

Democracy and the Media in Africa: 2010-2011 Ivory Coast Political Transition

*Démocratie et médias en Afrique :
2010-2011, la transition politique en Côte d'Ivoire*

*Les medios de comunicación y la consolidación democrática en África.
Côte d'Ivoire Transición a través de los medios*

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ABSTRACT

This contribution intends to critically analyze the relationship between the media's role in portraying facts and opinions, and democratic consolidation on African context. West Africa's Ivory Coast's recent and disputed transition will be the case study to focus on this particular combination of issues. This study draws theoretically on the positive role media could play in the democratic consolidation of the country, and acknowledges critical perspectives on the linear understanding of democracy. Following a qualitative approach, the role of the media during the transition process is addressed through interviews with media practitioners. Therefore, it offers additional elements in order to understand the contribution of media to democracy in African contemporary societies.

Keywords

Media, democracy, Ivory Coast, political transition.

RESUME

Cette contribution cherche à analyser de façon critique la relation entre le rôle des médias dans les faits et les opinions, et la consolidation de la démocratie sur le contexte africain. La récente ainsi que contestée transition en Côte d'Ivoire sera le cas d'étude. Ce travail s'appuie théoriquement sur le rôle positif des médias sur la consolidation démocratique du pays, mais aussi sur les perspectives critiques de la démocratie. Suite à une approche qualitative, le rôle des médias pendant le processus de transition est abordé à travers des entretiens avec des professionnels des médias. Par conséquent, l'article offre des éléments supplémentaires pour comprendre la contribution des médias à la démocratie dans les sociétés africaines contemporaines.

Mots-clés

médias, démocratie, Côte d'Ivoire, transition politique.

RESUMEN :

Esta contribución pretende analizar críticamente la relación entre el papel de los medios de comunicación y la consolidación democrática en el contexto africano. La reciente y disputada transición política en Costa de Marfil constituye el caso de estudio. Este estudio se basa teóricamente en el papel positivo de los medios en la consolidación democrática del país y reconoce las perspectivas críticas sobre la democracia. Siguiendo un enfoque cualitativo se analiza el papel de los medios de comunicación durante el proceso de transición, a través de entrevistas con profesionales de los medios. Por lo tanto, este trabajo ofrece elementos adicionales para entender la contribución de los medios de comunicación a la democracia en las sociedades contemporáneas africanas.

Palabras clave

Medios de comunicación, democracia, Costa de Marfil, transición política.

INTRODUCTION¹

Using the media to approach the complex issue of the Ivory Coast crisis after the contested presidential elections held last December 2010 requires a panoramic view of the various point of views involved in the equation. Firstly, the article presents a concise account of the main political events relating to independence, together with an overview of the Ivorian media political economy. Secondly, the performance of Ivorian media is assessed from the perspective of media professionals,

with views from local journalists and foreign correspondents covering the Ivorian crisis. In this analysis, media includes traditional newspapers, magazines, radio and TV, together with new Internet-based blogs. Other forms of media, such as street discussion groups (i.e. La Sorbonne, agoras, grins, as in our case study), together with Evangelical and prophetic churches, or those less recognizable forms of information circulation like DVD, cassettes, etc. will not be considered, even though it is important to note that these particular formats constitute privileged instruments through which ordinary people get information from which to build their opinions.

In the 1970s already, several scholars started to assess political economy of media in the context of a critique of the cultural industries' approach (Mattelart & Mattelart 1986, 1997; Miège 2006; Bustamante & Zallo, 1988). The main purpose of this tradition is to identify who is behind each media outlet, or decipher the property structure of any particular media, be it public or private. In this approach, it was implied that media content could be determined by both economic and political-related leverage also having its share of influence on society. Particularly, media concentration, has been raised not only as an economic strategy to build larger groups and gain competitiveness, it is indeed also considered a threat to democracy, because it means concentration in political power and consequently, the reduction of plurality ; although these consequences aren't easily identified on a short time span (Miège, 2006).

Côte d'Ivoire's media landscape presents highly concentrated media in the hands of well-known political figures and allies, together with low-distribution figures in the case of the press, and along with a big concentration of audio-visual media in the hands of the state (Moussa, 2012). This trend may possibly help explain how plurality in the media is hampered by property concentration, and therefore raises democracy issues.

Nevertheless, the connection between media and democracy is a complex issue that needs to be considered in light of a broad understanding of democracy and the context in which it is played. As Francis Nyamnjoh (2005, p. 27) puts it, almost everywhere, liberal democratic assumptions have been made about the media and its role in democratization and society, with little regard to the cultures, histories and sociology of African societies. According to the critical approach of democracy (Curran, Seaton, 2010 ; Perret, 2005 ; Nyamnjoh, 2005) the troubles faced by the media and its practitioners are no longer seen simply as their own failures ; rather, they are increasingly perceived as a result of the very deficiency of the current form of liberal democracy applied to Africa.

As Barbie Zelizer (2005) argues, journalistic conventions, routines and practices are dynamic and contingent to situational and historical circumstances. Journalists and the media in the region face multiple obstacles (Tomaselli, 2009, p. 9), especially relating to the companies that own the media in which they work, together with financial problems linked to high vulnerability due to corruption and dereliction of ethical values. Additionally, the situation may differ according to language patterns and past colonization legacies, amongst other factors. Whereas the media sector of the former British colonies is growing, especially Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana and Tanzania, where powerful print and broadcasting media groups are emerging, in the French-language speaking region, the media fits into old French press traditions, with intellectual circles, rather than business. The media in former French - such as the Ivory Coast case studied here - and Belgian colonies suffer from profound structural weaknesses (Frere, 2011, p. 11-12). As Nyamnjoh (2005, p. 89) points out, the English-speaking continue to be inspired by Anglo-Saxon (business-objectivity) media traditions, while French-speaking have remained French or Latin (literary-interpretive) in style.

METHOD

A qualitative perspective was applied to assess the Ivorian post-electoral crisis through the lens of the media. This implied a twofold procedure.

First, relevant information relating to Ivory Coast's social and political background and context was gathered, including the media landscape in the country, in order to clarify the historical processes that could help understand the political transition that developed after the 2010 elections. The political economy of Ivorian media was also appraised.

Secondly, the perception of Ivorian media performance was analysed from the viewpoint of practitioners. Therefore, a series of semi-structured interviews using a questionnaire were conducted through e-mail with an Ivorian journalists/communication expert (Mundo Negro-University Cocody-Abidjan), and one Ivorian diaspora blogger. Four foreign correspondents then on the spot were also interviewed (BBC, Bloomberg, *La Croix*, *Time Magazine/The Wall Street Journal*). All responses were analysed and compared critically in order to provide a set of combined views, which ultimately might shed some light on the research question.

IVORY COAST BACKGROUND

The Ivorian Coast experienced a coup d'état in 1999, and a rebellion in 2002, that somehow paved the way to the violent transition that took place in 2010-2011. Contrary to some narratives of greed and the political economy of war, what is unique in the Ivorian Coast's crisis is the contested claims on citizenship (Bah, 2010, p. 598) and sovereignty (Marsahl-Fratany, 2006, p. 11). After the 1999 putsch, General Robert Guéï sponsored a referendum in July 2000, when adding the Article 35 to the Ivorian Constitution in which it is required that both parents of anyone running for presidential office must be Ivorian citizens, rather than just one, as stipulated by the Constitution until then. Based on what had been called "ivoirité" (translated "ivorianity", Piccolino, 2011, p. 2), this nationalistic claim was obviously intended to stop his opponent from running, Alassane Ouattara, a Malinke - traditionally attached to commerce and business - from the North of the country, who was prime minister and deputy manager of International Monetary Fund. On the 6th of October 2000, a Supreme Court appointed by Guéï himself stated that neither Konan Bédié nor Alassane Ouattara were eligible to run for president, leaving only the long-term opponent Laurent Gbagbo (a Bete, from the West and history professor), who took over on 22 October.

The rebellion held in September 2002 was initiated by rebels from the North and West of the country. Former president R. Guéï and his immediate family, together with the Minister of Interior Emile Boga Doudou, were murdered. As a result, the country was divided into two, setting a scene, as it has often simplistically related, in which northerners, often lumped together as Burkinabe were allegedly barred from the political opportunities allowed the Southerners who were taken as the true Ivorians. Later on, president Gbagbo employed sovereignty to block outside attempts at peace that could be unfavourable to his regime.

From March 2004 onwards, home arrests started, as well as disappearances and extrajudicial killings of presumed Northerners from Abidjan neighbourhoods. A UN commission of inquiry established that at least 120 civilians were killed and it stated : "the indiscriminate killing of civilians and the committing of human rights violations."ⁱⁱ The UN Security Council passed resolution 1572/2004 authorising targeted sanctions against those responsible for human rights abuses, war crimes and blocking the peace process and imposing an arms embargo on Côte d'Ivoire.

International actors, from ECOWAS, via the AU (African Union) to the UN responded by giving Gbagbo and the government of national unity a one-year grace period within which to hold elections. Nevertheless, after several clashes between Young Patriots - a pro-Gbagbo movement that arrogate the nationalistic narrative of a second independence against the former French coloniser, (Banegas, 2006) - and UN forces, the international institutions failed to act on their threats and simply set a new deadline for the elections to October 2007 (McGovern, 2011, p. 23-24).

Finally, elections took place throughout the months of October and November 2010. Alassane Ouattara backed-up by Henri Konan Bédié and his PDCI party, as well as a number of smaller parties, defeated Laurent Gbagbo in the second round of elections that took place in November. International electoral observation missions unanimously said that the election was globally free and fair, but Gbagbo refused to step down and a horrific spiral of violence started.

From December 2010 to late February 2011, it was the security forces and allied militia loyal to Gbagbo that primarily perpetrated the post-election violence. During that time, Ouattara and his government were confined in “Hotel du Golf” in Abidjan, under the protection of UN forces. Throughout the West, pro-Ouattara forces killed, raped, and burned villages. At the peak of the conflict, more than 180,000 Ivoirians had fled to Liberia. Several hundred thousand more remain internally displaced for similar reasons (HRW, 2012).

President Gbagbo surrendered in April 2011, under high pressure from UN and especially the French forces (Banegas, 2011, p. 465). Ouattara immediately took over and confirmed the International Criminal Court’s authority in investigating the crimes under its jurisdiction, and Gbagbo was handed in to The Hague Tribunal.

IVORIAN MEDIA POLITICAL ECONOMY

From 1990 onwards, Ivory Coast enters a new period of its history characterised by the return of a multiparty system and a blossom of the press, euphorically referred to as “springtime”. Between 1990 and 1996, some 178 newspapers appeared on the nation’s market.

In his latest and comprehensive report on Ivoirian media during the crisis, Zio Moussa, chairman of the Ivorian Observatory for Press Freedom and Professional Code of Ethics (OLPED) points out that public service media belongs to the State of Ivory Coast. Main newspaper *Fraternité Matin*’s capital is wholly owned by the state. In the capital of the Ivorian Broadcasting Service (RTI : 2 television channels, RTI 1 and RTI2 and 2 of the national radio as well as Fréquence 2) the state controls a massive 98% of the shares. The Ivorian News Agency (AIP) is also owned by the state (Moussa, 2012, p. 52). Venance Konan, *Fraternité Matin*’s managing director tried to clarify the role of state media in Ivory Coast when he declared to RWB on 28 April 2011 that despite being a State owned media, *Fraternité Matin* will echo all Ivorian voice, because the State represents everyone in the country.

On the other hand, the number of private newspapers seems to have reduced radically. From the remarkable figure of 178 newspapers founded during the springtime period, only thirty were still operating by the end of 2011. The circulation data of all of them has fallen drastically. Nearly 8 million purchases were lost, from 35,984,611 copies in 2001 to 29,501,504 in 2005. The most important newspaper, *Fraternité Matin* was only selling 30,000 copies daily in 2011. The majority of newspapers endure high rates of unsold copies.

Alike other media markets worldwide, the Ivorian news consumers do realise the relationships of dependence between the media and power blocs, and they group them by colour : those which are for Laurent Gbagbo’s Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), are the blues ; those for the Democratic Party of Côte d’Ivoire-African Democratic Rally (PDCI-RDA) of Henri Konan Bédié, the greens (Moussa, 2012, p. 11-45).

Moreover, the same report showed the connection between media property and key political figures. Notre Voie clearly belongs to the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI) of former President Laurent Gbagbo; the current Minister of Interior, Ahmed Bakayoko, is the majority shareholder - 475 shares out of 500 - of the publishing company *Mayama Editions et Production*, with the remaining 25 shares held by the staff. Denis Kah Moussan, member of the PDCI-RDA holds 400 shares out of 500 Editions Le Réveil’s shares, publishers of the daily newspaper *Le Nouveau Réveil*, against 100 for the staff.

The 500 shares of Cyclone SARL, publishers of pro-Laurent Gbagbo's daily newspaper *Le Temps*, are divided between two shareholders : Bamba Nadiani (second's Gbagbo wife), 350 shares and Gbagbo Koudou Al Rais David (her son), 150 shares. Méité Sindou, current Chief Executive of the Directorate for Good Governance and former spokesman for Prime Minister Soro Kigbafori Guillaume holds 275 shares of Nord-Sud Communication ; the other 225 shares are distributed among six minority shareholders (Moussa, 2012, p. 56-57).

Private commercial radio stations, denominational radios, and neighborhood radios have grown exponentially, but cannot legally participate in the political debate, so some interviewees attested. The most popular Internet site for Ivorians living in Ivory Coast and abroad is www.abidjan.net. It was created in 1998 by two young Ivorian businessmen and it publishes articles from all Ivorian newspapers and from national and international news agencies (Théroux-Bénoni, 2009, p. 117).

In October 2010, Reporters Without Borders monitored 4 Ivorian newspapers : *Fraternité Matin*, *Le Nouveau Réveil*, *Notre Voie* and *Le Patriote*. The organization expressed its serious concerns about the verbal excesses and exaggerations used on October 27, 2010, four days to the first round of the presidential election in Ivory Coast, by private daily newspapers *Le Nouveau Réveil*, *Notre Voie* and *Le Patriote*. The organization believed that the use of the expression "mass graves and killings" to denounce an alleged "unpunished genocide" committed by Laurent Gbagbo on the first page of the daily newspaper *Le Patriote*, as well as the accusation of "those who cheated the farmers" made against the party of candidate Alassane Ouattara on page 7 of *Notre Voie*, or that "the plans of attack" by pro-government former soldiers who are preparing "troubles for the night of October 29 to 30" published on page 11 of *Nouveau Réveil*, are excessive and do not meet the standards of professional information.

Based on the work undertaken by the OLPED, his chairman Zio Moussa (2012, p. 28) states that the number of cases of serious professional misconduct committed by journalists and the Ivorian media is huge and disturbing. After establishing a problematic comparison with the Rwandan genocide, he questions whether the media is to blame for the conflict that followed the contested elections, which, according to the official sources, lead to 3,000 casualties. He answers that if the media cannot be considered fully responsible, it can be stated unequivocally, that their role in what happened was not a minor one.

The role of the press is combined with that of other actors : a particular way of consuming and participating in the circulation of news, that takes place in Abidjan particularly, is the phenomenon of headline specialists, referred to as "titrologues" (Bahi, 2001). The headline spinners are those who read the headlines and engage in discussions about them, whether they actually bought the newspapers and read the corresponding articles or not (Théroux-Bénoni, 2009, p. 82). The front pages thus serve as sources for rumors which, in this particular case, become true because they are published in the media (Moussa, 2012, p. 30).

This phenomenon is completely different from other types of discussion groups in the Abidjan context, such as "La Sorbonne" group, the agoras and the parliaments on the one hand ; and the grins - an urban setting and allows for people of the same generation to meet after school or after work around a glass of tea in a public space - on the other. Both are places around which people are gathered to discuss public affairs (Théroux-Bénoni, 2009, p. 203).

Mobile phones and the Internet also played also particular roles during the crisis. According to the State's telecom regulator, Agence de Télécommunications de Côte d'Ivoire, the country had 15.8 million mobile subscriber lines in June 2011. In 2010 Gbagbo's government started closing down the SMS messaging facility on mobile phone networks. SMS messaging was shut down for several days in November 2010 during the run-up to the second round in the presidential election. It was subsequently shut down again in February 2011, as the conflict intensified. The service was only

restored following the overthrow of Gbagbo's government two months later (Infoasaid, accessed 27 July 2012).

RESULTS

With regard to the role of traditional media (newspapers, radio and TV) both before and after the 2010 elections, in terms of fair and balanced reporting of political issues, there is relative consensus amongst interviewees relating to polarisation and unbalanced reporting by Ivorian media. It's role as a combat media is particularly emphasized in the responses. And according to the interviewees' vision, this combat is played as if each side in the political struggle managed to convey and manipulate its constituencies through certain media outlets.

The Ivorian press represents the ideology of political parties. This means that journalists are assigned to a mission, that of making propaganda for the political party for which they work. The war was on two fronts, that of communication and that of weapons. Ivorian media and foreign media communication made war in the same way. Each expressed the crisis in terms of its bias (Rosalie Kouamé : Ivorian diaspora blogger).

The role of media has been instrumental in the violent change of government. Newspapers and radio stations are responsible for chasing supporters from each party, even though today the question lies on disarming voices. The press called pro-Ouattara continues to accuse Gbagbo of all the country's illnesses (as if the pro-Ouattara were all angels) meanwhile pro-Gbagbo media still avoid self-criticism (Jean Arsène Yao : Mundo Negro, Cocody University Abidjan).

The media played a massive role in whipping up emotions and fuelling acts of rage in the run-up to the elections. The main public station, RTI, which is watched by the vast majority of Ivorians (even in communities where there are few televisions, it is shown in public bars) was a mouthpiece for government propaganda (Monica Mark : *TIME Magazine & The Wall Street Journal*).

Interviewees' opinions remain the same as above even when they are specifically asked to try to identify any example of trustful and independent Ivorian media.

The Ivorian private press is very politicized and polarized. Most of the press here is just about political communication and many directly or indirectly belong to politicians : *Nord/Sud* defends Soro ; *Nouveau Reveil*, Bedie ; *Le Patriote*, Hamed Bakayoko (interior minister now) and Ouattara ; *Notre Voie*, Gbagbo... RTI, the state-owned television, was used by Gbagbo's regime as a way to broadcast its propaganda... *Soir Info* and *L'Inter* newspapers were (and are) more balanced as they belong to Lebanese businessmen (the same group of press *Olympe*) and aim to defend the Lebanese interests. This being said, they've been unable to take any distance with the events, leading them spread the propaganda of both camps (but at least you could have many voices in those newspapers) (Olivier Monnier : Bloomberg, *La Croix*).

When referring to the role of the national broadcaster, RTI, foreign correspondents are especially critical. They seem to agree on the perception that a national broadcaster should be particularly respectful of journalistic ethical standards and, coherently, they must play an exemplary role in the national journalistic context. They obviously seem to compare what they see and hear during their coverage time of the crisis in Abidjan, against a perhaps highly idealised model of public broadcaster role in Western societies.

The national media has played a divisive role, with journalists fighting political points rather than seeking to report the strict truth. The state television is perhaps the worst culprit, toeing the line of whoever is in power and being relentlessly upbeat (John James : BBC).

When asked about the role of the radio stations and more precisely the role of community radio during the crisis, respondents are not unanimous in their perception of the role played by this media

during this period. Apparently radio stations are not allowed to broadcast political issues on their own behalf, but this requirement was not always respected.

Community radio isn't a way for people normally to get hold of political issues, given they're not supposed to deal with politics (John James : BBC).

Community radio is often dominated by the relevant political power for the community. Various UN agencies have pumped hundreds of thousands of dollars in the training of community radio journalists since the crisis began in 2002, but the effects of those projects are debatable (Pauline Bax : Bloomberg, Dutch newspaper).

Concerning the role played by the diasporic blogs in reporting the crisis it is not clear to what extent they played a significant part in shaping attitudes. In any case, they were active outside the country, but not very much relevant inside Ivory Coast, due to low access to the Internet, especially outside of Abidjan.

Diasporic blogs and sites had a colour depending on the person they supported. It must be said that the diaspora media as a whole was much more objective in its assessment, less passionate in its reactions than those in Côte d'Ivoire. Diaspora did not live this war directly (Rosalie Kouamé : Ivorian diaspora blogger).

CONCLUSIONS

It seems relatively clear that media sector in Ivory Coast has powerful ties with the political realm, to the extent that the property of relevant public and private media outlets remains directly in the hands of key political figures in the country. This tells us that mainstream media is, above all, one of the privileged means to show and translate personal and social leverage by political figures, regardless of their limited sale results, as it was pointed out earlier. In this vein, media should be seen more in terms of places in which to gain and project social capital, than platforms to perform the social responsibility of informing audiences. This development, in the medium or long term, does not impede on social capital turning into other forms of capital, be it symbolic or economic.

As far as the content channelled through the media is concerned, the reports seem to point towards a biased and politicized treatment of political issues. Nevertheless, the publication and circulation figures, especially that of print media, do not allow us to state high penetration of media in Ivorian society, their biased content, often accompanied with excesses, may be understood in a different way. The media content could also be understood as an instrument of political struggle ; not surprisingly, Ivorian media is often referred to as “combat media”. This struggle could be played not only over a certain political figure in the opposition or in the ruling party who is the particular media bull’s eye, but it could also be played as a means to create meaning and identity in a very polarized and divided society such is the Ivorian.

Therefore, traditional western perception of media, as a place in which objective information is channelled towards wide audiences, and through which the public may shape its opinions and contribute to the public debate, may not only be too much of an idealistic to be applied to many western societies, but it is also a superficial and limited comprehension of media in the context of the Ivorian crisis. Media property and its content played a more complex role in the Ivorian context, and specifically during the electoral crisis analysed here. Ivorian media seems to be the privileged arena to show and perform social power, to criticize and debunk political adversaries and possibly to project personal influence along ethnic lines.

Some of our respondents did not manage to go beyond what appears to be an extremely polarized media environment. It is common knowledge that foreign correspondents often have to cover international crisis in a rush, and they are not allowed enough time so as to grasp the overall picture in which the events unfold. Some of their responses seem to be expressed in consideration of Ivorian

media as opposed to a western media model, somehow projecting a very optimistic view of the latter. Even the most admired public broadcaster, such as the BBC, has to some extent problems connected with particular low performance, or excesses committed by its journalists. Not to mention public broadcasters in the Mediterranean countries, whose editorial lines are, much more often than desired contingent with the governing political party.

Comparison with the Rwandan genocide and the role played there by the infamous Radio Télévision Mille Collines are recurrent in many respondents' views, as it is in other reports on the role played by the media in war and conflict contexts. Nevertheless, it is highly problematic to establish such a straightforward comparison with the media in Ivory Coast, because it takes for granted that Ivorian media played exactly the same role in provoking hatred and violence such as this particular Rwandan counterpart. Additionally, this comparison takes for granted that there is a linear relationship between media content and peoples' behaviour. In the same line, it is also problematic, as some respondent's do, to establish that illiterate people take TV content as gospel, therefore obscuring the many ways in which people decode and negotiate TV content.

Therefore, our goal, which was to assess the role of the Ivorian media during the 2010 crisis, turned to be much more complex than predicted. Media could be and, in particular settings certainly is, a very visible way to mobilize the public. But Ivorian media, as we have shown from the reports of OLPED, is not only a place for biased and polarized content, but also a site in which social capital and identity is played and bargained.

It is beyond the scope of this work to appraise how ordinary Ivorian citizens decode the media content and, consequently, what are the implications of this negotiated meaning in their political views. Future research should focus on different types of communication and other forms of public opinion manufacturing processes, in order to grasp how people perceive and use media content.

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