

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN MALI AND ITS RELATION TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM: A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

By Elise Vermeersch, Julie Coleman, Méryl Demuynck and Elena Dal Santo

INTRODUCTION

While the influence of social media on the spread of violent extremist narratives and online radicalisation processes has recently become a focal point of research in the Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) field, most of the studies thus far have focused on Western countries and have often been aimed at analysing phenomena such as homegrown and lone wolf terrorism,¹ as well as online radicalisation of foreign terrorist fighters.² Far less evidence-based research has explored the influence of social media on terrorism in Africa³ and even less regarding Mali in particular.

To address this gap, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) have drawn upon survey data from youth participants in their joint project “Mali (Dis-) Engagement and Re-Integration related to Terrorism” (MERIT). One objective of the project is to enhance youth empowerment and engagement in Mali in order to prevent the spread of violent extremism amongst young people. As part of the monitoring and evaluation of MERIT, the youth participants were asked about their opinions on social media in general, as well as about their personal use of social media and their perceptions of the use of social media by violent extremists, in particular. Their responses inform this paper’s analysis of the implications of social media use vis-à-vis violent extremism in Mali.

Although traditional forms of media remain highly relevant across Africa, mostly notably television and radio channels (particularly given their accessibility to illiterate populations), online forms of media, including social media, are gaining in significance.⁴ There has been an impressive rise in the use of mobile phones in the last two decades across the African continent: 10 million people had a subscription in 2000 compared to 647 million in 2011.⁵ This number has undoubtedly increased in the subsequent years. In Mali, there are more than 97.1 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants,⁶ with 91% mobile penetration rate.⁷ As of January 2019, there were 12.48 million unique internet users in Mali, equivalent to 64% of the population.⁸ Mali has a reported 1.6 million social media users, virtually all of whom (1.5 million) access social media via their mobile phones.⁹ Notably, however, this number does not include users of social messaging apps, including WhatsApp, which is the most popularly used messaging app in Mali, as in most West African countries.¹⁰

The affordability of mobile services has given rise to a vast number of changes, including economic development and increased political engagement.¹¹ However, it also facilitates the easy and widespread dissemination of extremist beliefs and recruitment propaganda by violent extremist groups. Social media (e.g. Facebook) and social messaging (e.g. WhatsApp) platforms provide a stage on which such groups can communicate with their audience across wide geographic ranges in a manner that can be easily and almost instantly shared with an even broader network of potential sympathisers or supporters. Extremist actors use these platforms to reinforce their ideological narratives, to connect to potential recruits, to publicise their actions (or to discredit their opponents), and to fundraise.¹²

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- 1 See. Joel Brynielsson, et al., “Harvesting and analysis of weak signals for detecting lone wolf terrorists,” *Security Informatics*, vol. 2, no 1, 2013: 11. See also: Ahmad Shehabat, Teodor Mitew, and Yahia Alzoubi, “Encrypted Jihad: Investigating the role of Telegram App in lone wolf attacks in the West,” *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 10, no 3, 2017: 27-53.
 - 2 See. Klausen, Jytte, “Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38(1), 2015: 1-22. See also: Von Behr, Ines, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, Luke Gribbon, “Radicalisation in the digital era. The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism,” RAND Europe, 2018, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.pdf
 - 3 See Ogbondah C.W., Agbese P.O. “Terrorists and Social Media Messages: A Critical Analysis of Boko Haram’s Messages and Messaging Techniques”, in: Mutsavairo B. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Media and Communication Research in Africa*, 2018, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham; see also Manuel R. Torres-Soriano (2016) “The Caliphate Is Not a Tweet Away: The Social Media Experience of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39:11, 968-981.
 - 4 See, e.g. Free Press Unlimited, “Étude quantitative et qualitative des médias au Mali et de leur impact sur le processus de paix,” (2017), at https://www.freepressunlimited.org/sites/freepressunlimited.org/files/mali_media_survey_2017.pdf
 - 5 Kate Cox, et al., “Social media in Africa: a double-edged sword for security and development,” UNDP Research Report, November 4, 2018: 8.
 - 6 ITU Country Data, available at: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/LDCs/Documents/2017/Country%20Profiles/Country%20Profile_Mali.pdf
 - 7 “Mali: WhatsApp, arme de (contre)propagande jihadiste au Sahel,” *Nouvel Obs*, November 5, 2019, <https://o.nouvelobs.com/high-tech/20191105.AFP8033/mali-whatsapp-arme-de-contre-propagande-jihadiste-au-sahel.html#modal-msg>
 - 8 DataReportal, We are Social, “Digital 2019: Mali,” 2019, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-mali>
 - 9 DataReportal, We are Social, “Digital 2019: Mali,” 2019, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-mali>
 - 10 DataReportal, We are Social, “Digital 2019: Mali,” 2019, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-mali>
 - 11 Kate Cox, et al., “Social media in Africa: a double-edged sword for security and development,” UNDP Research Report, November 4, 2018: 8.
 - 12 Kate Cox, et al., “Social media in Africa: a double-edged sword for security and development,” UNDP Research Report, November 4, 2018: 9-10.

Although the use of social media specifically by violent extremists in Mali remains under-studied, both observations and surveys conducted by ICCT and UNICRI confirm that radicalisation and recruitment by extremist groups is also taking place through social media and messaging platforms throughout the country. For instance, Katiba Macina's leader, Amadou Koufa, has become known for using channels such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram to call for members of the Peul (Fulani) community to rise up against the Malian Armed Forces (known as FAMA), the G5 Sahel countries, and France's Barkhane forces.¹³ Ansar Dine, now part of *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM), has adopted social media and messaging technologies to advance their messages. Using Telegram, the group has pushed a narrative of framing itself as the 'good guys', by fighting off foreign oppression, including through releasing photographs such as ones of suicide bombers who carried out an attack on the Timbuktu Airport in 2018.¹⁴

Thus, despite a lack of dedicated studies regarding the specific situation in the country, it is clear that the internet, and social media and social messaging in particular, are playing an active role in the process of radicalisation and engagement in violent extremism, including "through the dissemination of information and propaganda, as well as [through] reinforcing the identification and engagement of a (self)-selected audience that is interested in radical and violent messages."¹⁵ It is likely that in Mali, as in other regions, social media and social messaging platforms are not causes per se of violent extremism, but are rather facilitators of it.

Given the significance of the role of social media in garnering and maintaining support for violent extremist groups elsewhere, most notably by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS), the ability of groups in Mali to do the same should not be underestimated, particularly given the prevalent use of mobile phones, the internet, and increasingly, social media. This report thus aims to provide new insights on the role of social media and messaging in either increasing support for or preventing and countering violent extremism in Mali. The paper will discuss the methodology used for the data collection, the demographic information of the respondents, findings related to social media use by youth in Mali, youth attitudes towards the trustworthiness of information on social media, their perceptions of the use of social media by violent extremists, and the potential to use social media to counter violent extremism.

Methodology

This report draws on existing data, as well as on primary data collected from youth leaders through surveys conducted by UNICRI and ICCT during a series of workshops organised within the framework of the MERIT project.¹⁶ In particular, a first questionnaire on their use of social media, as well as on their impressions of the use of social media by violent extremist groups was completed by 27 youth participants during an advanced media training workshop in August 2019; a second questionnaire was completed by 21 youth participants during a workshop on counter and alternative narratives¹⁷ to violence in October 2019; and a third questionnaire was completed by 29 youth participants during an advanced workshop on counter narratives to violence in December 2019.

The surveys were completed before the youth received the respective trainings, in order to avoid bias generated by their participation. One questionnaire was completed after the training on advanced media literacy, in August 2019, to gauge information learned during the training. The questionnaires included three types of questions: open questions, closed questions, and ranking questions, for which respondents had to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with several statements using a Likert scale (1-Strongly Disagree; 2-Disagree; 3-Neutral; 4-Agree; 5- Strongly agree). To analyse the latter, an average score was calculated for each question.

13 On 29 September 2018, Koufa released a video through the encrypted messaging app, Telegram. <https://jihadology.net/2018/11/08/new-video-message-from-jamaat-nu%E1%B9%A3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimin-go-forth-whether-light-or-heavy-2/> ; Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS), "Confronting Central Mali's Extremist Threat," (2019), <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/confronting-central-malis-extremist-threat/>

14 Michèle Bos and Jan Melissen, "Rebel Diplomacy and Digital Communication: Public Diplomacy in the Sahel," *International Affairs* 95:6 (2019), 1341.

15 UNESCO, "Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research," 2017: 43.

16 The "Mali (Dis-) Engagement and (Re-) Integration related to Terrorism" (MERIT) project, implemented by ICCT and UNICRI, and funded by the Royal Danish Embassy in Bamako, seeks to improve rehabilitation and reintegration of Malian VEOs in and after prison, as well as to prevent violent extremism outside the prison context among youths, through promoting alternatives to violence. For further information see: <https://icct.nl/project/countering-violent-extremism-in-mali/> ; http://www.unicri.it/topics/counter_terrorism/reintegration_mali/

17 Hereafter, the authors use "counter narrative" to cover what could be considered either a counter or alternative narrative.

Socio-demographic data

The table below provides a socio-demographic overview of the youth who participated in the surveys, including gender, age, ethnic group, residence, level of education and occupation.

		Survey 1 (August 2019) n (%)		Survey 2 (October 2019) n (%)		Survey 3 (December 2019) n (%)		Total n (%)	
Gender (n=77)	Male	21	(77.8)	13	(61.9)	13	(44.8)	47	(61.0)
	Female	6	(22.2)	5	(23.8)	6	(20.7)	17	(22.1)
	Not specified	0	(0.0)	3	(14.3)	10	(34.5)	13	(16.9)
Age (years) (n=76)	≤ 25	7	(25.9)	6	(30.0)	10	(34.5)	23	(30.3)
	25-30	14	(51.9)	9	(45.0)	12	(41.4)	35	(46.1)
	>30	6	(22.2)	5	(25.0)	7	(24.1)	18	(23.7)
Ethnicity (n=74)	Bambara	3	(12.0)	1	(4.8)	3	(10.7)	7	(9.5)
	Bobo	1	(4.0)	0	(0.0)	0	(0.0)	1	(1.4)
	Bozo	2	(8.0)	1	(4.8)	1	(3.6)	4	(5.4)
	Dogon	1	(4.0)	1	(4.8)	1	(3.6)	3	(4.1)
	Kassongué	1	(4.0)	1	(4.8)	1	(3.6)	3	(4.1)
	Minianka	1	(4.0)	1	(4.8)	2	(7.1)	4	(5.4)
	Mossi	2	(8.0)	2	(9.5)	2	(7.1)	6	(8.1)
	Peul	4	(16.0)	3	(14.3)	1	(3.6)	8	(10.8)
	Sénoufo	3	(12.0)	2	(9.5)	2	(7.1)	7	(9.5)
	Sonhaï	5	(20.0)	5	(23.8)	8	(28.6)	18	(24.3)
	Soninké	1	(4.0)	0	(0.0)	3	(10.7)	4	(5.4)
	Touareg	1	(4.0)	1	(4.8)	1	(3.6)	3	(4.1)
	Others	0	(0.0)	3	(14.3)	3	(10.7)	6	(8.1)
Residence (n=75)	Bamako	6	(24.0)	5	(23.8)	10	(34.5)	21	(28.0)
	Gao	1	(4.0)	1	(4.8)	1	(3.4)	3	(4.0)
	Kayes	2	(8.0)	2	(9.5)	2	(6.9)	6	(8.0)
	Mopti	6	(24.0)	6	(28.6)	7	(24.1)	19	(25.3)
	Segou	4	(16.0)	2	(9.5)	4	(13.8)	10	(13.3)
	Sikasso	3	(12.0)	2	(9.5)	1	(3.4)	6	(8.0)
	Tombouctou	3	(12.0)	3	(14.3)	4	(13.8)	10	(13.3)
Education (n=77)	High school	7	(25.9)	5	(23.8)	8	(27.6)	20	(26.0)
	Undergraduate	8	(29.6)	8	(38.1)	12	(41.4)	28	(36.4)
	Postgraduate	12	(44.4)	8	(38.1)	9	(31.0)	29	(37.7)
Occupation (n=77)	Student	4	(14.8)	2	(9.5)	3	(10.3)	9	(11.7)
	Intern	1	(3.7)	0	(0.0)	1	(3.4)	2	(2.6)
	Employed	18	(66.7)	18	(85.7)	21	(72.4)	57	(74.0)
	Unemployed	4	(14.8)	1	(4.8)	4	(13.8)	9	(11.7)

* Survey 1, conducted in August 2019, comprises both a pre-training and a post-training questionnaire.

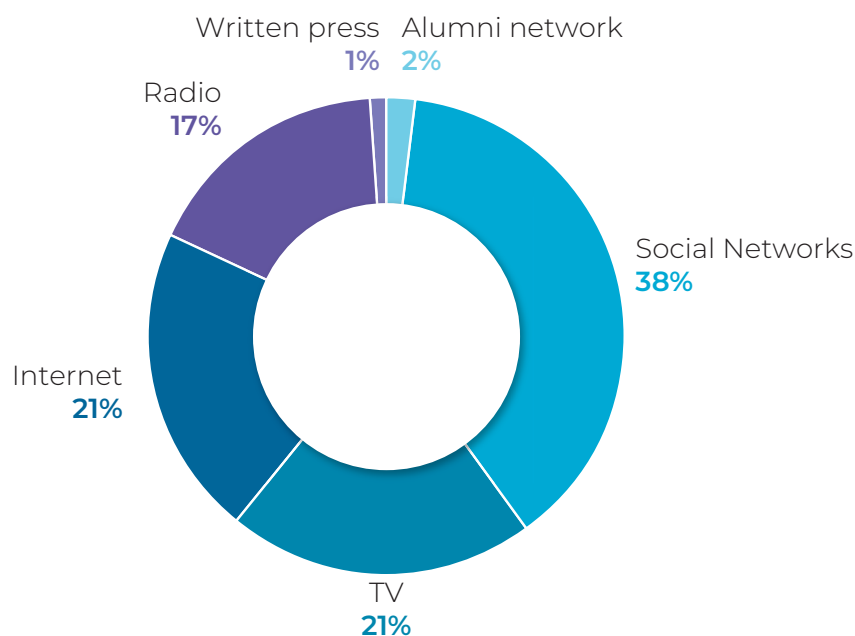
The youth engaged with the MERIT project, and thus those who took part in the surveys, were selected on the basis of their engagement with several NGOs in Mali as youth leaders.¹⁸ Although these youth are from geographically diverse regions, diverse ethnic groups, and significant efforts were made to include women in the sample, their demographic profile clearly indicates that they are not necessarily representative of the average Malian young person in several regards that may have implications for this report. This includes the fact that they possess a higher level of education, are generally of higher socio-economic status, and may possess other qualities that make them more resilient than average to radicalisation towards violent extremism. However, their survey responses may also shed some much-needed light on perceptions of violent extremist groups and their use of social media in Mali that have widespread implications for all Malian youth.¹⁹

YOUTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA: A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

With the rise of mobile phone use and widespread internet coverage, especially mobile internet, youth in Mali are active users of social media platforms. Almost all the youth respondents surveyed as part of the MERIT project use social media on a daily basis, favouring it over traditional forms of media, seemingly regardless of whether they view social media as trustworthy or not. Expanding to their wider peer group, the young people surveyed acknowledged the use of social media by extremist groups in the country and expressed concern that Malian youth as a whole lack sufficient tools and competences to counter the propaganda being espoused by extremist actors. This section lays out the use of (social) media by youth, as well as their perceptions of its trustworthiness and its use by violent extremists. The subsequent section addresses the vulnerabilities to propaganda observed amongst youth, and suggests steps that can be taken in order to prevent radicalisation.

Types of media used by youth and topics of interest

> GRAPH 1 WHAT TYPES OF MEDIA DO YOU USE?



¹⁸ Conseil National de la Jeunesse (CNDJ), International Alert, SNV-Oxfam-ICCO, and Think Peace Sahel.

¹⁹ Throughout this report, we have aimed to clarify when the survey results are likely to be appropriately extrapolated to the broader youth category in Mali, and when this is likely to be inappropriate/unrepresentative.

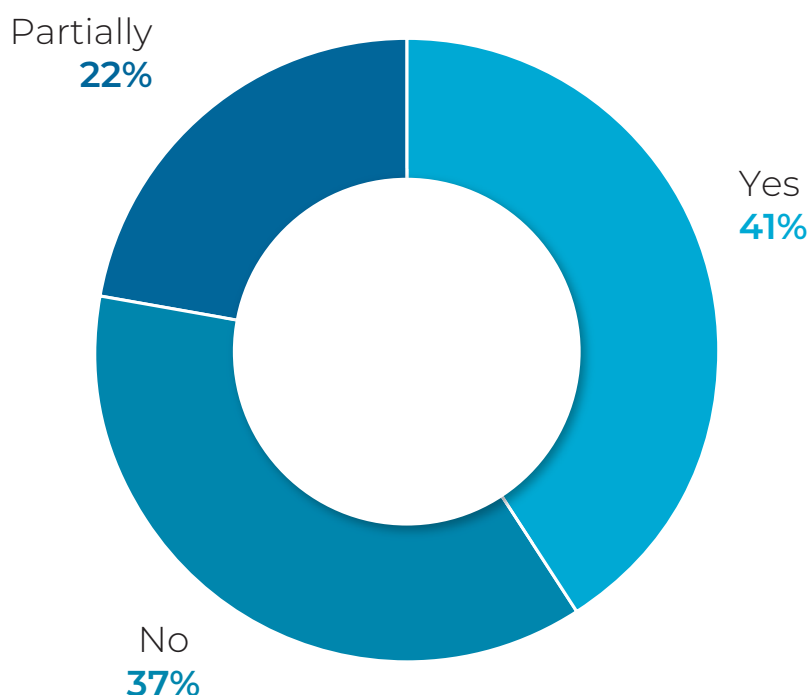
According to the responses collected (27), Malian youth use several different types of both traditional and modern media. Among the social networks, Facebook (11) and WhatsApp (6) were identified specifically as the most used platforms, which is consistent with global usage, which has Facebook as the most widely used social media platform and WhatsApp as the most widely used social messaging platform.²⁰ It is possible that the youth surveyed have a stronger than average preference for new forms of media, such as the internet or social media, but it is clear that, overall, social networks play an important role in the daily life of young people in Mali as a means of communication and information.

Notably, amongst the respondents, there was no significant difference observed in the prevalence of access to the internet within the different geographical areas. Thus, individuals from conflict-prone areas in northern or central Mali appear to have equal accessibility to the internet as those from more stable regions, including southern Mali.

Almost all of the respondents use social networks every day – ranging from “a couple of times a day” to “all day” – although their usage might depend on the Internet connection. Only one youth mentioned using social networks five times per week. However, despite their significant and frequent use of social networks, the youth reported that they do not necessarily trust these networks. Only 41% of the respondents indicated that they trust social networks, whereas the remaining 59% either do not trust social networks at all or only partially.

Youth's trust towards different sources of information

> GRAPH 2 DO YOU TRUST THE SOCIAL NETWORKS?



For those who do find social networks trustworthy, the perception is that they contribute to building peace, provide a good setting for awareness-raising campaigns, are useful for the sharing and dissemination of information, official messages and news, and allow for the development of individual knowledge and competences. Few respondents (3) specified that they trust social media because they can verify the truthfulness of the information. For the 37% of respondents who do not trust social networks, reasons given for mistrust were related to uncertainty regarding the sources of information: news on social networks needs to be analysed first, social media is not trustworthy because anybody can produce or share information on these platforms, which jeopardizes the level of professionalism and favours the publication of sensationalised information and rumours. In addition, two respondents mentioned that social media is not secure and confi-

²⁰ DataReportal, We are Social, “Digital 2019: Mali,” 2019, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-mali>

dentiality is not always guaranteed. Finally, 22% declared limited trust towards social media, noting that the information present can be either true or false, and while one respondent mentioned that it is a safe way to inform and be informed, another respondent mentioned that it is also a way to radicalise.

Despite the ambiguous or negative feelings towards social media, almost all the participants indicated that they nonetheless use social media on at least a daily basis, if not more often. This can potentially be explained by the response of one individual who stressed that, despite mistrust toward these tools, people are obliged to work with social media to communicate with the world, with friends and with family. Moreover, the young people surveyed highlighted several aspects of social media that they perceive to be positive, including that it is widely accessible and allows for real time, rapid spread of information and news. These factors are also exemplary of what renders social media very efficient for the spread of (violent extremist) propaganda.

It is at least possible that the level of trust amongst the respondents (with only 41% trusting social networks) is lower than average for Malian youth, due to their higher than average level of education, which may result in them being more critical of news sources, as well as being more able to access news and information from a broader range of both domestic and international sources in different languages. Thus, the average Malian youth may be more trusting of information they access through social networks than these results show, which further underscores the need to better understand how violent extremist groups in Mali are utilising social networks to further their reach, and thus how social networks can be used to stop it. Moreover, regardless of the level of trust in the social networks, this does not seem to stop Malian youth from actually using these networks, meaning that they remain within the reach of extremist propaganda despite their awareness of the possibility that information disseminated through social networks may not be trustworthy.

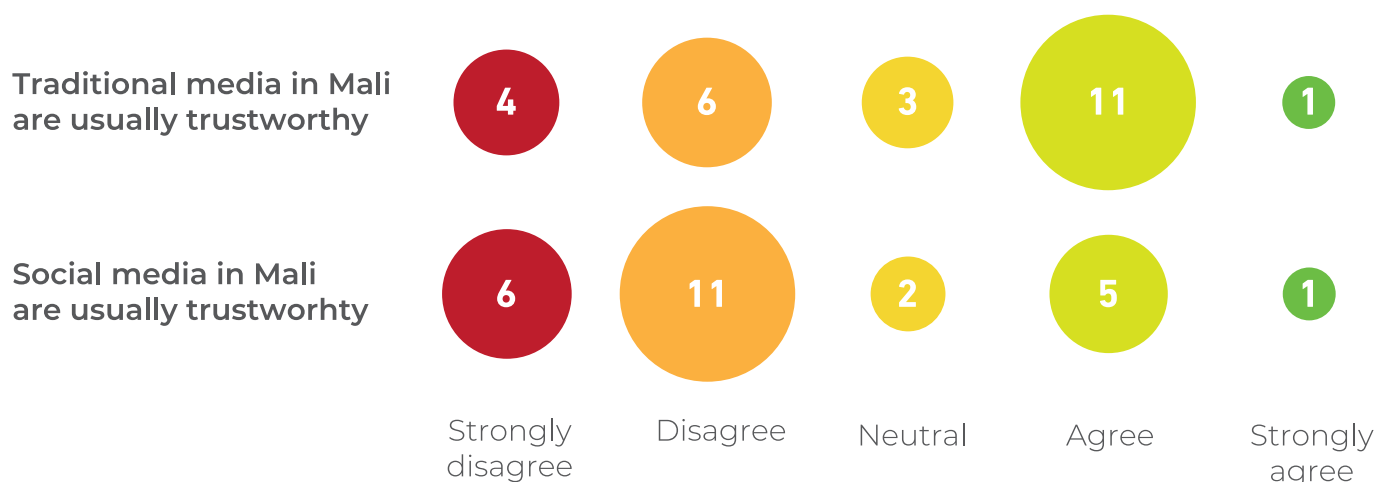
When asked about the types of messages the youth usually share, post, or comment on, respondents referred to news (19), opinions (10), and videos and photos (1), covering a wide array of topics: violence towards women, social cohesion, attacks in the region, peace, safety, the environment, politics, economics, science, community development, and education.²¹ From existing reports on the use of social networks by violent extremists in Mali, it is understood that these actors share information on similar topics, seeking to exacerbate frustration with the political class, safety, economic opportunities, and inter-ethnic attacks or tension, in order to increase support for their beliefs.²²

When asked about their agreement with the statement “The source of a message is not important,” the respondents tended to disagree (1.92) and also stressed the importance of knowing specifically why someone posts a message (4.12). They were confident to a certain extent in knowing how to identify correct information in online content (3.43), and they were quite confident in making a distinction between facts and opinions (3.92) but they did not have a strong opinion on the ease of distinguishing between fake news and truth (3.13). They mostly disagree that news and propaganda are the same (1.96). A majority of youth respondents agree that sharing a message means the person agrees with its content (3.84). They do however disagree that if a post has many likes, it is likely to be true (1.76). Finally, they report that if a friend shares a post, it does not mean they will share it as well (2.04).

21 Not classified by order of importance

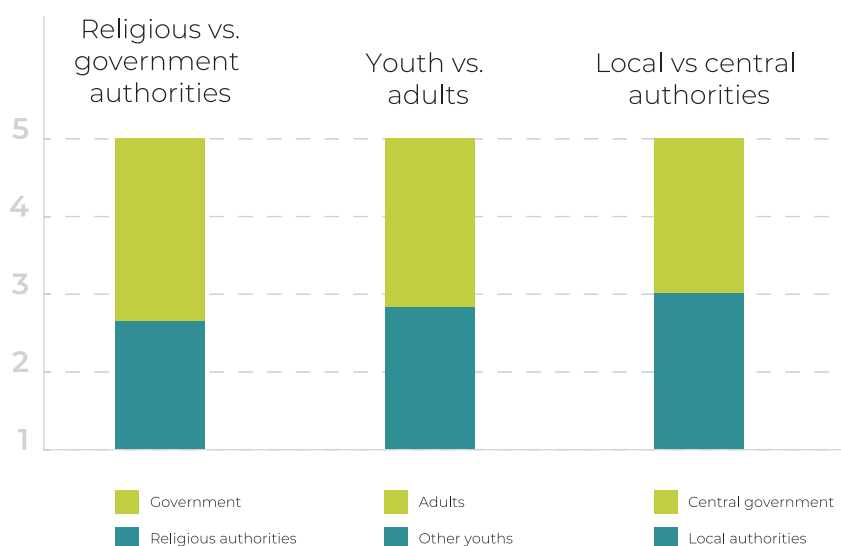
22 See, e.g. Kate Cox, et al., “Social media in Africa: a double-edged sword for security and development,” UNDP Research Report, November 4, 2018; See also, e.g. Michèle Bos and Jan Melissen, “Rebel Diplomacy and Digital Communication: Public Diplomacy in the Sahel,” *International Affairs* 95:6 (2019).

> GRAPH 3 MEDIA TRUST



The level of trust that respondents place in the news is generally low and varies just slightly depending on the tools and platforms. Youth consider traditional media to be slightly more trustworthy than social media and are inclined to trust information received from newspapers (2.76) and family (2.64) slightly more compared to information received through social media (2.00) and friends (2.00). The fact that Malian youth seem to trust social media almost as much as traditional media underscores the need to ensure that they are equipped with vital media literacy skills (discussed in a later section) in order to better ensure that they do not fall under the appeal of violent extremism online and can also more effectively prevent the same for their peer group.

> GRAPH 4 LEVEL OF TRUST DEPENDING OF THE SOURCE OF INFORMATION

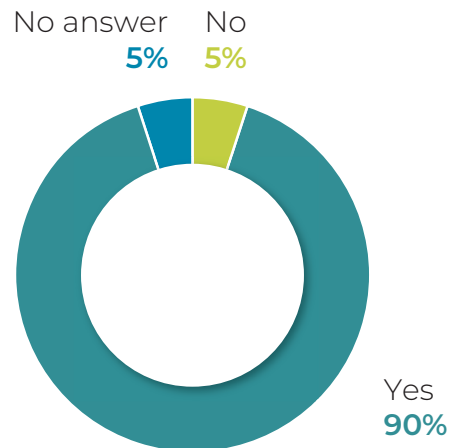


Data collected seems to indicate a certain mistrust vis-à-vis the information, no matter the media nor the source. Despite the limited size and sociodemographic characteristics of the survey sample and although the youth surveyed may not be as vulnerable to radicalisation and violent extremism as an average Malian youth, their understanding of the threat of violent extremism is nevertheless illustrative, particularly given their role as youth leaders. Thus, what is perhaps far more revealing in terms of the responses given is the youth perceptions of the use of social networks by violent extremist groups in Mali.

Youth's perceptions of violent extremist online propaganda

Notably, when asked if terrorist propaganda in Mali was effective in attracting Malian youth, only one respondent said no, while 19 responded affirmatively.

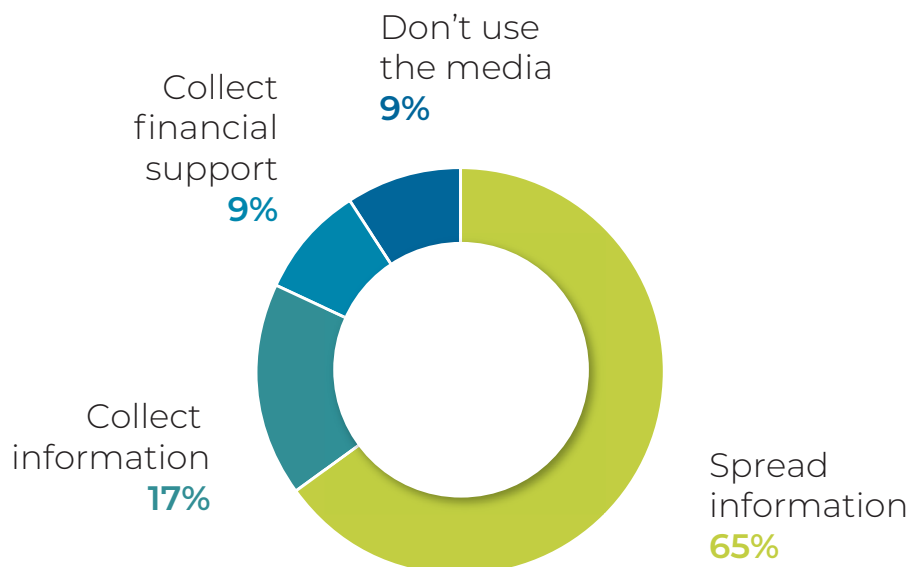
> GRAPH 5 IS THE PROPAGANDA USED BY TERRORIST GROUPS IN MALI EFFECTIVE IN ATTRACTING YOUTH?



A significant majority of the youth (85%) believe that terrorist groups in Mali are using social media. According to them, the main objectives for terrorist groups are to spread information and attract attention and support (65%). Some respondents also believe that terrorist groups used media to collect information on the state and population (17%), or to gain financial support (9%). Few respondents (9%) think that terrorist groups do not use social media.

“Sermons that were once broadcast on the radio and distributed by audio cassette are now transmitted via WhatsApp.”²³

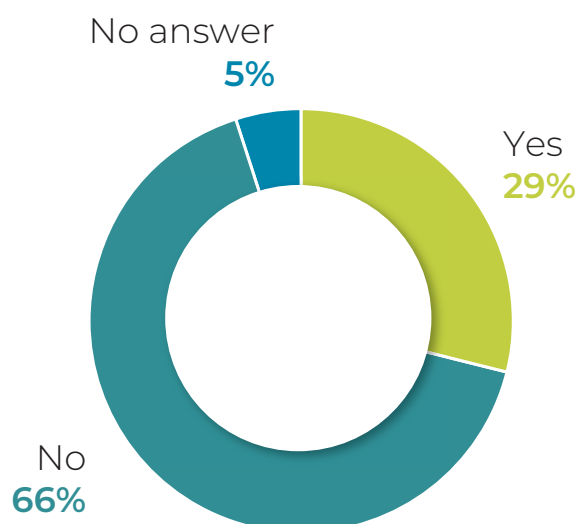
> GRAPH 6 WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR TERRORIST GROUPS TO USE MEDIA?



23 The Arab Weekly, “WhatsApp is jihadists’ recruitment tool”, November 9, 2019, <https://thearabweekly.com/whatsapp-jihadists-recruitment-tool>

According to the youth respondents, terrorist groups mainly use Facebook (33%), followed by WhatsApp (21%), Twitter (14%), YouTube (12%), the radio (10%) and Instagram (8%). Corresponding to respondents' recognition that terrorist groups are utilising social media in Mali to effectively recruit youth, a large majority of respondents (66%) consider Malian youth as not having enough competences and tools to counter terrorists' propaganda.

> **GRAPH 7 DO YOU THINK THAT MALIAN YOUTH POSSESS ENOUGH COMPETENCES AND TOOLS TO COUNTER TERRORIST PROPAGANDA?**



This data highlights the need for continued efforts to enhance youth's media literacy and their critical thinking skills, as well as to address drivers of radicalisation in Mali, which can include factors such as frustrations with the state, lack of economic opportunities, or ideological motivators.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO COUNTER OR PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM

According to the data collected from the youth respondents, social media can play a crucial role in both fueling and reducing violence. The youth surveyed agree that media can contribute to violence in Mali (4.28) and that many social media posts shared online contribute to inciting hatred (4.16). On the other hand, they have also recognised that social media can play a positive role in the de-escalation of debates (4.24).

The Effectiveness and Risks of Counter Narratives

Counter narratives are one method that has been utilised by numerous actors in recent years, in an effort to reduce vulnerability to online radicalisation and engagement in violent extremism. This approach has received considerable criticism, especially with respect to initiatives set up by the American or various European governments.²⁴ While scepticism of the counter narrative approach remains, some recent research does suggest that the strategy could be effective in terms of preventing violent extremism, especially if the counter narratives are "authentic and reflect youth perceptions of self and others, especially in terms of injustice, felt experiences of discrimination, corruption and abuse by security forces."²⁵ Counter narrative campaigns promoted by institutional actors may encounter resistance and mistrust and, in certain cases, might exacerbate resentment on behalf of the intended recipients. However, organic, comprehensive and multi-sectoral initiatives led by trustworthy actors may have an effective impact in terms of preventing and countering violent extremism.

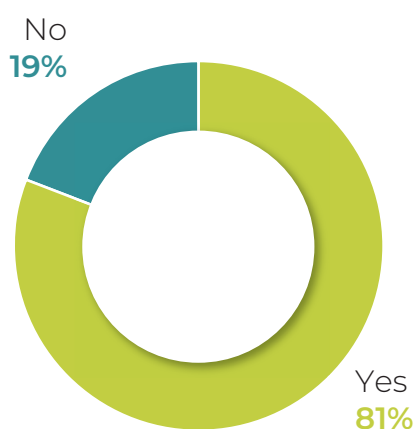
24 UNESCO, "Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research," 2017: 36.

25 UNESCO, "Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research," 2017: 40.

In the context of the MERIT survey, all youth respondents (19) believe that their community needs counter narratives against armed groups' narratives, with all but one considering that counter narratives are an efficient means to counter armed groups' narratives. The survey responses clearly demonstrate a desire from the demand-side for the utilisation of counter narratives, but there is also a clear lack of experience with creating and/or utilising such messaging. When asked whether they had ever replied to a message of a violent extremist group (on or offline), all except one of the youth respondents mentioned they had not. Thus, youth in Mali may benefit from support regarding counter narratives, including how to avoid efforts that would be counter-productive or could be easily undermined.

Youth engaging in communicating counter narratives may also be placing themselves at risk of response or retaliation from violent extremist groups. Most of the youth respondents recognised multiple risks associated with disseminating counter narratives to extremist propaganda. Those risks range from a lack of understanding and misinterpretation, psychological or physical violence, intimidation, insults and serious verbal abuse, stigmatisation (based on religion or ethnicity), or hatred from relatives and community members, amongst others. Some might also assume that the author is being paid by another actor to spread such messages, resulting in a lack of trust in both the message and the author. Most seriously, disseminators of counter narrative messages may become targets or enemies for extremist groups, with inherent associated risks (repression, aggression, being kidnapped or killed).

> **GRAPH 8** ARE THERE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH DISSEMINATING COUNTER NARRATIVES?



While risks are considered to be high, 70% of the youth respondents believe that they can be mitigated in several ways, including by: being prepared, seeking information before formulating a counter narrative, and properly targeting the recipient(s) of the message(s). They emphasized the need to be careful, discreet and patient, to focus on peace, tolerance and cohesion, and to have a clear message that does not generate confusion. They also underlined the importance of raising awareness and increasing the knowledge of the population, as well as training more young people on the formulation of counter discourses.

The Utility of Media Literacy

Given the lack of empirical studies demonstrating the effectiveness of counter narratives, many efforts have been redirected towards media literacy, which is more widely regarded as “a long-term comprehensive preventive strategy for reducing the appeal of violent radicalization.”²⁶ The overall objective of this approach, initially developed to identify misinformation in advertising,²⁷ is to improve critical thinking and understanding of the media. This includes inter alia developing the ability to detect inaccurate reporting, to distinguish facts from opinions expressed in the media, to recognise propaganda and to resist all forms of indoctrination.

Media literacy initiatives, through the emphasis on critical thinking, political engagement and pluralism, are increasingly being recognised as effective in reducing the demand for violent extremist content on social media, which is a “dominant space of such exposure,” especially for young people.²⁸ Media literacy cannot and

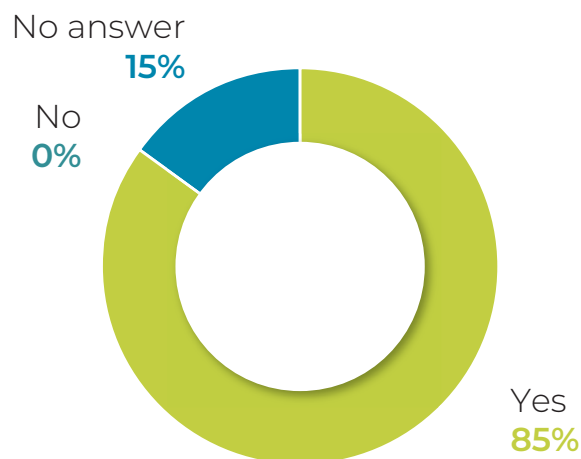
26 UNESCO, “Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research,” 2017: 37.

27 UNESCO, “Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research,” 2017: 37.

28 UNESCO, “Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research,” 2017: 39.

does not seek to eliminate the propaganda being put forward on social media outlets by violent extremists, but it can empower young people to expose fake news, to promote fact checking, and to otherwise debunk the narratives put forward by extremists.

> **GRAPH 9** HAVE YOUR ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE MEDIA, INCLUDING THE WAY YOU ENGAGE WITH OR IN THE MEDIA, CHANGED AS A RESULT OF THE MEDIA LITERACY TRAINING?



The vast majority (85%) of the youths surveyed, following a media literacy workshop conducted in August 2019, indicated that their attitudes towards the media had changed as a result of this training. As reflected in some of the participants' answers, one of the reasons behind this shift in attitudes might be related to an increased awareness regarding the role that the media can play in the dissemination of extremist discourse and ideas.

“Yes, of course, I used to see the media as a second priority in solving the problem of violent extremism, but today I understood that they play a big role.”

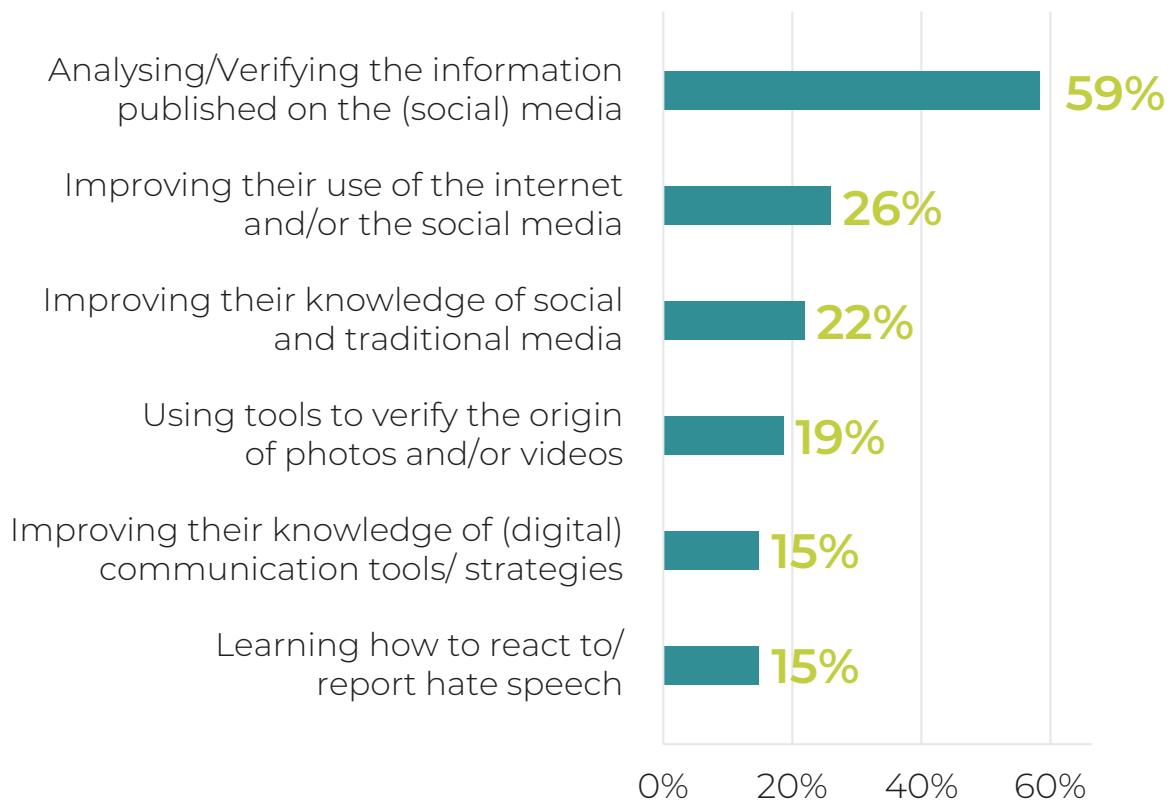
« Oui évidemment, auparavant je voyais les médias comme étant au second plan dans la résolution du problème de l'extrémisme violent mais aujourd'hui j'ai compris qu'ils jouent un grand rôle. »²⁹

During the aforementioned media literacy training, participants were provided with key tools and skills to enhance their media literacy level, as well as to improve their ability to demonstrate critical thinking skills in relation to information relayed by both traditional and social media. Among the main lessons learned, many youth leaders (59%) indicated a greater understanding of the importance of and the ways to analyse and/or verify information published in the media. Other key takeaways mentioned by several youth included an increased knowledge of traditional and social media, an improvement in their use of social media and, inter alia, their ability to react towards and report hate speech.

Data collected in the framework of the MERIT project suggests that, while the youth surveyed had indicated a relatively limited trust in the media, a fortiori in social media, these same youth may still lack the necessary theoretical knowledge and practical skills to efficiently identify and resist all forms of (online) propaganda, thereby further emphasizing the value of enhancing youth's media literacy skills.

²⁹ Quote from a youth participant's answer to an open question in the post-training survey conducted in August 2019.

> GRAPH 10 WHAT ARE THE MAIN LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH THIS MEDIA LITERACY TRAINING?*



*This question was initially framed as an open question, giving participants the possibility to mention several lessons learned, rather than being limited to naming only the top one. Categories which appear in this graphic were identified based on the various responses formulated and correspond to the most frequently mentioned ideas.

CONCLUSIONS

Data, including information collected by the MERIT project, demonstrates that social media and social messaging are powerful tools in Mali, and have the potential to both positively and negatively impact society, particularly in relation to violent extremism.

Malian youth use social media and messaging as a means of communication and information sharing on various topics. According to the youth respondents, confirmed by external information sources, violent extremist groups use the same types of social media both to collect and spread information, as well as to attract attention and support (including financial resources). Social media channels enable violent extremist groups to quickly and cheaply spread their propaganda among young people, who may be a vulnerable target because of their age, socio-economic situation and other contingent vulnerabilities.

Because social media platforms are used by both the youth community and violent extremists, social media is a key means to either fuel or reduce violence in the country. It is therefore paramount for all users, from authorities to communities, to be aware of the risks and benefits that modern digital technologies can yield in preventing and countering violent extremism, and to be trained on the best ways to use these channels in a positive manner while preserving their security.

The data collected and analysed provide valuable insight for future initiatives in Mali aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism. Further attention should be paid to the key role that youth can play as the main user community and, at the same time, as a potential target of extremist and terrorist groups. In this regard, training efforts should strengthen youth's media literacy, by focusing on the risks implied in the use of media

and by respecting and reflecting the specificities of the local contexts in which the different tools and platforms are used. Innovative approaches should be explored and enhanced in the attempt to develop effective alternatives and counter narratives, based on the fundamentals of media literacy.

In particular, although the use of media literacy to combat the radicalisation of young people on social media is a relatively novel approach, it has a successful record in addressing harmful and violent content, including propaganda, in other areas.³⁰ Several international actors have already or are currently implementing media literacy initiatives specifically focused on countering violent extremism. It may be that counter narratives developed within the communities that they target, combined with training on media literacy, may yield the most significant results in countering violent extremist narratives online.

30 UNESCO, "Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research," 2017: 37.