Leonce Gamai and colleague from Fact checking organization, March 8, 2025, Cotonou.

**Tell me about yourself?** We are Banouto, a media organization, most reputated in Benin. Online media outlet, only online. Launched in 2017. We are now 8 years existence, permanently only investigative journalists. Later on we added fact checking. When we add fact checking we create another website for this. Bonutu, means to investigate for the people. Also Badona (sp?). Means check. So we operate with both websites, investigative journalism and current news and provide training in journalism and fact checking. And other good quality journalism. In addition to writing, we also conduct projects. We apply for grants, get loans. Most of our projects are investigative journalists. We even got grant from USEMB to investigate social security challenges in rural community. We also got grants from other partners for fact checking.

**Where did you get the grants from?** Grant from OEF, for fact checking and fighting disinformation. We got grants in 2019/21/22, OEF. As far as investigative journalism, got funding from us emb and German foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020. To conduct investigative reporting about social economic and security in border areas. Even published some of them as books.

**Capacity building training**

We also provide training civil society organization to improve capacity to fight information threat. We train many of them. As part of our relation in 2021, we provide funding to civil society organization members for how to fight election disinformation.

**Origin story**

What led to fact checking? We started fact checking for two reasons. When we discover it was the new way of doing journalism, more precision and quality journalism. Since we are investigative reporting it was good for us to do fact checking. Second reason, we are starting to notice being affected by information threats. When ppl talk about information threats, the manifestations of the threat, when we noticed we decided to do investigative reporting media and our duty to work to help the community have the rights.

**Information Threats**

**What were the information threats?** Two faces. Local face and an international face, imported face. Local has to do with political battle spreading misinformation and the way of doing politics. That local face… during elections, 2016 election for example it was spread in the country that money was coming from Libya and distributed to politicians and not to population. As far as election. Political actors use disinformation…

Second local face, information threat relating to health issues. During covid spread, there was a lot of misinformation threat around vaccines. Political information threat is not only concerned with elections. Even in normal times, when the news had heavy subjects in the news, for example a politician is being sued. When a controversial topic in the public, info threats are high then. We have in elections, during normal periods and also when there are crises.

**Other health related disinformation?** Not really after the covid but recently gov talks about vaccination against malaria. It was not as controversial than after covid.

**International face?** Is noticed first of all when there are geopolitical issues as we are now witnessing with the west African public opinion almost divided into two regarding international partners. One side pro-USA/Europe and another pro-Russia. Since we have two sides of fighting that is noticed in the information space. Those pro Russia will amplify anything positive from Russia. When it is bad for Russia they don’t amplify. Those pro-western you have those who support US and Europe, France, also have those against the western world.

**To what extent is Russia actively disseminating content?** **Currently it is difficult to give a proportion of extent to which Russia does campaign vs. local bc there is no study that we are ware of conducted which can say if Russia is amplifying its misinformation campaigns.** But what we know and what is on the ground, there is a kind of systematic rejection of anything coming from France. When ppl reject from France they align with Russia. What we can say, we don’t have any proven records or data to say that Russia is conducting these campaigns. In the public opinion ppl are much more disgusted by France.

**Why France?** Due to our story, linked to colonization. New generation think our ancestor deprived of resources by France and issue of currency based in France and France takes a percentage of our economy.

**China?** What we notice so far is that we have not noticed any massive online campaigns, massive online opinions backing up China. What we notice is China has fellowship grants to some journalists, some influential media actors, to go to China to see how they work. Once those ppl come back, they become brand ambassador for China.

From what we observe, China’s way of influencing information is not oriented to denigrate others. More oriented to showcase China as model of development that African countries can use. So common to see ppl say we can copy China, we had the same level of development in the 1980s with China in west Africa. But now… same level of development, China in African countries were all under developed. Now China seen as developed countries so ppl think China is the model.

So ppl think instead of copy the western world we should copy china.

**Impact of cut off of USAID money?** Yes, obviously because one of the pillars of US influence in our country is aid development which goes to the states but also local communities financing projects on the ground. Access to water project, media projectS, work projects, development projects. So when there is no more programs and they are cut off, those local community the benefic… resilience can go to other partners. If there is any offer coming from China they will take it, if from another country, France, Germany, Russia, they will take it so the US will leave a hole. At same time a part of public opinion is opportunity for us to gain more sovereignty bc having the possibility to fund itself to fund access to water and other things is a matter of independence. So public opinion is divided as far as this is concerned.

China, one side of its influence is not linked to media. For example, trade that much more notice ppl organzing trip to China to see products manufactured in China so they buy and come here to sell and they have facilities to organize those trip. Chinese governments help make the trips happen. Population consuming more Chinese products creating a soft power affection. Which means tomorrow if any geopolitical tension between US and China, and ppl have to choose a side, they will choose the Chinese side. They much more feel China in their life than US in their life.

**Recommendations**

**What needs to happen?**

**Capacity building**

To keep on helping media, building the capacity, human and technological and financial capacity in order to strengthen the power as media institutions. Second, to improve the trust of ppl in the media. When the trust is affected, they are much more capacity for media to be more responsible, there is a debate going on how to fund fact checking initiative. Find ways to provide funding. Also, look at information actors on social media. In addition to media professional, you have new information actors that ppl call influencers online who influence the perception that ppl have on issues so if want to do anything to address information threats need to integrate those information actors.

**How integrate influencers?** Through training (train ppl how to use social media responsibly). Apart from that we have to build media capacity. We have to make sure we provide media with programs and systems to enable them to have funding and organization as business, to make money on the market. We also have to do media literacy programming. How to consume information. Also need to train and educate the population.

**How can the US better communicate to those in Benin?**

We also have to make political actors and politicians accountable as far as information threat. As we said earlier, some of them use disinfo as means to politics so we need to sensitize them and identify how threats for disinformation is. The other we need to do is work for accountability in public programs, the gov has to be accountable by improving access to the information to the population. When we don’t have access to information to information we believe (false information)..

**Benin Government comms**

**How well does government communicate?** The gov does communicates but here we are accountability. When a road is somewhere the population needs to know the amount of the road, where money comes from.

**Did gov counter disinformation during pandemic?** During the pandemic, the information was available; the gov created a platform where ppl could go and get information. Messages in local languages, whatsapp, how to prevent virus and what to do when you get a case.

First of all, the disinformation around corona was not local, there was this international debate about vaccines and it caught here. Measures taken by the gov which made ppl reluctant, was it something real or just fabricated. For ex, during the pandemic, to travel you need to get vaccinate to travel by plane and take a test and the test was not free of charge and ppl notice that the cost of the test was higher in Benin than higher countries.

**US Communications**

How can USG communicate to counterweight China? Yes communication is a problem. Communication issues, you know media organizations function as business so if you ask them to showcase any project results, they will ask for money to pay for that. Bc you are advertising. But what we notice is that funding program by USG, there is no budget for communication, no line for media project to publicize the project. So make sure there is a line in the budget to showcase the results of the projects through media to pay adds.

**Opportunity of Donald Trump**

Second thing is, Donald trump is like an opportunity for the US. Bc a larger part of public opinion see themselves in Donald trump’s speech. (like Donald talking to them). In some of the topics they have the same position as Donald trump. Like gender, we are still a conservative community so much more receptive to president like Donald trump, no more LGBTQ, more receptive than those who say you need to promote human rights. So Donald Trump is an opportunity. Earlier on, a part of the public opinion see what DT doing to make them more responsible, seeing that ok I am cutting funds, so looking at it that way so he is an opportunity to change the perception of the public opinion.

**Security Comms**

Ppl want much more concrete and sustainable results as far as security challenges are concerned. For example, until last year US had a military base in Niger but ppl did not understand why there is a US military base. At the same time, terror groups still spreading in that region of the continent. So … ppl think when US has a base in Niger they think the US has to help Niger but terrorism is not ending. Same thing in France, you have your country and base (or maybe just a training mission bc there is no French base in Benin) and you are not ending terrorism. If you have your

Would you welcome a US military base in Benin? No base in Benin, [Not for the US, France, Russia], not for anybody. 10 years ago it was possible.

You can help us face the risk…

**Us military support to Benin military?** Yes, they do that. People like that. But what ppl are expecting is providing our countries with right military materials. If you train them and don’t provide them with right material than we will criticize that. So need to add right material, like drones. Another thing ppl do, people wonder, what they heard is some terrorism more equipped than the armies of our countries. So ppl wonder where those terrorists get material from. They think they get the material, some ppl think, super powers like US and France provide material to terrorists. So even if you provide training… we don’t have military industries in our countries. (The argument here is that terrorists have military weapons, Benin does not make such weapons, only the great powers so they must get the weapons from the great powers like US, Europe or Russia).

How can the US military best publicize its efforts? Is not to be focused on the action but on the results on the impacts. So make sure the actions you are doing are giving good results. The impact is end of terrorism. So if the US is providing training, you said you provide training, one or two weeks later ppl hear a terror attack in a remote area this means the US support is not sufficient. So need to look at sufficiency of the quality you are doing is good. Other thing is to be transparent. We want to do training. Before doing the… if you want to provide equipment you need to say that. There has been that controversy last year that French military base in north of our country, but on social media ppl suspected there was a France base bc when ppl started talking about that, the government said no, France does not have a base but we had some instructurs coming from France to train our military. But they should have publicized the French presence before. Of course the military don’t

**Social media ads, a good way to do that?** Yes, but have to make sure of results. Take Mali, in 2012 when France started its military operation in Mali, it was approved by the opinion of the population. France coming to rescue us. But 10 years later, security threat was always there. It means ppl approved the action but the result was not as good. So even now if US help Benin gov but if a year later, in spite of your help [security gets worse or there are terror attacks]… ppl will say the US is not a good partner for us.

First of all, as far as military is concerned. The result for west Africans, not just Benin, at end of the day, will our country succeed in putting an end to terrorism.

Todd says that will make ppl comfortable 100% with any us intervention. Of course, in medium to long term… other is to ensure that ppl are having the right military capabilities to face the situation on the ground. Where terrorism shows is different between our countries (US and Benin). In Benin you see terror org occupying whole part of the country. Here it is not an attempt, as far as showcasing efforts in the realm of development, make your media … give fellowship to go to local areas to do feature story about the impacts of development.

Recommended contact:

Walnep. Civil society. They do peace building.

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