



Exploratory research report on the information environment in a political and security crisis context in the Sahel Region

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Authors: Adib Bencherif, Ph.D., Marie-Eve Carignan, Ph.D.

Contributors: Jennifer-Ann Beaudry, Sylvain Bédard, Alexandre Michel,

Dania Paradis-Bouffard, Joachim Lépine

Project Manager: LtCol Yves Desbiens

Design: Inga Ropša

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NATO STRATCOM COE

11b Kalnciema iela,

Riga, LV1048, Latvia

stratcomcoe.org

@stratcomcoe

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CONTENTS

Introduction	6
Regional context and monitoring challenges in the Sahel	8
Conceptual framework	11
Defining the media ecosystem in the Sahel	11
System and complexity	12
Issues	13
Public access to media	13
A culture of orality	13
Media mapping	13
Information poverty	14
Social co-construction and rumours	14
Conditions of journalistic practice	15
Authoritarian pluralism	15
Media funding	16
Journalists' compensation	16
The digitalization of public space and the rise of disinformation	16
The role of foreign media	18
China	19
France	19
Russia	20
Challenges specific to conflict coverage	21
Presentation of the research centres producing grey literature on the Sahel	24
Main research centres that structure monitoring activities in the Sahel	24
The monitoring produced by research centres	25
Other initiatives: social media and alternative media	25
Methodology for the evaluation of monitoring challenges	26

General challenges and resulting biases of media monitoring on the Sahel	27
Terrorism and counterterrorism	29
International interventions	31
Elections	32
Coups d'État	33
Popular demonstrations	34
Conclusion/Recommendations	36
General findings and recommendations	36
Bibliography	40
Appendix	46
Disinformation campaigns in Africa	46

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Introduction

It can be daunting to describe media dynamics at the scale of a country, or even a group of bordering countries, such as those in the Sahel, given the profusion of what can be considered media productions and the complexity of the connections between them. The countries of the Sahel region are also strongly influenced by external media productions that are often locally accessible. Indeed, these external productions have an impact on the international understanding of the region's issues. This fact in turn has a significant impact on the sources selected in the monitoring on the Sahel region. We are talking about a media ecosystem rooted in complex and fragile relationships of trust toward different epistemic sources and a relative understanding of the media world, characterized by practices of re-appropriation and information-sharing.

Media systems in the Sahel did not wait for the emergence of the Internet to become decentralized, but intrinsically featured rumours and orality. The importance of local radio stations across the region is a manifestation of this today. Understanding this complex world requires an examination of the uses of the media, the messages they convey, the sources they utilize, processes of interpreting content, and the socio-political impact of the content in question.

To grasp the logics of information and disinformation¹ that play out in the region requires a broad understanding of the media ecosystem and the information available on key issues.

[A]ny attempt to make sense of the evolution, mutation and sharing of fake news and cyber-propaganda in sub-Saharan Africa cannot be done outside the determining and constraining context of the production and consumption of news in Africa. At the core of this context of production and consumption are resource-constrained newsrooms, an ever-shifting communication ecology, realignment of the relationship between producers and consumers of content, digitization of political communication, media repression, digital literacy and competencies and competing regimes of truth and non-truth.

(Mare, 2019)

In order to paint an initial portrait of this media ecosystem, this report proposes, first and foremost, to review the current political and media context in the region, including relationships of trust and mistrust. Next, the report will define the key issues that need to be grasped in order to address the Sahelian

¹ The *Grand dictionnaire terminologique* defines disinformation as information that is "erroneous or distorts reality" and is put forward by traditional or social media to "manipulate public opinion." The use of information to convince and manipulate people is nothing new, but is facilitated by digital technologies.

media ecosystem globally and relatively comprehensively. We will proceed in two stages. The first section of this report will draw a portrait of what the scholarly research has to say about media and information issues in the region. This review will be rounded out by an empirical approach, based firstly on a portrait of monitoring by professional circles that produce grey literature. Next, the research team will set forth an empirical analysis, conducted from the perspective of monitoring existing documentation and based on the *Weekly news* of the University of Florida's Sahel Research Group. This analysis will enable us to better understand how the region's geopolitical context is approached by various media and to identify the main trends and issues associated with this media monitoring. Specifically, the analysis will cover various political/security themes (terrorism and counterterrorism, international intervention, popular demonstrations, coups, and elections and governance).

This analysis will uncover significant challenges with a view to better understanding the Sahelian media ecosystem. The report takes an initial look at key issues that need to be addressed to understand the relationship of countries in this region to information, but

it also highlights the need for more empirical data. The prominence of orality and radio media in the region, as well as strategies of using new socio-digital tools to bypass and appropriate information, also demand a field-based approach. This is all the more necessary since it is relevant to question practitioners on their observations about the limits of the monitoring exercise and the techniques and tools they developed to meet the challenge of processing news from the Sahel region. Finally, the rise of disinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories, sometimes orchestrated by foreign countries, such as Russia, calls for research specifically devoted to these issues, which have potential security and political implications.

Regional context and monitoring challenges in the Sahel

Since the mid-2000s, and especially after the fall of Ghaddafi's regime and the Libyan civil war in 2011 and the most recent Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali in 2012, the Sahelian countries have experienced many security and political issues, notably political violence, illicit smuggling, and fragile politics of democratization. Political violence is one of the most problematic issues. In Mali, the peace agreement signed in 2015 is still not fully implemented (Bencherif, 2018). Furthermore, since 2015, ethnic tensions have been on the rise in the region and not only in northern but also central Mali. Having emerged in Central Mali with the intensification of the conflict between nomadic Fulani and sedentary farmers, these tensions gradually spread to neighbouring countries (International Crisis Group, 2016).

Numerous jihadist groups continue to perpetrate attacks against civilians, state representatives, traditional authorities, and security forces. To survive against the Sahelian security forces and international counterterrorist operations (French operation Barkhane being the most significant in terms of resources and duration), jihadist groups are constantly adapting. Some of them are also taking advantage of ethnic conflicts in the region to mobilize the youth and weaken their opponents in the various political arenas (Michailof, 2017). For example, young Fulani are often joining jihadist groups to protect their communities. Jihadism can then overlap with ethnic conflicts. Two jihadist coalitions, *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen* (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), are now currently operating in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, in the Liptako-Gourma region. Boko Haram and its multiple scissions are also still active in the

Lake Chad. In this very complex ecosystem, national security forces have a hard time distinguishing between civilians and (jihadist) fighters. These fighters are regularly perpetrating attacks on civilians, fueling conflicts and ethnic tensions. Finally, populations are not necessarily supporting foreign troops. Protests occurred regularly against the U.N. Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

The withdrawal of Operation Barkhane announced by the French president in June 2021 was, among other things, prompted by the growing unpopularity of the international military intervention in Mali and, more generally, in the Sahel. Nevertheless, the main reason for the end of Operation Barkhane was the tense climate and lack of trust between the French state and the Malian regime led by coup plotters since August 2020 (Jankowski, 2022). It remains an open question as to how the French military operation will seek to restructure and redeploy to other Sahelian countries, and what kind of military cooperation will take shape between international troops and Sahelian armies (Jankowski, 2022)².

It is worth recalling that two coups have taken place in Mali since the June 2020 demonstrations against the regime of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK), who is accused of poor governance and failing to solve the country's security problems. The first coup d'état in August 2020, condemned by the international community, was widely supported by the Malian people. The junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta attempted hybrid governance by appointing civilians to the positions of president and prime minister, while maintaining a strong presence of high-ranking officers in the

2 A number of actors are calling on the French government to review its approach and be less asymmetrical, relying instead on dialogue with neighbouring states to promote the acceptability of its interventions. According to Jankowski (2022), "A less politically exposed French external operation that induces a lighter footprint via air assets and a reinforcement of capabilities in the information domain are necessary. To face this growing competition, France must reactivate the dialogue with Bamako to avoid leaving the field open to Russia. With the Kremlin's growing ambitions, Paris is obliged to offer a credible alternative to fill the security vacuum and to respond to the dynamics of diversifying the relations of West African countries. Only through this new strategic leap forward can the much-feared French retreat be avoided."

executive branch. Assimi Goïta then declared himself vice-president. Nevertheless, a second coup took place on May 24, 2021, when the junta considered that the government was not upholding the nation's interests or respecting the transition process. Colonel Goïta is now president of the transition in Mali, and political power appears to be even more strongly in the grip of the military. Sanctions by ECOWAS and other countries, and France in particular, have contributed to alienating the junta. A climate of suspicion and accusations against external actors operating in the region, and especially France, has regularly featured in the government's public discourse, as evidenced by the virulent speech of Mali's interim Prime Minister at the 77th United Nations General Assembly³. The Malian government has also developed a military agreement with Russia, and presumably with the Wagner Private Military Company. The agreement with Russia is explained by members of the Malian government as a response to the disengagement and abandonment of Mali by France, which continues to figure as a scapegoat in the narratives of the Malian elites. Conspiracy theories and disinformation have abounded since the second coup. These theories had been circulating for a few years, but they seem to be becoming more and more commonplace, fueled by people's mistrust toward and frustration with the political and security situation (Guichaoua, 2020; Sandor, 2020).

A major political change took place in Chad during the same period. After having just been re-elected to a sixth term, Chadian President Idriss Déby died on April 20, 2021, while on the front lines in the northwestern part of the country fighting armed rebels belonging to the Front for Change and Concord in Chad. The front launched a military offensive on the day of the presidential election. However, the circumstances surrounding his death have yet to be fully elucidated. Following his death, a transitional military council was established unconstitutionally. It was headed by Mahamat Idriss Déby, one of his sons, who became President of the Republic. This coup did not elicit the same reactions from the international

community as the Malian case, further fuelling narratives of suspicion and conspiracies about external actors, in particular France.

The recent coup in Burkina Faso in January 2022, which toppled the regime of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, had similar reasons behind it. The Kaboré regime was regularly accused by critics of being unable to stabilize the country and curb the terrorist threat. The head of the Burkina junta was Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. He held the position of President of Burkina Faso. The people of Burkina Faso, like those of Mali, by and large supported the coup at first. However, the security situation did not improve, and Damiba was in turn overthrown on September 30, 2022 by a new military junta, led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, in a popular climate of wanting to see Russia as a security partner, to stabilize the country. In short, popular support for the Burkinabe and Malian juntas can be explained by the unpopularity of political elites deemed corrupt and the belief that Western international actors, and especially France, are responsible for the region's political instability.

The ban on broadcasting *France 24* and *RFI* in Mali as of March 2022 cemented the growing climate of mistrust toward France, which extended to the media sphere. Access to the websites of these media was also shut down. However, *RFI* and *France 24* were and still are very widely listened to in the region. It is still possible to access *RFI* and *France 24* content by sharing short audio or video clips on WhatsApp—a very common way of sharing information in the Sahel—or through other information strategies such as using an alternative URL, a VPN, satellite channels or direct social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. The Malian junta justifies the ban by calling the media biased. It seems to increasingly want to control internal communication and media coverage across the country.

Concurrently, a number of corruption scandals have made headlines in the region, such as the prosecution of former Mauritanian

3 United Nations | Full Speech of Interim Prime Minister Col. Abdoulaye Maïga - YouTube

President Mohamed Ould Abd-Aziz and the embezzlement in Niger of funds that were supposed to be for military-equipment purchases. Niger has been actively involved in counterterrorism efforts since 2015. It is also experiencing security problems on the western front on the border with Mali in the Liptako-Gourma region and on the southern front with jihadist groups operating in Lake Chad.

The embezzlement case exacerbated the climate of mistrust toward Niger's elites. Conversely, good news was announced on the institutional front when Mahamadou Issoufou stepped down from power after two presidential terms, in compliance with the constitution, by holding elections deemed to be free. His successor, Mohamed Bazoum, was elected President of the Republic in the first quarter of 2021. He was sworn in on April 2, 2021, after the results were challenged by the opposition but validated by the Constitutional Court. The Issoufou clan appears to remain influential in the government, with the appointment of Sani Issoufou Mahamadou as head of the Ministry of Petroleum, Energy and Renewable Energies.

Compounding the situation, the health crisis caused by COVID-19 complicated journalistic work in the region, as resources were mainly allocated to dealing with the health situation, neglecting other current events in Sahelian countries (Bencherif, 2021a). Travel also became more complicated, for example when the region's major cities went under quarantine. Many of the measures taken by

Sahelian states, while welcomed by donors, have been unpopular, such as the ban on gatherings in places of worship in Niger and the inability to trade in Burkina Faso because of the many restrictions there. International and Sahelian media coverage was therefore less acute in capturing the political and security dynamics of 2020 and 2021.

Finally, French- and English-language media coverage is far superior for Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, while it is very limited in Mauritania and Chad. Although there are a few quality media outlets in Arabic in Mauritania, the low level of media coverage in these two countries makes media monitoring a particularly delicate and complex undertaking. This is even truer when the monitoring is carried out by external actors not operating in the Sahel and who lack preliminary knowledge of the political arenas and security issues in these two countries.

As we have seen, the media and political ecosystem in the Sahel is complex and widely affected by conflict and political upheaval. Research on these issues comes against several challenges in the way of access to and treatment of information. It is to this subject that we turn in the next section.

Conceptual framework

Defining the media ecosystem in the Sahel

As mentioned at the outset of this report, understanding the complex media ecosystem of the Sahel is key to addressing the region's socio-political issues and citizens' relationship to local and international news, as well as to assessing the content of any news that may be subject to media monitoring on the region.

The many theoretical approaches to reception, despite the different roles they assign to audiences and their trust of the news, all seem to suggest the importance of media, mainly in terms of agenda-setting, in relation to the audience and society, as well as in forging the social bond (Carignan & Huard, 2016). Thus, properly understanding a region's context and media environment is essential in order to grasp the workings of its society and social relationships.

Examining a region's media ecosystem helps us to approach the media as actors that are revealing of the region's complex and unstable social and political dynamics, but also to observe the dynamics of the media's social reconstruction of reality, which in turn influences understanding of these issues. The media present the public with a new, reconstructed reality, which can directly influence the public's perception of reality and shape public opinion.

However, one of the greatest difficulties in demonstrating this phenomenon lies in the complexity of analyzing and interpreting this constructed reality, which coexists alongside everyday social reality (Carignan & Huard, 2016 ; Berger & Luckmann, 1986). In order to be mediatized, information must be put into a narrative, or even staged (Jamet & Jannet, 1999), and morally interpreted (Tamborini, 2011); journalistic practices involve making choices and selecting and framing information, which has an effect on its construction, even in the context of an approach seeking to be objective and factual. If the media system disseminates information, its central role is to make sense of it. It is this sense-making capacity that makes news a potential vehicle for strategic communication, manipulation and even propaganda.

To understand this, it is important to grasp the workings of traditional media, but also the practices that play out in communities, orally and through the use of social media tools and cyberspace, i.e., hardware/infrastructure, systems/software, information, individual and social relationships, etc. (Dupéré, 2017). Our main focus here is the dissemination of information via traditional channels and its reception by various audiences.

System and complexity

The theoretical framework best suited to understanding this complexity is systems analysis (Lemoigne, 1994). This framework, applied to many subjects since the 1960s, has been transposed in ecology to the study of ecosystems, and then by analogy to the study of “media ecosystems” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). It offers a way to study the functions of the media as they exist (or should exist) in the absolute, but also to relate them to a broader social system that it can help maintain, destabilize or dismantle, or to which it can adapt. For example, systems analysis allows us to understand a macroscopic dynamic, such as the one studied in this report, based on interactions between different subsystems, both micro (between individuals) and meso (between organizations) (Benson, 2004). This framework allows for a flexible and empirical account of the different constraints on media organizations, be they political, financial, or related to the training of the journalistic workforce, by comprehensively mapping the media in a certain space, which we will attempt to do in the next sections (Saulnier, 2021).

The media system can also be described more generally by measuring (1) the vitality of media production and consumption, (2) the degree of media partisanship, (3) the level of professionalization of journalism, and (4) state interventions in the media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

One challenge of systems analysis is to determine the boundaries of a system, in other words, what is part of its functioning and what conversely belongs to its environment. This choice is neither simple nor trivial. The two-step communication flow model (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) shows, for example, that mass-media content relies on opinion leaders in order to be disseminated in the population. By extension, posts and comments on social media, rumour dynamics and other local oral interactions, when they concern large-scale news, may well be part of the media system itself, or may even be central to the system in certain isolated communities (Kari, 2006). Hence, public communication systems can be described as being made up of communication networks on which individuals depend in order to construct their knowledge and put it into practice (Walter et al., 2018). While the study of media often implicitly refers to the study of mass media (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001), we may be seeing a new era of minimal effects⁴ (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) that calls for a non-media-centric approach (Boczkowski et al., 2021).

In the next section, we will paint a picture of issues specific to the news sector in the Sahel region.

4 Bennett & Iyengar explain: “The increasing level of selective exposure based on partisan preference thus presages a new era of minimal consequences, at least insofar as persuasive effects are concerned. But other forms of media influence, such as indexing, agenda setting, or priming may continue to be important.” (p. 725).

Issues

Public access to media

A culture of orality

The Sahel is home to a culture of orality that is also reflected in media choices: radio seems to be the most accessible medium given its low cost and the fact that it can work without electricity (Mihoubi, 2019; NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020). Moreover, the vast majority of the population is illiterate; in fact, “The average literacy rate for working-age adults (ages 15-64) in the Sahel is only around 42 percent, with substantial variation by gender and geographical location” (World Bank Group, 2021, p. 24, translated freely). Radio communications are able to reach more people than media that requires print or electronic literacy skills (Diakon & Röschenhaler, 2017). In addition, newspapers are not widely distributed and very few people have access to the Internet. However, it should be noted that the region has a growing population with Internet access.

For example,

In January 2020, Burkina Faso had 4.59 million active Internet users, for a penetration rate of 22 percent (Global Digital Report, January 2020⁵). According to the same source, 97% of the Burkina Faso population has a cell phone and 73.8% of Internet users connect via this means of communication. (Yaméogo, 2020, p. 2)

In this context, print media is a powerful tool for reaching the elite, wealthier and educated population (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020). “[The press] is more effective in reaching a solvent audience because [...] private newspapers primarily rely on public and private services” given their subscriptions (Dolumbia, 2018, p. 118, translated freely). For their part, radio and online media will reach a wider audience.

Media mapping

Djingarey (2021) has conducted non-exhaustive mapping of the media in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, which highlights the diversity

of media and information sources available across this territory:

Mali	Burkina Faso	Niger
Approximately 500 radio stations (commercial, non-profit, community)	1 national radio 23 municipal radio stations 6 institutional radio stations 40 private radio stations 51 community radio stations	1 national radio 202 community radio stations ⁶ 64 private radio stations
More than 200 private newspapers	1 government newspaper 80 newspapers	1 public daily newspaper 1 public weekly 32 private newspapers
60 online media	22 online media, including 2 web TV	Approximately 20 online media
More than 30 TV channels	1 national television channel 12 private television channels 1 community channel	2 public television channels 16 private television channels

⁵ Available at the following link: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-global-digital-overview>.

⁶ Of these, 30 are believed to be inoperational.

Regarding newspaper circulation, it is difficult to know the true numbers and to pinpoint the most popular ones, since there is no institution that can verify the numbers provided, and some newspapers lie about their circulation in order to “come off to advertisers and readers as a big newspaper” (Dolumbia, 2018, p. 114, translated freely).

Information poverty

The concept of information sometimes leads to excessively boiling down the communication functions that inextricably include both the stimulus and the interpretation of that stimulus (Strate, 2012). Interestingly, the concept of information poverty does not only concern access to technology or media products, but also the ability to interpret them, as we mentioned earlier when discussing literacy:

Information poverty is defined as that situation in which individuals and communities, within a given context, do not have the requisite skills, abilities or material means to obtain efficient access to information, interpret it and apply it appropriately.

(Britz, 2004, p. 192)

Thus, it is important to take into account that the quality of media production is inseparable from populations’ ability not only to access it, but also to interpret it and to use it to guide their social participation.

[M]any factors including illiteracy, and particularly digital illiteracy, lack of political will, inefficient methods and poor understanding of social media potential contribute to strongly mitigate digital activities when it comes to access, governance, political participation and peacebuilding.

(Alzouma, 2015, p. 1)

Media reception can be articulated around three key areas: (1) direct or indirect access to media content, (2) sociality, which puts

content and interpretations into circulation through social interactions, and (3) ritualization, which contains habitual, socially constructed forms of media consumption (Boczkowski et al., 2021).

Social co-construction and rumours

Studying the interdependence between production and consumption demands an examination of the effects of the media on the population, but also the effects of the population on the media. This includes the structuring of media, mediums and content. For example, in terms of agenda setting, Chaffee and Metzger, 2001, point out that the media will seek to tell people what to think, but will also be influenced by what people want the media to lead them to think. The same is true of research on political parallelism, which emphasizes that the media’s focus will be affected by the interests of the media companies and their stakeholders, news professionals, but also the media audiences who will choose their media according to the contents and treatment angles that are offered. Indeed, the demotic turn in communications describes the focus of public discourse on the individual and everyday life rather than on expert discourse and the lives of the elites (Turner, 2010). As such it can be associated with democratization, but not necessarily when it only serves as entertainment or populism (Kperogi, 2022) or promotes sensationalism that hinders a deeper understanding of conflict dynamics (Chouliaraki, 2015).

In this context, rumours have a structuring role, infused as they are with political judgments on current events. They “express local realities and worldviews,” and especially proliferate in times of uncertainty or conflict (Tull, 2021). Rumours are a socially disseminated source of information, apart from the dominant and “authorized” narratives (Tull, 2021), and they play a key role in communities where access to media is low and illiteracy is high (Kari, 2007). As a result, despite the development of the Internet, radios remain a key means of communication within communities,

in their local language, which promotes local interaction and cooperation. Local ownership of radios may have transformed them from

a one-directional medium to an important element of content co-creation (Tietaah et al., 2019).

Conditions of journalistic practice

Authoritarian pluralism

The media systems of the African Francophonie are said to be based on an “authoritarian pluralism” (Frère, 2015) with the number of actors, the openness of the market and the principles of independence and media self-regulation suggesting a pluralism that is nevertheless subject to political and economic pressures:

In the facade we see a pluralist media landscape, a market open to private initiatives, an absence of a priori control over media content, a diversity of political parties able to interact with media outlets, and journalists who have gained autonomy through the establishment of their own principles of conduct, professional organisations and self-regulatory bodies. But behind the façade, media outlets have to face maneuvering from those in power who wish to control the flow of information through direct political pressure, indirect economic obstacles, dominance on the public media, and manipulation of the legal framework and judicial system

(Frère, 2015, p. 110).

Indeed, one must consider that ministries of information or communication, self-regulatory bodies, legislators, professional associations, local authorities, telecommunication regulatory authorities (sometimes in charge of radio-frequency allocation), and even the courts and tribunals that sometimes handle press law violations are all stakeholders in the media sector (de la Brosse & Frère, 2012). The

five countries of interest for the purposes of this report all have media regulatory authorities:

- **Mali:** the Haute autorité de la communication (HAC),⁷ created in 2014;
- **Burkina Faso:** the Conseil Supérieur de la Communication (CSC), created in 1995;
- **Niger:** the Conseil Supérieur de la Communication (CSC), created in 1993;
- **Mauritania:** the Autorité de la Presse et de l’Audiovisuel (HAPA), created in 2006; and
- **Chad:** the Haut Conseil de la Communication (HCC), created in 1994.

However, these authorities are not always impartial, they do not all have the same power, their scope of action is often limited, and they cannot intervene in matters involving the Internet and telecommunications (de la Brosse & Frère, 2012; Djingarey, 2021). The effectiveness of regulatory authorities varies according to a variety of factors, including their level of autonomy from the administration, the resources (financial and technological) that the state makes available to regulators, the extent of the powers granted to them, the effectiveness of the regulators, as well as the experience of the staff (de la Brosse & Frère, 2012).

⁷ The HAC replaced the Conseil Supérieur de la Communication (CSC) and the Comité National d’Égal Accès aux Médias d’Etat (CNEAME) that had been established in 2014.

Media funding

The Sahelian media are often in a precarious situation due to underfunding. For example, “[t]he support that states give to private media to fulfil their public service missions is considered insufficient by the media in Niger” (Djingarey, 2021, p.31, translated freely). The situation is not much different in Mali, where most independent media outlets struggle to survive (Diakon & Röschenthaler, 2017; Doumbia, 2018).

In Sahelian Africa, local radio stations rely on external sources (such as Radio China International [RCI], Radio France Internationale [RFI], the British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], and news agencies) to cover international news, due to a lack of resources and administrative difficulties (Mihoubi, 2019). This problem even extends to the country’s interior, where, due to a lack of local correspondents, newspapers struggle to cover the news outside the capital (Frère, Howard, Marthoz & Sebahara, 2005). In addition, it is difficult for journalists to get around; newspapers rarely have cars available or motorcycles (more common) available to their employees (Doumbia, 2018). Journalists often have to find their own transportation, and at their own expense, so that some of them have to spend nearly their entire salary on transportation (Perret, 2005 cited in Doumbia, 2018). Their salary is often low, as the lack of funding for media organizations also affects the working conditions of journalists. The media in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger struggle to pay their staff (Djingarey, 2021).

Journalists’ compensation

Due to the crises caused by the shortage of human resources at newspapers, these media try to round out their teams with foreign journalists who come from Cameroon and Togo, among other places (Doumbia, 2018). One of the foremost reasons for this human resource crisis is poor pay conditions (Doumbia, 2018). African journalists are usually very poorly paid (Sampaio-Dias et al., 2019), and are often volunteers. To survive, they will sometimes adhere to the philosophy and

editorial line of an organization, since it is able to pay them. As a result, a variety of actors can impact the views represented in media reports and articles (Diakon & Röschenthaler, 2017). African journalists are furthermore vulnerable to unethical practices because of their low compensation, which opens them up to attempts at corruption, i.e., bribing them to write favourable or unfavourable articles according to the wishes of the sponsor (Sampaio-Dias et al., 2019). In this space already vulnerable to corruption and rumours, disinformation abounds, and social media only contributes to its spread.

The digitalization of public space and the rise of disinformation

The advent of digital communication technologies may have created a significant gap between the communication habits of different countries, depending on the development of communications infrastructure; however, the gap is gradually tending to close with the deployment of the cellular network on the continent. While Manuel Castells (1998) once described Africa as the black hole of informational capitalism, access to devices and networks has greatly increased in recent years and has very much changed the media landscape in Africa (Kperogi, 2022).

This media diversification may well be accompanied, as in the West, by renewed possibilities of being exposed to forms of disinformation from various sources. For example, the manipulation of public space in various African countries has frequently made headlines, such as when media outlets revealed that the firm Cambridge Analytica used Africa to refine the techniques it then used in the United States to help elect Donald Trump (Mutahi & Kimari, 2020). Disinformation practices, linked to hidden interests, whether political, economic, social or just for fun—consisting, for example, of hiding certain information, taking facts out of context, exaggerating their scope, or even fabricating facts out of thin air—are certainly no example of ethical communicational conduct, but they are more widespread than one might think, at all sorts of levels, in all forms of

communication, insofar as they have a rhetorical function, as we mentioned earlier.

Moreover, the media themselves can be seen as agents of disinformation, especially in a context of close ties between politics and media companies: *“media in Nigeria have been accused of being used as agents of misinformation through the dissemination of ideologically laden contents aimed at deceiving gullible members of the public”* (Okoro & Emmanuel, 2018, p. 68).

A decline in trust in certain sources that are supposed to remain objective and factual, such as the traditional media, may raise the risks of disinformation, including in the choice of information sources. This feeling of being subjected to disinformation is thus connected to low trust in all media, which has been observed in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, among others (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019).

While the digitalization of public space can spur the spread of disinformation, it can also, under certain conditions, foster democratization provided that it supports participation in public space (Alzouma, 2015). While freedom in the choice of channels to use to consult the news may make one vulnerable to disinformation because of the proliferation of sources of varying quality, it also provides a bulwark against elite control of communications with the collaboration of the largest elite-controlled media, in this case, either state or private interests (Murdock & Golding, 1989), and may enable citizens to organize and voice challenges. The descriptions of cases from the region under study show that state controls have been

put in place to counteract the rallying potential of new technologies, leading to the emergence of new control and surveillance mechanisms (Roberts & Ali., 2021).

The era of digitalization, with the different tools it makes available, enables a degree of democratization of information, but also a new form of disinformation and propaganda strategies. In today’s “post-truth era”—if indeed a moment could be identified in African history when the truth was unanimously agreed upon (Ogola, 2017)—it is clear that the country is facing a rise in ideologically targeted disinformation—a subject we will circle back to. Terms associated with disinformation and fake news are widely used to discredit the discourse of opponents, or even to justify a certain censorship: *“This binary construction of the ‘truth’ and ‘false’ news media has serious implications in terms of the credibility of the public and private media in the African context”* (Mare et al., 2019, p. 6).

While digital capitalism, populism and the structural problems of the traditional media may have been diagnostic elements by which to understand the dynamics of disinformation in the Global North, they are not necessarily the exclusive and most relevant causes for the disinformation problem in sub-Saharan Africa (Mare et al., 2019). For instance, the continent may also exhibit disinformation from the Western populist right, conveying misogynistic and xenophobic language (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019 ; Muendo, 2017 ; Wasserman, 2018). This disinformation may be combined with rumours, which may spread rapidly due to orality and the rise of digital technologies.

The role of foreign media

State disinformation is carried by traditional media that are at some level controlled by public authorities, which undermines the public's trust in local media. Because of this statist nature of the country's media, citizens tend to turn to international or private media (Yaméogo, 2016).

However, the influence of foreign media does not stop there, because, as we mentioned earlier, the media ecosystem of certain states such as Mali receives funding from outside countries. Mihoubi (2019) explains that in order to “foster an informational influence operation, it is necessary to establish a local presence, with infrastructures that allow for the production and wide dissemination of information, to maximize the reach of the message to be transmitted” (2019, p. 90, translated freely). For example, early on, equipment donations for Malian media came from China, France and Libya (Diakon & Röschenhaler, 2017), as well as Russia (Audinet, 2021). Moreover, these countries' presence is not neutral. In the Sahel, a rivalry exists between the external broadcasters, especially from France and China,

which influence the international content that is broadcast (Mihoubi, 2019). This foreign presence and the resulting inter-country rivalry do, however, allow Sahelian countries to benefit from new technologies and skill transfer (Mihoubi, 2019).

Additionally, the presence of foreign countries in the Sahelian media sphere also contributes to the Sahel's reliance on international news and does not encourage it to develop its own local media (Mihoubi, 2019).

China

The People's Republic of China has become one of the most important players in recent years. In order to reach the Sahelian population and encourage Sino-African relations, China decided to invest in the media sphere of the countries in this African territory (Mihoubi, 2019). Although it is a major investor and has been setting up media operations since the birth of the Republic in 1949, a growth has been observed since the 2010s (Mihoubi, 2019). RCI's content is rebroadcast on Mali's national radio and expands the reach of Chinese media (Mihoubi, 2019). In addition, China provides training to Malian journalists, with the objective of improving their soft power (Diakon & Röschenthaler, 2017; Mihoubi, 2019). China provides Mali with Chinese-language instruction, press and photojournalist training, radio and television broadcasting, and employment for independent journalists (Diakon & Röschenthaler, 2017). Thus, while China does not require journalists who undergo the training to speak positively about the country, it does expect them to follow the principles that these civil society organizations actively promote by sharing their experience and work (Diakon & Röschenthaler, 2017). The Chinese government indirectly influences these journalists and encourages the dissemination of a discourse that helps promote a favourable image of Chinese activities on African territory.

One of China's strategies is to have various African leaders appear in the media to comment on Sino-African relations: "African political figures use RCI to promote

their activities. At the same time, China takes advantage of their statements to legitimize its diplomatic positions and to stage Sino-African relations" (Mihoubi, 2019, p. 100, translated freely).

France

France, as the former colonizing country, was one of the first to invest in the media development of Sahelian countries. It was France "that set up the infrastructure necessary for its media propaganda" (Mihoubi, 2019, p. 97, translated freely). In fact, any new country wishing to gain a foothold in the region had to face a rivalry with the French media (Mihoubi, 2019).

However, since the fall of 2019, anti-French sentiment has been building in the public sphere in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad due to the inability of a French-led international military mobilization since January 2013 to reverse the deteriorating regional security situation caused by jihadist movements, which we discussed in the contextual framework of this report (Guichaoua, 2020). These military tensions with France on Sahelian territory also show up in the form of informational warfare encouraged by Russia (Lalanne, 2021).

Russia

Russia is a more and more active actor in the media sphere in the Sahel. Kremlin-funded media outlets, including Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, are increasingly being accessed in French-speaking Africa (Audinet, 2021; NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020). RT is one of the largest international media players, with a budget of 330 million euros in 2020 (Audinet, 2021).

Moreover, African media organizations can pick up and share content from Sputnik

propagate “anti-French” narratives in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa, thereby encouraging this sentiment. Indeed, in Mali, there are more and more disinformation campaigns circulating on social media: “The anti-French sentiment being expressed in the Sahel is not created by Russia, but is used and leveraged by Moscow” via troll factories and fake accounts (Cognard, 2022, translated freely).

Examples of documented disinformation campaigns in Sahelian countries according to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022⁸:

Target country	Year begun	Main actors	Objectives
Mali	2021	Wagner Group (Russia)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To spread anti-French, anti-UN and pro-Russian messages ■ To “whitewash” Wagner’s human rights record before its arrival in Mali
Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger	2020	Groups professing to be non-profit organizations, charities and community pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To denigrate democratically elected leaders in order to lay the groundwork for military coups ■ To promote military juntas and delay elections ■ To advocate for a “revolution” in the wider Sahel region
Algeria, Angola, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo and Tunisia	2019	The Israeli political marketing firm Archimedes Group and the political actors who hired it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To promote designated politicians while denigrating others

(which is also a news agency) since it is royalty-free (Audinet, 2021)—which encourages the circulation of Russian discourse within the Sahelian media sphere. One element of this discourse is Russia’s use of the argument that it is not a colonizing country in Africa, with the aim of positioning itself as a better ally than European Union countries, including France (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020). Russian actors also

International coverage therefore plays a particularly important role in the news choices of the Sahelian population and sometimes contributes to disinformation in the country. Yet, for foreign and even local actors, especially journalists with precarious conditions and meager resources, the coverage of conflicts, which are omnipresent on the territory, adds a layer of complexity to the coverage of the news.

8 For the complete table: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/>

Challenges specific to conflict coverage

Conflict reporting raises its own set of challenges, both for local journalists and for foreign journalists sent out into the field or called upon to cover the crisis. Moreover, governments today still have concerns about the negative impact that the media coverage of conflict, war, and military intervention abroad can have on public sentiment, causing them to adapt their communication strategies and practices while also grappling with the media's influence on foreign policy (Aldrin & Hubé, 2022). This non-exhaustive section discusses some of the difficulties specific to such coverage.

Covering conflicts raises challenges in terms of access to the field that will affect journalists in different ways depending on their status and whether they are affiliated with a media outlet. Indeed, this type of situation often requires news professionals to be accompanied by people who have the field experience and local knowledge to connect them with relevant and reliable sources, ensure their safety, and master the languages and dialects of the communities at hand. Gauthier and Bizimana (2022) define the work of fixers as follows: "Fixers are local collaborators who facilitate access to the field and local sources, protect foreign journalists, and participate in the production of international news" (p. 54, translated freely). They also note that the "collaborative relationship between journalist and fixer is one of dependency in a context of high risk for foreign correspondents and parachute journalism; it is also a more complex interdependent relationship based on mutual responsibility at all levels" (Gauthier et Bizimana, 2022, p. 54, translated freely). Fixers are an expensive resource and bring into play the responsibility of media companies to select and ensure the safety of fixers, a point acutely made during the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, when many fixers on the ground asked the home country to protect them or repatriate them in the face of threats of being charged with treason.

Although the fixer's role in producing the news and their risk-taking are sometimes underestimated, journalists place a great deal of trust in fixers, which in turn can lead to other risks, as some fixers may have unsuspected ties to certain factions linked to the conflict and may act in bad faith, either by misleading the journalist or by putting their safety at risk. Despite these limitations, the role of fixer is essential to enable the news professional to do their job well in many operating environments. The cost of paying the fixer is in addition to all the costs of protective equipment and travel, making conflict coverage a significant resource demand on the media, especially foreign media, dispatching correspondents to the area. These costs often contribute to limiting the size and scope of coverage. The situation is even more difficult for freelance journalists who go into the field by their own means and try to sell their articles or reporting. They have limited budgets to purchase equipment and pay for fixers. Independent journalists are all the more inclined to take risks in order to access information on their own, just as some local journalists who lack resources may be. Tejedor, Cervi, and Tusa (2022) conclude that "there is a growing recognition that the most endangered journalists nowadays are not international journalists working for 'big media', [but] rather freelancers and especially local journalists who are forced to report about cases of contact between the authorities and organized crime groups" (online). The cost to ensure the safety of their journalists in conflict zones is overwhelming for media organizations in Niger, pushing them to inform the authorities in advance to take care of security. In fact, since October 2021, journalists must inform the Ministry of Defense and ask for prior authorization before entering a conflict zone (Djingarey, 2021). As for the journalists in Mali, it is nearly impossible for them to travel in two-thirds of the country because it is controlled by terrorists, and therefore, they face a high risk of being kidnapped (Djingarey, 2021).

Conscious or unwitting attempts to control information will also emerge, in a context where access to information and verified sources is already a challenge (Bizimana, 2014). Marthoz (2018) points out the role of propaganda in war and, therefore, in war correspondence. Beyond the use of fixers, one of the specific challenges for news professionals coming from outside or who are less familiar with a given area is being able to find reliable sources, as each party to the conflict will want to share their experience and defend their interests. For these parties, their truth is often the truth. In terms of source selection, one key element of conflict coverage is to be able to recognize rumours and not to trust them (Carignan, 2014). Sources will sometimes, even unknowingly, fuel the rumour as they believe it to be true. All that is necessary is for someone to have heard a bomb go off and to be told that the whole city has been blown up in order to become firmly convinced of this, even if they were unable to get any confirmation. In our field interviews, conducted in the course of previous research, several news professionals told us that one technique to avoid this trap was to go and interview sources on both sides. Often the rumours are the same and only the perpetrators change, depending on the interests to be defended; this juxtaposition of narratives helps to distinguish verified information from disinformation (Carignan, 2014). In addition, the journalist will have to take a step back from their own prejudices and prior beliefs, especially political and cultural ones. Lies uncovered in previous conflicts will fuel current suspicions (Marthoz, 2018).

For local journalists, one of the challenges will also be to distance themselves from the power and pressure of local authorities that may be exerted on them directly or on media companies, especially if their profession has not put in place safeguards to protect itself from attempts to control information from outside influences. In Burkina Faso, due to a recent adoption of amendments to the penal code, journalists are obligated to request prior authorization in order to collect information on terrorism and make it available

to the public (Djingarey, 2021). This is emphasized by Mostefaoui (1992), who states, “The main stumbling block for Maghrebi journalists is the difficulty of creating a sense of collegiality between peers that can help bring the members of the ‘brotherhood’ closer together (on the basis of union and ethical matters) while also enabling them to take a greater distance from the power of the state” (p. 65, translated freely). Disregarding political attitudes and positions thus becomes difficult considering the position of the country or the political and social ideologies shared with one of the factions in a conflict. “In major conventional wars, journalists covering a conflict in which their country was involved rarely reported from the other side. That would have been looked upon as a betrayal,” as Marthoz (2018, p. 117, translated freely) notes. Thus, conflict coverage is not neutral but sometimes suffers from ideological biases toward the factions involved.

“For years now, conflict journalism has been deemed a ‘risky profession,’” as Bizimana (2006, online, freely translated) points out. Indeed, conflict coverage presents several security issues. Media companies do not always have the resources to prepare journalists for the field and to support them when they return with trauma and stress. A culture of silence exists in certain media outlets, where journalists will keep quiet about the difficulties they experienced after their time in the field so as not to be seen as weak or to be prevented from being deployed again in the future. Nevertheless, kidnappings of journalists, deaths and recurrent threats raise questions about the conditions of practice. This “escalation (...) in many parts of the world raises acute questions about the conditions of journalistic practice, the assessment and management of risks in situations of permanent tension within conflict zones, and greater protection for journalists of all categories who are sent out in the field to gather information (...)” (Bizimana, 2016, online, translated freely). Adopting protective and safety measures, as well as training, is an important responsibility for the profession and media companies in order to help journalists

minimize the risks and consequences of covering conflict (both physical and psychological/emotional). However, these measures are not offered in a coordinated or homogenous manner. They vary greatly depending on the country, the size of the media outlet, or the status of news professionals and the organizations and associations to which they have access.

Conflict coverage also raises red flags among foreign audiences that can spur governments to take action:

“Mediated pain nourishes a kind of ‘suffering from a distance’” (Boltanski, 1993, translated freely) in citizens of distant countries who have no experience of misery or war. Pressure from an emotional, indignant, or even outraged public opinion can push governments to intervene (or think about doing so)—from the media coverage of conflicts in Biafra in the early 1970s or the boat people in 1979 to the Syrian refugees after 2015

(Aldrin & Hubé, 2022, p. 141, translated freely).

Nevertheless, this “journalistic coverage of international events is very dependent on the state-centric and ethnocentric interests of journalists, its supposed cost-effectiveness for the public, and the conditions associated with the production of international news that is increasingly covered remotely with fewer and fewer correspondents” (Marchetti, 2015, translated freely). The cruel calculation made by Esther Duflo in 2005 is that “a disaster taking place on the African continent needs 48 times as many victims to get as much coverage on American television as a disaster in America or Europe” (cited by Jeangene Vilmer, 2012, p. 254)” (Aldrin & Hubé, 2022, pp. 141-142). Thus, the news circulates in a complex media context, subject to multiple influences, in the Sahel. This complexity adds challenges for our monitoring, to which we now turn.

Presentation of the research centres producing grey literature on the Sahel

This section begins by briefly mapping the research centres that produce grey literature on political and security issues in the Sahel. These centres, through their texts, have helped nourish and structure monitoring activities on the Sahel. Indeed, the individuals who have conducted Sahel monitoring have often relied on the freely available reports, research notes, and analytical documents provided by these research centres. These documents help define the terms and ultimately the content of the monitoring, which is produced by various analysts in the public and private sectors (Suire, 2021).

Some of these research centres also produce monitoring-related documents. The main types of such documents will also be presented in this section. However, a comprehensive overview of Sahel monitoring initiatives—available on an open access basis—is hardly possible. Since the beginning of the Malian crisis in 2012, an exponential growth has been observed in the number of research centres specializing in the Sahel or structures that develop programs on the Sahel. The following mapping is therefore merely intended to present a few influential international and regional research centres, their types of productions, as well as the monitoring documents they produce. It is based on an introspective look at the practices observed in the field during years of research in the Sahel. The focus is solely on political and security dimensions.

Main research centres that structure monitoring activities in the Sahel

The major organizations producing research for the professional world include the International Crisis Group (ICG) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Africa. ICG's Sahel unit regularly produces dense and empirically well-researched reports based on field

research and a triangulation effort that is rare in the grey literature. Their work is widely read and commented on by practitioners studying the Sahel. ICG's Sahel unit also produces other shorter, explanatory formats that guide practitioners' monitoring activities. In a similar vein, ISS Africa regularly publishes reports, research notes, and short articles on political and security issues in the Sahel, thanks to a network of African researchers based in the sub-region.

Other research centres have gradually emerged as key players that are regularly followed by analysts engaged in monitoring. In Canada, the *Centre Francopaix* has published numerous reports and newsletters that are widely read and shared among practitioners. In Italy, the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) also produces similar literature in their Africa program, drawing on Italian, African, and international scholars. The reports and analyses of the *Clingendael Institute* in the Netherlands or the *Sahel and West Africa Club*, hosted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), also produce studies in various formats (notes and reports) that inform the representations of analysts conducting monitoring work. L'Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute in Sweden (SIPRI) and the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, based in Washington, likewise produce outstanding documentation. The Centre Francopaix newsletter formats or the Africa Security Brief are short documents that make it possible to quickly identify the main political and security issues in the region. The African Security Sector Reform (ASSR) and the Timbuktu Institute, based in Dakar, are also regularly consulted.

The monitoring produced by research centres

There are numerous initiatives aiming to offer monitoring (based on short summaries) on the Sahel that are freely available. They are often presented in the form of newsletters or bulletins that can be subscribed to online via the websites of the corresponding structures.

The *Weekly news* from the University of Florida's Sahel Research Group (SRG) is historically one of the first newsletters to provide summary and user-friendly monitoring of the region for practitioners. The sources used for this monitoring are the international and Sahelian print media. A minimum of two sources are used per news item. The *Clingendael Institute* also offers weekly monitoring entitled *The Echoes of the Sahel*. However, each news item is treated through a single article, which cuts down on cross-referencing efforts. An interesting variation, in terms of monitoring, is produced by the Groupe de recherche et d'information sur la paix et la sécurité (GRIP), based in Belgium. GRIP has created a *Monitoring Afrique de l'Ouest* section on its website. The document has been produced quarterly since 2011 and has covered news from West Africa and the Sahel. Nevertheless, this monitoring seems to have decreased in frequency since 2021; the last quarterly review was dated January 2021. Finally, the African Center for Strategic Studies also offers a *Daily Media Review* that can be subscribed to, but it consists of daily media coverage of the African continent at large. One of the issues associated with these monitoring activities offered by the various research centres is that they are often carried out by junior analysts who do not necessarily have an in-depth knowledge of the contexts and issues covered.

One monitoring document, *CrisisWatch*, produced by the International Crisis Group, has the particularity of offering a monthly overview of latent or active conflicts around the world, with a short regular update, in paragraph form, on the situation in the Sahel countries. This document is very similar to those produced by geopolitical and political/security risk analysis

consulting firms (Farrah, 2021; Bencherif 2021c; Bremand, 2021). Indeed, there are convergences when examining the literature produced by research centres with an applied vocation, on the one hand, and consulting firms and research structures focused on political risk analysis, on the other. This proximity in the way things are done is often neglected (Bencherif & Mérand, 2021). However, it helps orient monitoring activities and can in some cases reinforce biases in the processing of information.

Other initiatives: social media and alternative media

Many international and Sahelian actors who are particularly active on social media attempt to offer monitoring to analysts or their citizens regarding the situation in Sahelian countries, especially when attacks or armed incidents take place in certain areas. The most regular monitoring activities can be found on Twitter and Facebook. The ones on Twitter are generally more professional. Many WhatsApp groups also exist, with community or research-sharing orientations. News is also very often shared from person to person via WhatsApp. Some of these people are native to specific regions and have access to news before the media. Nevertheless, even if some of these people are reliable sources, the problem is the reliability of the information they pass along. Not everyone has triangulation reflexes and many improvise in their monitoring activities. Consequently, although they are informed and can share relevant information on social media, they may also spread unfounded rumours, inaccurate information or interpretations influenced by power issues in local arenas, etc. However, there are also Sahelian journalists, such as Baba Ahmed, or international journalists, such as Manon Laplace or Wassim Nasr, as well as local researchers in the field who share information almost immediately and who are mindful of triangulating it. Some international researchers studying the Sahel are also very active on social media sites, and perform public monitoring by reacting and commenting on current events. These include Yvan Guichaoua, Adam Sandor, Alex Thurston

and Andrew Lebovich. Some analyst groups are also very active on Twitter: the Sahel2r3s or **MENASTREAM**⁹ conduct remarkable monitoring of the region, particularly MENASTREAM with its coverage of attacks.

Finally, a number of local initiatives have emerged since the Malian crisis erupted in 2012. They seem to be structured around a few people, sometimes volunteers, or around figures interested in conducting monitoring. Among the monitoring produced on Twitter that has garnered a large following are *Sahel Security Alerts*, which mainly covers Burkina Faso, and the cyberactivists *Abdalah* (@abdalaag2022) and *Larmes des pauvres* (@ocisse691), who cover Mali.

Methodology for the evaluation of monitoring challenges

To illustrate the challenges of monitoring and to explicitly reveal media bias, this section proposes a case study. It consists of an analysis of the *Weekly news* produced by the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida.

This case study was chosen for several reasons. First, it is both succinct and direct, and as such it is a classic monitoring document, similar to internal documents produced within security agencies or ministries. It is a weekly document summarizing two news items per Sahelian country, in three bullet points. It covers the countries in our study, namely Mauritania, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali.

The sources used by the *Weekly news* can be subdivided into three categories: international, African/regional, and local. Thus, the analysis of these media, the information sources of the newsletters, will reveal trends regarding the quality of the information and its

impacts on the monitoring. The *Weekly news* is the type of document that may be used as a basis for attempts at systematization using algorithms and quantitative approaches. It is therefore important to assess the challenges and potential biases associated with these types of documents.

The *Weekly news* has also been produced continuously for the period covered by our case study, i.e., 2019-2022. Realistically, we wanted to cover the period from January 2019 to June 2022¹⁰, to be able to analyze the region's news coverage more insightfully. More coverage, since 2012, may have resulted in a superficial and systemic reading that would not have allowed for delving into the more complex challenges of the monitoring. The acceleration of political events since 2020 also required diligent coverage of this period (successive coups, multiple elections, large-scale terrorist attacks, corruption scandals, etc.). However, the choice was made to initiate the monitoring in 2019 to observe if there might be variations in monitoring activities before and after COVID-19. Finally, the *Weekly news* of the SRG was chosen because Dr. Adib Bencherif, one of the report's co-authors, actively participated in producing this newsletter between 2019 and 2021, allowing for an analytical, yet reflexive, articulation of the challenges associated with the Sahel monitoring exercise.

The analysis of the *Weekly news* material was triangulated with the grey literature to allow for greater empirical contextualization.¹¹ The monitoring covered by the *Weekly news* is divided into themes in the analysis set forth in this report, to facilitate our examination of media challenges and biases and help make recommendations according to the type of political-security event.

The themes¹² studied within the newsletters are:

9 MENASTREAM is a consulting firm specializing in security issues.

10 The latest coup d'état in Burkina Faso, which began on September 30, 2022, was therefore not covered by the Sahel Research Group's systematic analysis in the context of the *Weekly news*.

11 When making specific references to an article in the empirical section, we indicate the source or author and the date of publication. Interested readers may contact us to request access to the articles mentioned, as the research assistants compiled all the *Weekly news* issues from 2019 to 2022.

12 The identified themes are not exhaustive but were the phenomena that could benefit from a fairly exhaustive treatment by the research team within the time available. Other themes to be explored will be proposed in our conclusion.

- Terrorism and counterterrorism;
- International interventions;
- Popular demonstrations;
- Coups d'état; and
- Elections.

For each theme, we selected major events for the analysis of the main trends in the monitoring of the Sahelian countries. Recommendations or solutions will be suggested for each theme in order to improve the monitoring activities.

General challenges and resulting biases of media monitoring on the Sahel

The analysis of media monitoring conducted in the Sahel Research Group's *Weekly news* helped identify general and cross-cutting challenges to the monitoring, irrespective of the theme. These challenges (6) can lead to analytical biases during monitoring.

First, a general lack of diversity can be observed in the written sources used in the monitoring. Despite the effort to triangulate international and Sahelian media in the *Weekly news*, official sources or testimonies of government actors continue to dominate and little triangulation is done with civil society actors. However, this bias is intrinsic to the media content available in written and open access sources. When civilian testimony appears in the articles, it is often limited to a single story, for example related by a movement spokesperson. In the perception of the analyst and the monitor, this results in homogenizing public and community opinion, leading to risks of essentialism and oversimplifying the actors and their relational dynamics. Moreover, the monitoring rarely uses primary sources or more distanced institutional documents such as certain UN reports. These resources appear to offer more detailed and abundant information, so that monitoring may benefit from using them more extensively, although the challenge is to synthesize them within very short time frames.

Second, the monitoring tends to primarily utilize international newspapers, thereby

diminishing the local perspective on issues, despite the effort made in the Sahel Research Group's *Weekly news* to have one local and one international source for each story, on average. There are several reasons for the relative importance of the international media in the monitoring. Access to local newspapers available online, in French and English, is quite limited. They are also uneven in quality, often written in the tone of opinion pieces, and do not necessarily provide additional information to the international sources. Several Sahelian sources take up articles in French from international, African or regional sources and publish them directly on their sites, such as *Maliweb* or *Maliactu*.

Third, the need for the monitoring to report events in a short time frame means that it is often based on articles published on the spot. These articles are short and often lack context. It often appears necessary in the monitoring to revisit the events, based on articles published after obtaining more substantial information, via investigative journalists or identifiable correspondents who can provide greater triangulation work and present more context. This necessary iteration in the monitoring is prompted by the intrinsic limits of media that are short on the time, resources and interest to delve deeper into the news. This specific monitoring cannot therefore take place immediately, and the initial coverage may lead to reporting errors and inaccuracies. This is often the case in early coverage of

armed attacks or sudden political changes, such as coups.

Nevertheless, the *Weekly news* often goes back over the news, updating and correcting initial statements, thanks to the new information available in the media. These more analytical articles, written after investigation, bring together a multitude of actors by putting forward their (sometimes contradictory) points of view, generating richer monitoring than that based on the facts presented, for example, in a governmental news release justifying security measures and stating potential threats. Such articles are only feasible in a second stage, in the case of sudden political events, due to a lack of information in open access sources (coups, emergency political measures, armed attacks).

Fourth, a recurring issue in the monitoring is the rare explicit presentation of sources that allows us to evaluate the stance of the actor and the reliability of the source and the information reported. This is often due to the importance of ensuring anonymity in contexts involving precarious security. Correspondents are often the proxy for a news item. They do not always give clear references as to the source of the information, which is problematic for evaluating the reliability of the information by the monitor. Some areas, being the scene of violence, have become almost inaccessible and, when analyzing the monitoring produced in the *Weekly news*, few articles explain how the information was obtained and triangulated. Populations may therefore doubt the information and prefer other versions of the facts, which may be more rumour-based and fuel conspiracy theories to varying degrees. These conspiracy theories may also be at the core of the information obtained by field researchers. It is therefore common for some uncertainty to remain as to the reliability of the information presented in the monitoring. Monitors, being cautious, are therefore encouraged to use the conditional tense and to write in more hypothetical terms when they are unable to confirm a strict course of action or sequence of events.

Fifth, the numbers collected in the monitoring and associated with the events are often inaccurate. Triangulating information is a delicate task for the monitor. Government sources appear to inflate or downplay the numbers depending on the circumstances. Questions arose, for example, when Chadian forces claimed to have neutralized a surprising total of 1,000 Boko Haram terrorists in a single operation in 2020. This said, government sources also tend to underestimate the death toll after a terrorist attack compared to civilian sources on the ground. The inconsistencies in the numbers of casualties could be explained, among other things, by the fact that the dead are often buried quickly, which complicates the assessment of actual victim counts.

Finally, the sixth issue has to do with the various dimensions of the context. It is probably one of the main challenges, if not the main challenge. Monitoring generally presents little contextualization of the actors and no information on their interrelations or how spatio-temporal dynamics have evolved. When the monitoring touches on a military theme (an armed attack), this tendency is even stronger. However, when the *Weekly news* relates statements by experts, academics and analysts in news coverage, the information is presented in a more contextualized and nuanced way.

Similarly, the monitoring rarely puts into perspective the multiple temporalities associated with an event or a political process (history of coups during a regime change, or specific tendencies or evolution in the stance of leaders with respect to armed attacks). This makes it impossible to determine whether the news is marking a break with the past (especially when it is presented in this way in the news) or part of a trend that the country in question has been undergoing in recent years. This tendency is in part mitigated by readers' access to optional supplemental multimedia content (maps, videos, Twitter links, links to previous articles, etc.). This said, if readers do not consult this additional content, they are missing out on background information that is crucial to the monitoring.

As for the geographic context, little information is given on local governance structures, even in the case of elections or coups. In the context of violent events (whether targeted or systemic), few reference points exist to properly situate the event. The monitoring rarely allows the reader to put events into perspective in terms of the natural resources distributed over the territory and their management by local or centralized authorities. Monitoring that is accompanied with maps and visuals likely also allows for a better understanding of the workings of armed groups, such as jihadist groups. The *Weekly news* regularly reveals that jihadists are taking advantage of the particular topography of the Lake Chad region. However, there is no contextual evidence produced by the monitoring to capture how this swampy, island-strewn topography strategically benefits the jihadis. And yet this information appears to be essential to the monitoring exercise itself.

Finally, it is worth noting the caution observed around concepts appearing in the

Weekly news, particularly when the identity of the actor or description of the event is shrouded in uncertainty. The SRG monitoring frequently features articles that use “quotation marks” to emphasize lingering doubt about a piece of information or the use of a term. Quotation marks are also used when employing the terms used by local actors and that may therefore be politicized. Nevertheless, the use of quotation marks in the monitoring makes the events more complex to interpret. Users of the monitoring are not necessarily familiar with the issues that led the monitor to use quotation marks for a given concept.

The following section will examine the specificities associated with each of the previously identified themes, namely terrorism and counterterrorism, international interventions, elections, coups and popular demonstrations.

Terrorism and counterterrorism

When it comes to armed attacks, the monitoring often presents information in a rather simple way, and this entails the risk of a binary presentation of information. Indeed, a binary outlook tends to legitimize governments or official actors and delegitimize armed militias and jihadist groups, whereas the reality is more complex.

A contextualization of the actors, their objectives, and their interrelationships is necessary given the complexity of the terrorist phenomena in the Sahel. For example, the gradual expansion of territory affected by terrorist attacks is regularly attributed to JNIM or the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara between 2019 and 2022, even though spatial conquests are partly defined by internal jihadist dynamics; *katiba* or even sub-units of *katiba* of these coalitions carry out the armed attacks. There is a tendency to essentialize the realities

of jihadist groups, without taking into account the internal dynamics and diversity that also explain violent actions. In addition, the strong growth in the number of Islamist militants in recent years, as evidenced by the increase in the number of attacks and their geographic scope, has likely weakened the decision-making structure of these groups. Some of the militants partake in a mercenary logic in which the “profession of arms” (Debos, 2013) is contributing to redefining the regional political economy (Bencherif, 2021b). This is, for example, the case for the JNIM-affiliated Katiba Macina (Macina Liberation Front) and certain units of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (EIGS), whose militants are reportedly engaged in exploitation, extortion, and control of artisanal gold mining sites within local communities (ICG, 2019; Raineri, 2020). While some of the actions performed around the gold mining sites, such as securing the site, may stem from leadership

decisions, many initiatives are also carried out by *katiba* leaders and their men. These organizational tensions and the gap between strategic, operational, and tactical considerations have been central to the challenges of armed action by jihadist groups in the Sahel since the 2000s (Bencherif, 2020).

Thus, a disconnect can often be seen between the claims of the leaders of jihadist groups and the real actions on the ground. A good example of this can be found among some Fulani fighters of the Macina Katiba, dissatisfied with the protection of their communities, who have unilaterally carried out vengeful attacks on Dogon communities, without orders and despite the more nuanced statements of their leader Amadou Koufa. Some of them have defected to the Islamic State, which takes a globally more radical approach, particularly with regard to land conflicts (Jourde et al., 2019; Campana & Sandor, 2019; Roger, 2018; Mondafrique, 2020).

The sample of articles utilized by the *Sahel Research Group* monitoring exposes fuzzy and sometimes contradictory information in the way the internal and external dynamics of terrorist groups are presented, in addition to rarely naming the individuals who are responsible for the attacks or leading the operations. The middle rung in the hierarchy of jihadist groups is rarely well understood. Furthermore, the articles used in the monitoring very rarely involve people who have expertise on the subject and on the region. Experts mobilized in an article by Mathieu Olivier (JeuneAfrique, 2020-03-25) featured rare testimony shedding light on the ideological split between the different factions of the Boko Haram group. One of them is said to have initially remained loyal to the thinking of former leader Abubakar Shekau, and the other, to have become affiliated with the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP). The dynamics between the different factions stemming from Boko Haram are in fact even more fluid and complex.¹³ Yet this article was one of the few to refer to the concept of “faction” within a terrorist group. Most of the other articles

make out Boko Haram and ISWAP as “rivals,” without further caution or nuance.

When groups are named, their demands or aspirations are rarely expressed. This is all the more problematic because demands can also change according to local, regional and national contexts. The goals and motivations behind violent attacks and events are, therefore, rarely presented. Only a few of the previous day’s articles that make use of expert opinion take the time to analyze the potential motivations of the attackers. Contradictions also often abound in the information collected by the monitoring on the actors’ objectives and intentions.

This is the case of the media coverage on the attack in Solhan, Burkina Faso, on the night of June 4-5, 2021. Most of the monitoring draws on the governmental discourse to emphasize that the motives were economic, i.e., control of gold-mining sites. However, one article in particular explores the possibility that the Solhan attack was specifically aimed at weakening the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (VDP), a militia made up of volunteers from Burkina that helps the national army fight terrorists (Al Jazeera 2021-06-10, Burkina). However, these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive; the attacks may have been carried out to weaken the VDP and any potential opposition forces, and to regain dominance over the locality and control of the gold-mining sites. Finally, the attack does not appear to have come on the heels of an order by the JNIM leadership, but was rather an initiative of an “undisciplined” subgroup (RFI, 2021-06-25).

Finally, the monitoring often exhibits a methodological issue concerning the use of the term “terrorist.” During an attack, the identity of the assailants is very rarely known at the time of the events. The media should therefore not have the information necessary to label an attack as being “terrorist,” except for operations involving “terrorist” methods (e.g., suicide bombing). Despite this, the vast majority of the articles bring to the fore the macro security context, implying that it was a

¹³ For a deeper understanding of the schisms and realignments of Boko Haram’s elements, see among others, Alex Thurston, “Abu Mus’ab al-Barnawi’s Interview with the Islamic State’s Al-Naba’ Magazine,” *Journal for Islamic Studies*, vol. 36, 2017, p. 257-275.

terrorist attack partaking in strong regional trends. The likelihood of this being a terrorist attack is high because of the growing influence of these groups. Yet not all attacks occurring in the Sahel are solely “terrorist” in origin or, at the least, they may elude command and fall under a non-organizational logic or be rooted in extremely local relational power plays, not to mention that there is no consensus on the very definition of terrorism (Campana, 2018; Carignan & Marcil-Morin, 2018; Carignan, 2018; Campana & Hervouet, 2013). According to a 2020 study, the majority of attacks attributed to JNIM, for example, were never claimed by the jihadist coalition (Eizenga & Williams, 2020).

Inter-community tensions are also exploited by terrorist groups to fuel their recruitment campaigns. This has an amplifying effect on local conflicts, but also blurs the lines between intercommunal conflicts and terrorist attacks. Indeed, in their discourse, groups such as the Macina katiba mobilize the inter-community injustices perpetrated

against herders in connection with access to land, the frequent theft of livestock, and local and traditional authorities’ over-exploitation and taxation of populations (Brottem, 2021; Jourde et al., 2019). It is, among other things, through these communication strategies and instances of narrative staging that the JNIM subgroup gains support among populations in central Mali (Le Roux, 2019). In the case of the EIGS, the Sahrawi leader managed to recruit Fulani by tapping into the resentment they had toward certain anti-terrorist operations led by Tuareg paramilitary groups, in which certain attacks had been committed against Fulani communities (Bencherif, 2018; Grémont, 2019). This said, individual disputes over land distribution do exist and should not be confused with acts of a terrorist nature (Brottem, 2021). When an attack occurs in the region, one must therefore have a thorough knowledge of the immediate context of the event in order to identify, beyond any doubt, that it is indeed a terrorist attack. Unfortunately, these nuances rarely come through in media coverage of the violence in the Sahel.

International interventions

The shortcomings raised regarding the previous two themes also apply to the theme of international intervention. Moreover, beyond these shortcomings, there are inaccuracies and confusions specific to this theme.

Monitoring of international interventions generally presents little information enabling the reader to understand that military interventions are not sufficient in themselves. They must be accompanied by strong support for the sustainable development of these countries in order to have a real chance of halting the spread of terrorism. This being said, some of the articles in the Sahel Research Group’s monitoring sometimes do touch on the subject, as in this article quoting Dr. Ibrahim: “Even as French forces have proved able to ‘cut the grass’ by killing jihadists, they have been unable to ‘stop jihadism from expanding’, argues Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim of the International

Crisis Group” (The Economist, 2021-02-18). Two other sources point in the same direction: “This is an acknowledgment that France’s strategy has not been working” (RFI & Jézéquel, 2021-06-10, translated freely) and “To avoid the risk of getting stuck in conflict, we need a response that is not only military.” (France24, 2021-11-16). Similarly, the monitoring rarely notes “alternatives” to these foreign interventions, such as the necessary and inevitable negotiation with certain components of the jihadist groups (Bencherif, 2018; ICG, 2019). Yet a number of countries have even tried to include armed and/or terrorist groups in dialogues in order to reach peace agreements (The Economist 2021-02-18).

Moreover, the monitoring fails to present the host countries’ actual capacity for international interventions. It is frequently mentioned that they “need” these interventions, but not why and in what way, aside from having more

soldiers fighting. This missing information in the print media is a problematic starting point for reflection on the intervention methods of foreign countries.

Finally, the monitoring also presents few views that highlight the blunders of international interventions and local forces. Notably, recommendations to avoid these blunders are rare in the discourse collected by officials. Nevertheless, an interesting method can be observed regarding some of the sources at the heart of the Sahel Research Group's monitoring. An example would be an article of *Jeune Afrique*, which refers to prior violent acts:

This is not the first time that the French forces of Operation Barkhane have been accused of blunders in Mali. After the 2016 death of a 12-year-old child in the Adrar des Ifoghas, France promised to make the results of the investigation public, but it has never officially acknowledged

its responsibility. Another example would be the 2017 deaths, during an operation by French Barkhane forces, of 11 Malian military personnel taken hostage by jihadists near Abeibara in the north of the country. France had rejected the accusations of a blunder

(Diallo & Sangaré 2021-03-30, translated freely).

It is important to note that violent acts are not perpetrated by one specific foreign actor. Russian security forces in Mali have also committed violent acts on civilians in joint counterterrorism operations with the Malian army. One example is the Moura incident in April 2022 in Mali. Nevertheless, it is difficult to be able to say that the incidents covered in the written press and reported during the monitoring provide a real picture of the blunders and violent acts committed by international security forces.

Elections

Regarding the coverage of legislative and presidential elections, the monitoring does not generally allow for a complete and detailed record of political figures having finished their terms of office. It is said that the situation has improved, deteriorated or stayed the same, but few articles will make links with concrete policies implemented by political actors.

Generally speaking, the treatment of information by the monitoring does not demonstrate whether the population seems satisfied, although dissatisfactions are clearly noted when they are expressed in public space. If splits do exist in certain strata of the population, the monitoring, due to weak media coverage, fails to provide a portrait of the political visions of the different groups concerned. As a result, the monitoring does not generally provide an adequate grasp of the structure and characteristics of the country's electorate (who people vote for and how

they are distributed across the country) prior to an election.

Similar to the previous themes, articles that feature an identifiable author seem, in general, more likely to rally public opinion. The media treatment, and *ipso facto* the monitoring, appear to be better when it comes to demonstrations and political protests. In this context, the media treatment generally targets the localities in which the demonstrations took place. The different opinions, especially of the demonstrators, are therefore transcribed in the press to identify the motivations that triggered the protests.

When presidential elections are combined with legislative elections, the monitoring tends to focus almost entirely on the presidential elections. This phenomenon echoes the concepts of presidentialization and personification of elections in general. The focus is on the person who is supposed to embody power

within the executive branch. This bias may also be caused by the complexity of news treatment in the context of legislative elections.

The monitoring pays particular attention to election irregularities. However, little is said about the institutional context, the political parties and the different electorates, with the exception of regular mentions of the party of the head of state or of the key actors in the official opposition. Only a few articles express what is prescribed in the electoral law, the power structure in the country, the most important parties, the party or parties making up the opposition, and whether the country has been historically characterized by a two-party system, a single party, etc. Similarly, it is rare for the monitoring to show which regions of

the country favour one party over another. The monitoring frequently names the parties, but no information is offered on their ideology or policies. Moreover, in the case of Mali, Niger and Chad, the alliances between political parties have a huge impact on the ability of the party in power to act in the Legislative Assembly. Yet the monitoring pays scarce attention to this, except when rare investigative articles allow it.

Thus, the analysis in the election monitoring does not allow for contextualizing the outcomes, their impacts and any irregularities. The monitoring tends to report facts without analyzing the causes and consequences of situations that could be considered problematic. They are sometimes raised, but attempts at a summary explanation are rare.

Coups d'État

The monitoring usually provides some brief background on the causes behind a coup (growing tensions due to a situation of perpetual insecurity, economic dissatisfaction, etc.). It does not mention, in its sources, any further analysis of the structural causes and consequences of the coups, except for a small number of articles that offer up a few avenues.

Certain terms such as “return to constitutional order,” “return to the rule of law,” and “democratic space” are frequently used to criticize the coups in the articles and call for a return to the previous situation. However, no definition or link to the previous institutional context is presented. One may wonder whether the population, which was suffering from growing insecurity and human rights violations, may have had strong doubts that they were actually living in a context of “constitutional order” and “rule of law” before the coup.

Like the phenomenon of presidentialization in election coverage, coup monitoring places special focus on the coup leader and plotters or the people close to them who acceded to positions of power. Little attention is paid to the groups and organizations that

sparked the events and their motives and ideologies, probably due to a lack of investigative articles on these networks.

For each country analyzed in the context of coups (Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso), the monitoring features at least one article dealing exclusively with the life of an individual who led a coup. The treatment of the news sometimes takes the form of an interview with this individual, similar to a biographical article. This is the case of Assimi Goïta in Mali (*Mali's 'Black Panther': who is military junta leader Assimi Goïta?*, RFI 2020-09-02), of Mahamat Idriss Déby in Chad (*Exclusive – Chad – Mahamat Idriss Déby : “Mon père serait fier de moi”*, JeuneAfrique 2021-06-27) and of Paul-Henri Damiba in Burkina Faso (*Who is Paul-Henri Damiba, leader of the Burkina Faso coup?*, Al Jazeera 2022-01-25). This approach highlights the trajectories of the individuals who fell from power and potentially helps grasp certain elements that led to their fall.

Once again, monitoring that draws on the opinions of local or international analysts and experts (i.e., mostly articles written by identifiable authors) shows much more in-depth

analytical content. Certain particularities are worth noting regarding the theme of coups. Public opinion is best explored by articles by authors who turn to experts (more direct accounts from the public than opinions from organizational spokespeople). This is also the case for coverage of the relations between the actors (CÉDÉAO, the population, the military junta, elected governments or opposition figures). In contrast, monitoring that relies solely on articles written by international news agencies seems to involve more dialogue between spokespersons from civil society organizations and official sources.

The fate of the outgoing head of state and the international reaction (states, the UN, regional organizations, etc.) to a coup are very well covered by the monitoring, possibly because coups are closely monitored by these regional and international actors. The coverage is similar when it comes to scrutinizing the first decisions of a new, military-dominated government (return to constitutional order, establishment of a founding program/document and transitional bodies/institutions, planning for new elections, modification of existing institutions, issuance of main orientations, new appointments, etc.). Despite this focus, little

political/institutional context accompanies the factual information that is presented. The main changes announced by a transitional government are revealed, without necessarily presenting the situation prior to these transformations.

Sanctions following a coup are frequently presented in the monitoring as a solution put forward by regional or international actors to counter military takeovers. The monitoring more rarely addresses the negative consequences that sanctions can have on state populations or institutions. These can include strengthening anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiment that can even be negative toward regional organizations such as CÉDÉAO, resulting in increased popular support for the military. The serious consequences in terms of development and the weakening of the social fabric, which arise from the disruption of trade, are also rarely mentioned. These consequences appear to feature more prominently when the monitoring focuses directly on accounts from the population rather than from official sources (i.e., mostly in articles that draw on identifiable authors). There is strong criticism of actors such as France and CÉDÉAO and their actions to counter military takeovers.

Popular demonstrations

The number of people who take part in a demonstration is rarely estimated in the monitoring, which focuses more on demonstration organizers (often the opposition parties). While participants do not necessarily subscribe to the same ideology as the discourses that are presented, some of the articles utilized in the monitoring make generalizations in this regard by making no distinction between individual and organizational discourses, as in the following example: “Some had travelled hundreds of kilometres to attend the opposition-led demonstration in Ouagadougou, where protesters waved the red and green Burkinabe flag and blew whistles” (Ndiaga, Reuters 2021-07-03). This kind of generalizing language may suggest that all those participating in the

demonstration support the opposition whereas this is not necessarily the case. This situation seems to occur regularly, considering that most of the demonstrations take place in the context of a political challenge to the current government. However, the actors are well identified by the monitoring, often making it possible to associate the demands with a group and an individual.

Monitoring that aims to report information about popular movements can never adequately represent the many diverging views shared by individuals. The common practice is to turn to spokespersons from civil society organizations, which comes with certain limitations mentioned earlier in this report. This

practice does, however, provide a glimpse into some of the demands and ideologies that might be shared by the demonstrators. This said, the most representative and accurate practice would be to go and speak directly with a few demonstrators, which certain media outlets, such as *Deutsche Welle* (DW),¹⁴ seem to do frequently.

There appear to be some inconsistencies regarding the observations made by some media. During the pro-junta demonstrations following the coup in Burkina Faso in 2022, the statement, “No anti-French slogans were chanted during the rally, but some demonstrators, brandishing Russian flags, called on the MPSR to establish further partnerships in the fight against terrorism” appeared in an article by the *Journal de Montréal* (JDM, 2022-02-19, translated freely). An article from *AfricaNews* published the next day, however, stated: “Many in the crowd waved Russian flags and held anti-France banners” (AfricaNews, 2022-02-20). It would appear imprudent to claim that “no anti-French slogans were chanted” when the frustration with France’s role was clear. Narratives rooted in anti-colonial sentiments toward France and calling for closer ties with Russia were central narratives in the demonstrations that followed the coup.¹⁵

Some of the sources used in the monitoring appear to adopt good journalistic practice regarding the theme of demonstrations, in particular by having demonstrators speak directly during the events. It could be hypothesized that this is due to the fact that information is more easily accessible and triangulable in urban centres such as capital cities (where the largest events are located), while it is increasingly difficult to access in remote areas (where terrorist attacks most frequently occur).

In contrast to the more ambiguous situations related to terrorism and international interventions, the monitoring on demonstrations clearly identifies the security forces (and the units potentially responsible) when they injure or kill demonstrators.

Cross-cutting challenges were noted in the analysis of the *Weekly news* (diversity of sources needed, quality of local sources, the issue of contextualization, news scripting etc.). Certain political/security phenomena can be observed to be more delicate to cover, such as terrorism, counterterrorism and international interventions. The following section will present a few findings and make recommendations to improve the quality of the monitoring conducted on the Sahel.

14 DW is a German international radio station that also broadcasts in French and produces content for French-speaking Africa. It additionally has a network of correspondents who are deployed on the continent.

15 During informal discussions with Burkinans by Dr. Adib Bencherif, on the heels of the second coup in which Damiba was overthrown on September 30, the testimonies collected seemed to emphasize pro-Russian slogans more than anti-French ones. This issue would benefit from greater triangulation.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The following section sets out general findings and recommendations based on the analysis conducted in this exploratory report

on the media ecosystem and the monitoring in the Sahel.

General findings and recommendations

- The overall quality of articles written by international media and specialized media with dispatched correspondents (e.g., RFI, Jeune Afrique) is generally superior to that of the regional and local media in the Sahel. This is due to the difficulties encountered by local media, including a lack of resources and independence. This issue significantly complicates the monitoring of the Sahel and leads to a bias in favour of international sources over local ones.
- To be able to improve the monitoring, the quality of investigations and press articles produced by Sahelian journalists and media must improve significantly. Some Sahelian media are more opinion-based than factual and do not provide a clear understanding of the context, despite the fact that Sahelian media have easier access to local sources than international media. To address this issue complicating the monitoring, the following would be necessary:
 1. Greater professionalization of Sahelian journalists.
 2. Greater dialogue between Sahelian journalists and international news professionals.
 3. Incentives to conduct surveys rooted in local realities, via funding for specific surveys.
- 4. The financial stability of Sahelian journalists could allow for greater independence and impartiality in news treatment, given that some articles appear to be particularly biased and obey specific orders from actors in the local or international political arena¹⁶.
- The monitoring carried out by experts and analysts should not be limited to national, regional and international written media, but should be as cross-cutting as possible, including information shared by radio stations and written, visual and oral social media (Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp), especially considering the local importance of these media.
- Media coverage of certain issues, such as terrorist attacks, counter-terrorism operations or international interventions, can give the illusion of airtight categories and simplistic configurations between actors (civilians/security forces/jihadists), while forgetting, erasing or ignoring the diversity of visions and relational plays involved (circumstantial and evolving relations between the different actors, diversity of non-state armed groups operating on the ground, actors blurring the boundary between civilians and security forces such as

¹⁶ An interesting initiative of international media doing excellent independent investigations in the region is *Afrique XXI*. It would be interesting to see local, regional or African media developing similar funded platforms.

the Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie [VDP], etc.).

- Monitoring must therefore be connected with field practice, particularly because of the imbalances and contradictions that can exist between the various sources that are used (official, opposition, civilian, etc.); the tendency to oversimplify the presentation of local realities; or limited access to official sources that may present a reality far removed from the facts (national or international military operations). There is a need for the monitoring to be anchored in triangulation with information coming from people deployed in the countries concerned who possess a thorough knowledge of the particularly shifting contexts of the Sahel.
- While it does not appear to be sufficient in itself, monitoring on the Sahel can strive to harness artificial intelligence, algorithmic logics, or any method other of researching, selecting and processing information through the use of technology, provided that this monitoring also draws on complementary qualitative analysis by professional monitors and analysts. A detailed contextual knowledge of Sahelian realities is a prerequisite for processing and interpreting the information at the heart of the news. This information is often rooted in stakeholders' different interests and imaginaries, making it necessary to be able to interpret the information even as it is processed. Well-informed human analysts continue to have an important role to play in monitoring.
- A survey should be conducted more specifically on the radio ecosystem to pinpoint relevant regional, national and international programs,

and to analyze the qualitative differences between programs and their distribution across the region. This would significantly improve the monitoring on the Sahel by revealing which sources to incorporate relatively systematically.

- A strategy must be implemented to conduct the most systematic and rigorous monitoring possible of social media, particularly Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp—platforms that are widely used by the Sahelian population and that often relay information more quickly than the print media. This strategy will also need to involve a procedure for triangulating and verifying information, given the importance of misinformation, disinformation, and the extent to which rumours and conspiracy theories have taken hold in the Sahel region since the onset of the Malian crisis in 2012.
- A strategy should be devised to monitor rumours and conspiracy theories circulating in the Sahel. The objective would not be to examine facts, but to monitor the popular imagination that exists within the communities and that may shape actions.
- To improve monitoring, it is necessary to exchange information with practitioners (researchers, journalists and analysts) who regularly conduct monitoring exercises and produce documents on the Sahel to identify the challenges and trends associated with the coverage of various events. The difference between political and security phenomena (counterterrorism, elections, corruption etc.) would require separate treatment, hence the

recommendations in the following points.

- A more dense and systematic thematic exploration of the issues associated with the monitoring should be conducted, to make targeted recommendations based on each theme (terrorism, coup d'état, corruption, etc.). This exploration could take the form of individual reports making targeted recommendations for each issue. The suggested themes are:
 1. Terrorist attacks.
 2. Counterterrorism operations (international, regional and domestic).
 3. Inter- and intra-community conflict dynamics
 4. Corruption scandals and related governance issues.¹⁷
- In addition to a media content analysis, the suggested individual reports should include a content analysis of social media networks (ideally written, visual, and audio) and testimony from practitioners and experts.

Specific findings and recommendations for the production of monitoring documents such as the *Weekly news* from the Sahel Research Group.

- The COVID-19 pandemic does not seem to have negatively impacted the quality of the monitoring carried out by the Sahel Research Group's *Weekly news*, despite a pronounced focus on the treatment of the pandemic during the first months of its spread in the Sahel. Over the years, the *Weekly news* has upheld its quality standards as a monitoring document.
- The monitoring carried out in the *Weekly news*, and by extension in any similar monitoring document, qualitatively enhances contextual understanding and analysis of Sahelian political dynamics when an expert or analyst is strategically called upon in the form of a quote or a summary of their argument. Indeed, monitoring appears to be more analytical and possibly useful when it manages to use articles involving investigations that relate the opinions of experts or analysts informed on the situation or event at hand.
 1. Analysis of the monitoring examined here, based on that of the *Weekly news*, shows that it is particularly difficult and rare to have access to a nuanced/contextualized understanding and an analytical look at the situation reported, via international and local written sources. Sketching a big picture requires a variety of sources to nourish the monitoring. To improve the monitoring documents produced, it would be worth considering and including:

¹⁷ The four themes identified require a qualitative investigation including interviews with experts and practitioners in the field. For the last two themes, this is even more important as the issue is not just having access to the methods and techniques of practitioners, but also understanding more about the investigation, and possibly certain grey areas, in the treatment of the data. This explains why they were not addressed in this report within the empirical part via the Sahel Research Group's *Weekly news*. Moreover, inter- and intra-community conflicts call for a refined and differentiated treatment, with ethnographic sensitivity.

2. The different temporalities leading up to the event, and more temporal reference points.
3. Sources involving expert opinion (see previous point).
4. Primary sources (news releases from governmental, non-governmental and international organizations, as well as other sources) or sources from recognized media outlets such as UN INFO.
5. Primary sources and direct testimony from the different sections of civil society. The use of a multitude of different, even competing, sources, in addition to the official ones, may provide a much more representative picture of the reality on the ground.
6. A harmonized spelling of geographical locations, personalities or concepts in all the monitoring documents in order to avoid confusion for users and readers of the monitoring.

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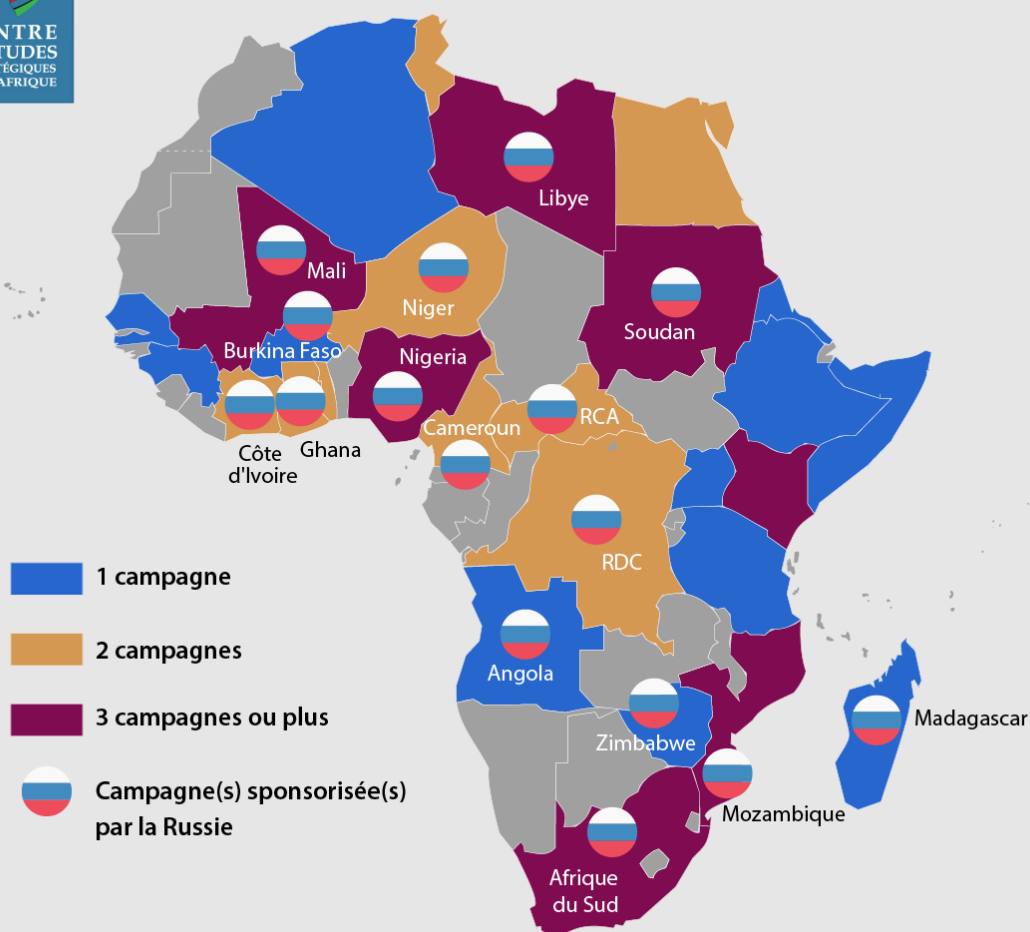
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Appendix

Disinformation campaigns in Africa



Campagnes de désinformation en Afrique



Source:

<https://africacenter.org/fr/spotlight/cartographie-de-la-desinformation-en-afrique/>

Legend:

Blue – 1 campaign
Yellow – 2 campaigns
Pink – 3 or more campaigns
Flag – Russia-backed campaign

