



ACADEMIA MILITAR

O Papel das Redes Sociais nas Operações de Informação – Caso de Estudo: Mali

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Trabalho de Investigação Aplicada

Mestrado Integrado em Ciências Militares na Especialidade de Infantaria

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EPÍGRAFE

*“Propaganda works best when
those being manipulated are confident
they are acting on their own free will”*

– Joseph Goebbels

DEDICATION

*Por Santiago e São Jorge,
Viva Cristo Rei!*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present research work represents the final obstacle in a challenging five-year journey. Although accomplished with much dedication and sacrifice, this research would not have been possible without the support provided; thus, this page is dedicated to all those who supported me.

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ABSTRACT

Information operations strategically use information and communication channels to influence perceptions, shape narratives, and achieve specific objectives. This research aims to assess the role, importance, and capabilities of social media networks in the context of Information Operations, focusing on Mali as a case study. We set out the following objectives: to understand the development of Information Operations, how social media networks are related to them and how they can influence a given target audience, the selection of the target audiences, and how to assess their effects. The research methodology adopted resulted from combining data collection and analysis from databases regarding pro-Russian influence and events, investigation on social media networks appertaining to pro-Russian activity, and interviews with Portuguese Officers deployed as Information Operations Officers at EUTM Mali. Our main conclusions are that social media networks play a significant role in the enactment of Information Operations, acting as a multiplier that can both protect and enhance friendly's capabilities or cripple the opponents through exercising influence, spreading misinformation, providing information, establishing narratives, engaging in counter-propaganda, psychological operations, and other features which effectively can achieve several degrees of success if correctly employed.

Keywords: Information Operations, Social Media Networks, Information Warfare, Influence, Misinformation, Mali, EUTM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EPÍGRAFE	i
DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	ix
LIST OF ANNEXES	x
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND INITIALISMS	xi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1 – LITERATURE REVIEW.....	3
1. Fifth Generation Warfare.....	3
1.2 Information Operations.....	4
1.3 Target Audience	7
1.4 Social Media Networks	9
1.5 Types of Social Media Networks	11
1.6 How social media is related to InfoOps.....	17
1.7 Assessment of InfoOps effects on social media	19
1.8 Mali Overview	20
1.9 Conflict in Mali	21
1.10 European Union Training Mission	22
1.11 The Pro-Russian InfoOps and Involvement in Africa.....	23
1.12 Wagner Group activities in Africa.....	36
1.13 JNIM and Islamic State activities.....	39
CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY	43
2.1 Research Objectives.....	43
2.2 Research and Derived Questions	43
2.3 Data collection techniques	44
2.4 Data Analysis	44
2.5 Interviews.....	45
2.6 Sampling Process	45
CHAPTER 3 - RESULTS	46

3.1 Conceptual Board of InfoOps through social media.....	46
3.2 Lessons Learned	48
CHAPTER 4 – DISCUSSION OF RESULTS	52
CONCLUSION	54
RECOMMENDATIONS	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY	59
APPENDIX A - Research Analysis Model	i
APPENDIX B - Framework for the interview survey in research questions	ii
APPENDIX C – Interview Script.....	iv
APPENDIX D – Answers	v
ANNEXE A – Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps	xv
ANNEXE B – ACLED data	xxii
ANNEXE C – Pro-Russian InfoOps on Social Media Networks.....	xxiv

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 - InfoOps Relationships Across Time.....	5
Figure 2 - Number of active social media users in millions.....	13
Figure 3 - Individuals using the Internet (% of the population) - Mali.....	14
Figure 4 - Age groups and gender distribution of Facebook users in Mali.....	15
Figure 5 - Age groups and gender distribution of Instagram users in Mali	15
Figure 6 - Age groups and gender distribution of Messenger users in Mali.....	16
Figure 7 - Social Media in Information Warfare.....	19
Figure 8 – Images of a 2019 rally organized by pro-Russia Groupe des Patriotes du Mali.....	25
Figure 9 - Context in which articles referring to MINUSMA were published	26
Figure 10 - Meta-narratives detected within sampled articles referring to MINUSMA	26
Figure 11 - Context in which articles referring to Operation Barkhane were published	28
Figure 12 - Meta-narratives detected within sampled articles referring to Operation Barkhane (I).....	29
Figure 13 - Meta-narratives detected within sampled articles referring to Operation Barkhane (II).....	30
Figure 14 - Regional map of disinformation in Africa.....	33
Figure 15 - Political Violence involving the Wagner Group in CAR, Mali and Ukraine	39
Figure 16 - Evolution of Economic Warfare Conducted by JNIM	41
Figure 17 - InfoOps through Social Media Networks.....	46
Figure 18 - Disorder and Event Type in Mali January 2, 2018 - March 8, 2024...xxii	
Figure 19 - Main Actors in Mali January 2, 2018 - March 8, 2024	xxii
Figure 20 - Mali Events' Sources January 2, 2018 - March 8, 2024.....	xxiii
Figure 21 - Examples of Pro-Russian InfoOps on X (Sputnik News Africa)	xxiv
Figure 22 - Examples of Pro-Russian InfoOps on X	xxv
Figure 23 - Examples of Pro-Russian InfoOps on Facebook.....	xxvi

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 - Specific Objectives	43
Table 2 - Research and Derived Questions	43
Table 3 - Selected Sample of Portuguese Officers deployed at EUTM Mali	45
Table 4 - Research Analysis Model	i
Table 5 - Framework for the interview questions	ii
Table 6 - Excerpts from the Answers	v
Table 7 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (I)	xv
Table 8 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (II).....	xv
Table 9 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (III)	xvi
Table 10 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (IV)	xvi
Table 11 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (VI)	xvii
Table 12 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (VII).....	xvii
Table 13 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (VIII).....	xviii
Table 14 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (IX)	xviii
Table 15 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (X).....	xix
Table 16 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (XI)	xix
Table 17 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (XII).....	xx

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A - Research Analysis Model.....	i
APPENDIX B - Framework for the interview survey in research questions.....	ii
APPENDIX C – Interview Script.....	iv
APPENDIX D – Answers	v

LIST OF ANNEXES

ANNEXE A – Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps	xv
ANNEXE B – ACLED data.....	xxii
ANNEXE C – Pro-Russian InfoOps on Social Media Networks	xxiv

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND INITIALISMS

ACLED – Armed Conflict and Location Event Data

AFRIC – Association for Free Research and International Cooperation

AQIM – Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

ATP – Army Techniques Publication

CA – Civil Affairs

CAR – Central African Republic

CIMIC – Civilian-Military Cooperation

DQ – Derived Question

ECOWAS – Economic Community of West African States

EUROPOL – European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation

EUTM – European Union Training Mission

FAMa – Malian Armed Forces

GO – General Objective

GPM – Groupe des Patriotes du Mali

IE – Information Environment

IED – Improvised Explosive Device

InfoOps- Information Operations

IRC – Information-Related Capabilities

IS – Islamic State

ISGS – Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

JNIM - Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin

JP – Joint Publication

MINUSMA – United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

NGO – Non-Governmental Organizations

OHCHR – United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

PAO – Public Affairs Office

PMC – Private Military Contractor

PPP – Posture, Profile and Presence

PsyOp – Psychological Operation

RQ – Research Question

SMN – Social Media Networks

SO – Specific Objective

TASS – Russian News Agency

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly global world and with the growing adoption of social media networks (SMN), these prove to be a crucial tool for applying social engineering strategies with different objectives, from marketing, politics, social action, supporting movements or exposing realities.

Its use in the military for various purposes falls within the concept of “Fifth Generation Warfare” – these are non-war military actions (such as social engineering, disinformation, cyber-attacks, propaganda and the use of technologies and artificial intelligence) to be able to dominate or control a specific population without resorting to violent methods inherent to the use of military means, or else, resorting only to their minimum necessary application – and it is in this environment that Information Operations (InfoOps) play their role.

Therefore, we seek to relate SMN and their theories of influence on the masses and how InfoOps are applied in this context, analyzing the forms, means, and methods when used in an operational context as well as the results and reactions on the part of the target audience. To this end, we intend to use as a case study the military personnel involved in the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM), seeking to understand how they applied InfoOps through SMN and what results and reactions were obtained in an operational context, being able to determine then the relevance of the relationship between InfoOps and its means of propagation, that is, SMN.

Given the intense information campaign activity from Russian and Jihadist players in the region, we consider this work of utmost importance to understanding the general geopolitical situation in Mali and the consequences it might have on an international level. Therefore, we define the objective of this work as understanding *how social media plays a part in InfoOps, using Mali as a case study*.

To refine further this objective into the following Specific Objectives (SO):

SO1: How does social media influence the public;

SO2: Identify the objectives of Information Operations and how they are applied;

SO3: Understand the relationship between social media networks and Information Operations;

SO4: Analyze the results of applying Information Operations through social media networks in the EUTM.

The definition of the objectives for this work leads to defining a Research Question (RQ) as a compass of the investigation: **“What is the role of SMN in Information Operations?”**. To answer the RQ, the following Derived Questions (DQ) must be answered:

DQ1: How can SMN influence the public?

DQ2: What are the objectives of Information Operations and how are they applied?

DQ3: What is the relationship between social media networks and Information Operations?

DQ4: What were the results of applying Information Operations through SMN in the EUTM mission?

This document consists of 4 Chapters. Chapter 1 presents the literature review addressing the conceptual framework necessary for contextualizing the present research. Chapter 2 describes and presents the methodology adopted in this study, the objectives and research questions, the data collection techniques, and the sample characterisation. Chapter 3 provides the research’s core results while Chapter 4 discusses them and draws the preliminary conclusions, relating the literature review to the interviews. Finally, the conclusions, limitations, proposals, and contributions for further investigations are provided, followed by the bibliography used in the research, appendixes, and annexes.

CHAPTER 1 – LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Fifth Generation Warfare

Information and technological advances have drastically changed the structure of politics, military strategy, economics, information domain activities, and other conjuncture constraints that epitomized the Cold War era. A field of opportunities suitable for properly orchestrated information campaigns was available with said advances (Armistead, 2004).

Armistead (2004) states that the easy access to the internet, smartphones, and social media made it possible for a determined adversary, using relatively unsophisticated means, to inflict significant harm on a nation and its populations, using the laws that protect civil liberties to operate in relative obscurity.

The defining characteristics of this era provide powers with unprecedented abilities to engage in information operations, characterised by the following: comprehensive, open communication channels where speed plays a significant role; little to no censorship, being the information flow controlled by the individual; although not initially, truth and quality could surface through quality analysis and fact-checking; weakening nation-states and strengthening networks (Armistead, 2004).

Fifth Generation Warfare evolved when the overlap of hybrid, irregular, and unrestricted warfare became directed at societies to affect the cognitive battlespace: the belief system of civilians and other target audiences that equalled more value than just the geography or ideology of a nation or its leaders. It encompasses manipulating thoughts and attitudes without people's awareness (Flynn & Cutler, 2022).

This new generation of warfare forces us to pay attention to the unseen wavelengths of the spectrum of war, as it made it clear that war is more than organized violence, shifting between extremes of energy and visibility. Having such a broad new definition of war, makes it possible for an enemy to inflict a decisive defeat on any defenceless spectrum when using a broader definition of warfare than an opponent (Abbott, 2021).

The Fifth Generation Warfare, through its hybrid forms of conflict, paved the way for enhancing InfoOps-related ways of seeking destabilization and confusion upon a target audience, providing a correlation between social division and unrest with disinformation (Pinto, 2022).

Considering this new warfare environment defined by the authors above, one can identify social media and its related networks as means to wage non-conventional warfare

on an opponent. Through social media networks (SMN), several societal layers of intergenerational individuals are connected and prone to be influenced by contents and information, manipulated or not, that can be presented to them, commented on, shared, and interacted with. If carefully planned, the spectrum of reactions to such information might be just enough to create division, subvert or undermine authority, possibly crippling the opponent's stability through social turmoil or the spread of information or disinformation.

1.2 Information Operations

According to United States doctrine (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014), Information Operations is *“the integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in conjunction with other lines of operations to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries and adversaries potential, while protecting our own (decision-making).”*

The end target of InfoOps is the adversary decision-maker. Therefore, the end goal of a campaign will be to coerce an individual, or group, into undertaking or not a specific action. To affect the adversary decision-making process, InfoOps uses various capabilities such as deception, psychological operations (PsyOps), and electronic warfare to shape and influence the information environment (IE). (Armistead, 2004) The IE is not separate or distinct from the operational environment. Still, inextricably part of it, all activities in the IE also occur in one or more operational environment domains and affect them. Due to the widespread availability of the Internet, wireless communications and information, the IE has become crucial in military planning and operations, as the military relies heavily on these technologies. Commanders and staff must understand the IE's complexity and impact on ongoing and planned operations (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014).

Combining the US' InfoOps doctrine (2014) and Armistead's (2004) concept allows to understand the objectives of InfoOps and its relevance in modern theatres of operations, where we observe an increasingly growing resource of technology, means of communication, and, consequently, the use of SMN by entities whether military or civilians that could provide the stage for the use of InfoOps methods. SMN, sustain influencing specific target audiences, seeking support for a cause, disseminating manipulated or unmanipulated information, and subverting opponents, among other purposes.

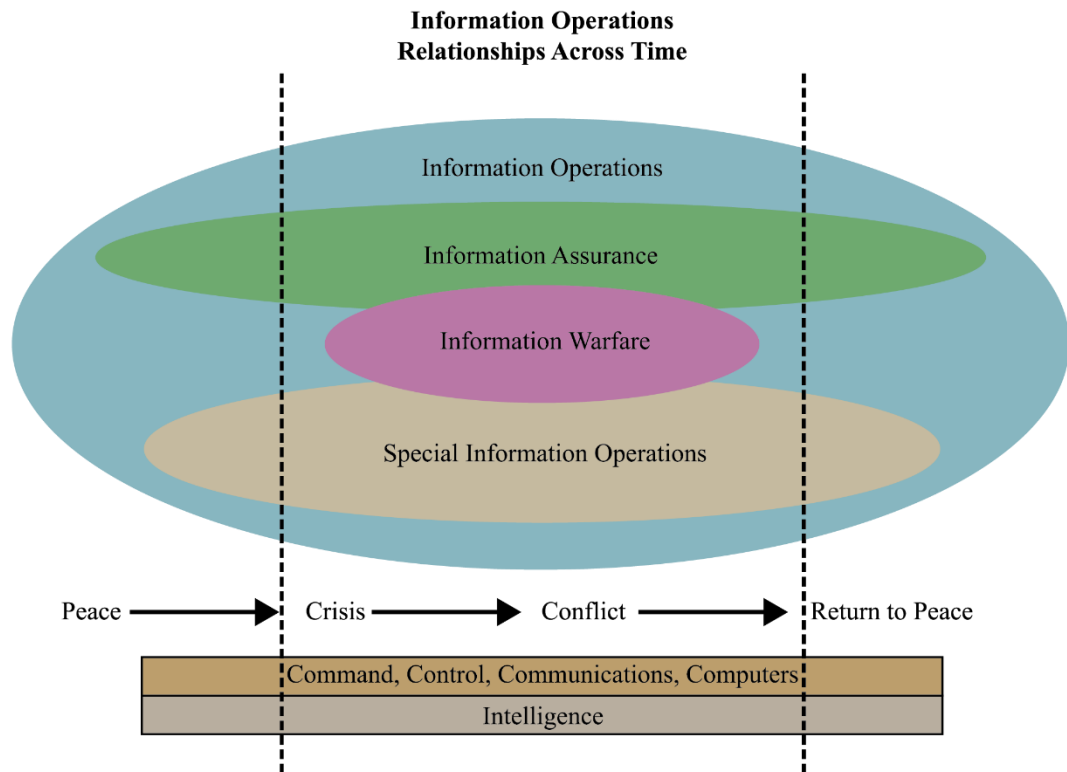


Figure 1 - InfoOps Relationships Across Time

Adapted from: Information Operations – The hard reality of Soft Power (Armistead, 2004)

Figure 1 highlights that contenders can develop InfoOps throughout various stages of a relationship between two or more powers, ranging from peace to open conflict. InfoOps during peacetime are preventive or dissuasive measures to gain the upper hand against opponents through information assurance and unique information operation methods. These can be tools for shaping the environment in the pre-hostilities phase so that the need for more hostile approaches can be minimised or avoided (Armistead, 2004).

Regarding open conflict, not only will traditional engagement methods be implemented, but the significance of information warfare will also be magnified. Although an integral part of InfoOps, information warfare provides a critical offensive instrument during hostilities between belligerent powers. They aim to gather information about the military infrastructure, attack their defences or offence capabilities, and sustain operations (Armistead, 2004).

Armistead (2004) considers that the capabilities and related activities for InfoOps include Civil Affairs (CA), deception, destruction, electronic warfare, Computer Network Attack, Operations Security, Public Affairs (PA) or PsyOps, which fall under the category of Information-Related Capabilities (IRC).

According to U.S. Joint Publication (JP) 3-13 (2014) on InfoOps, it is stated that InfoOps seeks to optimise the combined effects of selected IRC mentioned above through effective planning, synchronization, and assessment. While a single IRC can affect the IE to a friendly advantage, synchronized IRC activities and operations can multiply each other's effects and produce more effective long-term results. JP 3-13 (2014) continues by stating that IRC makes part of military information support operations units, CA units, or combat camera units, as well as tasks or activities managed by a staff section, such as military deception, operation security, and specific technical operations, all while being capable of articulating their capability's strengths, limitations, and risks to allow more straightforward decision-making regarding their use, employment, and balance.

JP 3-13 (2014) on InfoOps also states that "*intelligence and communications support is critical to conducting offensive and defensive information operations*".

Intelligence plays a significant role in information superiority. Intelligence entails information and knowledge about an adversary obtained through observation, investigation, analysis or understanding; therefore, it is a product resulting from information analysis that can be subject to relevance and applicability (Armistead, 2004).

Whether manipulated or not, the information released can influence the masses, promote ideologies and policies, provide support, or subvert opponents, seeking an ultimate objective to obtain the desired results in a specific target audience. However, the InfoOps concept uses available information on time, and the effects will only be observed if it is prepared and disseminated to the target audience through effective channels (Turan, 2018).

Edward Waltz (1998) defines information as organized data sets that can contain any observations and measurements studied. Once the information is analyzed and processed, and if relevant, it becomes knowledge. The process of creating IE involves collecting information, processing information, and, finally, disseminating it. According to the U.S. InfoOps doctrine, the IE is "*the aggregate of individuals, organizations and systems that collect, process, disseminate or act on information*" (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014).

Despite sharing close relationships and many similarities, InfoOps and Public Relations concepts differ. According to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) military public relations policy (2011), public relations and InfoOps are separate but related functions. They support military objectives, combat adversary disinformation, and deter adversary actions and both involve planning, message development, and media analysis. However, they differ in audience, scope, and intention, as military information activities must coordinate closely with public relations for consistency in messaging to external

audiences, promoting overall effectiveness and credibility while InfoOps, a military function, advises and coordinates military information activities to create desired effects on adversaries, potential adversaries, and other approved parties in support of Alliance mission objectives.

1.3 Target Audience

Before launching any operation, a commander must first and foremost prepare key information regarding the battlespace, opposing forces and factors that might enhance or limit his force's capabilities. The concept of the IE is included in the definition of preparation of the battlespace, indicating InfoOps acknowledgement as a vital part of conducting operations, as well as its challenges during peacetime and information warfare in times of conflict (Armistead, 2004).

According to Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 2-01. 3 (2019), The Intelligence Preparation of the Battlespace (IPB) consists of the stages defining the total battlespace environment, describing the battlespace's effects, evaluating the adversary, and determining and describing the adversary's potential courses of action (most likely and most dangerous particularly).

The first step of the IPB considers several planning factors. This phase addresses several relevant aspects such as defining the boundaries of the operational area, identifying the commander's mission, describing the unique characteristics and dimensions of the battlespace, defining detailed requirements, and looking for existing information (Department of the Army, 2019). These activities develop the eventual operational deployment and do not lend themselves to crisis action-planning. (Armistead, 2004)

Armistead (2004) goes further into stating that *"intelligence products, to be timely, accurate and available for InfoOps planning, often need to be "warehouses" and easily retrievable."*

The second step of the IPB process, which describes battlespace effects, further states priority military aspects to account for, such as the terrain features, the impact of the weather, mission, available troops or the time. (Department of the Army, 2019) Armistead (2004) relates this step to the information battlespace. The following points address the effects, such as media access and availability (both foreign and domestic). Information systems usage (from the government, industry or military), the population's internet access, critical infrastructures and architecture such as power, banking or telecommunications, public

opinion (both domestic and foreign), and other actors present and their agendas (including Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)).

An InfoOps environment addresses every facet of an operation (military or diplomatic) against the potential impact of all these factors (Armistead, 2004).

In the third step, evaluating the adversary, InfoOps seek to target the adversary's decision-making capabilities. By studying the opponent's human factors, other questions need to be answered, such as their psychological mindset, political goals and strategic objectives, intelligence sources and methods employed and trusted for information, and the opponent's biases. These questions require long-term data collection and planning to understand an opponent's decision-maker's intent (Armistead, 2004).

Finally, the fourth step of the IPB focuses on determining the enemy's course of action. This relies on the information previously collected, and analysed, and other that could be known or stored (Department of the Army, 2019).

Relying on technological improvements in information processing, collection platforms, reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition processes can expose the opponent's vulnerabilities, particularly the ones related to human intelligence (Armistead, 2004). Therefore, one can assess that determining the Target Audience (TA) is a product of InfoOps on the IPB. Through the whole IBP process, regarding InfoOps, one can acknowledge the kind of environment or means they'll work on (social media platforms and networks, newspapers, radio, leaflets, magazines), which conditions are present and how they might affect the operation (Spread of internet access, SMN with the highest usage and engagement, other players that should be considered), how well do we know our opponent and finally, how he's likely to react and if there's any chance it might jeopardize our operation.

According to LTG Flynn (2022), the TA is an individual or group selected for influence or attack through Information or PsyOps. The group selection can use gender, position within a family group (mothers, fathers, order of birth), tribal connections, political affiliations, religious backgrounds, economic standing, regional areas, age, military affiliation, occupation, educational background, and any other features that might turn these individuals prone to be fit within a specific group.

Building trust within the public towards one's cause is a crucial objective to correctly create a TA within a set society. Being deemed untrustworthy, labelled as disinformation, and failing to connect and appeal to people, will lead them to further distance themselves from their cause and even have the opposite reaction to their intention. If a military entity is

unsuccessful in disseminating information and cannot establish a connection with the public, the consequences could be misinformation and a loss of trust. The armed forces must maximize their use of social media in a well-structured and effective way to prevent these shortcomings, gain trust, and promote positive relationships with the public (Turan, 2018).

Leadership, Civil Infrastructure, Military Infrastructure, and Weapons Systems provide examples of targets suitable for InfoOps. Within Leadership, it ranges from civilian, cultural, social, and military leadership. Targeting leadership allows an opponent to subvert the command and control and further destabilize the hierarchy or relationships between various players. Civil infrastructure, telecommunications, transportation, energy, finance, and manufacturing are vital targets to create chaotic scenarios and undermine the opponent's capabilities. Targeting Military Infrastructures such as communications, intelligence, logistics, and operations cripple the opponent's military response and limit their actions. Weapons systems like aircraft, ships, artillery, precision-guided munitions, and air defences prone to be targeted by InfoOps can produce results on operational or tactical levels, damaging the opponent's potential in a given area of operations (Armistead, 2004).

Through accessing the nature of SMN and regarding the TA through social media, one could conclude the use of InfoOps through social media focuses on leadership and intelligence. By extensive sharing of media and information, it is possible for users whom InfoOps have successfully targeted to adopt a critical posture towards their leadership or provide valuable intel (even if unknowingly) to an opponent. This can lead to subverting national leadership, disrupting causes, creating further social division, or providing an opponent with helpful information about its ultimate goals.

1.4 Social Media Networks

The internet intrinsically supports the use of SMN. With the development and dissemination of the internet, each citizen can be connected in real-time, practically constantly. Thus, they receive information from various stakeholders, from government organizations, commercial companies, social movements, entities, individuals, and military organizations, among others. Official verification of information transmitted to the public by these entities allows filtering, ensures correct information, and prevents misinformation. Disclosing official information enables organizations and individuals to protect the integrity of their information and prevents manipulation by a competitor or adversary. (Turan, 2018)According to the U.S. public relations policy, "*official information can help create,*

reinforce, or preserve conditions favourable to the advancement of national interests and policies and mitigate any adverse effects from unofficial, misinformed, or hostile sources” (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2016). Therefore, we can state that information that official sources disseminate must always be verified and issued on an official basis to avoid misinformation, ensure the target audience's trust in the issuing entities and guarantee conditions for the applying policies necessary for the desired interests.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) define SMN as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and scroll through your list of connections and those made by others within the system”.

With millions of users globally using them daily and continuously, SMN have become crucial communication tools. SMN allow users not only to communicate, but to create and share content, search for information, read and update news and events, organize events, support causes, and give more visibility to social movements, making it possible for any user to keep up to date with what is happening in the world (Turan, 2018).

While commercial companies use SMN for marketing and sales purposes, political entities use them to influence people and gain trust in the causes and policies they defend. Likewise, the Armed Forces use social media to reach the public and share information daily (Turan, 2018). However, this shared information may have objectives beyond the informative nature, ranging from discrediting an adversary or showing support or successes of friendly forces to Information Operations.

By becoming a primary means of communication today, SMN allows other users, whether private or public entities, to share, edit, view, comment and disseminate the most diverse content globally (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012). Bertot et al. (2012) continue by establishing another advantage of current SMN, which is the possibility of creating and distributing content, posing a significant advantage compared to other media such as television, radio, and newspapers, in which the target audience is a mere receiving agent of information, instead of having a participatory role in transmitting it. With the spread of increasingly sophisticated cell phones, in conjunction with image, voice, text, and video editing applications, any citizen will be able, in real-time, to observe, collect, and disseminate information through their device, which, depending on the intended effect, you may have reactions to that same content. As any citizen can access to all the advantages of SMN, public and private entities, such as governments, companies, and organizations, have

also created their own social media accounts to participate in the online IE, each with different objectives.

Although some individuals want their SMN connections to be limited, companies and organizations choose to reach the largest possible audience and promote their content creation (Turan, 2018).

The rapid explosion and spread of SMN such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, which have millions of users, of which a significant percentage use these platforms daily, have attracted the attention of government, industrial, and commercial entities. The characteristics relating to availability and accessibility allowed by these SMN were central to their development and mass use on a global scale (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012).

According to Statista (2024), there are currently 5.35 billion internet users worldwide; of these, 5.04 billion have access to social media. It also states that in 2022, the share of female internet users worldwide was 63 per cent, six per cent less than that of men. Gender disparity in internet usage was more prominent in the Arab States and Africa, with around a ten per cent difference. At the same time, the Commonwealth and Europe showed a smaller gender gap. Individuals aged 15 to 24 have a higher chance of using social media, with youngsters in Europe representing the most significant percentage at 98%. In comparison, the worldwide average for the age group 15-24 years was 75%, clearly below their European counterparts. The income level of the countries was also an essential factor for internet access, as 92% of the population of the countries with high income reportedly used the internet, as opposed to only 26% of the low-income markets (Statista Inc., 2024).

While SMN have benefitted our society to a degree, such as in emergency response and social advocacy, they have been employed for more subversive effects and even as a weapon of InfoOps (Shallcross, 2017).

1.5 Types of Social Media Networks

Different types of SMN share the same technologies and objectives, although they have different characteristics. They all use Internet connections, collect, and share data, protect their users' privacy, and have guidelines to serve them better. However, certain SMN are more oriented towards sharing audiovisual content and images. In contrast, others react to sharing content, writing, and exposition of themes and comments, or a mixture of all these characteristics (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

SMN users can have several accounts on different platforms that best suit their objectives (Statista Inc., 2017): Instagram and Flickr, aimed at sharing photos; Facebook, aimed at establishing personal connections between friends, family and organizations; YouTube, allowing the production and sharing of videos; others such as X (former Twitter) and Tumblr, aimed at “blogging”.

As the market leader, Facebook was the first social network to exceed one billion registered accounts and currently boasts over three billion monthly active users. Meta Platforms, owns Facebook, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram, each with over one billion active users. Meta, reported around four billion monthly core family product users in the third quarter of 2023. Social networking sites in multiple languages facilitate connections across geographical, political, and economic boundaries and have reached 3.96 billion users in 2022, with continued growth expected as mobile device and social network usage increase in previously underserved markets (Dixon, 2024).

While most prominent SMN with over 100 million users originated in the United States, it’s also worth mentioning that other nations and powers have also developed their social media platforms more suitable to their societies and needs. Due to local context and content, Chinese platforms like WeChat, QQ, and Douyin (known internationally as TikTok) have gained widespread popularity in their respective regions (Dixon, 2024).

The discrepancies between SMN across different regions and cultural/political backgrounds can be significant. For instance, TikTok's Chinese version, Douyin, emphasizes culture and national unity, showcasing videos on patriotism, social cohesion, and educational activities. In contrast, TikTok in the West features hyper-sexualized dances and absurd viral trends (Schlott, 2023).

Such differences in the content on social media platforms provide reasonable grounds for claiming that their controlling entities can perform InfoOps upon desired users and target audiences with various ends. The vast number of SMN users worldwide and its constant expansion strengthens the importance of SMN as a vessel to carry out InfoOps.

From a worldwide perspective, Facebook stands out as the most used social media platform, with 3.049 million users, followed by YouTube with 2.491 million users. WhatsApp and Instagram have 2.000 million users each while TikTok has 1.562 million

users, as presented in Figure 2.

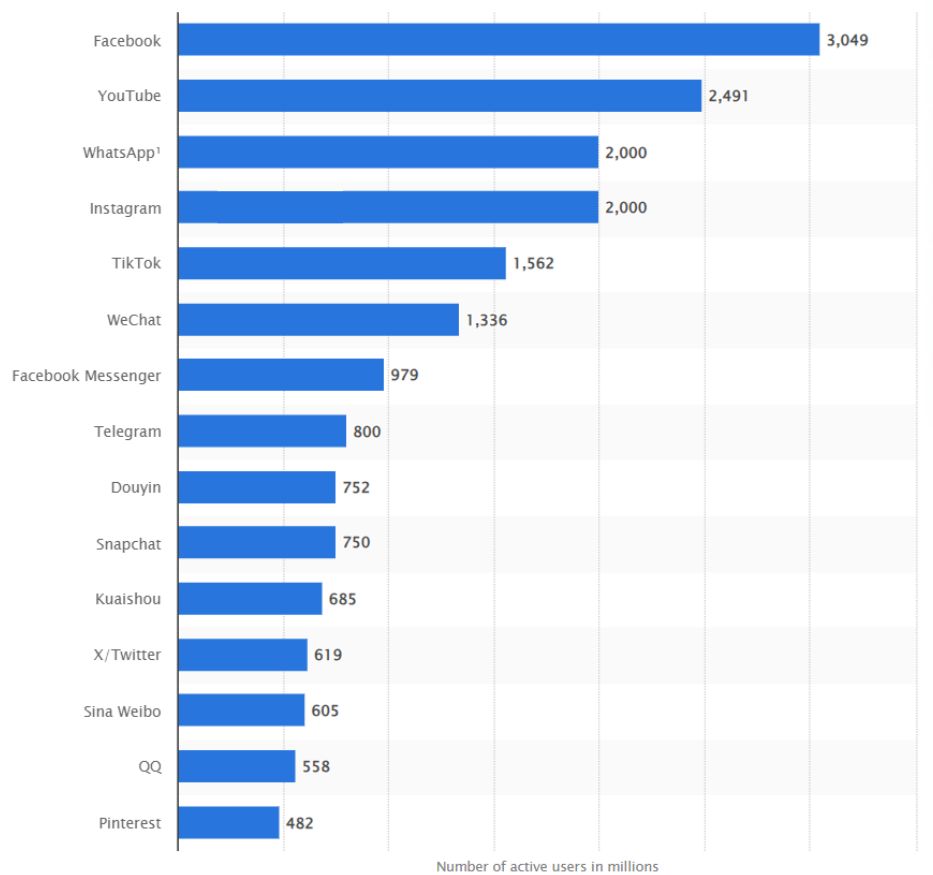


Figure 2 - Number of active social media users in millions

Adapted from: Statista (2024), Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2024, ranked by number of monthly active users

Mali's population is estimated to be around 24 Million, with a median age of 15,4 years. At the current rate it is expected growth is by more than 720,000 individuals yearly (Department of Economic and Social Affairs ,United Nations, 2022).

The percentage of young people in its population makes it suitable for the emergence of social media and related apparatus and activities. According to The World Bank (2021), in 2021 the percentage use of the internet throughout Mali was 34%, which is considered a significant increase given that in 2012, for instance, the overall percentage was merely around 3%, as reported in Figure 3.

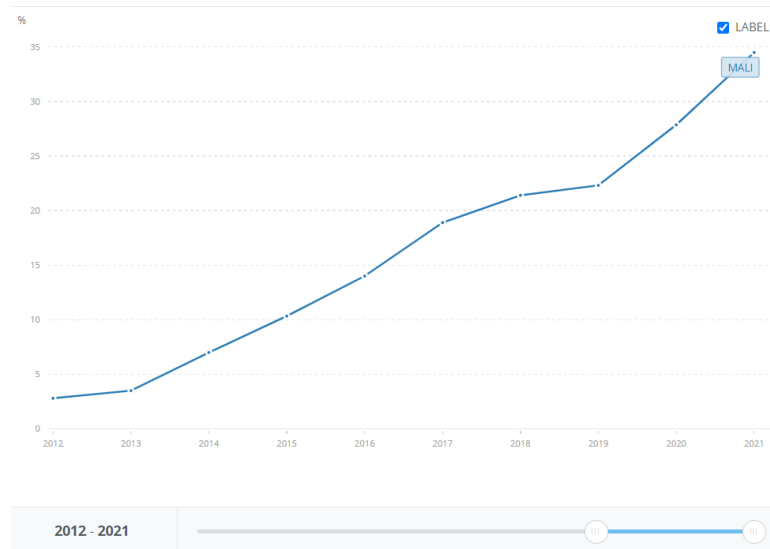


Figure 3 - Individuals using the Internet (% of the population) - Mali

Adapted from: The World Bank (2021), Individuals using the Internet (% of the population)

Regarding Mali, according to Napoleon Cat, a social media management tool, there were “2,603,900 Facebook users in Mali in February 2024, which accounted for 11.4% of its entire population. Most of them were men – 75.5%. People aged 25 to 34 were the largest user group (1,000,600). The highest difference between men and women occurs within people aged 25 to 34, where men lead by 758,500” (Napoleon Cat, 2024).

Figure 4 provides the age groups and gender distribution of Facebook users in Mali, while Figure 5 provides the same distribution of Instagram .

Concerning Instagram, still referring to stats from February 2024, Napoleon Cat states “there were 242,201 Instagram users in Mali in February 2024, which accounted for 1.1% of its entire population. Most of them were men - 74.2%. People aged 18 to 24 were the largest user group (120,800). The highest difference between men and women occurs within people aged 18 to 24, where men lead by 88,800” (Napoleon Cat, 2024).

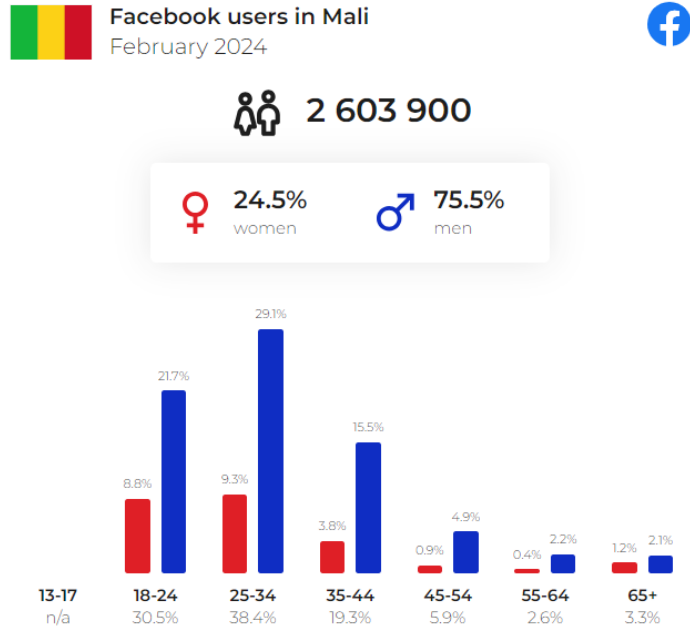


Figure 4 - Age groups and gender distribution of Facebook users in Mali

Source: Napoleon Cat (2024), Facebook users in Mali

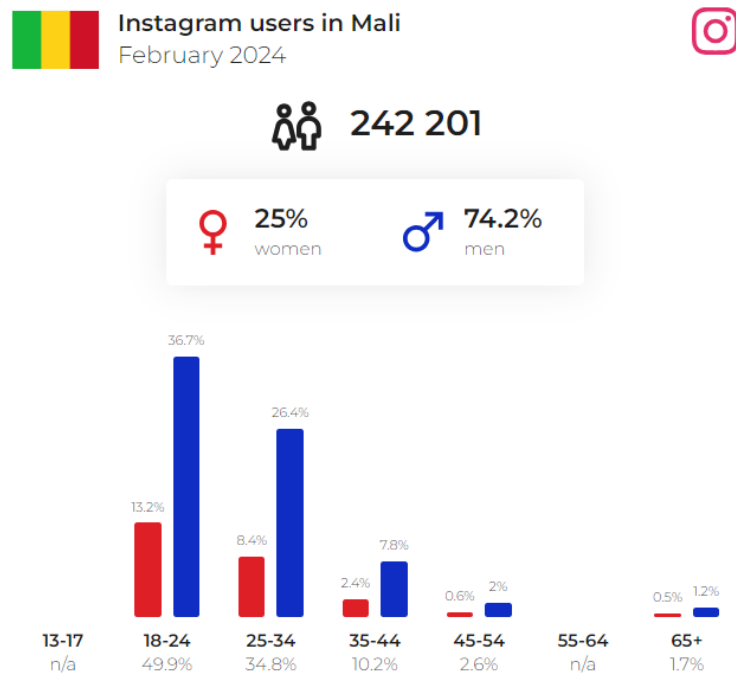


Figure 5 - Age groups and gender distribution of Instagram users in Mali

Source: Napoleon Cat (2024), Instagram users in Mali

Still according to Napoleon Cat’s statistics, “there were 2,360,800 Messenger users in Mali in February 2024, which accounted for 10.3% of its entire population. Most of them were men - 76%. People aged 25 to 34 were the largest user group (930200). The

highest difference between men and women occurs within people aged 25 to 34, where men lead by 707,400” (Napoleon Cat, 2024).

Figure 6 below provides the social distribution of Messenger users in Mali.

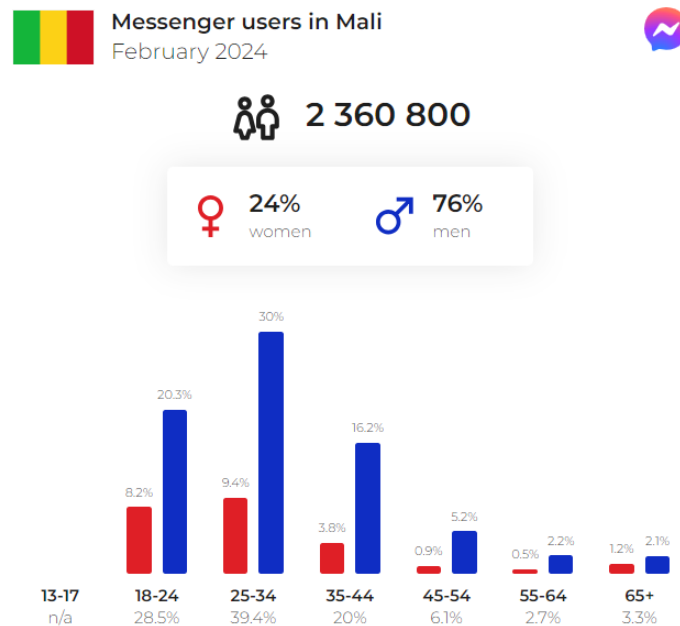


Figure 6 - Age groups and gender distribution of Messenger users in Mali

Source: Napoleon Cat (2024), Messenger users in Mali

The average age distribution is around 16 years old, and the expected internet-access growth in Mali makes its young society prone to embrace the internet and SMN available. A study by Meriläinen (2023) has shown that young people lack critical media literacy, often overlooking the potential influence of AI, advertising, algorithms, bots, and influencers. Whether on media companies such as Meta or state-owned Apps like TikTok, both provide grounds for acts of deception of various actors that go undetected. While unaware of widespread information operations, young people occasionally identify misinformation when it directly affects them. Nonetheless, they freely express their ideologies online, reinforcing their truths, which might be correct or not. Influencers leverage AI and algorithms to shape beliefs and values, presenting opportunities for constructive engagement and risks to democratic values through covert information operations (Meriläinen, 2023). We can therefore infer that Mali’s society is a fertile ground for using InfoOps. Its young population plays a central role in their outcomes, likely aggravated by rising internet access and social media availability.

1.6 How social media is related to InfoOps

Social media allows several sorts of information to be created and shared, and ideas made visible and understood. Images, sound, videos, and all other applications are nowadays readily available using smartphones, cameras, phones, and other media apparatus, recording and sharing events in real-time, and they have become tools for sharing information. When used through SMN, InfoOps provides diverse possibilities with various effects on the desired targets.

The development of technology, worldwide internet usage down to the individual level and the ability to record, photograph, and share in real-time on public platforms allowed the quick spread of ideas and concepts, openly supporting or denouncing events. The advent of the World Wide Web and the subsequent development of social media sites and platforms created a whole new environment suitable for InfoOps, as it represents an evolution in military affairs with the capacity to balance the power struggle between the greater and lesser opponents, as well as the non-state actors across the world. Several recorded events demonstrated the potential and adaptability of SMN as an instrument of power and as a weapon; it is “a tool that is neither easily wielded nor contained” (Shallcross, 2017).

According to Shallcross (2017), cyberspace is an operational environment without gravity, as the three-dimensional bounds of the physical world do not contain it. The terrain and features of a battlefield may impact the forces deployed in that area of operations, or an individual wishing to disseminate pieces of information through a telephone or a courier limits one’s ability to reach multiple recipients and requires more significant amounts of time per individual contact. Still, in cyberspace, as it transcends the limitations of geography or physical location, one can have the opportunity to reach millions of targets because, unlike a phone call, a blog post, a video, a comment or a photograph are not scalable to a degree; it takes the same amount of effort to reach one person as it does five million, accomplishing InfoOps objectives from across the globe, as the cyberspace is not subject to the limitations of space and time (Shallcross, 2017).

Regarding using SMN as a weapon, it is stated that it can be used to recruit supporters, members, and financers openly and anonymously to an organization. SMN are akin to a command-and-control tool to recruit supporters and direct operations from remote locations. SMN have become an integral part of the war effort as they can direct several means of both lethal and non-lethal effects on a target. In this regard, insurgencies and

terrorists employ SMN to direct attacks abroad, damage credibility, and undermine authority. Still, so it must be noted that several governments have used it to achieve operational success (Shallcross, 2017).

Maharaj and Niekerk (2013) state that from an information warfare perspective, SMN can be used to gather intelligence, inject malicious code, and influence perceptions. As SMN have been employed in perception management and to orchestrate large-scale demonstrations, it has demonstrated its relevance to PsyOps applied on a strategic level rather than a tactical one, as governments and the general population are considered a target, as well as striking the morale of the opposing military forces if they are also exposed to it.

SMN may also be used for attacks on individuals, through false-flag operations or social engineering orchestrated as PsyOps. On the individual level, these attacks can trick or coerce the target into providing information in an intelligence-gathering operation or downloading malicious code and malware, as part of a network warfare tool, which can impact or disrupt specific systems and networks or achieve control over them. The fast way of sending and receiving messages through SMN makes them a solid ground to influence populations and individuals into being favorable to a certain belligerent's objective or belief, to gain open-source intelligence, and can be used as a quick means of communication and collaboration platform for command and control (Van Niekerk & Mahraj, 2013).

Therefore, one can infer that Command and Control, Network, Intelligence and Psychological warfare can all be considered part of InfoOps. Through SMN, these sorts of warfare grant the ability to use it as a communication tool or a platform suitable for collaboration, as well as to exploit the opponent's vulnerabilities and use social engineering to attack an opponent's networks and assets. Information may also be compromised, and individuals or populations may be influenced, subverted, and have their perception compromised through PsyOps. These means can lead to the objectives of establishing command and control, disrupting the enemy's communications or their infrastructures, gaining intelligence and valuable information or having the population more prone to support one's forces or oppose their governments and leader's ideologies, policies, or actions. Figure 7 synthesises the conceptual model of SMN in information warfare:

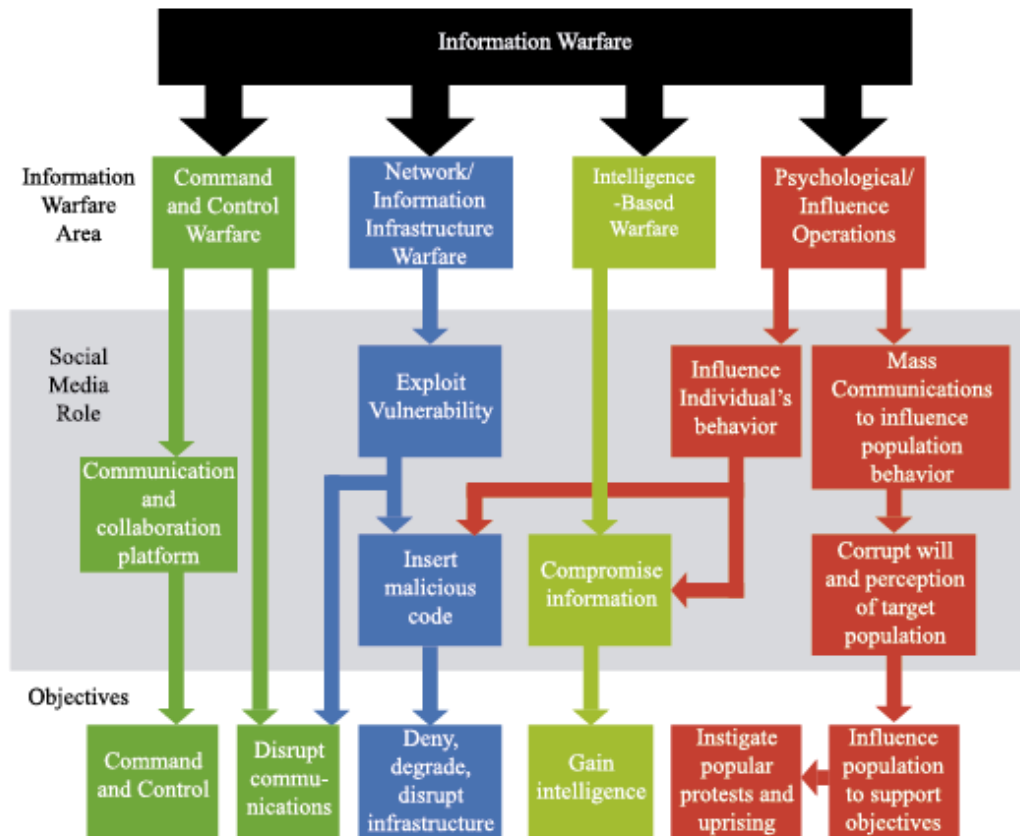


Figure 7 - Social Media in Information Warfare

Adapted from: Van Niekerk & Mahraj (2013) Social Media and Information Conflict

1.7 Assessment of InfoOps effects on social media

According to the various interviews elaborated throughout this thesis, more specifically relating to Question 3 “**Following the implementation of Information Operations, results are expected upon the target audience. How were the effects on the Target Audience evaluated?**”, answers to which are provided on Appendix D, one can divide the answer into four major approaches:

Firstly, subjective assessment methods were utilized, such as counting reactions on SMN posts and assessing the overall acceptance of the shared narrative. This approach provided a qualitative understanding of how the target audience reacted to the content disseminated through SMN channels.

Direct interaction with the target audience in the field played a crucial role in evaluating the effectiveness of InfoOps. By observing the population’s response firsthand,

including their willingness to establish contact and engage with EUTM forces, evaluators gained valuable insights into the level of trust and satisfaction generated by InfoOps efforts.

In addition to direct interaction, monitoring, and analysis tools were employed to track access to the official website and SMN platforms of EUTM Mali. By monitoring metrics such as website traffic, SMN engagement, and content reach, evaluators could assess the effectiveness of InfoOps in reaching and engaging the target audience.

Engagement metrics, such as tracking reactions, likes, and comments on SMN posts, were also utilized to evaluate audience perception and content effectiveness. Regular tracking of these metrics provided valuable feedback on which types of content resonated most with the audience and allowed for adjustments to messaging strategies accordingly.

Overall, the combination of subjective assessment, direct interaction, monitoring and analysis, and engagement metrics provided a comprehensive framework for evaluating the effects of InfoOps on SMN. This approach enabled evaluators to gain a nuanced understanding of audience perception and engagement, ultimately guiding the refinement and optimization of InfoOps efforts.

1.8 Mali Overview

As the World Bank (2024) documents, Mali is one of the largest Sahelian states struggling to sustain its economy, which is majorly based on agriculture and has a high population growth rate. Amid growing poverty, 15.9% were in extreme poverty in 2021, with an additional 3% who had fallen into extreme poverty in 2022. The country's instability, which worsened after the mid-2012 coup, resulted in conflicts and institutional breakdown. Alongside the attempts to prevent the brave new era by the March 2024 elections, Mali retreated from ECOWAS in January 2024, claiming the organization's ideals were not being implemented. Economically, Mali still had 3.5% GDP growth in 2022, but this time, it was based on cereal production and the mining sector. Stabilization in growth at around 3.5% in 2023 was anticipated; however, problems to be resolved remain, including a current account deficit of 6.8% GDP and a fiscal deficit of 4.8% GDP value. Based on the analysis conducted by the World Bank (2024), 34% of the population is internet users, and 53,4% have electricity.

1.9 Conflict in Mali

According to the United Nations (2023), the Malian crisis has its origin in long-standing structural conditions such as “weak State institutions; ineffective governance; fragile social cohesion; deep-seated feelings among communities in the north of being neglected, marginalized, and unfairly treated by the Central Government; a weak and externally dependent, albeit vibrant, civil society; and the effects of environmental degradation, climate change, and economic shocks. Recent factors of instability exacerbated these conditions, including corruption, nepotism, abuse of power, internal strife, and deteriorating capacity of the national army”.

Conditions were such that in January 2012, insurgents aligned with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) revolted against the central authority in Bamako, calling for the separation of the Azawad region, historically acknowledged only for its cultural significance by the Malian government. Within a few months, the entire northern territory of the country fell to the advance of insurgents and lawbreakers. By March of the same year, Captain Sanogo orchestrated a non-violent overthrow of power, assuming the presidency and replacing Amadou Toumani Touré. Shortly after, on April 6, under the leadership of Bilal Ag Acherif, the MNLA unilaterally proclaimed Azawad's independence. Criminal elements began to brutally enforce Sharia law across Northern Mali by June, triggering mass displacement of populations towards the south and neighbouring nations. Subsequently, insurgents regrouped and launched a synchronized offensive targeting Bamako from their strongholds in the north (EUTM Mali, 2024).

The offensive initiated by jihadists in January 2013 caught European capitals off guard and shattered the consensus on the indirect strategy's implementation. Bamako sought assistance from Paris, prompting French intervention alongside African allies due to a pressing sense of urgency. The potentially dire outcome of the Malian capital's fall risked the strategy's collapse and offered jihadists the chance to seize additional Western hostages. Hence, French President François Hollande unilaterally decided to commence Operation Serval on January 11, aiming to assist Dioncounda Traoré. (Gros, 2014) The backing of Malian and Chadian forces halted the advancement of extremist factions. In a matter of weeks, international intervention overwhelmed the insurgency, who offered minimal resistance, retreating from their northern bases, blending into civilian populations, or seeking refuge in the Sahara or beyond Mali's borders. UN Security Council Resolution 2071 urged regional and global entities, including the EU, to provide coordinated aid, training, and

support to bolster the Malian Armed and Security Forces, aiming to reinstate governmental authority. On December 24, 2012, Mali's President contacted the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, requesting the dispatch of a European Union military training mission (EUTM Mali, 2024).

These events culminated in adopting Council Decision 2013/34/CFSP on January 13, 2013, outlining the structure and objectives of the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) Mali. Consequently, the initial contingent of European troops arrived in Bamako on February 8, 2013. By February 18, Council Decision 2013/87/CFSP was passed, formally launching EUTM Mali, which was promptly activated in Brussels. Finally, on February 20, 2013, the EUTM mission commenced operations in Bamako (EUTM Mali, 2024).

Under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2690, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) closed on December 31, 2023 (United Nations, 2023).

1.10 European Union Training Mission

EUTM Mali embodies the military aspect of the EU strategy in Mali, which was established in 2013, complementing other dimensions like political and humanitarian development. The mission aims to bolster the capabilities of the Malian Armed Forces, fostering self-reliant armed forces that can safeguard their population and territory (EUTM Mali, 2024).

According to EUTM Mali's (2024) official website, since the approval of the Fifth Mandate in March 2020, the mission's strategic objectives include contributing to the enhancement of the capabilities of the Malian Armed Forces under political authority control, consolidating improvements achieved since 2013, and supporting the restoration of state control and the rule of law throughout Mali. Additionally, the mission aims to support the G5 Sahel by consolidating and improving the operational capabilities of its Joint Force and strengthening regional cooperation to address common security threats, particularly terrorism and illegal trafficking, including human trafficking.

To achieve these objectives, EUTM Mali focuses on providing advice at all levels to the Malian Armed Forces, contributing to improving the Military Education System from schools to ministerial levels, and offering advice and training to G5 Sahel Joint Force headquarters. These activities are essential for enhancing the effectiveness and capabilities

of the Malian Armed Forces, promoting stability, and countering security threats in the region (EUTM Mali, 2024).

According to the interviews in Appendix D, namely answers to Question 1, **“Regarding EUTM, what were the main goals of using InfoOps in Mali?”**, the main goals of using InfoOps as part of the EUTM mission in Mali can be summarized into five approaches. These include enhancing EUTM’s image and portraying it as beneficial for the local population by disseminating information regarding EUTM’s activities, fostering positive perceptions, and demonstrating its commitment to supporting Mali’s development and stability. Additionally, cultural sensitivity and engagement were emphasized through effective communication with the local population, involving studies of the local culture, advising training teams on cultural sensitivities, and engaging in direct outreach activities to build trust and credibility. Internal coordination and cooperation played a crucial role in ensuring unity of effort among the various nations of the EUTM and preventing internal disputes. They were managed both at the HQ in Bamako and in field operations to align with the mission’s objectives. Furthermore, addressing misinformation and external influences that could undermine EUTM’s mission involved adapting strategies to respond to challenges such as entering the Wagner group into Mali and collaborating with Russia. Lastly, a holistic approach to the IE was adopted, considering stakeholders, media platforms, information systems, and critical topics influencing individual perception, aiming to create messaging and engagement strategies to reach and influence target audiences effectively.

EUTM ended its 11-year presence in Mali and redeployed to Europe on the 18th May 2024. (EUTM-Mali - Press and information team, 2024)

1.11 The Pro-Russian InfoOps and Involvement in Africa

The instability in parts of the African continent not only called for the intervention of Western powers but also opened the way for an increasing influence from Russia. As Western nations use strategic narratives and InfoOps to advance their interests in the African continent, Russia has also been trying to exercise its influence through the media, as defended by Clifford and Gruzd (2022).

Following the escalation of the 2014 Ukraine conflict, Russia’s use of media to obtain more extensive influence campaigns has gained notoriety, both domestically and internationally. Clifford and Gruzd (2022) state that Russia’s state-owned media outlets proved imperative to the Kremlin’s strategy. They are clear channels of its soft power in

Africa as news outlets such as Sputnik and RT (formerly Russia Today) find wide acceptance among African editors. Building on anti-imperialist agendas and making their way as an alternative news source, state-owned media can provide a more balanced image of Russia in Africa, while countering Western narratives.

Clifford and Gruzd (2022) continue stating that African news websites repeat Russian-sponsored media on a large scale, the main message being that Moscow is ready to cooperate with African nations on mutually beneficial terms. Utilizing SMN for influence-building is crucial to Russia's media tactics in Africa. This strategy aims to instil uncertainty and foster reliance on alternative news outlets while forging partnerships with local entities across African nations to camouflage their operations more effectively.

This clearly states an attempt by the Russian government to gain a foothold in Africa and influence the local population to be supportive of their presence, therefore actively using InfoOps for such ends and exercising “soft power” through media assets.

Media outlets supported by the Kremlin, notably RT and Sputnik, are experiencing a surge in popularity throughout Africa. From November 2017 to January 2018, there was a notable spike in subscribers to the RT France Facebook Page, soaring from 50,000 to 850,000. Most of these subscribers hail from nations in the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, indicating a growing interest in Russian-affiliated French-language media. Additionally, Russia aims to weaken the diverse Western-led multinational peacekeeping endeavours in the Sahel region. Recent research suggests a prevalent negative portrayal of these missions and France's involvement, supported by the predominance of pessimistic quotes and the proliferation of antagonistic narratives by Russian content sources (Svoboda, Matlach, & Baddorf, 2021).

The same Russian influence campaign regarding humanitarian aid seeks to establish Russia as a significant global contributor to Africa. It utilizes state media platforms and official declarations to showcase its modest contributions through its official news channels (Clifford & Gruzd, 2022).

Regarding Mali, supporters of a coup d'état took to the streets in celebration in August 2020. Among them were individuals waving Russian flags and displaying images of Putin. This occurred alongside reports indicating that some junta leaders, who had compelled President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita to resign, had received training in Russia and maintained connections to the Kremlin. (Muvunyi, 2020) Although Russia lacked significant bilateral, cultural, or historical connections with the country at that time, the groundwork for pro-Russian sentiment had been laid a year earlier when specific SMN platforms began

attributing Mali's militant Islamist insurgency in the north to France. (Siegle, 2021) Silverman (2020) claimed that Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency paid local actors and the population to post and share this content on the Kremlin's behalf, in an attempt to prove its authenticity, as exposed in Figure 8, featuring a Pro-Russian demonstration in Mali organised by the pro-Russian *Groupe des Patriotes du Mali* (GPM).



Figure 8 – Images of a 2019 rally organized by pro-Russian *Groupe des Patriotes du Mali*

Adapted from: Fred Muvunyi (2020), “Was Russia behind the Coup in Mali?”, Deutch Welle, October 6

The Mali incident underscores that backing for Russia, whether shaped by online content or not, can manifest in tangible actions. While Russia has successfully revitalized its image as a substantial influence in some regions of the continent, the appeal of Russian-sponsored content may rely heavily on its adoption by African entities. (Clifford & Gruzd, 2022).

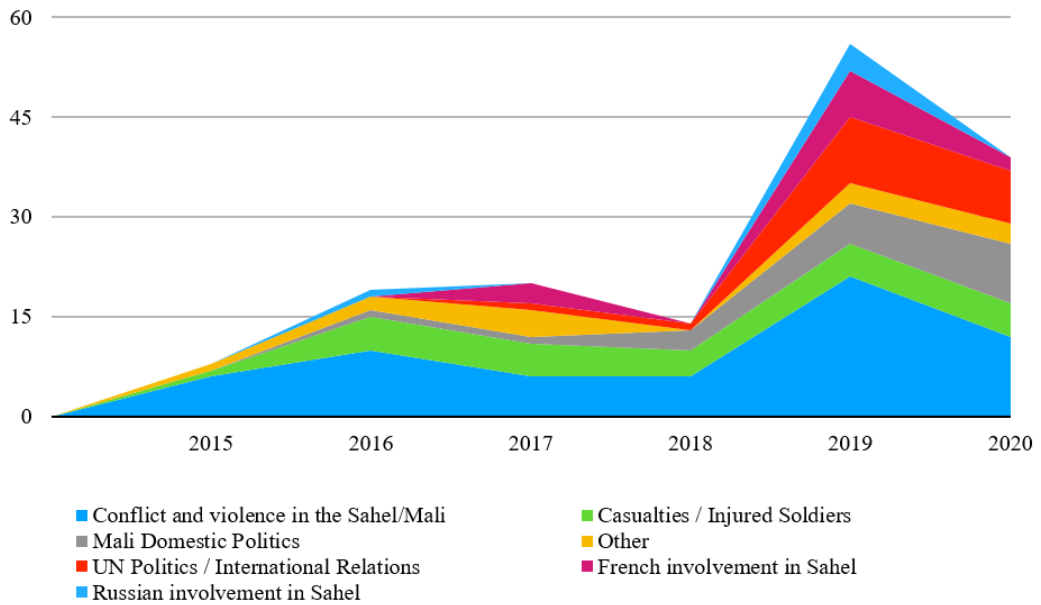


Figure 9 - Context in which articles referring to MINUSMA were published

Adapted from: Svoboda et al. (2021), “Russia’s Activities in Africa’s Information Environment”

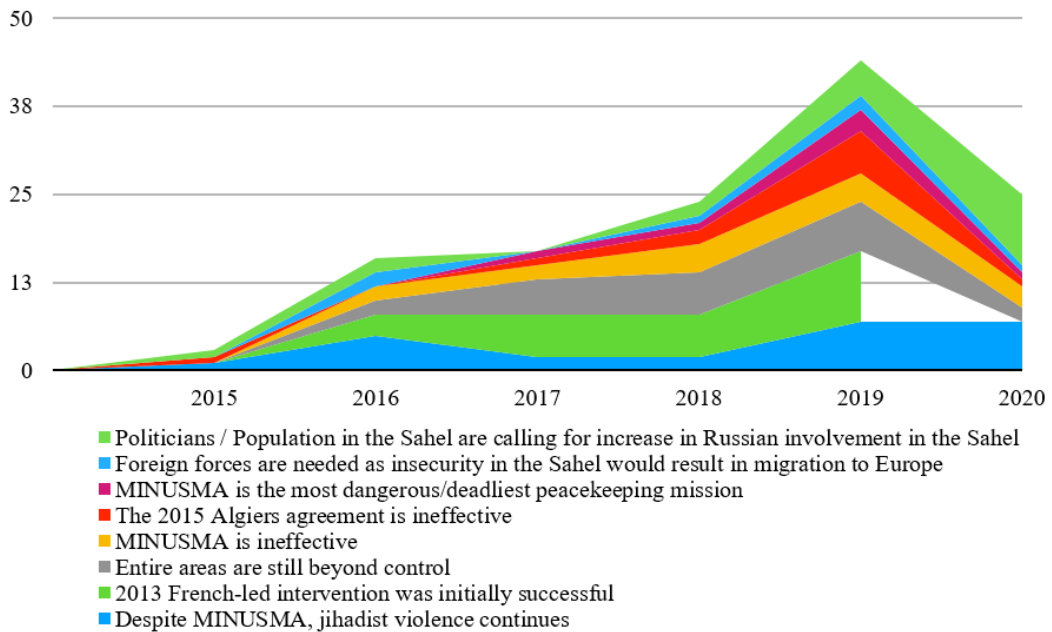


Figure 10 - Meta-narratives detected within sampled articles referring to MINUSMA

Adapted from: Svoboda et al. (2021), “Russia’s Activities in Africa’s Information Environment”

Between 2015 and 2020, the EU Training Mission in Mali received limited coverage on RT France and Sputnik France, with only 12 mentions. These mentions are divided into updates on the mission, discussions related to Malian politics and conflicts, and reports of

alleged misconduct. While two articles portrayed the mission negatively, one presented it positively. Thirteen distinct narratives emerged, with ten being critical, suggesting inefficiency or questionable actions. Despite this, no consistent pattern in media portrayal was discerned due to the scarce coverage. Notably, recurring narratives highlighted the initial success of the 2013 intervention and ongoing challenges in securing certain areas of Mali (Svoboda, Matlach, & Baddorf, 2021).

In the follow-up of Operation Serval in 2014, Operation Barkhane took place intending to be a counterterrorism force in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger. Operation Barkhane was the most frequently mentioned initiative among the five missions included in the study, with 310 articles referencing it. There are reports of a clear editorial interest among Kremlin-sponsored media in Operation Barkhane, which has been steadily increasing. Operation Barkhane has consistently been referred to in reporting on casualties and injuries among troops (54) as well as the ongoing conflict in the Sahel region (64), French domestic politics and foreign-security policy (24), and UN/EU politics or other international affairs (31) as shown on Figure 11 below. Other notable topics covered in mission-related articles include discussions on the future of Operation Barkhane and the recently formed Takuba Task Force (41 articles), developments in Malian domestic politics including the 2020 coup (14 articles), and conversations surrounding French engagement in the Sahel region as well as French bilateral relations in the area (54 articles). Thirteen articles quoted statements portraying the operation negatively, while twelve cited positive statements about it (Svoboda, Matlach, & Baddorf, 2021).

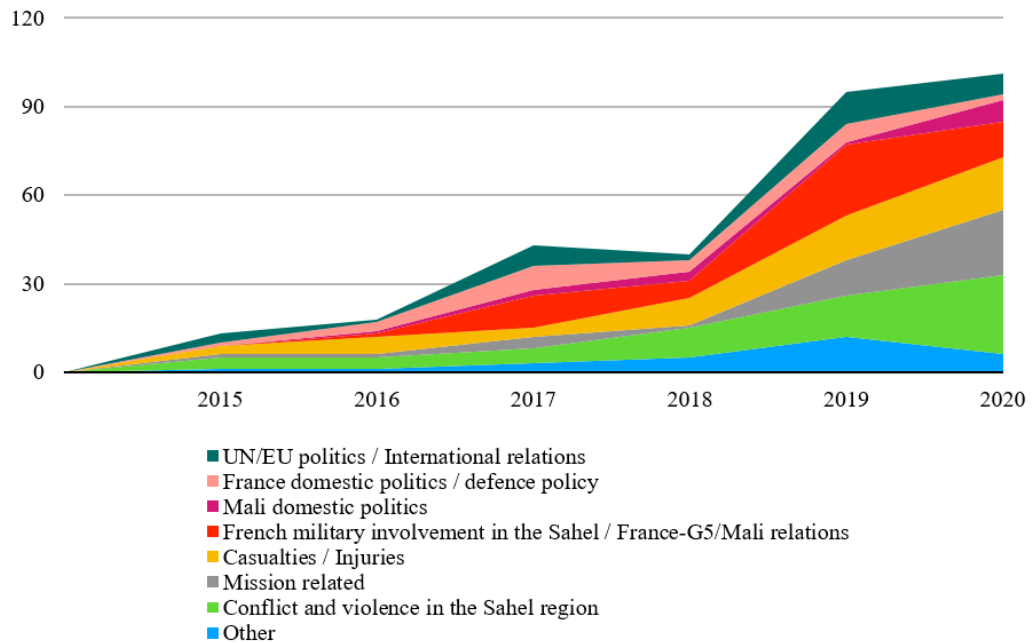


Figure 11 - Context in which articles referring to Operation Barkhane were published

Adapted from: Svoboda et al. (2021), “Russia’s Activities in Africa’s Information Environment”

Three recurring narratives concerning Operation Barkhane emerged throughout the six years under study by Svoboda et al. (2021). Articles consistently highlighted the operation's significant human and financial costs, with increased frequency in 2019 and 2020 (25 articles). Similarly, claims of operational failure or flawed strategy were more prevalent in articles from these later years (32 articles). More recent narratives included assertions of the operation's reliance on US armed forces for intelligence and logistics (7 articles) and comparisons between the Sahel situation and Afghanistan (11 articles).

Regarding France's role in the Sahel, six narratives were identified, with the most prevalent being the perception of growing hostility towards French presence in the region (52 articles). Other narratives included France's commitment to Operation Barkhane and Mali (22 articles), calls for assistance from allies (18 articles), and accusations of ulterior motives by the French government, such as resource exploitation in Sahelian countries (17 articles). Additionally, some articles accused France of perpetuating colonialism (12 articles), while others defended France against such claims (13 articles) (Svoboda, Matlach, & Baddorf, 2021).

According to Svoboda (2021), two narratives regarding the Russian Federation emerged from the analysis. Eleven articles suggested that Russia is re-establishing its presence or may expand its involvement in Africa. In comparison, another eleven articles

indicated that Sahelian populations or politicians advocate for increased cooperation with the Russian government. Moreover, fourteen articles asserted that European forces in the Sahel aim to control migration flows to Europe, attributing regional insecurity to migration pressures. Regarding editorial interest from French-speaking Kremlin-sponsored media, there appears to be relatively low interest in the EUTM missions in the Central African Republic and Mali. However, there was considerable interest in UN missions, particularly Operation Barkhane. The number of articles referencing MINUSCA peaked in 2016, while references to MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane steadily increased, particularly in 2019 and 2020 (Svoboda, Matlach, & Baddorf, 2021).

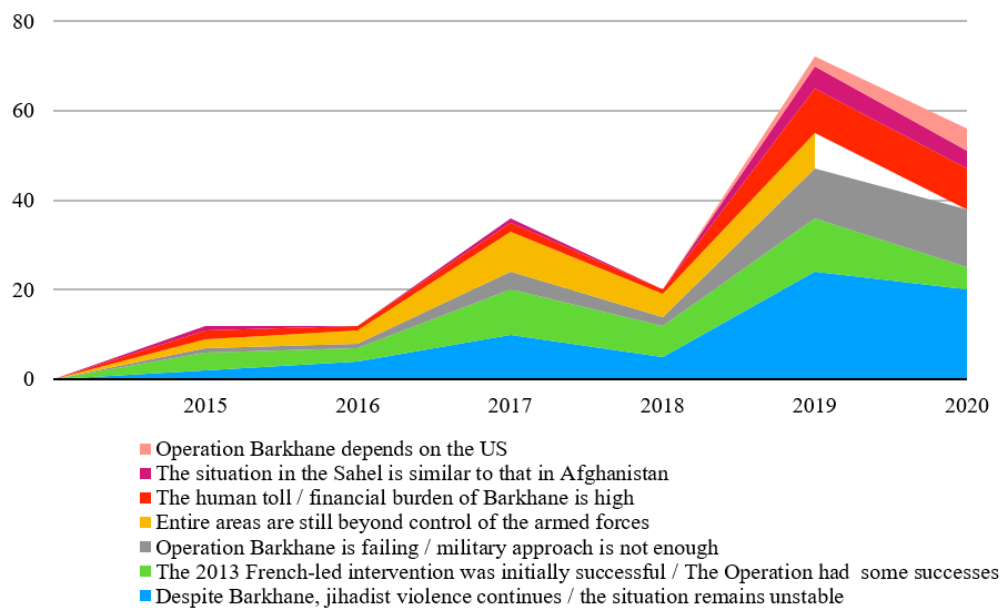


Figure 12 - Meta-narratives detected within sampled articles referring to Operation Barkhane (I)

Adapted from: Svoboda et al. (2021), “Russia’s Activities in Africa’s Information Environment”

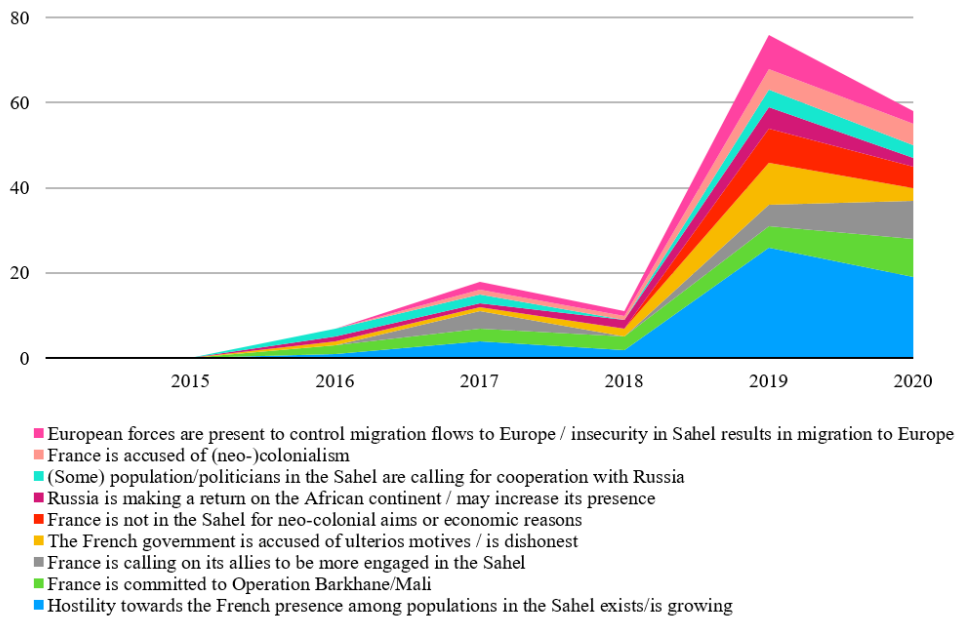


Figure 7: Meta-narratives detected within sampled articles referring to Operation Barkhane (II)

Figure 13 - Meta-narratives detected within sampled articles referring to Operation Barkhane (II)

Adapted from: Svoboda et al (2021), “Russia’s Activities in Africa’s Information Environment”

Although Russia’s influence on Mali is somewhat limited, there’s an apparent attempt to increase its influence over the region and population, control over the media, and more recently, the deployment of Wagner Group to Malian territory paves the grounds for a more “hard power” approach to control over Africa (Doxsee, Bermudez, & Jun, 2023). When addressing the Central African Republic (CAR), a nation within the grasp of Russian control, Svoboda’s study (2021) summarizes the narratives used by Russia, namely through pro-Russian Facebook pages, Telegram channels, and websites, as follows:

- Narrative 1: “Russia Empowers Central African Republic”
- Narrative 2: “Russia Brings Peace to Central African Republic”
- Narrative 3: “The West destabilizes Central African Republic”
- Narrative 4: “The West is a colonizer”
- Narrative 5: “Russia Supports Pan-Africanism”
- Narrative 6: “Russia Develops the CAR”
- Narrative 7: “Don’t trust Western Media”

Svoboda et al. (2021) also remark on the tactics used by Russia in this Information war, which include repeated sharing of Russian narratives across platforms, incorporating relevant social and cultural issues, using local voices, creating division, amplifying conspiracies, and sponsoring non-governmental organizations. Pinto (2022) states that, as a

consequence, peacekeeping initiatives aimed at safeguarding citizens, countering terrorism, ensuring territorial integrity, delivering humanitarian aid, and facilitating peaceful elections in Mali face significant challenges due to the perception of Western assistance.

Figures 9 to 13 convey the noticeable increase in online activity regarding French operations in Mali between 2019 and 2020. Considering the narratives used, it is likely that that activity increase might have been an attempt to hinder MINUSMA, and Operation Barkane and provoke the Malian and international communities to see the operation as unsuccessful or to undermine its support. The identification of narratives highlights an agenda used by powers opposing French activity and can be considered the use of InfoOps.

However, acknowledging Russia's limited involvement in Africa is crucial when evaluating its operations on the continent. Given its current economic and military constraints, Russia cannot allocate significant resources to Africa. While Russia aims to enhance relations, mainly through arms exports, Africa does not rank among its top priorities. (Svoboda, Matlach, & Baddorf, 2021) While Russian state-owned news outlets RT and Sputnik aim to discredit rivals, they also offer alternative perspectives on overlooked African stories, appealing to some African states. As mentioned above, the impact of Russia's media campaigns remains debatable; however, instances like Mali demonstrate tangible support for Russia's influence. Yet, the success of Russian-sponsored content may rely more on its adoption by African actors. Despite pushing narratives on a limited budget, Russia's efforts to sway African audiences towards its foreign policy objectives have yielded only modest results thus far (Clifford & Gruzd, 2022).

Russia has been actively working to shape media perceptions in Africa following its renewed engagement on the continent. Leveraging its expertise in propaganda, Russia aims to position itself as a supportive ally while undermining the credibility of traditional African partners like France and the US. The Kremlin's robust control over Russian media outlets facilitated this effort. State-owned channels such as RT, Sputnik, and Russian News Agency (TASS) play a pivotal role, forging partnerships with African media and providing newsroom training. Russia's digital strategy, including content published in French by RT and Sputnik, targets francophone Africa to challenge France's influence. SMN campaigns in Africa promote hyper-partisan content, supporting Russia's agenda while criticizing other foreign actors. These campaigns often involve local influencers to enhance credibility and cultural relevance. However, challenges such as detecting inauthentic behaviour and low internet connectivity in Africa have hindered their effectiveness (Clifford & Gruzd, 2022).

According to the Africa Defense Forum (2021), the suspected Russian disinformation campaigns dating back to 2019 correlate with Mali's political instability, with Russia allegedly utilizing manipulation on SMN to expand its influence in the region. The absence of oversight and fact-checking agencies in Mali's media environment provides fertile ground for such manipulations, allowing narratives denouncing Western interference and promoting Russian sovereignty to gain traction. France and Russia engage in information warfare on SMN platforms, with both facing consequences such as Facebook and Instagram's removal of hundreds of accounts originating from Russia and France targeting African countries, including Mali. Despite Russia's efforts to strengthen its image and establish military cooperation, the potential deployment of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group in Mali faces pushback from allies and concerns about further destabilization in the region. While disinformation shapes anti-French sentiment, nuanced factors, including historical mistrust of France and geopolitical interests, contribute to Mali's complex political landscape (Africa Defense Forum, 2021).

Following the work by the African Center for Strategic Studies, there's a relation between instability and disinformation. In the last seven years, 300 million Africans have joined SMN, bringing the total number of active users to over 400 million, with 600 million people using the internet across the continent. Africans connected to the internet depend heavily on SMN for news access (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

Disinformation campaigns have extensively targeted Africa, affecting at least 39 countries. Conflict-ridden nations experience higher levels of disinformation, with a median of 5 campaigns. Multiple actors are involved, sometimes amplifying each other's narratives. Foreign state sponsors, notably Russia, China, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, account for nearly 60% of these campaigns. Russia leads with 80 documented disinformation operations, aiming to undermine democracy in 19 African countries, totaling 23 campaigns taking place on the African continent. Elections are particularly vulnerable, with mercenary disinformation teams and domestic actors exploiting disinformation. However, press freedom decline and legislation targeting disinformation pose additional challenges, including harassment and detention of journalists (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

The study states that the West Africa region is the primary target of disinformation campaigns in Africa, with nearly 40% of documented campaigns focused on the region. Russia is heavily involved, accounting for about half of these attacks, particularly in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Military juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso also

sponsor disinformation, emulating Russian techniques and targeting entities like France and the UN (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

The infographic of Figure 15 referring to the disinformation campaigns throughout the African continent showcases a robust Russian influence over Mali.

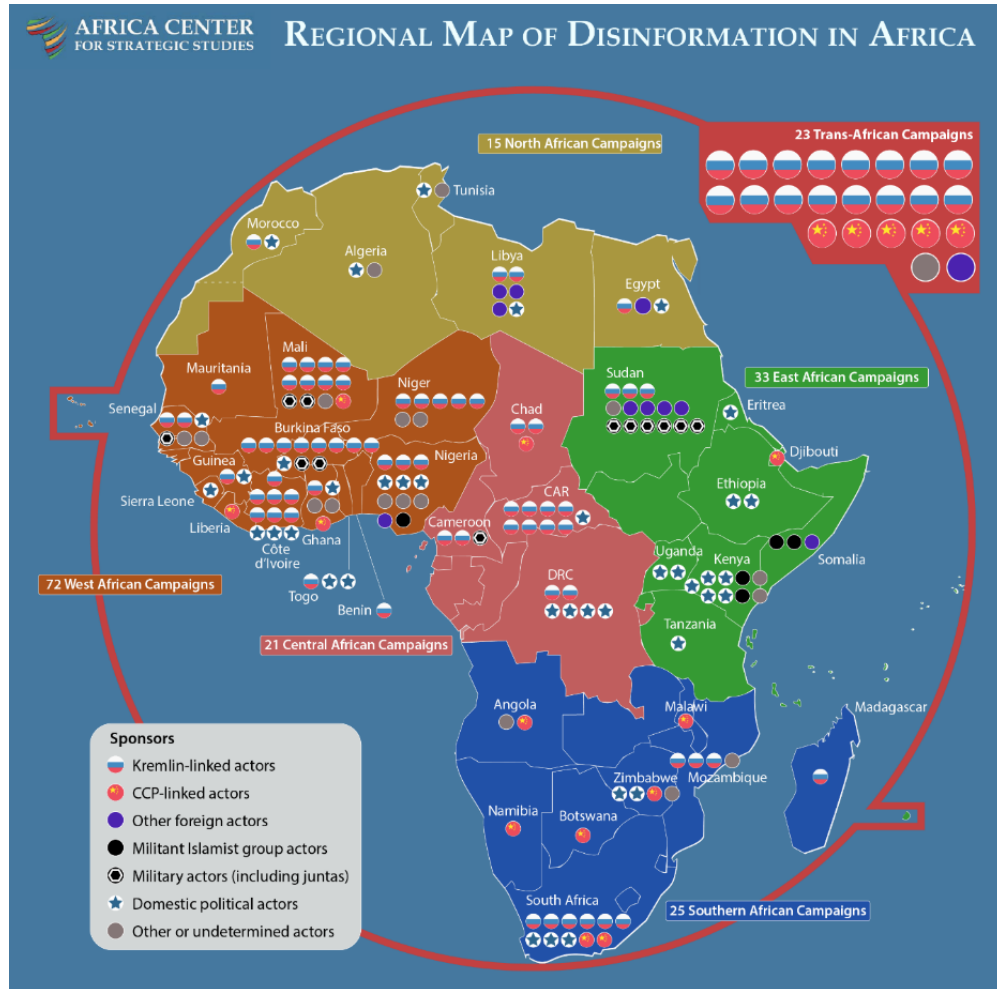


Figure 14 - Regional map of disinformation in Africa

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), “Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa”

Despite limited successes, pro-Russian activity in African media remains significant. Various pro-Russian African SMN pages, groups, and accounts share content supporting Russia's involvement in the region, ranging from state-owned news outlets such as Sputnik to informal groups and individual accounts, including bot accounts, as seen on the various examples on Annexe C, Figures 21 to 23, featuring several displays of InfoOps use through different SMN and sorts of accounts. Using French as a primary language, these interactions align with a structured InfoOps campaign, displaying a narrative that fosters empathy

towards Russia and the Wagner group, showcasing military strength, portraying Russia as an ally, demonizing Western powers, and mocking Western leaders.

One such reported example is a network known as "Russosphere," which promoted anti-Western and pro-Kremlin sentiments and emerged as a significant influencer in several African countries, particularly in former French colonies. This network glorified Vladimir Putin, accused France of modern-day colonialism, and echoed Russian propaganda about Ukraine while also celebrating Russia's Wagner mercenaries and actively recruiting new members. Despite restrictions on Russian state media following the invasion of Ukraine, "*Russosphere*" has thrived on various SMN platforms, amassing over 80,000 followers. Analysts suggest that the network's activities contribute to growing mistrust between African nations and the West, potentially impacting support for Ukraine while amplifying grievances against France and influencing local sentiment (Atanesian, 2023).

This influence is evident in protests where demonstrators wave Russian flags, demand closer ties with Moscow, and oppose the French presence in the region. The campaign's success reflects broader anxieties in Western capitals about the erosion of Western influence in Africa, with diplomats and military officials in Paris reportedly aware of and alarmed by these developments. (Atanesian, 2023)

On February 12th, 2024, the U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center exposed Russia's intelligence services for supporting the African Initiative, a new information agency focused on Africa-Russia relations, which spreads disinformation targeting the United States and European countries. The African Initiative recruits African journalists, bloggers, and locals to bolster Russia's image and denigrate other countries. African Initiative spreads disinformation primarily through branded and unbranded SMN accounts, websites like afrinz.ru, and platforms like VKontakte and Telegram (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

The Russian government's use of InfoOps on African soil has become increasingly apparent. Its influence on the population and local government has been felt so that in March 2022, Mali banned Radio France Internationale (RFI) and France 24 media organizations from the country (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022).

According to AccountabilityLab's interim Country Director, Konaté (2022), the ways to minimize InfoOps effects are through a 4-stage process, described below:

Collect local data

- Western policymakers lack a comprehensive understanding of how information is consumed and perceived in the Sahel. This hinders effective data gathering and communication on crucial topics like justice and governance in Mali..

Counter-disinformation strategies

- Effective counter-disinformation strategies involve disseminating validated, reliable information through accessible channels such as local language voice notes on WhatsApp or radio and employing traditional communication methods like town criers in communities.

Legitimate news sources

- Creating relationships with and supporting the growth of legitimate news sources. Strengthening legitimate news sources in the Sahel requires addressing longstanding challenges such as revenue generation, management, and corruption, ensuring they are trusted by citizens and not influenced by donors.

Prioritize engagement in fragile regions

- Given the rapid growth of internet usage, SMN companies must prioritize engagement in fragile regions like the Sahel by forming local partnerships, monitoring activities, enforcing policies, and combating fake accounts to address misinformation effectively.

One key factor to consider is the anticipated growth of internet users by 2030 in Africa by 260% compared to 2017, coupled with the World Bank's goal of bridging the continent's digital gap, underscoring the necessity for SMN companies to give precedence to this matter. SMN companies should be prepared to establish innovative local collaborations, dedicate additional resources to monitoring activities in our region, enforce policies addressing these concerns, and eliminate counterfeit and automated accounts, among other actions, to secure a healthy IE and prevent the spread of misinformation in the region (Konaté, 2022).

As seen in the answers to the interviews showcased in Appendix D, there were no attempts to counter Pro-Russian InfoOps on EUTM Mali's part due to limitations regarding the employment of InfoOps due to EUTM's political constraints – as the mission is intended only to provide training to Malian Armed Forces (FAMa), it cannot impose itself nor carry out offensive InfoOps and also, Russians were deemed as partners as they also have a presence within the United Nations.

1.12 Wagner Group activities in Africa

Alongside Russian-state activities, the Russian-based mercenary group has been escalating its presence on the African continent over the past years. The Center for Strategic and International Studies announced the growing presence of the Wagner group, having deployed to Mali in December 2021 with support from the Russian armed forces and established a solid, fully functional, and long-term operating base a stone-throw away from Bamako's Modibo Keita International Airport, neighbouring Airbase 101, a Malian Air Force's military base. Wagner's operations in Africa—both the core paramilitary services and the broader network's involvement in resource extraction, smuggling, influence operations, and other activities, provide an essential channel for Moscow to expand its influence and achieve geopolitical goals on the African continent (Doxsee, Bermudez, & Jun, 2023).

The potential deployment of the Wagner Group to Mali mirrors the activities of other private military contractor (PMC) companies across Africa. Since 2018, Russian PMCs have operated in the Central African Republic, where they have seized control of mineral resources and perpetrated severe human rights violations. Similar PMC deployments have occurred in countries like Sudan, Libya, and Mozambique, illustrating a broader irregular Russian effort on the continent with PMCs playing a prominent role. Although officially designated as a private security contractor, Wagner is widely regarded as a "creature of the Russian state," maintaining close ties to Russian military intelligence services and tasked with advancing the economic interests of Russian elites. The group has engaged in various security activities, including training local forces, providing VIP protection, and laying the groundwork for a potential contract in Mali (Thompson, 2021).

Thompson (2021) considered that Russia's potential engagement with Mali threatened to undermine the political and security goals of the United States and its allies, including efforts in counterterrorism and promoting democracy. A heightened Russian presence in Mali could hamper pressure from the United States and France on the military government to embrace democratic reforms, which is crucial for a successful counterterrorism strategy in the Sahel region.

Additionally, Thompson (2021) defended that if the Wagner Group became active in Mali, it could escalate the conflict's violence and brutality, as seen in their operations in the Central African Republic. The potential withdrawal of French forces in response to a Wagner deployment could further exacerbate violence as various armed factions wrestle for control

in a newly created security void. This was eventually verified by the escalation of political violence in the region in the following years, as shown in Figures 15, featuring Wagner's group involvement in Mali, CAR, and Ukraine, and Figure 19, featuring the count of political violence events in Mali by leading actors.

Utilizing entities like the Wagner Group and other Russian-funded organizations strategically, Moscow seeks to sway domestic elites and disseminate misinformation regarding Western and Russian foreign policy objectives among the general populace. The Wagner Group and similar private military security contractors operate independently from the Russian state and military, initially tasked with safeguarding critical Russian energy infrastructure, notably state-owned firms like Gazprom. This dependence on energy exports has transformed Wagner into a vital security asset for Russia. Their involvement in Mali forms part of a broader Russian strategy in sub-Saharan Africa, driven by Moscow's mounting frustration with perceived Western global influence (Elischer, 2022).

Russia's increasing interest in Africa coincided with its discontent over what it viewed as Western expansionism. Vladimir Putin's historic visit to sub-Saharan Africa in 2006 marked a turning point, followed by numerous high-profile Russian government visits to the continent. Events such as the removal of longstanding allies like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, the Syrian civil war, and post-Crimea annexation economic sanctions intensified Moscow's drive to diversify its economic partnerships (Elischer, 2022).

In Mali and across the African continent, Russian officials portray their nation as a non-Western power, drawing parallels between Russia's foreign policy challenges and Africa's historical experiences of Western exploitation and colonialism. This narrative emphasizes the sovereignty of formerly colonized nations, traditional gender roles, and national values. Russia's messaging on the importance of national sovereignty, its interpretation of global events, and its portrayal as an emancipatory force have reached Malian households through channels like the RT France news network. Additionally, Moscow-based entities have invested in platforms such as Maliactu.com, a prominent online source for Malian news. Informal networks and illicit organizations, including the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC), have supported initiatives to bolster Russian soft power in Mali and sustain local civil society groups like Yèrèwolo or GPM, which have emerged as visible pro-Russian actors (Elischer, 2022).

While the Wagner Group has employed a comparable approach to its operations in Sudan and the CAR, Mali poses distinctive challenges for the group. Securing mining

investment opportunities is more challenging and less lucrative in Mali as the Wagner group must deploy a substantial number of troops and invest heavily to compete with other actors, namely local and Western ones. This could have led to conflicts with the region's Western military and aid presence. By employing tactics used in CAR, Wagner could undermine Western security interests and the credibility of UN missions in Mali. Funding remains a major hurdle due to sanctions, requiring Wagner to negotiate with state and non-state entities controlling mining concessions. If unable to secure financing through conventional means, Wagner may seek direct support from the Russian state, highlighting the Kremlin's strategic calculations in challenging French interests in the region (Parens, 2022).

Despite the setbacks, the mercenary group still has enough tools to exercise its influence over the African public – pro-Russian movies, such as *Tourist* and *Granit*, produced by Parity Films from 2021 to 2022, which take place on CAR and Mozambique respectively, portray “Russian instructors (...) sacrificing their lives for their [African people] protection, while also presenting PMCs as a noble and valiant profession for audiences” (le Roux & Knight, 2023).

Wagner Group’s activities under the Malian government in the country over the year 2022 have roused controversy as, according to the UN News outlet, “There are “strong indications” that more than 500 people were killed – the vast majority summarily executed – by Malian troops and foreign military personnel during a five-day operation in the village of Moura in central Mali in March 2022” (United Nations, 2023). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported on grave human rights violations in the village of Moura, Mali, allegedly involving Russian-based Wagner mercenaries. The report by OHCHR detailed horrifying acts, including mass rapes of women and girls and mass executions of at least 500 individuals over four days, with evidence suggesting the involvement of both Malian forces and foreign personnel. Despite an announced investigation, Malian authorities continue to deny wrongdoing by their armed forces. The report highlighted a climate of terror and impunity surrounding the activities of private military contractors like the Wagner group in Mali. (United Nations, 2023).

After the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project's previous report on Wagner operations in Africa, published in August 2022, the focal point of political violence involving the Wagner Group has moved from Africa – mainly Mali and CAR – to Europe and the conflict in Ukraine. However, this shift does not suggest a decrease in operations in Africa. In fact, during the first quarter of 2023, there was an increase in violent incidents involving the Wagner Group in the core conflict zones – Mali and CAR – compared

to the average number of quarterly events in the preceding year, as shown in Figure 16 below (Sewat, Nsaibia, & Gurcov, 2023).

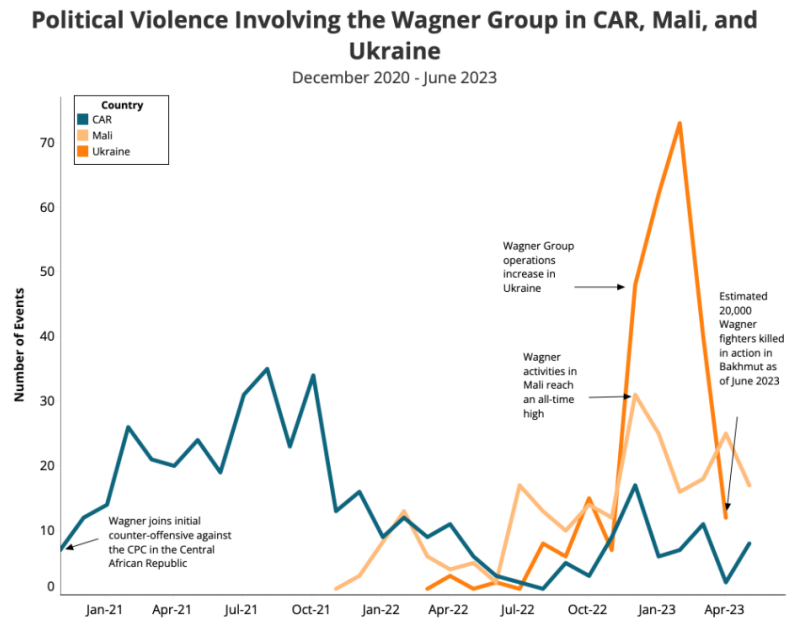


Figure 15 - Political Violence involving the Wagner Group in CAR, Mali and Ukraine

Adapted from: ACLED Data (2023), “Moving Out of the Shadows Shifts in Wagner Group Operations Around the World”

1.13 JNIM and Islamic State activities

Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) is a Salafi-jihadist group affiliated with al-Qaeda and operates in the Sahel region. It stems from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which originated during the Algerian civil war in the 1990s. JNIM is considered the most active armed group in the Sahel regional conflict. It holds significant influence and operates across central Sahel and into the coastal states of West Africa (ACLED, 2023).

JNIM targets a diverse range of opponents, including international, regional, and local forces, along with various non-state armed groups like pro-government militias and rival jihadist factions such as the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel). The group's warfare tactics involve gradually escalating activities in frequency, scope, and geographic spread as it expands its military operations across the region. It also maintains a rapid operational pace that surpasses its regional adversaries and rivals. JNIM employs a diverse range of violent tactics, including targeted assassinations, kidnappings, and large-scale military campaigns, with a notable emphasis on remote violence such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs). These tactics constitute a significant portion of its activity and

have surpassed IS Sahel's. Additionally, JNIM destroys infrastructure and imposes its interpretation of Islamic law in areas under its control. It sustains its activities through various nonviolent means, including artisanal mining, extortion, and control of supply chains. While its bureaucratic capacity is limited, it provides basic services and seeks to control populations in areas under its influence (ACLED, 2023).

JNIM primarily targets international and local government forces in the regions it operates, positioning itself as a defender against foreign influence and portraying local governments as corrupt and anti-Islamic. It has historically clashed with French forces and MINUSMA, referring to them as occupiers and invaders. With MINUSMA's withdrawal from Mali, JNIM now perceives mercenaries from the Wagner Group as its primary adversaries, reflecting a similar narrative in its propaganda. JNIM strategically employs economic warfare alongside confrontation to destabilize its adversaries, weaken governmental authority, and create opportunities for territorial expansion. Economic warfare tactics have gradually increased and diversified as JNIM expands its regional operations, indicating a multifaceted approach to achieving its objectives beyond direct military engagement (ACLED, 2023).

Beyond striking emblematic representations of state power, such as police stations and government buildings, JNIM attacks educational institutions to eradicate state presence and impose its ideological framework. Targeting essential infrastructure like roads and markets undermines state financial capacities and disrupts local economies. At the same time, embargoes on non-compliant towns and villages create hardships and strain relations between populations and authorities. JNIM controls information flow by disrupting telecommunication installations and hinders coordination among military and security forces, gaining an advantage in shaping local narratives and impeding counter-insurgency efforts (ACLED, 2023). Such activities fall into the concept of InfoOps.

Figure 15 infographic assesses the growth of JNIM's economic warfare over time, noting a slight increase in activities that ultimately grant JNIM's soft power over the regions it controls in the Sahel, attesting the group's ability not only to engage in warfare but to control regions and hinder governmental influence on their territories. As ACLED puts it, JNIM is capable of "a combination of guerrilla warfare, strategic use of violence, governance and population control, economic warfare, and media and propaganda operations (ACLED, 2023)".

Evolution of Economic Warfare Conducted by JNIM

March 2017 - September 2023

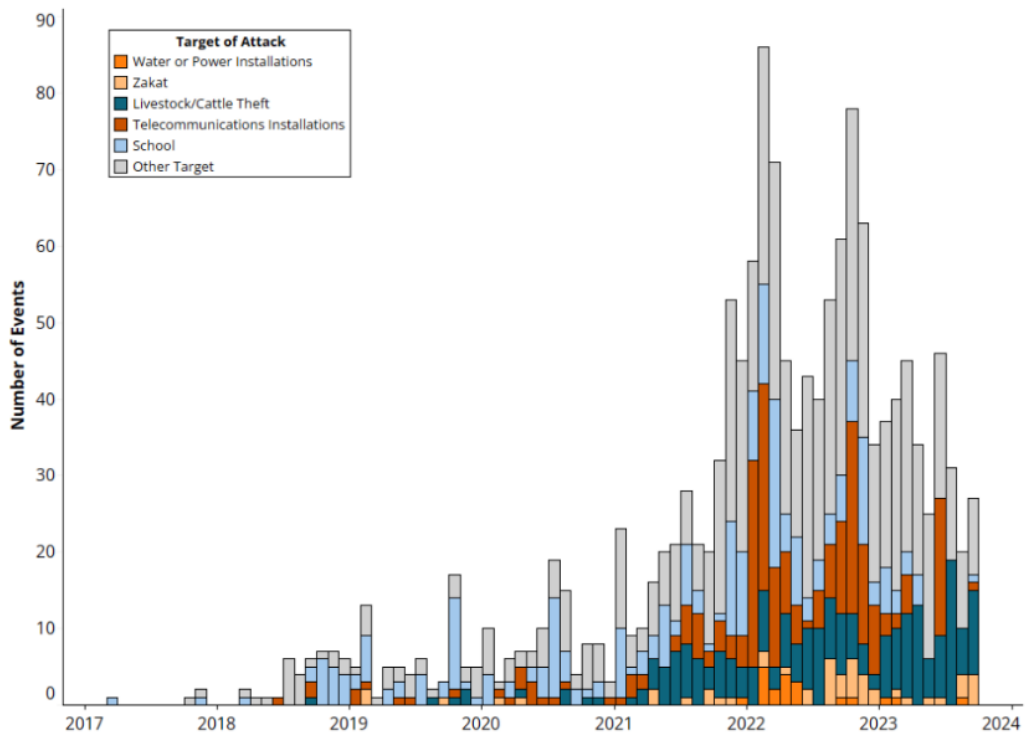


Figure 16 - Evolution of Economic Warfare Conducted by JNIM

Adapted from: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (2023), “Actor Profile: Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)”

The Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) operates as the Sahelian affiliate of the transnational Islamic State (IS) organization, primarily active in border regions spanning Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Initially known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), it refrained from claiming attacks until September 2016 when it began targeting military and security positions in Burkina Faso and Niger. Despite limited engagement in IS media operations during its existence as ISGS, the group's violence showcased its loyalty and alignment with the parent organization (ACLED, 2023).

IS Sahel emerged as the second most active armed actor in the Sahel regional conflict, following its al-Qaeda rival, JNIM. Driven by growing competition with JNIM, IS Sahel aimed to challenge its dominance and expand its influence. The escalating conflict prompted France to launch extensive military operations against IS Sahel to contain the perceived threat it posed. (ACLED, 2023).

Despite setbacks, IS Sahel's conflict with JNIM remained deadly and protracted. In late 2022, there was a shift in favour of IS Sahel, marked by significant losses inflicted on JNIM in major battles along the Burkina Faso-Mali border. IS Sahel militants exhibit a

pattern of large-scale violence characterised by indiscriminate attacks on adversaries and civilian communities. This indiscriminate violence underscores the group's ruthless tactics and the significant humanitarian toll of the conflict in the region (ACLED, 2023).

The distinguished *modus operandi* of these two actors regarding information and media operations is worth noting. While JNIM seeks to use its media assets, namely the Al-Zallaqa Media Foundation, to reinforce its image as an inclusive armed group that advocates for widespread communal support (Nsaibia, Beevor, & Berger, 2023), IS Sahel uses its assets to portray triumph, boost morale, publicize attacks on communities and features the burning of churches and gruesome executions (EUROPOL, 2023).

CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, we'll describe the methodological process employed in this thesis, designed according to Academia Militar's SOP 552/1.^a regarding format and structure. Citations and bibliography follow the American Psychology Association (APA) norms. The following sections underline the investigation objectives, starting question, derived questions, data collection techniques, and sampling process to further develop the methodological method.

Alongside literary sources used throughout the literature review, we assessed academic and media sources, focusing on Russian-affiliated channels, groups on SMN, pages, and accounts. The extraction and analysis of ACLED and Africa Center for Strategic Studies data proved to be of the utmost importance in providing factual data supporting the preparation of interviews and remaining research.

A Research Analysis Model is provided in Appendix A as well as a Framework for the interview survey in Appendix B.

2.1 Research Objectives

Regarding the investigation type used in this investigation, a General Objective (GO) was defined, followed by its "deconstruction", allowing "research into more restricted and elementary aspects, translated into activities and tasks that must be observable and measurable, to allow knowing the degree of compliance" (Santos & Lima, 2019, p. 58). Table 1 summarises the Specific Objectives used in this research.

Table 1 - Specific Objectives

SO1	How does SMN influence the public.
SO2	Identify the objectives of InfoOps and how they are applied.
SO3	Understand the relationship between SMN and InfoOps.
SO4	Analyse the results of applying InfoOps through social media networks in the EUTM.

2.2 Research and Derived Questions

Hailing from the research general objective, we define the Research Question (RQ) as "What is the role of SMN in Information Operations?". The RQ is further decomposed into four Derived Questions (DQ). Table 2 presents the Research and Derived Questions used in this work.

Table 2 - Research and Derived Questions

RQ	What is the role of SMN in Information Operations?
DQ 1	How can SMN influence the public?
DQ 2	What are the objectives of Information Operations and how are they applied?
DQ 3	What is the relationship between SMN and Information Operations?
DQ 4	What were the results of applying Information Operations through SMN in the EUTM mission?

2.3 Data collection techniques

This thesis followed a mixed approach, using interviews and data collection. We used the inductive method, which “corresponds to a mental operation that has as its starting point the observation of particular facts to, through their association, establish generalizations that allow the formulation of a law or theory” (Santos & Lima, 2019, p. 18).

Therefore, this thesis follows a literature revision based on documental research. The research uses academic and institutional publications and the content analysis of relevant media and SMN. We also conducted interviews with selected military personnel, namely officers who were experienced in developing Information Operations at EUTM Mali.

2.4 Data Analysis

In the first stage of the research process, we assessed academic and grey literature to provide definitions and a conceptual baseline framework to guide the investigation. Beginning in Fifth Generation Warfare, we started by understanding the practical development of Information Operations, their key features, and related importance such as TA. We then sought to define SMN and how it relates to InfoOps to understand how a target audience is chosen and how to assess the effects of an InfoOps campaign on the target. There’s also the need to understand the environment, conditions, and features of the location our study focuses on – describing Mali, its population and accessibility to commodities, such as electricity, and SMN, as well as the local conflicts and relationships towards EUTM. Other players such as Russia and Wagner Group, JNIM and Islamic State must also be accounted for. All these actors perform relevant roles that assert their power through dominance, warfare, and “soft power” techniques.

Intensive research through international scientific papers, databases, joint army publications, books, website documents, and pages was carried out, particularly through the Armed Conflict & Location Event Data (ACLED) project, which provided ample sources and data essential to create statistical products regarding episodes of political violence, actor’s activities, and sources throughout the recent years.

2.5 Interviews

According to Santos and Lima (2019, p. 101) “an interview is a unique form of social interaction whose main objective is to collect data for research” and as such it can be unstructured, structured, and semi-structured.

In this investigation, along with intensive documental and data research, interviews were conducted to obtain as much information as possible. The sample for this investigation comprises 4 Portuguese officers who served as Information operations Officers at EUTM Mali. We prioritised conducting live interviews, and online whenever needed for all parties' convenience. We prepared the interview guide per the research objectives, for interpretation and data collection and made it available before the interviews, to facilitate engagement and direct the work to accomplish the Research Question.

2.6 Sampling Process

The samples used in this thesis are intentionally non-probabilistic, as the investigator picked the interviewees (Santos & Lima, 2019). The selection of participants in this research was used as criteria their role as Information Operations Officers in the Portuguese contingent at the EUTM Mali. Considering the rise in Russian and JNIM's activity in the region, it was planned to select officers who deployed to Mali over different periods to assess the evolution of InfoOps. Figure 3 provides minimal data to characterise the interviewees.

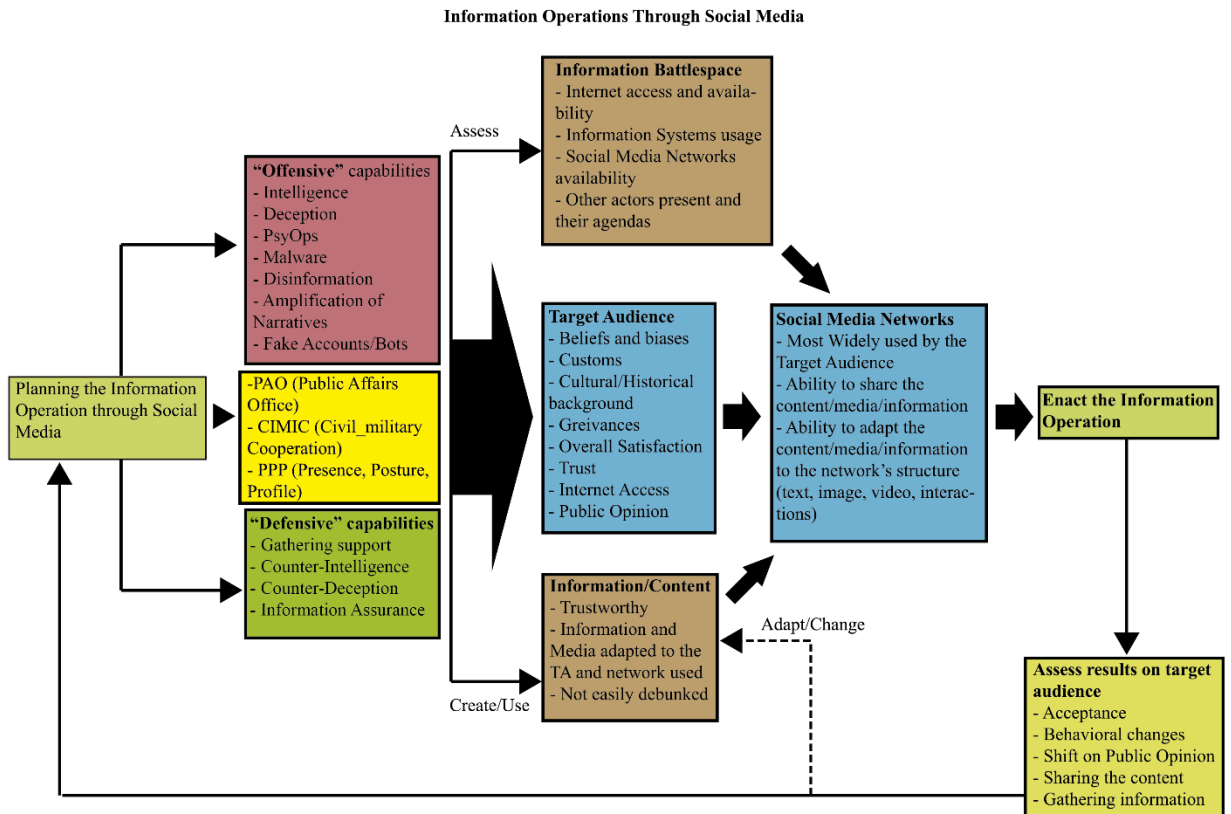
Table 3 - Selected Sample of Portuguese Officers deployed at EUTM Mali

Interviewee	Name	Rank	Unit (PRT Army)	Time of Deployment
Interviewee 1	João Xavier	Major (OF-3)	EME	22Jul19-13Jun20
Interviewee 2	Atalaya Ferreira	Major (OF-3)	Sub Chefe CRVNG	20Jan20-21Aug20
Interviewee 3	Duarte Correia	Major (OF-3)	EM BrigRR	14Feb22- 12Oct22
Interviewee 4	Afonso André	Major (OF-3)	CIGeoE	02Jun23-10Feb24

CHAPTER 3 - RESULTS

3.1 Conceptual framework for developing InfoOps through social media networks

Figure 17 - InfoOps through Social Media Networks



Through the literature review and the interviews with experts, we developed the diagram in Figure 17, featuring a conceptual framework for developing InfoOps through SMN.

The diagram features boxes that contain several concepts and stages, each of them being titled by bold letters on top and respective contents below. These boxes are interconnected through a series of arrows that aim to direct the several actions and interactions between them, being the actions towards TA and SMN the most prominent due to being the main subjects when carrying out InfoOps. Traced lines mean this interaction exists, however, its execution is not mandatory.

When intending to enact a particular InfoOps upon a desired opponent, it is necessary to know the available capabilities and cells that can shape the development of InfoOps. The literature and interviews allowed us to identify capabilities leaning towards offensive or

defensive actions, whose use depends on the intended end, and cells that can advise and direct their use, providing significant assets to a commander intending to enact InfoOps upon a particular target population.

Several interviewees mentioned the advisor cells such as the Public Affairs Office (PAO), Posture, Profile, and Presence (PPP), and civil-military cooperations (CIMIC) and how they can guide the way in which a force interacts with the population, provide information regarding cultural backgrounds and traditions, and guide interactions with the local population while ensuring alignment with the mission's objectives and cultural sensitivities.

Armistead (2004) and JP3-13 (2014) literature allowed to identify that while on offensive operations, InfoOps provide capabilities of intelligence, deception, or disinformation campaigns, establishing narratives, implementing and sharing malware, or using PsyOps on a given target. On defensive operations, InfoOps will allow collecting support for one's cause or narrative, counterintelligence and counter-deception operations, and reassuring gathered information.

LTG Flynn (2022) and Turan (2018) mention that a TA is studied and chosen based on its characteristics and features, which make it prone to be targetable and deemed proper to be either subverted or have its support shifted to our cause. A narrative is therefore created through media content tailored to be considered acceptable, trustworthy, and legitimate by the TA, considering it will have an impact according to our objectives and intentions. The information battlespace is also a significant factor, as it englobes the characteristics of the IE the InfoOps will act upon, which can either limit or enhance it, providing key elements that can be exploited or presenting limitations that should be considered or avoided.

Upon establishing these concepts, the available SMN must be chosen and the desired content tailored to those platforms and published, acting as a vessel where the contents meet the TA within a given Information Battlespace as defended by Shallcross (2017) and Van Niekerk & Mahraj (2013). The goal is to create a narrative through sets of related episodes or content that will sway the TA toward the desired outcome. According to interviewees, the InfoOps assessment relies on its results upon the TA, through direct interaction with the population, interactions with the contents online, and behavioural or public opinion shifts, which may dictate a need to adapt content or create/change narratives to have a more robust impact.

In conclusion, whenever the need for the enactment of InfoOps through SMN comes, this conceptual framework can be used as a guide for its correct application and ensures the main characteristics and concepts are analysed and implemented.

3.2 Lessons Learned

Based on the interviews in Appendix D, we provide key observations concerning using InfoOps through SMN in the context of EUTM operations in Mali.

OBSERVATION I

Upon analysis of interviews, namely answers to Q4, we identified the need to adapt EUTM's narrative based on the reactions of the local population to activities on SMN. Such initiative underscores the importance of continuously assessing and adjusting approaches to align with the evolving IE. The rising population and increasing access to the Internet and SMN reported by The World Bank (2021) make Mali a suitable ground to be exploited and subject to the creation of narratives and influence campaigns to shape public opinion towards political or military objectives.

OBSERVATION II

The narratives are already being exploited by Pro-Russian InfoOps as shown by Svoboda et al. (2021) in the region, and therefore require a response to counter said narratives and seeking to gather support from the Malian population.

OBSERVATION III

As exposed in several interviews to Q6, the challenges posed by local limitations such as lack of internet access, illiteracy, and diverse dialects, showcased the importance of understanding the local context and tailoring InfoOps strategies to address these specific challenges. It is necessary to have a thorough understanding of the local context for effective communication and engagement, mirrored by the positive reactions to the content shared by EUTM on local dialects and featuring locals engaging in EUTM's activities.

OBSERVATION IV

It also was possible to determine which networks are best for each end, either using Facebook as the most effective SMN to reach out to the African population or Instagram for

the European one. Considering The World Bank's data (2021) regarding the steady expansion of Mali's population and its increasing access to the Internet and SMN, alongside the InfoOps capabilities fostered by SMN presented by Maharaj and Niekerk (2013) and ACLED (2024) data presented on Annex B regarding political violence events' sources, it is possible to determine that SMN will continue to play a significant role in Mali's public opinion in the future. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a solid online social presence and positive narratives to continue a friendly influence over the population.

OBSERVATION V

Communication is crucial for guiding InfoOps efforts and ensuring consistency in messaging, as well as the need to create narratives that are on par with the mission's objectives and goals supported by the continuous creation of media products to back the narrative up and rouse the desired reactions on the target audience, as defended by Turan (2018).

OBSERVATION VI

These guidelines in shaping public perceptions should be continuously evaluated and adjusted as needed. Interviewee 3 mentions in Q2 the good reception of videos with quality content showcasing EUTM and FAMA cooperation and training also underlines the necessity of creating content deemed worthy and of value by the Malian population. Therefore, personnel with photography, video, and content-creating skills are valuable to any InfoOps campaign and their presence significantly enhances the media products of said mission. As defended by Turan (2018), there must be a connection between the public and a military entity to build trust and promote positive relationships, highlighting the importance of EUTM's necessity to provide the Malian public with training and activities that are considered beneficial and likely to be shared among the population.

OBSERVATION VII

Political dynamics and external influences can significantly influence the effectiveness of InfoOps efforts. It's essential to anticipate and navigate these factors to achieve desired outcomes. Interviewees provided answers to Q5 and Q6 which stated that as Mali's military junta and EUTM's relations grew cold, it severely hindered the mission's capability to provide training and harmed the Malian population's perception of the mission,

also damaging EUTM’s capacity to enact InfoOps – it has shown the importance of having good-standing relations with key partners and not to be politically constricted to use InfoOps to achieve an end effectively.

OBSERVATION VIII

Pinto (2022) correlated social division and unrest due to disinformation. Building on this correlation, and knowing the growing pro-Russian influence over Mali as presented in the examples of Annex C and subchapter 1.10, we can infer the ever-increasing negative view of EUTM stems from pro-Russian InfoOps upon the Malian population and influence over its government, alongside political setbacks that prevent EUTM from acting promptly.

OBSERVATION IX

Reputation management and counter-narratives are also critical elements of InfoOps, as a proactive stance on reputation management and effective counter-narratives are essential for mitigating reputational damage and maintaining credibility, particularly in the face of external InfoOps targeting the EU and seeking to undermine its actions in African nations, as mentioned by Interviewee 4 on Q5 and Konaté (2022). This requires dedicated InfoOps and Intelligence personnel capable of debunking and denouncing third-party InfoOps while promoting narratives and creating content without being limited on their actions to the point it jeopardizes the InfoOps carried out.

OBSERVATION X

Konaté (2022) considers that effective information strategies in the Sahel face several challenges, including Western policymakers' limited understanding of local information consumption and perception, which impedes data collection and communication on key issues like justice and governance in Mali.

OBSERVATION XI

To counter these disinformation campaigns, strategies should focus on disseminating validated and relatable information through accessible channels such as local language voice notes on WhatsApp, radio, and traditional methods like town criers. Konaté (2022) also defends strengthening legitimate news sources in the Sahel, which involves addressing

revenue generation, management, and corruption to ensure these sources are trusted and independent.

OBSERVATION XII

Finally, Konaté (2022) considers that SMN companies must also prioritise engagement in fragile regions by forming local partnerships, monitoring activities, enforcing policies, and combating fake accounts to address misinformation effectively.

CHAPTER 4 – DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

When addressing the political and social instability in Mali, we identify a noticeable increase in events related to political violence over the past five years, as shown in Figure 18 of Annexe B.

Considering events related to specific players, e.g., Wagner, JNIM, or IS Sahel, Figure 19 in Annexe B supports concluding increased activity in the period 2022-2023 than in previous years. Also, regarding Figure 20, Annexe B, it is noticeable that SMN are being increasingly used to report political violence and armed conflict events. This can dictate a broader dissemination of SMN usage or an increase in episodes of political violence.

The InfoOps examples reported by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies in Annexe A, along with the several examples found on several SMN and shown in Annexe C, adding other examples discussed through subchapter 1.11, one can conclude that there's concrete evidence that there's a major InfoOps campaign targeting Mali that has been affecting its population and political stability.

An aggressive pro-Russian InfoOps campaign is being implemented in Mali with identifiable narratives that smartly exploit the cultural and historical backgrounds of the Malian population, effectively establishing anti-European narratives and gaining support towards Russian partnerships.

SMN proved to be a critical tool, being a prominent means to collect data, conduct intelligence operations, and share EUTM-related media. Likewise, pro-Russian entities use SMN to spread pro-Russian propaganda. Other players, e.g., JNIM, use them to enhance their influence over controlled areas, while IS Sahel shares content boasting military achievements.

Also, through the interviews, we identified that the political situation impacts mission success and may impose unforeseen complications on the need to enact InfoOps on a given TA. As a result, EUTM was severely constrained on its InfoOps capabilities, whereas pro-Russian InfoOps operated freely and seemingly without any preoccupation regarding the quality of the shared content.

In addition, we noted that each SMN platform had its own characteristics, suitable or unsuitable, for use on certain levels; for example, Facebook was used to create contact with the Malians, and Instagram was used for the Europeans. It was observed that Mali has severe limitations regarding internet access to the general population; however, there's a degree of

success in using InfoOps through SMN, which suggests a more practical usage when employed in more developed nations with high usage of internet and SMN.

Finally, the Mission Commander must consider InfoOps' capabilities parallel to other operations. PPP, PAO, and CIMIC cells provide valuable insights and counselling that can influence the success of InfoOps. We consider these cells critical enablers to enhance the reach and efficacy of InfoOps.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to analyse the impact of hybrid threats, specifically in the domain of InfoOps, when using SMN's influence on African nations, taking Mali as a case study. Considering the Sahel as a region of instability and given the missions developed by the EU in Mali, it would be relevant to examine how InfoOps have affected the political scenario of the state, the effects they had on the population, as well as the implications it has brought to the operations conducted there in the presence of third-party influencers. Given this circumstance, it became pertinent to study how nations can prevent and combat this type of threat with the assistance of organizations such as the EU and NATO, which have been developing work in this direction over time. It should be noted that even a country without broad access to the internet or SMN, such as Mali, is subject to the enactment of InfoOps through SMN. Then we should infer that other more developed, modern nations with a wide spread of internet access and SMN presence from their population, are very prone to be targetable by InfoOps.

These hybrid threats, aiming to exploit vulnerabilities orchestrated by hard-to-detect actors, have complicated decision-making processes. In the case of InfoOps, they've led to confusion, discord, and social divisions among the target audience. Mali is a nation deeply troubled due to its inherent social and government fragility in fostering conducive conditions for the state. Facing a complexity of conflicts and being targeted by terrorism and foreign interference, Mali struggles with democratic consolidation, making the development process and institution-building challenging.

Mali has emerged as a fertile ground for hybrid activities due to their ease of implementation in a highly volatile context. To expand its influence, Russia, utilizing non-affiliated forces such as the Wagner Group, has steadily strengthened its presence in the country. Disinformation serves as a primary tool in efforts to disrupt Mali's stability, interfering with elections, undermining Western values, and challenging military operations conducted by both the EU (via EUTM Mali) and the UN (via MINUSMA). The dissemination of false information, rumours, and propaganda, supported by Russia and its non-affiliated forces, has aided the withdrawal of European troops, eroding Western involvement, and institutional credibility, and straining relations between the EU and its African partners, posing challenges to the perception of Western presence and assistance by the local population.

After our research, we are now within conditions to answer our DQs; as for DQ1 **“How can SMN influence the public?”** we can conclude that SMN can influence the public through tailored content that is accepted and perceived as truthful by the audience. By appealing and rousing to their emotions, exposing facts, sharing subversive content, or promoting critical thinking about specific subjects or dogmas, a public’s opinion can be shaped into positive reactions or perceptions towards a particular subject. The different kinds of SMN present nowadays allow the sharing and posting of all sorts of media content (pictures, text, video, and audio), tailored to fit a specific narrative and enhance the sharing and its influence over the TA.

As an answer to DQ2 **“What are the objectives of InfoOps and how are they applied?”** we have that the objectives of InfoOps are related to shaping public opinion into supporting or opposing a particular subject, acquiring intelligence, addressing misinformation and external influences, providing knowledge regarding cultural sensitivities and engagement of a given population to build relationships, employing counterpropaganda and crisis management, or targeting an adversary’s decision-making capabilities. These can be achieved through various means and methods, whether through more offensive or defensive-oriented capabilities or other support/advisory cells (PPP, CIMIC, PAO). The conditions for applying InfoOps into a specific theatre must include knowing the characteristics and limitations of both the TA and the IE in which it will be enacted in. The content for the InfoOp must also be tailored to be deemed truthful, from trustworthy and reputable sources, and adapted to the means used for its insertion/inception in diverse media, such as using SMN or news agencies for online content, billboards, flyers, radio, television broadcast, and direct contact with the TA.

To DQ3 **“What is the relationship between SMN and InfoOps?”** we can state that SMN has become one of the major vessels of the usage of InfoOps. Through SMN, any actor can easily create a narrative, adapt media products into various types (video, images, text, audio), pick a desired TA, post it, and share without any considerable financial cost, which in turn can be replicated by other users or accounts that align themselves with said narrative. The reactions and engagement roused by posting such content will also reflect in public opinion and might return a behavioral shift from the TA towards the subject matter at hand. SMN also proved to be a source of information using OSINT tools and other more archaic means (such as manually counting positive/negative interactions), which provide insight into public opinion or other sorts of information. Through Annex B it is possible to notice a rise in the events reported by SMN throughout the years, alongside the increasing activity by

other players in Mali, which can be inferred as an expanding use of SMN throughout the country, highlighting its importance.

Finally, we can answer DQ4 **“What were the results of the application of InfoOps through SMN in the EUTM mission?”**. It was noticeable throughout this investigation the presence and engagement of pro-Russian InfoOps in Mali through SMN, which successfully participated in creating pro-Russian public opinion in Mali. Examples shown in Annex C provide a clear insight into InfoOps through SMN, in which several accounts from private individuals, possible “bot” accounts, Pro-Russian pages, groups, and even Russian-state media platforms such as Sputnik showcase Russian and African partnerships, military cooperation and equipment, demonstrations in support of Russia, and anti-European/French, “neocolonial” sentiments. Despite local limitations such as poor electricity reach, internet access, and high illiteracy, pro-Russian InfoOps had their successes, even if limited - they were just enough to tarnish EUTM’s mission in Mali, by fostering Pro-Russian sentiment and cooperation, forcing the cancelation of the operational training provided to Malian forces, which was the bulk of its mission. As a result, EUTM’s permanence in Mali was met with growing opposition and mistrust. Although there were some successes in bonding with locals and creating content deemed valuable by the Malians, after the EUTM- Mali training partnership was canceled, the lack of media products made its presence online unsustainable, which in turn also was worsened by the growing perception that EUTM’s presence was no longer beneficial for the Malian people.

Having answered all the DQs, we are now in place to provide an answer to the RQ **“What is the role of SMN in InfoOps?”** – we hereby conclude that SMN serve as a vital tool for InfoOps, allowing the dissemination of targeted messaging, amplification of tailored narratives, engagement with audiences, data-collection, counter-propaganda, exercise influence and credibility in a given IE and provide decision-making intelligence. Mali’s social infrastructure yielded positive results regarding the usage of SMN in InfoOps, which points out that much higher importance might be achieved if undertaken in a more developed nation with widespread SMN usage. SMN provide several capabilities to InfoOps which can be taken in a more “offensive” or “defensive” posture – the seeming lack of constraints regarding the media format intended to use, the ability to share content effortlessly to a wide range of potential targets without limits bounded by geographic limitations makes anyone prone to be subject to InfoOps. Not only one is subject to becoming influenced, demoralized, disinformed, or deceived by the content shared, but it’s also possible to unknowingly become a source of data collection, a PsyOps subject, a means of information assurance, or a means

to share malware and misinformation. These features provide ample opportunities for SMN to be a major tool in the 5GW context, which can be considered as a multiplier that greatly enhances one's capabilities or severely thwarts several of an opponent's abilities.

Given the increasing dependence on SMN usage, it is of the utmost importance to effectively dominate this new battlespace, through training dedicated and professional personnel, engineering and maintaining systems of information and infrastructures, creating narratives and credible content through the presence on SMN, and building a trustworthy image towards our own and foreign publics. Effectively controlling SMN environments grants intelligence, secures public support, avoids social instability, and provides an advantage when faced by an opponent, therefore, Commanders should consider dominating and investing in the necessary means to effectively manipulate this new hybrid environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further studies should be conducted to understand Russia's endgame in the Sahel region. The growing destabilization of nations and their politics leaning heavily on Russian influence paves the way for Sahelian nations to become grounds for recruitment and resource exploration by the Russian state and its proxies or simply worsening the current migration crisis in Northern Africa, causing an influx of more immigrants from south Saharan regions. This ultimately further destabilizes the European continent and causes more social unrest, which can have dire consequences and be a major problem for Europe to face whether the current conflict with Russia escalates or not. JNIM and IS Sahel might have similar strategic objectives and their recent investment in SMN and information assets is a major red flag for the group's readiness to bring jihadist propaganda to cyberspace to further enhance their causes. It is necessary for European powers to find answers to these problems to avoid major repercussions in the future, as well as to develop strategies and techniques capable of confronting opposing powers on SMN and rendering their agendas and operations useless, while enacting InfoOps of our own aiming to stabilize and develop problematic areas, gain trust, and discourage subversive actions upon our nations.

Also worth noting is the discrepancy between EUTM and Russia's InfoOps activity, being the latter more engaged than the former, providing it with ample advantages regarding exercising its influence over the Malian population and even the government. The concept of "intelligence" and related activities should be ministered to African nations, and personnel trained in that area, to minimize or neutralize the effects of foreign InfoOps on their soil and online platforms. There is also the need to have dedicated InfoOps personnel, along with professional teams and media equipment, which can assess a particular situation, create a narrative, and produce media products for publishing on various media platforms, such as online SMN, television, or newspapers/magazines.

Considering other scenarios such as the current conflict in Ukraine, further investigations should be carried out on this subject, and lessons learned from the African theater should be kept in mind and exploited to further advance the study of the impacts of SMN in the military and civilian population.

Potential correlations between Russian involvement in Africa and the current migration crisis in Europe should also be considered for further studies.

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APPENDIX A - Research Analysis Model

Table 4 - Research Analysis Model

General Objective	Understand how SMN play their part in InfoOps, using Mali as a case study		
Specific Objectives	Starting Question	What is the role of SMN in Information Operations?	
	Derived Questions	Concepts	Data collection Techniques
SO 1 - How does social media influence the public	DQ 1 - How can social media influence the public?	Social Media Influence	Interviews (Q2, Q3), Literature review, data analysis
SO 2 - Identify the objectives of Information Operations and how are they applied.	DQ 2 - What are the objectives of Information Operations and how are they applied?	Carrying out InfoOps	Interviews (Q1, Q5, Q6); Literature Review;
SO 3 - Understanding the relationship between social media networks and Information Operations.	DQ 3 - What is the relationship between social media networks and Information Operations?	Enacting InfoOps through social media	Interviews (Q2, Q5) Literature Review
SO 4 - Analyze the results of the application of Information Operations through SMN in the EUTM mission.	DQ 4 - What were the results of the application of Information Operations through SMN in the EUTM mission?	Effects of InfoOps on Target Audience	Interviews (Q4); ACLED Data analysis

APPENDIX B - Framework for the interview survey in research questions

Table 5 - Framework for the interview questions

Starting Question	Derived Question	Investigative problem	Questions
What is the role of SMN in Information Operations?	How can social media influence the public?	Social Media influence	Mali is a country with a shallow average age (16 years old), around 34% internet access and 53,4% connection to electricity. It features several groups struggling for power, foreign actors, and overall political and social instability, which certainly fractures and divides Malian society. Which features were considered while selecting the Target Audience?
	What are the objectives of Information Operations and how are they applied?	Carrying out InfoOps	Information Operations (InfoOps) can achieve a wide range of various ends. The overall instability in Mali provides a solid ground for implementing such operations through social media to influence the Malian population to accept a particular cause, blame an actor, influence their perceptions regarding events, foster support for causes, or spread misinformation. Russia is already implementing such operations in Mali. Regarding EUTM, what were the main goals of using InfoOps in Mali?
	What is the relationship between social media networks and	Enacting InfoOps through Social Media	Research shows Facebook, Whatsapp, and X (former Twitter) are Mali's most widely used social media networks. In what ways did

	Information Operations?		EUTM use them in the InfoOps context?
			Several other players in Mali such as Russia and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), have dedicated media assets that conduct their own Information operations to hinder EUTM's activity, alongside limitations such as poor internet and electricity access. Please describe significant difficulties in undertaking InfoOps through social media in Mali.
	What were the results of the application of Information Operations through SMN in the MINUSMA mission?	Effects of InfoOps on Target Audience	Following the implementation of Information Operations, results are expected upon the target audience. How were the effects on the Target Audience evaluated?
			In the follow-up of Information Operations, the effects and results on a target audience are expected, and these intend to influence their behaviors, beliefs, and even actions. How did using information operations through social media affect EUTM operations in Mali?

APPENDIX C – Interview Script

Name:

Rank:

Date:

E-mail:

Q1) Information Operations (InfoOps) can achieve a wide range of various ends. The overall instability in Mali provides a solid ground for implementing such operations through social media to influence the Malian population to accept a particular cause, blame an actor, influence their perceptions regarding events, foster support for causes, or spread misinformation. Russia is already implementing such operations in Mali. Regarding EUTM, what were the main goals of using InfoOps in Mali?

Q2) Research shows Facebook, Whatsapp, and X (former Twitter) are Mali's most widely used social media networks. In what ways did EUTM use them in the InfoOps context?

Q3) Mali is a country with a shallow average age (16 years old), around 34% internet access and 53,4% connection to electricity. It features several groups struggling for power, foreign actors, and overall political and social instability, which certainly fractures and divides Malian society. Which features were considered while selecting the Target Audience?

Q4) Following the implementation of Information Operations, results are expected upon the target audience. How were the effects on the Target Audience evaluated?

Q5) In the follow-up of Information Operations, the effects and results on a target audience are expected, and these intend to influence their behaviors, beliefs, and even actions. How did using information operations through social media affect EUTM operations in Mali?

Q6) Several other players in Mali such as Russia and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), have dedicated media assets that conduct their own Information operations to hinder EUTM's activity, alongside limitations such as poor internet and electricity access. Please describe significant difficulties in undertaking InfoOps through social media in Mali.

APPENDIX D – Answers

Table 6 - Excerpts from the Answers

Q1	Answers
Question	<p>Q1) Information Operations (InfoOps) can achieve a wide range of various ends. The overall instability in Mali provides a solid ground for implementing such operations through social media to influence the Malian population to accept a particular cause, blame an actor, influence their perceptions regarding events, foster support for causes, or spread misinformation. Russia is already implementing such operations in Mali. Regarding EUTM, what were the main goals of using InfoOps in Mali?</p>
Interviewee 1	<p>The implementation of InfoOps in Mali aimed to cultivate positive perceptions in support of the EUTM mission. Initially, efforts focused on disseminating information among the population in the capital city, Bamako. Later, attention shifted to conducting a study of the local culture in regions where training teams were deployed. This involved advising teams on cultural sensitivities, interpersonal dynamics, and fostering effective communication with the local population.</p> <p>Internally, there was a concerted effort within EUTM to ensure seamless cooperation among its 29 member nations and to prevent internal disputes. This internal coordination was managed both at the headquarters and in the field operations.</p> <p>In Mali, particularly in the early stages, there was a challenge in communicating the objectives of the EUTM mission and distinguishing it from the French military presence, which was not always viewed positively by the population. Building credibility with the Malian population required direct engagement as well as "marketing" activities such as distributing school supplies and providing medical care.</p> <p>Efforts were made to centralize InfoOps implementation through EUTM rather than having individual member countries carry them out independently, aiming to enhance the mission's overall image through positive perceptions of its work.</p> <p>The Posture, Profile, and Presence (PPP) cell played a crucial role in advising the military on their actions and interactions with the local population, ensuring alignment with the mission's objectives and cultural sensitivities.</p>
Interviewee 2	<p>As the term InfoOps itself says we dealt with information. Especially with the information environment (IE). Obviously, this is a wide field because IE was divided into 04 basic fields:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stakeholders, key players: important influencers or groups who determine the public opinion;

	<p>2. Media: place, where you find the information (in newspaper, radio, tv, social media);</p> <p>3. Infosystems: describe the kind of communication how the information (channel) is transferred, e.g. via WhatsApp or interview;</p> <p>4. Critical topics and themes: that influence the thinking and acting of the target audience, e.g. Malian security situation.</p> <p>To sum it up: The IE was the holistic approach to recording all relevant factors, that could influence an individual perception. It's all about the individual perception. Because in the IE it is not true what is the truth or the fact, but what people believe and perceive as the truth.</p>
Interviewee 3	<p>First, we must make it clear that EUTM's mission was a non-executive one, meaning EUTM was in Mali as a bilateral agreement and could never impose itself on Mali. As such, certain features of InfoOps such as PsyOps were not allowed to be enacted. EUTM lacked civil-military cooperations (CIMIC), even though Spain and the Czech Republic had national CIMIC cells which greatly benefited not only EUTM's mission but also brought benefits to their respective nations. One major capability EUTM had was the Public Affairs Office (PAO).</p> <p>EUTM's main objective was to provide training to Malian armed forces, develop them, and strengthen ties between participating nations. Improving EUTM's image in Mali and showing it as beneficial for the local population was one of the main objectives of the use of InfoOps. This objective meant elaborating a plan through related capabilities while considering all the factors that could impact it, whether local and foreign influences, actors, or outcomes.</p>
Interviewee 4	<p>Essentially, the InfoOps in EUTM Mali served to disseminate our activities to various target audiences and convey a message of mutual cooperation, respect for sovereignty, and the importance of the European Union's work in the process of stabilization and return to democratic normality in Mali. Regarding the means to convey these messages, there were some restrictions. The entry of the Wagner Group into Mali and the collaboration of the current military junta with Russia led to the deterioration of EU-Mali relations and the cessation of operational training activities between EUTM and the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa).</p>
Q2	Answers
Question 2	<p>Research shows Facebook, Whatsapp, and X (former Twitter) are Mali's most widely used social media networks. In what ways did EUTM use them in the InfoOps context?</p>
Interviewee 1	<p>SMN were primarily utilized for dissemination to European countries rather than targeting the Malian population due to factors such as limited internet access, electricity shortages, and high illiteracy rates in Mali at the time. Nevertheless, efforts were made to engage local organizations and the population in EUTM projects. Radio served as the main platform for InfoOps dissemination, reaching a</p>

	<p>wide audience, complemented by pamphlets and communication in local dialects. Operational activities were openly publicized to avoid surprising the population, while educational and recreational initiatives were conducted concurrently to foster community involvement. Additionally, attempts were made to engage "key leaders" whose social standing could influence the broader population when participating in EUTM projects.</p>
Interviewee 2	<p>We prepared multimedia and written contents related to the courses delivered and other EUTM Mali activities in order to publish them on the official EUTM Mali website and its SMN (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram e Youtube). We provided appropriate themes and key messages with the aim of create desired effects and minimizing undesired effects on perception and behaviours of Target Audience (TA).</p>
Interviewee 3	<p>InfoOps used social media networks as an analysis and data collection tool. Also worth mentioning that Social Media Networks should be integrated into the mission’s PAO and narratives and persuasion lines should be created through the posting and sharing of media products (pictures, videos, audio files).</p> <p>An experimental software was being developed that had the capability of correlating several posts and publications, finding out their origin, all through Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) means, however, EUTM did not have contact with it by then, therefore used the social media networks as means of gathering information following an intuitive method. This investigation was carried out on Pan-African, pro-Russian groups on social media and it was possible to predict if there was a chance of occurrence of a certain event.</p> <p>As an InfoOps Officer, my main related capability was the PAO, as for the secondary I would consider CIMIC, as well as counseling from Presence, Posture, and Profile (PPP) which was also a major capability. We performed an exhaustive analysis of social media networks and found that our PAO was not making any distinction between Facebook and Instagram, as it should, for instance. Instagram was a tool that allowed the marketing of EUTM’s mission to their respective European nations, but in Mali, it proved to be quite limited due to the low user count, therefore, Instagram was used solely towards the European public. Facebook, however, had a higher African public reach.</p> <p>It was noticed that EUTM was creating too many posts relating to ceremonies, which were perceived as useless and not of value by the local population – this became an issue as foreign presence in a country that is deemed unvaluable, and whose government has an increasingly negative relationship with, is prone to be perceived as an “occupation” (or invasion). These social media posts on Facebook regarding ceremonies had a crushing majority of negative reactions from African users, however, the acceptance by the African public was different when showing the training that we were providing to the Malian Armed Forces, featuring logistics,</p>

	<p>mechanical, and trainer courses taking place, as these were perceived as valuable to the Malian population. Notably, operational training, although seen as a valuable increment by the Malians, was not being implemented at the time due to complications between the EU and the Malian government. There were no repercussions on Instagram, however, as it was not widely used by Malians in general. Simultaneously, through Czech and Spanish CIMIC there was an effort to improve relations with the local press to have good coverage of news relating to the EUTM mission.</p> <p>YouTube and TikTok were noticed to have an increasing user count in Africa. The videos posted on the EUTM channel had received mostly negative reactions or were simply ignored by Malians, as they were mostly targeted at the European population. To solve this, a narrative was implemented and videos were created and posted on YouTube featuring a Captain from the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa) speaking in the local dialect with French subtitles, showcasing EUTM’s contribution to the FAMa development with quality and professionalism showing at the same time EUTM training/courses activities. The overall acceptance, reach and reactions were as expected: highly positive reviews from a huge majority of African users. The objective of showing EUTM was providing something of value to Mali was fulfilled, with over 90 thousand views, 75% of them from Malians, making it the video from EUTM with the widest reach ever. One of the ways to achieve this engagement was spreading in the FAMa Regiments and Training Centers, QR Codes linking to the video, aiming to incite FAMa personnel to share the video with friends and family, providing the video a higher reach. But in my opinion, the main reason for this achievement in terms of views, was to be spoken in the local language and the script that was made to show the value of our training to contribute to the development of the FAMa and consequently to the security of the country.</p> <p>Social media analysis was done subjectively, by counting reactions and comments on a certain post and finding the percentage of positive/negative reactions. In conclusion, using social media through EUTM’s InfoOps was mostly on an Intelligence Operation level.</p>
Interviewee 4	<p>Social media was not the preferred means of implementing InfoOps but proved to be the main means of application – radio remains the most predominant media outlet, followed by television, newspapers, and other written publications, however, due to the current political situation, some of these means were inaccessible to us, so the bulk of our work was directed through social media.</p> <p>The presence of EUTM on different social media platforms carries different weights - Instagram, for example, has only a vestigial presence in Mali and other African audiences, so its content is mainly directed at the European audience.</p>

	<p>Facebook has proven to be the main successful social network to reach the Malian population, while X has seen significant growth but its presence remains small.</p> <p>Due to the current political situation and the cessation of operational training, operational activities were limited to Force Protection training and other internal training reactions to various incidents. There was also an effort to publicize the few cooperations with Malian authorities that still cooperated with EUTM such as visits to the École de Guerre, visits to the Peacekeeping Maintenance School, and other institutional activities. Social media posts were always bilingual, in English and French. The use of this bilingual system in X allowed conclusions to be drawn regarding the effects of the language used in EUTM publications, with those in English obtaining greater visibility suggesting that X would not be the appropriate social network to interact with the Malian audience.</p> <p>There was no active role of InfoOps in Mali through social media, however, there was passive tracking of the content and reactions posted on social media related to the EU and EUTM.</p>
Q3	Answers
Question 3	<p>Mali is a country with a shallow average age (16 years old), around 34% internet access and 53,4% connection to electricity. It features several groups struggling for power, foreign actors, and overall political and social instability, which certainly fractures and divides Malian society. Which features were considered while selecting the Target Audience?</p>
Interviewee 1	<p>There was no selection of target audience based on social or personal characteristics; instead, it was chosen according to the location where activities would take place and considering the final intention and interests. In parallel to this, we relied on constant dissemination in Bamako, which involved ongoing InfoOps work. There was also an attempt to deconstruct narratives and incorrect perceptions of the EUTM mission.</p>
Interviewee 2	<p>TA was defined by the EUTM Mali Mission Force Commander: Local population, European Countries taking part in the EUTM Mali, and every soldier of EUTM Mali.</p>
Interviewee 3	<p>Indeed, Mali is a country with several diverse population groups. Regarding InfoOps, our main target audience was the people in large urban areas with a certain level of influence, access to information, and the will to vote. InfoOps was also enacted locally to create bonding with the locals, with limited success.</p>
Interviewee 4	<p>The target audience was defined at the superior level of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) in Brussels, taking into account the objectives to be achieved by the mission, namely to justify the presence of European military both to Malian and to European audiences.</p> <p>As target audiences, we mainly sought Malian military personnel, but also the general population, policymakers, and dissemination in the EU member states that</p>

	<p>constituted the EUTM mission because it is also important to justify our presence in Mali to our military personnel, their families, and our policymakers.</p> <p>Regarding the population of Mali, it was necessary to convey the perception that the European presence was not a form of neocolonialism or imposition of European interests, but rather a genuine attempt to provide development and prosperity to Mali, which will subsequently also benefit the EU for various reasons, such as future economic cooperation and control of migratory flows.</p>
Q4	Answers
Question 4	Following the implementation of Information Operations, results are expected upon the target audience. How were the effects on the Target Audience evaluated?
Interviewee 1	<p>The effects on the Malian target audience were subjectively evaluated through direct contact with the population. Indeed, the best method of assessment was a simple "smile" or their willingness to establish contact through physical touch, which conveyed their trust and satisfaction. Thus, the evaluation of effects relied on the practical application of our tasks in the field, where there was an observed increase in population engagement, trust, and establishment of connections with EUTM forces despite initial distrust. The final feedback from the populations during on-the-ground activities was positive. In Bamako, although there was no operational training, there was an attempt to interact with people from various social strata and professions, to understand their perceptions of the EUTM presence, albeit in a rudimentary manner.</p> <p>Regarding SMN, indeed, an analysis of reactions to content was conducted, but it was directed toward a European audience.</p>
Interviewee 2	We developed a project for monitoring access to the official website of EUTM Mali and its SMN (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube) through an online platform, intending to improve the posting of content and thus increase the scope and the visibility of EUTM Mali.
Interviewee 3	As mentioned before, an OSINT tool was being tested by the EU's Strategic Communications (STRATCOM) that allowed the gathering of data regarding posts and activity on local media outlets and social media in general. However, since it was not still in use, most of it was done through somewhat subjective means, through counting reactions on social media posts or overall acceptance of the shared narrative.
Interviewee 4	<p>A tracking was conducted every 2 weeks, comparing reactions, likes, and comments, in an attempt to understand the posture and type of content to publish to obtain a more positive perception among the population.</p> <p>It was noticed that institutional activities had very little visibility, while operational activities of EUTM had considerable visibility among the European target audience. Posts about operational training activities (before it was canceled) with the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa) were positively received when recycled,</p>

	<p>however, the use of past activities had to be controlled. Indeed, messages and reactions to posts were received from Malian citizens questioning why EUTM was still there if there was no more operational training with Malian forces.</p> <p>There was an incident when resources, personnel, and activities were being concentrated in Bamako from Koulikoro Training Center (KTC), and the local media reported this event as if EUTM was definitively leaving Mali – the situation was quickly clarified, explaining that they were only refocusing resources in Bamako, however, the damage was done socially, with a large part of the population believing that EUTM had left and questioning why there was still European military presence in Mali. The perception was that our presence there was no longer justified, and that the fact that there was still European military presence in Mali could be due to another factor that was not favorable to Malian interests.</p> <p>In an initial approach to social media analysis, the study was done manually, counting reactions, comments, etc. If anything suspicious was detected, a social media and media analysis tool used by MPCC, EUTM Mali, and already in use in CAR was employed.</p>
Q5	Answers
Question 5	<p>In the follow-up of Information Operations, the effects and results on a target audience are expected, and these intend to influence their behaviors, beliefs, and even actions. How did using information operations through social media affect EUTM operations in Mali?</p>
Interviewee 1	<p>The practice of InfoOps through social media proved to be challenging due to local limitations (lack of internet access, illiteracy, different dialects), as well as partly due to episodes of internal inflexibility within EUTM that disregarded advice from the InfoOps cell. However, it is impossible to assert that there was a specific action where InfoOps played a decisive role, although they were definitely important.</p>
Interviewee 2	<p>We used the following EUTM Mali communication guidelines:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increase awareness of EUTM Mali main mission; 2. EUTM Mali contributes to the defense of freedom and human rights and Malian society; 3. Report on the EUTM Mali efforts to improve the training and advisory skills of Malian Troops; 4. Make all audiences aware of the need of the mission doing visible the results; 5. To increase the degree of knowledge about each project individually, so that the audience sees that objectives are being achieved. We have been in Mali for 7 years. The objectives achieved must be known;

	<p>6. The activities involving local and international press are important and necessary to show a clear image of the work of EUTM Mali personnel and results;</p> <p>7. Promote awareness of security and mission needs among all EUTM Mali personnel, and present EUTM Mali as a proactive institution in this field;</p> <p>8. Motivate the components of the EUTM Mali to contribute effectively to the dissemination of the EUTM brand.</p>
Interviewee 3	<p>Since our activity was limited, it was mostly about minimizing collateral damage and understanding how the local population reacts to EUTM's social media activity and possible consequences. This data was used to provide informational environment assessments IOT to advise EUTM's command in this area and to adapt EUTM's narrative. There was also an intention to release a series of videos contributing to our narrative. We released the first one, which was a success for our goals as I described before, but due to the lack of operational training, as mentioned previously, we didn't have the "material" to continue with the series.</p>
Interviewee 4	<p>Some might argue it was inevitable, but the failure of the EUTM mission, due to the current political situation, led to its abandonment of Mali. There were no conditions to continue cooperation with the military junta, nor was there viability in maintaining a training mission that did not provide operational training. In this regard, InfoOps were unsuccessful, as, despite their importance, they were severely limited in their purposes and means of action due to prevailing political conditions.</p> <p>Pro-Russian InfoOps, however, free from any restrictions and unconcerned about collateral damage to their narratives, heavily targeted the Malian population, causing reputational damage to the EU, particularly and to France (portraying an image of "colonial overlord"). However, there were no InfoOps actions specifically directed at EUTM.</p>
Q6	Answers
Question 6	<p>Several other players in Mali such as Russia and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), have dedicated media assets that conduct their own Information operations to hinder EUTM's activity, alongside limitations such as poor internet and electricity access. Please describe significant difficulties in undertaking InfoOps through social media in Mali.</p>
Interviewee 1	<p>One of the difficulties was the increasing Russian influence felt not only among the general population (where movies were used to create pro-Russian narratives, for example) but also in the highest social echelons, with several Malian figures having Russian advisors. The growing Russian military presence in Mali, with armament and equipment (including armored and heavy), as well as their investment in advertising directed at the Malian public, resulted in positive perceptions among them. China, although not exerting military influence, wielded it economically through the construction of infrastructure and public works. This</p>

	<p>competed directly with EUTM’s attempts to increase its influence over the Malian public.</p> <p>There was also a disparity in operational training knowledge when applying Western doctrines, leading to conflicts with Chinese and Russian doctrines being taught, making standardization of procedures a difficult task.</p>
Interviewee 2	Nothing to report on this issue.
Interviewee 3	<p>EUTM’s mission was in the reorganization stage and there was a halt on the military training, therefore the mission was greatly limited on the InfoOps it could enact. The Czech and Spanish CIMIC cells tried to give an improved perception of EUTM’s role to the overall Malian Population, although limited.</p> <p>The “Low Profile” posture by the European Union and the increasing Russian influence over both government and population also hindered EUTM even further, fostering opposition from the Malian government itself.</p> <p>Limited dedicated InfoOps personnel and the lack of professional means to create narrative-related social media products (pictures, posts, videos, etc) also failed to provide value to the European presence in Mali, significantly hindering the struggle with increasing Russian propaganda. The poor cooperation between institutions such as EUTM, EU Delegation, and EUCAP Sahel Mali failed to provide mutual support to said institutions and enhance their presence in the region through social media, which was also hit by the cancellation of French Media Outlets such as France 24, followed by MINUSMA mandate’s conclusion upon the request of the Malian government and personnel withdrawal in late 2023 – a series of events that weakened EUTM’s capacity to exercise influence on social media, population, and Malian Armed Forces. As aforementioned, since there was no military training going on, creating a narrative able to provide value to EUTM’s presence in the region was a challenging task.</p> <p>On a final note, an increasingly hostile local press also made it difficult to enact any action, causing several unforeseen complications. For instance, the EU provided a project to train future bloggers and journalists, giving the trainees free media-recording apparatus and personal computers, which was perceived by local press as an attempt to bride said youths to make propaganda against the Malian government, which caused some social unrest.</p>
Interviewee 4	<p>I would say that when it comes to the application of InfoOps, social media is the easiest medium to use, as it is easy to create media content and cost-effective to execute InfoOps compared to radio or television, for example. There were indeed some limitations, namely the small percentage of the population with access to the internet, and consequently, social media, as well as a high illiteracy rate – this becomes an obstacle when using written information, as the population either cannot read and write or can but not in the languages used.</p>

	<p>Considering Bamako, with roughly 3 million inhabitants, a large portion of its population can access what we publish, which contrasts with the rest of the Malian population, where less than half are likely to have access to social media. Indeed, trying to reach the rest of the Malian population proved to be a challenge.</p>
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ANNEXE A – Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps

Table 7 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (I)

Region	Target Country	Year Started	Key Actors	Objectives	Tactics	Content	Degree/Effect
Trans-African	Trans-African with operations in at least 15 Francophone African countries, including Benin, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal	Significant activity around 2023 Niger coup	PARADE (Russia Africa Alternative Partnership for Economic Development) led by Samba Mbenda Diaw in Senegal, who is openly linked to Russian Ambassador in Niger	Create perception of widespread anti-French sentiment and popular support for forging closer ties to Russia in Africa.	Staged photographs of pro-Russian/anti-French events, which are then amplified by pro-Wagner Telegram channels through copy-and-paste campaigns.	Anti-French false claims, including about uranium mining in Niger. Photographs of PARADE members displaying pro-Russian signs and slogans.	A PARADE Facebook page coordinated with a network of 22 other accounts to amplify anti-French claims.

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), “Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa”

Table 8 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (II)

Region	Target Country	Year Started	Key Actors	Objectives	Tactics	Content	Degree/Effect
Trans-African	CAR, Libya, Mali, Mozambique	2022	Wagner (Russia)	Glorification of Wagner Group mercenaries targeted at young audiences.	Sleekly packaged propaganda amplified by online accounts.	A comic-strip style video series depicting a Wagner mercenary hero.	Over one million views.

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), “Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa”

Table 9 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (III)

Region	Target Country	Year Started	Key Actors	Objectives	Tactics/Content	Degree/Effect
Trans-African	Trans-African, with notable activities in Central African Republic, Cameroon, Mali, Mozambique, and South Africa	2019	Prigozhin/Russian-affiliated entities	Promote antidemocratic, anti-EU, anti-UN narratives through African voices. This network has been especially vocal in promoting Russian propaganda around its invasion of Ukraine.	Recruitment, instruction, and financing of African social media influencers, intellectuals, and media figures starting at the Sochi Summit. Influencers promote Russian disinformation on social media, radio, and television shows (such as Lengo Songo, Radio Révolution Panafricaine, and Afrique Média TV), and in the publications of Russian-backed “think tanks” (such as AFRIC). Much of this content comes directly from Russian state media outlets such as RT and Sputnik. RT registered at least four new African domain names prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and plans to set up an editorial office in Nairobi, Kenya.	Widespread direct and indirect exposure of Africans to these messages. Over 600 African news websites picked up Sputnik and RT content “as normal sources.”

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), “Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa”

Table 10 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (IV)

Region	Target Country	Year Started	Key Actors	Objectives	Tactics/Content	Degree/Effect
Trans-African	Algeria, Angola, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, Tunisia	2019	Israeli political marketing firm Archimedes Group and the political actors that hired them	Promote designated politicians while smearing others.	The campaign engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior on Facebook, including creating fake and misleading “fact-checking” pages and “leak” pages that posted fake information about politicians	Globally the network of inauthentic pages was followed by 2.8 million users.

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), “Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa”

Table 111 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (VI)

Region	Target Country	Year Started	Key Actors	Objectives	Tactics	Content	Degree/Effect
West Africa	Mali	2023	Wagner (Russia) and pro-junta assets	Confuse the situation in northern Mali to advance the junta's narratives.	Fictitious profiles impersonating real accounts made false or unverifiable claims.	Pro-junta pronouncements, including claims of numerous deaths of the ex-rebels.	Contributed to skewed and unreliable information on FAMA/Wagner's advance toward Kidal.

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), “Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa”

Table 122 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (VII)

Region	Target Country	Year Started	Key Actors	Objectives	Tactics	Content	Degree/Effect
West Africa	Mali	2022 and 2023	Wagner (Russia) and pro-junta groups, including Collective for the Defense of the Military (CDM) targeting MINUSMA	Delegitimize MINUSMA peacekeeping force in Mali and speed up its drawdown from the country.	Conspiratorial messages often accompanied by calls for violence carried out through press releases and on SMN to spread and amplify these narratives.	Conspiracies that MINUSMA troops are pillaging the country's natural resources or arming militant groups. Specific campaign around April militant attack at Sévaré suggesting it was organized by the UN.	Disinformation against MINUSMA escalated in 2022, coinciding with peacekeepers noting increased aggression and distrust toward deployments and demands that MINUSMA leave the country, allowing Wagner to increase its influence. This endangered the lives of peacekeepers and hamstrung their ability to carry out their mission.

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), “Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa”

Table 133 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (VIII)

Region	Target Country	Year Started	Key Actors	Objectives	Tactics	Content	Degree/Effect
West Africa	Mali	2022 and 2023	Pro-junta operatives	Suppress dissent online to skew social media toward pro-junta sentiment.	Coordinated harassment (coupled with offline threats and persecution) by online troll army targeting online expressions of perspectives contrary to junta line.	Concerted digital intolerance toward dissenting opinions on security, political, and social topics in Mali.	A chilling effect observed by members of the Malian media and blogger community.

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), “Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa”

Table 144 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (IX)

Region	Target Country	Year Started	Key Actors	Objectives	Tactics	Content	Degree/Effect
West Africa	Mali	2022 and 2023	Collective for the Defense of the Military (CDM)	Unconditionally defend both the Malian military junta and FAMA (military) and push intimidation and informational attacks on Operation Barkhane, France, ECOWAS, MINUSMA, and the signatories of the Algiers Peace Agreement.	Press releases smeared media outlets, including RFI and France24, and set ultimatums for their departure.	The creation and weaponization of "patriotic journalism" to push nonfactual pro-military narratives.	The two French media outlets were suspended by the authorities 3 days after CDM's press release.

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), “Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa”

Table 155 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (X)

Region	Target Country	Year Started	Key Actors	Objectives	Tactics	Content	Degree/Effect
West Africa	Mali	2022	Wagner (Russia)	Seed suspicion and anti-French sentiment.	Buried corpses for staged photographs were amplified by disinformation networks on social media.	Photographs of fake mass graves to seed the conspiracy that the French military had committed human rights abuses at their former Barkhane base in Gossi.	France was able to proactively detect and debunk this Wagner information attack.

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), “Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa”

Table 166 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (XI)

Region	Target Country	Year Started	Key Actors	Objectives	Tactics/Content	Degree/Effect
West Africa	Mali	2021	Wagner (Russia)	Spread anti-French, anti-UN, and pro-Russian messages. Burnish Wagner's human rights record prior to its arrival in Mali.	A coordinated campaign of false and misleading messaging appeared on Twitter, TikTok, Telegram, WhatsApp, and Facebook. Moderation was circumvented by using puns with multiple meanings.	Fake photos were disseminated to the 5,000 members of one Telegram channel alone.

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), “Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa”

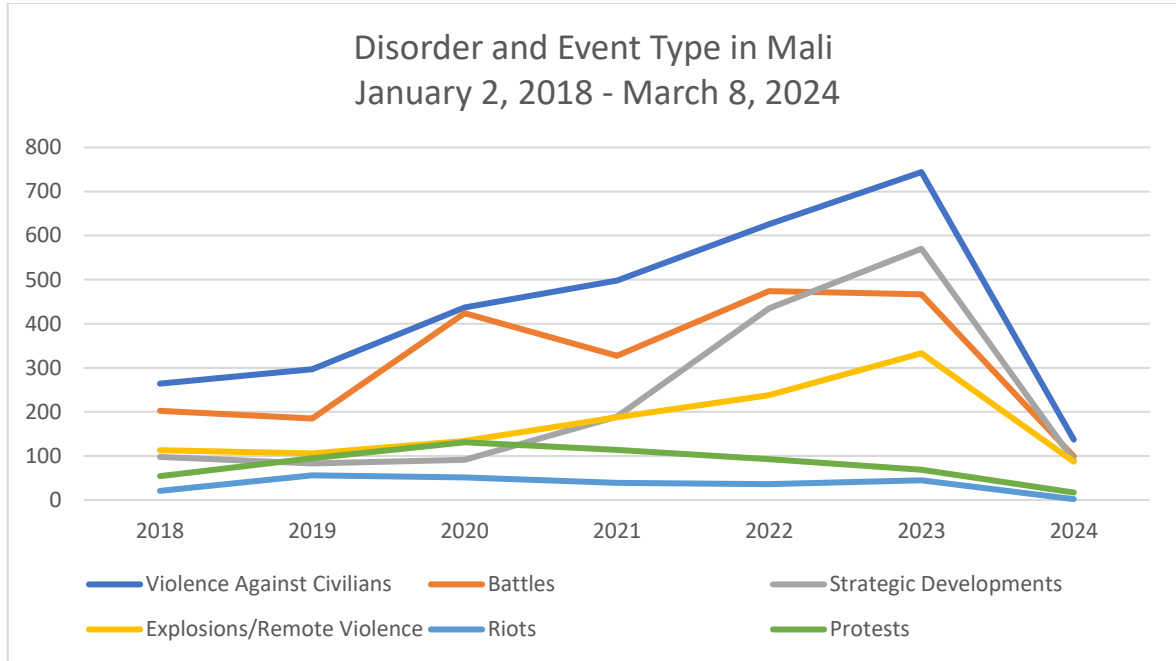
Table 177 - Reported Pro-Russian InfoOps (XII)

Region	Target Country	Year Started	Key Actors	Objectives	Tactics/Content	Degree/Effect
West Africa	Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger	2020	Groups claiming to be nonprofits, charities, and community pages.	Denigrate democratically elected leaders to soften the ground for the military coups. Promote military juntas and delay holding elections. Advocate for a "revolution" in the broader Sahel region.	Facebook pages posted coordinated and misleading pro-Russian and anti-French/Western content. One-third of posts across the pages were posted within 60 seconds of one another in the leadup to Mali's 2020 coup and the arrival of Wagner mercenaries in Mali.	These pages were followed by 140,000 accounts and posted 24,000 times.

Adapted from: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024), "Mapping a Surge for Disinformation in Africa"

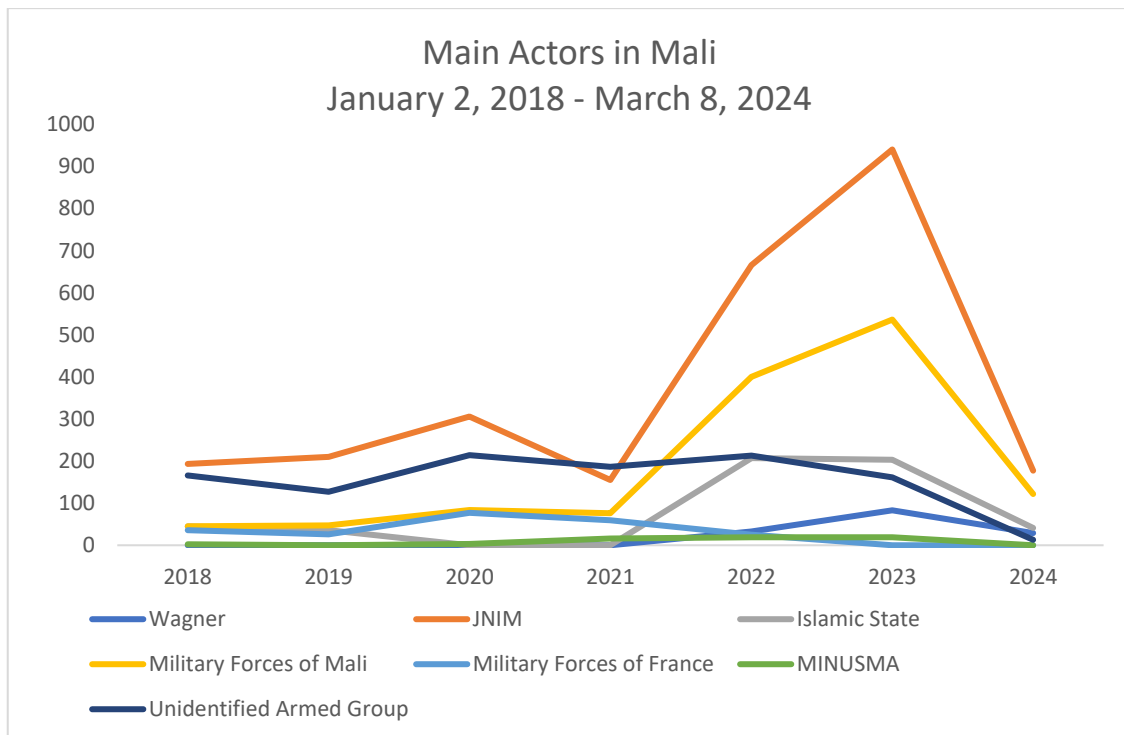
ANNEXE B – ACLED data

Figure 18 - Disorder and Event Type in Mali January 2, 2018 - March 8, 2024



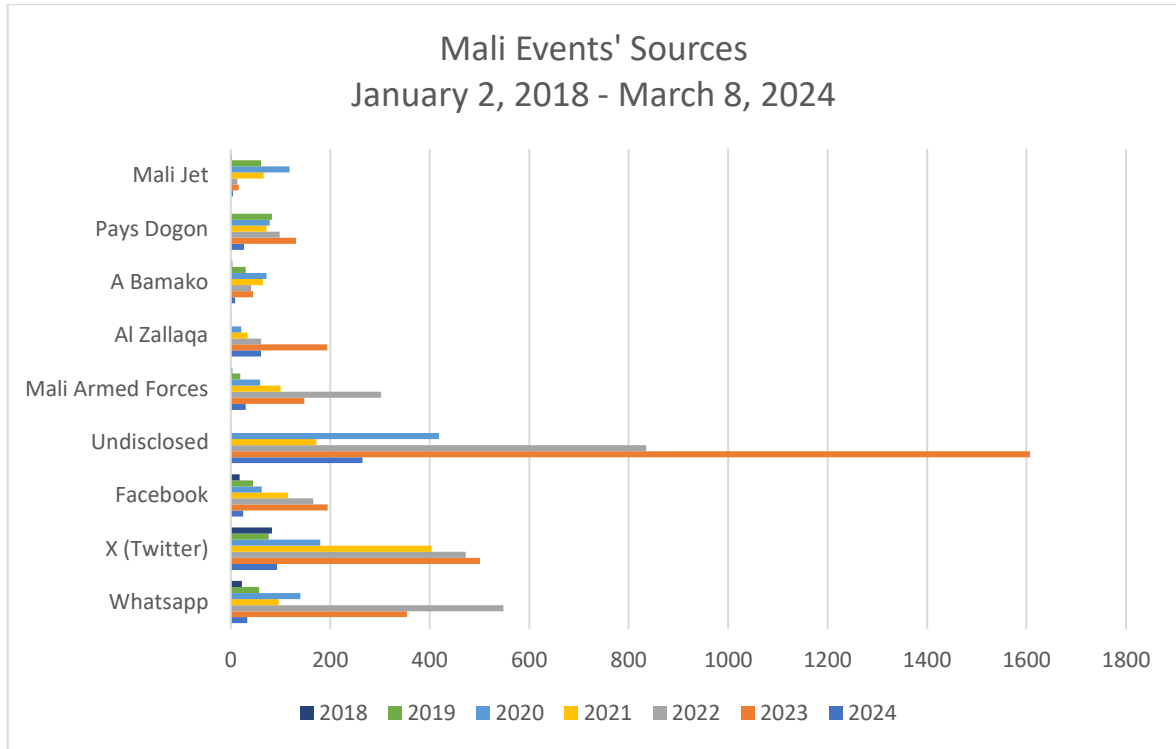
Adapted from: ACLED (2024) "Africa Regional Curated Data"

Figure 19 - Main Actors in Mali January 2, 2018 - March 8, 2024



Adapted from: ACLED (2024) "Africa Regional Curated Data"

Figure 20 - Mali Events' Sources January 2, 2018 - March 8, 2024



Adapted from: ACLED (2024) "Africa Regional Curated Data"

The seemingly decreasing activities in 2024 in Figures 18,19 and 20 are in such a way due to the counting only appertaining from January 1st to March 8th. Notably, in just 2 months and 7 days into 2024, there's a considerable count compared to 2019 and 2020, also expecting the increase of said counting throughout the current year. The total count of reported events from January 2, 2018, to March 8, 2024, is 8758.

The date of January 2, 2018, to start the count was chosen to provide a comparison of Mali's situation before and after the Coup and before and after the engagement of Russian disinformation campaigns, which correlate with Mali's political instability and social turmoil.

ANNEXE C – Pro-Russian InfoOps on Social Media Networks

Figure 21 - Examples of Pro-Russian InfoOps on X (Sputnik News Africa)

The figure displays seven tweets from the account 'Sputnik Africa' (@sputnik_africa) on the X social media platform. The tweets are arranged in two columns. Each tweet includes a profile picture, the account name, a timestamp, and engagement metrics (replies, retweets, likes, and views). The content of the tweets includes:

- Tweet 1 (Top Left):** Posted on 4 de Jan. Text: "#Russia #Eritrea Russia Delivers 25,000 Tonnes of Grain to Eritrea Free of Charge, Embassy Announces". Video thumbnail: "Russia Delivers 25,000 Tonnes of Grain to Eritrea Free of Charge, Embassy Announces".
- Tweet 2 (Top Right):** Posted on 26 de jul de 2023. Text: "The #UnitedStates and other Western states are using #Africa as a tool to blame #Russia for the situation around the Black Sea grain Initiative, Eritrean Ambassador to the #UN, Sophia Testamariam, told Sputnik." Video thumbnail: "West Used Africa as Bait to Press for Grain Deal Continuation: Eritrean Envoy to UN".
- Tweet 3 (Middle Left):** Posted on 26 de jul de 2023. Text: "#SputnikVideo | Transitional President of #Mali Assimi Goita has arrived in St. Petersburg to take part in the Second #RussiaAfricaSummit." Video thumbnail: "Transitional President of #Mali Assimi Goita has arrived in St. Petersburg".
- Tweet 4 (Middle Right):** Posted on 12 de set de 2023. Text: "No one in #Africa will ever forget how Western countries transported people in cages. They saddled African countries with loans as contributions, #Putin said at the plenary session of the Eastern Economic Forum." Video thumbnail: "#EEF #eef2023" featuring a man speaking at a podium.
- Tweet 5 (Bottom Left):** Posted on 15 de dez de 2023. Text: "Why is everyone 'running' to Russia? Analyst answers. 'In terms of diplomatic relations with #Russia, it's a win-win partnership. That's why #Mali decided to turn to it,' Abdoul Diallo, Malian analyst and columnist, head of Radio Couleur Media, told Sputnik Africa." Video thumbnail: "They are the ones who have been seeking".
- Tweet 6 (Bottom Right):** Posted on 13 de dez de 2023. Text: "#Russian language and culture center opens in #Mali. The center 'will also become a driving force for the emergence of new ideas, talents and common projects,' Rector of Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University of #Russia said." Video thumbnail: "Russian language and culture center opens in #Mali".
- Tweet 7 (Bottom Center):** Posted on Jan 17. Text: "#Russia handed over a humanitarian cargo of 25,000 tonnes of free grain to #Mali, said the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman Maria #Zakharova." Video thumbnail: "Russia handed over a humanitarian cargo of 25,000 tonnes of free grain to #Mali".


Adapted from: X Social Network

Figure 22 - Examples of Pro-Russian InfoOps on X

Grey Dynamics @GreyDynamics · Sep 3, 2023

While everyone is focused on **#Russia** in **#Mali** and rest of the **#Sahel**. **#China** is supplying the Malian SOF units with weapons and vehicles.

Operators can be seen rocking CS/ LS2 submachine guns and Lynx CS/VP11 ATVs with 12.7-MM W-85 machine guns.



0:18

2 22 52 9.2K


Russia at the United Nations @RussiaJN

UN Security Council failed to adopt the press statement on the terrorist attacks in **#Mali** on September 7, prepared by **#Russia**. Criminal terrorist attacks killed 49 civilians and 15 military personnel.

Western members of the Council chose to politicize a seemingly simple task - sending an immediate and unambiguous signal condemning terrorism. Instead, they chose to delve into a political discussion, which has nothing to do with what happened.

We believe it's just another example of double standards used by western countries towards states. They are quick to condemn attacks against their friends, but use every pretext not to react when their opponents are attacked. We saw the same pattern towards Syria, now we see it towards Mali.

Our position is unequivocal - there is no excuse for terrorism. Our deepest condolences to Mali.



10:54 PM · Sep 14, 2023 · 11.8K Views

76 45 100 5


Presidence Mali @PresidenceMali

Le Président de la Transition, SE le Colonel @GoitaAssimi, Chef de l'État, Chef Suprême des Armées, a présidé, ce jeudi, la cérémonie de remise officielle d'aéronefs militaires, au Pavillon présidentiel de l'aéroport international Président Modibo KEÏTA.

Translated from French by Google

The President of the Transition, HE Colonel @GoitaAssimi, Head of State, Supreme Chief of the Armed Forces, chaired, this Thursday, the official handover ceremony of military aircraft, at the Presidential Pavilion of President Modibo International Airport KEÏTA.

Was this translation accurate? Give us feedback so we can improve:




4:41 PM · Mar 16, 2023 · 80.9K Views

65 171 1.2K 4

Amba News Line @amba.newsline · Feb 27

If Burkina Faso, **#Mali** and **#Niger** can liberate themselves from the colonial **#West** with the help of **#Russia** & **#Wagner** then why not **#Ambazonia** and **#Biafra**? Good deal with the Africa liberators **#Russia** & **#Wagner** will definitely **Rend** the Western **#Interest** & that will be **#Freedom**




0:15 141 260 2.6K

Dees @Dees1991 · Aug 13, 2023


The Russian tricolor branding in all Africa as a symbol of liberation

#Niger **#Nigeria** **#BurkinaFaso** **#Mali** **#Chad** **#Guinea** **#Congo** **#Russia**



0:27

1 11 21 1.9K




7 12 10 10

BoughyOfficial @Boughyofficial · Sep 12, 2023

It looks like a Movie, but it is the Wagner group in Mali on a combat mission.

#Wagner **#WagnerGroup** **#wagner2023** **#WagnerPMC** **#Mali** **#Françatrique** **#Francia** **#sahel** **#niger** **#nigercoup** **#mission** **#Russia**



0:2 6 41 15K

Adapted from: X Social Network

