Digital Platforms and Civil War: How Côte d'Ivoire's Press Informs a New Model of African Journalistic Practices in Authoritarian Regimes

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During Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa's 2010 presidential elections, conditions on the streets of the main city Abidjan became too dangerous for journalists to report in person, which influenced many newsrooms to close their offices and swiftly switch to digital platforms. This study includes 15 field interviews with journalists who reported during the 2010–11 national elections in Abidjan. I examine how journalists adapted their news routines to using digital platforms to avoid being physically present during this civil war. This case study of Côte d'Ivoire adds to the theoretical discussion on a context-dependent theory of African journalistic practices in the digital era, in which sociopolitical contexts shape a more accurate definition of how journalists operate in repressive African regimes. Results show contextual factors such as spatial immobility, collaboration, and negotiating polarized communal violence are emergent patterns in how journalists adapted their reporting routines.

Keywords: sub-Saharan Africa, digital media, civil war, African journalism, authoritarian regimes, Ivory Coast, communal violence, Ubuntu, remote journalism

African journalists continue to harness digital media in their reporting routines throughout the widely variable African governments. Media scholars have explored the idea of a new African digital epistemology, where African journalists report on digital platforms in ways that orient more clearly to the regional contexts of living in an African culture (Mabweazara & Mare, 2021; Mabweazara, Mare, & Moyo, 2019; Mabweazara, Mudhai, & Whittaker, 2014). This article examines how journalists in the African nation of Côte d'Ivoire adapted their digital coverage in response to the national election crisis in 2011. Many African scholars have commented on the digital evolution of journalism in Africa, but this piece takes a more in-depth look at that evolution when journalists face communal violence in their reporting routines.

When the presidential election in Côte d'Ivoire arrived, incumbent president Laurent Gbagbo allegedly lost the vote to candidate Alassane Ouattara, but Gbagbo refused to concede the election, thus inciting a four-month civil conflict that shut down most of the nation. From January to April 2011, 3,000 people died in the election violence. The different warring factions in Abidjan created tense and unsafe conditions, forcing all newsrooms to close and begin reporting from clandestine locations. Prior to the civil

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conflict, newspapers in Abidjan were printing from physical offices and issuing print editions. Entire newsrooms adopted new reporting practices almost overnight because of the civil conflict in Abidjan.

During both the 2010 and 2020 presidential elections, conditions on the physical streets of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, became too dangerous for many journalists to report in person, which influenced many newsrooms to close their offices, and swiftly switch to digital media to keep reporting. Digital platforms refer to all sources of social media and online news technologies, such as news sites, news site blogs, Facebook, Twitter, mobile phone texting services, and other emerging social media. Although many Ivoirian journalists were already using digital platforms for news coverage before the national election crisis of 2010, the rapidly deteriorating situation in Abidjan saw many journalists packing up their physical newsrooms and turning exclusively to digital media, according to those interviewed for this study. The abrupt shift to digital media led to overnight changes in how Ivoirian journalists were trying to report the news while also keeping themselves and their newsroom offices safe. Most of Abidjan's news flooded online sites by January 2011, creating a burst of sustained, intensive online coverage of the civil war. This study includes 15 field interviews with journalists who reported during the 2010–11 national elections in Abidjan. I examine the particularities of this punctuated period in this West African nation's news cycle, including the impact on journalists' reflections on their changed news routine at the time. If digital media collapses the need for the physical presence of a journalist, how does this affect one's reporting routines amid political turmoil? The newsrooms include:

- Alert.info (an online, text-based news agency)
- Abidjan.net (Côte d'Ivoire's main online news agency)
- La Force de la Plume (international blog hosted by expat Ivoirian journalists and in-country political analysts, many of whom were hired later to work for *Fraternité Matin*)
- Partisan newspapers: *Le Temps*, *Le Nouveau Courrier*, *Notre Voie*, *Fraternité Matin*, and *Le Patriote*. *Le Temps*, *Notre Voie*, and *Fraternité Matin* were, at the time of the crisis, all considered to be pro-Gbagbo newspapers. *Le Patriote* is pro-Ouattara. Alert.info, Abidjan.net, and *Le Nouveau Courrier* define themselves as nonpartisan.

This article explores the resulting package of journalistic issues that arose from this swift adoption of digital media for Ivoirian journalists. Further, the majority of media studies on Africa center on English-speaking regions, and thus this package of interviews, conducted in French and in a nation still grappling with the effects of decolonization from France, offers a unique dataset on media studies in Africa.

In *Online Journalism in Africa: Trends, Practices and Emerging Cultures,* the authors issue a call for a new body of scholarly literature on the practice of new media in Africa's unique political landscape (Mabweazara et al., 2014).

> What is lacking is a close look at how African journalism has forged new ways of practice in the new media age, particularly how the Internet and its associated interactive digital technologies have offered a new "stand-alone" platform for the practice of journalism. (Mabweazara et al., 2014, p. 1)

As Internet usage mounts in some of Africa's more repressive regimes, government political repression of online media has responded in a corresponding fashion. How have African journalists responded with their new media skills? Most of the recent scholarship on social media and political turmoil in Africa in recent years has focused on Internet shutdowns during elections or the uses of digital media in the Arab Spring (Chapsos & Frangonikolopoulos, 2012; Khamis & Vaughn, 2014; Segev et al., 2013). Scholars have focused on the censorship aspect of social media in African nations during political violence, but there is limited research on how journalists sidestep, adapt, and evolve their own routines in the face of political violence. Interviews with these Ivoirian journalists go beyond a conversation about online censorship and offer a more holistic approach to the daily routines of these Ivoirian journalists as they reported or fled the war zone that became Abidjan in 2011. This study instead explores how journalists adapted their reporting routines to incorporate digital media and avoided being physically present during a period of political violence in Côte d'Ivoire's 2011 civil war.

Clearly, one cannot draw general assumptions about all of African journalism from one case study from one West African nation—a key limitation of this study. However, the neighboring francophone African nations of Benin, Gabon, Togo, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Cameroon have all seen periods of intense political violence during national elections of the past 10 years, much like Côte d'Ivoire. The case study of Côte d'Ivoire journalists and their digital reporting in 2011 can offer lessons to other neighboring francophone African nations experiencing election violence alongside a rapidly growing community of Internet users.

Scholars in the field of international communication in Africa now factor in the existence of online African news organizations as a growing alternative voice to international media wire coverage of African events (Badawi, 2017; Bunce, 2017; Nothias, 2017; Nyabola, 2017). African-produced online media such as Abidjan.net in Côte d'Ivoire, MyJoyonline in Ghana, and Seneweb in Senegal are sprawling, native media corporations with content provided on all social media platforms, in addition to TV, radio, and text on the online site (Mudhai, 2011).

Readers in African news audiences continue to gain more access to online spheres as Africa's digital divide continues to shrink. In 2011, 103 million individuals had Internet access in Africa, compared with 299 million in 2019 (International Telecommunications Union [ITU], 2021). In 2011, 23 million individuals had mobile phone broadband access, compared to 354 million in 2020. More specifically, Internet usage in Côte d'Ivoire dialed in at nine percent in 2010 but rose to 28% by 2019. That is a 19% increase in nine years. Further, the mobile phone broadband access in Côte d'Ivoire was calculated at 14 out of 100 inhabitants in 2013, compared to 66 out of 100 in 2019 (ITU, 2021). As the number of Ivoirians with Internet access on their mobile phones continues to climb, more Ivoirian readers will turn to online news for updates. These statistics show the "digital divide" in Africa highlighted by many scholars at the dawn of the digital era in the 2000s is changing in complex ways: Internet and mobile phone usage continues to increase exponentially for news audiences.

To best contextualize the interviews with journalists for this case study, a lucid description is needed of the physical electoral situation in Abidjan from December 2010 to April 2011. The media landscape in 2011 in Abidjan was a mix of tiny, partisan newspapers that supported either Gbagbo or Ouattara, alongside a more powerful lineup of international wire offices including Agence France Presse, *Jeune Afrique*,

Reuters, the Associated Press, and France 24 (a French TV network). Most journalists reporting on the crisis were reporting physically from Abidjan at the time, and the majority were Ivoirians or French citizens. Like many African nations, the metropolitan hub of Abidjan features a much different culture than the rural villages of Côte d'Ivoire. Major newsrooms of the country report exclusively from metropolitan Abidjan, where access to reliable WiFi, electricity, air travel, and public transportation are available.

The newspaper industry in Abidjan is quite partisan, with newspapers typically pro-Gbagbo (called "la presse bleue" among journalist circles) and the pro-Ouattara newspapers (la presse verte). The political newspapers support their political candidates and issue commentary that boosts their respective political parties.

In November 2010, the citizens of Côte d'Ivoire came out for a tense presidential election. Laurent Gbagbo, who had held the presidency for 10 years at that point, rejected the alleged victory of his political opponent, Alassane Ouattara. In early December 2010, both Gbagbo and Ouattara held separate, official press conferences, in which their loyal cabinet members swore each of them in as president; Côte d'Ivoire now had two presidents. Because Abidjan's newspapers are so partisan, journalists working for either press side were immediately under threat from the rival political militias. Indeed, militias from either camp made lists of names of journalists from the papers, such as *Notre Voie* or *Le Patriot.* The sudden turn toward political violence prompted dozens of newsrooms to go underground overnight. By December 2011, the UN Security Council and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union, had issued public statements supporting Ouattara as president and asked Gbagbo to step down. France's military mission Opération Licorne and the UN Mission to the Côte d'Ivoire (ONUCI) were also activated and came out in support of Ouattara.

In late March 2011, France 24 published a story detailing how a contingent of pro-Gbagbo military troops had murdered a group of women protestors in Abobo, just outside Abidjan (France 24, 2016). The converging military factions of Licorne, ONUCI, and Ouattara's Forces Républicaines de Côte d'Ivoire (FRCI) seized on the attack on the women as the final straw, and they launched a coordinated gun battle to overcome Gbagbo's strongholds throughout Abidjan and his palace. Gbago was arrested in his palace on April 11, 2011, and was consequently held at the Hague, where he was tried by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes (Lemke, 2020).

Gbagbo was acquitted by the ICC of all war crimes in 2019 (Holligan, 2019). He returned to live in Cote d'Ivoire in 2021, where he was officially pardoned by Ouattara in August 2022 (Churm, 2022). Many Ivoirians still pledge allegiance to Gbagbo and his platform of national independence from France; Gbagbo's politics continue to influence Côte d'Ivoire through his Front Populaire Ivoirienne (FPI), which is now headed by politician Pascal Affi N'Guessan.

Ouattara's administration in 2015 voted to extend the time a president can serve from two terms to three, and he recently won his third term in November 2020 (Coulibaly, 2020). More than 3,000 people died in the 2011 civil war, and more than 50 people were killed in intercommunal violence in the country's 2020 election (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Theoretical Approaches

This research article relies on the growing body of African media theory that argues for a more African-centric model of journalism (Mabweazara, 2014; Nyamnjoh, 2015; Obonyo, 2011; Skjerdal, 2012). In general, Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White's (2009) *Normative Theories of the Media* is commonly used in mass media research to discuss models of journalism in democratic societies. Christians et al. (2009) depict models of journalism as fitting among four distinct roles: monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative. Collaborative versions of journalism refer to newsrooms that work participatively with ruling bodies to further their interests, and these traditionally include state media or newsrooms governed by political parties. Many authoritarian or weak democratic nations in Africa could fall under this model, when one considers the extent of state-funded TV, radio, and newspapers throughout the continent (Karam & Mutsvairo, 2018, p. 5). Although there are many funding models for the press in Africa, the many state-run and politically affiliated newsrooms in this region would likely cater more to a collaborative role, as we see in Abidjan's partisan newspapers and the state newspaper, *Fraternité Matin*.

However, a growing number of African media scholars have argued for new African-centric models of journalism that more astutely consider the postcolonial, government, and communal elements of this vast continent (Mabweazara, 2014; Nyamnjoh, 2015; Obonyo, 2011; Skjerdal, 2012). The common argument among such scholars is that Western styles of journalism and journalism studies, with their value on objectivity and independence, are not a realistic model for African cultures or audiences.

> Indeed, the performance of journalism in Africa is all too often measured against the backdrop of Western standards. While theories and empirical studies developed in the West might appear to be applicable to Africa, closer consideration reveals that adapting these studies is not always straightforward, since they cover only a small portion of developments and experiences in Africa. (Mabweazara & Mare, 2021, p. 5)

The contextual and social differences in African audiences and the overarching postcolonial and neoliberal political structures that have developed across African nations have created a totally different chessboard on which African journalists use digital media, as noted by Mabweazara (2014): "The research gap noted above has resulted in sustained dependence on Western theoretical and empirical constructs, which, in many cases, have little or no correspondence to the concrete and material realities of African journalists" (p. 5). The idea of a liberal democratic government with a functioning free press is at odds with many of the nation-states that formed in sub-Saharan Africa in the period of decolonization, argue Nyamnjoh (2015) and Obonyo (2011).

> In Africa, the history of difficulty in implementing liberal democracy and the role of journalism therein attest to this clash of values and attempt to ignore African cultural realities that might well have enriched and domesticated liberal democracy towards greater relevance. (Nyamnjoh, 2015, p. 39)

In assessing this void, multiple scholars have taken a step back to more thoroughly outline their own theoretical observations on *existing* newsroom models witnessed in African nations today (Mabweazara, 2014; Mabweazara & Mare, 2021; Skjerdal, 2012). In surveying the many styles of journalism that better reflect the particular strengths and peculiarities of African civil society, Skjerdal (2012) highlights three categories: journalism for social change, communal journalism, and journalism on oral discourse. The strength of all three categories lies in their recognition of the highly varied spectrum of government, cultural, and funding structures found in Africa. For example, journalism for social change, Skjerdal (2012) argues, visualizes the journalist as a change agent. This type of journalism would be advocacy journalism or development journalism. Communal journalism values the African cultural principles of *Ubuntu*. The concept of Ubuntu has received particular attention among Africana studies because many African cultures embrace this idea of community as individual. Ubuntu can be conceived as a communal mindset: "A person is a person through other people" (Tutu, 1999, p. 34). Other types of communal journalism include public journalism or community journalism:

> Ubuntu is not readily translated into journalism practice, but its relevance as a guiding principle for journalism standards has been emphasized by a number of media scholars . . . What Afriethics and Ubuntu media theory share is a distinct confidence in the community as vital. (Skjerdal, 2012, p. 645)

Ubuntu journalism and its warm prioritizing of community as goal stands in contrast to the Western ideals of objective journalists, impartial to their community, focused on independence and fact-finding.

Within this milieu of journalism models, Mabweazara issues a call for an African digital journalism epistemology (Mabweazara, 2014; Mabweazara & Mare, 2021; Mabweazara et al., 2014), which opens the field for better articulating how digital technologies are integrated into African newsrooms. He is careful to point out there are many nations and subcultures across all of Africa, thereby making one homogenous journalism model unreasonable: "The adoption and deployment of new digital technologies should be viewed as part of a complex social and institutional matrix, which stretches across a wide range of social institutions," (Mabweazara, 2014, p. 5). Atton and Mabweazara (2011) call for a new body of research that adequately identifies a more African-centric set of technology principles that better fits the location-specific resources of many of these nations:

> Few studies have as yet sought to empirically discriminate between what could or should be universal professional values and what might be context-dependent practices with respect to the deployment of new technologies in mainstream journalism…This approach is particularly urgent given that the performance of the media in Africa is all too often measured against the backdrop of western professional values and standards; local contextual factors that shape and underlie practices in Africa are often overlooked. (Atton & Mabweazara, 2011, p. 668)

Local contextual factors affecting the use of digital platforms by journalists in Africa could be authoritarian regimes, digital censorship, and underfunded newsrooms that rely on funds from political parties. In times of war, many political parties in sub-Saharan Africa have chosen the route of direct

censorship of the media to accomplish their political aims (Chala & Lemke, 2016; Freyburg & Garbe, 2018; Karanja, Opiyo, & Rydzak, 2020; Mabweazara et al., 2014; Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2019; Marchant & Stremlau, 2020; Mare, 2020). This can mean jamming radio signals, Internet shutdowns, wiretapping, blocking IP addresses, hacking private newsroom websites, or direct attacks on newsrooms and journalists. A comprehensive study of 29 sub-Saharan African nations showed that 10 of 33 presidential or parliamentary elections in 2014, 2015, or 2016 saw an Internet shutdown by an Internet service provider (Freyburg & Garbe, 2018). Their results showed ownership of the ISP, whether state-owned or privately owned, actually had less influence on whether a particular government was successful in commanding a shutdown: "News reporting in the media and various digital rights blogs suggest a positive relationship between elections and shutdowns of Internet services in electoral authoritarian regimes," (Freyburg & Garbe, 2018, p. 2).

The European Research Council (ERC) awarded in 2017 a substantial 5-year grant to University of Oxford research professor Nicole Stremlau to create ConflictNet, an online research project that researched the spread of social media in conflict zones and weak nation-states in Africa. The research project, now concluded, probed the new spaces developing online among remote and conflict-affected African communities, examining how "access to social media affects the balance between peace-building efforts and attempts to perpetuate violence in conflict-affected communities" (ConflictNet, 2017, para.1). This project produced research on Internet shutdowns by repressive African regimes in late 2020 (Karanja et al., 2020; Marchant & Stremlau, 2020; Mare, 2020). Further, the international digital activist network Global Voices in 2019 won a grant from the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), with which they wrote 14 analytical news articles that "examine interferences with digital rights during key political events" throughout Africa (Global Voices, 2019, para. 4). Clearly, the rising rates of digital connectivity across sub-Saharan Africa have led to increased attention from funding bodies, as seen above.

"An increasing number of African governments disrupt access to the Internet, mobile networks and social media platforms as a strategic tactic to quell dissent and maintain power—particularly during protests, elections and times of political upheaval," reads the introduction to the series of articles (Global Voices, 2019, para. 2). One article covered the wave of fake accounts in Algeria created on social media before the impending national election involving incumbent candidate Abdelaziz Bouteflika in early 2019 (Souames, 2020). Another piece on Mozambique documented multiple online threats and the beating of a radio journalist leading up to the national election in 2019, in which incumbent candidate Filip Nyusi won the vote (Tsandzana, 2019). Even within the past five years, the national governments of Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Cameroon, and Nigeria have held contested elections in which various politicians attempted to censor the online reporting of journalists and activists using Internet shutdowns (Karanja et al., 2020; Marchant & Stremlau, 2020).

A second approach to examining the context-dependent usage of technology in sub-Saharan Africa journalism is individual usages of digital platforms for reporting. How African journalists use social media "demonstrates that interactive digital technologies are, in fact, socially and culturally shaped and that the nature and form of their appropriation is inextricably embedded in the context in which they are developed" (Mabweazara et al., 2014, p. 66). A study of Zimbabwe newspapers and their usage of

Facebook showed journalists relied on the platform for story tips, and to "tease" stories for print editions (Mabweazara, 2014). The study showed news content posted to Facebook produced a bank of user-generated content (UGC), which itself became a living body of news for the public to consume. The study found Zimbabwean journalists were freer to "blur" their posts to their public accounts with their own opinions. The general Zimbabwean public has a considerable digital divide in who consumes online news or posts to social media, because many Zimbabweans might not have WiFi, a mobile phone, or are illiterate: "This response highlights the limitations of journalists' overreliance on social media, especially its potential to marginalize stories from sources that are not digitally connected," (Mabweazara et al., 2014, p. 80).

Further, consider how traditional African cultural values of solidarity, interconnectedness, and interdependence affect how citizens and journalists alike use technology. Nyamnjoh (2005) observes how cell phone usage in villages often adopts a "single-owner-multiple user" attitude, where one family member's cell phone can be shared among an entire compound or streets of neighbors for phone calls and texts (p. 54). In another study of cell phone usage in Zimbabwe, the practice of "beeping" was observed, where a participant will call a friend and then hang up to signify they want a callback, presumably for the other person to use their own phone to pay for the callback (Mabweazara, 2011, 2014).

What is missing in the conversation on digital usage by African journalists is how coverage changes during times of civil conflict in repressive governments. This case study on Côte d'Ivoire intends to probe the contextual factors created when journalists are rapidly forced to both hide their physical newsrooms and subsequently emerge in a converged online space, in the presence of political violence. The following research questions can help locate what happened in the Côte d'Ivoire within the broader literature on adaptive journalistic routines in Africa. Instead of focusing on censorship as in the above studies, I instead take a more ethnographic angle with journalists in field interviews, exploring journalists' personal reflections on their changed routine at the time.

RQ1: *The arrival of the Force Républicaines de Cote d'Ivoire and the Forces Nouvelles militias in Abidjan in late March turned much of Abidjan into a war zone, including the downtown area. Journalists could no longer visit protests or report in person. How did journalists capitalize on using digital media to quickly adapt their reporting during the crisis?*

RQ2: *Mabweazara and colleagues (2014) have argued that an emphasis on the African locale, including its socioeconomic context, or an African model for journalism is crucial for a more culturally appropriate analysis of how African journalists use digital media in repressive political environments. What emerging patterns in the use of digital media in Abidjan contribute to an African model of journalism?*

Interviews

With the local press, I interviewed 15 journalists (all Ivoirian) from the following news agencies: Alert.info (an online text-based news agency), Abidjan.net (Côte d'Ivoire's main online news agency), *Le Temps, Le Nouveau Courrier, Notre Voie, Fraternité Matin*, and *Le Patriote. Le Temps, Notre Voie, Fraternité*

Matin were, at the time of the crisis, all considered to be pro-Gbagbo newspapers. *Le Patriote* is pro-Ouattara. Alert.info, Abidjan.net and *Le Nouveau Courrier* define themselves as nonpartisan.

I first conducted interviews with journalists in September 2016 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Participants were first contacted at their newsroom office. I then conducted in-person interviews in their physical newsrooms. Interviews ranged from 15 to 60 minutes in length. Interviews were recorded. Of the 15 Ivoirian journalists included in the study, 13 were men and two were women. All of them lived in neighborhoods of Abidjan. A typical Ivoirian journalist was male, had worked for his newsroom for 10 years or more, and was supporting a family on his monthly salary. All journalists were in their 30s, 40s or 50s. My university's Internal Review Board approved this research project in June 2016. Under the Internal Review Board's direction, journalists signed a consent form that guaranteed their anonymity in this study.

After reading back through multiple transcripts from my time in Côte d'Ivoire and reviewing my research questions, I assembled four preliminary, open codes for analyzing interviews:

- Conditions facing journalists
- Uses of digital media during crossfire/shutdowns
- Their opinions on the political intentions and role of local press
- Their opinions on the political intentions and role of international press

For example, if I was speaking with a local journalist, and they mentioned their organization's news team was forced to flee their newsroom and report from the editor's home, a statement of this type would be added to the code "conditions facing journalists." Once all transcripts were assembled into these four open codes, I then used axial and selective coding (typically used in grounded theory to connect themes within open codes) to find final themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The first two codes listed, "conditions facing journalists" and "use of digital media," form the backbone of results for this study.

Results

Three themes emerged from interviews with journalists that speak to the inquiry of this study. First, journalists overcame a serious challenge of spatial immobility (limited ability to travel around) due to (a) militias of either Ouattara's Force Nouvelles or Gbagbo's Les Forces de Défense et de Sécurité (FDS) stalking their newsroom offices and their homes, (b) general military blockades erected throughout the city, and (c) crossfire when fighting broke out between differing factions. Second, journalists around Abidjan adapted to this spatial immobility with a hyperactive exchange of equipment sharing and blending. Third, news teams also adapted a sort of hyperactive collaborative mindset among themselves, flocking to many digital platforms overnight. This wave published all manner of commentary related to the crisis, such as chat forums, blogs compiled by multiple Ivoirian diaspora authors, hashtags, Facebook editorial posts, and an SMS texting service. This last theme highlights the rush of online news commentary emerging from Abidjan to the rest of the international community on digital platforms, thus opening up news of the crisis to previously unreached international readers. This onslaught on online news also sidesteps the problem of spatial immobility for the international community to hear news in places they cannot travel.

Interestingly, results also showed that (aside from the Internet itself) no single piece of digital media was more dominant during the civil war. Rather, newsrooms invested overnight in a wide spectrum of technology and websites to get their news out from November 2010 to April 2011. Results also show that all local newspapers "went dark" and stopped printing entirely when the United Nations, Licorne, and Ouattara's Force Nouvelles arrived with forces in Abidjan on April 2, 2011.

Spatial Immobility

Interviewees spoke of having trouble "being in the field" or "going out in the streets" because the military blockades stopped cars to search everyone's papers.

> It was a problem of security, because there were armed groups patrolling. You didn't know who you would run into. There were road barricades, police forces had put up barricades, and when you went out, you had to present your papers, lift your hands. It was not easy to get around. (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016)

This common theme of spatial immobility posed an obstacle for every journalist because visiting different locations for fact-gathering is a basic facet of journalism.

> I couldn't leave my house anymore. I put on a headdress, but my hair was blonde, so people were going to notice me really quickly. And because it was a blog (it was the most read, we had the largest online audience), so seriously, people were searching for you to find out what you were doing. Me, I was pregnant, and anyway, there was a grand amount of anonymous bodies found, so that could be me, why not? (Local blogger, personal communication, September 2016)

Another journalist said his name was so well-known in Abidjan that he went into hiding at his editor-in-chief's home in November 2010 and stayed there, reporting for the duration of the crisis.

> You couldn't go out into the field to get the news, because it was dangerous; there was gunfire everywhere, and people were looking for us. So what we did, we used our cellphones. If you had someone's number, you could recover some information. (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016)

Several journalists spoke of being indoors when actual fighting broke out near their building. *Fraternité Matin*, a state-funded newspaper under the guidance of Gbagbo at the time, kept their newsroom going in-house until their building literally came under crossfire when ONUCI, Ouattara's militia, and Licorne began advancing across the city in early April.

> We [our building] were below, and the cross fire passed overhead. It had just started for a minute, and then we all hit the floor. We ran through the corridors to the printing press. You know, our printing press has a basement underneath, and we all fled there

to hide until about four in the afternoon. (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016)

And lastly, another major factor contributing to journalist's spatial immobility was militias from either camp actively searching for partisan newspaper journalists.

When the war took off in April, first I was in Yopougon. I left there to come to Cocody, and then when I got here, friends told me, "Get out. People are looking for you. They are saying soldiers of Ouattara are looking for you." Because Ouattara won, and they had taken [arrested] Gbagbo. So I left my own home. (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016)

The journalist then hid at a friend's home for three weeks until late April, when the fighting died down. Journalists spoke of being "sur le terrain" (in the field) and the importance of always being aware of which neighborhood one was in. In addition to these other unique ways of using technology, one company, Alerte.info, invented a new reporting system that speaks to all three themes. This news agency cobbled together about 600 subscribers consisting of businessmen, diplomats, United Nations staff working in Abidjan, politicians, and their phone numbers. Journalists sent out text messages to subscribers' cell phones with news headlines, with the full news article available on their website. The creative pairing of cellphones and texting headlines swiftly overcame the spatial immobility concerns present in Abidjan.

It's practical. Your telephone: you travel with it, you sleep with it, you wake up to it, you go everywhere with it. Even when you are talking with someone, you aren't reading a newspaper, but you could be on your phone, getting our texts. So you are informed; even while in meetings, at the airport, you know what is happening, everywhere. This didn't exist anywhere. (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016)

Journalists for Alerte.info kept reporting from their office in the first months of the crisis, and then they retreated to their homes during the heaviest fighting in the first days of April 2011. Through calls to sources, they continually produced a feed of text messages on politics, economy, and security to their 600 or so subscribers.

We did it all by phone. I knew a lot of people here. I was doing a lot of the reporting: the majority of the reporting was coming from me; I knew sources, residents, officials. My journalists were writing the texts, but I was giving them the information . . . It's instant, it's in real time. Newspapers you have to wait for tomorrow; we give it to you right now. There's also the fact it doesn't depend on an Internet connection. Someone can get it while they are out of the country even. The phone is always with you. Even if you don't have credit on your phone, it still receives it. (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016)

The subscribers to Alerte.info could go into exile to Ghana or take refuge in one of the many rural regions outside Abidjan and still get up-to-date texts from the service as the fighting converged in Abidjan.

This theme demonstrated the creativity of African news agencies in sidestepping a volatile physical interface through adaptive means of technology, even without the Internet, in the instance of Alerte.info.

Sharing and Blending of Newsroom Equipment

All journalists interviewed said their newsroom had to pack up their equipment and vacate their offices to protect staff and machinery (with the exception of *Fraternité Matin*, which stayed until April 2, 2011, and Alert.info, which was run from the editor's home). Most local newspaper offices ended up transporting their newsroom computers to editors' homes around Abidjan, where the staff then took shifts typing their stories on shared computers.

> We hid the entire newsroom . . . since the month of November 2010, we quit the newsroom, we went into hiding. We unplugged all the equipment, took it all out, and moved it to another hidden location. We wrote right up until the end of the crisis. (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016)

Essentially, by March 2011, most partisan newspaper news teams were either writing from shared computers at their editors home or had fled Abidjan entirely and continued to provide news commentary from their hidden location using cyber cafes or Internet keys. One journalist wrote for her blog, *La Force de la Plume* [The Strength of the Pen], from a cyber-café, where the owner was pro-Ouattara and allowed her to use the computers for free because of her affiliation.

Surge in Networking on Digital Platforms

The third theme among interviews was the amount of networked journalism and general hyperactive amounts of online commentary that sprang up in November 2010. In all 15 interviews, journalists mentioned some form of online collaboration driven by their inability to move around Abidjan. Consider the definition of networked journalism as "the active synthesis of traditional news media such as newspaper or TV stories with the new, many-to-many model of new media" (Beckett, 2010, p. 2). Journalists described a rapid adoption of the following for both story tips and publishing.

Much of this content can be considered political commentary:

- Facebook posts
- Twitter #CIV2010
- Blogs
- Chat forum on Abidjan.net
- Alerte.info, a texting news agency

For example, two journalists mentioned that both Ouattara's Rassemblement des Républicaines and Gbagbo's FPI were passing out free laptops at huge political rallies throughout Abidjan.

> Everyone online was trying to win what they call the battle of opinion, kind of trying to comment more than anyone else. So with that logic, people tried to block us, they tried to block the information we were writing about Gbagbo. Basically, camp Alassane had his

hackers that tried to block anything coming from camp Gbagbo, and vice versa. (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016)

Abidjan.net opened a public chat forum on its front page, where citizens could post eyewitness sightings and political analyses while safe at home.

People were writing blogs, letters, and addressing it to someone. It was an open column for people to bring attention and comment. People could put real or fake information. They were quite active at that time. It was a liability. We took it down. There were a lot of insults. It was really difficult to manage the liability for our brand and our site. People could stay anonymous, which was also not helpful . . . Through the years, we have created a small online community. When people don't work, they have more time to be in front of the computer. In those times of crisis, there is so much news. There's no other source. We are trying to be as alert as possible to any information that comes in. (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016)

A host of political blogs sprang up as well. One journalist said she became a blogger during the crisis for a famous blog and began posting alongside Ivoirian expats located around the world—an international, online collaboration: "The creator of our blog, he was already in exile in France. There was another participant in London, another I think in South Africa, another in France in Nice, and then me in Côte d'Ivoire" (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016). Multiple journalists from the highly partisan newspapers *Le Patriote* (pro-Ouattara), *Le Temps* (pro-Gbagbo), and *Notre Voie* were posting daily editions to Abidjan.net and posting their email with their bylines. Journalists said readers around the world would write to them via email.

A lot of people got back to me. I signed my articles, I put my email at the bottom. I had friends who work in the political parties of France. For example, I have a friend who works for the Communist Party in France; he's called Christophe Sembla, and he used to send me dispatches. I wrote articles too, and he took those to work with them in France. So we had people like that. (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016)

In addition, these newspapers posted their political pieces to Facebook, where they often received varying reactions of hostility or appreciation. One journalist noted, "It was a little [commentary] from everywhere; people in France, in the U.S., in West Africa, Burkina, Mali, Guinee, Belgium, Canada. There are a lot of Ivoirians who follow us," (Local journalist, personal communication, September 2016)

All 15 journalists mentioned their news site was hacked and their online coverage was interrupted, making this an important component of this theme. Many of the tiny, local newspaper sites were down for several weeks of the crisis, forcing journalists to publish editions on Abidjan.net and teasers for stories on Facebook.

Discussion and Outlook

As can be seen, journalists in Abidjan underwent massive changes to their reporting routines when the country's civil war struck in November 2010. The first research question in this study asks how journalists capitalized on digital media to quickly adapt their reporting during the crisis. The spatial immobility caused by cross fire and roaming militias forced a rapid reliance on digital platforms, which opened up a host of new, unique problems as outlined in the three themes earlier; groups maintained their publication schedule despite the inability to travel, the transport and sharing of newsroom equipment, and a surge in online commentary on digital platforms shared internationally.

These results can add substance to Mabweazara's call for a new examination of how African journalists use new media, given the social and cultural factors of their environments, as they are "inextricably embedded in the context in which they are developed" (Mabweazara et al., 2014, p. 66). For example, Ivoirian journalists were using Abidjan.net and Facebook to publish their articles because it was too dangerous to take taxis or busses to visit the printed press with their PDF drafts. The reality of sharing two or three newsroom computers in an editor's living room to continue publishing a newspaper online was a direct result of the political condition of civil war. This loss of resources because of political instability certainly informs a new idea of an African digital journalism epistemology, where (in the specific case study of Côte d'Ivoire) the practice of journalism in a volatile political environment must account for political and communal violence. It is important to clarify here that not all African governments grapple with political instability. Yet what we can observe about Côte d'Ivoire's communal violence as an obstacle to reporting during civil war certainly qualifies as a "local, contextual factor" in how journalism is practiced here. Further, what we observe is Ivoirian journalists using all manner of creative digital strategies to overcome this problem of reporting in person, from Alert.info's texting service to a community of Ivoirian expat journalists forming a collaborative political blog.

The second inquiry of this study revisits the call for an African model of journalism that better integrates the volatile socioeconomic and political environments within which these journalists operate. It is important to note that political violence clearly affects journalists in many parts of the world; attacks on journalists in Europe increased by 51% in a 2022 report from the Council on Europe (2022). Attacks on journalists for their media outlet's editorial line are increasing around the world. The threats to journalists in other nations and threats to journalists in Abidjan are both alarming. The element of partisan newspapers aligned with either Ouattara or Gbagbo's politics cannot be ignored in this case study, because their harassment from opposing military factions is a key reason their reporting routines were disrupted. Journalists clearly had to cope with a distinctly polarized political situation and stay vigilant as to which neighborhoods, roadblocks, and secured regions one was visiting, so as to not fall into the wrong hands. This element of polarized communal violence during a civil war also seems to form a bedrock to an African model of journalism, in which journalists writing for partisan newspapers must prioritize their own safety and the safety of their newsrooms based on their political affiliations. One interviewee called this "the battle of opinion." What we learn from the case study in the Côte d'Ivoire is that politically affiliated newsrooms can face a secondary armada of threats when political violence breaks out—journalists are targeted for their political affiliations in this cultural environment. For example, Ouattara's rebel militia Forces Républicaines de Côte "Ivoire had a literal list of pro-Gbagbo journalists they were hunting down after Gbagbo was

captured on April 11. The resultant themes from journalists regarding how they negotiated this highly divisive communal violence via the use of digital platforms can certainly be considered a key contextual and cultural factor influencing an African model of journalism. Sharing newsroom equipment, sharing the editors' computers, collaborative blogging, sharing the publishing of online editions, and contributing to the hotly divisive "battle of opinion" online constitute ways these African journalists adapted to the threat of communal violence "sur le terrain" in Abidjan.

In addition, the collaborative nature in how journalists came together during the national crisis to support each other and to continue printing their newspaper certainly has similarities to the theme of community journalism, outlined in the African concept of Ubuntu (Nyamnjoh, 2015; Obonyo, 2011; Skjerdal, 2012; Tutu, 1999). For example, journalists whose newspaper websites were hacked continued churning out daily editions and uploaded them as PDFs to Abidjan.net, who faithfully kept posting editions from at least six local newspapers to their website up until the day the UN and Ouattara's military arrived in April 2011. The collaboration between both those newsrooms and Abidjan.net created a kind of community safety net that continued to get out the news. A distinctly African theme of responding to a volatile crisis with collaboration and the pooling of resources seems to form one helpful contextual factor in understanding a new African model of journalism, as observed in the case study of Abidjan. This theme seems to fit well with Skjerdal's (2012) thoughts on communal journalism, where this type of journalism "is rooted in the community and its inherent values, taking as its starting point that the journalist is first and foremost a member of a local community. The professional identity only comes secondary" (p. 644).

Recognizing these underlying contextual factors affecting the practice of digital journalism in Côte d'Ivoire has implications for many similar electoral conflicts elsewhere in francophone African governments and sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Gabon's 2016 national election created a violent political climate between incumbent president Ali Bongo and candidate Jean Ping, a conflict that stretched for months in Gabon and rocked the nation's capital with violence (Africanews.com, 2017). The partisan press in Gabon faced a similar debacle of physical harassment from either side's militants and was equally constrained by an authoritarian regime that spent the next several years trying to silence Gabonese journalists with online censorship (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). The lessons drawn from regionally specific quandaries facing Ivoirian journalists can perhaps contribute to Mabweazara and other scholars' ideas about a new African model of journalism as the online sphere of news in this region continues to evolve in volatile authoritarian regimes.

Suggestions for Future Research

A setback for this case study was the inability to gather a second set of interviews from journalists for the 2020 national election in Côte d'Ivoire because of the COVID-19 pandemic and funding shortages for overseas research. The nine years between 2011 and 2020 have seen exponential growth in digital platform adoption by journalists in Côte d'Ivoire. Measuring the online behavior of Abidjan's newsrooms in 2020 compared with 2011 can help shed more light on how the online news sphere of West Africa is evolving. In addition, a comparative case study of a national election crisis in a second francophone nation in West Africa with troubled politics, such as Gabon or Cameroon, could certainly add contrast and texture to the themes found in this present case study. It is tenuous to generalize grand assumptions about the contextual factors shaping digital platform usage in francophone West Africa from a single national election in a single

nation in 2011. However, these results are still a significant contribution to the field because Côte d'Ivoire's political crisis bears so many similarities to other African francophone nations still attempting political stability as former colonies of France in a neoliberal era.

Conclusion

Africa continues to lead the world in the rate of growth in the mobile phone sector and Internet access (Ericsson Report, 2018). The collision of rising digital audiences, authoritarian regimes, and real deadlines of African journalists will continue to experience conflict over the next 10 years. The trending crisis of digital censorship of journalists among African governments is a growing field in academic literature on African journalism.

Our analysis suggests there are indeed a litany of culturally specific factors relevant to an African model of journalism, particularly as journalists grow in their use of digital platforms. The online collaboration, hyperactive online coverage, and negotiation of communal and state violence found in the case study of coverage of Côte d'Ivoire's electoral helps add substance to Mabweazara and colleagues' (2014) comment that "interactive digital technologies are, in fact, socially and culturally shaped and that the nature and form of their appropriation is inextricably embedded in the context in which they are developed" (p. 66). These considerations call for further research on the role of digital platforms during civil war in African authoritarian contexts.

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