The Media and Participatory Governance in Senegal:

Trends and Challenges

Media & Governance Series   July, 2019

The Media and Participatory Governance in Senegal:
Trends and Challenges

Media and Governance Series
July, 2019

1. Introduction

Senegal has long been considered as one of the most stable post-colonial democracies on the continent. It is also the only country in West Africa that did not experience a coup or a civil war since it gained independence. Senegal's democratic process has gone hand in hand with the expansion of various instruments for the implementation of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and of the press. The implementation of these rights makes it possible for the population to take part in the governance process of their country.

The concept of citizen participation refers to initiatives taken by civil society organisations (CSOs) and citizens to participate in the development of public policies, and monitor their implementation. Citizen participation aims at enhancing transparency in procedures and decisions taken by national and local authorities and to instil a reflex of accountability.

During the 2005 International Day for Press Freedom which focused on the relationship between the media and good governance, the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation underlined that "an increased participation of citizens is crucial for good governance for two main reasons: it helps in improving transparency, and ensuring that the decisions taken are adapted to the needs of the people; it also enhences the democratic credibility which highly depends on the level of investment citizen make in their government"[1].

In Senegal, the adoption of the decentralisation policy, the political will to promote good governance, the CSOs work toward a greater participation of citizens, the various initiatives undertaken to strengthen the media are all opportunities for empowering the population to influence decisions that affect them directly. In this perspective, transparency and equal access to information are key elements of citizens' engagement.

The media's role in open governance transcends their watchdog role and distribution of information. The media plays an active role in shaping understanding, highlighting key issues for the attention of society and ensuring political mobilisation. Thus, the media is both an actor and facilitator in the democratic process and popular participation.

According to UNESCO, "the role that the media can play in good governance is clear since all the aspects of good governance are both improved and strengthened by a strong, and independent media industry. UNESCO further underlines that it is only when the media is free to monitor, investigate, and criticise the public administration that good governance can take root in a country."[2]

In Senegal, the set of governmental actions aimed at strengthening the media created opportunities empowering the population to influence decisions that affect them directly. However, the legal framework as well as the political will is often challenging the media's role in participatory governance. For instance, there is no law granting the right to access information in

---

[1]Unesco. Medias and Good Governance. 2005. http://www.unesco.org/new/fr/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/celebrations/international-days/world-press-freedom-day/previous-celebrations/worldpressfreedomday200900000/theme-media-and-good-governance/

[2] Ibid

Senegal. Furthermore, because of political pressure or self-censorship, there are few investigations carried out by journalists.

Drawing on available data and literature, this policy brief assesses the contribution of the media in promoting participatory governance in Senegal. The paper begins with an introduction on the media landscape in Senegal and explains how they have today become platforms where citizens can get information and express their views on the implementation and the operationalization of public policies. This paper also elaborates on the challenges that hinder the media from effectively contributing to participatory, transparency and accountability from duty bearers. Finally, a set of key recommendations to encourage citizen's participation in governance processes are given.

2. The Media Landscape in Senegal

2.1 Description of the Media Landscape

In Senegal, the history of the press is intrinsically linked to the country's political history and can be traced back from the colonial era to independence then to the second democratic transition in 2012. The evolution of the Senegalese press was greatly influenced by political events. The media in Senegal has evolved from a state monopoly on both broadcast and print media to a situation of media plurality thanks to the liberalization of the media sector. The country now has a diversified media environment with a mix of private and public outlets, which allows the media industry to play its watchdog role of monitoring governmental actions.

Increasingly, citizens are having access to national and international media. There is a wide range of publications, and media content can be accessed through newspapers, audio-visual mediums, and online. The media landscape is vibrant and is made up of:

- **Press Agencies**: The Senegalese Press Agency (APS) is the state owned press agency. It gathers information around the country and provides ready to publish material to other media outlets. It also publishes reports on its website. APS used to have editorial independence. However, for the last seven years, its editorial independence has been questioned as the Director is allegedly close to the ruling party and the President of the Republic.

- **Print Medias:** *Le Soleil* is a national daily newspaper and state-owned printing outlet. *Le Soleil* is viewed as not having editorial independence as its Director has always been appointed by the President of the Republic. There are also about (20) twenty private daily newspapers who are largely free in their expression as a reflection of the dynamism of Senegalese democracy. Weekly and monthly magazines are increasingly emerging and some of them specialise in economics, culture, sports, etc**.**

- **Radio**: In 2017, the country counted about 276 radio stations, of which 222 are community radios, 48 are commercial and six are international radio stations. Radio Senegal is the national radio station. There are number of other dynamic private radio stations such as Radio Futurs Médias (RFM), Sud FM, Iradio, Walf FM, etc....

- **Television**: Senegal has about 15 Television and the main ones are the state owned *Radio-diffusion Télévision Sénégalaise* (RTS) and the private 2sTV, Walf TV, TFM, 7TV, Touba TV…

- **Internet**: Internet access is unrestricted, and penetration reached 52 percent in 2018. The rapid growth of mobile telephone usage in recent years has led to wider access to news and social-networking websites for many citizens. Seneweb, Dakaractu, as well as Senego, are among the most active online news platforms in the country.

The Senegalese media scene is marked by a strong concentration around media groups such as *Walfdjri*, *Sud Communication,* and *Future Media*, and *D-Media.* Each of these groups has at least one daily newspaper, a radio, a television station and an active online presence – website and social media platforms.

French, the official language and Wolof, the national language, are the predominant languages used in the media. Even though the Constitution lists six national languages, there are actually about 20. Most of them are used by the national television station (*Radio-diffusion Télévision Sénégalaise*) RTS to cover ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities. In general, media organisations are readily available and accessible albeit more in the urban areas.

Challenges in the media landscape include heavy operating costs, harsh fiscal environment and multiple taxes. Limited training and capacity building also remain one of the biggest challenges in the sector. The voices of women and men are not fairly reflected in the media. Generally, women are portrayed as victims of abuse. Equal opportunity is not promoted in most media organisations, although the national television RTS makes efforts to provide equal opportunity to all groups of citizens. Finally, investigative journalism is increasingly rare in the media landscape in Senegal.

2.2 Legal and Policy Framework on the Operation of the Media

Freedom of expression and of the press are stipulated in the 2001 Constitution and protected by legislations that guarantee fundamental individual freedom, economic, social, and collective rights.

According to article 10 of the Constitution "every citizen has the right to freely express and share his opinion orally, or by writing, or through peaceful demonstration, as far as excising these rights do not harm the honour of other citizens, or the public order"[3].
Again, Article 18 of the Constitution further stipulates "the Republic of Senegal guarantees all citizens fundamental freedom, as well as economic, socials, and collective rights. These freedoms and rights include: civic and political freedom, as well as freedom of opinion, of expression, of the press, of association, of assembly, of movements, and of protest…"[4]

Senegal has also ratified almost all African, regional and international instruments on freedom of expression. Despite the commendable efforts, these legal instruments and frameworks at the national level are not fully implemented.

---

[3]Constitution of Senegal

[4] Ibid

Although President Macky Sall has pledged to support laws in favour of stronger protections for press freedom, there has been little legislative progress. In August 2014, the National Assembly rejected a proposed media code that would have decriminalized a number of press offenses. Media organisations noted the existence of several other laws—including Article 362 of the penal code, which prescribes fines and prison terms for libel—that can be used to muzzle freedom of the press.

The New Press Code:

After several years of discussion, a new **Press Code** was adopted in June 2017. The code:
-   Protects sources used by media professionals – except in exceptional cases provided by law.
-   Enables the state to filter or block content on the internet.
-   Regulates competition and prevent concentration.
-   Prohibits community radio stations from taking the form of a commercial entities.

However, journalists have been disappointed by the new Press Code as it failed to decriminalise press offences. The Code also allows the confiscation of equipment and material and even the closure of media outlets for threats to state security.

Furthermore, the exercise of the rights on freedoms of expression and of the press is not fully respected. For example, **Law no. 2017-27** on the Press Code, provides that,

> *in exceptional circumstances, to prevent or to stop an attack on the security of the state, the integrity of the territory, or in case of incitement to hatred or calls for murder, the administrative authority may order that the broadcasting material of a newspaper be seized, the broadcasting of a programme be suspended or stopped and a media outlet be temporally closed.*

In addition, some find that article 14 of the Press Code which stipulates "the journalist and the media technician must not use unfair methods to obtain information, images, recordings or documents". This creates an opportunity for restrictions on investigative journalism insofar as the law does not specify what is considered an unfair method.

There is still no law in Senegal regarding access to information. In 2009, a coalition of civil society organisations launched a campaign for the adoption of such law. A draft bill has been prepared over the past three years and is awaiting consideration by the government.

2.3 Media Regulatory Bodies

-   **The National Broadcasting Regulatory Council** (CNRA), which was created in 2006, oversees the regulation of the broadcasting sector and ensures compliance with the specifications and conventions set in legislation. CNRA's independence is guaranteed by law. This makes it an independent administrative authority with financial autonomy and whose members cannot be dismissed. In addition, the CNRA is one of the few independent administrative authorities not under any other state structure. However, its members are appointed by the President which creates the impression that members owe their allegiance to the appointing authority hence; the Council's independence is in question.

    The CNRA does not issue broadcast frequency licences. Licences are issued by the Regulatory Authority for Telecommunications and Posts (ARTP). Applications for

broadcasting frequencies are sent to the Ministry of Communications, which examines them in consultation with the ARTP and determines the broadcast frequency to be allocated. However, in practice, it appears that broadcasting frequencies are not allocated according to standards and for public interest.

- **The Council for Monitoring Professional Codes of Ethics** (Conseil pour l'Observation des Règles d'Éthique et de Déontologie - CORED) was created in 2009 with the aim of ensuring that the conditions of access and practice of the journalistic profession are respected. The members are both media veterans and journalists. This self-regulated body has a say in the issuance of the national press card, in collaboration with the Ministry of Information and Communication. In case of violation of the professional codes of ethics, CORED can withdraw the press card of a journalists or media practitioner.

- **The Council of Broadcasters and Media Owners** (Conseil des Diffuseurs et des Éditeurs de la Presse du Sénégal - CDEPS) is an organisation created in 2008 with the aim of improving the management of media organisations.

- **There are also several Professional organisations** that collaborate on issues of common interest and vigorously defend the security of journalists when they are attacked in the course of their work. They include the Union of Information and Communication Professionals (SYNPICSs), the Convention of Young Reporters of Senegal (CJRS) and the Committee for the Defence and Protection of Journalists (CDPJ).

3. The Media and Participatory Governance in Senegal

3.1 Background

In Senegal, the consolidation of the media industry created opportunities geared towards empowering the population to influence decisions that affect them directly. The liberalisation of the media sector has facilitated access to information in the country. The emergence of community radios has been particularly helpful in informing citizens about national and local policies and engaging them in the governance process.

The media in Senegal has a strong interest in issues related to good governance and public accountability. They devote commendable time to programmes and debates on such issues. The media played very meaningful roles in sustaining and advancing democratic participation, especially during elections. In these periods, the media increases programmes, articles and reports on issues related to good governance.

The media also intensively explore and uses reports from civil society organisations and state institutions engaged in promoting effective management of public resources and the fight against social injustice. Talking points for public debates are often generated from these sources.

3.2 The Trends

3.2.1 Traditional media: Promoting Interactivity between Citizen and Authorities

Political issues are largely discussed in the media space, especially during electioneering campaigns. Traditional media, including radio, television and the print, have been very active in informing citizens and providing them the platforms to engage in public discourse around governance issues in Senegal. For example, during the 2019 presidential elections, media organisations were highly engaged in covering the electoral process, political issues and social programs of the various candidates.

Citizens are increasingly participating in public debate through radio and television discussions in which they share their opinions through phone calls. Citizens are also able to share their views during meetings and debates on general development of communities. In particular, private radios have offered a space for citizens across the country to express their needs and demands. For instance, *Rfm 94.0* broadcasts **"La question du jour",** a radio programme in which the listeners are invited to give their opinions and ask questions to politicians.

During the 2019 electioneering period, public discussions in the media were characterized by incidents such as indecent language, expression of misdemeanour, verbal attacks, lies, isolated altercations, and intense verbal exchanges. To counter such behaviour, Senegalese media like *IRadio* broadcast messages of tolerance. To preserve peace in the country, religious and civil society leaders' multiplied their initiatives on air to call for calm.

3.2.2 Impact of social media in participatory governance:

Social media is becoming a growing source of information. Traditional media organisations are increasingly seeing the benefits from social media - more accessibility and interactivity with their audience, increased digital visibility and influence in the public debate, revenues opportunities among others. For example, *Africa Check*, an independent media organisation based in Dakar, is specialised in debunking fake news on social media and to also encourage citizens to help in spotting cases of misinformation.

Aside from the traditional media, social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, are vibrant public spaces where debates on democracy and good governance take place. Social media networks are positively impacting public dialogue, especially during election periods. Citizens, activists, and political parties exchange, share information, give feedback, and participate in public debates on these different platforms. Social networks also provide the public with a digital space on which they can express their frustrations and anger at politicians.
Since 2012, social media has become an indispensable tool for citizen participation in public discussions on issues related to governance. Since then, young activists in the country launched an online platform and a hashtag dubbed Sunu2012. The digital platform allowed citizens to partake in discussions from February to March on issues surrounding the 2012 presidential election in the country[5].

---

[5] Senegal: #Sunu2012: An African Innovation of monitor elections. Global Voices. Avril 2012.
https://fr.globalvoices.org/2012/04/16/105509/

The crucial role that social media plays is further illustrated by the fact that during the 2019 presidential election almost all candidates had at least a social media account either on Facebook or Twitter. Some of the candidates even had online interaction with voters.

In 2014, the social movement **Y'en A Marre** launched an online platform for citizen participation in governance. The purpose was to "give the opportunity to Senegalese, especially the youth to express their views on the management of public affairs and issues affecting their society"[6].

Citizens led a number of advocacy campaigns on social media. In 2014, through the hashtag #NonAuMur (Notothewall), citizens forced governmental officials to bring down a wall built on a public domain to help in the construction of the Turkish embassy.

In 2019, serious reactions on social media forced the government to sack a police commissioner who arrested a pharmacist who refused to sell him some medicines without medical prescription.

The hashtag *#Senegalvote* is a digital initiative launched by the association "WA MBEBMI" which means "people of the street" during the 2019 election campaign. Initially, the aim of the project was to make information about the electoral process accessible and understandable. The hashtag was spread on social media, especially on Twitter and gathered thousands of tweets. Even after the elections, the project "Senegal Vote" helped the population to get information about the proclamation of the results.

4. Challenges to Media and Participatory Governance in Senegal

The Media plays an indispensable role in participatory governance in Senegal. However, there are a number of challenges to the media's action in improving citizen's participation in the governance processes. These challenges might in the worst case threaten both the existence of many media outlets and freedom of expression.

4.1. Political and Judicial Pressure that Intend to Intimidate and Mute Critical Voices

Journalists occasionally face political pressure or harassment from authorities. In December 2015, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) expressed concern that the detention and questioning of four *D-Media* employees could indicate that the government was discouraging reporting about corruption. *Radio Walfdjri*, a privately-owned independent radio station, has been a consistent target. In February 2016, the Criminal Investigation Department demanded the recordings of a broadcast programme in which an activist criticized President Macky Sall. In March, the

---

[6] Osiris. Y'en A Marre launches an online platform on participatory Governance. http://www.osiris.sn/Y-en-A-Marre-lance-une-plateforme.html

Telecommunications Regulatory Agency tried to disconnect the station's signal but was thwarted by the crowd of listeners that gathered outside.

Physical obstruction or abuse of journalists is rare. However, in March 2016, a journalist from *Radio Futurs Médias* who was covering a press briefing by former President Wade was allegedly manhandled and prevented from entering the event by members of Wade's political party. In June 2016, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) published an alert on allegations that the Mayor of Kaffrine had pointed a gun at a journalist in late May.

4.2. Disregard for Ethical Standards

There have been reports of self-censorship among journalists, particularly those who work for governmental outlets like *Le Soleil*. Journalists practice self-censorship for fear of possible retaliation from certain religious groups, but also a self-preservation mechanism when it comes to securing interests such as advertising contracts, the safety of their families and gaining political recognition. Therefore, public media are often seen as a propaganda tool.

In 2015, Mamadou SyTounkara, host of "Senegal ca Kanam" ("Senegal ahead") on 2STV, sent a letter to the General Director of RTS in which he says: *"Everything you do is centred on propaganda for the ruling party to which you belong. There are no contradictory programme, demonstrations organised by the opposition are not covered; any content which does not please the power is censored".* This criticism can be understood in the sense that since the arrival of Macky Sall in power all state owned media are led by men who are partisan or close to the ruling party.

On the other hand, private media is considered as an ally of the opposition. This is because their coverage is viewed with a negative slant to the great displeasure of the government. In 2014 for example, a private daily newspaper, *La Tribune*, signalled "5 cases of Ebola" in Senegal. The article further accused the Health Ministry of hiding information. However, in the long run the paper could not provide concrete evidence for the allegation. The Director of that publication was accused of creating panic by spreading false information.

Corruption seems to be gaining grounds in the media landscape in Senegal. If the organiser of an event covered by the media does not provide a monetary incentive, some journalists will not broadcast the coverage of the event. The practise of reimbursing transportation costs up to an amount of 5,000 FCFA (10 USD) has become a worrying practice that needs to be addressed.

4.3. Lack of Training and Investigation

According to a 2018 MFWA report, even though the media in Senegal organise debates and other programmes on issues of participatory governance, they make very little efforts in initiating investigations to acquire in-depth knowledge of the issues. Hence, they rely so much on information from the population without the ability to verify these information. The situation is further worsened by weak knowledge of institutional and judicial instruments related to public accountability. This is as a result of low capacity on governance related issues.

4.4. Sustainability Challenge and Weak Supporting Institutions

The salaries of journalists and media professionals are relatively low. Apart from *RTS*, *Le Soleil* and *Future Media Group*, media employees are paid a monthly salary based on a 1991 collective agreement, with a basic salary of 170,000 FCFA (340 USD). There are media outlets that pay less. A new collective agreement, which introduces considerable improvement in salaries with an 11-12% increment of the basic salary is still yet to be considered for approval.

The state grants an annual subsidy to media organisations, which is estimated to be around 700 million FCFA (1,4 million USD) per year. The management and distribution of this aid remains opaque. Under Abdoulaye Wade, the government was accused of selectively granting or withholding state subsidies to influence media outlets. Sadly, the practice appears to have continued under MackySall.

5. Recommendation

The outlined trends and challenges above call for many interventions and actions from different stakeholders such as the government, media owners, regulatory bodies and citizens. In order to allow journalists to adequately carry out their watchdog mandate and improve participatory governance, we make the following key recommendations:

5.1 Citizens and CSOs

- **CSOs must provide maximum support to the media** despite the challenges of low ethical standards and professionalism knowing that the original objective of the media is to serve the interest of the public and their absence thereof will incur negative impacts on the citizenry.
- **Citizens must express interest in governance** and **actively participate in public debate** through media outlets or Civil Society organisations. Thereof CSOs should also encourage the population to take part in actions and discussions, especially in rural communities, through the organisation of information and sensitization campaigns.

5.2 Media organisations and Media Regulatory Bodies

- **Strengthen the technical capacity of journalists** to conduct the highest ethical standards and professionalism in their work and educate them on the need to make conscious efforts to research and understand institutional and legal instruments and the role of relevant actors in specific areas of public management;
- **Encourage journalists to conduct investigations** on acts of corruption to better inform citizens on the affairs of the State;
- **Institute stiff punishments** for journalists who breach the ethical codes or are engaged in dishonest acts that tarnish the image of the profession.

5.3 Governments

- **Fast-track the implementation of the Press Code** and consult professional organisations for their suggestions to improve the existing code (decriminalization of press offences, remove the right to confiscate equipment).
- **Prioritize the safety of journalists and media organisations** to safeguard the crucial role they play in participatory governance, transparency and accountability and intensify efforts to punish press freedom violation perpetrators.

References

Africablogging, "Sénégal : le citoyen grand gagnant de l'élection présidentielle", https://www.africablogging.org/

2018 African Media Barometer, « Senegal », https://www.fesmedia-africa.org/

Aw, E. (2013), *« La déontologie à l'épreuve des médias, de quelques cas en Afrique de l'Ouest francophone »,*https://journals.openedition.org/

IED Afrique, « Médias communautaires et engagement citoyen dans l'action publiques, Kaolack, Janvier 2005 », http://www.iedafrique.org/

Le Monde, « Au Sénégal, le nouveau Code de la presse inquiète les journalistes », https://www.lemonde.fr/

Mbow, M. (2004), « Éthique déontologie et régulation de la presse écrite au Sénégal », https://www.memoireonline.com/

MFWA 2018 report, http://www.mfwa.org/

Mor Faye (2015), « Bilan et perspectives de l'aide de l'état à la presse au Sénégal », https://www.cairn.info/

Reporters Without Borders, "Senegal", https://rsf.org/en/senegal

Sow, M. (2018) *« Médias et pouvoirs politiques au Sénégal : une étude de la transition d'une presse d'État vers un pluralisme médiatique »,* https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/

Media Foundation for West Africa

32 Otele Avenue, East Legon,

Telephone: +233 (0) 302 555 327

Twitter: @TheMFWA

Facebook: Media Foundation for West Africa

info@mfwa.org

www.mfwa.org

@themfwa   @TheMFWA   www.mfwa.org