo can get projected into with actual positive alternative voices and reinforcing some of those things and build communities. We have our own conflict resolution mechanisms and we don’t need outsiders to help.

**Really long term sustainable support to independent journalist.** Not one offs (we did a training) and now your’re sustainable. DFID very short term funding cycles. One year cycles. Have to have a sustained strategy and need impact over 5-10 year period. Russia has got all network, they got the same ones but invested over them for period of time. Where we cut ppl lose all the time.

If you want to subscribe to a western wire you have to pay a ton of money. But can get that from Russia or China for free. They take wire stories and print them out. The us tried to do a program on this ages ago and had to write an application, jump through 27 hoops and do reporting.

**Build capacity for exposure?** Historically we don’t that a lot. I have a lot times civil society, they have no reach. Civil society very nebulous. But it seemed to be independent think tanks it can be challenging, particularly Africa where grassroots society is legacy or not trusted. Not that it can’t work but need to reframe what we mean. Historically when build counter disinfo you go to journalists, thinktanks and academics and if you don’t do that you have more impact (like the comedian). Academics are resource, they should be.

**Challenge of supporting government c-disinfo capacity?** When it comes to government good experience and bad experience, it is too often political in the wrong way. All disinfo is political, can’t avoid that. UK civil service good at being neutral.

**Risk that it gets politicized?** Yes, even in western countries, it doesn’t mean it can’t be done, it can. But usually through the lens of national security. That is easiest to do. That depoliticizes the message. But the malign actors are agitating domestic issues. Nobody will ever say that Brexit was a Russian info op. But everyone knows they agitated it.

In terms of capacity building a tendency to flag everything … one of things happen routinely bc they… three guys in a shed (who run a blog or whatsapp group) with reach will drop a CCP phase, peaceful reunification, and someone will say this is Chinese outreach but actually three guys doing their best. Then that comes through and proof of the Chinese reach.

We work in local source world and you can find valuable work in open source and in gov side doesn’t seem very good connecting what they hold on classified level with attribution for what is in the open source domain and the combined conclusions you get. Intelligence collection very siloed and if get more integrated… get more difficult info on attribution.

Tom: the real problem is that in Africa, you train ppl, journalism techniques they go and get a better job and you lack sustainability in the institutions. Sometimes they get better paid by Russia and China so all the hard work.

Last 48 hours seeing.

A lot of the organizations relying on that money to do good, independent journalism. Hundred million pounds that will go up.

The anti LGBTIQQ stuff trying to hold.

Donors talking to each other. We found, often an overclassification of this work bc seen as linked to Russian so seen as high risk when the solutions are supporting journalism or influencers and as a result of securitization no one can talk about it and what they are funding. We are monitoring someone funded by the French. And there is a de….

No need to hide that UK investigating Wagner but isn’t that obvious.