Participant organization: US Embassy Burkina Faso

1. How are different actors sharing false, malign or harmful forms of information in Burkina Faso? What is the impact of such efforts?

* R1: Many Russian malign actors, Russian trolls. Between 15-30% have internet access. So being an internet troll isn’t very useful here. But it spreads out by word of mouth. Trolls said Malaria initiative was using “Bill Gates Mosquitos”. But that was shut down very quickly by the Minister of Health who came out and said this is not true, don’t listen to it. It was shut down right away. So there is a way to fight back.
* R2: We have issues differentiating ourselves from other actors - from Russia, China, France. Our outreach is limited to just Ougadougou. We cannot reach Burkina Faso outside of the capital. That is a big constraint for us. How can we send a better message about what America is about, what are our interests, etc.
* Jackie: Is it true government has shut down official foreign content on air waves?
* R1: They shut down a lot of the international foreign programming. Jeune Afrique and VOA. Have you heard the whole story?
* Jackie: A little, but please share more.
* R1: A guy was on a talk show and he mistranslated something to where it sounded like the talk show host was complimenting terrorist. Saying that they have courage to do something, instead of what he meant to say, which wasn’t that. This was met with extraordinary umbrage, and they shut down VOA. VOA paid a fine and got back up a week or two ago. But now, they’ve been shut down again from the US side this time.
* Jackie: Are there other actors other than Russia?
* R1: There are rabble-rousers (pro and anti- “Hunta?”) individuals who try to manipulate the narrative. The good thing is that we are not France, so Burkina cares much less about us. Last year we put out a joint statement with EU and said “what a shame there is that there are all these massacres,” and there were protests in front of US Embassy. We’re not really the big player here. It depends on what messages we want to get out. We need to be careful to show we don’t have anything to do with France. Right now we’re getting a lot more support and understanding from the authorities than before. Much better contact.
* Jackie: Have you seen anything from China, Turkey, etc.? Supporting the government, doing their own thing, or…?
* R2: I don’t have an answer or palpable examples, but we are sure China actors are here.

1. In what ways are governments, military and civil society organizations in Libya and West Africa working to counter this? What more can be done in this respect?

* R1: Not much. Except to counter narratives from France. And they’re very involved in the AES states and being a part of that, and against ECOWAS. There is civil society, but it is deeply reined in right now. The unions are very powerful but they’re taking a quiet stance. Everyone is taking things quietly. One organization named “SENS” just had four activists arrested for being anti-government. A lot of people get taken or disappeared to the front lines, so the press is very self-censuring. As is much of the civil society space.
* R2: I agree. You don’t have to do much to counter the disinformation because people are scared to talk. People are very cautious. Those that put out their own narratives, they can get in trouble. If you don’t talk, you don’t face reprisals.

1. In what ways are the U.S. or allied governments working to counter this in Libya/West Africa? How are they working to build institutional capacity in Libya/West Africa?

* R1: There is still journalist training.
* R2: Yes, we did training in Kizep University. We do a lot of outreach to enhance our coordination with them. We did 4 outreach last week in journalist training and education. Education USA, etc. We go out, we try to promote America, we donate books and dictionaries. They are very appreciative of that. We are doing a lot to promote America. We have a big library here – twice a week we receive 70-80 students who come to use our library and our resources that we provide them.
* R1: They have a very professional media corps. But it is under threat now. But not from foreign malign actors. It seems like its tapered off for the foreign malign actors – the bots and the trolls. They’re still around. But if we post something, the positive remarks outweigh the negative remarks by like 95%.

1. What more can the U.S. or allied governments do in this respect?

* R1: That’s a terrible question to ask! (laughter) One of the best things we could do is get into community radio. More VOA type stuff, but more out in the rural communities. Out there is very little internet, but they have radios. Literacy rate is low. We are active in programs, and we are reaching the elites and educated in Ougadougou, but we’re not reaching the ones we want to reach. We’re not reaching the people who would believe the malign influencers.
* R2: I agree. We want our presence known and what we are doing here, we want it known.
* R1: Money is tight, and we can’t get out there. We have some American presence in Ouagadougou and an American corner Bobo Dioulasso and Koudougou, but we can’t go anywhere else. Here, the number one goal of everything is fighting terrorism. Nothing else matters nearly as much. Most people in the country know that the US helps. Especially with France falling out of favor. They trust us WAY more than they trust France. And it is a toss up between us, Russia, and China. Because Russia and China give them what they need and want – arms. We can’t do that. So we’re not as good as partners as we could be if we did some of that. We still do training of gendarme and police. USAID is a brand that is well known here, and liked. They are not negative to us.
* R2: Young population wants to learn English. We need to take that opportunity to engage with them. They are young, they want to learn English, they want to study in the US. Maybe they can’t go there, but we could bring the US to them here. If we could invest more in our exchange programs, that would be great. We had to shut down the application for our library card because we had so many applications. They are so interested to learn about America. We need to explore the young population.
* Jackie: This is interesting. Sounds like there is opportunity for US to increase footprint even if it is a complicated situation.

1. How does the U.S. conduct interagency coordination or inter-government coordination with respect to its policies and operations in Libya/West Africa?

* R1: The interagency here at post is working really well. I think we’re all on one page. As far as disinformation – I know that when the Bill Gates Mosquito thing came out, DC was very concerned, CDC was very concerned. We told them the good news, but the CDC came out anyway to ensure that the rumors were quashed, only to find that they were indeed quashed. I don’t think that lately Burkina Faso is on their radar right now. We just lost the global engagement center, the VOA, all these resources we could be using.
* R2: I began drafting language today about illegal immigration. But I will need to talk to my INS colleagues, because we have to take into account the local situation and how they will receive it. There are videos circulating about illegal immigration coming from DC, but we cannot put those out there as they are. We have to take into account the reality on the terrain. We are gaining popularity. People are following us, they are appreciative of us and the support we are providing. Although the messaging has to be in alignment with our other goals.
* R1: Everything we have been trying to do strategically communications wise has been tossed out the window the last two months. So we’re trying to pivot. Not that it’s wildly different than what we were already doing, but now we are more limited in what we can do, outreach we can do, etc. So it’s a bad time to ask about strategic communications.
* Jackie: We will still put long-time recommendations because they could be used later in the future. So any other recommendations are fine.
* R1: I think we can’t offer any trainings to the military, even English training, due to the restrictions. As far as I know. I’m pretty sure about that. The tragedy about all this is our Ambassador was here from 2006-2009, and they had a vibrant English language program they had up and running. Self-funding through the payment of students. But once she left, it all felt apart. We used to have huge English language programs that were self-funding. Now everything is saying “you should do English language training!” Well, we used to, and it worked great, and we said it worked great and we shouldn’t get rid of it.
* R1: Russia has Russian language training, etc.
* R2: I believe they are doing much more than us. And that’s very dangerous you know.
* Jackie: Have we seen any language/cultural stuff from China?
* R1: I think there’s been some cultural things but no language program as far as I know.
* R2: I do not know either, but will look into it for my own curiosity. We welcomed some traditional chiefs a while back, and culture and tradition is so big in Burkina Faso. If we can reach those traditional chiefs in rural communities would be huge. That would be so good for our image.

1. Who else should we speak to?
   1. R1: Have you talked to other Embassies?
   2. Jackie: Not yet.
   3. R1: That would be a good idea. You could talk to a journalist here. But I don’t know if that would be wise.