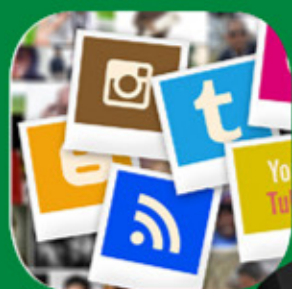


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MY CLICK MUST COUNT: The influence of social media on democracy in Côte d'Ivoire



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WACSeries are analytical periodic write-ups on topical themes and issues relevant to West Africa. These write-ups provide experts, researchers and practitioners a space to reflect, analyse and posit views and recommendations on emerging issues and debates.

OBJECTIFS DE WACSeries Issue Paper

- To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
- To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
- To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
- To provide recommendations to policy makers.

MY CLICK MUST COUNT:

The influence of social media on democracy in Côte d'Ivoire

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ABCI	Association des Blogueurs de Côte d'Ivoire
ARTCI	Autorité de Régulation des Télécommunications/ Technologies de l'Information et de la Communication de Cote d'Ivoire
CIV Constitution	Côte d'Ivoire Constitution
Civ2010	Côte d'Ivoire 2010
CivSocial	Côte d'Ivoire sociale
DG	Directeur Général
Kantar TNS	Kantar Taylor Nelson Sofres
LIDER	Liberté et Démocratie pour la République
RFI	Radio France Internationale
RHDP	Houphouétistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix
RTI Bouaké	Radiodiffusion télévision ivoirienne - Bouaké
RTI1	Radiodiffusion télévision ivoirienne 1
RTI2	Radiodiffusion télévision ivoirienne 2
TIC	Technologies de l'Information et de la Communication
UBCI	Union des Blogueurs de Côte d'Ivoire
UNBCI	Union Nationale des Blogueurs de Côte d'Ivoire
VoteConst	Vote constitution
	Vote constitution



Introduction

The history of African revolutions through social media begins in 2000s in Egypt and Tunisia. However, their use reached a peak in 2011, in the case of the Arab spring, marking a perpetual turning point in social and political demands in Africa. Social media thus served as a means for insurgents in Egypt and Tunisia to organise their actions and mobilise in the streets. While some have not hesitated to assert that this success of citizens - standing up against social injustice and restriction of civic space in the Maghreb countries, particularly in Tunisia - is to be attributed to social media, others, like Evgeny Morozov, argue that the role of social media has been deliberately exaggerated and amplified by the international media, to establish the hegemony of Silicon Valley. In any case, it must be noted that a change has occurred as a result of these events.

Internet and social media have established a new way of exercising democracy throughout the world, in general, and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. From Sudan to Nigeria, through Djibouti, Angola, Gabon and Swaziland, among others, thousands of citizens are criticising and mobilising online. Currently, political, economic and social life has taken over Facebook and Twitter. The word is released, and anyone can take it up.

Examples in West Africa are the case of Senegal in 2011 with «Y'en a marre» and that of Burkina Faso in October 2014 with Balai Citoyen. Social media has been used to inform, mobilise and call for action. As an online social movement fighting against constitutional review, the Balai Citoyen has emerged as the spearhead of the popular revolution that saw the fall of the Compaoré regime. Till date, Balai Citoyen still plays an important role not only on the Burkinabe political scene but also beyond borders, in defending freedom of expression, the right to information and participation in political action in Africa.

Côte d'Ivoire is not left out. Over the last six years, a wave of young bloggers has emerged and through tweets and Facebook posts, have sparked interesting debates about government actions. These initiatives, although appreciated in various ways by the Ivorian populations, make it possible to animate and enrich the Ivorian civic space. The question is whether they really contribute to repositioning the Ivorian citizen and civil society as a key actor, at the heart of political and social dialogue and in the decision-making process in Côte d'Ivoire. In other words, could this gradual rise of these new online spaces of expression and protest, like Balai Citoyen, reconfigure the Ivorian socio-political, economic and cultural landscape? Our approach will first consist in presenting the citizen uses of social media in Côte d'Ivoire and then in analysing their effects on democracy and governance in the country.



I - Social media, the voice of the «New Ivorian»?

According to the 2016 Africascope study by Kantar TNS, in Côte d'Ivoire, 93 percent of the population watch television, of which only 35 percent watch national channels. Viewers give Preference to pan-African and international television channels. With respect to radio station, the report shows an auditory rate of 63 percent, down from previous years. Since 2012, the TV station France 24 and Radio France Internationale (RFI), both international, have been the most tuned channels by the general public and senior managers (with an estimated 96.6 percent).



Source : Abidjan.net

Ivorians use the various applications made available to them by these international media to track information. The results of the Africascope 2018 study confirm "the phasing out" of traditional media. 26 percent of Ivorians watch national or private television channels and RFI remains the most listened radio station. In view of these figures, it seems that Ivorians are increasingly turning away from traditional media and turning to social media, which now seems to be the voice of the «new Ivorian».

In Côte d'Ivoire, the media is governed by several laws, which establish the legal regime for audio-visual communication, the press and the status of journalists. The laws adopted in 1991, were amended in 1999, 2004 and 2011. They proclaim freedom of expression and of the

press and put an end to the State's concession of the national public service.

Côte d'Ivoire's media landscape is composed of public service broadcasting and private media. The public service includes three television channels (RTI1, RT2 and RTI Bouaké) and two radio stations (Radio Côte d'Ivoire and Fréquence 2). As for the private media, there are about 100 radio stations (commercial and local) and more than 50 hard copy and online newspapers. Despite the quantity of local supply, Africascope noted Ivorians' preference for international media, as well as a decline in the audience rate of the national audio-visual sector.

This decline can be explained by the imbalance in the treatment of information by the local media. In fact, since most media are financed by patrons, they most often serve as communication and propaganda tools of a political party. An example is the national television. RTI1 has been and unfortunately continues to be the voice of the ruling party. In addition, the quality of the programmes offered is unsatisfactory. Too much space is given to entertainment and other telenovelas programmes. The Senegalese sociologist Momar Coumba Diop calls these programmes, the people's «new opium» and rightly accuses African states of not having «been able to establish a credible cultural policy in the state media through a mastery of national television production».

Few political programmes, inviting contradiction or diversity of views, were censored. Major social events have been also under-reported (e.g. the terrorist attack on Grand Bassam in March 2016).

To the point of wondering whether the main objective of this television is to infantilise the population.

Many Ivorians no longer support this control over public service broadcasting and are impatient with the effective liberalisation of the audio-visual sector. Another point: Ivorians have real difficulty finding impartial, neutral information related to their interest, as the analyses of most journalists are very partisan. The role of the media

is to inform and educate people while preserving social peace. Unfortunately, the information disseminated is often limited, partisan and sometimes even a source of conflict. Internette is exposing Ivorians to the world and other cultures.

In their quest for transparent information, citizens are no longer content to be consumers of information. They are now producers of information.

A- Social media, a tool for the voiceless

According to the Africascope 2016 report, 44 percent of people aged 15 and over residing in the countries covered by the study are Internet users, in other words 7.4 million people. Among them, 73 percent (as against 68 percent in 2015) regularly use their phones to connect to the Internet. The most common uses are:

- Social media at least once a week (81 percent in Côte d'Ivoire),
- Communication via WhatsApp or Messenger (55 percent),
- Search for professional information (41 percent) and
- News sites consultation (40 percent).

Ivorians now have access to more and independent sources of information. They can share them and, above all, have more opportunities to express their opinions. As Ianis Pledel argued, «these new tools would have the capacity to create independent broadcasting spaces to evade the constraints by allowing the confrontation of everyone's opinion». Now, regardless of whether they do not have access to RTI, with the Internet, more than 2,400,000 Ivorian citizens (i.e. 10 percent of the national population) can express their opinions on the country's news through their Facebook pages, Twitter accounts or via a blog. They share personal views and opinions. Many professional journalists have also engaged in blogging and videoblogging (vlogging). Fernand Dedeh, Israel Guebo, Kahofi Suy, Frederic Goré Bi, De Laure Nesmon or Daouda Coulibaly, among others, use their blogs to express more freely what they cannot say under the cover of their media outlet.

For Ianis Pledel, «every citizen is a potential reporter, a real-time sensor». Some Ivorians have understood this very well and is translated into a growing number of blogs on Côte d'Ivoire. Many initiatives to promote blogging have been carried out to achieve this: Abidjan Blogs

Camp (2009), the directory of blogs in Côte d'Ivoire in Akendewa, Ivorian blog platforms such as Ivoire Blog and Blogs web, the Meet-up of the Union Nationale des Blogueurs de Côte d'Ivoire (UNBCI). Since 2011, there has even been a contest for Ivorian bloggers, Evoir Blog Awards. In addition to blogs, there is a growing trend towards participatory platforms where ordinary citizens volunteer to share local news and opinions, thus democratising information (example d'Avenue 225).

B- New framework for social and citizen mobilisation

Speaking of blogs, Kline and Burstein said that they «help to break (...) the isolation inherent in modern life. They provide individuals with a platform to speak openly to the government. If in recent past, social media was only a means of entertainment and communication for the Ivorian, today it has become aware of the tools they represent and does not hesitate to use them. Facebook, Twitter and blogs have thus become real means of pressure. The Ivorian, who until then had been passive and content to criticise «in his living room» certain public policies, increasingly dared to bring his criticism to the attention of the government and the world.

Social media have facilitated the emergence and spread of a critical culture and protest, creating a sense of civic belonging far beyond partisan considerations. This was the case with the death of the young Ivorian model Awa Fadiga, kidnapping of children and the rise in the cost of electricity. Even the former Minister of Digital Economy and Government Spokesperson, Bruno Koné (now Minister of Construction, Housing and Urban Development), experienced it, as he was violently criticised after his somewhat inappropriate remarks about Ivorian activists complaining about the cost of living. In other cases, social media has been used to circulate information and coordinate actions on the ground. This was the case, for example, during the post-electoral crisis, during and after the scramble of 31 December 2012, which resulted in the deaths of 61 people, where highly influential bloggers such as Cyriac Gbogou, Edith Brou, Mohamed Diaby, helped to circulate information, identify the injured and register the missing.

Ivorians mobilised through hashtags launched by these bloggers such as #Civ2010 for the 2010 elections, #Civ-Social for humanitarian assistance during the post-election crisis, #DramePlateau for the Plateau scramble on

31 December 2012, #MousserContreEbola for the fight against Ebola, #Les200 to denounce the contempt in the words of the Minister of the Digital Economy, and more recently for the constitutional referendum with #CIVConstitution and #VoteConst225.

Realising the importance of social networks, the government is now conducting online surveys. Parties and politicians are not left out. Henceforth, the battle to win voters is also fought on social media with virtually no holds barred. The most active political parties on the web are: Liberté et Démocratie pour la République (LIDER), an opposition party and the former ruling coalition, le Rassemblement des Houphouétistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix (RHDP) . These two parties regularly use their Facebook and Twitter accounts to spread political messages and mobilise their members. As for political figures, the most active and followed on the web are the President of the National Assembly, Soro Guillaume, the former Minister of Sports Alain Lobognon and some deputies, such as Yasmina Ouegnin. This presence thus provides a new framework for more direct interaction between citizens and politicians.

In addition, in the face of the breakdown of social living conditions and in this quest to be heard by decision-makers, spaces for dialogue, sharing and above all action have been created on Facebook, such as «Un consommateur averti en vaut deux» with 57,716 members, «Police secours» with 43,089 members, «Observatoire démocratique de Côte d'ivoire» with 41,050 members, «Marre des chauffards» with 7,924 members. These platforms offer the opportunity to alert national opinion on real-life experiences, to denounce the actions not only of governments but also of citizens, and to make recommendations for a positive change. Social media therefore offer citizens the power to «unify the public space around a limited number of explicit issues» by compartmentalizing, online, this public space and to shift position lines. The question is whether this movement is sustainable or not.



II- Fashion effect or real citizen dynamics ?

According to Ivorian laws, freedom of thought and expression are guaranteed for all. Everyone has the right to freely express and disseminate his/her ideas within the limits prescribed by law. Freedom of expression is therefore fundamental to the Ivorian constituent in the sense that it is essential to the exercise of other human rights and good governance. Social media practically supports this right to expression.

A- When citizen returns to power, lines move

Based on the above-mentioned facts, it can be safely stated that social media has been a true channel for liberation of speech, somewhat transferring the power of the media to citizens in Côte d'Ivoire. By facilitating the rapid dissemination of information, freedom of expression and collective mobilization, social media have created an unprecedented opening of the public space in Côte d'Ivoire, thus offering every citizen the opportunity to effectively exercise his/her right to expression and participation in public life. Between 2014 and 2016, the social discontent materialised by mobilisation on social media reached an unprecedented level; forcing the Ivorian government to action.

On January 4, 2013, bloggers Cyriac Gbogou and Mohamed Diby were arrested by the police for «Interference in the

operation of the administration and information» during the deadly scramble of Plateau on the night of December 31, 2012. However, the police authorities were compelled to quickly release them, due to the mobilisation which followed their arrest.



Source : Blog les découvertes d'Aamlorie

In April 2014, the death of the model Awa Fadiga led to the eviction of the Director General (DG) of the Cocody Hospital and led to the rehabilitation of the hospital's emergency department. In May 2015, the Minister of Youth and the Governor General were swept away by the case of unpaid premiums. Similarly, in March 2016, the RTI's Information DG was dismissed as a result of the mismanagement of information during the terrorist attack on Grand Bassam. In April 2016, a customs policy introduced customs clearance for items contained in travellers' personal luggage. However, a video of a disgruntled Internet user, which had more than 145,000

viewers, caused a public outcry, forcing customs authorities to explain themselves at a press conference. The government's decision was not long in coming, the measure was suspended. In the face of social unrest, the Head of State announced on May 1, 2016, taking of action against the high cost of living, including the cancellation of the increase in the price of electricity, the end of the monopoly on the distribution of electricity and water previously held by the French group Bouygues as well as the suspension of the reform of the driver's licence.

In the absence of strong and «neutral» civil society organisations capable of influencing political decisions in Côte d'Ivoire, citizens have taken up their responsibilities. These «victories» can be attributed to the social media that have supported collective mobilisation. They are also due to influential cyber activists gathered within the two national bloggers' associations, Association des Blogueurs de Côte d'Ivoire (ABCI) created in August 2013 and Union Nationale des Blogueurs de Côte d'Ivoire (UNBCI) which was created on December 07, 2015. The fact of being incorporated as an association gives legality to their actions and indicates a long-term firm resolve, by positioning themselves as a counter-power.

B- Watch out for abuses

Nowadays, social media are so present in the daily lives of Ivorians that most of them are satisfied with the information they get there. As a matter of fact, in addition to «titling», i.e. reading only the headlines of a newspaper and then drawing his/her own conclusion, the main source of information for the Ivorian seems to be social media. However, not everything on the Internet is credible. Therefore, false information and rumours are spreading.

If a person has a computer or mobile phone and an Internet connection, he/she can open a blog, Facebook page or twitter account and disseminate the information he/she wants, whether it is verified or not. The Ivorian consumer is therefore easily manipulated by this so-called «citizen information».

In a generalised social context of discontent, social media is an agitator of collective fears, initiating all kinds of abuses. We see it very regularly in Côte d'Ivoire. In early 2016, in a context of general psychosis created by frequent child kidnappings, numerous calls for popular justice were

broadcasted on social media. This has led to the lynching of innocent people in several cities across the country.

Another negative point to note is the violence in Internet users' comments, especially when it comes to political issues, mainly between supporters of the ruling party and opposition parties. Instead of contradictory debates based on objective analyses, there is a recurrence of offensive language and inappropriate comments in conversations, especially on Facebook. Apparently, the wounds opened by the post-electoral crisis have not yet healed. Unfortunately, this shows a certain political immaturity. From this point of view, social media can be perceived as a danger to social peace. Given their impact, it is therefore important for citizens to make good use of the tools offered by social media. If used correctly, they will be a powerful ally of democracy in Côte d'Ivoire.

for Peace and Reconciliation for the development of peacebuilding tools (le Hackathon pour la paix et la réconciliation) should be multiplied.

They also have a watch over role to play in the regular monitoring of public authorities' commitments and accountability. Very often, the commitments made by the authorities during a crisis have only been measures to calm the storm and have not been implemented. Article 23 of Ordinance No. 2013-660 of September 20, 2013 on the prevention and fight against corruption and related offences, which stipulates that «associations, foundations, groups and, in general, civil society groups and legally constituted non-governmental organisations[...] are called upon to promote democratic legality and good governance, as well as the values of transparency, integrity and accountability of the public and private sectors». Considering this article and given their popularity and neutrality, the two bloggers' associations enjoy the legal and moral guarantee to carry out this monitoring.

What remains now is the technical competence which can be acquired through capacity building, such as the partnership between UNBCI and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. In addition, participating in initiatives such as AFRICTIVISTS creates international visibility and a powerful network for disseminating their actions. In this march, we must also ensure the dissemination of verified, fair and quality information to avoid falling under the new law on the legal regime of the press. In this respect, fact checking which is a practice of checking information in real time, can be a useful tool. On the road to democracy, citizen journalists should not lose their sense of humour, as humour is a very effective weapon of contest and protest in Côte d'Ivoire. All this should be done of course, in compliance with ethics and professional conduct.

Conclusion

« You don't fight with clicks. We fight with slaps »

French trade unionist, 2012

There is no doubt that position lines have moved in Côte d'Ivoire, as a result of popular mobilisation led by citizen journalists through social media. A citizen consciousness is emerging. However, much remains to be done to achieve significant change that can transform existing power relations. Romain Lecomte says it so well: «A revolution is not only led behind computer screens». David Faris also argues that «online revolt is not a mono-causal phenomenon and it would be absurd to think that social media alone could trigger an uprising». That would be reducing politics to technology. Social media is only a tool for a cause.

According to the Regulation Authority of Telecommunications/ICT of Cote d'Ivoire (ARTCI), although Côte d'Ivoire has a 100 percent mobile penetration rate (i.e. 24.5 million subscribers), only 5,230,000 Ivoirians have access to the Internet. Considering this fact, the virtual «struggle» for democracy would greatly benefit from materialising, alongside communities, both urban and rural, in order to counter any attempt by the government to censor them. Overcoming the obstacle of the digital divide will therefore be able to ensure social mobilisation on a larger scale.

In this highly politicised environment, cyber-activists and other bloggers' associations have a decisive role to play. Their vision should consist of bringing out a citizen consciousness and a strong nation. In a country with a literacy rate of 45 percent, they will need to make a strong, long-term commitment and leverage on their communication skills to informing and educating people to take an active part in the management of public affairs. As civil society actors, they must also continue to be ingenious and exercise leadership in the process of citizen participation and national reconciliation to enrich the political debate. Initiatives such as Election Observation Digital Electoral Brigade (la brigade numérique électorale pour l'observation des élections), Hackathon

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