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FROM RUMOURS TO RUIN: THE ROLE OF DISINFORMATION IN CONFLICT ZONES

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Considering the emerging threats of the 21st century, hybrid tactics are increasingly embedded within modern conflict dynamics and strategic competition. In this evolving landscape, the term disinformation is often used interchangeably with fake news, referring to intentionally false or misleading information, capable of undermining global security and triggering conflict, has become a growing concern. While disinformation has historically served as a tool to destabilise governments or advance political agendas, in recent years peace missions such as those conducted by the United Nations have been increasingly affected by these attacks.

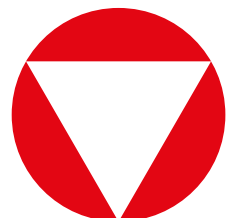
Weaponized Words: Disinformation as a Tool of Hybrid Threats

As a key instrument of hybrid threats, disinformation is used to destabilize nations, polarize societies, incite conflict, and, in this case, impair humanitarian aid. In a digitally interconnected society, where information spreads rapidly, this practice is particularly effective in creating havoc. It is therefore critical to understand what disinformation entails and what impacts it can have.

Disinformation is the intentional dissemination of false or manipulated information with the aim of misleading, confusing or influencing public opinion. Its main purpose is to undermine and manipulate opinions or destabilise societies. Be it news or even truth presented out of context to alter its meaning, as well as rumours. Unlike a

simple misconception or misunderstanding, disinformation has a clear purpose: to cause harm. Even if there is no malicious intent, *misinformation* can also cause negative effects. In this context, Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) is an increasingly present phenomenon that refers (according to the terminology used by the European Union) to the actions of information manipulation carried out by actors external to the target country. These strategies, driven by both state and non-state actors, are distinguished by their intentional, organised and manipulative nature, and seek to intervene in the values, dynamics, and political decisions of foreign nations.

Within this broader landscape of information manipulation, rumours play a particularly in-



sidious role. While they may appear spontaneous or harmless at first glance, they can serve as powerful vehicles for disinformation or misinformation, especially when deliberately shaped according to their source, content, and target audience. Their spread and ability to distort reality is amplified by the level of individual and collective anxiety and concern.

The Role of Rumours in Protracted Conflicts

Rumours serve as the perfect instrument of influence. They require no substantial budget, no research, and no sophisticated storytelling. A single false narrative, casually shared between neighbours, can quickly be perceived as truth. Fuelled by the emotional weight of the story, rumours tend to spread like wildfire. The more outrageous they are, the faster they propagate.

The disseminators of rumours are often people or entities that we trust, be it neighbours, family members or other respected authorities. From a perceptual standpoint, individuals tend to evaluate information based less on its inherent credibility and more on their relationship with the source. Consequently, the veracity of the content is seldom scrutinized. However, it is important to recognize that even rumours, though often dismissed, can carry elements of truth.

In times of political uncertainty and social upheaval, rumours flourish. When reliable information is scarce, people turn to whatever explanations are available to make sense of their reality. In conflict zones shaped by war and insecurity, this urge grows stronger. Historical and political contexts shape how believable rumours seem, especially in tense inter-group situations. Even obvious fabrications can be used strategically to reinforce power, discredit opponents, hinder peacebuilding initiatives or sow division.

A vivid example of how destructive rumours can become in a volatile setting is

the case of Kosovo in March 2004. In this instance, misinformation and emotional manipulation ignited widespread violence with deadly consequences. In the wake of unverified rumours falsely blaming Serb citizens for the drowning of three Albanian children in the Ibar River, widespread riots broke out across the region. A total of 33 incidents of large-scale violence were recorded, overwhelming international peacekeeping forces such as UNMIK and KFOR. By the time an official investigation by the UN mission concluded, however, that there was no evidence to back up the allegations. However, the spread of these unfounded claims had already left a trail of devastation: 19 people were killed and more than 1,000 injured, including peacekeepers and police officers. In addition, widespread destruction occurred, with hundreds of homes and other buildings reduced to rubble.

Impact of Disinformation on the Malian Conflict

For years, Mali's northern Tuareg population faced political and economic marginalisation, fuelling demands for autonomy. In 2012, they allied with Islamist groups to seize control of the region, triggering a military coup that ousted the president and created a power vacuum. Regional and international actors, including the African Union, ECOWAS, and France, intervened to restore order and support a transitional government. In addition to these measures, the United Nations set up the MINUSMA mission in 2013. It was tasked with stabilising conflict areas, promoting state reconstruction, protecting the civilian population and supporting political dialogue, national reconciliation, and reforms in the security sector. It was also tasked with implementing the 2015 peace agreement.

Since then, several events have been reported in the context of the conflict, a small but significant part of which do not correspond completely to the truth. Due to the fragmentation of the conflict, the civil-

ian population found itself disoriented and unsure whom to trust. Rumours stemming from both disinformation and misinformation played a key role in escalating the crisis, deepening confusion and making it even harder to discern the actual situation on the ground.

One of the most significant controversies during the takeover of northern Mali in 2012 was the sudden wave of rape allegations that followed rumours of systematic rape by the MNLA. It was alleged that makeshift NGOs were offering up to 31 euros to any woman willing to file a complaint against the rebel group. Given the context of extreme poverty in northern Mali at the time, it is understandable that many filed false complaints in the hope of obtaining some form of financial assistance.

This situation generated a great deal of social confusion, making it difficult for foreign humanitarian missions to differentiate between real and false allegations. As a result, there was a misallocation of financial and logistical resources, which negatively affected the effectiveness of the international intervention. In this context, MINUSMA's human rights division conducted a thorough investigation to verify the veracity of the allegations. However, the tardiness of the investigative process only reinforced the negative perception that already existed about MINUSMA, not only due to the apparent attempt to "rehabilitate" the MNLA's image in light of the rape allegations, thereby taking a political stance, but also because of the broader perception of incompetence in the mission's overall management.

Russia's Role in Shaping Narratives in the Sahel

One of the most active nations in the dissemination of disinformation in the context of peace missions in Africa is Russia. In countries such as Mali and the Central African Republic, the circulation of fake news has increased proportionally with the deployment of Russian mercenaries,

especially from the Wagner group, both before the coup d'état and after the installation of the new government led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, head of the junta. This disinformation is characterised by strong pro-Russian, anti-French, and anti-Western content that exploits anti-colonial sentiment and is often disseminated through local civil society organisations or media outlets with financial ties to Russia. Coincidentally, the new government has since strengthened its relations with Moscow, including the supply of \$100 million in fuel, fertilisers and wheat as announced (by the Minister of Economy and Finance) in November 2022. In this context, it can be deduced that Russia has a strategic interest in the Sahel, motivated by a desire to reassert its political influence, globally project power and secure access to the abundant natural resources the region has to offer such as gold, uranium, oil and gas.

With the establishment of the junta, the authorities began to implement a systematic strategy to control the public narrative, including a strong suppression of the media and the persecution of numerous local journalists. Part of this strategy has been the creation of pro-Russian propaganda networks, the censorship or restriction of independent and foreign media, and the promotion of anti-Western narratives in the local media. In addition, the recruitment of local journalists to spread disinformation and reproduce the Kremlin's discourses. As one Malian journalist revealed, digital mercenaries paid by the regime defame critical voices on social media, making them targets of public hostility and political discrediting. As a result, many journalists face increasing pressure to align with Russian interests or remain silent.

Conclusion and Relevance

Certain states use information manipulation to expand influence, exploiting fragile, marginalised countries and fuelling conflicts worldwide—from active wars to humanitarian crises. Social media ampli-

fies disinformation and rumours by prioritising sensational content, enabling rapid spread of false narratives. Powers like Russia and China employ these tactics as part of hybrid warfare to destabilise rivals and weaken global institutions. However, existing countermeasures often struggle to adapt to conflict zones marked by marginalisation and disconnect from their intended contexts, raising doubts about their effectiveness.

- ❶ To combat misinformation in Mali, the organization Tuwindi developed the 'Wuya' app, a fact-checking platform allowing users to verify and submit suspicious content. Conformed by trained journalists, it collaborates with credible media to debunk false claims, particularly targeting youth, and addressing challenges like low literacy and public distrust.
- ❷ Effective disinformation response must respect local contexts and cultural narratives – rather than imposing external tactics, affected communities should be consulted on their own approaches, ensuring support is collaborative and not driven by a colonial “white saviour” mindset.
- ❸ Strengthening the communication capabilities of operational forces is a key objective within the 2032+ reconstruction plan, with a particular focus on information operations and the strategic relevance of the information environment. This includes the deployment of specialised units trained to conduct and counter information operations, the integration of information environment challenges into strategic planning processes, and the

development of new national capabilities. These efforts should be supported by a network of interdisciplinary experts in information operations and strategic communication, who can be mobilised and deployed to affected countries as needed. At both national and international levels, these capabilities are vital to enable the accurate and context-aware development and interpretation of a common operational picture.

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