

Fake News in the Sahel: “Afrancaux News,” French Counterterrorism, and the Logics of User-Generated Media

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Abstract: Studies of fake news have historically suffered from being primarily Western-centric and focusing on “news” emanating from formal media outlets. The Sahel has generated its own unique version of fake news, the authors refer to as Afrancaux News. Using nationwide public opinion surveys in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, open-source online forum ethnographic research, and postcolonial epistemological

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predispositions, the authors suggest that although other historical instantiations exist, the most prominent contemporary example of Afrancaux News can be seen in the fake news stories related to the French counterterrorism presence in the Sahel.

Résumé : Les études sur les fausses nouvelles ont historiquement souffert d'être principalement centrées sur l'Occident et de se concentrer sur les « Nouvelles » émanant des médias officiels. Le Sahel a généré sa propre version des fausses nouvelles, que les auteurs appellent Afrancaux News. En utilisant des enquêtes d'opinion publique à l'échelle nationales au Burkina Faso, au Mali et au Niger, une recherche ethnographique sur les forums en ligne à source ouverte et des prédispositions épistémologiques postcoloniales, les auteurs suggèrent que, bien que d'autres instantiations historiques existent, l'exemple contemporain le plus important d'Afrancaux News peut être vu dans l'histoire des fausses nouvelles liées à la présence française de lutte contre-terrorisme dans le Sahel.

Resumo: Ao longo dos tempos, os estudos sobre as *fake news* (falas notícias) têm sofrido de um viés centrado no Ocidente, com enfoque sobretudo em “notícias” provenientes de órgãos de comunicação formais. A região do Sahel criou a sua versão muito própria de *fake news*, que os autores do presente artigo denominaram “Afrancaux News”. Com recurso a inquéritos nacionais de opinião pública realizados no Burkina Faso, no Mali e no Níger, a fóruns de investigação etnográfica *online* e de acesso livre e às tendências epistemológicas pós-coloniais, os autores sugerem que, apesar de haver outras consubstanciações históricas, o exemplo contemporâneo mais evidente de “Afrancaux News” pode ser encontrado nas falsas notícias relacionadas com a presença do contraterrorismo francês na região do Sahel.

Keywords: fake news; “Afrancaux News”; Sahel; France; social justice; counterterrorism

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“Are you still not aware that it is France which finances our enemies against our children? That there is no terrorist in Mali? That all what is going on is orchestrated by France?” (Salif Keita)

In the 4:39 minute-long video released on his official Facebook page in November 2019, iconic Malian musician Salif Keita addressed Mali's then-President, Ibrahim Boubakar Keita¹ in their mutual native Bambara language. In the video, the seventy-year-old musician called on the president to open his eyes and recognize the role France had played in underwriting the jihadist movements which were destabilizing Mali. As Keita warned the president, “If you are afraid to speak the truth to France, if you cannot manage this country, step down and another person who is not afraid will take over” (*Jeune Afrique* 2019). Keita's post quickly went viral—subsequently widely discussed in francophone media networks throughout Africa as well as

France—and served as a distillation of one of the most prominent examples of the discursive *zeitgeist* in West African user-generated social media.

While Keita's intervention was perhaps one of the most prominent of its type, as of early 2021, the broader Sahelian West Africa social media sphere abounded with user-generated news on major issues occurring in the region, particularly related to the role of the former colonial power, France, in the region with respect to its Barkhane counterterrorism forces. Though such viral citizen-media content such as Salif Keita's invective frequently receives traditional, "mainstream" media attention, it is often simultaneously swept under the rug and disregarded as polemical and unreliable fake news.

To the extent that the impact of Keita's invective against the president has had an unclear impact on quotidian politics in the country, theoretical disparities within and across academic disciplines also make it difficult to understand both the intentional and unintentional production and sharing of so-called fake news in varying, specific global contexts. To that end, current empirical literature on fake news is mainly focused on the Western world (Talwar et al. 2019:79; Bhaskaran, Mishra, & Nair 2019). These studies provide concepts and theories which, though useful in understanding the fake news phenomenon in Western contexts, are not necessarily externally valid in spaces outside of the West. In America, what is and is not considered to be fake news is predominantly filtered through one's partisan identity, as a Republican or Democrat (Pennycook & Rand 2019). However, in Cameroon, the Ivory Coast, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon, for example, a form of fake news known locally as *kongossa*—consisting of a fusion of rumors and political strategies—can and does inform the political participation patterns of the citizens (Ovundaga 2020). In yet another example, in a study focused on northern India, studies found a positive correlation between fake news sharing and community members' perceptions of online trust, self-disclosure, fear of missing out, and social media fatigue (Talwar et al. 2019).

Though these studies provide a useful starting point for the study of the fake news phenomenon in the Sahel, one of the driving arguments of this article is that for the study of fake news to be useful, it must necessarily prioritize the inclusion of nuanced cultural and local specificities to its analyses. Thus, taking seriously the intertwined combination of the rise of citizen social media participation in the Sahel (which we discuss subsequently), as well as the need to apply local, cultural, and historical specificity to the study of fake news more generally, we ask: How does the fake news phenomenon present itself in the Sahel today? What are the primary "strains" of fake news discourses in the region?

This study suggests that the Sahel has generated at least one strain of its own version of fake news, which its inhabitants refer to as "Afrancaux News." Afrancaux News is understood as a historically rooted though contemporarily salient set of postcolonial social justice-seeking discourses that percolate in West Africa and the wider francophone African world, which place France at the center of citizen-generated "news" stories, especially those related to negative societal developments. After showing historical instantiations of

the prevalence of *Afrancaux News* in the Sahel, the authors argue that the most prominent contemporary examples can be seen in the proliferation of fake news stories related to the French counterterrorism presence in the Sahel, the contours of which this article recounts in depth.

In undertaking this study, we used a mixed-methodological approach, first leveraging nationwide surveys conducted in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger between 2008 and early 2021, which focused on citizens' social media usage and their perceptions of France.² This report is based on nationwide surveys commissioned by the U.S. Department of State of adults ages 18 and over in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The polls were conducted in local languages by in-country interviewers using face-to-face interviews. In Mali, the regions of Kidal, Menaka, and three communes in Mopti were excluded due to heightened security reasons. In some regions of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, the survey has an urban bias, because in rural areas interviewers were largely limited to small towns near the regional capitals, and they were unable to conduct interviews in more remote areas, due in part to issues of security. The survey data were weighted to correct for this bias and to compensate for the areas that were excluded. (See [Table 1](#) for sample sizes and fieldwork dates.) In addition to these surveys, the U.S. Department of State also sponsored focus groups which examined security perceptions and media usage in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in December 2019 and January 2020.³ (See [Table 2](#) for additional details on fieldwork dates and the demographics of the participants.) All references to public opinion data in this article are based on the aforementioned survey research and focus group discussions.

The second methodological approach relies on both primary and secondary open-source ethnographic research focused on user-generated posts which were circulated on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp by users in the Sahel. Theoretically and epistemologically, this article adheres to a postcolonial studies orientation. Following the lead of postcolonial scholars such as Raka Shome and Radha S. Hegde (2002), we argue that understanding contemporary sites of social transformation and electronic communication within a global context requires a merging of postcolonial studies with communication studies. Therefore, our methodological orientation is transparently postcolonial. It subscribes to these attributes of critical mass media studies: skeptical in its attitude, humanistic in its approach, and political in its

Table 1. Fieldwork Coverage and Sample Size for the Most Recent Surveys.

Country	Dates of fieldwork	Sample size	Margin of Error	Method
Burkina Faso	March 3–April 11, 2021	2,733	±4	Face-to-face
Mali	February 24–March 23, 2021	2,073	±4.6	Face-to-face
Niger	March 17–April 4, 2021	2,796	±3.4	Face-to-face

Table 2. Fieldwork Dates and Composition of Focus Groups.

Country	Dates of fieldwork
Burkina Faso	January 7–9, 2020, two focus groups in Dori, one male Fulani ages 18–30, the second mixed gender ages 31–45; two focus groups in Fada Ngourma, one male ages 18–30, the second mixed gender ages 31–45; two focus groups in Ouagadougou, one male ages 18–30, the second mixed gender ages 31–45
Mali	December 16–17, 2019, two focus groups in Gao, one male Fulani ages 18–30, the second mixed gender ages 31–45
Niger	December 13–14, 2019, two focus groups in Tillabéri, one male Fulani ages 18–30, the second mixed gender ages 31–45

assessments (Ott & Mack, 2014). With this goal in mind, and with the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary background of the three authors—spanning communication studies, political science, African studies, and security studies—this study seeks to contribute to forging a path toward a better understanding of fake news in the Sahelian French-speaking context with a commitment to collaborative, interdisciplinary, multimodal data collection methods which sustain an Afro-centric epistemology on and about Africa (Nyamnjoh 2011: 28).

This article proceeds in three sections. In the first section following this introduction, the article contextualizes the fake news phenomenon, first delineating the meaning of this term and related concepts, and next offering overviews of two primary problems in the study of fake news. Throughout this section, we highlight the Western-centric nature of discourses, assumptions, and studies on fake news, and in taking a postcolonial studies approach, suggest that the fake news phenomenon in Africa broadly, and the Sahel specifically, needs greater, specific contextualization. In the second section, this article introduces the term “Afrançais News,” offering a discussion of its meaning and historical incarnations. In the third section, this article shows examples of how this phenomenon of Afrançais News plays out contemporarily, with specific reference to discourses surrounding the French counterterrorism presence in the region. A final section concludes.

An Overview of fake news and Two Challenges in Its Study

There are two primary challenges in current approaches to the academic study of fake news that should be addressed before we attempt to understand the current contours of its presence in the Sahel. Before we present these challenges and suggest solutions for them, this section first presents an overview of the prevailing definitions of “fake news.”

What is Fake News?

In academic literature, the most widely accepted and cited definition of fake news is “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017:213). In their extended review of the literature of the subject, Edson C. Tandoc Jr., Zheng Wei Lim, and Richard Ling identified six distinct types of fake news: satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, propaganda, and advertising (2018:159). Fake news and “propaganda” are often used interchangeably, but they must be differentiated. “Propaganda” implies “some interest group or organization that is pushing a particular viewpoint in a way designed to promote it to a mass audience” (Walton 1997:385).

Thus, propaganda denotes a more top-down agenda, while Afrancaux News, as a specific form of “fake news,” is the horizontal circulation of information between everyday people. Beyond the definition and categorization challenges in the understanding of fake news, there are also historical, socio-political, and cultural considerations which constitute key factors for making sense of fake news (Wasserman 2017). These contexts are perhaps what Matthew Lvinger (2018) calls the “master narrative” which allows media consumers to make sense of the stories which are presented to them.

In the history of media and information sharing, fake news is an old phenomenon, despite its conceptual novelty in media studies (Cevolini 2018). Some of the earliest concerns about fake news were recorded as early as the fifteenth century (Lévrier 2018). By the sixteenth century in France, fake news surrounded the schism and conflict between French Catholics and Protestants, a period during which rumors and news reports of questionable veracity were referred to as “faux bruits,” or “false noises” (Mingous 2018). Later, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, throughout the reign of King Louis XIV, *La Gazette*, the monarchy’s mouthpiece newspaper, constantly published news stories to counter the fake news from domestic and foreign press concerning the king’s health (Lévrier 2018). Later, in the twentieth century, when *Time* magazine was founded in 1923, it hired its first fact-checkers to systematically check the veracity of information prior to publication (Bigot 2018). Clearly, as Jonathan Ladd (2011) suggested, the idea of mass media without some degree of falsehood and fake news—whether deliberately or accidentally produced—is a fantasy.

While preoccupation with fake news dates to the pre-digital age, the 2016 presidential election in the United States brought it to the forefront of current political discourses (Corner 2017). In recent years, three concomitant factors have facilitated the exponential growth of fake news in traditional journalistic work: the competition for media audience, the acceleration of the rate of dissemination of news on the Internet and within social networks, and the structural and conjunctural crisis in the media industry which forced media outlets to downsize their staff (Bigot 2018:62). Thus, a large repertoire of information and news delivery forms are grossly referenced under the category of “fake news,” and they are

often scrutinized for their possible impact on democratic processes. This repertoire includes hoaxes, “fabricated news,” satirical information such as what one would find on *The Onion* or *The Daily Show*, and farfetched fictional stories found on tabloids (Wasserman 2017). The modern hyper-connectivity capabilities of current digital media have conferred upon the fake news phenomenon a much wider reach in a historically unprecedented way (Cevoloni 2018). One study found that false political news, for example, fared better than true information online (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral 2018)

We are not primarily interested in the verifiability of the citizen-generated fake news; rather, we seek to understand the master narratives that condition its formulations and the meanings it conveys. While Afrancaux News in the Sahel may present the characteristics outlined in the literature, its dominant traits cannot be dissociated from the postcolonial context of its formulations and the justice-seeking agenda it conveys.

Problem One: A Western-Centric Bias in the Study of Fake News

The first major challenge that typifies the current study of fake news in the Sahel is that the prevailing literature approaches the topic of fake news generally through a primarily Western-centric lens. Indeed, as some scholars have noted, “the present scholarly attention to fake news is heavily Western-centric with limited comparative perspectives” (Bhaskaran, Mishra, & Nair 2019:159). For Francis Nyamnjoh, relying exclusively on the Western canon to study media in Africa misses the opportunity to capture Africa’s “value added in terms of how people communicate and how they share communication with one another” (2011:29). This assumption of a “one-size-fit-all” approach to studying fake news has inherent limits. In lacking cultural, geopolitical, and geographic nuance, Herman Wasserman argues that “the concept of ‘fake news’ is so imprecise as to be of very little analytical use unless accompanied with specifications” (2017:10).

This long-recognized awareness of Western analytical biases has compelled African scholars to rethink the study of media on the continent. They have thus begun to sketch a direction for the study of media on the continent, pointing out the need for a theoretical and methodological hybridity in the study of popular media in Africa. Within that context, Nyamnjoh (2011) underlined the danger of “either essentializing Africa by treating her as ‘different’ or by ignoring her specificity by approaching her media via Western theoretical constructs” (2011:19). He has thus urged media scholars to recognize “the creative ways in which Africans merge their traditions with exogenous influences to create realities that are not reducible to either but enriched by both” (2011:28). Subscribing to the concerns raised in these theoretical interventions, we approach the question of fake news, user-generated information, and security in Sahelian West Africa with a focus on these producers and consumers and their local contexts.

Problem Two: A Formal Media-Centric Bias in the Study of Fake News

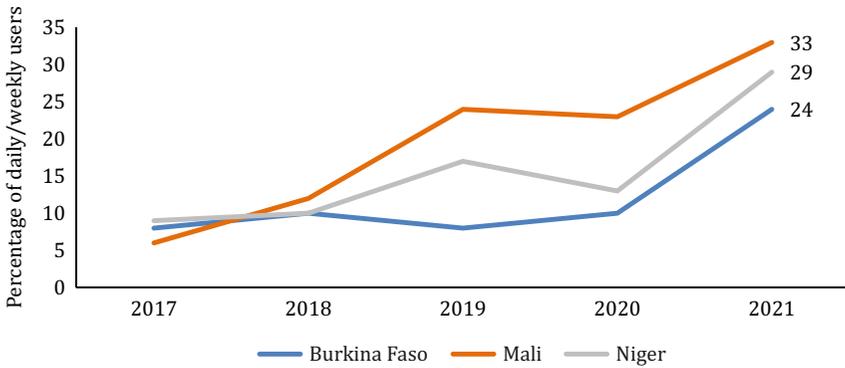
The second major problem with prevailing approaches to understanding fake news in the Sahel is that, as per the definition cited at the beginning of this section, the widely accepted and foregoing definitions of fake news do not appear to include user-generated content, nor do they differentiate between “news” and simple “information.” While most studies of fake news in Western contexts have focused on formal news organizations, so too has the study of media in Africa (including newer iterations of fake news) focused most acutely on formal media organizations. To that end, the study of mass media in Africa has globally undergone several paradigm shifts since the early postcolonial era. At the start, in the 1960s, African media were studied as a potential tool for the socio-economic development of the newly independent nations.

In the following decade, that rhetoric shifted, and African media were approached with much caution, being viewed as canons for Western cultural imperialism. In another about-face, the nascent literature on African mass media in the 1990s—which continued to be normative and Western in its approach, and centered on print media with little interest or knowledge of its audience—positively associated African media with the democratization process of the continent (Capitant 2008). Then with the advent of the internet, cybercafes that tethered early social media users in Africa were perceived as tools of political and economic empowerment in some cases, though few users used new media for participatory communication (Obijiofor 2011). Next, on the eve of the third millennium, African mass media were predominantly studied for their capacity to facilitate conflict mediation (Capitant 2008). Finally, the explosion of social media brought back a rhetoric of media as facilitators of social change and participative democracy (Wasserman 2005). The latest paradigm in mass media studies in Africa must account for increased connectivity and users’ capacity to produce alternative content capable of completing, contradicting, and challenging the content produced by official media houses.

To be sure, the need to focus on the informal, user-generated landscape of fake news production in the Sahel is important precisely because of the growing landscape of citizens’ connectivity, thanks largely to ubiquitous access to smartphones. In broad terms, as demonstrated in [Figure 1](#) below, the Sahel has seen a modest rise in citizens’ use of WhatsApp since 2017, according to nationwide surveys. For example, according to the nationwide survey conducted in Mali in 2021, WhatsApp use has grown dramatically since 2017, when less than 10 percent of those surveyed reported using it on at least a weekly basis.

Several phenomena are driving the rise of the popularity of social media in the Sahel. In addition to an increase in internet accessibility, the nature of media consumption in the Sahel informs the popularity of certain genres of social media usage. In brief, given the relatively low literacy rates in the Sahel—which has the highest illiteracy rate in the world, with approximately six in

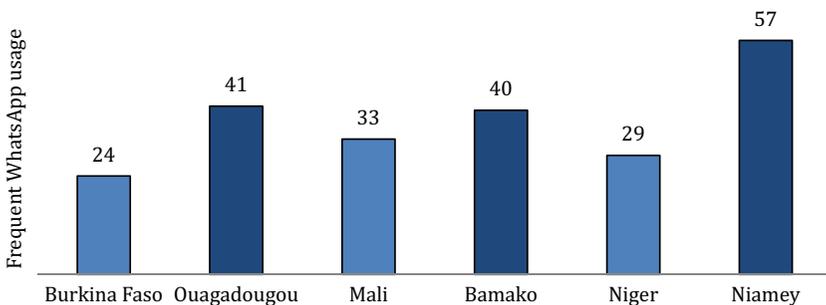
Figure 1. WhatsApp Use in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (2017–2021)
 “How often do you use WhatsApp?” (% daily/weekly)



ten adults across the three countries being illiterate—non-print media, especially in the form of memes shared on Facebook and WhatsApp, have surged in popularity.^{4,5} Voice messages are popular as well as WhatsApp group messages. Moreover, the Sahel is home to some of the youngest and fastest growing populations in the world. As elsewhere, these youthful, tech-savvy populations have shown themselves open to adopting various types of digital communication.

Despite the rise in the use of these platforms by citizens, as compared to other places in the world, the penetration of these platforms remains relatively low, for numerous reasons. Expensive data rates, poor reception outside of major urban areas, and low smartphone ownership are all factors that serve to limit the usage of WhatsApp. As such, as noted in Figure 2, nationwide 2021 surveys reveal that the use of WhatsApp is significantly higher in capital cities, where expendable income is higher, cellular networks and wi-fi are more prevalent, and smartphone ownership is more common.

Figure 2. WhatsApp Use in Sahelian Capitals by Percentage of Population (2021)
 “How often do you use WhatsApp?” (% daily/weekly)



Despite the fact that the use of any of these platforms on a consistent basis involves fewer than 35 percent of the overall populations of Burkina Faso, Mali, or Niger, much larger percentages offered an opinion on how much they trust the content on WhatsApp. According to nationwide surveys conducted in 2021, in general, Sahelian publics are more likely to view content on the platform with skepticism, rather than to consider it trustworthy information. In comparison with Nigeriens and Burkinabe, Malians are the most trusting of information on WhatsApp: 32 percent of those surveyed say they have trust it. Still, 54 percent say they don't trust information circulated on WhatsApp (13 percent say they "don't know").

In sum, in the Sahel, the relatively recent rise and digitization of participation in public discourse through social media and messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook have exponentially increased both the potential reach of fake news and the challenges associated in countering it.

Introducing Afrancaux News

One of the primary varieties—if not the primary variety—of fake news circulating in the Sahel is what we refer to as “Afrancaux News.” As we use the term “Afrancaux News,” we are referring to the historically derived though contemporarily salient set of postcolonial, social justice-seeking, citizen-generated discourses that percolate in West Africa and the wider francophone African world, which place France at the center of many negative societal outcomes. While various tropes of Afrancaux News have emerged and been disseminated over the past several decades—several of which we discuss below—this article focuses primarily on the most prominent: that of the French counterterrorism presence in the Sahel.

“Afrancaux News,” is at its core, a term created from the combination of “African,” “France,” and “faux” (“fake”) news, attempting to show the elision—the bleeding into one another—of these three concepts in practice. It is also a nod, in no small part, to an analogical predecessor term, “*Françafrique*,” itself composed of the indistinguishable concepts of “France” and “Afrique” (Africa) and the very ideology that undergirds the contemporary phenomenon we describe. In our case, not only are the terms “Africa,” “France,” and “faux” indistinguishable from one another etymologically, but a reference to France is to be found also in the center of “Africa” and “news,” emphasizing the former colonial power’s centrality to this genre of fake news.

Second, in the same way that “*Françafrique*” has a double meaning of “France à fric” (or “to France by money”) so too does “Afrancaux News.” When disaggregated to “À Franc[e] aux news,” the term suggests that when news, or happenings, need to be explained, it is toward France that communities in the Sahel often turn their gaze. Third, the term Afrancaux News is not entirely French, but, with the inclusion of “News” refers to the globalized nature of the Sahelian fake news phenomenon.

Investigating the propagation of user-generated polemical information in the Sahel through the lens of Afrancaux News is useful in many ways. At its core, using this lens helps to overcome the two aforementioned problems—the Western-centric bias as well as the formal news biases of fake news studies. The notion of Afrancaux News helps to overcome the Western-centric bias in the study of fake news by centering discourses from the Sahel, which have generally received little attention. While the notion of Afrancaux News does include a reference to a Western state (France), it nevertheless, we believe, helps to capture at least one dimension of the experience of Sahelian populations and states with regard to colonization, decolonization, and postcolonial state exploitation.

The notion of Afrancaux News also helps to overcome the “formal news-centric bias” in the study of fake news by focusing on the study of user-generated content in the Sahel and the ways that such content can often, as a result of the constrained media environment in the Sahel more generally, serve as a more powerful generator of ideas and modes of knowing than formal media houses. Instead of the acute attention focused on formal media organizations, we suggest that at least in the study of fake news in the Sahel, attention should be given to user-generated “news,” since the differentiation between official “news” and mere “information” is increasingly blurred. Thus, we seek to lay the groundwork for that endeavor by exploring the current contours of the Sahelian user-generated “news” landscape, which exists primarily on the social media platforms of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter.

Though we are unaware of any other scholars who have discussed anything similar to Afrancaux News as a term, it is important to acknowledge the work done by Denis Tull (2021), which was published while this article was under review. Tull’s conclusions share similarities with the arguments contained herein, as he interrogates the politics of rumors and truth as a means of contesting French intervention in Mali. He argues that Malian rumors and conspiracies around French intervention, derived from colonial experience, serve as contestations of a perceived prolongation of colonial exploitation, and themselves constitute new ways of knowing for populations themselves. While our article gives greater attention to the notion of fake news, introduces a new term, and uses novel methods—surveys and online ethnographic research—Tull’s work is an important analogue read to the present piece.

We also note a caveat: in introducing the notion of Afrancaux News, we do not suggest that counterterrorism discourses are the only elements which constitute Afrancaux News, nor do we deny the existence of other sorts of fake news in this region. To the first point, some social media postings point to France as the country responsible for the spread of COVID-19 to French West Africa. In 2020 in Senegal, a viral Facebook post claimed that seven children had died after being deliberately infected with COVID-19. The story spread before vaccines had been made available, and eventually it was debunked (AFP 2020). This sort of fiction does actually constitute “Afrancaux News,” though it is not related to counterterrorism. To the second point, in

Ghana in April of 2020, a video that circulated virally on WhatsApp claimed that the hibiscus flower could cure COVID-19, which the news organization *Ghana Fact* (2021) debunked. While this type of fake news does exist in the Sahel, we do not consider it to be Afrancaux News, because it does not place France at the center of its claims.

It is important to note that Afrancaux News is at its core undergirded by the contentious relationships that Sahelian states have had with France since gaining their independence in the 1960s. Though this article focuses on the current incarnation related to the French counterterror presence, we highlight below how various points in Sahelio-Franco relations have paved a path for the emergence of Afrancaux News. The initiation of polemical, social justice-seeking discourses that focused on the role of the French state began at the very inception of the Sahelian states. Of all the former African colonial powers, France has been the one that has been most eager and aggressive in attempting to maintain its influence in its former colonies after they achieved independence. For many in the Sahel, France's role as a meddling and often destabilizing actor is the very basis for the Afrancaux News narrative.

Perhaps most emblematic of the destabilizing French presence is the figure of Jacques Foccart, otherwise known as "Monsieur Afrique," who served as a key operator during the opening days of African independence and well into the 1980s (Médard 2002). Foccart created networks to sustain a political stability that benefited French government and business interests, frequently to the detriment of democratization in France's former colonies. Regarding the Foccart networks, Daniel Bach states:

If necessary, force was used, overtly so, as to comfort the power of friendly heads of states, as occurred in Gabon in 1964, or Chad in 1968, but also covertly, in order to neutralize domestic opposition to friendly regimes, and destabilize those considered unfriendly as Sekou Touré's Guinea, or dangerous as Lumumba's Congo or Nigeria during the Nigerian civil war (Bach 2002).

Moreover, there has been an accumulation of events which have contributed to Sahelian suspicions of France. According to one analysis, there have been about thirty French military interventions in Africa over the three decades after political independence (Chafer et al. 2020). And though it involves a different region, France's role in the Rwandan genocide continues to garner criticism. Critics label the CFA currency system as a striking contemporary example of neocolonialism in Africa (Taylor 2019; Pigeaud & Sylla 2020). Resource extraction in the Sahel continues to have unsettling neo-colonial aspects, the mining of uranium in Niger being just one example (Martin 1989). The French group Orano, formerly Areva, has been extracting uranium in northern Niger for forty-three years (though the operation is soon set to close). Even today, the echoes of the Foccart networks continue to reverberate. Burkinabè, and other Africans for that

matter, continue to demand justice for the death of former President Thomas Sankara, in the belief that France played a role in his assassination (Otayek 2017).

The receptivity of the Sahel's citizens to stories which denigrate France, even those that appear patently false, may bewilder some observers. But when one considers the legacy of colonization, the context becomes more understandable. Fake news in this context is a form of standing up, discursively at least, against perceived neocolonial meddling. Participation in rumors on social media, which quickly turns into conspiracy making and spreading of fake news, is a form of a citizen participation in national, socio-political discourse. Throughout the 1980s, these discourses emanating from the Sahel endured, though they increasingly began to look toward France as the generator of the social justice ills attributed to economic malaise in the country, particularly those underwritten by the CFA currency and devaluation of the currency in 1994. Below, we move from these historical underpinnings of Afrancaux News to what we suggest is the most prominent incarnation of the phenomenon: user-generated, social justice-seeking discourses around the French counterterror presence in the Sahel.

Afrancaux News and Anti-French Counterterror Presence in the Sahel

Though we have discussed above some of the seminal events which served as precursors to current Afrancaux News tropes in the Sahel—around political assassinations of popular leaders, broad machinations of *Françafrique*, and the CFA currency—we suggest that the current iteration of Afrancaux News began after the French intervention in Mali in January 2013, which had the intention of fighting a combination of jihadist and non-jihadist insurgent groups in the broader Sahel. In this section, we provide a brief background on these phenomena; show how and why this intervention was the kick-off for this current stage of “Afrancaux News,” and then examine specific instances of user-generated social media, polemical discourses which center France as the culprit in these events. To be sure, there are legitimate popular concerns about the French intervention and role in the region which this analysis does not discount.

The Sahelian Destabilization and France's 2013 Intervention

The Sahel has experienced a profound and unprecedented uptick in jihadist violence over the past half-decade. The current wave of jihadist violence began in earnest in 2012 as a Tuareg rebellion⁶ in Mali and was co-opted by affiliates of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁷ A bungled response from the Malian government led to a military coup that opened the door to the takeover of large stretches of northern Mali by mid-2012 (Warner et al. 2020). In January 2013, France intervened to stop the tide of violence through Operation Serval, and by April 2014 it had initiated Operation

Barkhane, a region-wide counterterror force. Despite these French efforts, by 2017 the constellation of merging and splintering al-Qaeda affiliates in the Sahel coalesced under the banner of the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM).

Simultaneously—and deriving from an offshoot of these groups—in 2016, a group affiliated with the Islamic State, the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (the Mali-Niger branch of the current Islamic State’s West Africa Province) also emerged and began to conduct attacks of their own (Nsaibia & Weiss 2020). Beginning in 2016, Burkina Faso also fell victim to violence generated by both al-Qaeda and Islamic State-affiliated groups (International Crisis Group 2017). Indeed, as the African Center for Strategic Studies has noted, since 2015, the Sahel has experienced a yearly doubling of violence linked to Islamic jihadist groups, with the Sahel being the African region with the largest increase in jihadist violence in 2019 (African Center for Strategic Studies 2020). In that year alone, there were an estimated 4,000 deaths in the Sahel caused by jihadist violence, which involved an estimated eight hundred events (The New Humanitarian 2020).

The Deteriorating Public Opinions of France

The current era of Afrancaux News—tied to the French counterterror presence in the Sahel—is exemplified by a deteriorating public perception of France following an apogee at its initial intervention in Mali in January 2013. As seen in Figure 3 below, according to nationwide surveys in the region, Sahelian publics’ favorable opinions of France had been rising from 2008, cresting most notably in Mali in January 2013, the month in which French Operation Serval intervened. In no uncertain terms then, France’s most positive public perception in the Sahel occurred at the very moment of its first counterterror intervention.

However, as shown above, following their apogee in roughly 2013, the opinions of the Sahelian publics regarding France began to fall over time, reaching their lowest point in the past twelve years in Mali and Niger in late 2019, with the lowest public opinion of France from Burkina Faso coming in January 2020. There is evidence that social media usage, particularly WhatsApp content, is influencing Malian opinion regarding the former colonial power. As shown in Figure 4, there is a strong correlation between WhatsApp users and more negative opinions of France, according to a nationwide survey conducted in Mali in 2021. For example, in Figure 4, 55 percent of frequent WhatsApp users in Mali have a negative opinion of France, while only 40 percent of Malians who never use WhatsApp say they have a negative opinion of France.

Beyond simply having a general antipathy towards France, participants in the focus groups held in Niamey, Ouagadougou, and Bamako in late 2019 and early 2020 (detailed in Table 2) suggested that France had actually played a

Figure 3. Sahelian Publics' Favorability Ratings of France (2011-2021)
 "Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion France?" (% favorable)

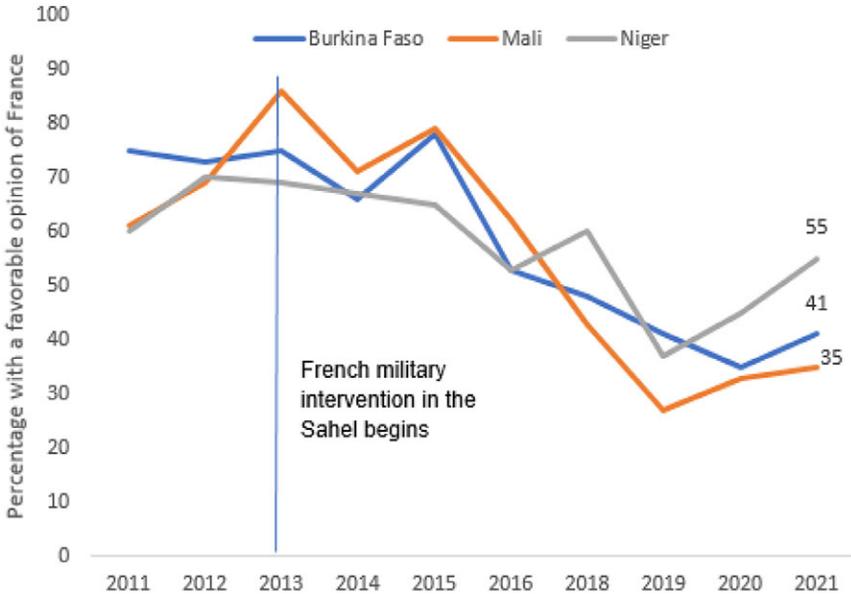
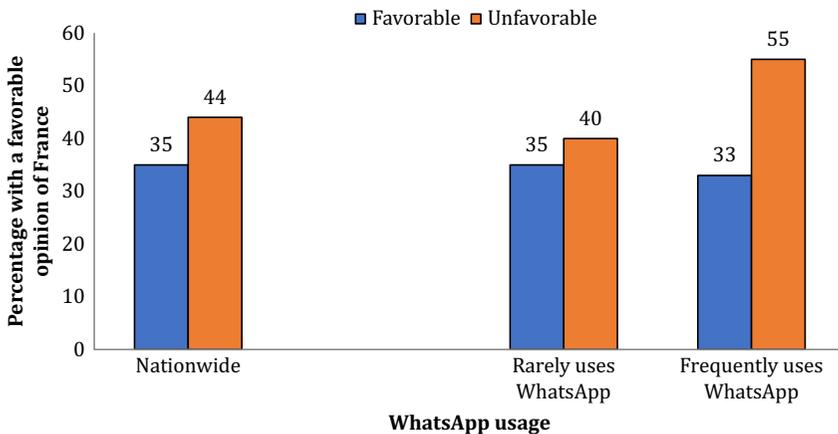


Figure 4. WhatsApp Users in Mali more Negative Toward France (2021)
 "Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion France?"
 "How often do you use WhatsApp?"



role in fomenting the jihadist violence afflicting the region. In Mali, for instance, some participants stated that Mali had been a bastion of intercommunity peace, but since the French military intervention in early 2013, ethnic conflict had emerged, most notably between the Dogon and Fulani in central

Mali. Survey participants in Niger also invoked the idea of a French invisible hand that worked behind the scenes to destabilize the country. It is significant that the focus groups in Niamey took place in the wake of some of the most devastating losses of military life in the history of the country; attacks in Chinagodrar and In-Ates in late 2019 had claimed the lives of at least 200 soldiers (*Reuters* 2020), thus potentially contributing to even greater than normal resentment toward the French military. According to surveys conducted in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, when survey participants were asked to name the country that was the source of the most of their problems, France was named first (methods detailed in [Table 1](#)). Interestingly, the sentiment is even more pronounced in regional capitals, where social media usage is much higher ([Figure 4](#)).

The Current Phase of Afrancaux News

The nadir of the Sahelian public's opinions of France, which we suggest is connected to the current phase of Afrancaux News related to French counterterrorism in the Sahel, was reached in 2019. Before delving into specifics, what is most notable about the current anti-French counterterrorism sentiments marking contemporary Afrancaux News tropes is the support for the various storylines evinced by citizens from all strata of society. From civil society, the press, internet users, governments, and terror groups to religious figures and pop stars, the pervasive anti-French sentiment cuts across Sahelian demographics (*Sahel 2r3s* 2020.) As one commentator wrote:

The presence of the French Operation Barkhane constitutes a fertile terrain for disinformation. Numerous rumors circulate, echoing widely on social media networks and engendering thousands of comments nourished by a strong anti-French sentiment. (Chapleau 2019)

Below, we delineate four tropes of Afrancaux News in the Sahel related to French counterterrorism and briefly describe the impacts of these tropes on Franco-Sahelian relations.

Trope 1: French Counterterror Presence as a Cover for Gold Extraction

When it comes to specific tropes of Afrancaux News, perhaps one of the most common is the alleged role that the French military has played in gold theft in the Sahel. Two memes circulated, months apart, in 2019, making such claims. The first meme purportedly shows French soldiers in the Sahel stealing gold. The images, which began to circulate just days after the March 2, 2019, Ogassagou massacre in Mali—in which an estimated 150 Fulanis were killed by Dogon “defense” groups for their reported collaboration with the jihadists—were shared widely in March and April 2019 (*Human Rights Watch* 2020). The suggested inference was that the French military was too occupied with stealing gold to mitigate the interethnic violence. However, fact checkers associated with

France24 later revealed that one of the images was of French soldiers in the Central African Republic destroying arms in 2014; the second was of a man in Sudan who had found a gold-colored rock that he claimed was gold, but which was later revealed to be a joke; and the third was a stock photo traced to a Zambian mining company's brochures in 2017 (*France 24* 2019a).

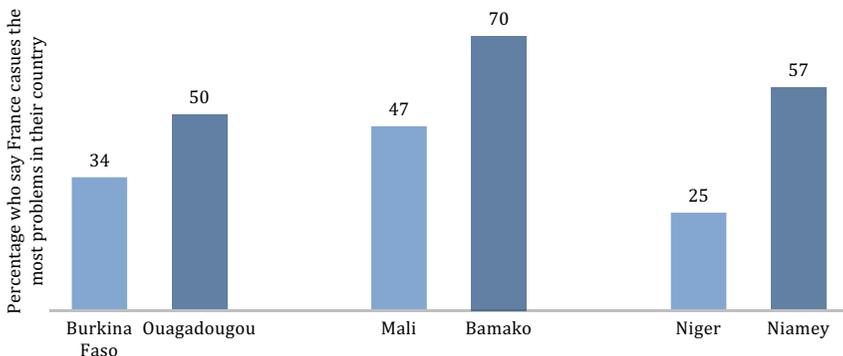
The “French soldiers as gold thieves” Afrancaux News trope continued, and in early September 2019, a video was shared, largely on WhatsApp, showing airport customs agents “catching” French soldiers in the act of smuggling a briefcase of gold bars out of a country. The video purported that l’Elysee had directed the gold smuggling (Pezet 2019). As one Tweeter of the video wrote:

Customs agents in Mali, in the presence of international observers and journalists, just dismantled a gold trafficking operation undertaken by members of the French military, who said that they were transporting arms. The [military] declared that they had done it [the presumed trafficking] at the order of the Elysee.

Due to the wide circulation of the video—which also made its way to similar conspiracy theory websites in the DRC—several fact-checking websites attempted to identify the video’s provenance and found it had come from Ghana. Fact-checkers were ultimately able to interview people in pictured in the video and found that it simply showed the verification of the quality of gold metal bars between an owner and a potential buyer in Ghana (Pezet 2019).

The gold theft meme resurfaced in July 2020. Circulating some of the same images from the initial examples presented above, *AFP* reported that Malian Facebook and WhatsApp users again made accusations, showing the photos in Figure 5 (see Nouri 2020). While the image on the bottom left had already been identified as being the destruction of arms in the Central

Figure 5. Sahelian Capital Residents vs. Overall Populations’ Responses to the Question: “What Country Cause the Most Problems for Your Country?” (% who answered France) (2021)



African Republic in 2014 (*France 24* 2019b), the image in the upper right was sourced to journalist Salif Sanogo, who had published the photo in 2014, showing Barkhane forces uncovering a cache of weapons in Mali (Sanogo 2014).

Trope 2: French Counterterrorism Presence as Attacking Allies

Beyond the gold theft trope, a second contemporary Afrancaux News theme suggests that French counterterrorism troops are actively attacking the Sahelian partners that they are in the country to protect, a storyline that had also emerged within the aforementioned focus groups. Beginning in late November 2019, a rumor circulated on WhatsApp that Barkhane forces had accidentally attacked a Nigerien military base outside of Diffa, Niger. Posts sharing this news went, according to one website, “extremely viral” on pages in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Côte d’Ivoire (Le Cadre 2019a). One user suggested that not only had the French military accidentally attacked the Nigerien base, but in the aftermath of the attack, members of Boko Haram had overrun the base as well (*Mali D’Ivoire* 2019). The French embassy in Niger as well local authorities in Diffa vigorously denied these claims (Le Cadre 2019a).

Trope 3: French Counterterrorism Presence as Aiding Jihadists

A third and more insidious Afrancaux News trope suggests that France is actively and directly aiding the jihadist groups that it is in the Sahel to fight. One striking image that circulated on Facebook and WhatsApp during November and December 2019 alleged that the French military was delivering motorcycles, the preferred method of transportation for insurgents in the region, to extremists (Le Cadre 2019b). It was later revealed that the motorcycles had been delivered for use by Malian security forces (*Malijet* 2019).

Another instance of an Afrancaux News item suggesting French aid to Sahelian terrorists circulated in December 2019. In these discourses, citizens in WhatsApp groups in Mali circulated images suggesting that shipping containers full of arms, purportedly from France and en route to Kidal, Mali (a location favored by terror elements), had been seized—sometimes allegedly also in Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso (See [Figure 6](#)). Audio messages in WhatsApp groups in Zarma (a language spoken in Niger and Mali) made the claims, showing what observers claimed, as the *AFP* notes, to be “proof of the delivery of arms to terrorist groups in Kidal by France” (*France 24* 2019a). Yet, the images the *AFP* showed were from a 2017 discovery of a container of arms in Tin Can Island in Lagos, where the Nigerian Customs Service had intercepted a shipment of arms (Ibeh 2017). France, French soldiers, or terror groups in Mali were not involved in the actual story at all.

A third example of Afrancaux News stories suggesting French support for terrorists was a meme circulated in July 2019. The picture showed two white Frenchmen being escorted in their underwear; commentators on social

Figure 6. Recirculated Post Insinuating French Counterterror Presence in Mali as a Cover for Gold Extraction (July 2020)



Figure 7. Social Media Post Claiming Interception in Burkina Faso or Côte d'Ivoire of French Shipment of Arms to Armed Groups in Kidal, Mali (2019)



Exemples de publications circulant dans des groupes WhatsApp et associant la France à la livraison d'un conteneur diplomatique et transmis à la rédaction des Observateurs de France 24.

media alleged that the two Frenchmen had been arrested as part of a terrorist cell. As one commentator wrote:

TWO FRENCHMEN ARRESTED AMONG TERRORISTS IN MALI

Here's the image that I received today, and I tried to verify it on the net but nothing for now. Can anyone verify? We are all troubled by the game of France in Africa, and we're seeking to provide proof to our brothers who remain skeptical of what's happening in our country. It's France that's recruiting the so-called Islamist terrorists or jihadists, and it's also France that is training them, arming them, and financing them to divide us, to break up our states to strategically reposition it for their own ends. (Celestam 2019)

Said another commenter about the picture, which the *AFP* assessed to have been circulated at least 1,400 times, “A bullet in the head of each one as trial, sparing no time or money” (Celestam 2019). Social media posts such as in [Figure 7](#) illustrate fake news alleging that weapons from France that were destined to terrorists in the Sahel were intercepted in Burkina Faso or Cote d'Ivoire.

Ultimately, fact-checking efforts debunked these claims as well. The picture associated with the above claims, the *AFP* revealed, had actually been taken in June 2017, with the men who were depicted being in the process of being rescued. They had fled the grounds of their hotel after militants aligned with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb attacked the Kagbana resort, on the outskirts of Bamako, at which they were staying. Upon the attack, many of the guests, including the two French soldiers depicted, had fled the resort (*BBC* 2017; *Le Cadre* 2019c). Rather than depicting Frenchmen being arrested as members of a current Malian terror group, the photo instead depicted French soldiers—who were in the country to participate in counter-terror efforts—being assisted by Malian forces after having fled a Malian terror group attack two years prior.

Trope 4: General Disinformation About French Counterterror Presence

Another trope of African News coming from Sahelian citizens related to the French counterterror presence simply relates to the proliferation of generally doctored photos showing French presence in the region. While not vilifying France specifically, this trope of fake news is simply the proliferation of fake content related to its presence. For instance, on November 25, 2019, when two French helicopters that had been in the Menaka region of Mali to help assist the Barkhane Operation crashed, official and unofficial news sites in Mali purported to have images of the crash. The quick circulation of these images, one fact-checking site noted, was strange, because the helicopters collided in the dark of night, in an area inaccessible to journalists or other observers. Such photos, to be sure, would have been impossible to take. Instead, Facebook users and websites circulated images of helicopters

that were, in their aftermath, found not to be genuine, but instead, of a 2015 helicopter crash in Argentina; a burned-out Boeing 727 used for narcotic-trafficking that, in 2009, traffickers then lit aflame in Mali; a downed helicopter in Iraq; and an image from a Turkey-Azerbaijan joint military exercise in May 2015. One media outlet, Mali24.info, purported to show a picture of the crash, which, it was later revealed, was a still captured from the video game “Just Cause 2” (Le Cadre 2019d).

Jihadists themselves also added fuel to the fire. For their part, militants in ISGS claimed that it was they who had been responsible for causing the crash, as they fired on the helicopters (RFI 2019a). As a release from the Islamic State claimed, “The caliphate soldiers fired in the direction of the aircraft, forcing it to withdraw and in the end, it collided with another helicopter causing the deaths of 13 soldiers.” General LeCointre adamantly denied this, instead reiterating that the helicopters had crashed while engaged in “very complex operational combat” (Lagneau 2019).

Implications of Afrancaux News on France-Sahelian Relations

In France itself, viral politicalized social media discourses emanating from the Sahel and the anti-French sentiments associated with them have caused visible consternation. In December 2019, growing social media criticism of France and its military presence in Africa prompted President Emmanuel Macron to summon the leaders of French-speaking Sahelian West Africa to a meeting regarding French military presence in their countries. At a NATO meeting on December 4, 2019, and in light, at least in part, of the proliferation of anti-French counterterrorism force discussions, Macron announced his desire to convene a meeting of the heads of state of the G-5 Sahel countries in the French city of Pau. Scheduled to take place on December 16, 2019, the meeting was intended for G-5 Sahelian countries to “clarify their positions” on the French military presence in the Sahel and “admit” that French troops were in the region at the request of the G-5 countries themselves, and not, as the communique stated, “for neocolonial aims.” For its part, one French periodical wrote that the “invitation” was viewed by Sahelian leaders as a “convocation” from Macron (Chapleau 2019).

In the aftermath, it was argued that the summit went poorly. Outlets have reported that the former Minister of Foreign Affairs for Burkina Faso Ablasse Ouedraogo found Macron’s tone to be “annoyed and annoying,” but admitted, nevertheless, that the “French president pounded his fist on the table (metaphorically) and held our governments to their responsibilities, to their incoherences, and their inconsistencies” (Chapleau 2019). In the aftermath of the meeting, France’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian noted that anti-French sentiments in the Sahel caused him, “sadness and a little revolt, when we know the strength of our commitment, our 41 dead servicemen and that this was done at the request of the political authorities of the Sahel.” As he continued, “I also don’t want to overestimate this feeling. It is being strongly relayed on social networks, through fake news that must be

combated, but, in a situation of crisis and insecurity, we always look for a scapegoat” (Nehem 2020). That message resonated with his previous comments, on December 16, 2020, in which, again combating notions of Afrancaux News against assertions that France’s presence in the Sahel was for economic reasons, Le Drian noted:

I see in there [in the Sahel] relatively few French economic interests, or, at least, no economic interests that would necessitate a French military intervention, which isn’t our habit or approach anyway...We are there [in the Sahel] essentially, and only, to combat terrorism (Chapleau 2019).

These pleas for the cessation of Afrancaux News fell on deaf ears even at the diplomatic level relatively soon after the Pau summit. In February 2020, Mali’s Foreign Minister Toumani Djime accused parachutists from the French foreign legion—in the vein of other Afrancaux News discourses—of frequenting red-light districts in Bamako and behaving badly:

At times ... you find them, in the Pigalle of Bamako, with tattoos all over their bodies, rendering an image that is not the one we know of the [French] army. It scares, it intrigues...Some of them do whatever they want in the streets of Bamako, it’s not good for the image of France. (*L’Express* 2020)

For its part, the Armed Forces Ministry noted that it had never deployed forces to Bamako; all had instead been at the Liptako border region at the intersection of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. The Ambassador, France said, should stop spreading false rumors (*Reuters* 2020).

As the fortunes of France have faded in the Sahel, particularly in Mali, the prospects of Russia have certainly increased. Afrancaux News may have played a role in Russia’s quest for greater influence in the Sahel, as reports have emerged that the Russian private military contractor the Wagner Group now has a presence in Mali. The findings previously reported in this study highlight how social media may have primed the Malian audience to be more receptive to a robust Russia-linked security presence (*Reuters* 2021). The growing calls for a Russian response to Mali’s security situation became more pronounced in 2020 (Whitehouse 2020). Nationwide surveys in Mali reveal that positive opinions of Russia have grown since 2020, as shown in [Figure 8](#).

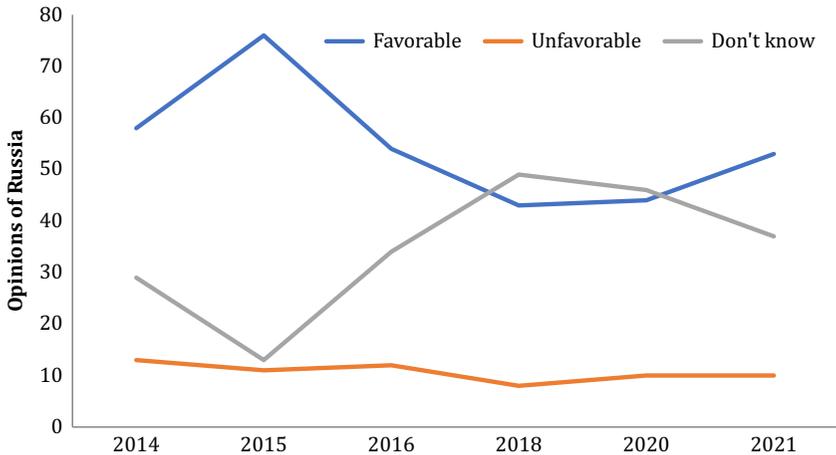
Conclusion

We have sought to answer several questions, namely, how does the fake news phenomenon present itself in the Sahel today? What are some of the main “strains” of fake news discourses? And, what phenomena undergird the spread of fake news in the Sahel?

Despite the fact that fake news in general has been conceived as primarily a Western phenomenon in the domain of formal media, observers should recognize that it not only presents itself differently in different global

Figure 8. Sahelian Publics' Favorability Ratings of Russia Climbed in 2021 (2014–2021)

"Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion Russia?" (% favorable)



contexts, but it also has had a longer historical arc in many places than has often been recognized. Realizing the need to put into specific geographic context the phenomenon of the production and spread of “fake news,” we have argued that one of many tropes of fake news in the Sahel is what we refer to as “Afrancaux News,” or news emanating from the Sahel which places France at the center of many current social and economic ills. After delineating the meaning and historical origins of Afrancaux News in the Sahel, we then investigated what is viewed to be the most predominant trope of Afrancaux News circulating in the Sahel today, fake news about the intentions and activities of members of the French counterterror forces operating primarily in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

Although the fake news landscape in the Sahel has some unique aspects, in other ways, it is typified by many of the same phenomena as elsewhere in the world. This finding reinforces Nyamnjoh’s point about recognizing African media’s uniqueness while avoiding essentializing it into something completely unique (2011). Despite the focus on the instantiations of fake news in the Sahel, we emphasize that the process occurs around the world; we make no claims that Sahelian citizens are somehow more prone to disseminating or believing fake news than populations anywhere else in the world. Instead, we have only sought to show how and to what extent its prevalence is unique in this region of the world.

As in other places in the world, the fake news landscape in the Sahel continues to be informed by non-African powers, even outside of the ubiquitous French influence. In late October 2019, Facebook announced that it had shut down several Russian-backed accounts with content aimed at African countries, including postings that criticized France and the United States

and supported Russia. Russia has also used YouTube videos to boost its reputation in Africa (Grossman et al. 2019). Likely frustrated with negative narratives of the Barkhane mission, there is evidence that the French military has entered the social media landscape as well. Recent reports detailed how Facebook shut down accounts disseminating messaging in Mali and Central African Republic (Velluet 2020; Barotte 2020). This development is likely going to have an effect on the Afrancaux News phenomenon and further muddy the media landscape and diminish trust in news sources.

In terms of the practice of the dissemination of Afrancaux News specifically and fake news generally, the practice is only likely to increase as time wears on. Despite the outsized role that social media appears to be playing in the propagation of Afrancaux News, social media usage in the Sahel is still relatively low. Yet if urbanization and population growth rates continue on current trajectories, it is very likely that the usage will grow quickly, which portends a challenging environment for finding the “truth.”

We close by returning to our original goal: to reiterate the specificity and sources of the emergence and proliferation of Afrancaux News in the Sahel. At its core, these tropes have arisen in the aftermath of formative colonial experiences, a postcolonial period of unfulfilled potential, and a current environment which is marked for many by an insecurity which, frustratingly, the French counterterror presence has not been able to adequately address. Indeed, for many in the habit of the production and dissemination of Afrancaux News, their disdain for the current state of affairs is evident.

Disclaimer

All statements of fact, analysis, or opinion are the authors' and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of State or the U.S. government.

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Notes

1. By June 2020, Mali had been rocked with protests demanding that the President step down, which, by August 2020, saw him deposed in a *coup d'état*.
2. The questionnaire includes questions pertaining to interest in media usage as well as multiple questions focused on social, economic, and political perceptions. Extensive demographic questions are also included. Respondents were selected via a random sample, and responses were recorded on tablets.
3. Each group consisted of eight to ten participants; the groups were moderated by local research assistants in French and local languages. The focus groups shed light on perceptions of the media and current events.
4. It is important to remember that despite low literacy rates in the official language and local languages, there are also significant segments of the population that read and write Arabic, which was typically learned through Madrassa attendance as a child.
5. According to the UN, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have some of the lowest education rates in the world. Currently the mean average of years of schooling is 1.6 for in Burkina Faso, 2.0 in Niger, and 2.4 in Mali. These low education rates translate into low literacy rates. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics Sahelian countries have some of the highest illiteracy rates in the world. Among people fifteen years of age and over, six in ten or more are illiterate: Burkina Faso (59 percent) Mali (65 percent), Niger (69 percent).
6. This was the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA).
7. These were Ansar Dine and the "Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa" (MUJAO).