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RESEARCH PROJECT

“The impact of Social Networks on the level of democracy in
Côte d'Ivoire from 2010 to the present day”

Interview by Amnis VIGAN



RESEARCHER BIO

Donassongui Benjamin SORO, is a teacher-researcher and a specialist in religious and social history, at the Department of History, Université Alassane Ouattara (Bouaké - Côte d'Ivoire);

He is a consultant with AEBECI (Association des Eglises Baptistes et Evangéliques de Côte d'Ivoire) ; and

- Member of LARSHI (Laboratoire de Recherche des Sciences Historiques);
- Member of the PTR - Governance and Development of CAMES;
- Author of several publications and papers presented at various international conferences on the missionary work of American Baptists in Côte d'Ivoire;
- Principal investigator of a research team on the general theme of 'Democracy, conflict and polarisation' as part of the West Africa Regional Hub Small Grants Fund of the CERAP - EGAP programme.

The project led under this grant is entitled : *The impact of Social Networks on the level of democracy in Côte d'Ivoire from 2010 to the present day*

- Excellence scholarship from the Swiss Confederation,
- Postdoctoral fellow at the University of Geneva (Switzerland);
- Holder of a Certificate of Study in English.

Contact info:

- E-mail: sbendona@gmail.com
- <https://www.unige.ch/lettres/istge/enseignants-chercheurs/soro-donassongui-benjamin>



INTERVIEW



How do you define democracy?

The definition of democracy is based on these characteristics in a state governed by the rule of law, freedom of expression or plural expression and political alternation. A state governed by the rule of law refers to the separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary. Freedom of expression or plural expression refers to a multiparty system, civil society and the media. Political alternation refers to periodic changes in the ruling political class through elections.

Which social media platforms have had the most impact on democratic values in Côte d'Ivoire since 2010?

Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube are the social networks that have had the greatest impact on democracy since 2010. This is justified by an analysis that shows that from 2010 to the present day, Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube rank in the top 3 networks with the largest number of users. Facebook held the top spot ahead of WhatsApp and YouTube from 2010 to 2020, before handing it over to WhatsApp, which has held the top spot since then. However, it should be noted that from 2012 to 2014, WhatsApp occupied the fourth place before reclaiming the top spot it occupies to this day. As the number of users on each network has grown, so too has the number of users on each network. Between 2010 and 2012, on an occurrence of 138, Facebook was cited 46 times, and this figure evolved to 186 between 2016 and 2018, which corresponds to one of the periods of high subscriber numbers on the networks. The same applies to WhatsApp, which rose from 25 to 146 between 2018 and 2020. The same cannot be said for LinkedIn, which even with an evolution still occupies last place on the list with an occurrence that went from 1 between 2010 and 2012 to 4 between 2020 and 2022 before disappearing from the list. Based on these statistics, we can confirm that our results are in line with E2Business Consulting and training's 2021 report.

What are the arguments made for ensuring the reliability of political information ?

Table 2 : Representation of Arguments justifying the reliability of political information

Arguments	Numbers	Percentage (%)
Reliability of information relayed by social networks	30	25,64
Importance of sources and verification	26	22,22
Transparency and freedom of expression	24	20,51
Easy access to information	22	18,80
Role of influencers and media	15	12,82
Total	117	100,00

The reliability of information relayed by social networks, the importance of sources and their verification are the main argument for reliable information from social networks.

They account for 39.31% of respondents' reasoning, for a total of 46 appearances. As for the role of influencers and the media, although rarely mentioned - 17 occurrences for a proportion of 12.82% - they also appear to respondents as essential factors in the reliability of political information disseminated on social networks.

The arguments used to justify the position of our respondents in relation to the reliability of political information disseminated via social networks show that there is a diversity of understanding of the term "reliability".

Our surveys revealed 56 occurrences, or 47.86%, of such arguments being put forward. Alongside these arguments, "transparency and freedom of expression, easy access to information" are not to be outdone.

Table 3 : Representation of Arguments justifying the reliability of political information

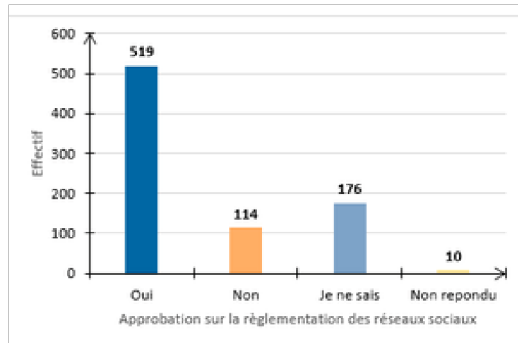
Arguments	Occurrence	Fréquence (%)
Massive dissemination of false informations and rumors	198	42,13
Lacks of verification of informations sources	101	21,49
Manipulation of informations	93	19,79
Uncontrolled freedom of expression	78	16,60
Total	470	100,00

Among the reasons given for maintaining that the information distilled on social networks is unreliable, we note the predominance of the massive dissemination of false information and rumors. The number of times this was expressed was 198, or 42.13% of arguments. Other reasons, such as lack of verification of information sources, manipulation of information and uncontrolled freedom of expression, appeared 101, 93 and 78 times respectively, in proportions of 21.49, 19.79 and 16.60% of respondents' comments.

On the basis of these arguments, we could point out that our respondents' lack of trust in political information from social networks is mainly fuelled by the dissemination of erroneous information, the lack of verification and the manipulation of this information. On the other hand, a cursory comparison of the arguments suggests that while some respondents point to the advantages of social networks, such as ease of access and freedom of expression, these same actions can become sources of difficulties if controls are not rigorously applied. Which raises the issue of regulation.

How has user trust in information available on social media, evolved since 2010 ?

The spread of false information and hate speech has made it necessary to introduce regulations to protect privacy and data security. If properly implemented, these regulations could help limit abuse, protect users and ensure better use of these platforms.



Our investigations revealed a number of opinions, which are summarized in the figure below.

The figure shows opinions supporting the implementation of social network regulation. This is the majority of respondents, with a total of 519. On the other hand, some were opposed (114), while others were undecided (176) or didn't bother to answer the question. Whatever their position, they gave their reasons. The tables below show their responses.

Figure 1 Respondent's approval of the introduction of regulations to govern social networks

Respondents' main expectations of social networks can be summed up as improving the quality of information. A reading of the table confirms this idea through occurrences such as "reduce fake news" (112 occurrences, 28.87%), "increase news quality" (108 occurrences, 27.84%) and "combat news manipulation" (37 occurrences, 9.54%).

Arguments	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Reducing fake news	112	28,87
increase news quality	108	27,84
protecting the integrity of the state and its people	42	10,82
Reducing conflict and tension	42	10,82
Combating information manipulation	37	9,54
Focus of freedom expression	24	6,19
Effectiveness of social networks in spreading information	23	5,93
Total	388	100,00

Source : our survey, 2023

Table 4 : Representation of the arguments justifying approval of the introduction of social network regulation

The expressions used to express them are listed below:

- "With the regulations, only reliable information will be conveyed"
 - "With the fines, I think that everyone will take the time to check their information before distributing it"
 - "Because they help to limit false information".
 - Protecting the integrity of the State and the population"
- and 'reducing conflict and tension' are other concerns for our respondents.

For them, regulating the use of social networks would reduce the risk of tension and promote social stability. The table below shows that freedom of expression is of fundamental interest to opponents of social network regulation. In 29 occurrences, representing 24.17% of interventions, our interlocutors hammered home their fear of seeing freedom of expression on social networks being curtailed for the sake of other rules. A recourse to their words gives the following :

- "Currently, there are already laws, and that's enough.
- "For information shared in opposition to the government will be subject to sanction.
- This is a danger to freedom of expression
- "Because being in a country where there is freedom of expression, social networks are channels for every citizen to express his or her views on political life".

Arguments	Total	Percentage (%)
Letting freedom of expression take its course	29	24,17
Reducing communication and distraction	24	20,00
Better implementation of existing laws	15	12,50
Fear of reprisals and restricted access for certain citizens	14	11,67
This will be a form of confiscation of freedom of expression	12	10,00
Raising awareness instead of regulating	9	7,50
No opinion on the subject	6	5,00
Risk of revolts and waves of discontent	6	5,00
Better to use another type of communication	3	2,50
Regulation will have no impact	2	1,67
Total	120	100,00

Source : Nos enquêtes, 2024

Table 5: Representation of arguments justifying disapproval of social network regulation

Following on from this argument, we also note their interest in maintaining the level of communication and distraction. This second group believes that any new regulations would undermine the existing level of communication and, above all, reduce the distraction provided by social networks. Other justifications, along the lines of "better enforcement of existing laws (15 occurrences, 12.50%), fear of reprisals and limiting access to certain citizens (14 occurrences, 11.67%), it would be a form of confiscation of freedom of expression (12 occurrences, 10.00%)", must be taken into account in their advocacy.



What motivates citizens to express themselves on social media about topics related to democracy ?

Social networks have become a veritable forum for expression in Côte d'Ivoire, offering free access to all opinions, unlike the traditional government-controlled public media.

How did your collaboration with Alassane Ouattara University contribute to the implementation of your study, and what were the benefits?

Our collaboration with the Université Alassane Ouattara, contributed to the implementation of our study through the following advantages: the provision of administrative documents officially authorizing field surveys on the university premises, the coaching of senior teacher-researchers who are members of the Université Alassane Ouattara and the Programme Thématique de Recherche Gouvernance et Développement, the provision of premises at the Université Alassane Ouattara for the study and the facilitation of contact with the target population.

What are the main results of this project regarding the impact of social media on democracy in Côte d'Ivoire since 2010 ?

THREE KEY RESULTS OF THE STUDY

We have three (3) results :

Result 1 : *Since 2010, social networks have strengthened the political participation of Ivorian citizens through e-militancy, the communication and monitoring of political information, support for and denunciation of socio-political events, the organization of training, conferences and online political panels, the implementation of political marketing strategies, etc.*

Result 2 : *The accessibility of social networks to all facilitates interaction between citizens and leaders, so that citizens can express their views on a given socio-political situation through a like, a comment or a share. Social networks break the distance maintained by traditional state media between the people and their leaders;*

Result 3 : *The recurrence of misinformation on social networks is an obstacle to democracy. This calls for state regulation of the use of social networks. Unfortunately, this regulation of social networks becomes a pretext for controlling and hounding users in the political sense of social media.*

How do you see social media's role in promoting democratic values in Côte d'Ivoire?

We need to encourage the State to regulate the use of social networks, rather than control and track down discordant or contradictory voices on social networks. We also need to educate people to use social networks more efficiently, by integrating lessons on the democratic use of social networks into secondary and university education.



Benefits of funding

The funding has benefited us on several levels:

- *practical and theoretical reinforcement of our capacities in qualitative and quantitative methods ;*
- *creation of a highly rewarding teamwork environment in which we faced real challenges;*
- *developing our understanding of the different stages in carrying out a research project and how to deal with them;*
- *Strengthening our resilience and sense of leadership through the role of principal investigator on the Social Networks and Democracy project.*

“We would therefore like to express our gratitude to the Cerap-Egap team for this wonderful opportunity to fund our project and plunge us into the heart of the techno/digital and political changes of our time. This funding has enabled us to continue our training and strengthen the skills and knowledge we have already acquired. It is thus making a significant contribution to the development of quality research in Africa”

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