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Participant organization: Media Foundation for West Africa

**Introductions:**

* I am a program manager for the independent journalism project of the Media Foundation for West Africa.
* Media Foundation traditionally focused on freedom of expression, press freedom, access to information, and digital rights. It worked on the intersection of media freedom and human rights.
* Broadened the scope to include independent journalism.
* Fact-checking work - monitoring disinformation, producing fact-check reports, building the capacity of media press rooms, politicians, and journalists.
* Investigative, more like forensic work – strictly investigative journalism. We focus mostly on the inside of the country.
* Media Foundation for West Africa works across Western African countries, such as Mali, Guinea. These countries are pulling away from West Africa. I can tell you a bit about landscapes, but my work has broadly focused on Ghana.

**What are your biggest information threats?**

* In Ghana, in contrast to neighboring countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, Benin, Togo, and even Nigeria, the threat is largely domestic. We have a very vibrant media landscape – over 500 active radio stations, and about 200 inactive. This is the data for the end of 2023. It might be even more now. 220+ TV stations, 150[?] are “free to air”, multiple news websites.
* A lot of the media is owned by politicians. They aim to use these platforms to extend ideological, for the purposes of their political aspirations, sometimes, to launder their image. We tend to have a lot of disinformation coming through traditional media houses.
* The biggest threats come from social media. Many groups access social media. The speed of broadband increased. Now we have 5G, a few years ago we had 4G, 3G. Now it is easy for people to spread information.
* In 1992-1993, when Ghana returned to liberal democracy – the media landscape developed. But we have no legislation and no media establishment to deal with the digital age. We are also doing so little on TV, radio.
* Extended reality, AI are coming up. We have very little regulatory framework – a lot of things to try. A lot of the time, we have to rely on legislation when media platforms were not established. We try to use the legislation from that time to deal with today.
* Landscape – every [?] do anything with TV, radio.
* Media platforms are suffering. There is no financial sustainability. Funding issues for media support, like USAID, are contributing to weakening the media
* Journalists are the poorest paid in the country. This makes them the most vulnerable.
* The greatest threat – domestic actors, politicians, political parties, apparatchiks of the political parties.
* Also, influencers – people with large numbers of social media followers – social media, traditional.
* Religions – largely, threats are domestic.
* But we have seen the emergence of malign actors – foreign actors coming up here. Very isolated, not really mainstream – you have to pay attention [to notice]. Largely, the threat is domestic.

**Can you give me an example of how these domestic threats unfold?**

* Politicians – win political power. They come with campaigns and misleading media.
* Ahead of the election – published a report on an influence campaign regarding opinion polls before the elections, forecasting. They participated in the campaigns like that. A poll was established, and it was shared in the media that the ruling party was going to win the election. They attempted to create a bandwagon effect – present it as a decided trend.
* Second, [there have been] reports in terms of targeting of narratives around LGBTQ in Ghana. Ahead of elections in Ghana – Ghana parliament passed a law against LGBT – both parties use these narratives. [80 percent?] of the Ghana population dislikes homosexuality. If anyone appears to like it, they will not win elections. For LGBT – able to promote human rights. It puts the queer communities or people who are perceived to be LGBTQ in harm’s way.
* In terms of the actors and domestic actors – during COVID-19, people were using narratives around COVID, people who are salesmen for herbal medicine, spreading [narratives] to buy their product. They present them as a cure.
* Religions – also around COVID-19, some promoting anti-vax narratives.
* All are domestic actors.

**Factors making the population susceptible and vulnerable**

* Non-literate people [are the most vulnerable]. Having at least some amount of literacy helps you read and understand how empty the message is. If you are not literate, you depend on others [to tell you what the message is]. A lot of information is in English. English is an official language in Ghana.
* The non-literate population tends to be aged. Ghana is very young. About 70-80 percent of our population is very young, in their 20s or below 30. 40 and up – a lot of them are not literate. Reading and understanding – also not very savvy with digital [tools]. Some of the lame and mundane information – but they could fall into it.
* Religious people are susceptible, especially [to narratives] coming from religious leaders, mixed with spiritual interpretation. They say something is coming from above, and it makes it difficult for the people to rethink it and raise issues about that. We have a lot of religious leaders [spreading disinformation] during COVID-19.
* In terms of politics – stronghold, diehard supporters of political parties are very susceptible. The interests of their parties and leaders make it difficult for them to challenge, question, and verify the information. Those are very susceptible.

**Tell me more about your work**

* We do fact-checking of media and information literacy. We build literacy and capacity of journalists, newsrooms, media workers, students from the university, even high school, and the general public – we do it through radio.
* We have media literacy content, sometimes reproduced in the local language – not literate, not savvy with the internet.
* We break down the media literacy into simple messages and translate it into local languages:
  + Hausa, Ewe – spoken in Ghana and Togo
  + Khi [?] is in the North, and Dagbani is also in the North.
  + Gha – in capital.
* Targeting the people who are most vulnerable, so they can get the reports of the fact-checking.
* A lot of our work is fact-checking. We conduct a survey of the media and look through the media for those issues.
* Sometimes we do a full-blown investigation to identify trends. For example, with LGBT, I published a report exposing people who are behind it, their strategies, tactics, and implications of their activities.
* Platform – all the training, disinformation, fact-checking,
* [The Fourth Estate](https://thefourthestategh.com/) is investigative work – the biggest investigative work for the countries, some [of the findings] are still in conversation [talked about].
* The Ghana government is using the database of the country, and money is paid to people who do not exist. For example, the National Youth Service Program – for people who have finished tertiary education, they spend one year in youth services – government payments. Officers added non-existent people to the database and added these payments. Then the money can be redirected. We investigated it, and the president called for an investigation. The state attorney gave a briefing – how they invited all top politicians and will start prosecution very soon.
* On the side of training, we build capacities of journalists, anti-corruption crusaders, civil society activities – trends we have seen on corruption, graft issues. We have a fellowship program for young journalists who want to be investigative journalists – select young, promising journalists and build their capacities through workshops and field training, so they can produce critical reports.

**What is the government doing to counter the information threats?**

* The government is lackluster on disinformation – not so much interest in conversation. Even if they appear to have an interest, bureaucracies caught up. no outcome.
* Big conference that the government held – I didn’t attend. Those who spread disinformation want to discuss the disinformation. This is by the politicians.
* We made a lot of proposals to the government. We developed a national media framework of disinformation with the previous government, which didn’t go beyond the cabinet. We brought a lot of policy suggestions – but…
* Ghana must pass a broadcasting bill – how TV stations should go about producing information, how do we ensure that the media is protected from partisan, political, and business influence. Bills like this have been on the shelf for decades.
* The government pays lip service, and nothing has been done about it. Recently, the communications minister said he would want to pass a law to deal with disinformation, only because his photo in parliament on the first floor appeared online showed him scrolling his phone. Somebody imposed pornography on his screen and made it look like he was watching pornography in parliament. He was really upset. He wanted to make sure laws are passed to deal with people who spread [information like this].
* But this is not a genuine way to address the problem – going forward, people who are perceived to spread disinformation are punished. Not consistent with UNESCO regulations. UNESCO says that if you want to regulate conversations on disinformation and misinformation, it has to be geared toward protecting human rights and freedom. But I see a push from the minister – a law used to jail people who share or are perceived to share [disinformation].
* [We have seen in other] West African states that the governments have passed what they consider big news laws and weaponized them. We see it happening across Africa – when a conversation – laws are supposed to protect but have been weaponized against journalists. Laid back, even if suggestions are given, it takes forever [for the government]. People who are in government don’t want to address this program.

**Who about other countries – malign actors:**

* Sometimes we see a lot of interest from Russia in Ghana, even before the war in Ukraine. In 2020, ahead of U.S. elections, Meta shut down Facebook, and then Twitter closed accounts deemed to be engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior connected to Russia’s Internet Research Agency. One platform – EBLA – “Eliminating Barriers to the Liberation of Africa” – this was linked to civil society in Ghana but operated toward the U.S. to disrupt the election. A U.S. journalist came to a journalist trained in Russia in 2020.
* In 2023, a group of young men wearing Wagner t-shirts in the western part of the country protested. Later, we looked into it. It came from a Telegram channel of Aussie Cossack – a Russian influencer based in Australia, who runs the Telegram page pushing pro-Russian, anti-Western narratives. [He does it] across the world, and some in West Africa.
* In 2023, ECOWAS threatened to use force against Malian, Guinean, and Burkina -countries that relinquished power from democracies to return legitimate governments who had been overthrown. This was in Guinea-Bissau, I think, maybe Mali – one of them – a protest wave across West Africa sponsored by Cossack. Young men went to protests against ECOWAS's interference. It was a page for Russian flags and Wagner t-shirts to print. [Young people] went to the streets and protested. Immediately, [they were detained and] court processes [started]. Since then, we have suspicions that Ghana has been a center where these disaffected actors are hiding. We have not seen in a clear or visible way how they are going to this election – they were waiting to see how things play out. We didn’t see anything that would be an attempt to influence the election. But from Burkina Faso, the narratives are overflowing. You may not see Russian narratives promoting Russia. But narratives promoting military leaders of Burkina Faso, Afropopulism, anti-West, and anti-France. I am currently working on a report [on a narrative] about Traore paying university students while they get jobs after school. It is not true. Some of the narratives pushing the Russian leader – they threw out France and embraced Russia, and since then, the country has been moving forward. There was a narrative about Traore asking people not to hang pictures of him. Instead, he asked public officials to put portraits of their family members, as in this way, they would constantly be reminded of the need to build [a good society for them]. But he did not say that. It was Ukrainian President Zelensky who said that in 2019, when he was sworn in as president. Zelensky. Narratives that Iran wants to build mosques but he [?] said you have to build schools, classrooms instead, are also false.
* It is not Russia coming here to promote, but it’s the overflow, stories that are pushing the narrative that military leaders are doing well after they overthrew the democratically elected leaders. They build certain narratives – maybe we can also do the same, maybe military leaders [are better], democracy is not the way, not the standard here as it is in the West. Trends like this are beginning.

**How about China?**

* [laughing]
* It is a very fine line again. China is really integrated here. PRC is one of our biggest partners. We owe China a lot of money.
* We see China pop up everywhere. Illegal mining – we call it galamsey. Some of the people, foreigners who come with heavy machinery, are Chinese. I don’t think it is an issue of information manipulation. But they are influencing the country, the leadership,
* When they catch people illegally mining, the court jails them, but the previous and current governments are not interested in dealing with the Chinese. If you break a law in Ghana – Chinese, American, or anyone else– you should be put in court, and if found guilty, jailed. If the country wants to repatriate them [after they have been sentenced], that’s fine. The government says no. This is a declaration by the interior minister.
* China weaved so fine into the activities, it's difficult to say
* A lot of influencers are employed by them, also journalists. They pick some of the finest journalists to work for them. There is Chinese TV here – CGTN.

**What are your future plans?**

* First, we will continue to work full-blown on media and disinformation. We plan to move into rural communities. These hinterlands, real targets – do not speak English, only local languages.
* Our work is too focused on English and the elite. But disinformation finds its way to the depths of the country.
* Pro-military narratives, Afropopulism – military leaders present, anti-Western
* Even today, we heard from a state-owned media that the newly elected [Namibia?] president sent about 50 Americans out of the country – not true
* Usual investigation, publish stories.

**What can the U.S. and other donor countries do?**

* First, we still need to do a lot more work on media literacy. Educating people about what is really happening in the local language.
* A lot of videos have been published over time. share. We need to build more capacity. We need to educate people on these issues.
* Build more capacity for schools, universities, high schools – before it catches up. Fund the work of fact-checkers, investigate.
* Rise of authoritarianism, decline of democracy – affects the work of a lot of independent media. Politicians are occupying the work of all media. Hard to find independent media.
* The public does not get free information. They are directed to the narratives.
* Support independent journalists – not just for Ghana, all the other places – Mali, Burkina Faso have money to keep quiet the independent journalists -if we don’t support.
* Narratives on anti-West, anti-France, anti-US, pro-Russia, and pro-China will continue to rage. A dire impact on the return of democracy.