What it’s like to be a JOURNALIST in the Sahel
FOREWORD

Although French reporter Olivier Dubois was released on 20 March 2023, after 711 days as a hostage in Mali, conditions for journalists in the Sahel have worsened steadily for the past decade. The only French journalist to have been held hostage anywhere in the world in the past ten years, Dubois was kidnapped in a region where no fewer than five journalists have been killed and six others have gone missing since 2013. The increase in attacks by armed groups has steadily reduced the space in which journalists can gather information and has weakened the means of communication. Media simply giving a voice to community radio stations, which have many listeners in the Sahel, have been destroyed for just interviewing those who do not sympathise with the armed groups or for “broadcasting music instead of sermons”.

The deterioration of the state of the media in Chad, Burkina Faso and Mali has been exacerbated by military coups. Pressure and patriotic directives from army juntas has fostered the development of controlled media and a code of silence surrounding sensitive subjects. Bans on international media and the expulsion of foreign reporters reflect a desire to silence criticism and have created space for media favourable to a pro-Russian narrative, that defend the presence of Wagner’s mercenaries in the region, and contribute to the spread of disinformation.

The use of cyberspace laws and Internet shutdowns have also caused a great deal of harm to journalism and press freedom. In Benin, journalists can be sentenced to imprisonment under the Digital Law. In Niger, the cybercrime law was used to convict journalists until a revised version was adopted in June 2022. In this hostile environment, fear of reprisals has favoured self-censorship. Withholding information has become the norm. The challenge for many media outlets has become existential. How do you continue as a news organisation when journalistic freedom and quality journalism are clearly compromised?

The fraught and complex situation for journalism in the Sahel requires widespread mobilisation efforts. This is why Reporters Without Borders (RSF) launched its “Save Journalism in the Sahel” campaign in January 2022. The aim is to bring together and organise the resistance in defence of journalistic freedom and pluralism in the Sahel so that this region does not become Africa’s biggest news and information black hole.

This report is the fruit of research, interviews and advocacy carried out by the staff of the RSF bureau in Dakar as part of this campaign. It focusses above all on Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and northern Benin, which borders the countries of the Sahel and is dogged by similar security issues. It also reports on the conditions for journalism in Mauritania, a country in the region that has so far been relatively protected from the attacks suffered by its neighbours. And it mentions initiatives that have emerged in the region that reflect a certain resilience. The report also stresses the importance – even amid the threats, armed attacks, retaliation from governmental forces and junta directives – of protecting the rights of journalists, and in particular their right to access information in the interest of the Sahel’s.
Mauritania  15
Mali   12
Burkina Faso  17
Benin  10
Niger  15
Chad  72

THE SAHEL
ABUSES AGAINST
THE PRESS
2013 - 2023

Journalists killed
Journalists held hostage
(from 8/04/2021 to 20/03/2023)
Journalists disappeared
Journalists detained/jailed
Other abuses (physical attacks, threats, ransacked or suspended media)
FACING NEW ENEMIES

1/ TERROR BY ARMED GROUPS

Community radio station reporters, presenters and technicians have not been spared the terror that armed groups have spread in the Sahel in the past decade. More than 1,000 terrorist attacks were recorded in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from 2017 to 2022, according to Liptako Gourma Security, an organisation that provides security monitoring and expertise. Similar levels of violence have also been reported in neighbouring countries such as Chad. Threats, the risk of kidnapping, even assassination, have become part of the daily life of journalists in the region.

FROM GAO TO KIDAL, A NO-MAN’S LAND FOR REPORTERS IN MALI

It’s a date that many Malian and foreign reporters cannot forget. On 2 November 2013, two French journalists working for Radio France internationale (RFI), reporter Ghislaine Dupont and sound technician Claude Verlon, were abducted by four Jihadi militants and executed a few hours later.

This double murder took place in the far north of Mali, in Kidal, a place regarded as the epicentre of the country’s rebel groups, especially those allied with Tuareg warlord Iyad Ag Ghali, the founder of a Salafist Jihadi group that is part of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

“What we didn’t imagine at the time,” said Christophe Boisbouvier, RFI’s deputy director for Africa, “was the impact that the Kidal tragedy was going to have, not only on RFI, but also all the Malian and international press.” From the end of 2013 onwards, the national and international media gave up traveling to northern Mali on their own, “as Ghislaine and Claude used to do.” Some journalists still go there, but only when “embedded” with the Malian army or with the soldiers of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), or with the troops that were deployed during the French-led Operation Barkhane. “But for the past ten years, there has been practically no investigative reporting in the field in northern Mali, in Kidal or Tessalit”, Boisbouvier added.

Since 8 April 2021, journalists have not been to Gao, in northeastern Mali, either. That was the day that Olivier Dubois, a French freelance reporter for Libération, Le Point and Jeune Afrique, was kidnapped when he went to Gao to interview the head of an armed group. His abductors, members of the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM), a group affiliated with Al-Qaeda, released two videos showing him in captivity. In the first, a 20-second video released nearly a month after his abduction, Dubois asked his family and friends and the French authorities to do everything in their power to get him freed. In the second video, released on 14 March 2022, he asked his supporters to keep campaigning for him and he again asked the French authorities to work to obtain his release. RSF registered as an interested civil party in the French judicial investigation into his abduction in order to support the efforts of his family and friends to obtain his release. It was only a year later, on 20 March 2023, that Dubois reappeared, now free in Niamey, the capital of Niger.

On 18 April 2021, ten days after Dubois’ abduction, Moussa M’Bana Dicko, a Malian journalist who was head of programming at Radio Dande Haïre (The Voice of Haïre), was abducted in the east-central locality of Boni by members of an armed group who accused him of making “critical comments” about them. His family was given no proof of life and demands in exchange for his release have not been made. He is now regarded as missing.

The family of Hamadoun Niakibouly, a journalist with Radio Dande Douentza (The Voice of Douentza), not received any news of him since armed men abducted him on 27 September 2020 in Somadougou, a village in central Mali’s Mopti region. RSF has learned that he went to Bamako to participate in a training for journalists provided by the Mali Media programme. On his way home, his bus was stopped by a group of armed men, dressed as traditional hunters. He was the only passenger taken away by force (or abducted). On two separate occasions, the Maison de la Presse du Mali (an umbrella organisation of 50 Malian media groups) sent envos to try to negotiate his release, to no avail.

1 “Olivier Dubois, voyageur immobile,” by Célian Macé, Libération, 7 March 2022.
2 RSF on Twitter: “A 21-second video of which we learned this morning shows the French journalist Olivier Dubois saying he was taken away by an armed group in Boni, on 27th September 2020. He asks his family & friends and the French authorities to do everything in their power to get him released. https://t.co/UcBz96ZsOs” 7 Twitter
3 “New video of Olivier Dubois: RSF asks the authorities to do everything in their power to get him released” RSF, 14 March 2022.
4 RSF helps coordinate support for French journalist kidnapped in Mali RSF, 17 May 2021.
5 “RSF ‘overjoyed and relieved’ at Olivier Dubois’ release” RSF, 20 March 2023.
JNIM and Islamic State – leading predators of journalists

Since 2012, attacks by armed groups directly affecting the media have been mainly concentrated in the northern areas of the Sahel countries. The group that held journalist Olivier Dubois hostage for 711 days is one of the two most active groups in the region, its name is JNIM. JNIM – Support Group for Islam and Muslims and its leader was the warlord Iyad Ag Ghali. Since 2017, it has brought together several Jihad groups in the Sahel, including Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The other group is Wilaya al-Sahel (previously Islamic State in the Greater Sahara).

According to Wassim Nasr, a France 24 journalist specialising in Jihad, these are not groups that mainly have a presence in Mali but they are also in Burkina Faso and Niger, and they have been active in border areas in the north of Benin, Togo and Côte d’Ivoire. “They have been waging an unrelenting war since late 2019 or early 2020.” This war, which is aimed at extending their control over the territories of the Sahel, is also played out in the media. According to a report by the French military research institute IRSEM, the communication strategy “of the African jihadists oscillates between invisibility and the staging of scenes of horror”, involving increasing use of social media and dedicated propaganda outlets such as JNIM’s al-Zallaqa.

These two groups do not directly threaten the media, says TV5Monde Africa editor Ousmane Ndiaye. “But when they say ‘Western propaganda’, we knew they meant ‘Western media.’ And we pay particular attention when they threaten France, because this can have consequences for journalists, who are less protected than the humanitarian workers or UN employees still in the region. Iyad Ag Ghali posted a video threatening the French government just a few days before Olivier Dubois’ abduction.”

The dangers are growing elsewhere in the Sahel. In Niger, a journalist with a privately owned media outlet said: “Since the beginning of the fighting in 2015, no journalist has dared to go into the field except on the occasional trips organized by the government, such as visits by the president or ministers responsible for security issues.” In Burkina Faso, Atiana Serge Oulon, the publisher of the newspaper L’Événement, said: “I often travel within the country, but in recent months my trips have become less frequent because of the security situation. Nowadays, you have to evaluate the risk before you make a move.”

The tragic death of two Spanish journalists in eastern Burkina Faso on 26 April 2021 has left a deep mark on the media. Reporter David Beriain and cameraman Roberto Fraile were attacked and killed by a terrorist group while reporting on poaching in a nature reserve near the tri-border area (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso). Several armed groups are active in this area, which is traversed by strategic traffic routes and is one of the central points of the Sahel’s multifactorial crisis.

TV reporter and cameraman Obed Nangbatna fell victim to the conflict between the government and armed groups in Chad. Employed by the national TV broadcaster Téléd Chad, he died on 25 May 2019 from the injuries he sustained when the army vehicle in which he was traveling triggered a mine on route to the north shore of Lake Chad. Chadian army positions had been attacked by terrorist groups in this area the day before.
It was outside in Tampouy, a neighbourhood in the northern outskirts of Ouagadougou, that an RSF team met Ali Oumarou in September 2022. He spoke against a backdrop of music and the voices of reporters commenting on a football match that was being broadcast live.

Until the beginning of 2022, he worked for Radio Lutte Contre la Désertification ("Radio Fight Against Desertification"), otherwise known as Radio LCD. It was set up in Djibo, the capital of northern Burkina Faso’s Soum province, by SOS Sahel, an NGO founded in 1976 and based in Dakar, Senegal. With ten employees, Radio LCD covered a radius of 100 kilometres, and used to broadcast prevention, awareness and information programmes on health and the environment in local languages. Oumarou, who is originally from Soum, left the province in early 2022 to participate in a training in Ouagadougou, and has not returned since then.

"It’s very dangerous to travel by road" due to roadblocks on the Ouagadougou-Djibo highway, he explained. The fact that his national ID card specifies his profession puts him at even more risk in the event of an inspection. The fear of running into armed groups limits not only his work trips but also his travel for family reasons. "My father died in my absence, but I could not attend his funeral," he said. Several very specific threats forced him to change the radio station’s programming. He described how armed groups began intervening on Radio LCD in 2017. "They called during a programme to threaten us", he said. Four years later, in 2021, "they asked us to stop broadcasting our shows, and threatened to attack us if we refused." Since then, the radio station’s programmes have been limited. Frequent power and phone network cuts in the area also prevent listeners from calling in and participating in interactive programmes to give their views. Gathering information has become more and more difficult. Several of its reporters and radio show hosts, including Ali Oumarou, decided to leave the region and, as a result, lost their jobs. But Oumarou is not thinking of giving up journalism. "My dearest wish is to be able to continue my work," he said. "If I really had to quit journalism and stop hosting shows, it would be like a stab in the back."

### DOWNEO TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Journalists who are still active need to be able to communicate and transmit. In some areas, it is complicated because the terrorists destroy the phone towers", said Fanny Noaro-Kabré, TVSMonde’s correspondent in Burkina Faso. Since 2015, the destruction of telecom infrastructure has been part of terrorists’ modus operandi, as they try to isolate certain areas in order to better take control of them.

According to ARcep, Burkina Faso’s electronic communications and postal regulator, between late 2020 and late 2022, 293 telephone antennae were destroyed9 in the country’s Sahel provinces, the Boucle du Mouhoun region and part of the northeast. These acts of vandalism took 853 mobile phone sites out of service. In early November 2021, in Sebba, in the northeast of Burkina Faso, individuals destroyed two cell phone towers used by the three mobile phone companies: Moov Burkina, Telecel and Orange. In January 2022, armed groups burned down the telecom infrastructure of at least five villages. A few months later, assailants affiliated with JNIM raided Ouo, a locality in the south-west, disabling the installations of mobile phone companies. Cutting villages off from the rest of the world not only prevents their inhabitants from reporting in real time the presence of armed groups to the army and police, but it also complicates the work of journalists, who have a hard time contacting their sources in the area in order to verify information.

### TERRIFIED SOURCES

When journalists manage to contact people living in areas threatened by armed groups and ask to interview them, the issue of their safety arises. "Most of those contacted in these areas do not dare to speak and the few who dare always ask to remain anonymous", said a Beninois journalist working on subjects related to security in the north of the country, who himself asked to remain anonymous. A Burkinabé journalist, who also asked not to be identified, said: "People who agree to provide us with information on the situation in the north often tell us that they are threatened and are afraid of reprisals." Aware of these issues, the foreign journalists interviewed by RSF explained that they take extra care to protect sources who are exposed to pressure, and to protect anyone else providing information or accompanying them. "Even the army auxiliaries are afraid," TVSMonde reporter Fanny Noaro-Kabré said.

The risks are real. A Malian livestock herder was kidnapped and savagely murdered in 2020, a few weeks after the broadcast of a France 24 report for which he was interviewed, cruelly raising the issue of the safety of those who agree to speak openly on camera. In a statement, France 24 defended its decision to broadcast the report without blurring his face: ‘The terrorists know everything and about everyone, without any delay, from the presence of soldiers in the villages to the identity of the inhabitants who speak to them. There is no reason to think that blurring Sadou Yehia’s face would have guaranteed him any security. In this context, anonymisation is illusory.’10

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9 "Radio LCD 98.6 FM - Officiel | Studio Raptoires.com"
8 "Burkina, les télécommunications victimes des jihadistes" | APA news, 9 December 2022
9 "Sahara: les télécommunications victimes des jihadistes" | APA news, 9 December 2022
10 Except from the statement entitled France 24 s’exprime sur le drame de l’assassinat de Sadou Yehia that the broadcaster posted on its website on 12 February 2020.
FOCUS

Women journalists in the Sahel: “Either their husbands say no, or they’re afraid”

The International Network of Women Journalists (RIF), an RSF partner, brought women journalists from Sahel countries together in Dakar, Senegal in October 2022 for a workshop entitled “Strengthening the network of women journalists and communicators across the Sahel”. The fear of violence from armed groups was at the heart of the conversations during these meetings.

Clotilde Sawadogo from Radio Salaki in Dédougou, in northwestern Burkina Faso, said she could no longer travel to cover events in certain areas despite the adoption of various methods for gathering information. “We initially adopted a strategy of bringing certain sources to us”, she said. “But when we broadcast our programmes, the sources were identified and they could be threatened. We then had to develop a second strategy – using only the telephone. Except that the armed groups destroyed the phone network antennae, and went so far as to ban people from meeting to listen to our programmes in groups and discuss the subjects raised afterwards.”

Participants from Niger said few women journalists in their country dared to travel to such areas as Tillabéry or the Diffa region in the north for the purpose of reporting. “Either their husbands say no, or they’re afraid”, said Aminatou Housseini Noma of the Association of African Women Journalists (APAC Niger).

At the end of the workshop, RIF issued a call to governments to ensure the protection of women and men in the media in a situation of crisis, and urged the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to establish a sub-regional Code for the Safety of Women Journalists in Conflict Zones.

KEY FACTS

REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

2 November 2013
RFI journalists Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon are abducted and murdered by a Jihadi armed group in Kidal.

29 January 2016
Mali
Biramou Toure, a reporter for the weekly Le Sphinx, disappears in Bamako. After being held secretly for several months by the former General Directorate for State Security (DGSE), he most likely died from injuries sustained while tortured.

1 August 2019
Mauritania
Mohamed Ould Ghazouani is sworn in as president after being elected with 52.01% of the vote. He tasks a commission with overhauling the media in 2020, and its recommendations are gradually implemented. A fund for supporting privately owned media is increased by half.

16 August 2020
Mali
The country’s armed forces stage a coup, overthrowing Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who has been president since 2013.

8 April 2021
Mali
French reporter Olivier Dubois is abducted in Gao by a Jihadi armed group affiliated with Al-Qaeda. He is released 711 days later.

21 April 2021
Chad
When President Déby Itno is killed in clashes with rebels at the front, his son, Mahamat Idriss Déby takes over at the head of a transitional government meant to last 18 months, until democratic elections. Opposition parties call it an “institutional coup d’état”. A traditional nation government is formed on 14 October 2022.

24 May 2021
Mali
Vice-President Assimi Goïta removes the government and takes power in the second coup d’état in less than a year.

September 2021
Mali
Pro-junta and pro-Russian accounts appear on social media while the Russian paramilitary organisation Wagner is deployed in Mali.

17 February 2022
Burkina Faso
The military remove President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and take power in a coup d’état.

27 April 2022
Mali
France and its European partners formally confirm the withdrawal of their Barkhane and Takuba forces from Mali. The last French troops leave the military base in Gao on 15 August.

27 April 2022
Mali
Permanent suspension of RFI and France 24 by the High Authority of Communication (HAC).

30 September 2022
Burkina Faso
Citing a deterioration of the security situation, Capt. Ibrahim Traoré takes power and declares himself president in what is Burkina Faso’s second coup in less than a year.

3 December 2022
Burkina Faso
The government announces that the broadcasting of RFI programmes is suspended throughout the country “until further notice”.

27 March 2023
Burkina Faso
Local broadcasting of France 24 is suspended indefinitely.
The periods of instability that can accompany political changes are particularly delicate for the media that had taken over in September and during the days that followed.

When the junta that was in power from January to September 2022 refused to sign a decree confirming the Superior Council for Communication’s new, democratically elected president. As a result, its activities were suspended until the decree was finally signed on 6 December 2022 by the new junta that had taken over in September.

Soldiers control the entrance to the national TV channel during the coup d'état in Burkina Faso in January 2022 © Olympia de Maismont / AFP

JOURNALISTS EXPELLED, MEDIA OUTLETS SHUT DOWN

After taking power, the military juntas have not hesitated to reshape the media landscape in order to better serve their interests. This was the case in Mali and Burkina Faso, where several French media outlets have been suspended.

In a letter to Mali’s communications ministry in January 2022, the Military Defence Collective (CDM) – a group of soldiers said to be close to the ruling junta – accused the correspondents of Radio France Internationale and France 24 of contributing to a “campaign of disinformation, denigration and incitement by making subversive remarks undermining the homeland’s sovereignty and integrity.”

Benjamin Roger, who covers the Sahel for the French monthly Jeune Afrique, was arrested at his hotel in Bamako on 7 February 2022 and was expelled from Mali. He had been in the country for less than 24 hours and had a visa, but the Malian authorities said he did not have press accreditation. The CDM hailed his expulsion and urged the authorities to “immediately expel the correspondents of France 24 and RFI.”

The following month, Col. Abdoulaye Maïga, the minister for territorial administration and decentralisation, announced that the junta was suspending local broadcasting by two French international news broadcasters, RFI and France 24. The announcement came just days after RFI and France 24 broadcast a report in two parts on 14 and 15 March 2022 about summary executions and looting by Malian soldiers and their Russian auxiliaries. Other international media outlets carried similar reports but only the two French broadcasters were suspended.

Although France Médias Monde, the public company that owns RFI and France 24, provided a detailed response to Mali’s criticisms of the report, local broadcasting by the two French broadcasters was terminated for good by Mali’s High Authority of Communication (HAC) on 27 April 2022.

This has had consequences in Mali. “As RFI’s French, Mandenkan and Fulfulde language correspondents can no longer work freely, they are no longer working,” said Christophe Boisbouvier, RFI’s deputy director. RFI no longer reports from Bamako. “And this hasn’t just affected RFI,” he said. “Several other international media correspondents have had to stop working or leave the country.”

2/ HOSTILE MILITARY JUNTAS

The arrival of military juntas in the Sahel has posed an additional challenge for journalists. As soon as they took power in Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad, the military governments have tried to control the media by means of prohibitions or restrictions and even attacks and arbitrary arrests.

The state-owned media are particularly vulnerable when coups are being carried out because the military try to seize control of the national TV and radio stations in order to announce their takeover. In Mali and Burkina Faso, the coup plotters controlled who was going in and out of the headquarters of the national TV channels11 – ORTM and RTB – and forced journalists12 to read their communiqués on the air. Some journalists were even attacked.

Media regulators may also be targeted. In Burkina Faso, the junta that was in power from January to September 2022 refused to sign a decree confirming the Superior Council for Communication’s new, democratically elected president. As a result, its activities were suspended until the decree was finally signed on 6 December 2022 by the new junta that had taken over in September.

Opposition protests: high risk reporting

The periods of instability that can accompany political changes are particularly delicate for the media and journalists. In Chad, Narcisse Oredjé, a producer at the privately owned radio station CEFOD, was killed by a stray bullet in N’Djamena, the capital, during a protest on 20 October 2022 against the extension of the transition period. His death’s traumatic effect on the media was increased by the fact that several other journalists were attacked and arrested by security forces the same day and during the days that followed.

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12 “After coup, Burkina Faso’s junta must let journalists work, says RSF,” RSF, 28 January 2022.
13 “In Bamako, two journalists were briefly detained by the police although they were returning from covering a story and had their press cards on them. In Sarh, a city 600 km southeast of N’Djamena, Raymab Mbaion, a journalist with the provincial radio station of the National Media and Broadcasting Office (Onama), and Radio Lotoko’s Voltaire Allahoguina were briefly detained by the police and beaten even though they had their press cards. A group of soldiers fired three shots at Mbaion without hitting him and took his motorcycle.”
14 “After coup, Burkina Faso’s junta must let journalists work, says RSF,” RSF, 28 January 2022.
Worsening relations between France and Mali affect French media

Speaking from the podium of the United Nations in New York on 25 September 2021, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga accused France of subjecting Mali to "a sort of abandonment in mid-flight." He was referring to the announced withdrawal of Operation Barkhane, the French military presence in the Sahel and Sahara since 2014, which had failed to stop the expansion of armed groups in the region. A year later, Mali’s interim prime minister referred to the French government as a "junta." Operation Barkhane’s troops left Mali in November 2022.

The journalist Rémi Carayol19 blames this military "fiasco" in part on the length of this military intervention and referring to the announced withdrawal of Operation Barkhane, the French military presence in the Sahel since 2014, which had failed to stop the expansion of armed groups in the region. A year later, Mali’s interim prime minister referred to the French government as a "junta." Operation Barkhane’s troops left Mali in November 2022.

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The situation has also worsened in Burkina Faso. RFI’s local correspondents “are in a very complicated situation” there, Boisbouvier said, and RFI hasn’t sent any reporters there since 3 December 2022, the date on which the junta suspended broadcasting by RFI throughout the country until “further notice.” The junta accused RFI of relaying a “message intimidating the population that was attributed to a terrorist leader” and including a “false report” in its 2 December press review, namely that the president of Burkina Faso’s transitional government, Capt. Ibrahim Traoré, had said he was the target of a coup attempt.

A few weeks later, France 24’s correspondent in Burkina Faso, Bangaly Touré, was summoned by the Superior Council for Communication (CSC) about an “error” in a news item on the TV channel’s scrolling news ticker on 16 January 2023, which reported that 50 women had been kidnapped by “Islamic rebels” in the north of the country. According to the government’s version, they were “armed terrorist groups” not Islamist rebels, the CSC pointed out. On 7 February 2023, the CSC issued a formal warning to France 24 about this. It said that, in the event of a similar mistake, France 24 could be sanctioned and could have its broadcasts in Burkina Faso suspended. A few weeks later, on 27 March 2023, France 24’s broadcasts were indeed suspended indefinitely after it broadcast replies by the head of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

3/ THE LONG SHADOW OF WAGNER’S MILITIA

“It’s hard to be outspoken, to enjoy freedom of expression in the media today because you’re caught between the hammer of terrorists, who go so far as to control radio programmes in certain localities, and the anvil of the junta and its Russian partners”, said a Malian journalist who asked not to be identified because of these dual threats to his profession. The Malian government’s rapprochement with Russia is accompanied by a rhetoric that relies on an anti-French sentiment and references to relations with “our Russian partners”. This communication strategy, especially on social media, owes a lot to the influence of the privately owned Russian military company Wagner, which has had a significant presence in Mali since late 2021.18

NO INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING ON THE WAGNER PRESENCE

All the journalists contacted by RSF have the same comment: “In Mali in general, in the north and centre in particular, no media outlet dares to talk about Wagner for fear of reprisals”, one said. “Since the suspension of France 24 and RFI, the national media have refrained from using the words ‘Russian mercenaries’ or ‘Wagner’. Everyone adopts the terms used by the government and talks about our ‘Russian partners’ or our ‘Russian instructors’. The local media limit themselves to relaying official information. Only the international media mention reports by NGOs talking about human rights violations by the White soldiers. No journalist here dares to do any investigative reporting about the Wagner presence.” In other words, everyone censors themselves, to “avoid trouble”, said a Malian journalist who asked not to be identified because of these dual threats to his profession.

15 “Wagner au Mali : enquête exclusive sur les mercenaires de Poutine” by Benjamin Roger and Mathieu Olivier, Jeune Afrique, 18 February 2022.


17 “RSF urges Burkina Faso to lift ban on French public broadcaster,” RSF, 5 December 2022.

18 “Wagner au Mali : enquête exclusive sur les mercenaires de Poutine” by Benjamin Roger and Mathieu Olivier, Jeune Afrique, 18 February 2022.

19 “Wagner au Mali : enquête exclusive sur les mercenaires de Poutine” by Benjamin Roger and Mathieu Olivier, Jeune Afrique, 18 February 2022.
**INFORMATION SUPPORT** FOR THE RUSSIAN PRESENCE IN MALI

At the same time, online campaigns have emerged that encourage the dissemination of content in favour of the relations between Mali and Russia. In a study entitled *Russia in Mali, a two-headed presence*, published by the French military research institute IRSEM, researchers Maxime Audinet and Emmanuel Dreyfus analyse “information support for the Wagner group’s deployment in Mali”, which they define as “information support for Russia’s unofficial presence, promoting content favourable to Wagner’s paramilitaries, endorsing its actions by media and cultural means, forging links with potential local supporters and, on a larger scale, legitimising cooperation between Russia and Mali and discrediting its detractors.”

Among the local sources of support identified, the study names Mali Actu, a news site founded by the journalist Séga Diarrah in 2007. When the rapprochement between Russia and Mali began developing, the Russian media outlets Sputnik and RT approached Diarrah, offering to sign a partnership with him and acquire a stake in his website. When contacted by RFI, Diarrah said Mali Actu “declined the participation proposal” and indicated its “reticence as regards any external participation”. But he confirmed, as he already did in an interview for the Qatari TV news channel Al Jazeera in May 2022, that Mali Actu, against the backdrop of the suspension of RFI and other French media, seeks to diversify its news sources and that it may use content provided by Russian TV channels.

![Image](https://example.com/image.jpg)

**THREE QUESTIONS FOR**

**Sophie Bernard**

*All Eyes On Wagner expert*

**“Press freedom has deteriorated since Wagner’s arrival in Mali”**

All Eyes On Wagner (AEOW) is an independent international project consisting of experts from Switzerland, France, Australia and Canada. Created in March 2022, shortly after the start of hostilities in Ukraine, AEOW aims to monitor and investigate Wagner, and to document the various aspects of this Russian paramilitary organisation’s crimes and its predatory and disinformation activities.

**How has Wagner’s influence in Mali affected the local news market?**

It’s hard to say with any certainty that the Malian junta is solely responsible for the recent restrictions on the media. The chronology of violations that we recently compiled has unfortunately shown a deterioration in press freedom since the Wagner Group’s arrival in Mali. Added to this is the creation of an online ecosystem of fake media on Facebook, and theplacing of articles favourable to Russian interests in Mali, even if it is not possible to formally link these two aspects to Wagner. For the moment, we don’t have a precise vision of the impact on radio stations. On the other hand, groups that mainly relay pro-Russian messages and narratives are proliferating on WhatsApp.

**Have you been able to document cases of national or community media, especially in northern Mali, that have been prevented from working by Wagner, and pro-junta media campaigns?**

We’ve not found any trace of media being prevented from working by Wagner. But there are pro-junta media campaigns, although it’s often difficult to directly attribute and link a campaign to a group. Our Year 1 of Wagner in Mali report, published in November 2022, shows online influence operations directly correlated to actions linked to the Wagner Group. In our view, Mali doesn’t yet have the cyber capability to implement such influence operations. So they may either be handled by the Russian partner, as can be seen in the Central African Republic, or outsourced to communication companies that have worked with the Wagner Group in the past.

**What are the recent narratives that you have seen emerge in Mali?**

We’ve noticed that there are coordinated unauthentic online campaigns (Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp) that promote the junta and its actions. The recent narratives that we’ve seen emerge are: “The terrorist groups are funded by the French military”; “There are no Wagner Group mercenaries in Mali”; and “There are no atrocities in Mali.” For the “Recovered Sovereignty Day” celebration, we also noted that media outlets linked to the junta and its actions. The recent narratives that we’ve seen emerge are: “The terrorist groups are funded by the French military”; “There are no Wagner Group mercenaries in Mali”; and “There are no atrocities in Mali.” For the “Recovered Sovereignty Day” celebration, we also noted that media outlets linked to the junta and its actions. The recent narratives that we’ve seen emerge are: “The terrorist groups are funded by the French military”; “There are no Wagner Group mercenaries in Mali”; and “There are no atrocities in Mali.”

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22 On 14 January 2023, Mali’s transitional government organised the first “Recovered Sovereignty Day” celebration, commemorating the big protest on 14 January 2022 against the sanctions that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) had imposed on Mali.

**Mauritania**
- 97th/180
- 166 media outlets
- 2011: Approved a bill ending prison sentences for press offences.

**Mali**
- 111th/180
- At least 700 media outlets
- 2000: Adopted a media law criminalising certain press offences.

**Burkina Faso**
- 41st/180
- 430 media outlets
- 467 press card holders (since 2016)
- 2019: Modified the penal code, criminalising the publication of information about military operations that could “jeopardise troop morale” and providing for sentences of up to ten years in prison.

**Benin**
- 121st/180
- At least 220 media outlets
- 2015: Adopted an Information and Communication Law abolishing prison sentences for press offences and guaranteeing the right of access to state-held information.

**Niger**
- 59th/180
- At least 350 media outlets
- At least 236 press card holders
- 2019: Adopted a cybercrime law exposing online journalists to the possibility of arbitrary arrest and detention.

**Chad**
- 104th/180
- 144 media outlets
- 653 press card holders
- 2010: Adopted a media law criminalising press offences, including defamation.
- 2018: Adopted a new media law jeopardising the freedom to report news and information by requiring media publishers and editors to have had at least three years of university-level education.

*RSF's 2022 world ranking of press freedom*
AN INCREASINGLY UNFAVOURABLE INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

1/ ARBITRARY DECISIONS

As the security situation in the Sahel’s countries worsens, entire swathes of territory are becoming inaccessible. Border regions where armed groups operate are turned into military zones from which civilians are banished. The evolving regulatory framework in dangerous areas and security priorities enable the authorities to keep tightening the restrictions on the freedom of movement of national and international journalists. Increasingly complex and opaque administrative protocols facilitate arbitrary arrest and deportation.

INCREASINGLY RESTRICTIVE PRESS ACCREDITATION

Newly created travel authorisation systems are now part of the bureaucratic red tape that “discourage journalists”, said Idriassa Birba, the head the New Human Rights Organisation (NDH-Burkina). In Mali and Burkina Faso, simple administrative registration formalities have been replaced by complex accreditation processes, which hamper journalistic work and do not respect the principle of journalists being able to protect the identity of their sources.

Jeune Afrique reporter Benjamin Roger’s deportation from Mali in February 2022 on the grounds that he was not accredited highlighted the junta’s increased control over the activities of journalists working for the foreign media. Until 2021, accreditation was rarely required in Mali and not having it did not prevent journalists from working freely. Since the second coup in 2021, the accreditation process has become more restrictive and opaque. In principle, only broadcast media journalists must systematically apply for accreditation, using a form on which they are required to specify the stories they plan to cover and the people they plan to meet. Several journalists have reported having difficulty in obtaining their accreditation and in some cases it has been refused without explanation. A few weeks after Benjamin Roger’s expulsion, another Jeune Afrique reporter, Manon Laplace, was briefly detained on the same grounds.

“The conditions for accreditation had already changed in 2012 when Amadou Sanogo took power”, said TV5Monde Africa editor Ousmane Ndione, who was based in Mali at the time. “This is a constant feature of military regimes. As soon as there’s a coup, there are bureaucratic restrictions on journalists.”

In the case of Burkina Faso, five months after the second coup and three months after RFI’s suspension there, the Superior Council of Communication (CSC) issued a reminder that accreditation had been a legal requirement since 2015. A visiting foreign correspondent or a local reporter for a foreign media outlet can only work if they have an “accreditation issued by the employer and approved by the CSC”, the regulator said. The CSC reminder, published on 23 February 2023, added that this accreditation could at any time be “invalidated by the cancellation of the visa of the regulatory authority.” These loosely worded and draconian conditions clearly open the way to arbitrary decisions.

Journalists are not only unsure of being able to get accreditation, even after lengthy administrative procedures, but the accreditation they obtain may not actually guarantee their ability to work. Although reporter Edouard Dropsy and producer Philippe Abdelkai had accreditation when they arrived in Burkina Faso in May 2021 to report on camps for displaced persons for French TV channel M6’s “Enquête exclusive” (“Exclusive Investigation”) programme, and although measures had been taken for their protection, they were expelled on the grounds of a “threat to state security” after just 40 hours in the country.

| ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND EXPULSIONS IN BENIN |

Journalists are faced with vague and arbitrary procedures in Benin as well. In theory, journalists are not required to obtain special authorisation to travel to areas bordering Burkina Faso and Niger. But, in practice, these dangerous areas cannot be accessed without permission. No fewer than seven journalists and a fixer were arrested there in 2022.

Four journalists, including three working for Agence France-Presse, were arrested in the northwestern city of N’Zi in January, after filming a stone tunnel in “a dangerous area” near Tanguaï, a small town 50 km to the north. The N’Zi police hold them there for four days for “violating the rules of Benin’s drone legislation” and scrutinised the contents of their phones. They were then transferred to the capital, Cotonou, where they spent three more days in police custody. After being interrogated at the Central Office for the Suppression of Cybercrime (OCC), they were handed over to the special prosecutor at the Court for the Suppression of Economic Crimes and Terrorism (CRIET) and then finally released.

A month later, Beninois journalist Flore Nobime and her Dutch colleague Olivier van Beemen headed for the northwestern town of Tanguaï, where Nobime had already gone in 2019 without authorisation and without incident. They were investigating the funding of African Parks, a nature conservation NGO that manages nature parks in Africa. Their report quickly turned into a nightmare. After taking a detour to the village of Sangou, near the main entrance to the Pendjari National Park, they were detained and taken to the local police station for an identity check, and then they were transferred to criminal police headquarters in Parakou, a more than four-hour drive from Tanguaï. Half-way there, at the police station in Djougou, policemen confiscated van Beemen’s equipment and money. To protect her sources and information, Nobime managed to tear up her notes and spill water on them so that they were illegible. Van Beemen threw his out of the car window.

25 Gen. Amadou Sanogo seized power in Mali when he overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré in a coup on 22 March 2012.
After reaching Parakou, the two journalists learned that they were “suspected of espionage” and that they were also accused of failing to ask permission to visit the villages where they had gone. After many questions about their identity, whether or not they belonged to certain political parties and what they were reporting on, they were ordered to sign a confession that said they were accused of serious offences, and that “the investigation has gathered corroborating information against them.” They refused to sign, but did so the next day after the statement had been modified. The police then set off with them for Cotonou, a journey that usually takes only six hours but in this case lasted 24. They continued to be interrogated, handcuffed – sometimes together – and the police refused to give them water.

After arriving at Republican Police headquarters in the capital, van Beemen managed to make several calls to the Dutch embassy, and they were received by the police director-general, who told them they should have “requested authorisation from the authorities in order to go into the field.” They were then finally released and van Beemen was deported that evening. In January 2023, the two journalists referred their case to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, registering a complaint against Benin.

Prohibited and Restricted Areas

**Niger**

Dangerous areas have been placed under a state of emergency. In the regions of Diffa, Tillabéri and Tahoua, the state of emergency was implemented on 24 January 2020 and was renewed for three months on 26 January 2023. These areas are inaccessible to journalists without a military escort and without government authorisation. Without it, says a journalist based in Niamey, “the journalist risks being taken for an enemy of the state or, if he comes across an armed group, he risks being mistreated, kidnapped or even killed.”

**Benin**

In the north of the country, the border areas with Burkina Faso and Niger are considered dangerous, like the Pendjari National Park, as well as the entire W National Park. While there are no official instructions requiring journalists to bring special authorisation to go there, the areas considered to be at risk are inaccessible without authorisation.

**Mali**

Working outside the capital, Bamako, is very risky for journalists. Northeastern regions, such as Gao, where Olivier Dubois was taken hostage in 2021, and Kidal, where Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon were kidnapped and then executed in 2013, are very high risk areas due to terrorist threats. Since mid-July 2022, terrorist attacks have also turned the centre, the south of the country, and the vicinity of Bamako into dangerous areas.

**Mauritania**

The military areas located near the border with Mali to the east and the Sahara to the north are inaccessible to civilians. Journalists can only go there with a special delegation from national authorities or international humanitarian organisations. To travel in the rest of the country, a travel order, an authorisation or a pass from the authorities, as well as accreditation for foreign journalists, are recommended.
2 / UNCOOPERATIVE OFFICIALS

Whether accredited or not, journalists working in the Sahel region have to face another major difficulty. It has become much harder if not impossible to gather and verify information relating to political and military issues because the relevant institutions are uncooperative. The media find themselves increasingly limited to relaying mollifying governmental press releases.

WITHOLDING OF INFORMATION

In Niger, a journalist said the authorities “withhold information” on security grounds and issue-related press releases that contribute nothing because they have no new information or no official data or figures.

In Benin, since Patrice Talon became president in 2016, journalists have found it hard to get information about matters related to the security situation, internally displaced persons, and mining contracts. When they try to contact government ministers or their staff, the officials are “often busy or unreachable,” several journalists said. “Sometimes,” one Beninois journalist said, “politicians call us to give us information but ask us not to divulge it. So, we then have material that we cannot use, because we have to wait for permission. It’s very frustrating.”

In Burkina Faso, journalists find it especially difficult to get information about terrorist attacks. As they occur in areas where journalists are no longer able to go, some attacks receive no media coverage at all. The international media must also deal with the particular mistrust that the authorities may harbour towards them. “We are not the most incisive, but the authorities watch us closely,” said one international media journalist on condition of anonymity. “They no longer inform us systematically, including about events that may concern the president. And they don’t dare speak to us on the record, even about matters that might reflect positively on the government. They only speak to us on background.”

CONTROLLING THE STORY

The authorities’ silence on certain subjects is due in part to their desire to control what the media say. To this end, they produce their own content and statements that are unverifiable. In the event of a terrorist attack in the north of Burkina Faso, for example, the president’s communications department often sends their own people to the site to interview people. This was especially so when Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba was interim president. These people film and show aspects that are then made available to the media. “The government communicates information that is impossible to verify, which poses a problem of journalistic ethics,” Burkinabé freelance journalist Charles Bako said.

Wenceslas Mahoussi, an investigative reporter for Bénin Web TV, in 2020. He spent six months in prison because, in social media posts, he quoted comments that a prosecutor had made during a workshop on disinformation.

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THE END OF PROTECTIVE LAWS

In what is another major challenge for the region’s journalists, the worsening security situation has undermined the legislative progress that, from 1990 to 2010, had gradually helped to strengthen the media and protect journalistic work. In some countries, new regulations that were adopted to combat the dangers of online fake news are restricting the right to report the news more than they are protecting it.

In Benin, the Digital Law has been used to arbitrarily detain and convict several journalists, including Ignace Sossou, an investigative reporter for Bénin Web TV in 2020. He spent six months in prison because, in social media posts, he quoted comments that a prosecutor had made during a workshop on disinformation.

Niger’s 2019 cybercrime law was used against journalists until its modification was announced in 2022. It provided for sentences ranging from six months to three years in prison for defamation by means of electronic communication. In 2020, the law was used to arrest and jail the journalist Samira Sabou in response to a complaint by the then president’s son, whom she had linked to a case of overbilling for military equipment in a social media post. Responding in April 2022 to criticism of the way the law was being used, Niger’s new president called for the “abolition of prison sentences for offences by means of electronic communication, including insult and defamation.”

Press offences have been decriminalised in Mauritania, but the country still has “provisions in the criminal code, cybercrime laws and law on attacking the symbols of the state that can be used against a journalist or other person expressing an opinion online”, said Amadou Sy, the Mauritania country director of Médias et Démocratie (Media and Democracy), an independent NGO. Abdellahi Mohamed Ould Aligha, the editor of the independent newspaper Al Hoora, was held by the police for 48 hours in 2021 because of a Facebook post in which he questioned how the government had spent money from a fund for disadvantaged sectors of the population.

Burkina Faso’s national assembly amended its criminal code in 2019, adding provisions criminalising the dissemination of information about military operations in order “not to undermine troop morale.” These new offences are punishable by five to ten years in prison and fines of up to 10 million CFA francs (15,000 euros). In theory, these criminal code provisions do not concern journalists, who are governed by the Information Law, but they have nonetheless had a chilling effect on them. Interviews by RSF confirm a trend towards self-censorship on matters relating to terrorist attacks and military operations.

26 “Mauritanian reporter held for two days over Facebook post,” RSF, 26 May 2021
27 “Niger: Two journalists arrested in disturbing setback for press freedom,” RSF, 16 July 2020
28 “Mauritanian reporter held for two days over Facebook post,” RSF, 27 July 2020
**FOCUS**

**Challenge of combating impunity**

**MALI: BIRAMA TOURÉ DISAPPEARED IN A SECRET PRISON**

It has been seven years since Birama Touré, a reporter for the weekly Le Sphinx, disappeared in Mali. Neither his family nor his colleagues have seen him since 29 January 2016. At the time of his disappearance, he had been investigating two stories involving Karim Keïta, the powerful head of the national assembly’s defence committee and son of then President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. One was about the affair Keïta was reportedly having with the wife of one of his friends, and the other concerned weapons contracts in which a great deal of money had reportedly been embezzled. In a report published in February 2022, RSF revealed that Touré was secretly detained for several months at a clandestine prison run by Mali’s General Directorate for State Security (DGSE) and that he most likely died as a result of being mistreated and tortured there. Seven years later, his body has yet to be found and the suspects are still at large. RSF’s view, it is vital that the Malian judicial system should continue its efforts to shed all possible light on the case and should assign the required resources to this task.

**CHAD: ÉVARISTE DJAÏ-LORAMADJI’S KILLERS STILL UNPUNISHED**

A reporter for Radio Lotiko, a Christian community radio station, Évariste Djaï-Loramadji was shot dead while providing live coverage of an intercommunal clash between livestock herders and crop farmers on 9 February 2022 in Sandana, a village in southern Chad. Eleven people in all, including Djaï-Loramadji, were killed in that day’s clash. According to Radio Lotiko’s director, Djaï-Loramadji had received threats after covering a punitive raid three days earlier in connection with the conflict between herders and farmers that had left around ten dead in the village. His murder must not be allowed to remain unpunished, says The Union of Chadian Journalists (UJT), which is calling for all those involved in this “vile act” to be prosecuted. Justice for journalists in Chad is at stake, the union says.

**IMPOVERISHED MEDIA**

Funding is another major issue for the region’s media. Most of the Sahel’s governments have neglected their annual subsidies for the media because of economic difficulties and the financial demands of responding to terrorism. In Mali, for example, the grant allocated to the media has not been paid off since 2019. At the same time, the security crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic have slashed media income from advertising. Some media outlets are therefore struggling to pay their staff and many of them do not have the means to finance investigative reporting or pay for their journalists to travel outside the major urban centres.

**3/ PATRIOTIC DIRECTIVES**

Aside from the constraints imposed on security grounds or by draconian legislation, journalists must also resist direct editorial pressure. The desire by the authorities in some of the Sahel’s countries to control what the media say directly threatens journalistic independence and reliable news and information.

**REPORTING UNDER CONTRACT**

In Benin, the authorities influence media content by means of so-called partnership contracts, which began under the former president in 2006 and have become much more widespread since Patrice Talon became president 10 years later. The media outlets that sign these contracts are paid up to 1 million CFA francs (1,500 euros) every month to cover the government’s activities and to prioritise the information it gives them to. Guideline memos tell editors what angles to take.

“Partnership contracts foster corruption and have reversed much of the progress that had been made with regard to press freedom in Benin”, said media expert Wenceslas Mahoussi. He also pointed out that “the use of guideline memos contributes to the frequent identical front pages in the Beninois press”, even in newspapers with otherwise very different editorial lines.

**PATRIOTIC NEWS COVERAGE**

Although Mali’s transitional government appears to enjoy a significant level of support from the population, Col. Assimi Goïta, who took over in a second coup in May 2021, has sought the media’s support. During a meeting in June 2021, he invited the main local media organisations to “preach the right words so as not to demoralise” the population and the armed forces. “We are asking you to help calm the situation down”, he added. The “House of the Press” supported him in the press release it published eight months later urging journalists to provide “patriotic coverage” of the news.

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29 “Malian journalist who disappeared six years ago is very likely dead, RSF says,” RSF, 5 February 2022

30 “Mali: chiffres du mal à la presse au Mali: Une méconnaissance et un élimination,” 10 May 2021

31 “Le colonel Assimi Goïta lors de sa rencontre avec les hommes de médias: ‘Le Mali a besoin de ce sursaut, surtout au niveau de la presse’.31 “We are asking you to help calm the situation down”, he added. The “House of the Press” supported him in the press release it published eight months later urging journalists to provide “patriotic coverage” of the news.”
Dear friends,

You have been invited to follow the broadcast, on television and radio, of the meeting between the President of the Republic (PR) Patrice Talon and pharmacists in 2018. The one reproduced below was sent to the media when the president met with pharmacists in 2018.

RSF has received several copies of "guideline memos" that were sent to Beninois media from 2017 to 2019. The one reproduced below was sent to the media when the president met with pharmacists in 2018.

In another "guideline memo" sent to editors ahead of a TV broadcast with health minister Alassane Seidou in 2021, the government explicitly urged the media to focus their headlines and coverage on the achievements of Patrice Talon, the newly reelected president.

• Health sector reforms: Talon wants better care for the Beninois
• Health/Two years of investment: projects of hope
• Year 2/Health Sector: Talon therapy’s results, or First fruits of Talon therapy
• Health: Minister Alassane Seidou reports two years of progress
• Health/Two years of Talon regime: patient Benin’s cure is under way
• Health Report: Training and Equipment, Talon revolution’s two thrusts

"The particularity of this second coup d’État," said TV5Monde Africa editor Ousmane Ndiaye, "is that it convinced a sizeable proportion of Mali's journalists to provide 'patriotic news coverage' – a term invented by Mali’s pro-coup journalists, that means coverage that supports the government." A specialist in the Malian media who spoke on condition of anonymity added: "Most radio stations are won over to the cause of the military in power and their Russian partners. And similarly, the experts and guests who speak in the media generally support the actions of the army.

The authorities also use social media and count on influencers who support them. "Unlike some media outlets", the same media expert said, "these influencers are accredited to travel with the prime minister. They cover official events such as ceremonies at which Russian military equipment is received. These influencers also insult and smear dissenting voices." (See Box "Malick Konaté, a journalist harassed and threatened online" p. 32)

"The current military government has imposed a new reporting standard based on a very simple principle", said RFI deputy director Christophe Boisbouvier. "If you are with the transitional government, you are with Mali, but if you are against the transitional government, then you are against Mali." Daring to make comments regarded as liable to "discourage the troops" exposes journalists to harassment and intimidation. The High Authority of Communication (HAC) suspended the Joliba TV channel from November to December 2022 after it broadcast an editorial regarded as critical of the junta.32

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"The transitional government’s goal is for independent media to be silent”, Boisbouvier added. “With hindsight, I realize that by disconnecting our antennae, the military government did not just target RFI and France 24. It also sent a chilling message to the Malian and international media in general. Now, all journalists are nervous and there is less and less independent analysis and freedom of expression.”
In neighbouring Burkina Faso, where local broadcasting by RFI was also suspended on 3 December 2022 and France 24 was given a formal warning, the transitional government’s president, Capt. Ibrahim Traoré, also invited his compatriots and the media to demonstrate their patriotism. During an interview for the national media on 2 February 2023,32 he said that, when you want to talk in the media or on TV in a “context of war”, you must ask yourself, “Is it good for my homeland or is it not good for my homeland?”

During a hearing at the Superior Council of Communication (CSC) a few weeks before that, the prime minister said that it was necessary “to refocus communication at the media level in order to avoid chaos.” Journalists’ organisations responded immediately to this threat, issuing a joint statement denouncing excessive calls for patriotism and “the grave risks of press freedom violations” in Burkina Faso. The statement added: “This outburst by the prime minister throws the media to the lions, especially in a national context in which emerging last-minute patriots and supporters of a single-way of thinking don’t hesitate to treat all those who don’t share their view [...] as traitors, or as enemies of the transition who must be physically eliminated or expelled or imprisoned.”

As in Mali, journalists in Burkina Faso can also pay a high price for not complying with patriotic directives. The journalist Newton Ahmed Barry was subjected to an aggressive cyber-harassment campaign33 for daring to describe the suspension of local broadcasting by RFI as an “illegal decision.” Mohamed Simon, the head of the Collective of PanAfrican Leaders (CL), called for Barry to be “killed” in a video widely circulated on social media. Arrested on 20 January 2023, Barry was given a two-year suspended prison sentence and fine of 1,500 euros three weeks later after being convicted of issuing “calls for murder.”

In this degraded and unstable security environment, the media and journalists have had to adapt their practices in order not only to circumvent the harassment but also overcome the difficulties of movement and access to certain parts of the Sahel and thereby, despite everything, continue to fulfill their mission to report what is happening.

1/ OTHER MEANS TO GATHER INFORMATION

One of the options for getting information from restricted areas is to blend in with the local population. A journalist from Ouagadougou told RSF that he deliberately did not mention his profession in order to be able to enter camps for internally displaced persons34 and carry out interviews there, thereby circumventing the requirement to obtain a special permit that needs approval from three ministries.

Conversely, in some areas, it is preferable for reporters to avoid the immersion technique and instead to limit their exposure time in the field to 24 hours. In both cases, journalists know that they should “keep a low profile” and adapt their clothing.

OFF THE RECORD

Because of their inability to visit dangerous areas, journalists are developing networks of informal sources to collect off-the-record information and thereby continue to cover the situation. “We have set up a network of informants in the towns of Djibo, Dori and the entire province of Soum,” said an investigative reporter in Burkina Faso who asked not to be identified. “They give us the essential information reported by international news organisations is regarded as reliable and is regularly picked up by many local media in the region. But in Mali and Burkina Faso, the broadcasting bans imposed on RFI and France 24, combined with accreditation difficulties and the departure of international media correspondents, have contributed to the creation of a vacuum in the Sahel’s media.

A total of three million people were registered as having fled their homes to escape terrorist attacks from 2017 to 2022 in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, including 1.8 million in Burkina Faso alone, according to Liptako Gourma Security. The press are usually barred from camps for internally displaced persons, officially for “reasons of security and protection of human dignity.”

OPERATION COLLATERAL FREEDOM

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The information reported by international news organisations is regarded as reliable and is regularly picked up by many local media in the region. But in Mali and Burkina Faso, the broadcasting bans imposed on RFI and France 24, combined with accreditation difficulties and the departure of international media correspondents, have contributed to the creation of a vacuum in the Sahel’s media.
2/ COMBATTING DISINFORMATION MERCENARIES

In February 2023, the "Story Killers" project41, which brought together a consortium of international news media investigating the global disinformation market, revealed the existence of an Israeli company involved in large-scale election manipulation, mainly in Africa. Throughout the world, and in particular on the African continent, disinformation mercenaries "thrive at the crossroads of social media, digital media and cyber espionage, influencing public opinion and, in the shadows, impacting political life and the business world,"42 said the French daily newspaper Le Monde, which contributed to the investigation.

Disinformation has grown in the Sahel against the backdrop of a struggle for geostategic positioning in the region. Caroline Roussy, the researcher in charge of the Africa programme at the Paris-based Institute of International and Strategic Relations (IRIS) said Wagner's presence in Mali seems to have contributed to "a certain vitality of disinformation in the Sahel on the part of Russia,"43 to the review of the Timbuktu Institute thinktank, its director, Bakary Samb, wrote that "the Malian terrain has recently become the laboratory for experimenting with all forms of influence communication (...) which is hidden behind targeted communication campaigns." Disinformation has become a real threat to security in the Sahel, he added.44 To the point that it is difficult today to distinguish what is true from what has come from completely fake accounts, the two sometimes intermingling.

THE FACT-CHECKING STRATEGY

To combat the rampant disinformation, some news media in the Sahel have developed fact-checking services, whose mission is to systematically verify statements that are being widely shared by government officials or politicians or are circulating online.

"MailCheck"45 was one of the first projects to combat misinformation in Mali. It was launched by Le Jalon, a news site whose motto is "Inform well rather than inform quickly", in partnership with the US embassy in Mali. From 2020 to 2022, it trained nearly 1,000 journalists, college students and secondary students in fake news detection and verification.46 Le Jalon's website also houses a MailCheck section47 that checks videos, photos, texts, voicemails and speeches that are faked or have been taken out of context to mislead public opinion.

The "Africa Check" project48, which trains journalists and tracks disinformation across the continent, recently identified several influencers specialising in disinformation who are very popular on social networks. They included "Gauthier Pasquet",49 a popular Twitter account that often has tweets about politics in the Sahel.

In Chad, disinformation on digital platforms was at the heart of the discussions at a forum entitled "Disinformation in Chad: should we worry about it?" that was organised in February 2023 in N'Djamena.50 It was part of "Désinfox Tchad", a project51 launched in 2022 by the French media development agency Canal France International (CFI). Intended to make the Chadian media more aware of the problem of disinformation, it also trains journalists to produce content analysing false information.

41 "Story Killers, Au coeur de l'industrie mortelle de la désinformation," Forbidden Stories, 14 February 2023
42 "Ville de Bamako, la destruction des murs de la désinformation," Libération, 16 September 2022.
46 AFRIQUE-SCRIT, "Story Killers, Au coeur de l'industrie mortelle de la désinformation," Forbidden Stories, 14 February 2023
47 "Ville de Bamako, la destruction des murs de la désinformation," Libération, 16 September 2022.
Mauritania’s media regulator, the High Authority for the Press and Broadcasting (HAPA), has also set up specific training in combatting disinformation. But more training is needed, according to Amadou Sy, Media and Democracy’s Mauritanian country director. "There is no journalism training course at the University of Nouakchott," Sy said. "In a report, submitted in February 2022 on the reform of the media sector (…) the 64 recommendations include the creation of a press institute to train journalists. It is also a response to the challenges of professionalising the sector and combating disinformation."

Combating disinformation is also a key concern of the international media. "We do not broadcast any information that has not been verified and cross-checked," said RFI deputy director Christophe Boisbouvier. "As RFI’s strength is its credibility, we prefer not being first with the news to taking the risk that it’s wrong." When a journalist is personally defamed, RFI tries to identify "the origin of the attack and refers it to the regulatory authorities of the country concerned," Boisbouvier added. And to address propaganda and content based on conspiracy theory, RFI has also created a weekly disinformation analysis programme called "Les dessous de l’info" whose subjects often concern Africa.

3/ NETWORKS OF RESILIENCE

The creation of new networks and partner media at the national and international level has fostered the resilience of journalists and enabled many media to continue reporting in the Sahel.

NEW GENERATION RADIO STUDIOS

Yafa, Kalangou and Radio Ndaram International (RNI) are members of a radio station network established by the Fondation Hirondelle that has brought a new media dynamic to the region. Their goal is to promote the professionalisation of the media sector and to provide information to populations facing crises. "We strive to do quality fieldwork whenever the security situation allows," said Hyacinthe Sanou, editor-in-chief of the Yafa studio, located in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou.

For this, the Yafa studio relies on both a privately owned TV channel and 51 partner radio stations in nine regions, to which it offers thematic programmes broadcast in five local languages. Some of this network's correspondents, also called "community relays", live in areas inaccessible to outside journalists. These relays are trained and equipped to create journalistic content. "We have to listen to each piece of content before it is broadcast," Sanou said. "Because a single inappropriate or misused word can endanger the partner radio station that uses it and that is located in a red zone with a high security challenge."

Created in 2016, the Kalangou studio in Niger produces radio programmes in five languages (French, Hausa, Zarma, Tamasheq and Fulani) for a network of partner radio stations, seven TV channels and social media. It also trains partners and provides them with equipment. "To date, more than 150 Nigerian journalists and media professionals have been trained in various branches of journalism," editor-in-chief Alhassane Abdou said. In April 2022, the Kalangou studio became the first African media outlet to be certified by the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), an RSF project that provides a machine-readable certification of compliance with journalistic standards for use in platform algorithms, with the aim of promoting reliable, quality journalism online.

RNI is based in the Chadian capital, NDjamena, with an editorial office across the border in northeastern Nigeria, in the city of Maiduguri. It covers much of the Lake Chad basin, a conflict-ridden region where many armed groups, including Boko Haram, operate. It manages to reach inaccessible areas by means of short-wave broadcasts. "On a daily basis, the radio station also works with correspondents who are in Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon," said RNI regional director Antoine Kaburahe. "The journalists immerse themselves in the field every month for ten days, which allows us to carry out very detailed investigations and reports."

RNI’s journalists work in a difficult environment, but “the originality and strength of RNI has been to recruit and train young journalists from these regions”, Kaburahe said. "They are local people, who speak the local languages, including Kanuri, Kanembu and Buduma." Their knowledge of the terrain gives them a great advantage. “They are very well informed about these complex conflicts thanks to their many local sources, who are often members of their communities. They are like fish in water in this area, especially as the fact that we broadcast in the local languages is very popular. But the dangers remain and we must salute these journalists’ courage.”

WORKING TOGETHER TO INVESTIGATE

Other local initiatives have helped to develop investigative journalism, including the creation of the Norbert Zongo Cell for Investigative Journalism in West Africa (CENOZO) in 2015. It was named after Norbert Zongo, the Burkinabé journalist who was murdered in 1998 and who founded the weekly L'Événement (of which L'Événement is now the heir). CENOZO’s aim is to build the capacity of West African investigative journalists through training and to provide financial and technical support for investigations into such matters as corruption, organised crime, poor governance, human rights violations and the environment.

From 2020 to 2022, CENOZO reinforced the capacities of nearly 450 journalists, including more than 150 women, according to CENOZO president Moussa Aksar. During this same period, a total of 209 investigative stories were published in the 16 West African countries. The rise of investigative journalism in West Africa is not without difficulties. Several CENOZO members, including its president, have been prosecuted for their investigative work. "This shows that freedom of expression and the right to hold our leaders to account have yet to be achieved", Aksar said. "This requires greater vigilance and an unwavering commitment to journalists by from civil society."

TV5Monde Africa editor Ousmane Ndiaye regards history and precedent as fundamental for structuring the media sector and defending press freedom in Burkina Faso, regardless of the current government. "The Burkinabé press is the one of the best in the sub-region," he said. "It’s the country of Norbert Zongo, who published investigative reports at the height of a dictatorship. It’s an organised press with a strong culture of independence and struggle."
RSF APPEALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reminds the countries of the Sahel that the complex task of dealing with terrorist attacks and the response by regular armies must not be regarded as grounds for violating the right to information and press freedom. To provide solutions to the various issues raised in this report, and to allow the freedom to report news and information to be respected for everyone's best interest, RSF recommends and calls on:

Governments of the Sahel countries to:

> Ensure as best as possible, and to the extent of available means, the safety of reporters who go to dangerous areas;
> Negotiate with hostage-takers to obtain their release;
> Provide practical security training to journalists, especially women, to prepare them for the dangers in the field;
> Put an end to verbal attacks and threats against journalists, including by politicians, and publicly condemn such attacks when they occur;
> Ensure that threats and attacks against journalists are the subject of systematic criminal investigations designed to ensure that those responsible are identified and prosecuted, in order to put a stop to such threats and attacks;
> Allow journalists to access conflict zones and sites hosting internally displaced persons, so that they can do their job of covering what is happening in situ;
> Improve the communication of official information about the security situation and allow representatives of the various state agencies to talk to journalists without fear of reprisals;

> Adopt laws on access to state-held information (in countries that have not yet done so), in accordance with relevant international standards;
> Not unduly obstruct the dissemination of information in the public interest, especially about military and security operations;
> Not prevent journalists, who take their own security precautions, from reporting in the field;
> End the arbitrary expulsions of foreign journalists;
> Overhaul draconian electronic communication laws and bring the definition of offences and penalties into line with common law provisions, including the media laws of the countries concerned;
> End Internet shutdowns, including those imposed when elections and street protests are taking place;
> Promote quality media reporting and trustworthy news sources by supporting adoption of the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI);
> Adopt criteria for state support of the media that condition this support on respect for professional standards.

> Adopt the JTI standard in the community area as the standard for promoting reliable news and information;
> Support the creation and development of a regional media support agency.

Countries of the African Union and African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights to:

> Work, especially with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, on implementing the recommendations to the region’s countries;
> Recognise and guarantee the right to news and information as proclaimed by the Partnership for Information and Democracy;

> Support the creation and development of an African media support agency;
> Recognise the JTI standard in Africa as the standard for promoting reliable news and information.

International partners of the Sahel countries to:

> Establish a special fund for rebuilding destroyed media and radio stations;
> Finance and sponsor security training for journalists;

> Help media to establish security protocols;
> Help to promote reliable news and information by funding media certification by recognised providers of media standards certification such as the JTI.
REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS (RSF) works for journalistic freedom, independence and pluralism all over the world. Headquartered in Paris, with 13 bureaux and sections around the world and correspondents in 130 countries, it has consultative status with the United Nations and UNESCO.