MALI'S FAKE NEWS ECOSYSTEM

## An Overview

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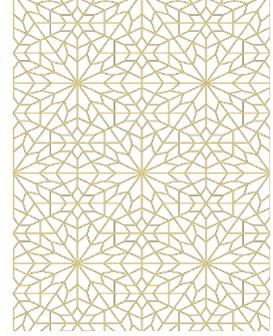
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study aims to better understand key facets of the ecosystem of fake news in Mali. It argues that the deteriorated political context in the country has facilitated the proliferation of fake news. The Malian fake news ecosystem is also thriving in the traditional media which is dominated by the political and economic elite who sponsor narratives to serve their own ends. Four of the top five newspapers in circulation in Mali mid-2021 are privately owned by politicians.

While radio remains the most important source of information in the country, Facebook and WhatsApp are growing in popularity as the main channels for the dissemination of both accurate and misleading information. The possibility to send and receive audio and video communication on WhatsApp and Facebook allows non-literate users to connect, produce, consume, or share content. Fake news circulating on these social media platforms permeates all spheres of offline life by becoming topics of conversation at social and religious gatherings. It is also true that viral social media conversations can shape traditional media content.

The key actors and enablers of fake news include politicians, cultural figures, non-state armed groups and even terrorist organisations. Increasingly 'cyber warriors' are paid to peddle fake news. The impact of these 'cyber conflicts' are felt on the ground. Fake news has contributed to, and exacerbated, community conflict. Crime perpetuated against members of one ethnic group is often attributed to members of another ethnic group leading to retaliation.

There are also some external actors, such as the French military and the Russians, who engage in propaganda and fake news sharing. With the recent decision of the new Malian authorities to sign a contract with Russian private security company, Wagner, fake news related to France military intervention is once again circulating widely.

To address this proliferation of fake news, the Malian government legislated a cybercrime law in 2020. While this law does not explicitly talk about fake news, it provides punishments - including steep fines and jail time - for various offences committed on electronic media. The law also gives the state power to cut or slow down internet access during events deemed as a threat to security such as protests or election. Civil society activists remain skeptical about this legal framework and warn that it may be misused to curb freedom of speech and press freedom. Organised fact-checking media platforms are at a nascent stage although media professionals are becoming more and more aware of the important role it can play in countering fake news.

INTRODUCTION

Mali's last decade has been a period of political uncertainty and change. In January 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA, in French), a Tuareg separatist rebel group attacked Malian military camps in the north of the country, igniting a crisis that continues today. In opposition to the MNLA, Islamist armed groups including the Movement for the Oneness of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO in French), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine emerged.[1] These groups not only took on the MNLA, but they also overpowered the Malian state which lost control of all the north.

On 23 March 2012, while the country was fighting the separatists and Islamists, disgruntled military personnel led a coup and toppled President Amadou Toumani Toure. Under pressure from the international community and Economic Community of West African States, the junta transferred power to a transitional government. In January 2013, at the request of the Malian government France intervened militarily to help re-establish authority. Three months later, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali was deployed. The country was then able to organise elections to bring back democratic elected leadership.[2] But in August 2020, Colonel Assimi Goita led a coup to topple the weak regime of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. A transitional government was put in place, with Colonel Goita serving as vice president. Goita's coup was not unpopular with many Malians who were already protesting the government incapacity to resolve the conflict among other issues and staging strikes about poor public say pay and conditions.[3] Nine months later in May 2021, Goita led another coup, this time against the transitional government, and has since then served as the de facto president of Mali.

The ongoing conflict and political turmoil, along with limited media literacy amongst the general populace, offers fake news the perfect environment to flourish. A recent report by Media Landscape indicates that in Mali, "less than 10% of active journalists are graduates of a journalism school, with obvious consequences on the quality of their work".[4] Malians receive information about the insecurity in their country from various sources including private and public media, government, extremist groups and foreign military spokespersons, and religious leaders. Each of these actors have particular objectives in mind when they share information. It is this plurality of competing sources, coupled with low trust in media and authorities, that provide an ideal environment for misinformation and disinformation to flourish. This situation has contributed to further dividing the Malians into media echo chambers with ethnicity, language, and political views often constituting the boundaries.

1. Ba Oumar. (2020). Contested Meanings: Timbuktu and the prosecution of destruction of cultural heritage as war crimes. African Studies Review,63(4), 743-762.

2. Moseley, W., & Hoffman, B. (2017). Introduction: Hope, Despair, and the Future of Mali. African Studies Review, 60(1), 5-14.

3. Boubacar Sidiki Haidar. (2020). Grève un jour, grèves toujours. Journal du Mali. https://www.journaldumali.com/edito/greve-jour-greves-toujours/

4. Modibo Konate, Expert analyses of the state of media: Mali. Media landscape. https://medialandscapes.org/country/mali

This study draws on the expert view of selected Malian journalists, media commentators, and fact-checkers who shared their understanding and opinions about the extent and impact of fake news. These interviews were conducted over WhatsApp chat and video calls with a snowballing approach used to build out the respondents from two persons first identified. The names of some individuals have been anonymised. These insights were then further examined through a review of relevant literature and media reporting on the issue.

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Misinformation, disinformation and "fake news"

Misinformation involves the spread of falsehoods without a deliberate attempt to mislead whilst disinformation is manipulated narrative or facts— propaganda deliberately intended to mislead. Both are more commonly captured under the term 'fake news', a term used in this report as a catch all term. These kinds of information pose a significant threat to liberal democracy because as they are allowed to spread and flourish, they disinform and misinform people about a range of civic issues from voting to political accountability, and corruption.

Seeking to shape a civic process using falsehoods is not new. Before the internet, people shared disinformation and misinformation through word of mouth and rumour networks, with information spreading slowly from one person to the other before diffusing through communities. Traditional media and propaganda outlets also broadcasted or published news meant to mislead people and promote agendas.

Although the internet did not start the spread of fake news it has further enabled it. The availability of the internet has made it far cheaper and easier to produce and disseminate fake news to a wider audience and much harder to sort fact from fiction. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, alongside messaging applications like WhatsApp, have served as popular conduits. With these platforms enabling people to share a myriad of information in a range of audio, text and visual formats.

Understanding Information Flows

The inherent and structural weakness of mainstream media in Mali together with the failure of the state have coalesced to create an ideal environment for fake news to thrive. The communication ecosystem itself is shifting rapidly and digitalised political communication is increasingly important. Traditional media such as print, radio and television has always been the mouthpiece of the people in power and the economic elite. Although state control of the media is not that strong in Mali - as of mid-2021, four of the top five daily newspapers are privately owned by political actors[5] - editorial influence, driven by private owners' interests remains strong. Both private and public radio and television debates are used to promote a particular narrative, with the so-called 'experts' who appear on discussion programmes often being nothing more than propagandists for a particular individual or party. In the view of one civil society expert many people are sponsored to debate about the conflict on television because they have a strong opinion about it, not because they are experts or because they have credible or new information.[6] It should also be noted that the Malian media landscape remains a heavily male dominated sphere. Women access to media is relatively limited compared with men. However, this trend is slowly changing with the younger generation of women who are joining and expressing themselves in media. Some radio station programming run by women journalists are now contributing to raising awareness about women issues.[7]

In Mali, radio (60%) and television (18%) are still the two primary sources of information according to a 2019 survey.[8] But social media platforms are gaining significance as sources of information and communication channels. Facebook is the main platform where fake news originates from and circulates. According to Internet World Stats, there were 12.4 million internet users, 2 million of those are on Facebook, in Mali as of December 2020.[9] WhatsApp also represents a popular channel for the circulation of fake news. It is particularly popular with people who don't know how to read and write because they can compose and send audio messages. Information is shared through groups that can have up to 256 members. Groups are often dedicated to sharing jokes, information about a specific topic and are based on locality, ethnicity or language. The WhatsApp user-base has grown significantly since 2017 when only 9% reported using it on at least a weekly basis.[10] A similar survey conducted in late 2020 found that figure was now 24%.[11] The study found that content circulating online moves offline too, with 17% of Malians saying that word of mouth was the primary way they heard about news.

5. BBC News (July 2019). Mali Profile https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13881373
6. Key informant Interview with Yahiya Samake, a civil society leader. 2 July 2021.
7. Heywood E., Harding S. (2021) The "Contrôleuse": recognising the role of the "Fixer" in academic and media NGO development partnerships. Development in Practice p.1-13.
8. Kirwin M., Ouedraogo L., Warner J. (2021) "Fake News" in the Sahel: "Afrancaux News," French Counterterrorism, and the Logics of User-Generated Media (Paper under final review).
9. Internet World Stats, Mali. https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#ml
10. Kirwin M., Ouedraogo L., Warner J. (2021) "Fake News" in the Sahel: "Afrancaux News," French Counterterrorism, and the Logics of User-Generated Media (Paper under final review)
11. Ibid.

Word of mouth remains the primary way 17% of Malians hear about news.[12] But the offline and online worlds are not disconnected. Information from social media shapes the conversations at gathering places such as mosques and "grins" - semi-intimate public places which are predominantly and often exclusively male gathering places that are organised based on age.[13] In media terms, grins and mosques constitute perfect echo chambers where the same people with similar friends and access to information meet regularly.

What is a "hot topic" on Facebook is often what is hot in the grin and in the local marketplace. In such a flow of information the original source of that information becomes obscured, instead listeners make a judgement of its veracity based on the person who relays it to them. According to Ousmane Diaby a senior journalist, "here when someone gets news from a trustworthy friend, even when said news is problematic, he is likely to believe it. Yet his friend might have picked it on Facebook".[14] In this ecosystem, false information is often genuinely shared with no malicious intention to misinform.

Key Actors and Enablers

Malian politicians may not directly share fake news, but they fabricate it and push it through others. It has become a common practice for politicians to pay young people on social media to help them propagate information which they would not be able to bring to a radio station, a newspaper or a television station where information might be fact-checked before it is broadcasted. Traditional media may wilfully spread falsehood too, but not with the ease that social media propagates it. On social media, the consumer becomes an agent of transmission and by sharing the most current information they receive with their own network of friends, they add some sort of credibility to it. The fact that some social media savvy young people are willing to be paid to do this work, makes it difficult to trace the information back to the party behind it.

This type of politically motivated fake news is always in favour of one political party or is denigrating another. According to journalist Ousmane Diaby, "cyber-warriors play a crucial role during the electoral years when you see them display a certain zeal for a particular candidate. For most of the time, they [the cyber-warriors] are just trolling Facebook and liking, sharing, and commenting favourably anything posted by the person they support. These are the same people who would even bully genuine commenters who have an opposing view".[15]

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12. Ibid.
13. Bondaz, J. (2013). Le thé des hommes. Sociabilités masculines et culture de la rue au Mali. Cahiers d'études africaines, 53(209-210), 61-85.
14. Key informant Interview with Ousmane Diaby a senior radio journalist, 20 June 2021.
15. Key informant Interview with Ousmane Diaby a senior radio journalist, 20 June 2021.

During the 2018 presidential election, fake Facebook accounts were created for candidate Housseini Amion Guindo to publish disinformation and undermine his campaign.[16] The campaign staff of candidate Ibrahim Boubacar Keita also paid for the services of social media influencers during this election.[17] These influencers, such as Ballinu Montana Sissoko, Dede Cissé, and Akim Soul make a "decent living" from their job.[18] According to Fadilatou Diawara, a journalist, "sharing or pushing certain controversial information and making it go viral online is actually a lucrative source of income for many social media influencers in Mali".[19]

Outside of political actors' members of non-state armed groups, as well as members of extremist groups, are also spreading fake news in the country. Since the beginning of the conflict in Mali, Islamist organisations have created false information that seeks to discredit the Malian government and its international partners. For example, Nusrat al-Islam also known as Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) - a 2017 federation of militant Islamist organisations including Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front, Al-Mourabitoun and the West African branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb - has developed a strong communication network that allows them to share messages with the populations in the regions under their control.

JNIM is engaged in a strong campaign of disinformation in which it often accuses France of perpetuating genocide against the Fulani ethnic group. While it is not a surprise that jihadists in Mali would despise France given that they are engaged in combat with them, it is not rare to find some of their narratives, and even posts, repeated in the social media of less radical Malians. Keita Mohamadi, a youth leader from Bamako adds that, many youths often knowingly share fake news because they think they are patriots and share information that they think can contribute to getting rid of France. "I would say that a segment of the Malian youth has developed a form of blind nationalism consisting in denigrating anything French and they would share any information that blames the French for the predicament of the country".[20] Fake news has contributed to exacerbate the conflict in central and northern Mali by sensationalising all aspects of it in the discourse.

Cultural figures are also important when it comes to the spread of falsehoods in Mali. They are trustworthy public figures in the eyes of many people which makes what they have to say more potent. For example, when musician Salif Keita livestreamed on Facebook an allegation that France is underwriting jihad in the north of the country his statement circulated widely on the internet and was quoted across mainstream media not just in the country, but in the Francophone West Africa region. Addressing the Malian President in his video he asked: "Are you still not aware that it is France which finances our enemies against our children? That there is no terrorist in Mali? That all what is going on is orchestrated by

16. Nedjaa, Amirouche, and Nouha Belaid. "Les médias sociaux et la campagne électorale des candidats à la présidentielle malienne de 2018 : exemple de Facebook."
17. Nafmalook (September, 2018) Influenceur, un métier en pleine expansion au Mali. https://benbere.org/terre-dopportunites/influenceur-metier-expansion-mali/
18. Nafmalook (September, 2018) Influenceur, un métier en pleine expansion au Mali. https://benbere.org/terre-dopportunites/influenceur-metier-expansion-mali/
19. Key informant Interview with Fadilatou Diawara, an online journalist, 5 June 2021.
20. Key informant Interview with Keita Mohamadi, Youth leader and community development specialist. 29 June 2021.

France?"[21] Sensational social media content like keita's invective often shapes the content of traditional media. In return, traditional media may inadvertently give credibility to social media fake news when it discusses it. Content that feeds back into social media.

Recognition of the power of cultural actors can also be seen in the way political actors bring musicians on board during elections to promote them. Musicians, especially griots who sing praise music, are seen as opinion leaders. When Malian musicians are not involved in political fake news, they may be involved in the spread of fake news about other Malian musicians. Attacking fellow musicians is not new. For example, Oumou Sangare, one of the most popular and successful female musicians of Mali was accused of acting in a porn video in 2004. According to Baba Traore, "that allegation was discussed from the pulpits of mosques, we just didn't have social media to make it known everywhere".[22] But now with online rumours networks enabled by social media, these sorts of messages can reach more people, far more quickly.

Fake News Influence

On social media, out of context photos or videos presenting violence allegedly perpetuated by one ethnic group against another one are growing in prevalence. When tragedy strikes, people immediately begin speculating on the cause and that speculation often becomes the information shared online via social media. In early 2018, a video emerged on Facebook and WhatsApp showing the violent attack and killing of women and children from the Dozo ethnic group in Koumaga, a small village near Djene. The video alleged that Fulani combatants from Le Front de Liberation du Macina, a non-state armed group led by Imam Dicko, who is a Fulani, were the ones doing the killing in Komaga. While the attack on the Dozo did take place, there was no factual evidence that it was perpetuated by Fulani.

However, in reaction to the video, the Dozo carried a deadly attack on Fulani communities. Driven by the false narrative painted by the video, 16 Fulani were officially killed in a reprisal attack, but escapees from the attack reported seeing more than 50 of their fellow Fulani dead.[23]

In addition to driving clashes between Malians, lot of the fake news circulating in Mali is about the presence of the French military and its counterterrorism operations in the country. Narratives of gold smuggling and that they are in fact providing military assistance

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21. Pascal Loukou Ye. (2019). Insécurité au Mali : L'artiste musicien, Salif Kéita, pointe du doigt la France. LeFaso.Net. November. Available at https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article93195
22. Key Informant Interview with Baba Traore, 12 July 2021.
23. Key Informant interview with Joshua Mawuli, broadcast journalist with Class FM, May 2021.
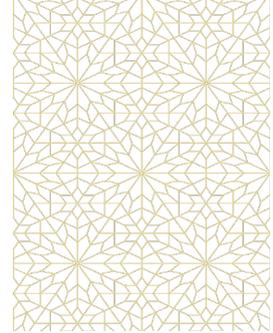
to the jihadist movements are most prevalent. Official communication about the presence of the French military is scarce, especially in occupied zones, and this provides the oxygen for rumours to flourish. Furthermore, Malian state officials have often criticised the French troops in the media, which only reinforces the existing anti-French narratives. In 2020, the Malian ambassador in Paris alleged that the French military in Mali had committed grave misconduct adding "they are known to be tough in battle, tough in battle, but they are also greedy for gain".[24]

A popular, and ultimately polemical, narrative is that France is underwriting terrorism in Mali and the subregion. In one widely circulated video on WhatsApp, the viewer can see what appears to be men in French military uniform digging for gold. This video, which first emerged in 2014 on Facebook and various screenshot photos from it, has been fact-checked and found to be about American soldiers confiscating smuggled gold from Afghanistan in 2003.[25] Nonetheless, the video is often recycled with vibrant new captions such as "Stop the French genocide in Mali" and "Here is how the terrorists get supplies from France". Another example is a Dioula language audio that circulated on WhatsApp between 2019 and 2020 that said the French military was attacking the Malian army overnight and that Malian soldiers were not getting rid of the terrorists in the country because the latter are helped by the French army. According to a youth leader, who saw the same video in February 2019 and then toward the end of 2020, the voice in the audio promises to reveal more evidence to support its claims. Although this is an anonymous voice, it seems to have a good reception among its audience. This is because that the audio plays into the increasingly deep rooted anti-French sentiments and narratives in the country. However, there is no factual evidence to support the claims made.

These falsehoods are not just confined to social media. Online media and mainstream media are not exempt from falling prey to sharing what can be considered as fake news or polemical and unverified information with regards to Franco-Malian relations. In November 2020, Universal News TV, an online media broadcast a news segment in which it indicated that Malian customs service officers had stopped French military officials attempting to smuggle gold out of the country.[26] In the clip Universal News TV aired, a man in a French military uniform can be seen sitting on what appears to be stacks of gold bars. The reporter added that "these soldiers have confessed that they were receiving orders receiving orders directly from President Emmanuel Macron".[27] In a news segment on the same channel where Malian media pundits discussed the alleged incident, they affirmed falsely the accuracy of the report as they discussed France's meddling in Malian affairs. However, fact-checkers from France 24 found that this video was a gross misrepresentation of a run-of-the-mill inspection carried out during a metal sale in Accra, Ghana.[28]

These sorts of falsehoods have galvanised youth to protest in support of France leaving

24. Agence France Press. (2020). Un diplomate du Mali dénonce les débordements et les tatouages de la Légion étrangère. Available at https://www.lapresse.ca/international/afrique/2020-02-26/un-diplomate-du-mali-denonce-les-debordements-et-les-tatouages-de-la-legion-etrangere
25. Julia Galan. (2021). Des images de soldats français au Mali pillant les réserves d'or du pays ? Attention, intox ! France 24. June. Available at https://observers.france24.com/fr/afrique/20210611-intox-soldats-français-pillage-or-mali
26. Universal News TV, (2020) YouTube. November. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHooy_ivYBU
27. Ibid.
28. Alexander Capron. (2019). The truth behind the viral video showing gold bars "looted in Mali". France 24. September. Available at https://observers.france24.com/en/20190911-gold-bars-looted-mali-stolen-viral-video

Mali. On 22 September 2020, when Mali was celebrating its independence day, protesters gathered in large numbers to demand that France leave their country. The ongoing discussions between the military junta and Wagner, a Russian private mercenary group, that could see a new security partnership between the two will only further sustain these narratives about French motivations in the country. In the eyes of most cyber activists who wage anti-French sentiment, this new deal with the Russians is evidence that the Malian new leaders are fed up with the French double game.[29]

> " Online media and mainstream media are not exempt from falling prey to sharing what can be considered as fake news...

A third major area where fake news is not only prevalent but influential is in relation to COVID-19, which has created an infodemic of misinformation not just in Mali but across the world. Like the COVID-19 virus which was first discovered elsewhere before it got to Mali, fake news surrounding the vaccine has also arrived from other countries. Malian fake news rarely has a clearly established scapegoat, but in COVID-19 related fake news, Bill Gates is often cited as the head of a massive scheme to dominate the world; a narrative that has circulated widely in other parts of Africa and beyond.[30] Another fake news circulating on social media and through word of mouth in Mali says that the COVID-19 vaccine has killed 40% more people than the virus itself. In a WhatsApp video an old Arab man speaking French can be seen with a smartphone stuck on his forearm. He explains that he and all other people who were vaccinated with Astra Zeneca are doomed and that it is his duty as an elder to warn everyone to not make the same mistake he did. He claims that the vaccine contains micro-chips that will allow the people behind the vaccine to later control anyone who is vaccinated. These are falsehoods.

As Solo Coulibaly, an online journalist and fact checker, notes the trend of fake news about COVID-19 has shifted from speculation about local cures and denialism of the disease, to conspiracies about the available vaccines in recent months. Mali was the first country among its neighbours to adopt the COVID-19 vaccine, but Malians remain suspicious about taking the vaccine.[31] As of July 2021, only 0.7% of the Malian population had been vaccinated.[32]

29. Roozenbeek J. et al. 2020. Susceptibility to misinformation about Covid-19 around the world'. Royal Society Publishing. 14 October.
30. Lassina Niangali, (2020). Covid-19: Bill Gates n'a pas envoyé de vaccin au Mali. Le Jalon. March. Available at https://lejalon.com/2020/03/31/covid-19-bill-gates-na-pas-envoye-de-vaccin-au-mali/
31. Key informant Interview with Solo Coulibaly, Journalist and fact checker. 2 July 2021
32. The New Humanitarian (2021). Vaccine shortages and surging cases: A COVID-19 Africa snapshot. 14 July. Available at https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/7/14/how-six-african-countries-are-handling-covid-third-wave

EXTERNAL SHAPERS

External actors involved in the ongoing conflict have been involved in efforts to shape information narratives in Mali. Facebook, in its effort to remove what it calls "coordinated inauthentic behaviour," indicated that individuals linked to the French military and Russia were using its platform to engage in propaganda and fake news sharing in Mali and removed them.[33] These people are believed to have been using deceptive tactics, including posing as local actors, to spread fake information. They actively engaged with one another and co-opted authentic local voices to support their view and gain more credibility in the eyes of their audiences. These clusters of social media accounts used local Malian names and anonymous profile photos such as a local physical monument to pass for Malians. On one of the Facebook pages, the photo of Mohamed Ali as young boxing champion was used as a profile photo. In reporting this event, Malian media projected this incident to have a negative impact on the credibility of the French army as a genuine and transparent partner in the fight against terrorism. Other deplored the amateurism of this disinformation campaign which shows the weakness and inefficiency of France's digital counterterrorism.[34]

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The French accounts involved pushed a pro-France narrative especially about development initiatives and their military presence in the country.[35] Whilst the Russians presented the French as imperialists seeking to reconquer Mali. This online battle opposing fake French and Russian accounts involved "two networks with 274 fake Facebook accounts, along with groups, pages and accounts on Instagram".[36] It is hard to estimate the extent to which these coordinated inauthentic online behaviour impacted the situation on the ground in Mali, but this propaganda war aligns with local negative sentiment toward France. It is notable that pro-Russian banners are more and more visible in anti-French protest gatherings.

33. Nathaniel Gleicher & David Agranovich. (2020). Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from France and Russia. December. Available at https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-france-russia/

34. Bamada.net. (2020). Les faux comptes Facebook de l'armé française au Mali et au coeur d'une guerre d'influence entre la France et la Russie. February. Available at https://bamada.net/les-faux-comptes-facebook-de-larmee-francaise-au-mali-au-coeur-dune-guerre-dinfluence-entre-france-et-russie

35. Quentin Velluet, (2020). France/Russia: Propaganda war on Facebook targets Mali & the CAR. The Africa Report. December. Available at https://www.theafricareport.com/56013/france-russia-propaganda-war-on-facebook-targets-mali-the-car/

36. Craig Timberg & Elizabeth Dwoskin. (2020). People affiliated with French military used Facebook to meddle in Africa. The Washington Post. 15 December. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/12/15/people-affiliated-with-french-military-used-facebook-meddle-africa/
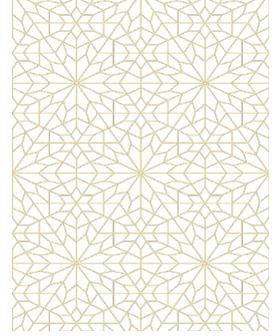
Addressing The Problem

At the government level, the 2019 Répression de la Cybercriminalité law remains the most tangible tool for the fight against fake news. Article 2 of this this legislation sets out the coverage as "any offense committed by means of information and communication technologies (ICT) in whole or in part on the territory of the Republic of Mali, any offense committed in cyberspace and the effects of which are produced on national territory".[37] This law does not explicitly talk about fake news, but it remains open to interpretation. Punishment for the breaking this law can include a fine and jail time of up to three years.[38] Whilst many in the civil society space are concerned about how the law might be used to clamp down on dissenting voices, some Malian media users have welcomed it, believing it could contribute to "sanitise communication on the social media sphere which is getting out of control".[39]

The law is part of a legislative framework that was deemed necessary to support reforms in the ICT sector, in accordance with the Malian Telecommunications Sector Policy Declaration of 2000. Regulation is provided by the High Authority of Communication, which also has the power to sanction anyone who contravenes the law. The president of the republic designates three of the nine members of this body for a seven-year term. The other six members sit for a six-year term and three of them are appointed by the president of the National Assembly. The last three members are chosen by the media companies, giving them some self-regulation role.

The Malian government has a record of seeking to control electronic communication. During the 2018 presidential elections, the government shut down the internet for three days to counter a protest movement.[40] During the subsequent runoff, the government disrupted telephone lines and internet access the day before the announcement of the results. In June 2017, during street protests opposing the referendum on the constitutional reform, the government censored Twitter and Facebook.[41] More recently in July 2020, the government of then President Boubacar Keita blocked access to internet for three days arguing that it wanted to slow down the spread of fake news that instigated violence. But this internet blockage was also in response to a nationwide protest staged by the Le Movement du 5 Juin - Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques (M5-RFP), a new coalition of civil society movements. In fact, on 10 July, M5-RFP, which supported the controversial preacher Imam Dicko, organised a nationwide protest to ask Keita to step down. This protest was violently repressed causing the death of at least 14 protesters and injuring several others.[42] Cyber activists and civil society leaders condemned the president's move to shut down the internet, arguing that he was preventing Malian youth from holding his

37. Loi N°2019-056 Du 05 Décembre 2019 Portant Repression de la Cybercriminalité. Available at https://www.cicert.ci/images/pdf/loiregional/Loi-n2019-056-du-05-dcembre-2019-portant-rpression-de-la-Cybercriminalit-au-Malic.pdf
38. Ibid
39. Key informant Interview with Haoua Dembele, journalism student. 2 August 2021.
40. Simone Toussi. (2020). La nouvelle loi du Mali sur la cybercriminalité potentiellement problématique pour les droits numériques. CIPESA. February. Available at https://cipesa.org/2020/02/la-nouvelle-loi-du-mali-sur-la-cybercriminalite-potentiellement-problematique-pour-les-droits-numeriques/
41. Netblocks. (2018). Mali elections marred by internet disruptions. https://netblocks.org/reports/mali-elections-marred-by-internet-disruptions-G3Anxqy2
42. Human Right Watch. (2020). Les forces de sécurité ont fait un usage excessif de la force lors de manifestations. 12 August. Available at https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2020/08/12/mali-les-forces-de-securite-ont-fait-un-usage-excessif-de-la-force-lors-de

regime accountable.

Away from legal redress and restrictive measures, fact checking is being used to address the proliferation of fake news in Mali even if it is not widespread practice in the media. Currently there are just two known private organisations which specialise in fact checking: Benbere and Mali Check which is run by an online media outlet Le Jalon. Mali Check seeks to fact check all fake news in circulation even when the content is not about Mali. Benbere, which in Fulani language means a place where people gather to seek understanding and harmony, fact checks problematic information in circulation on social media, as well as publishing short pieces of analysis in local news outlets. However, the scope of the work of these two media is limited compared with the sheer amount of fake news in circulation in Mali.

However, there is a growing awareness, and even a concern, among media professionals in Mali about the potential harm that fake news can cause. Increasingly more and more bloggers, media personalities and influencers are receiving training on internet fact checking to help mitigate the spread of fake news. Yet fact-checking does not always have the power to establish factual truth in the eyes of most social media users. There are several examples of misinformation, which have been fact-checked many times and found to be false, still circulating, and being believed, online. This highlights a key challenge facing such efforts: their reach and ability to penetrate discourse is not as wide or as powerful as viral fake news.

CONCLUSION

The plurality of competing sources of information in Mali together with the deleterious political climate has groomed a media eco-system favourable to the explosion of all kinds of fake news. While the general population contributes to sharing fake news, falsehoods most commonly originate from government officials, politicians, extremist organisations, internet-savvy cyber-warriors, cultural icons, and individuals linked to France and Russia. The ongoing conflict has reduced the capacity of mainstream media, which remains dominated by radio, to cover news stories effectively across the entire country.

In lieu of these traditional channels, social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp constitute constitute important relaying platforms where people share information, almost unmonitored and uncensored. This information is further amplified and carried offline by word of mouth through the grins and other public places where people discuss the information they receive with close friends, family, and acquaintances. These networks are well established and as such are a key avenues for the dissemination of falsehoods that can have significant offline impacts in worsening tensions between ethnic groups in the country or in driving false narratives about the conflict.
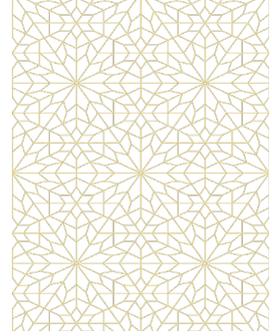
RECOMMANDATIONS

Based on the analysis presented in this report the following recommendations are proposed for countering fake news in Mali's information eco-system:

1 More Malian journalists, bloggers and online influencers must be trained on how to detect and counter fake news. Media professional should also be discouraged from knowingly spreading fake news through a careful application of the law and the creation of a self-regulated media code of conduct.

2 The Malian authorities should work to make official information more readily available all over the country by better protecting journalists. Currently in conflict areas, private radio stations and even public radio does not have freedom to broadcast certain information. Protecting the flow of local information is important to ensure a diversity and plurality of voices that can help avoid singular narratives.

3 The new authorities of Mali must seize the opportunity of their current popularity among citizens to establish transparent communication with the people and demonstrate accountability in their leadership. This has the potential of restoring the people's trust in the government communication and helping counter fake information. More proactive sharing of information by government, although difficult in the current fluctuating political context, can help rebuild trust.

4 As a member of the Francophone Media Regulators Network which covers over 30 countries, the High Authority of Communication could tap into the wealth of experience in media regulation that countries with similar realities have. Member organisations in this network constantly publish reports on how to moderate online communication and hate speech.

5 Radio programmes and social media campaigns that aim at teaching media literacy to the public are critically important in Mali. Even if journalists, bloggers, and civil society leaders are trained in fact checking, if the end consumer does not have the capacity to differentiate the fake from the factual, fake news will continue to circulate.
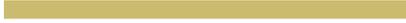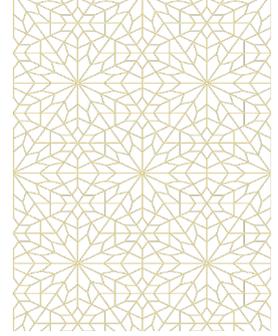
About The Author

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