

ICTs, Social Media and Tendencies of Radicalization in the Sahel

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ABSTRACT

The African Sahel has become a stage for increasing violent conflict since 2009. It is probably no co-incidence that the upsurge of these conflicts went together with the increase in digital connectivity in the region. In this paper I explore the relationship between radicalization, conflict and access to ICTs and social media in the Sahel. First I sketch how the social landscape has changed due to the advancement of the 'digital highway'. We will see how the so-called hybrid organization, the democratization forces of the digital have influenced the formation of trans-national communities and through these influenced conflict dynamics. The second part of the paper explores the increase in violence and the potential role of the digital networks in the upsurge of this violence. Radicalization in different forms (ethnic, religious, national) is an important effect of the information flows that travel the digital networks and that seems to influence the increasing (ugly) violence.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Information Systems; • World Wide Web; • Web Applications; • Social Networks; • Applied Computing; • Law, social and behavioral sciences; • Anthropology; • Human-Centered Computing; • User characteristics; Collaborative and Social Computing;

KEYWORDS

Radicalization, Sahel, New ICTs, Conflict

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1 THE SAHEL TURMOIL AND THE APPEARANCE OF ICTS

The present work is the result of on-going research in the central and west Sahel (de Bruijn 2018, 2019 [1, 2]), mainly in Chad and Mali.

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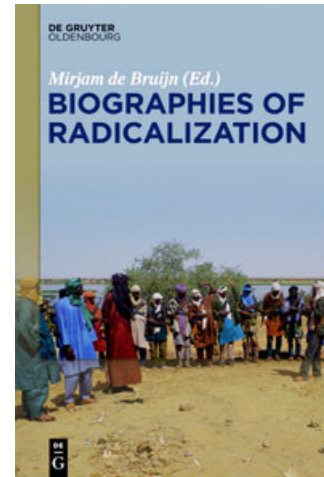


Figure 1: The term 'radicalization' immediately evokes images of extremism, Muslim fundamentalism, and violence, but we need to develop a different, broader understanding of radicalization [1, 2]

The turmoil in the Sahel has been analysed as a resource war, part of criminal networks, related to the effects of climate change, the absence of the State and hence space for criminal networks and Jihadi groups to take over (Gaye and Serigne 2018 [3], Raineri and Strazzari 2015 [4]). In these analyses so far, little attention is given to the role of the new connectivity that have become also in the Sahel, an important factor in social and political life. In this short article I will delve into the possible role of new ICTs (mobile telephony and social media) in socio-political changes that have at least exacerbated if not also been at the roots of the present-day turmoil. I will focus on the wherewithal (Jackson 2013 [5]) of one social and ethnic group: the Fulani in Central Mali that will illustrate the two points I want to make: 1. The further ethnicization as a form of radicalisation, enabled through ICTs, 2. The increasing violence as a consequence of information flows that also leads to radicalisation. I will only sketch tendencies, that are still part of on-going research (see www.nomadesahel.org).

2012 was the start of the war in Mali that was a consequence (a.o.) of the fall of Gadhafi in 2011. The Tuareg who were under Gadhafi came back to Northern Mali with arms and were one of the forces to relaunch the liberation war for the Tuareg, soon this war was hijacked by jihadi groups and gradually it became a chaotic turmoil where the absence of the State led to the emergence of militias, self-defence groups, the upsurge of local conflicts etc. (Lecocq e.a. 2013 [6]). The military approach of the international community in collaboration with the national armies has had no real effect on the

situation, instead violence has only increased and the area of turmoil has expanded to other Sahelian countries and recently also to the southern West African States like Ivory Coast and Ghana (Promediation 2020 [7]). Central Mali got involved as a 'battle ground' in 2015 when the Fulani organised under the banner of Hamma Koufa, a Muslim Fulani preacher, and started to claim their security in the region. As a consequence, a local Jihad became a reality (Sangaré 2016 [8], Jourde, Brossier and Cissé 2019 [9]).

The Sahel-Sahara has always been a region of mobility. The middle age trans-Saharan trade routes are today still important trading routes (often for criminal networks, like the International Jihadi networks). The region has been driven by mobility also through the lifestyles of the population who live of the whims of pastures for their animals and of the scarce rains for the growth of their millet crops. Mobility and travelling are part of these societies and communication, being informed is crucial. This may be one of the explanations for the quick acceptance of mobile telephony in the region. The first mobile telephony masts were planted around 2006, and it took another few years for the communication signals to reach also to the remote areas where the herdsman live in mobile camps, or where the itinerant farmers dwell during the rainy season (Keita *et al.* 2015 [10]). From 2000 to 2019 the coverage of mobile telephony rose from 0 to 115% in Mali (ITU statistics). Affordable smartphones were introduced through the Chinese markets, facilitating connectivity via mobile internet. From 2009 the use of mobile internet was on the rise also in the Sahelian countries. Sahelians who are connected to the internet often connect through Facebook using its light version that does hardly use bytes and is pre-installed in these phones. Illiterate nomads are on WhatsApp and use the audio function to send their messages.

2 EMANCIPATION OF THE NOMADS

The Fulani are hierarchically organised, as many other Sahelian societies. The nomads who herd the animals (goats and sheep, cattle and camels) are one social group. They belong to the 'free' social layers, like the elites (religious and political). The unfree are the slaves and the castes. Today slavery does no longer exist, but former slave groups still belong to a different (subordinate) social layer in the Fulani society. In some parts of Mali slavery still continues to be part of the hierarchical construction. These (former) slaves continue to depend on the elites (Pelckmans 2011 [11]). In this hierarchy the nomads were free, but dependent of the elites, who were the guardians of the pasture areas, and also the intermediaries between the nomads and first the colonial and now independent states. Corruption has entered these relationships. For instance, accessing the Innerdelta of the Niger, which is crucial pasture area for the dry season, was only possible by bribing these elites (in coalition with the state) who control these lands. Such exploitative relations were accepted in the existing hierarchies.

However, in the course of the 1990s nomads gradually entered the 'modern' world, through animals' trade relations/markets, sedentarization (also due to droughts of the 1980ies), and becoming part of the capitalist economy. This brought them in contact with urban life. They started to send their children to school, probably in some areas mainly Koranic schools. With the advancement of 'democracy' some of the nomads entered politics and became followers of

political parties that were not shared by their elites. We can depict this development as an emancipatory process. Some nomads turned into leaders who became aware of the exploitative situation they were in, and the role their elites were playing.

This emancipation of the nomads needs to be better understood, but it seems to be a crucial factor for the developments that we have seen over the past decade. It should also be noted that these urban and political relations that were new for the nomads were enhanced through the new modes to connect through mobile phones.

3 ETHNICIZATION AND ICTS: MOBILE COMMUNITIES

One of the consequences of 'easy' communication is that people will unite in new ways. If we consider most of the Sahelian societies as network societies, as a consequence of their mobility and the spread of families over geographical space (de Bruijn, van Dijk and Foeken 2001 [12]), then we can imagine that communication density may have an influence on the form of this family network. A study on Cameroonians who lived in South Africa, Europe and Cameroon shows these dynamics. In such family network the ties between family (in the large sense of the word) become stronger with the aid of communication. New ICTs lead to a constant flux of information between the families spread over the world, and it also makes communication (increasingly) affordable. They literally become the glue of society (Vertovec 2004 [13]). Hence international mobile communities that are based on family and ethnic linkages are formed (Nyamnjoh 2014 [14]). Such a process has also happened in the Sahel, where nomadic societies have used mobile communication to unite. The Fulani nomads in various parts of the Sahel do have family ties, that they sometimes link back to a shared history, and certainly to a shared language. Easier communication has made contact between these groups easier.

An important moment in the development of the turmoil in central Mali was the gathering of Fulani nomads from different parts of Mali, Burkina and Niger to discuss the insecurity in the region and develop a strategy for the future to avoid falling into civil war. They had been able to gather 1000 nomads, inform the authorities (national and international) and organise a central prayer (*duaa*) during which they also opened the discussion about their position in the region and the insecurities they faced. They felt abandoned by their elites, who they considered as being part of the evil they were living through, and they felt abandoned by the State who had allowed their marginalisation for decades (in fact since independence). During this meeting they demanded for help. Without the mobile telephone this would not have happened. The meeting showed the unity of the Fulani nomads in the Sahel. And some of these nomads, who acted as their leaders had a clear discourse on their marginalisation (in the film 'Hopeless' this process is followed and the meeting filmed: <https://voice4thought.org/watch-online-hopeless-biographies-of-radicalization/>).

The outcome of the meeting was a big disappointment for the nomads, because they did not receive any protection, nor any other assistance of the (inter)national community. But the meeting did give them a sense of unity and a common enemy in fact. It was for some a sign that they had to rely on themselves and they turned



Figure 2: Stills from the online available film ‘Hopeless’ referred to in the text

their eyes to the protection of the, by then well implanted, Jihadi groups in the region (Sangaré 2019 [15]).

4 INFORMATION FLOWS AND RADICALIZATION

Then, 2015, was already the period of good connectivity in the region, and smartphones were part of the equipment of many youth of the nomads. The preaches of one of the main figures in the Fulani-jihadization, Hamma Koufa, were circulating in the phones. His preaches were the counter discourse: he did reveal the nomad’s marginal position vis-à-vis the Modern State (including their elites), and the devastating influence of the French (international community) and he would celebrate the Fulbe nomads unity and their strong history in relation to the Sahelian Jihads in the 19th century. He referred to the Diina, the Maacina empire that was a Muslim empire build on a Jihad. The nostalgia to go back to such position of hegemony for the Fulbe resonated with the present-day marginalisation that they feel. Furthermore, the Jihad propaganda from Al Qaida and other internationally based groups would also circulate in these phones (Galy Cissé 2019 [16]). Such messages must have influenced choices of the youth to join the self-defence groups that turned into Jihad groups and followers of Hamma Koufa.

From 2017 violence in Central Mali was really on the rise (Human Rights Watch 2020 [17]). The main victims were Dogon and Fulani who have a shared history in the region. Their relationship can be summarised as the relation between farmers and herders, and tensions between these livelihoods had been rising for decades, also due to climate change. These old conflicts flared up under the new

opposition that was created with the arrival of the Jihadi groups. The Malian army was not neutral in this conflict. On social media the various groups have united in ethnically led platforms where they post the most horrific photos and the most terrible accusations from one to the other. These messages do raise the ethnic awareness that seems to be deliberately fed by hate speech. It exacerbates the oppositions between these groups and incites to violence.¹ Violence that easily becomes mortal in a region where weapons are easily available, and the local authorities fail to protect the population. As a consequence, many people flee central Mali and seek refuge in urban areas, or in southern regions, some cross the border to Burkina Faso. The number of deaths in such ethnic clashes is rising every day.

5 CONCLUSION

Communication can be a weapon in war, as it is power (Castells 2009 [18]). Those who control the communication channels do have the power. With the advancement of new ICTs power in the social networks were assumed to become more democratic. These new ICTs would give power to people without a voice. The story we have related in this article does follow this logic. Indeed, access to easier communication makes the organisation of horizontal networks, such as the nomadic Fulani, easier. The relations that people forge through these new ICTs are their own choice. It has led to the existence of stronger unity between ethnic groups transcending national borders. The power of such networks then also changes, and may change the political landscape. In central Mali this is what has happened.

The power of the network is next to communication between people, also based in the information that flows in the network and is received and interpreted (Gleick 2011 [19]). Information flows in highly opposite war areas however can become a violent arm. It is not the first time that communication has been the core in the occurrence of extreme violence. The Rwanda and Sierra Leone examples have become common knowledge and a warning for future possible developments in war regions.

These two ‘effects’ of ICTs on the turmoil in the Sahel can be summarised as influencing people in their choices in war. As such they have to adopt the ideas of one of the sides in the conflict and when they internalise these they radicalise. Such radicalisation can be ethnic, social, political or religious. It may be a necessity for survival (de Bruijn (ed.) 2019 [1, 2]).

It is time that the factor communication and the role of new ICTs will be taken into account for the understanding of the Sahel turmoil and probably instead of fighting the conflicts militarily we should start to develop a strategy to fight through communication.

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¹With Mamadou Togola we are working on an analysis of these processes on various social media. They are part of the PhD project of M. Togola that he will fulfill at Leiden University.

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Mirjam de Bruijn is professor in African Studies at Leiden University, The Netherlands. She is based at the History Institute and at the African Studies Centre. Her research is interdisciplinary at the crossroads of Anthropology, communication studies, conflict studies and History. Since 2006 she follows the advancement of new Information and Communication Technologies in Africa and how this has transformed the socio-political landscape. Another focus of her work is crisis and conflict. She is director of the foundation Voice4Thought that combines academic research with artistic practices to create societal impact. To do so a form of citizen science and co-creation of knowledge has been developed. Mirjam received various grants and prizes. She has published widely.