Participant name: **Zoë Robson** (Deputy Political Counsellor), **Duke Mensah** (country-based member of staff and ex-broadcaster)

Participant organization: British High Commission, Accra

**Introductions**

* **Zoe**
  + I’ve been in Ghana for the past three years. I’m working on external relations, but it is a busy team, so I found myself working on human rights, domestic politics, and elections.
  + It is important for the UK to stay neutral. We are supporting stabilization efforts and institutions but are not involved in politics.
  + Mixture of policies – programs leading up to the elections on governance. We provide a lot of lobbying instructions.
  + Different parts of the mission are more pronounced in information – misinformation and disinformation.
  + Clara is a government adviser, 8 years, more work with governance.
* **Duke**
  + I work on the same team. I am a political advisor – parliamentary work, judiciary.
  + Overlaps a lot with the focus on domestic policies and human rights.
  + I have a background in disinformation and misinformation. Before working at the Commission, I worked in the media – TV and radio.

**Can you give us your overview of the situation?**

* **Zoe**
  + In a misinformation/disinformation space, over the past few years – disruptive role.
  + We work on improving good governance, media, and institutions to have regulations.
  + Media Foundation for West Africa, a CSO, published a report. I’m not sure it is publicly available, but it was publicly presented – not for attribution!
  + They are looking at the past few years. Its qualitative work – interviews – in several regions: Accra, Ashanti and Savannah. They wanted to understand the challenges in information. There is no information on individuals or narratives. But they look across sectors – increasing polarization, trends.
  + External actors – the report is quite light on that. They spread regionally – China and Russia. There is not much evidence of China spreading disinformation here. They wanted to find it. We funded three organizations – the UK Government Communication Service was in the lead.
  + During the elections, they looked for external influences. I will ask if I have permission to share this. They expected to see more evidence for external influence. It was more a quantitative approach – analysis of social media.
  + Overall trends – rife in disinformation and misinformation – but these are not trends in strategic.
  + In 2020, a Russian troll farm was doing its operations from Nigeria.
  + On the more pragmatic side, we are involved in training. We trained journalists in 2023-2024. Also, civil society. Over the past year, we have worked more with the electoral commission and the peace council – it was the Government Communication Service. We worked on upskilling them, helping them to identify misinformation and disinformation and strengthen their capacity.
  + External actors – we were interested. There are two Chinese think tanks operating here. They are mostly China-funded. There is very little evidence, it is mostly anecdotal. They pump out material about China here and often write op-eds.
  + But China’s influence is mostly economic. They moved to political – China funds construction of an annex of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ghana – this is not something the UK can do. They are increasing their scholarships. There are strong economic relations. Chinese are more interested in normative soft power.
* **Duke**
  + The media landscape has become more mature. Until 1996, media in Ghana was government-owned. There was only one public broadcaster.
  + Under the current constitution, there is media freedom and pluralism of media. We have [96?] private media companies – close to 50 TV stations, close to 500 radio stations. A lot of online media. Anybody can do a blog, go on social media.
  + Trends of misinformation and disinformation – alarming. If we look at the domestic and political situation, there are new forms of controlling the narratives. We have seen it in the past elections a lot. People don’t read beyond the headlines. Also, people lack the sophistication to understand the information. They don’t know how to verify the source. These are two factors contributing to disinformation.
  + Both parties use media as a new war front. They both have their social media armies. They invest in social media. They are doing these cards, flyers – for example, a photo of a minister and his words. They clone them. People don’t even understand that this might be an outright falsehood just to elicit some reactions. They made doctored videos – muffed mouth, voice. It is totally manufactured. It is going on so much. People have been arrested for working on troll farms – it is similar here in Ghana before the 2020 elections.
  + In 2024 – main instrument of political parties, political warfare – social media. It plays a big role. All youth are on social media.
  + Media houses have fact-checking desks. There are dedicated fact-checking websites. Civil society organizations, media foundations have fact-checking projects. They track what has been said and put out their rebuttal with that information crossed out to counter misinformation and disinformation. There is a coalition of fact-checkers – Ghana Fact – that was working before the elections.
  + There is such a proliferation of this that media now has to design itself in such a way that they can dismiss news that doesn’t come from them. They have to do it to maintain their credibility – quickly issue debunking of fake news.
  + Political actors have been doing that. Bad news spreads faster, especially for some issues.
  + National Media Commission is supposed to regulate content. They have funding. There are two regulators in Ghana. The National Media Commission mostly regulates content, programs, video etc. National Media Authority has a role in more technical aspects – they issue spectrum, regulate tech. Both are underfunded and don’t have enough resources. They have not been able to catch up with the disinformation. They can only cry foul. Because of that, they are powerless even though they are in the constitution.
  + Media houses are fighting disinformation. They are trying to keep their reputation.
  + People are not aware; they hide behind false identities.
  + Discussions of the law to regulate social media. But it leads to the discussion of media freedom. In other countries, the government would just shut off the internet in case of protests. It is a very fine line.
  + Disinformation is moving faster than regulation. There are also tensions in certain places across Sahel – a lot. Burkina Faso disinformation gets out. There are followers of the regime here in Ghana. People think that they are doing better. During the presidential inauguration, the loudest cheer was for their leader – for a non-democratic leader. They painted this glorifying picture – foreign malign actors. It has a long-term effect. People start thinking that democracy is not working.
* **Zoe**
  + Incentive for spreading disinformation – the population is economically vulnerable. There are financial incentives. There were reports of pro-Russian protests in Takrwa. It was reported that there was a large crowd. We called people who are in the region. There were only a few people, and they were almost immediately arrested. So, there was not much, but a lot of noise.
  + Media houses – a fine line. They are incentivized not to fact-check. Some are owned by politicians and are used to propagate.
  + In Ghana, the context is different from others. There is economic vulnerability, government issues.
* **Duke**
  + Generally, across the world, anybody can create a blog. They seek value, it provides a possibility to monetize the content – for clicks, subscription. They make money out of deceiving as it brings higher reward.
* **Zoe**
  + Pertinent point about young people. We had a misinformation/disinformation conference with the former government. We made assumptions that people are interested. But there was one influencer who said she did not care whether the content she was pushing was true. She is interested in what is driving the engagement.
  + There is cross-party interest – in government and opposition – in recognizing that it is a problem. But there is a balancing of that with risks like internet shutdown. Politicians are interested in spreading the narratives about the issues.

**Can you tell me more about the foreign?**

* **Duke**
  + Brought in Wagner group. It is not clear how influential they have been since Prigozhin died. But they were very influential when he was here. In return for their work, that they dealt with the jihadi, they had access to gold mining. They were pushing this narrative.
  + Russia works in this region. People’s frustration with the democracy. Young people are voting and voting again, but they are not getting anything. The image of democracy.
* **Zoe**
  + I can follow up more on that. If you are asking how we can track, I don’t have that level of detail. We made assumptions based on what we observed on the political side. There are pro-Russian narratives, we can recognize the signature.
  + There is a Center for Information Resilience working; they have teams.

**Can you tell me more specifically about your work?**

* **Zoe**
  + Media literacy – I don’t know how much of that is funded by us. Media Foundation for West Africa is doing media literacy.
  + We funded the training of 75 journalists and 25 prominent social media influencers. It was in 2023-2024. We were funding it.
  + Media Foundation – runs programs in Accra but also spreads out in other parts of the country.
  + We try to be open about the programs we run.

**Is there any coordination among the donors?**

* **Zoe**
  + I need to defer to Clara. The Media Foundation is well established, and Clara knows more.
  + On the subject of governance, I’m not sure there is a platform on which we can coordinate.
  + Interest in doing more [coordination] – led by the Germans – Media Freedom Coalition – Ghana is a member – doing some work.
  + We work with the government of Ghana – in a way, our work is neutral.
  + Other countries like Canada, Australia.
  + There are so many issues. Different parts of the Mission might be working with.
  + Other embassies – The EU is interested in the space. Also, US. These are the two major players.

**What are your plans?**

* + The UK aid budget has been reduced to 0.3%. we have a freeze on spending. Not on programs that have already been running.
  + What it might mean potentially – the programs might be centrally managed. There will be less ability to be on the ground.
  + *[KH asked for a clarification on that}* It means that we’ll have bilateral programs administered by us but coordinated by the capital. Accountability will be in London teams. These programs are humanitarian – they might be misinformation/disinformation-focused stability programs.

**How is your cooperation with the Ghanaian government going?**

* **Zoe**
  + It is good. We have good access to high level. We had a couple of meetings with ministers or senior people in the communications space. We are still figuring out the right tools – how we empower civil society and also government. I don’t have details of the programs.
* **Duke**
  + The UK government, because of historical reasons, has access. A lot of political elites have some relationship with the UK. They could’ve been educated in the UK. They push the population to accept it.
  + Media freedom: Today, we need to find issues that are not controversial. But the most important issues are typically controversial.
  + The relationship remains warm even though the media freedom index of Ghana went down.
  + Open media – evolution of radio stations.

**Are you targeted in any information campaigns?**

* + Occasionally, there is misleading information. But the High Commissioner here has a strong profile.
  + The UK's role in the election was not perceived as undermining.

**Anything else?**

* + For the UK team, it is important to talk not to us but to a team focused on foreign influence. US or UK embassies can connect you with them.
  + I can put you in touch with Clara, who can give more information.
  + Talk to the Media Foundation for West Africa.