Participant name: Roselene, Silas, and Maxime

Participant organization: DUBAWA

**Introductions:**

* ***Roselene***: Thank you for considering us for this. It’s good to know that our work is recognized and noticed. We have a verification project for West Africa, In-Depth [?] headquartered in Nigeria. We also work on other West African countries – in Liberia, Gambia.
* ***Maxime***: I work on the same team. We are working on the expansion of projects to other countries. Both in terms of offices and ongoing projects – Senegal, Cot D’Ivoire, Chad, Mali – and the rest. I will send a link.
* ***Silas***: I conducted detailed investigations and open-source analysis. I also lead a team at Digital Technology Artificial Intelligence and Information Disorder Analysis Centre (DAIDAC). We do media effect research, disinformation research, and open-source analysis in terms of media and disinformation. Silas spoke on a panel at the summit.

**Question: We are doing a study on Ghana as one of our case countries but are also interested in another West African country. What are your information threats more broadly?**

* ***Silas***:
  + It is very hard to disclose disinformation landscape. To disclose information landscape in Western Africa – it is very difficult to talk country by country. We have an open border system in West Africa. This is a source of many issues that are the same across Western Africa many issues are the same.
  + A particularly large amount of disinformation was here during the elections. I saw a massive influx of disinformation. We say 120 [?] campaigns within the first days of elections.
  + In Ghana, we saw the use of coordinated disinformation campaigns on Twitter. It was a scheme. A group of people was using AI to create tweets to demonize one candidate. It was very well coordinated. But I cannot link it to FIMI. It was so sophisticated. I have not seen anything like that before.
  + [Glorification?] of military governments. We saw how Burkina Faso and Mali are portrayed with disinformation attached – power and prowess. That also showed up in Ghana. When [some politician] came, I saw young people shouting on the streets; people were celebrating his visit. It’s an oxymoron. We celebrate democracy, but young people are going on the streets shouting [against democracy]. Disinformation threatens democratic stability.
  + There is propaganda to portray authoritarian governments as a way forward. There have been instances when local men, influencers are using local languages to speak about this – spreading gallant images of authoritarianism. I saw a few campaigns on TikTok that we have been tracking.
  + Ghana shares a border with Burkina Faso – open border system. There are messages that what is happening in Burkina Faso is cool.
  + We saw people in Nigeria picking up Russian flags and celebrating. It was a coordinated effort. Some of the online guys were spreading this narrative. They were paid to do these things. We asked a question – why did people become interested in this in Northern Nigeria and not in the Southern? Northern Nigeria shares border with Niger. There is an affection with people on the other side of the border – they did it there, why can’t we do it here.
  + We need to find a new word to describe this. This is not disinformation. This is more like propaganda that trickles in from Nigeria. If this current President didn’t win in Ghana, something terrible would happen. People say if Nigeria can protest, Kenya can protest, and we can too.
  + Actors continue to pop up from nowhere. In Ghana, local influencers are recruited to join the Russian army. Young men were taken abroad to join the war. They are crying; they want to go back. There is a glorification of Putin. They use AI to show Putin fighting, shirtless in the snow. It has a psychological impact on how young men see that.
  + On foreign influence, the Russian Army, through Wagner, is trying to influence young people in this regard. It is very dynamic in Ghana,
  + Three types of disinformation in the Sahel region: 1) disinformation threatening democracy, 2) disinformation praising authoritarian government, and 3) disinformation portraying violence as the only way to get our voices out there. The only way to be heard is to take arms.

**Question: You mentioned domestic threats. But is there a concern about domestic actors being influenced by foreign actors as well? Russia has been active. How about other countries – China, Turkey?**

* ***Silas***:
  + Definitely. It’s not just China or Turkey. I also saw it from Saudi Arabia. Ghanaians have higher religious tolerance. We can have a Christian dating a Muslim. You cannot see it elsewhere. [Somebody from Saudi Arabia] came and was talking about religious reawakening in Ghana. They don’t just send materials. They send money.
  + In Burkina Faso, a journalist said that the Saudis are sending money to build a mosque.
  + Turkey is not doing information warfare. It is very subtle because of economy.
  + China has a lot of influence on Ghana. On TikTok, Ghanaians speak Chinese and make content in Chinese. They are admired by other Ghanaians. China was able to use that and get more people to do that.
  + I spoke with someone in Nigeria. There are a lot of apps powered by China in Nigeria. It might not look like foreign influence, but it is. But you take young people, and it keeps going round.
  + China fact-checking – a lot of Nigerian journalists have been invited.
  + I don’t have a problem with China, Russia. I have a problem when someone tries to manipulate people. It is very brazen like in Niger with Russian flags. In Nigeria, Chinese and Russian flags. Other countries might have their foothold too, but they are not so brazen. There is a lot more visibility of Russia – a lot of Telegram groups. There is an African Initiative Ghana – a lot of conversations. Other domestic actors. On the northern border of Ghana, there is an encroachment of terrorist groups from Burkina Faso. There are successor groups. A lot of stories like that that can be linked with Russia. Russia is trying to push them.
  + Terrorist groups, networks of terrorist groups are influencing young people to join. How this recruitment is made – you block this place and then a new one appears. They [gamify] – how many people can you kill? Religion is beautified.
  + A lot of money is floating in TikTok. It is dangerous. There are cases of local influencers who were interested in other issues are not linked with foreign influence but then they do it.

**Question: Are they doing it for ideological reasons or for money?**

* ***Silas***:
  + Both. Popular Ghanaian celebrity who is famous, prides himself in Ghana songs – is doing for both. [?] floats disinformation recruiting people to join him.
  + A story I wrote last year about protest in Nigeria. Local influencers paid people to wave these flags, show content on TikTok – this is serious. Money came from the African initiative.
  + But it is also financial. Economy is harsh, government is making harsh political decisions. But we cannon say just because of economic reasons. There has to be emotional connection as well.

**Question: what can be done about this?**

* ***Silas***:
  + Highlighting the problem helps us find the solution. First and most important is to be able to clearly track these things. We put out a report saying this is happening. Then we can get to a point to this. We have a lot of reports.
  + Empower journalists. We have been training local, rural journalists across West Africa, training them in digital tools.
  + We had a 6-month fellowship to train journalists in OSINT tools. This is not a popular issue. People are tracking climate and gender. Disinformation is not something interesting. We need to empower journalists.
  + A lot of media and info literacy campaigns. I traveled to six states in Nigeria to talk to 10- to 15-year-olds in school about media. This is important as when the influence comes, it’s not the people in high places who protest. It is the young people who show up to do these things. We do a lot of media literacy.
  + Try to diversify our content in different languages. It is important as language is not just communication; it is context, it is friendship. When people are greeted in their language, we’ve seen that it works – in Twi, in French, Ewe, English, Arabic (?).
  + Work closely with radio stations. We have weekly radio program in Ghana in local language in tri. It has been really effective.
  + How we leverage new tech – we created a WhatsApp chatbot. People can verify information and get a response. The feed to chatbot comes from our publication, reports, and analysis. So it’s not like ChatGPT. It’s called Dubawa audio. It helps journalists to track disinformation on radio. People lie on the radio and people don’t track that. Our tool is built in a way that it can understand Ghana's accent and Nigerian's accent. The tool transcribes the audio and can highlight fakes. We had almost 5 thousand users in one week. Digital tech – they can help us expand across Africa.
* ***Roselena***:
  + For the past few years, we have been working with tech companies, especially Meta, to move beyond our platform to Meta. It is still running in Africa, even though it is no longer in the U.S., so we are fact-checking on FB.
  + The government has been fighting disinformation – we have the “Right to Information” law. It has given fact-checkers the ability to access relevant information. The platform gets relevant information for our work.
  + Cybersecurity Act – [KH: I didn’t catch whether it will be or was] – Electronic Communications Act – criminalized spread of false information online.
  + Perhaps, we might have a stricter law to punish disinformation. But nothing concrete yet.
  + The government has been pushing for education, public awareness, and national communication for civic education, educating young people on its dangers and how to become fact-checkers. The government’s actions were quite prominent during the election. We didn’t see much outside of elections.
  + Capabity-building for media, other civic sectors.
* ***Maxime***:
  + I want to highlight this particularly because we also identified that the role of influencers is important in this spread. Last year, we were the resource for people to train influencers to share information responsibly during the US election. Dubawa was the resource to facilitate these trainings in addition to other stakeholders. We were bridging the gap between information sharing and how influencers can do it.
  + We are very big on this as we are pro-democracy. One of the tools that acknowledge and promote elections – big on any intervention – is that we have a region-wide election strategy. To ensure in whatever country – credible information, we work with security agencies, the union of journalists, local journalists. We ensure there is credible, transparent information that would enhance peace and stability.

**Q: you have a transcribing tool on the radio – is it important in rural parts? How developed is the tool?**

* ***Silas***:
  + Dubawa Audio works in 3 dimensions. First, you can upload your own external radio and ask it to highlight false information. You can get it from anywhere, from YouTube. The tool transcribes and highlights the parts. A lot has been fed into this tool. You should check that. For example, a politician was in office in 2011 and says I did this good thing. The data is then fed into the app in the form of questions. So it changes the data into questions – did X build a road when he came into the office? Fact-checkers can find out whether he actually did it. Before this, he would just say it, and it would be in passing. Nobody would know.
  + Second, you can put in live tracking of certain radio stations. When you come, you will have a transcribed program already.
  + Third, our tool is helping journalists to transcribe African accents. A lot of media use our tool for their transcription. Western tools are adapted to American, European English. So some journalists use our tool just for transcription. We will share a link to the tool.

**Q: Ghana has a law but in some countries it is abused, e.g. to arrest political opponents.**

* ***Roselene***:
  + We have not seen such abuses of the law in Ghana. I cannot recall any instances. Some arrests have been made, but they were warranted. During COVID, there was one gentleman, I can’t recall his name, who was arrested by the police, arresting fear among his audience. I have not seen any abuse.
* ***Silas***:
  + I have to give context. Jackie inferred that it was not just abuse but also the fact that there was a law.
  + In Nigeria, there is a cybercrime act. Ghana is really ahead in terms of countering regional disinformation. The cybercrime act in Nigeria is if you try to scam someone online. But nothing that talks about an abuse of online disinformation. If someone does it, it is tied to some old law. If you say the government is bad, they say it is a prison for you.
  + Last month, I sat down with a committee of human rights of the parliament. They said we need to regulate media. I didn’t agree – we should not regulate social media. The problem is that we need to make clear the consequences of disinformation. But they don’t want to talk about this if they use social media for their benefit – to win elections. We need to bring experts, think how to define disinformation – but they don’t want this. In Nigeria, when you say something to the powerful, they will tie it to something existing. They don’t care if people have business – not tied to disinformation – they would say it’s treason.

**Q: How can countries like the US support your work?**

* ***Roselene***:
  + Top of the list is funding support. The work of fact-checking is tedious. We need much more to make the level of impact we need. The ability to expand our teams is key. We can build on existing ones but have a more widespread reach.
  + In terms of expertise – more and developing applications. More tweets. Building on these things. Funding is key. Support is key.
  + I don’t know what the U.S. government can do to help solidify support in tech companies. They are largely used in spreading, so helping these platforms to understand how important the work of a fact checker is.
  + We have been getting support from other countries for fact-checking. Sometimes the funding is limited, so there is always room for more. If more of that could come, it would be amazing. We appreciate what is coming already.
* ***Silas***:
  + You see the dynamics playing out with disinformation. Attention to disinformation in Africa is once in a while. I see that the US and the UK don’t create a lot of opportunities for journalists to have extensive training. One year of school for journalists, a fellowship would give them a lot of understanding. I keep thinking there are a lot of opportunities for journalist exposure so they would understand the program. You have to have it look serious. Real engagement to help, you understand. It is not a wide case. People say – interesting, but.
* ***Maxime***:
  + The influencing is changing a lot, changing people’s behavior, decision-making. The US embassy is already keen on it. One of the things is we are trying to gather intelligence, why people are doing what they do. We need a lot more research done. We need a lot more work, especially in Ghana. It looks like a niche. Not as overt as in other countries – we need to understand what is happening and why it is happening.
  + Another thing is to unite people against these threats. We need media literacy in Ghana and capacity building for a diversity of stakeholders. Other governments are not as savvy to these things as people on the ground can be. But they are not as aware of the threat.
  + We need to have more robust immunization and more robust stakeholder support. We are a big one. We need something like a media and disinformation festival to bring people together.
  + I cannot emphasize enough the importance of transferring knowledge. The US embassy can come and do it. But we have the privilege of language and context. We are moving toward direction more – using local languages to influence people.
  + Biggest threat – disinformation always financial motivation, before any emotion. If people invest more in spreading influence, we need to educate influencers that there is more that your getting than money. They are shaping ideologies. We need to work with local languages. What we currently have, materials, are online. But many of these readers cannot read or even access online.
  + One of the interventions we had is the tool – radio remains the African preferred mode of communication. We need more work with local languages. We would be glad to have your support.

**Q: Who are your biggest supporters?**

* ***Maxime***:
  + US embassy was a major supporter.
  + For election work, we had the German embassy.
  + Also, during the election, we had tech companies like TikTok to help influencers responsibly share information.
  + NED also supports our work on training journalists on OSINT and fact-checking; set a fact-checking desk – not just true or false but also the networks of behavior. That cycled out.

**Q: Can you give an example of Chinese influence like you mentioned before people waving Russian flags**

* ***Silas***:
  + You have to understand that Russia and China have distinct methods. Russia is more about manipulation. China is more about economically investing. All streetlights in Abuja were completed with Chinese aid. China has a more direct approach to institutions, particularly in the North.
  + There are Chinese institutions in Ghana. Unlike Russia, China sells culture. They do this by investing. China doesn’t try to disrupt the government or economy. China’s benefit is economical.
  + I had a friend who went to China for a conference on fact-checking. A lot of investment in Ghana and Nigeria to study in China.
  + China is patient. They invest a lot. You can hardly even know why they do it. In Sierra Leone, China built a whole airport. You see Chinese taking money. See influence in Zambia.
  + Media and information – Chinese TV is free for Africans. CGTN is free to air for Africa. NYT, CNN – you have to pay. In villages and communities, if they have a TV, they can connect to cable and watch CGTN because it is free.
  + The effect is not in waving Chinese flags. It is more direct. They are building for long-term, more economic gain. Softer policies would direct people to buy more cars from China and influence the government to have ties.