Interviewer: with academic fact checker ([dialimpa@gmail.com](mailto:dialimpa@gmail.com)), phone interview, **Threat**

* Turn around western narratives, specifically the French narrative. In many sahel countries like mali, niger, burkina faso. But seeing the same trends in other countries like Cot and Senegal, Benin and what happens is we can observe a sort of **peak of disinformation during what I can call breaking news**. For example, when there was elections in Senegal last year, I observed many activities around Senegal, content disseminated on social media. Senegal will take distance from France, etc. Say France is trying to have close ties with Russia. So I think basically these are the main trends and
* we can also see some tensions between **disinformation and topics or even narratives when it comes to countries facing armed conflict**, like mali, niger, bf, where most of trends around allegations of support of France for terror groups. In other countries like Senegal, benin, cot, influence of France or political activities or influence on government so these are some of the trends.
* At the same time there is also, how to say it, in response the way how French government framing all the trends or disinformation activities as Russian influence. I won’t say it is not true **but I think when observing what happening in sahel I would say there is a sort of overstatement of Russian influence** that can be a mistake in how to influence. Not that there is no Russian influence but I think it is overstated.
  + Say more about overstatement? What I mean by overstated is that in my opinion I have this impression that any disinformation campaign. We have the tendency to label Russian influence as from Moscow. I have impression it is a bandwagon effect. Maybe there is a sort of, we may neglect … some activist organizations, some ppl who are active in disinformation can say this is trending now so even in the demonstrations there are random guys who come with Russian flag and researcher see it as Russian influence without having evidence that Russia is behind it. Maybe the organizers, ok, Russia is trending, lets put in Russia and maybe more successful. **As researchers ppl need to be very careful in labeling everything as Russian influence. To dig in and try to have more evidence**. Ppl can have their own agenda, maybe if we mix it with Russian content it can be successful. I am not sure all the things labeled as Russian influence are Russian influence.
* **China**,
  + we are in Abidjan so doing field research trying to understand Chinese influence. Could you detail more of description of Chinese strategy \
  + I will say the domain that I would say I know the best which is the ?? what I see what china is doing there, it can be quite insightful in terms of trying to understand how the influence works and what kind of strategies they have. For instance, **China do not have any media outlet or in Africa a few years ago but now they have a few of them. Their press agency Xuanet (xinua), they have china presence in Senegal. Two stations. One in Dakar. So this new trend in last 20 years…** they …
  + They also try to do is selecting some journalists working for state owned media. Bring them to china as correspondent of state media. Invite journalists to cover the communist party yearly congress. It is for them it is presented as a way to immerse the journalists on china culture and china way of life. really soft influence but pushing journalists to see china with different eyes. You can come as a journalist to report on china as you like but at the end of the day some things you can’t cover and all is prepared.
  + share content with the national daily, content from china. So that is one of the strategies I have observed for many years, collaborating with state owned media, state content, bringing journalists to china, they base there and work for at leat one year. So they do that for many years. In Senegal they do it with the national daily called, La Sole, the sun. they doing this for many years and sharing content… share equipment and now more and more having media in the field in Africa. Radio stations in some African countries, one in yemen/niger. Satellite tv broadcasting programs in French and English. I also think they are sending more and more media scholars in some conferences in Africa. I have met some Chinese journalist and scholars I attended last August in Tanzania.
  + They have cultural centers in many African big cities, one in Dakar, confuscious center.

So quickly this is how I can present the themes. And add that I also have the impression that less focus in other, in the influence coming from other countries that labeled as disinformation coming from turkey, china or even though these countries very different strategies. But if we are to be interested in context of foreign influence we have to look at how all these actors how they are pushing the narrative and in which way they are doing it.

**Your work?**

I am a journalist. I still work sometimes as journalists but I have academic background, doing phd in oslo university and focus of my work in disinformation and fact checking. I worked for many years as fact checker, leading team of african check, the first fact checking org in Africa. Working around disinformation since sept 2022, doing phd. Focusing on Ethiopia and Mali, studying disinformation conflicts.

**Fact checking in Africa is growing**

**Fact checking is now getting momentum in Africa. We are having more and more fact checking organizations established in the continent**, Africa check started activities in Africa, south Africa and now it has offices in Nairobi, Lagos, Senegal. Office I was leading since I left to go do my phd. So it is growing with having different organization around the countries, different fact checking in Nigeria, Dubawa. And I have observed that some of them trying to adapt to local context. When started in the continent, they started copy pasting what has been done in western countries where it started. In the way this org understood that there is a need to adapt to the local context. Like how to adapt digital tools to reach a wider context, using whatsapp to reach ppl who do not have access to websites or can’t read in French. And content in local languages. Adding media literacy activities and see how that works with fact checking. Fact checking more on reaction in content and how to have a proactive strategy to anticipate and educate the ppl with media literacy. So many are doing this kind of activity.

**Challenge of poor fact checking**

At the same time, I also have the.. a sort of rush on fact checking, everyone wants fact checking, lots of funding, so can be a backlash bc ppl getting in fact checking without a serious offer or strong content and if you dn’t have strong content it can backlash.

Strong content? Fact **checking report with reliable sources, more informative than just dismissing what is said, should be about helping ppl access reliable information. It is not just that. I think it is required to have more skills to do research, storytelling skills. Media literacy should be used component of countering disinformation strategies and having strategy about that. If no connection with the local context you may be doing this job for nothing.**

**Value of regional approach with local context**

Having a pan African approach is good bc I think fact checking is a global issue but take example of sahel to be more effective in the sahel against disinformation, collaboration is important. When you are having the same trends of disinformation around the region, mali, bf, when you observe when it comes to security issues you have the same trends of disinformation so collaboration is very important. Acting locally is important is important but having regional collaboration is important.

**Value of networks**

How strong are networks? On a contintental level, the collaboration strategies started a few years ago, created network called Africa fact. What they do is have annual conference on challenges, new strategies and possibility of collaboration. It is networking, Africa fact is not for all these organizations to work together but a way of networking. They could share ideas for fact checking work, ideas for networking, training opportunities. Having skills to do this work is important and really understanding what disinformation is about. So there is a sort of better networking, working on training possibilities. In francophone Africa they also created one, as a prolongation of Africa fact. It is platform for fact checkers, Africa-francophone. Thy have collaboration opportunites between different organizations. They run activities around media literacy, now to collaborate with media. Looking at way to work with community radio, the media that talk to more ppl. Mainstream media is good but they are elite media so community radios are very important.

**Work with social media influencers: Media literacy, raise awareness of disinformation**

Something not done so far, there is a way how to work with influence on social media. Social media influencers, a lot of them sharing content and social media, a way to think about how to work with some of them. How? Try to have media literacy activities, they cannot be ignored in fact against information when it comes to use social media. Some of them can be involved in media lit activities, awareness raising campaign about disinformation. How to be sure they won’t share disinformation in the content they are sharing with audience. Maybe not all will be interested, some go and work on media literacy activities, talking with audience about disinformation, it can be useful.

**Work with community mediums**

Community mediums are very important tool of communication in many African countries, working with grassroots organizations.

**Risks: Motivations of $ and USEMB support**

Influencer training? One of the strategies. That can be strategy but my experience is see doing everything around grants will attract many people only interested in that money but not everybody like that but my experience you see grants around and everyone will want to work on this and you will not know who is interested.

Other thing I want to flag, how to avoid trap where ppl see that, these ppl are funded by USEMB, they are running us propaganda. We have seen that with all this talk about USAID. So that is why I flag it earlier, this overstatement and over reaction. Ppl may see some activity only a reaction to Russian influence but not a real interest in fighting against actual disinformation. So need to think strategically how to work with these organizations in terms of whether funding them or supporting them.

**Poorly trained fact checkers in benin?**

First about fact checking. I think you are right, I have fact checking backround, run a fact checking organization, I lead it for five years, I have this experience. In Africa check, there is a training part and media literacy training part. So I have interaction with fact checkers who come in later, some we train. I will say some countries or many countries, most of the fact checking orgs have yet to be mature. They do fact checking but if you read the content, they are doing it but sometimes the way they do it the content is not strong. The content they are addressing, some minor topic, if we are not addressing the big issues, the fact checking wont’ be taken serious.

**Recommendations**

Recommend? Ppl need to have **proper training**, **so strengthen the training curriculum and programs, depending on strategies of funders**. That will allow this organ to have skilled ppl. Maybe to really **focus on what I would call harmful disinformation content, disinformation that impacts real life, not just the last trending content on social media**. So need to rethink training but also how fact checking organizations work. Another way is to try, an example in Senegal, where Africa check started to collaborate with school of journalism, **fact checking training of curriculum in journalism training**, that approach is very useful approach and again, I think media literacy is very important. I think that there is two dimensions in fact checking. **Fact checking as a tool and fact checking as an activity. The tools and technique need to be popularized. Some minor verification that everyone who has smart phone can do on social media. That is where media lit work comes in to make this tool public.** If my cousin the village receive my picture on whatsapp he may be able to do some basic verification without waiting for me to do a fact check. So a lot to do and that means fact checking oranizations may more focus on working on very big issues, the biggest narratives the trends.

We need more research on this issues. What I am seeing around, you will see some organization… every organization has its own objective. The research part, coming from the academic world needs to be strengthened to understand local dialects of disinformation.

**Application to China?**

There was another question about china. This one is a bit complicated; I think **china influence is a bit different with no blatant disinformation**. But we used to see what is labeled as Russian disinformation. Where we face concrete evidence of Russian influence is south Africa. Can’t compare with Russian is acting. So there is a need to think strategically about what type of response to give to china in the way they working. But definitely, I think it is important to **promote good journalism**. I think that is definitely important. The media landscape in Africa, including western Africa really changes this last year with the advent of the technology and the media landscape is filled with new media and ultierior media. Now the information is in the digital space but if you look in **west Africa, all the traditional media and most influence traditional media lagging behind in the digital space. They have the best offer in terms of info content but they are not online or popular online.** Popular ones online these are websites created by random guys but big time potential bc they understood potential of info space. In Senegal if do ranking of the most read news websites, the top ten you hardly find historical or traditional media. Like La Sole, xxxxx French), these are the biggest and serious content but if you go online… **so something to do to have serious journalistic content online**, how to do it, need to work in media to go online to have a very good offer online. Try to see some independent media run by good journalists trying to build strong offer online but when trying to do serious things without the means to do that it is very hard to push and to go. For example in Senegal you have west Africa news trying to do strong journalism on internet. Same in some countries on cot, in other countries you have the same. So important to have good journalism in online media and gov.

**Impact?**

I would say that it is very fair criticism, fact checking is reactive. Not only reactive but depending on channel the spread can be good or not. So I think, as I said earlier, the **fact checking work should go together with media literacy work**. Fact checking organizations need to be more innovative in terms of how they share content. Not only publishing article on your website but also see how you can share your content in very various platforms but adapting… if article on website, **maybe do a video on tiktok, something on whatsapp, twitter and facebook and adapting on specificity of that platform.** At the same time, Id give an example, when you do a verification article, **mix fact check and media lit, when fact check verify content, why not put advisory to person reading the next time you come across this content this is how you can verify it.** I read this article and this is what it say about verifying pictures. This article how they say, next time I have a video, this is how I process. This kind of strategy can be useful for the readers.

**Excellent example from Mali: Fact checking on localized whatsapp groups**

When I talk about working with influencers, I have an example in Mali. There is an organization, it is local org called Doniblog, they have platform called Benbere. Platform where they publish blogs and fact checking work. They told me that when they were running activities around the country, they went to remote places and noticed that some young people in remote areas they have whatsapp and create whatsapp group for villages. In the village they have 200 ppl on the whatsapp channel. What young guys do they follow news on different platforms on France international, all the international news outlets, at the end of the day they summarize all the news they have gathered during the day and share on their whatsapp groups and ppl have to pay a fee entry for the month. And when the guys at doniblog approached some young ppl, we want to work with you. When they publish a fact check they share it with young ppl an they include it in the content they sharing. At the same time, they say if you come across content you are not sure of the authenticity, you can send it us we can verify it. So there is a way to build a very broad strategy to see how confront.

**Think about connecting different activities**

… we are interested indoing some actions, fact checkers, **so everyone is working in silo so room to think what can be done when thinking about connecting all these different activites and having broad strategy that can integrate all these different activities**.

What would that broad strategy look like? Lets say, what fact checkers can take from the research world… what the journalism training community gets, **integrate it in journalism training, also learn fron fact checking… on disinformation, how mainstream media can be involved in having integration of information.** How think tanks and funders can be able to benefit from research community to understand local context, so I think it is something that is maybe a brain storming needing to be done to see what effective way to put into place this strategy that can integrate all these different.

Contacts? I have some email addresses for ppl at code for Africa. In ghana there is guy from media information in west Africa doing different type of work supporting independent journalism, fact checking. I used to work with them. Based in accra.

Also an organization in burkina faso, linked with german org, Faco Check. Doing all the work around media literacy, information integration, disinformation. But the head is now based in Senegal bc he was obliged to flee the country.

Afric activist. It is mix of activism, civil society organizations, doing broad work in human rights, disinformation, migrant rights. So in trying to have different perspective on issue worth having conversations.

Nigeria, interesting things in Nigeria with center for innovative journalism and development. They are also doing amazing things around all disinformation, strengthening journalism, trying to create innovative way to do.

Access to information is key to fighting disinformation and a lot of ppl in the region lack access.

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