Interview with Mahoussi Wenceslas, Academic, March 9, 2025, Cotonou, Benin

**Background**

He had doctorate in Paris on the science of information and communication. On practice of media and information. And that is how he approaches questions of disinformation. He is lecturer at local university. Six years talking about disinformation in the country thanks to a grant of the us embassy. He was a consultant and training on three projects. He trains local activists to track and monitor false information on social media. So he is looking into how disinformation is made in different local languages. The misinterpretation of information happens in the interpretation often.

Questions.

**Information environment: Role of mis-translations**

He does not know if foreign actors use translation as means of disinformation. So he is doing project for Benito, financed by OIF. Limits of fact checking. A linguistic limitations in fact checking. Local actors don’t know if misinformed by translation or actual facts being transmitted. Example, the waitress when asking what we wanted to have she asked her in her own language and we knew what she said but we didn’t know word for word what she asked us. There are biases on google translate when you translate and it does not give acutrate tone.

Ah its mainly through social … disinformation online and in the physical space. So in the physical world it happens in kiosks, word to mouth and social gatherings.

A term where in the village a public space where ppl gather and that is where false information can also spread.

Spreads afterword on WhatsApp and Facebook and TikTok.

Forums on WhatsApp specifically only by voice and not text so they don’t have to read

There is young people and artisan and private sector ppl that spread information. The motorcycles we see all over the place that serve as taxis they also spread misinformation.

They participate in misinfo bc they want to show ppl they are informed but they don’t know.

**Intentional?** No, just based on what they read.

**Actors intentionally spreading false?** Political actors, both side, opposition and government.

**Political disinformation and foreign websites**

The government spreads its own information. The opposition fabricates info to have the gov react to that so they can speak on matters they don’t want to talk about. Russia, kemeseba suggested there are military bases in the country. A few months ago there was a rumors that the president was captured by military forces two- three months ago when it used fake news, images from the us to spread information of a car chase. Ppl believed it? Yes.

Websites created in the US. A problem. The height of…height of authority for audio visual comms regulates that some websites cannot be created in Benin so they are created abroad. Some conditions in which you can’t create information websites. There is a bunch of websites exist outside of Benin. All of the websites created on April 2023. He will send the links. They are on multiple topics. We don’t know who is behind it. Potential foreign transmission but we don’t know who it is.

**Government role in media space**

The government disabled six months ago six hundred accounts on TikTok. The national censure for digital investigations which is the authority that banned all the TikTok accounts that cooperates with higher authority we talked about earlier, regulation of communication authority that regulates what websites can be published in Benin. The data privacy authority. All of those cooperate to regulate and monitor from gov side the fake news. How effective? No. they organize, had a meeting a week ago on all 4 authorities to regulate their processes. Trying to change their model from preventive model to tracking way of looking at all the actors in the information space.

He thinks it is a good way.

**POC at the government?** We need to try to talk at the ministry of digital. He can connect us with the director.

**China – Travel to China; China will fill in US gaps**

**What is China doing?** China is not active in this space. They created a network of journalists that go to China and it is a passive way to spread disinformation. He has not found evidence that China is behind misinformation, always other actors but he thinks that had he been in the field before he could have looked into covid to see if China produced info to their advantage.

They offer opportunity so it helps China’s image in the country. What opportunity? The political parties go travel in China, the journalists also go to China. The agricultural farmers also go to China, students, exchange programs.

**More than us and Europe?** Much more. They go for one months, two months.

**Why does China do this?** In his opinion they are trying to prepare the field for further influence.

**How compare with US retracting from foreign affairs?** He thinks China will impose itself. As example, as Americans when we travel here we don’t know who to talk to but China who has been preparing the field would know who to talk to. They have closer ties with the military, they give rifles to the military.

China preparing to jump in (to replace US footprint and support). impact will be negative. They don’t know China or their intentions or what they want. It is a local saying to say they are scared their economic investments is to profit themselves and not local actors.

**Perceptions of US**

**How is us military perceived?** There is some affections for France. For France he does not know for the us, ppl don’t like France.

Trump, anti-gay, they love it but they are ambiguous about USAID. They like Trump.

**USAID?** There are a lot of ppl unhappy who are partners with USAID and … so brutal, the direct and brutal effect of USAID being dismantled was negative perceived.

**Know contacts fired by USAID?** He can connect us.

This contact, we are going to talk to her now, there is a project she put him on. … project been maintained, the rest gone, he is working on one project. The brutal end that had the negative perception, not really a self-reliance narrative that is there. More on brutality was negative factor for image and scared people about funding for projects that will no longer will exist and other actors that will step in.

What other actors? Russia and China. France. Turkey.

**What might China do?** China is going to give grants now. It is his belief. Russia probably too. He says it is possible Russia and China could collaborate bc they have seen a lot of projects…

**Russia/Chinese collaboration?** So they have done that in the past, financing of narratives in their favor. Russia financed kemesaba. He says it is a fact. Is

**What is the best way to counter kemesaba?** He sees him as smart guy and done university teaching and he is a professional who knows what he is doing. The only one who has been countering him is the spokesperson of the government.

One influencer opposed kemeseba. (provided his name) They are rivals to be the official opposition in politics.

**MEDIA LITERACY**

**Training, social media education?** Some programs on media literacy but not much. This year the gov of Benin introduced in schools the question of digital literacy to help ppl.

Six months ago, he did 3-4 cities to talk about media and literacy but limited action, not much. Those classes he tried to introduce digital literacy but it was not organized well and not very successful.

Cot d’v is very advanced on this. So he is going to keep on working with a few folks with digital literacy for media training. That is his organization, which is an association of journalists.

**ROLE OF GOVERNMENT POLICY REFORM**

**Recommendations?** Same answer every time. A judicial response, the digital code we mentioned earlier, it is article 550, which he, it is the law we mentioned earlier where they put ppl prosecuted for spreading false information.

Technological recommendation that has implications for how some websites are incentivized to be created outside the country. So basically not restrain that but restrain the influence that some accounts that are made abroad when you domestically can’t do the same. Problem is the agency we described earlier, they have the ability to restrain domestic websites so they should be able to do it all across the board (e.g., restrain foreign websites). The gov is trying to see what it is about and who is spreading.

And improve media literacy and put in schools to train ppl about the news.

The gov did the first recommendation, the second they are working on bd they are concerned by cyber delinquency and cyber crime and they launched a program for the third (media literacy) one, so they are working on all three.

Need to involve university, NGO and to a general level and not just local. They need to do a national program.

Only the OIF that finances his work on media literacy. And another sponsor is CFE a French organization. The francophone international organization that finances most of those projects. They also finance projects in Burundi and cot.

The Germans too. The Germans are asking the same questions as us.

A report online about disinformation during covid we should check out.

Education? The gov made cyber crime a priority and they are trying, digital media literacy is their priority.

Fact checking baunuto. They5