

At a Glance: With the growth of new social media users across the Sahel, existing conflict dynamics are increasingly manifesting. Sahelians are entering a complex digital space. The ability of individuals and communities to adapt to online/offline conflict dynamics will define the future of conflict in the region. Search for Common Ground convened West African academics and practitioners in Bamako, Mali in October 2021, to analyze conflict trends and opportunities for peacebuilding in digital spaces in the central Sahel region (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger).

Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso are three of the fastest growing internet user bases in the world, even if the absolute numbers remain low. In just one year - from 2020 to 2021 - internet users increased by 18.5% in Mali, 18.9% in Burkina Faso, and 20.9% in Niger.¹ The majority of these individuals are under the age of 35.^{2,3} As digital access and usage in the general population grows, online spaces are increasingly contentious as historical divisions shift from online to offline spaces and back, at times triggering outbreaks of physical violence.⁴ Online access exponentially increases the amount of information available to people and offers new opportunities to find communities of similar or dissimilar interests, perspectives, or backgrounds. Sahelian academics and practitioners point out that when these new ways to connect are introduced into already fractious societies, the social dynamics offline interact with new connections being made online. When this goes poorly, these online spaces create a new arena for social challenges like disinformation, hostile confrontations, political manipulation, radicalization, and polarization to manifest.

Despite its contributions to conflicts, digital access also presents opportunities for peace. These include building upon pre-existing digital tools for accountability and transparency that could form the basis for more cohesive and inclusive use of online spaces. The current moment presents a window to influence and establish good practice (whether mechanisms, safeguards, education, or capacity-building) and creative solutions to address, and potentially prevent, online conflict issues.

As part of our ongoing work to amplify the perspectives of African academics and peacebuilding practitioners, Search for Common Ground (Search), the world's largest dedicated peacebuilding organization, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, convened a diverse group of civil society practitioners, researchers, and government officials from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal in Bamako, Mali. The findings of this convening are substantiated by key informant interviews with a wide array of Sahelian and international experts, practitioners, and policymakers.

¹ Simon Kemp, "Digital 2021: Global Overview Report," *Datareportal*, 2021, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-global-overview-report>.

² Jason Bremner et al., "Building resilience through family planning: a transformative approach for women, families, and communities", *Population Reference Bureau*, 2015, <https://www.prb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/sahel-resilience-brief.pdf>. UNDP, "UNDP and Partners Launch YouthConnekt Sahel to Foster the Socio-Economic Transformation of Sahelian Youth," September 6, 2021, <https://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2021/undp-and-partners-launch-youthconnekt-sahel-to-foster-the-socio.html>.

³ In Africa, a significantly higher percentage of people aged 15-24 are online compared to other age groups. "ICT Fact and Figures," *International Telecommunication Union*, 2017, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2017.pdf>.

⁴ Institutional Learning Team, "Handling Harmful Content Online: Cross-National Perspectives of Users Affected by Conflict," *Search for Common Ground*, April 2021, https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/SearchForCommonGround_Handling-harmful-content-online-report_April-2021.pdf.

Participants in Search's convenings point out that historical divides and conflict are transferring to the online space as more new digital users are using social media and online messaging services.

- **Mis/disinformation is a key challenge in Sahelian social media experiences.** Much of the online misinformation shared in the Sahel is in the form of edited or doctored videos, manipulated to highlight stereotypes and identity-based divisions and to target a wider swath of the population with lower literacy rates and limited access to traditional news sources.⁵ Convening participants shared examples:
 - A video showing a 2019 Nigerian army raid against Boko Haram was shared on social media in September 2021 with descriptions claiming the video depicted Niger nationals attacking Ivorians. This misinformation inspired mass xenophobic attacks against Nigeriens in Abidjan, leading to at least one death and demonstrating how social media can accelerate incitement to violence.^{6,7}
 - A recently circulated video purported to show Burkina Faso's embassy in Mali being vandalized by rioters angry about Burkina Faso's support for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sanctions against Mali; in reality, the video showed a protest in Angola.⁸
 - Misleading posts about the Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary group, surged ahead of the 2022 upheaval of the Burkina Faso government, predated by a build up of pro-Russia content, some of which utilized misinformation and misappropriated images.⁹

Facebook is often the primary entry point to the internet for Sahelians. Most smartphones used by Sahelians have a low-byte version of Facebook pre-installed that is often used as their de facto internet browser. The confluence of news stories and personal opinions on the platform often obfuscates what is actually "news" and what is a rumor or opinion.¹⁰ Convening participants noted many Sahelians are still developing the digital savvy to cross-check information found online, the difficulty of which is compounded by limited sources of perceived unbiased news reporting.

- **Online users often end up in echo chambers, which limits the diversity of perspectives and reinforces divisions.** Inflammatory rhetoric, stereotyping, side-taking, and other in-group behaviors online make groups increasingly hostile to those perceived as different. Severe polarization has a damaging effect on democratic institutions and when left unchecked can damage civil society and increase hate crimes and political violence.¹¹ The most violent content online happens in private or restricted access groups and messages.¹² When hate speech is prevalent within these closed circles, it creates a "sense of normativity to hatred," which can lead to radicalization and intergroup violence.¹³ A rise in private WhatsApp or Facebook groups of an ethnic, community, ideological, or regional nature, where messages promote stereotypes and emphasize identity-based tensions. Convening participants pointed to examples in the central Sahel:

⁵ "Fake news floods Sahel as disinformation wars escalate," *Africa News*, February 15, 2022,

<https://www.africanews.com/2022/02/15/fake-news-floods-sahel-as-disinformation-wars-escalate/>.

⁶ Interview with a scholar on international peace and security issues, Côte d'Ivoire, September 15, 2021.

⁷ Anadalu Agency, "Sénégal: des transporteurs maliens pris pour cible après un accident à Kaolack," August 16, 2021,

<https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/s%C3%A9n%C3%A9gal-des-transporteurs-maliens-pris-pour-cible-apr%C3%A8s-un-accident-%C3%A0-kaolack/2336379>.

⁸ "Fake news floods Sahel," *Africa News*.

⁹ Tessa Knight and Allan Cheboi, "Local support for Russia increased on Facebook before Burkina Faso military coup," *Digital Forensic Research Lab*, February 17, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/local-support-for-russia-increased-on-facebook-before-burkina-faso-military-coup-a51df6722e59>.

¹⁰ Interview with a civil society practitioner, Bamako Mali, August 2021.

¹¹ Thomas Carother and Andrew O'Donohue, "How to Understand the Global Spread of Political Polarization," *Carnegie Endowment in International Peace*, October 1, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/01/how-to-understand-global-spread-of-political-polarization-pub-79893>.

¹² Institutional Learning Team, "Handling Harmful Content Online."

¹³ Michał Bilewicz and Wiktor Soral, "Hate Speech Epidemic. The Dynamic Effects of Derogatory Language on Intergroup Relations and Political Radicalization," *Advances in Political Psychology* 41, no. 51 (June 19, 2020): 3–33.

- During the March 23, 2019 and February 20, 2020 massacres in Ogossagou Peulh, Mali, during which at least 200 people died, messages calling for intercommunal violence and revenge shared on WhatsApp significantly contributed to community conflicts.¹⁴
- During recent elections in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, social media users actively incited violence against minority populations. After a member of the Arab minority was elected in Niger's election in February 2021, anti-Arab social media campaigns triggered offline violence. Several Arab businesses were ransacked in Niamey because of rhetoric and calls to violence online.
- **The relationship between the government and the governed is shifting online.** Citizens are demanding services, critiquing government action and inaction, and mobilizing opposition to political officials online. Political parties are increasingly using social media to reach and motivate new constituencies. In some cases, opposition parties use anonymous Facebook accounts to post antagonistic messages toward government policies and parties with limited reach on conventional media utilize social media to target potential supporters and denounce opponents.¹⁵ As more civic engagement happens online, governments have increased efforts to govern and regulate it including using tools to limit internet access or restrict critical views online.¹⁶ In the central Sahel:
 - In July 2020, Mali suspended Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp – as well as Instagram for some social media users – amid mass protests against then President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.¹⁷
 - Legal frameworks, such as Mali's Cybercrime Law, empower the government to tackle criminal activities online but are also allegedly invoked to target and suppress dissenting voices.
- **Violent extremist groups exploit new opportunities for recruitment and mobilization.** Violent extremist groups continue to expand their online efforts to recruit and mobilize support, frequently targeting youth. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, violent extremist organizations in the Sahel rely even more on digital financing and online recruitment.¹⁸ Experts pointed to the 'protest discourse' formulated by violent extremist groups and shared in clandestine social media groups as resonating with young people seeking structural change in their communities as well as a sense of belonging. Extremist groups drive support by playing off existing dissatisfaction and frustration with political elites, economic opportunities, inter-ethnic violence, and security.¹⁹ Participants shared the following examples:
 - The group Ansar Dine, part of al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), reportedly uses the messaging app Telegram to promote a narrative of the group defending Mali from foreign oppression.
 - A decentralized, online recruitment pool means that extremist groups can access individuals sympathetic with their cause in places where they do not currently have a physical presence and mobilize them to act in their communities. Experts from Cote d'Ivoire shared that this online mobilization can also lead to organized crime, including financial scams or kidnapping plots.²⁰
- **There is a gendered digital divide - and when women access online spaces, they face a higher chance of harassment.** Women in Sub-Saharan Africa are 13 percent less likely than men to own a mobile phone,²¹ and 37 percent less likely to use mobile internet²² - causing a digital gender divide. Participants point out that men tend to

¹⁴ Interview with a researcher, Bamako, Mali, July 28, 2021. Interview with a civil society organization leader, Bamako, Mali, July 31, 2021.

¹⁵ Interview with a researcher, Bamako, Mali, September 2, 2021.

¹⁶ Christopher Giles and Peter Mwai, "Africa internet: Where and how are governments blocking it?" *BBC News*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47734843>.

¹⁷ Netblocks, "Social media restricted in Mali amid protests against president," July 10, 2020, <https://netblocks.org/reports/social-media-restricted-in-mali-amid-protests-against-president-QyKpdX8D>.

¹⁸ Interview with a researcher, Bamako, Mali, July 28, 2021.

¹⁹ Vermeersch, et al., "The Role of Social Media in Mali and its Relation to Violent Extremism: A Youth Perspective," *UNICRI and ICCT*, March 2020, <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/03/Social-Media-in-Mali-and-Its-Relation-to-Violent-Extremism-A-Youth-Perspective.pdf>.

²⁰ Yaya Koné, "Globalized Work by Day and Local *Travaillement* by night. Digital revolution and social revenge of Brouteurs from the Koumassi District," *Journal of Anthropologists* 142-143, (2015): 307-324, <https://journals.openedition.org/jda/6327#quotation>.

²¹ Paula Gilber, "Sub-Saharan Africa still struggling with mobile gender gap," *Connecting Africa*, June 3, 2020, http://www.connectingafrica.com/author.asp?section_id=761&doc_id=758009.

²² Isabelle Carboni, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021," July 6, 2021, <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/programme/connected-women/the-mobile-gender-gap-report-2021/>.

receive priority when access to technology is limited, whether it is ownership of internet-capable cell phones or use of the internet at home or school.^{23,24} When women in the Sahel do communicate with others through social media or communications apps, they are often the recipients of predatory behaviors, including sexual abuse and exploitation that can morph into offline violence. In a context where sexual and gender-based violence is prevalent, half of Malian women aged 15 to 49 had experienced physical or sexual violence,²⁵ these dynamics replicate and exacerbate themselves in online spaces. Participants said that this is a significant barrier to online participation by women and girls, as families attempt to protect women by restricting their use of the internet or digital tools.²⁶ Some Sahelian social media users target female journalists, women in politics, and human rights defenders by sharing exploitative images to demean or shame them into staying out of public or political spheres. In some cases, their intimate lives are projected online and these women are the targets of dishonor from their families and communities.

"Digital users realize that [social media and the internet] will undoubtedly become part of our customs and habits of tomorrow. Without awareness, mishandling can have a negative impact on peacebuilding... One of the opportunities is the use of digital tools for development purposes by using digital to reduce distances, reduce the generation gap by bringing young and old together, etc."

- Researcher in Mali, August 2021

Recommendations to address online conflict dynamics

Convening participants and consulted experts offered a series of **recommendations** for national, regional, and international actors to stem these risks and capitalize on identified opportunities:

- **Enhance digital literacy, responsible media consumption, and conflict-sensitive use of online tools among the Sahelian population, especially through digital empowerment of women, youth, and children.**
 - Sahelian governments, academic institutions, and civil society should promote internet literacy education and public awareness campaigns on responsible online behaviors and conflict-sensitive use of digital technology. International actors can partner with Ministries of Education and/or Information to support the creation of community-based networks of individuals trained in identification of misinformation, rumor management, and conflict de-escalation, including for moderators in online groups.
 - Civil society organizations and international actors can partner with social media influencers, bloggers, and moderators with significant online followings on how to respond to crisis moments, conflict-sensitive content production, as well as encourage them to share information on how to distinguish between false and truthful content.
 - Sahelian governments should prioritize structural inequalities in internet access, smartphone usage, and other technologies that hinder the inclusion of all gender, ethnic, religious, and social groups as they develop infrastructure and policies to foster their growing online space.
- **Deploy digital, programming, and policy tools to combat mis/disinformation, hate speech, and extremist mobilization online and offline.**

²³UN Women, "Addressing the digital gender divide in Africa through the African Girls Can Code Initiative," October 2021, <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/10/feature-addressing-the-digital-gender-divide-in-africa>.

²⁴ UNICEF, "What we know about gender digital divides for girls," 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/8311/file/What%20we%20know%20about%20the%20gender%20digital%20divide%20for%20girls%20A%20literature%20review.pdf>.

²⁵"Mali," *Demographic and Health Surveys*, 2018, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/SR261/SR261.pdf>.

²⁶ Plan International, "Free to be Online? Girls' and Young Women's Experiences of Online Harassment," *The State of the World's Girls Report*, 2020, <https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline>.

- Social media companies can form partnerships with organizations and groups in-country that understand local conflict dynamics. They should form partnerships now while the market is growing to inform the development of automated tools to detect hate speech and misinformation, rather than waiting for the conflict dynamics to cascade into offline violence. Where these partnerships exist, they should work to identify a “watch list” of key issues in the country and scenario plan response to deal with potential escalations in the conflict.
- Social media companies can amplify the work of content creators who are champions for peace. This could include campaigns on how these users utilized the social media platform tools to make their communities better and safer.
- Technology companies should work with multilaterals, governments, and operational organizations to develop and disseminate best industry practices on how to implement technological development in a conflict-sensitive way. They can use the central Sahel countries as a case study, with a broad scale engagement of affected populations.
- **Foster citizen-government exchange, enhance social cohesion, and transform governance using digital tools.** New digital tools and platforms can enable Sahelians to better monitor, manage, and prevent conflict and empower grassroots activism in their communities. In particular, human rights organizations have increasingly relied on social media to expose human rights violations, abuse, and corruption to demand changes from those in power. Opportunities to break down social and spatial distances offer the potential of increased contact between people of differing identities or perspectives. Increasing digitalization and internet access can also provide opportunities for internet-based government service provision, transparency, and direct communication from governments to citizens.
 - Governments should consider early investments in digital tools, virtual service provision best practices, and overall governance capacities so that they are equipped to capitalize on digitalization’s benefits for governance and service delivery. In particular, they should foster digital tools for accountability and peacebuilding, including forums for virtual exchange and participatory decision-making that are focused on improving inclusion of marginalized offline and online communities.
 - Regional intergovernmental bodies, such as ECOWAS and the African Union, should coordinate the harmonization of cyber and digital policies in West Africa and foster collaborative cross-border approaches to transnational threats such as online radicalization.
 - Donors should capitalize on the growing interest and expertise of Sahelian academics and practitioners addressing conflict in the online space by supporting joint research and analysis. For instance, through tools such as USAID’s [Digital Ecosystem Framework](#) and Digital Ecosystem Country Assessments (DECAs), development donors should incorporate an assessment of conflict drivers and peacebuilding opportunities in the online space and build on those findings with their implementing partners.