At 6AM EST Monday, January 21st, 2013, many Eritreans around the world became the victims of rumors and anti-Eritrean propaganda that spread through both social media and print media. The rumor was that a coup was taking place in Eritrea. It was later shown to be false. This is not the first time that Eritreans have witnessed such ridiculous claims that have spread across the internet like wild fire and I doubt that this will be the last. The purpose of the text that follows below is to analyze how this rumor became started, understand the direct and indirect forces that spread and perpetuated it, and recognize future methods of preventing and mitigating the effects of similar propaganda against the state and people of Eritrea. Because many pictures are included below, I have chosen to use an outline format followed by more standard free form text in the conclusion.

So here goes….

- As we review all the initial Twitter tweets on #Eritrea during the morning of January 21, 2013 we discover that the first person to make any mention of the alleged incident in question was Meron Estefanos (@meronina). She claims it all started via a supposed broadcast by Radio Erena. At 6:06 AM Eastern Standard Time, she writes the following tweet:

6:06AM, Jan 21, 2013 (EST)
○ So who exactly is Ms. Meron. Well according to her Twitter page she is a "radio presenter for Radio Erena" based in Sweden. What is Radio Erena, exactly? We’ll get to that in a second. Anyway, here’s a copy of Ms. Meron's page:

- The next tweeter on the scene is a fellow who goes by Mahfuz H Yousif (@majnoon1). He’s the first person on Twitter to use the word "coup d'état" in regards to #Eritrea.

6:29AM
○ Notice that he tags Al Jazeera and anti-Eritrean journalist Martin Plaut. Both are unaware of the faux news at this time.

- Then comes along Leonard Vincent with this Tweet:
Then comes along Leonard Vincent with this Tweet:

So who is Leonard Vincent anyway? According to Twitter:

- He cites a link to his French blog post (English), which claims that 100 Eritrean soldiers captured the Ministry of Information and that a coup d'état is underway in Asmara. He then claims that the soldiers forcefully broadcasted a message calling for implementation of the constitution and release of political prisoners. He cites no sources. And as we'll see shortly, it was only after his report was found to be bogus that he gave up his sources and deflected his responsibility.

- On further investigation, it turns out that he's a Frenchman and the former director of Reporters Without Borders Africa Desk from 2004 to 2008. After writing "Les Erythreens," a scathing book on life in Eritrea as seen through the myopic lens of the exiled journalist, he helped to establish Radio Erena in 2009.

- Radio Erena, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is:

  Based in Paris and run by Eritrean exile journalists, Radio Erena has been operating for the past nine months. Broadcasting by satellite to Eritreans in Eritrea and on the Internet to the Eritrean diaspora, the station serves as an independent news source for a country where press freedom is non-existent and anyone straying from the official line is severely punished. This original project is supported by Reporters Without Borders. (16 March 2010)

  In other words, RSF funds Radio Erena. And as we already know, RSF is funded by US imperial organizations. And according to this article, the station is managed by Amanuel Ghirmai and Biniam Simon, exiled Eritrean journalists.

Next up, we have an eager and excited Martin Plaut, a known anti-Eritrean journalist, awaiting more information:

For those who may not know, Martin Plaut is a vehemently anti-Eritrean journalist, who has been deliberately skewing the facts and analysis on Eritrea, Somalia, and other African nations.

So anyway, Mr. Leonard Vincent responds to Plaut with the following tweet:

- He says "several confirmations" but, again, fails to cite any sources. Why?

- For the lazy Martin Plaut, that was enough. He then went on a Twitter rampage, promoting the rumor via these next 5 tweets:

  1. 
Seriously, who writes like this without definitive confirmation, without citing sources, and without presenting any serious facts to corroborate his claims?

Finally, Plaut pens an article and cites it with this tweet:

In the article, which has been updated multiple times since its original publication, he cites disgruntled journalist Dan Connell:

"Dan Connell Eritrea expert writes:

'News coming out now suggests the mutiny may be facing a counter move from other military units. If this is stopped, it will be imperative to make a lot of public noise about the dangers of bloody recriminations. And to use this event as a moment to call for international action on the human rights situation there through pressure on the mining companies (Nevsun, Sunridge, Chalice) to halt production until the situation changes. The demands raised here are clear and simple: implement the constitution, free political prisoners, establish a transitional government with broad representation.'" (Emphasis mine)

Connell is clearly hoping to internationalize this faux coup. However, Connell doesn't cite his sources. Many Eritreans are already very aware of Mr. Connell's destabilizing role towards Eritrea.

Next we have Mr. Mark Anderson, another so-called journalist, who tweets the following:

About an hour later he claims to have a live shot of Eri-TV off air:

Here's the picture:
After RSF-funded Radio Erena, Leonard Vincent, Dan Connell, Martin Plaut, and Mark Anderson have all had their say on the supposed "coup," Radio France Internationale picks up the rumor—"I mean, "story." Remember that RFI, like Radio Erena and Reporters Without Borders, is also Paris based. At 7:12 AM, RFI tweets the following:

7:12 AM
○ RFI is the first Western media source to carry the rumor. For your convenience, here's a screenshot of the brief and factless article:

○ How is it that "forcing a state TV off air" constitutes what "may have been a coup attempt"? Perhaps Wikipedia can help RFI better understand what a military coup or a coup d'état actually is:

A coup d'état (/ˈkuːdɛtər/; plural: coups d'état), also known as a coup, a putsch, or an overthrow, is the sudden, illegal deposition of a government, usually by a small group of the existing state establishment—typically the military—to depose the extant government and replace it with another body, civil or military.

From this point on, other western media organizations promote and escalate the unfounded rumor, which then bounces back-and-forth between the social media world and the print media world. We see little facts between the two. We also see the rumor spreading among groups opposed to the Eritrean government and supposedly East African media groups. See this list of 7 select ed tweets below as an example:

1. Keep your eye on that symbol of the hand. It’s the same symbol used in colored revolutions around the world that follow the Otpor! model. See this short documentary for more details:
Other interesting links (1, 2) talk about the role of the National Endowment for Democracy, George Soros, Gene Sharp, Otpor!, Kefaya, and other subversive elements working against countries that oppose Western imperialism.

Remember this guy (from above)?

7:26 AM

- They pose the question of a coup in Eritrea and cite Mr. Plaut’s article, which is based on unconfirmed rumors. This begs the question: how did they catch on to this so early when everything was still unclear? They sent this tweet only an hour-and-a-half after Ms. Meron’s initial tweet at 6:06 AM and less than ten minutes after Mr. Plaut’s article. Do they have a relationship with Plaut?
- Then interestingly, they go on an anti-Eritrea propaganda spree with these next 13 tweets:

7:35 AM

- This tweet cites a recent biased and politically-motivated Human Rights report that claims that international mining companies in Eritrea use forced labor. Aside from the fact that the report is filled with errors and misrepresentation of facts on the ground, why does Anonymous feel the pressing need to cite this article when they could instead talk about matters more relevant to their organizational mission like those relating to internet freedom and privacy? What does the HRW report...
have to do with the supposed coup? Furthermore, what does the supposed coup have to do with internet freedom and privacy? For all they know, given such little facts, the leaders of the supposed "coup" might be repressive warlords waiting. The fact that they are jumping the gun on tweeting this is quite telling of their position on Eritrea.

2. They cite this article.

3. Anonymous (@CIAprессofficce)


5. Anonymous (@CIAprессofficce)

6. The ministry of information has been taken over by troops & there is a rumor that the president's daughter is among the detained.

7. If this is a coup d'etat, was the president's daughter the target or the #MOI? If both, which is the largest gain? #ERITREA

8. More unconfirmed rumors!

9. Anonymous (@CIAprессofficce)

10. This guy -> @CFKlleberTT Reports of gunfire & explosions near #MOI | Which suggests a battle may have occurred. Between whom? #Eritrea

11. Link for Eritrean State TV. eestafro.com/EritTV1/ #Eritrea
12. Let me get this straight. Because someone provides an alternative view to Plaut and Leonard they must be working for the Eritrean regime? I don’t know this "Ternafi" fellow but I do know that to stoop down this low is unprofessional for the mouthpiece of a global organization that expects to be taken seriously.

8:45 AM
- Source? The CIA? Maybe. For a group that claims to fight the powers that be, the funny thing is that their Twitter name is ironically named @CIApresoffice.
- Is Anonymous a genuine anarchist liberation group? Why do they focus on some governments while ignoring others? In particular, why do they focus on anti-imperialist states like Eritrea, Syria, and Iran while turning a blind eye to states like Israel, which represses the Palestinians to a far worse degree than the aforementioned countries do their citizens. An example of this double-standard is exemplified by this later retweet by Anonymous:

7:07 PM
- Then we have folks like George Coote, a researcher for BBC, that uses the rumors from Wikileaks' diplomatic cables to capture the imagination of the Twitter-world:

7:39 AM
- He cites this article suggesting that petty diplomatic gossip translates to fact.

By this point, the #Eritrea topic begins trending on Twitter and all the major media organizations start to spread the rumor:

8:19 AM
- The US government also decided to chime in, retweeting Horn of Africa News (@Horn_News), which should tell Eritreans a thing or two about @Horn_News (see above):

8:40 AM
- RT @horn_news: Reports of a military coup in #Eritrea. soldiers are said to have taken the Ministry of Information and state TV.

8:41 AM
• Why is an official government agency quoting Horn of Africa News?

8:51 AM

• More from Anonymous’ "GHC" division:

9:00 AM

• And Anonymoose:

9:21 AM

• Then we get to BBC, which publishes this article. The next tweet is responsible for the "troops deployed" meme which caught on like wildfire. How do these memes spread so quickly? We’ll get to that shortly.

9:22 AM

○ In the article they explain that, "the UK Foreign Office said that it had received reports of ‘unusual military movements in and around Asmara’, and noted that local radio and TV appear to have been shut down."

• More from an Anonymous affiliate:

9:51 AM

• Then Reuters reporter Aaron Maasho releases his article on the matter:

9:58 AM

• Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization (RSADO), an openly terrorist organization which has threatened to conduct terrorist acts in Eritrea, released the following tweets:

10:36 AM
Soon, Al Jazeera hits the scene:

When I checked the link at noon, it was down:

Perhaps they were getting second thoughts about rashly posting information with little facts.

However, our old friend Mr. Mahfuz chimes in explaining that the issue has reached Al Jazeera televised network:

Here is a screenshot of the Twitter picture:

It would be two days later, when Al Jazeera joins the bandwagon and attacks Eritrea.

The Associated Press is also significant in this whole scenario in that they were responsible for the "unrest" in Asmara meme that spread like wild fire after this tweet:
Meanwhile, no one in the press, clearly intent on using Twitter to source and promote questionable information, was actually listening to people tweeting from Asmara:

○ 10:36 AM
  - @tekerebanelim
    Soldiers at MoI BUT #Asmara is calm, all’s normal in tow. ST @Africamymind @[me] can u pls update what is happening in Asmara #Eritrea?

8:06 AM
- @RahelWeldeab
  Ppl in #Asmara are going about their daily lives while "experts on the #Horn" cry coup. I live right near the airport. NOTHING IS HAPPENING

1:09 AM
- @RahelWeldeab
  If those who cry concern over #Eritrea really care, why don't they contact those within? B/c @martinplaut is more credible? Shit

1:22 AM

- By the end of the day, Jeffrey Gettleman, the New York Times' go-to journalist on all things East African, wrote a sloppy piece in regards to the faux "coup" titled "Coup Attempt by Rebel Soldiers Is Said to Fail in Eritrea."

○ Flippantly referring to Eritrea as a "sliver of a nation" in the Horn or Africa (it's roughly the size of England), he starts out by explaining that "mutinous soldiers stormed the Ministry of Information and took over the state-run television service, apparently in a coup attempt." He cites no sources other than "several people with close contacts inside Eritrea." Again, what coup? Not even Mr. Plaut or Mr. Vincent claimed that the supposed soldiers were attempting to overthrow the government (definition of a coup). Without presenting any other details relevant to the alleged coup, he hastily goes on a wordy diatribe against the Eritrean government for nearly the entire length of the article, wrongfully calling Eritrea the "the North Korea of Africa." He also quotes Dan Connell on unrelated issues, which reveals to Eritreans once again the extent of the journalistic incest that limits this small group of Western journalists from presenting a more balanced view of the nation while simultaneously giving tacit credence to the Eritrean government’s claim that opening up the nation to the private, Western press will promote the agenda of Western special interest groups. Sadly, it's irresponsible, external journalists like these--and their Eritrean minions--that delay the allowance of the free press for all other Eritreans.

○ Also, let us briefly step back to earlier in the day when, interestingly, a fellow who goes by Rob Bates calls for people writing on the supposed "coup," to contact a central source:

- @rawbates
  If this really is a coup attempt in #Eritrea, and you're thinking about writing about it, contact Dr Richard Reid at SOAS first.
7:10 AM
○ Why contact Richard Reid? The answers is not clear but we do know that Reid published a book for Chatham House, in which Dan Connell writes multiple essays. Again, is this not journalistic incest? Chatham House often takes a non-neutral and undoubtedly hostile position towards Eritrea as it relates to the conflict with Ethiopia.
○ Anyway, Mr. Bates then makes this completely irresponsible tweet:

The above tweets and articles concludes the media flurry that took place on the first day the false coup rumor broke out. Just to put things in perspective in regards to how much weight and influence western journalists actually have in spreading rumors on Eritrea, consider that in reviewing all 1,425 tweets that took place from 6:06 AM to 6:26 AM, Martin Plaut was tagged 143 times, which is approximately 10% of all those tweets. Is that right for someone who’s not in Eritrea, provides no confirmation for his outlandish claims, and has a very checkered history of journalism on Eritrea?

**Day Two**

○ Day two opens up with a BBC article titled, "Eritrea: Asmara calm after 'information ministry raid'" and we suddenly see a bombardment of identical tweets citing the article:

As I scrolled down the list there were at least hundreds, if not thousands, of tweeters who tweeted this same exact message around that same time. There were so many that I had to stop scrolling down the Twitter page on #Eritrea. Who are all these people that feel that they need to cite this article? Well let's find out! If we look at all their individual pages we will learn that these people are essentially identical in what they tweet. I thought it was some sort of autotweet setting through a dashboard or a subscription service but then I noticed that the autotweet from the BBC website would have read as follows:

5:22 AM, January 22, 2013
○ As I scrolled down the list there were at least hundreds, if not thousands, of tweeters who tweeted this same exact message around that same time. There were so many that I had to stop scrolling down the Twitter page on #Eritrea. Who are all these people that feel that they need to cite this article? Well let's find out! If we look at all their individual pages we will learn that these people are essentially identical in what they tweet. I thought it was some sort of autotweet setting through a dashboard or a subscription service but then I noticed that the autotweet from the BBC website would have read as follows:

This is clearly different from the tweets of the tweeters above. This tell us that they must have typed it in. The next interesting observation, shows us that these people not only tweeted the exact same tweet for the "Asmara raid" article but also for an array of selected BBC articles. Notice the 100% concordance when I place these tweets side-by-side:
As I scrolled down the seemingly endless list of tweeters who were tweeting the same exact BBC article using the same exact words, it became obvious that these were not people at all but, more likely, robots or programs. Reviewing each of these accounts I saw familiar trends: they all had an innocuous, first and last name Twitter name that represented their supposedly real name rather than some creative pseudonym or alias (as is common on Twitter); they don't interact with other users; and they don't retweet or comment on anything. Could this be the work of sock puppets? In my opinion, these probably aren't military sock puppets but more likely sock puppets used by BBC to increase their article rankings (and their biased views) around the world. Is it any surprise then that the BBC article tweeted by these users has been the top news article listed at the top on the #Eritrea Twitter page all day Tuesday, January 22nd? Here's a screenshot:

In regards to that BBC article suggesting that the calm has returned, one Tweeter actually in Asmara makes an astute observation:

8:30 AM, January 22, 2013

- And since we’re on the topic of robots, I should also mention that phone robots were also being used by members of the Eritrean opposition when word of the faux coup got out. In fact, they are partly the reason why so many Diaspora Eritreans who fell for the rumors and tried to call Eritrea, particularly during the evening, were unable to get through to family members because the phone lines were busy. According to the political gossip website Asmarino.com:

"On Monday 21st of Jan 2013, the Diaspora based youth initiative ArbiHarnet (Freedom Friday) sent nearly 10,000 automated phone messages to members of the public in Eritrea."
The messages that were translated and posted on Eritrean Face Book Pages outlined the positiveness of the movement and encouraged the public to support it as a natural continuation of their struggle for democracy and justice.

...Realising that the Eritrean public was in the dark about all this, Project ArbiHarnet mounted a quick operation to send 10,000 automated messages on the evening of Monday the 21st and of the 10,766 numbers dialled 9,419 received the message successfully."

However, in a recorded interview with RFI's Michel Arseneault, our same Meron Estefanos, one of the members on the team of callers, admits that she was using robots to make those calls:

"Michel: So it's really a robot calling...?
Meron: Not only a robot call, we also do one-to-one calling as well. We do the same thing. While we hire a robot calling company, at the same time the team would call at least 20 numbers a week, each.
...
Michel: How much does this kind of operation cost, especially when you have to hire a robot?
Meron: 10 calls cost $3.00.
Michel: And the funding comes from...?
Meron: ...from Eritreans on Facebook."

Two days after the robo-calling incident, Meron begins to promote the so-called "Freedom Fridays" campaign on Twitter while downplaying the use of robots:

Excited about what transpired, Ms. Meron attempts to turn this scenario into a campaign dubbed "Forto 2013" (Forto is the name of the MOI building):
Leonard Vincent also shows his true colors in the days after he promoted the non-existent coup. He insults our intelligence by implying that the word coup d’état was a foolish mistranslation of another French phrase:

He also throws his formerly concealed sources under the bus after it was learned that his unconfirmed claims were completely false. He disingenuously calls Beniam Simon and Amanuel Girmai the "ordinary heroes" behind what transpired on Monday, January 21. Had this story showed any credibility, would he have even mentioned their names? When will Africans learn that many of these Western so-called "journalists" that cover the continent are only using them for their own self-promotion?

Conclusion

Alas, we come to our final analysis of this highly educational event. What exactly does it all mean? First off, we must remember that Eritrea has entered into a new stage of its development. Despite the many internal and external obstacles that hindered and held hostage the political, social, and economic development of Eritrea, the nation is now set to become one of Africa’s fastest growing economies for the foreseeable future. This coming February, Eritrean investors in both Eritrea and the Diaspora are set to officially become equity holders of dozens of privatized former state-run businesses. Now that the basic infrastructure has been laid down from the sweat and sacrifice of thousands of Eritrean youth, the focus is now on developing the business sector so that Eritreans may benefit from the fruits of their toil.

There is also increased interest by mining companies and their investors to do business in Eritrea. However, when false reports about coups and the imminent death of the Eritrean president capture the imagination of investors, they hinder the growth and development of Eritrea. For example, below is a copy of the chart of Nevsun's (TSX:NSU) stock price before, during, and after the January 21st coup rumor:

Fortunately, investors saw beyond the lies and deception and now the stock price is almost where it was prior to the incident. As they say, "money talks."

It must be understood that Western nations led by the special interest groups in the United States are pushing for measures that retard Eritrea’s economic growth. They have pushed for sanctions targeting mining companies suggesting that they are indirectly supporting terrorism. They have released reports suggesting mining company involvement in "forced labor." Why all this focus on the mining companies? Why now? The distortions and lies are endless and many Eritreans believe it will only get worse as they continue to develop on the course towards self-reliance. To become self-reliant is in direct defiance to imperialism and Empire America will not watch as an African nation sets a precedent for other African nations to follow in suit. Need we mention the recent experiences of Libya ("liberated"), Zimbabwe (economically destroyed through currency speculation), Sudan (fractured), etc.?

From this event we also learn of the tremendous weaknesses and obstacles that Eritrea faces in regards to information, propaganda, and...
public relations. Often times, rumors and lies are spread with reckless abandon or, perhaps, more nefarious aims. Groups like Anonymous that claim to act in the name of people around the world should be looked at with a skeptical eye by every Eritrean. They have worked very closely with Julian Assange and Wikileaks. And we must recall that when Wikileaks first went online in 2007, its "About Us" page said the following (as reported by CBC):

"Our primary interests are oppressive regimes in Asia, the former Soviet bloc, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, but we also expect to be of assistance to those in the west who wish to reveal unethical behavior in their own governments and corporations," the group said on wikileaks.org.

Notice how their "primary interests" are non-western "oppressive regimes" around the world. Why this preference? Why not focus on home, where most of the hactivists come from? As Wikileaks gained more notoriety, the above quote was taken down from their website for obvious reasons. Luckily, the CBC article documented their true aims. The aims of Anonymous and all affiliated groups also become obvious when you see them silent on the apartheid in Israel but loud on the supposed "revolution" in Syria. The hypocrisy is quite stark. We now see the same double standard of press coverage when it comes to Eritrea.

We must also remain vigilant of social media being used as a weapon of imperialism. Sock puppets may be a serious threat in the propaganda war. Social media outlets are quickly becoming the intentional or unintentional tools of regime change around world. We must consider the following quote from the Council on Foreign Relation's Foreign Affairs publication during the time of the now defunct Arab spring and Libya "revolution":

Technology, therefore, played a role, as did the intrepid Arabic news channel Al Jazeera, whose reporters blended in with the demonstrators and sent out regular reports to electrifying effect. Activists used Twitter and Facebook to mobilize street demonstrations and spread warnings on police tactics and concentrations. WikiLeaks, moreover, had weeks earlier published the U.S. ambassador’s confidential reports of corruption within the president’s family. These had the effect of turning gossip and rumor into fact and fueling popular anger. In this case, then, I would argue that some benefits have been gained: a dictator has fallen, and reporting from U.S. embassies has gained new credibility.

It’s now looking like the same is coming to Algeria and Eritreans must be wary that the same does not happen to Eritrea. Don’t be surprised to hear concocted reports and analysis on an emerging "African Spring." Perhaps 2013 may be that year.

Therefore, there is much to be learned from what transpired on Monday, January 21st, 2013. From the event, we learn that the odds are stacked against Eritrea and the greater African community. As the nation continues to blaze it’s own course towards development, on it’s own terms, there will be progressively more anti-Eritrean propaganda, more attempts to isolate the nation, and more attempts to turn the Eritrean people against their own government. It is important that all Eritreans remain wary and continue on the charted course.