Interviewer: Paul Cormarie

Participant name: Ariel & Jerome Avocentin

Participant organization: CAP Radio FM, La Nation

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1. First Impressions: What struck you as most interesting and insightful about this interview?
   1. They think that perception matters a lot in misinformation.
   2. They think that the “Mercy ship” from the US was a big hit.
   3. The Chinese embassy offers a lot of opportunities for journalists: exchange programs, access to information, etc. which they would not have otherwise.
   4. They really think that allowing a press conference with Benin journalists asking the US army questions on CT would be a big hit. Or otherwise write reports to communicate what’s going on.
   5. Journalist card is a big problem for journalists in Benin. You need to have 5 years of experience of journalism to apply, and you can wait 2 years to get it. If you don’t have a journalist card, you are much more vulnerable to lawsuits.
   6. There was a proposal to set up a pool of funding for journalists to be organized by the French embassy, but the proposal went no where.
2. What political, economic, or development factors in Libya/West Africa enable adversary disinformation or challenge western efforts to build host government capacity for counter disinformation?
   1. False information is spread via the internet and social networks (online sites, WhatsApp, Facebook, Tik Tok, Telegram, Instagram). They are also amplified by “word of mouth” especially in offline families. Some traditional media carry false information.
      1. Ex: Rfi announced Soglo's death in 2005.
   2. -Modus operandi
      1. “Access by the greatest number of people and the uses to which it is put have made all citizens collectors and disseminators of information. This reality has given rise to practices of disseminating information whose sources are not always verified or reliable. The phenomenon has taken on worrying proportions, going as far as imagining facts, constructing imaginary facts or events and relaying them without verification”, Dr. Lucien Batcho, research lecturer in information and communication sciences in Ecosystème des Fake News, by Léonce Gamaï. We've seen several cases where false information was created from scratch.
      2. Ex: the house arrest of Chief of General Staff General Gbaguidi (February 2024).
   3. I would add that there are real facts that are misreported and therefore biased. Or else, these facts are simply hijacked from their real context to prove a point, whatever the cost.
      1. Ex: Statement by Ibrahim Traoré, head of the junta in Burkina Faso, on Benin (July 2024).
   4. ”In some cases, this dubious information can be likened to the lies that spread by word of mouth in our communities”, Léonce Gamaï in his publication Ecosystème de Fake News au Bénin. Allusion made to “received ideas”.
      1. Ex: The woman has 7 ribs and the man 9; The vaccine against covid is to reduce the African population. Or when someone's death coincides with the period of their Covid vaccination, the death is attributed to the Covid 19 vaccine, without palpable proof.
   5. -It should also be noted that many infoxes do not appear ex-nihilo. There is often a context that favors them: elections, political crises, terrorism...
      1. Ex: the deadly May 2019 uprisings in Cotonou.
   6. A government's tendency to hide information can sometimes be fertile ground for fake news. Some say that nature abhors a vacuum. Similarly, the absence of an official response to false information amplifies it even further, and people who are initially skeptical end up believing it, since no one has denied the rumor. And it stays that way until the day they find out otherwise. Ex: rumor about Claudine Talon.
   7. Misinformation can affect any field: politics, health, security and defense, the economy, employment, the environment, and so on.
   8. Actors:
      1. Local: The informational threat comes from political circles of all stripes; from social network users (influencers, media individuals) as well as from citizens with no online presence.
      2. External (Beninese with no connection to a government and Beninese with a connection to a government): There are Beninese who sometimes spread false information. And there are Beninese or Africans in the diaspora with a direct link to a third-party state, who spread false information against the Beninese regime or system, for the benefit of the third-party state. Ex: the case of Kemi Séba (his clear links with ESA countries and Russia).
   9. Infomercials can tarnish a person's or a company's reputation, or even cause the company's revenues to plummet, or endanger the company's employees. It can provoke a popular uprising, armed conflict, electoral violence or even war, with its attendant toll of displaced persons, deaths, injuries, destruction of public or private property and so on.
      1. Ex: The case of the 2019 electoral violence. There were several deaths and injuries among the population and the military.
   10. In the case of Covid-19, this has slowed down the rate of vaccine coverage in several countries, particularly in Africa, including Benin.
3. What existing counter disinformation initiatives (by host or supporting government) did the participant identify? (list)
   1. The government's mechanism for combating this phenomenon is through legislation. There is a legal framework that punishes the authors and co-authors of false information.
   2. The Digital Code prohibits the dissemination of false information. If you are found to be the author or co-author, you will be sent to prison. And it's the Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism (CRIET) that judges those accused of fabricating or relaying false information.
      1. People are afraid of the CRIET because, in the public consciousness, it's a very severe court. For investigations, the Centre National d'Investigations Numérique is in charge. This is a super-powerful government body that tracks down cyber delinquents. Alongside this, they also raise awareness and educate people in digital hygiene. Ex: Tiktokeurs, Influenceurs, Journalists in prison for information “deemed false”.
   3. So in Benin, the dissemination of false information is criminalized. According to a publication by the Media Foundation for West Africa, in 2021, “it has been elevated to the rank of an offence”.
   4. Article 550 al.3 states: “Anyone who initiates or relays false information against a person via social networks or any form of electronic support is punished by a prison sentence of one (01) to six (06) months and a fine of five hundred thousand (500,000) CFA francs to one million (1,000,000) CFA francs, or one of these penalties only”. The penalty is doubled if the victim is vulnerable or has special needs. E.g.: the elderly (senior citizens), pregnant women, etc.
   5. On the civil society side, the focus is on fact-checking and media and digital literacy.
   6. But the practice is not widespread. I know of only three or four media outlets doing fact-checking in Benin at present, whereas the number of media outlets here exceeds a hundred (93 radio stations, tv stations, newspapers, magazines in 2019 + 46 online media in 2023 -Stats. HAAC-).
   7. I'm not against the imprisonment of a man for disseminating false information, but I am against the imprisonment of a journalist in the exercise of his duties. If you can help us sort this out, that would be great.
4. What suggestions did the participant identify for additional programs (either issues that need to be addressed or specific programs that should be implemented)?
   1. Reinforce existing initiatives, initiate others of greater interest, mediate between journalists and the Beninese government to ensure access to fair and reliable information.
   2. US: Training for journalists, exchange programs, funding of projects to combat information threats, support for newsrooms of all kinds.
5. What other contacts did the interview provide for follow-up interviews?