

Introduction

The outbreak of the corona virus epidemic has led to severe disruptions in economies and social life in countries across the world. A June 8, 2020 [report](#) by the World Bank said “The swift and massive shock of the coronavirus pandemic and shutdown measures to contain it have plunged the global economy into a severe contraction. According to World Bank forecasts, the global economy will shrink by 5.2% this year.¹ That would represent the deepest recession since the Second World War.”

As an industry that depends largely on advertisement revenue, to the media was one of the downstream industries badly hit by the economic effect of the COVID-19 on the primary service and manufacturing sectors. Journalists have been laid-off, some have been infected and salaries have been cut at a time the media is badly needed to help inform and educate the public on the COVID-19 pandemic.

For Cote d’Ivoire and Guinea, the outbreak of the corona virus only worsened a toxic socio-political climate related mainly to electoral disputes, while Mali was plunged into months of political tension resulting in a coup d’état.

Given that a tensed political and social climate affects the media environment and in view of the crucial role of the media in sustaining democracies and sensitising the public during emergencies, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) organised a series of webinars on “The Media in the Face of the COVID-19 and Political Crisis in Mali, Guinea and Cote d’Ivoire.” The webinars featured media and governance experts, journalists and activists in the three countries who examined how the COVID-19 and the political events in have affected the media.

Discussions

The first webinar was held on November 30, 2020 and focused on Cote d’Ivoire. The panel was made up of Lucien Houédanou, media and communication expert, Ousmane Sy Savané, General Manager of the Cyclone Press Group and André Silver Konan, contributor to Jeune Afrique, Manager of the online portal Afriksoir.net, and Ivoir’Hebdo, political analyst.

Cote d’Ivoire recorded its first case of COVID-19 on March 11 2020. The government responded by declaring a state of emergency that was enforced through the imposition of curfews, closure of restaurants, places of worship, cinemas and exhibition grounds. These measures affected the businesses of sectors that are clients of the media.

The COVID-19 economic shock therefore brought to the fore the media’s overdependence on a very limited sector, rendering it prone revenue fluctuations, hence the need to explore new media business models in Cote d’Ivoire.

In with hygiene protocols recommended by the public health authorities, managers of the print and audiovisual media companies in the public and private sectors set up devices for washing hands with soap and water or with hydro-alcoholic solution. Regular disinfection of premises and the studio microphones also drove up overheads.

It was in such a context that, on October 31, Ivorians [went to the polls](#) to elect a president. Ahead of the polls, the country witnessed a wave of deadly violence as opposition candidates called for civil disobedience and a boycott of the election. This came as Alassane Ouattara, the president announced his bid for a third term in office. The wave of violence witnessed in the country culminated into the [death of at least](#) 30 Ivorians.

The double context of the pandemic and the controversial elections, there was a surge of false information about the pandemic and the political crisis. Fake news fuelled suspicions on the virus, while spreading fear and panic among the citizens regarding on the political front.

Recommendations

- **Diversify revenue sources:** [Studies](#) have demonstrated that media organisations, particularly radio stations and Televisions in Cote d'Ivoire dependent heavily on advertising contracts to stay afloat. This makes media outlets prone revenue fluctuations depending on events impacting the advertising industry. With the closure of non-essential businesses and the drop in adverts traditional media business models in Cote d'Ivoire are collapsing and revenues are dwindling. To sustain their survival, media organisations need to amend their business models and depend less on advertisers by investing in activities with the potential to generate revenues which can support them. Media organisations in Cote d'Ivoire could learn from CITI TV in Ghana that organises events such as the [Back to Your Village Food Bazaar](#), and the [Heritage Caravan](#) which are all innovative avenues for generating revenues to sustain operations.
- **Reduce the number of circulations:** In Cote d'Ivoire, 40% of newspapers sales are made outside the Greater Abidjan region. Although the print press remains vibrant, sales revenues were already on the decline for the past years. According to Ousmane Sy Savanne, General Manager of the Cyclone Media Group, "in 2015, the print press revenues were 4 billion CFA. Fast forward in 2019, revenues stand at 1 billion". The adoption of COVID-19 restrictive measures such as curfews, and limited movements of citizens disrupted newspapers distribution networks, and markets outside Greater Abidjan could not be reached. False information suggesting that newspapers were means of COVID-19 transmission considerably affected sales. This has significantly reduced newspapers market seize. In order to avoid waist and overproduction, newspapers should reduce their circulation, remain flexible and proactively adapt to their market seize when necessary.
- **Cutdown the number of printed pages:** Daily newspapers in Cote d'Ivoire print on average 12 pages per publication. On average, the printing costs about 75 FCA which is 375,000 CFA for 5000 copies which is the minimum number of circulation required by printing agencies. Considering that newspapers sales have plummeted during the pandemic, the print press should strategically reorganise page allocation to news and

reduce the number of printed pages from 12 to 8 pages. This would cut down printing cost and help the media sustain its operations. Ousmane Sy Savane, said “we used to spend about 6,000,000 CFA monthly on print only. By reducing the number of printed pages from 12 to 8, our printing cost came down to about 4.200.000 million pages and these savings help sustain operations”.

- **Comply with the Journalism code of Ethics:** Following the incidence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the media in Cote d’Ivoire witnessed a spike of false information. Mis and disinformation surged during the political crisis as online and mainstream media organisations imported and published unverified claims generally from social media. This led to the [suspension](#) of the daily “*Le Bélier intrépide*” by the state regulatory agency on November 11. To change the growing trend, media practitioners should respect the journalism code of ethics, produce balanced reports, verify sources and fact-check information before publication and avoid partisanship in reportage.
- **Avoid hate speech:** In the wake of President Alassane Ouattara decision bid for a third term in office, opposition parties in Cote d’Ivoire called for a civil disobedience and a boycott of the election. This situation favoured the rise of hate speech on the media, inciting violence and hatred. On October 27, the United Nations [called on](#) the all stakeholder to avoid hate speech. Till date, the political landscape remains tensed and volatile hence, the panel recommends that media outlets restrain from disseminating hate speech via all their platforms, reject false information and hate speech from political parties, and avoid candidates that peddle false information.
- **Amend the Electoral Code:** Media organisations in Cote d’Ivoire are banned from covering the counting of votes until the official publication of the results by the electoral commission. Over time this has generated suspicions from political parties who see the process as being opaque. The panel believes that to improve transparency and the credibility of the election’s results, the government should amend the electoral code and allow journalists to witness or cover the counting of votes.

Guinea

The second webinar focusing on Guinea had as panelists Boubacar Azoka Bah, Editor-in-Chief of Lynx FM and Administrator of the news website Guineedirect.org; Dr. Oumar Sivory Doumbouya, sociologist, university lecturer and researcher and Camara Salia, technical officer at the civil society organisation Balai Citoyen.

The panelists observed that the COVID has had a devastating effect on the media. There was a drastic loss in revenue as a result of the general slump in economic activities.

The revenue losses forced media owners to truncate a process of adopting a collective bargaining agreement. The agreement was supposed to guarantee a decent minimum wage, annual leave, professional development, health insurance and capacity building.

Over thirty journalists tested positive for COVID-19 in Guinea. Dr. Doumbouya advised observed that reporting on the disease and being infected put the journalists at risk of becoming traumatized. He therefore called for psychological care for the infected journalists.

Guinea has also been in the grip political tensions following a controversial referendum on March 2020 that led to the amendment of the constitution to allow President Alpha Conde to seek for a third term. The president went ahead to secure re-election in a bad-tempered contest in November.

On the eve of the referendum and legislative polls, social media was blocked by Guinea's leading internet providers Orange and MTN. Twitter Facebook, Instagram were cut and was WhatsApp restricted. After the presidential elections held on October 18, some media houses were suspended or shut down and the internet was disrupted as Guineans waited impatiently for the results. The discussants expressed concern at these freedom expression violations and the condemned the deaths recorded in connection with the crisis over President Alpha Conde's defiant bid for a third mandate.

They expressed regret that Parliament and the Judiciary in Guinea and other countries acquiesce to contentious constitutional changes to allow leaders who have finished their mandate to seek further tenure in office. The discussants consequently called on civil society in the various countries in West Africa and the continent as well as the ECOWAS and the African Union to take a resolute decision to end the trend that has seen Faure Gnassingbe (Togo), Allasane Ouattara (Cote d'Ivoire) and Alpha Conde (Guinea) entrench themselves at the cost of social peace and human lives.

Mali

The third edition held on December 11, 2020 focused on the effect on the media environment of the COVID-19, the sociopolitical crisis and insecurity in Mali. The panelist for the session were Ely Brima Dicko, Sociologist, Lecturer-researcher at the University of Bamako, Consultant for UNESCO and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SPRI). The second panelist was Sadou Abdoulay YATTARA, Journalist, General Coordinator of the Institute for Democracy and Media Education (IDEM) in Mali.

The discussion assessed the complexity of the prevailing security and political situation in Mali which is currently the only West African nation under military rule following a coup d'état on August 18, 2020. The panelists highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on the population and the media. In particular, the pandemic intensified the limitation and restriction of movement of journalists due to the imposition of a curfew and the obligation to obtain authorisation from the authorities in order to travel. The peculiarity in Mali is the fact that since 2012, restriction of movement and access to information due to terrorist attacks has already limited the work of journalists. This situation has led to self-censorship for fear of reprisals both from the authorities and from terrorist groups operating in the country. It was underlined that access to information for journalists on the areas occupied by terrorist groups is virtually and international forces present in Mali.

The issue of misinformation about the pandemic was also debated. It was noted that the restriction of information left room for speculation, leading to misinformation and fake news which sometimes created friction between the media and the authorities.

Unlike the case in many countries where governments supported the media to overcome the negative economic effect of the corona virus, in Mali, the media received no form of state aid whatsoever. According to the analysts, the political transition distracted the authorities' attention from the COVID-19, and the precarious financial situation of the media.

The safety of journalists was also put to the test during the political turmoil that led to the overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. There were a few cases of attacks on the media. The experts projected that the year 2021 will be a pivotal for press freedom and may witness an upsurge in violations as journalists begin to demand accountability from the transitional authorities regarding the roadmap to restoring full democratic, civilian rule.

At the end of the discussions, the panelists made the following recommendations

That the state support the media to deal with the effects of COVID-19

- Strengthen the capacity of journalists, media and law enforcement agencies on the issue of the protection and safety of journalists, in times of crisis and during democratic transitions
- Organize meetings on the media and their contribution to the political transition to inform a strategy for the development of the media and the promotion of security, the end of impunity for crimes committed against journalists
- Support the media in playing their essential roles for the successful completion of the transition and for peaceful, transparent and democratic elections in Mali.



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@mfwawest.org

www.mfwawest.org



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