**Interview with Chris Runyan, December 9, 2024, Washington, DC**

One ask: to stay in touch.

I have had no SETAF contacts. I spent five weeks at Africom five weeks and used time to reconnect.

This is a bewildering ecosystem of different entities. I am not only willing to participate in some dod SETAF Africom processes I want to participate. If there is going to be an event, an outbrief, a table top, related to this space. Chad conference. Africom runs that show and organizes that. Senior advisor to Africom Mora Barry. She doesn’t track information manipulation closely but I talk with her about it.

I should explain structure wise. We don’t use mis, dis, mal info because it is so toxically political in the United States. I have been part of a house judiciary investigation. So you can imagine the kind of stigma that puts on this work, esp. our term is information manipulation, which I hate bc data scientists manipulate data. The good thing we do in the info space is information integrity and resilience so IIR. I am hearing ppl grumbling at the political level but tik tok is going to be goine and we will use the terms I described.

**USAID Information Resilience Council (do not reference)**

When we use disinformation we pin to a particular actor who uses that technique. We will say Russia disinformation. The other is, we have, we are not public about this, but we have an information resilience council and that is a cross regional cross agency wide global team that tries to look at this. It is a volunteer fire department. So for the last two years we have used that process to bring ppl together at the technical level and sensitize ppl to it.

**Four pillars of USAID Info integrity**

* **Operations**
* **Program working group**
* **Stratcom**
* **External engagement**

**Operations: risks from non-attributable (open season)**

We have never spoken publicly about that entity so do not put that in a report. It is not giggles and someone emails but we have a regular heartbeat of meetings. But we have structured ourselves on four pillars. **One on operations**, four working groups under IRC, that is the **risk that information manipulation creates for our staff directly, for our implementing partners and our beneficiaries who are extremely exposed and have none of the protections of a direct hire**. Whether that is a human rights advocate, journalists, investigative reporters, they are targets and they are exposed. The implementing partner similarly, ppl don’t like what the usaid does so ppl use the information space to push back on that just like any other tool. **So open season on information targeting our ops.** The operations working group is looking at risk to our ppl. We have had staff that were doxed, situations where we have ppl leave post bc of ppl were target of slanderous to physical threats and similarly for implementing partners and beneficiaries. Aid has several convictions in this space. **One that we stand by is that vast majority of info threats we face are not attributable to a top tier strategic competitor. It is local. We are pushing back on corruption, media freedom, clean elections, trying to get a better health system up in place and ppl don’t like that. Most of the ways we find our work is targeted is local sources that don’t have a link to Russia or china.**

**Operations: risks from attributable (Russian)**

We also see threats that come from attributed information that makes it behind a strategic competitor. West Africa has seen a considerable upswing in the last year. That involves aid specifically in west Africa. In some cases the PRC will play a game to amplify that d… Secret information is almost useless. We know and it has been exposed in public that the Russians have a well funded intentional approach to use information to target our interests and usaid is a viable article.

**False narratives target USAID, CDC and Ditra**

Couple articles… in **Feb the WSJ** put an article on usg public health programs in west Africa. Aid and us center for disease controle and ditra we joke that we should get tshirts that say victims bc usually the false narratives will throw the three of us together. These hook to old tropes to usg created hiv aids, we don’t know so keep options open. Why is there a rise in denge fever, bio labs, medicine questions, lots of conspiracies around that stuff. Drip drip drip.

Some interesting capabilities. Ditra (defense threat reduction agency) has created… made a structural decision… Randy Long. The other link, OIOP, office of information operations policy. James Jabanal, we don’t see each other as much as we would like to. Very hard to do this with…. Within dod I consider james and greg johnson as really important counter parts. If I don’t have an Africa specific issue then I usually reach out to oiop. We talk much more about policy, training, capacity, priorities, we have not gotten in a tactical coordination yet. To take io out of a miso silo and to mainstream it with j2 and j5. James has a vision for a broader thing. And I think it is wonderful. We have a young but necessary relationshiop with dod.

**USAID Lacks enterprise wide social media assessment**

First working group operations. One more word, usaid has no enterprise wide media scraping capability. We fly dark and I get tips that include narratives about usaid from ditra bc they have the money and they work to find examples. But it is a wonderful illustration about need to get more organized. We are cheap and we are broke most of the time. I am not going to advocate to buy something capacity wise if other agencies can get this for free. As we engage with dod and others I am still trying to figure out the essential core tools. … it is strategic if everyone is contracting to the same or different org for duplicative capabilities..

Ditra has capability but they are looking for ditra search terms

**Need something specific? Yes, but others in the ia is developing capabilities**. We have not put our money behind this to protect ourselves from an operational perspective and we would need early insight to toxic streams that become physical threats. We have met with contractors and national labs. Is there something out there we like and l

**Monitoring at embassies?**

**Do Chiefs of station monitor country threats?** The way that RSO at embassies or diplomatic security env or chief of station, get threat info, it seems like they are mining specific lanes about terror threats than others and they do get some alerts. We should talk with RSOs and ask, Do you feel you are exposed bc you don’t have the kind of filtering and early warning tools you wish you had? And if you don’t who gives you alerts.

**2nd line: Program working group**

The operational working group space is where most concerned about physical threats. The second is the program working group. What is the role of foreign assistance in this problem set. How and should and if we should use foreign assistance and program money, what is the way in which we can use that resource in this space.

The rise in tech and social media has dramatically changed that space. Our programmatic work which is 99% of budget is out there and exposed to this risk. What can we do to shape the info space so we approach it like a development problem. Free media work, journalist integrity, host country relationships, fact checking, prebunking, debunking, that are not about us but the host country env and the susceptibility of Africans, Asians, to this problem. If that problem is impacting the efficacy of our development work then we want to factor in that info problem to our approach. We are trying to prepare research in this space, we have programs now, done some procurements like implementing partners to build into their work.

**Proinfo -need to find out what this is.**

We announced Proinfo. You will see that described in second summit for democracy. A separate pot of money we created to support integrity and resilience. That is some early work that is happening. Some analysis and workshops and conferences, one in Africa next year.

**AID offices initiate programs on their own.**

Aid is decentralized if we are not screaming at our posts to do something in this space but they recognize it is a problem they will say we can work on it here. So for this first couple of years we have seen some missions just taking the initiative. The sahel regional office in Dakar is regional mission, they issued procurement that will look at info integrity and resilience more deliberately and they dedicated resources to do it.

**USAID STRUCTURE**

The west Africa mission, a regional mission in Accra, the Sahel office is regional office based in Dakar and supervise country reps in Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso and we just recently created a free standing mission for Niger and for years we had free standing mission in Mali and other coastal countries of west Africa. They are twinned like Siera Leon and ghini, (sl falls under gini). We don’t have full missions in all west Africa countries so the Ghana covers cot/, Togo, Benin, Cameroon, we have a full mission … in Accra we have two officers a bilat mission for Ghana and the regional mission. The west Africa regional mission has done work in the info space for a while, they started on that bc of CVE issues so they are less doing this from democracy, rights than from peace while Dakar is looking less from peace and security and more democracy and gov.

**POCs: Susan Abbot and Shannon Mcguire**

We have two ppl in all of aid who have scope very deliberly, focused on info. One is democracy, human rights and gov, Susan Abbot. Shannon Mcguire. Needless to say

That is the programmatic working group. We have seen big uptick of our teams saying hey there is weird toxic stuff in the info space. And some missions have acted independently. That is a dynamic space and we hope to have more best practices and lessons for the field.

There is a reason we under communicate internal…. We are discrete how we talk about this publicly.

**Third is Stratcoms**

Third is stratcoms. This is the age old, is aid tracking negative narratives, are they identifying ones… reputational assault. That gets more in the comms space, Bureau of Legislative and Public Affairs. They don’t have much money or staff capacity. They have been advocating for additional resources to amp up our comms capability. Also and just like the operations ppl they are interested in social media scraping and that is such a total twofer on ops and stratcom.

They are looking and being informed by what state knows… getting us to a better prebunk so if someone deploys these tools they get less purchase. That is the stratcom space. I’m hoping this new threat and how it is metastizing can help us do comms better.\\

**Fourth: external engagement**

Fourth group, external engagement, that line of effort is **we as development agency, recognize staff capacity and systems and what we learn about this threat. We are not going to go off to a retreat and decide how we respond. It will be interacting process working with internal and interagency partners and external partners.** I have been leading that effort to engage with all these different entities to decide couple things. How are they assessing threats and what are the development actors in those gov and what are they thinking about this. I want to inform a development agency approach based on what other develop… if you do scatter plot ppl are all over the place. It is still formative. Bureaucracies move slowly. A lot of other bilateral partners and multilateral foundations but not front line in this space, many have not settled on their convictions. What does this mean for us, is this somebody elses problem, do we have responsibility to build capac ity and what do we as developemtn professionsl should respond.

**International engagement from aid**

I met with the **Germans**, gizd, foreign ministry and I think I got four opinions. They are still trying to figure out from development perspective what is the incumbent responsibility, what frameworks do they want to use. Not like it is zero level, they have worked CT/CVE with us so they know information has created a problem in west Africa and we partner with them in west Africa. Question more broadly, what is your approach to info manipulation. I want to geek out with other development ppl. We have a unique approach. If there is a problem what role do we play. Some donors look and say it is a security issue. We don’t have a role here. They are having these conversations trying to figure out their role.

Bmz, they have a website page that tries to say, we as the German development agency, here are narratives that are false about us. So they tried to debunk false narratives and aid not done this but in other areas they don’t have a cohesive approach. And that reflects German government where different ministers come from different political partners.

The **Brits**, probably the most organized after us, FCDO, has both development and diplomacy and as tribal society they sometimes talk with us. I had a meeting in London with cyber, security, development, comms folks and even within some of those different groups.

The FCDO people, were interested in what we are talking about but they were not introduced other ppl in this space. But they have sophisticated stuff on cyber side, see as operational threat to their work and want to do stratcoms. And they are focused on the fmi.

**TERMINOLOGY**

Terminology, the dni lexicon on foreign malign influence. The lexicon document is the ic effort to create a common terminology so in the ic products use the same words to describe the same phenom. The rest of the agency uses it sometimes but we are not held to use it in a disciplined way like the ic does.

The other thing on terminology. I see strategic competition at the highest level. Within strategic competition there are tools called foreign malign influence, strategic corruption, energy, and information manipulation. The information manipulation fits in …

We also have info manipulation that doesn’t have anything to do with strategic competition. All of the meetings we have with the interagency are around…

We talk about fmi, usaid sometimes is very bullish and overt on how we push back… local part…. We exercise t… so you can imagine how our local partners and host gov would push back on china.

No one talks about … fimi is very much the info part of fmi. Where info manipulation is a broader thing… We should use information manipulation.

**EU**

Other on external engagement, the EU has responded in interested ways, programmatically they are not very organized but stratcom wise they are organized. EU INTPA that is the development assistance agency and that is different than the EU external action service. EU INTPA has leaned into this bc of concerns about threats, they get intel reports so they can see how are we relative to the PRC and what narratives are in this month. And they are becoming more and more informed about info space and sentiment. They built it themselves as a development agency. The EU external action service, is the team that does fimi. They are more in the stratcom space. They are focused on malign actors and top tier strategic competitors and th… it is a good team. They got spun about reputational assaults against the EU in sahel. So they pulled in ppl with security background to protect the eu reputational ops in Africa and globally.

**FRENCH**

French. The gec has very regular contact with the eueas, … French development agency, Afd, they have not really jumped into this as a development issue but they have deferred to French foreign. Ministry and viginum. They have not sought to lean into this as a development issue. AFD made decisions to do more in public private partnership and finance, they have different programmatic approach than usaid. After all the chats, I finished the german conversation, you are two years ahead, brits more close to parity, the EU is organized but not programmatically.

**CANADIANS**

Canadians? They were interested in this from a public health perspective. They were interested in the other development angles. Susan abbot is well informed in this space and getrs to dedicate most of her day to readin about this, she has extensive network. She is a contractor and… she has been doing eval in this space

Another article, malaria disinfo in nyt. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/14/world/africa/russia-africa-disinformation-malaria-.html

The feb wsj did not happen by accident. https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/russian-intelligence-is-pushing-false-claims-of-u-s-biological-testing-in-africa-u-s-says-ea817592

That was not the work of an … huge portion how we respond is assisted when the usg is able to do exposures. The gec has played a valuable role working with intel and others to get stuff declassified so we can demarch gov impacted by this. When it is appropriate to make interagency decision to expose.

Foreign malign influence center is focused on strategic competitors. GEC, dod only compare about strat competition. We experience. Usaid only agency that faces threats from local sources.

A lot of this comes from classified channels. We experience some of these problems and I can’t tell my staff about it. Needless to say, 75% of staff are host country citizens and no clearances at all. When the wsj came out, I walked thru this problem set at conference and walked through wsj findings. But because the exposure happened I was ablt to blowl.

IC structure. The foreign information operations response group. The nwsc chairs that and convenes it. Meets at a sub and an IPC level. The fiorg is where we as agencies can bring concerns and try to evaluate as a group. Staffer, Lauren Protentis and Kate Luries. Both directors, one is the democracy directorate and the other in the resilience directorate.

Resilience reports up the domestic side an…

There is a process on fmi. The fmi group focused on trying to create policy or approaches on fmi as a threat. There is stuff cooking there.

Kahina Robinson, the nsc director for sahel. Both her and molly would want to talk at a classified level.

In west Africa you have complexity and very little insight.

DITRA, GEC, OIOP, J39 africom, fmic, gec, state gpa, global public affairs. Have mike heath give name of state comms.

Fmi ish issue is dealt most ly in the state RPS, Regional Peace and Security Team.

Don’t put in report that only two ppl but we have not hired a battalion of ppl to work on this issue and we have volunteers from all the regional and functional bureasa and I am leading that.

Other person I colead is Vera Zakem and she is a political appointee.

Request for contacts: DITRA (maybe reach out via). GEC? THEY HAVE A PRC AND RUSSIA and a functional team, just somebody in the GEC and navigate the right cocktail. The point person for Africa. Stevie Hamilton at State.

Partnership with gov in cot’voir.

Carrie Gaux. She is a political appointee. She is terrific.

SETAF as

Paris: OECD. Created an info integrity hub and the us participates in that. That was an effort within oecd countries to try to look at this. Development assistance committee. We participate in that pretty strong. I have not seen the world bank get in this space.

Another entity, we work with is the WHO. A huge amount of this in the health space and who has been good and forward leaning. They call it the infodemic, regression analyses. We have teams in our global health… that has been how we … draw on approaches and frameworks.

Who afro is based in congo.

Nato stratcom coe.

This is a multisector problem.

I have never talked with Gates about if they see this as a comms issue.

Even if disinfo effects 5% of aid operations. The impact o that cumulative investment was upended by a bunch of bs. So we have huge stakes in this issue. And similarly but not as many zeros the democracy rights and government space. The ppl most worried about this are the ….

Complex crisis fund in mali…

Jennifer Miller, OSD, Policy, a co-chair of the strategic information working group. Dod centric entity. It is a peer group that gets together.