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Digital Media in Côte d'Ivoire : Mixed and Disappointed Expectations in a Rapidly Evolving System

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Abstract

Purpose: The study aims to assess the current situation and examine the achievements of the digitization of Ivorian media.

Methodology: With this in mind, this analysis is based on a literature review, field observations, and semi-structured interviews, using Henry Jenkins's (2006) theory of media convergence as its theoretical framework.

Findings: The results show a mixed reception for digital media, which were launched to ensure the survival of traditional media on the one hand, and, on the other hand, reveal the platformization of digital media as the foundation of a new business model currently taking shape.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Ultimately, this study sheds light on the emergence of a business model as the foundation for the resilience of the press in the digital age.

Keywords: *Digital Media, Traditional Media, Digital Social Media, Media Economics, Platformization*

Introduction

Traditional media are going digital in Côte d'Ivoire. This process has been underway for several decades. Print newspapers were the first to undergo this change. Indeed, the drastic drop in sales following the Internet boom made this shift inevitable. In June 2024, the National Press Authority (ANP) released statistics showing a clear decline in traditional media, with sales falling from 6 billion CFA francs in 2011 to 546 million in 2023 for some twenty daily newspapers. The same study showed a positive trend for digital media, estimated at 73.7 percent. Consequently, newspapers such as Fraternité Matin—founded in 1964 as a pro-government general-interest daily launched its online version in 2004 as fratmat.net, which became fratmat.info in 2011. The Olympe Group, owner of the daily newspaper L'Inter, launched its online version in 2012: linfodrome. Abidjan.net was launched earlier, in 1998. It is not an online newspaper but a digital portal that serves as a distribution platform for all print newspapers. Television and radio stations, in turn, are undergoing a major transformation. They, too, have moved online. For example, the Ivorian Radio and Television (RTI), founded in 1962, launched its online version in 2021: rti.info.

According to their leaders, all of these media outlets were created to address the crisis affecting traditional analog media and to adapt to changing times and technologies. Several years after their launch, what is the actual situation? Have online media outlets enabled traditional media to regain their audiences and thereby increase their revenue? This analysis will focus primarily on addressing these concerns.

For the sake of clarity, it seems appropriate to define, in this context, what constitutes a digital medium and a digital social network, while also clarifying the difference between these terms. Digital media, or professional digital media, refers to a digital platform used to disseminate information that has been gathered, processed, and then conveyed by media professionals in this case, journalists and photographers. These professionals carry out their work responsibly, in accordance with the code of ethics and professional conduct that governs their field. Examples in Côte d'Ivoire include fratmat.info, rti.ci, aip.ci, and lintelligentdabidjan.info… One thing is certain: the digitization of information is transforming journalistic practices (Mark Deuze, 2004; & Schulte & Dufresne, 1999). In contrast, social media platforms are internet applications through which communities form and share content. Andreas Kaplan & Mickael Haenlein (2010) emphasize that this content is produced by non-professional users of information. These include platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. However, these two entities are neither diametrically opposed

nor parallel, in that a professional digital media outlet may use social media to disseminate information. That said, digital media operate according to an editorial line with a clear and professional information production process. Platforms, on the other hand, are socio-technical systems guided by interpersonal or community interactions, driven by algorithmic logic.

1. METHODOLOGY

This section is organized around two phases: data collection techniques and the theoretical framework.

1.1. Data collection techniques

1.1.1. literature review

We selected and reviewed, primarily, documents related to the subject; specifically: reports from media regulatory bodies in Côte d'Ivoire namely, the National Press Authority (ANP) and the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA) on sales. We also consulted the Diagnostic Study on the State of the Media: Print Media, Online Media, Radio, and Television; Obstacles to Professionalization and Corrective Measures (Ibitowa, P., 2017). This is a key document that maps the Ivorian media landscape and analyzes the evolution of the country's media system.

1.1.2. The semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with executives from these media outlets who are familiar with the program, the target audience, how the media operate, their business models, and the evolution of the selected media formats. Ten media users were also interviewed to supplement and cross-check the information gathered. Media executives were asked to provide information on the history, (comparative) evolution before and after digitization and in the era of artificial intelligence (AI), the business model, and the outlook for their respective media platforms. Media consumers were asked to provide information on the evolution of the media and their consumption habits before digitization, after digitization, and in the era of AI.

1.1.3. The technique of stratified random sampling

Public and private media outlets, both analog and digital, were selected. In addition, the media outlets chosen were also selected based on the accessibility and availability of their editors and their content. First, there are print media:

A public newspaper: Fraternité Matin ;

A private newspaper : L'Intelligent d'Abidjan;

A public news agency: AIP

Second, audiovisual media:

A public radio and television broadcaster : Radiodiffusion Télévision Ivoirienne (RTI)

A private television station: Life TV

Third, digital media:

A primarily digital platform: abidjan.net

The digital versions of all the print and audiovisual media mentioned above.

1.2.Data analysis methods

Data analysis consisted of compiling the survey results to catalog the various pieces of information. In conjunction with this approach, discourse analysis was employed to establish connections among the data.

1.2.1. Discourse Analysis

The processing and analysis of qualitative data were carried out according to the following steps : transcription of the interviews, post-interview coding, and the establishment of connections between the various discursive categories.

1.2.1.1. Transcription of the Interviews

Rather than processing the information collected directly from audio recordings, we transcribed the individual interviews in writing to facilitate reading and ensure an accurate record. Thus, the information gathered during the interviews was transcribed into written form. These texts (or verbatim transcripts) constitute the raw data of the study. Transcription allowed us to organize the study data in a text format that is directly accessible for analysis.

1.2.1.2. Post-transcription coding of the interviews

After transcription, an analysis plan was developed, including the categories of analysis that is, the criteria and indicators essential for the analysis. During this process, using the interview guides, we identified subsets within the texts that corresponded to basic ideas and specific aspects of the

main themes. Based on this work, the codes were developed. Ideas that appeared frequently were used to highlight the central themes.

1.2.1.3. Processing of Transcripts

For data processing, the interviews were transcribed and coded in a Word document, and the coded information was processed manually. Data analysis took the form of a content analysis of the participants' statements during the interviews, following this method : transcription of the data ; coding of the information ; and data processing. For each theme, the key messages expressed by the participants were first ranked according to their frequency of occurrence in the overall data. Next, a comparison was conducted to identify differences and similarities, and finally, the key messages were illustrated using verbatim quotes that reflect the perceptions expressed by the participants.

1.3.Data analysis

Henry Jenkins' (2006) theory of media convergence served as the theoretical foundation for this analysis. For Jenkins, convergence is not synonymous with the merging of content onto a single medium. Rather, it is a process by which content circulates across multiple media platforms. For him, audience interaction and participation are very important. Furthermore, issues related to content convergence, as well as technological, organizational, professional, and audience convergence, provide a relevant theoretical framework for this discussion. All of a given company's traditional media channels are brought together on a single platform.

2. Results

2.1. Radio, television, print newspapers, and specific digital media outlets

2.1.1. The RTI Group, a public media organization serving the public interest

It all began in 1949 with the creation of the broadcasting service, which later, on October 26, 1962, became the Ivorian Radio and Television (RTI). This media group is a public service entity funded by a license fee included in electricity bills, government subsidies, and advertising.

The group operates four television stations: RTI1, RTI2, and RTI 3 the main ones as well as RTI Bouaké. The group also operates three radio stations: Radio Côte d'Ivoire and Fréquence 2 the main ones followed by RTI (radio) Bouaké, the regional station. In addition to these media outlets, the group offers other digital platforms (mobile apps, a website, and social media), supported by state-of-the-art technical equipment. Naturally, its missions include, among other things, the

production, broadcasting, distribution, and marketing of content.

Of the three radio stations, Radio Côte d'Ivoire broadcasts 24 hours a day. It positions itself as the leading sports news radio station in Côte d'Ivoire. As for the television consortium, RTI 1 the oldest channel is a national, general-interest broadcaster, with an editorial line reflected in its slogan: "RTI 1, the channel that brings people together." Operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Communication, it is regulated by a Board of Directors. In addition, RTI has maintained a digital presence via rti.info since 2017. This digital platform broadcasts live news broadcasts and other programs from the group's radio and television stations. Furthermore, it develops primarily digital content and even engages in fact-checking through its "Les vérificateurs" section.

2.1.2. Life TV, a private television network focused primarily on "entertainment"

Life TV is a privately owned media group that operates a television station and a radio station broadcasting from Abidjan. It was granted its operating license in March 2017. Three years later, on June 26, 2020, it began broadcasting. The group, which is also available online, has its own equipment for its television and radio stations. Its staff of about 100 employees focuses primarily on young people through a variety of entertainment and drama programs.

2.1.3. The Fraternité Matin Group: An Extension of Government Policy

The Fraternité Matin Group launched its first publication, the daily newspaper "Fraternité Matin," in December 1964. Operating under state supervision, this newspaper covered the activities of the Ivorian government. The group, which owns state-of-the-art printing technology, has diversified its operations to include a publishing and distribution house and a digital platform. The digital version of the newspaper, fratmat.info, was launched in 2012. It targets a young, tech-savvy, and broader audience. "The digital platform offers free access and interactive features with continuous updates 24 hours a day. (…) It positions itself as a 'citizen media' outlet that supports the 'development' of Côte d'Ivoire. (Topé, Touré, 2026: 378). The Fraternité Matin group is funded not only by government subsidies and sales but also by advertising and its publishing house.

2.1.4. L'Intelligent d'Abidjan, an independent private group

L'Intelligent d'Abidjan is, at its core, a privately owned newspaper founded in September 2003. According to official, A. W., the publication presents itself as an independent media outlet based on a diversity of opinions. As early as 2005, the newspaper launched its online presence. Since

2021, the first signs of L'Intelligent TV's digital presence have already become visible. According to its officials, the group operates on a for-profit basis and derives 27% of its revenue from advertising, 26% from government subsidies, and 13% from newspaper sales.

2.1.5. AIP, the state-run news agency

The Ivorian Press Agency (AIP) was established in June 1961. As a news distributor, its mission is to collect and redistribute national and international news to its clients. Originally a public enterprise, it became a department within the Ministry of Information and Communication before being transformed into a national public administrative institution by Decree No. 91-181 of March 27, 1991, as amended by Decree No. 2024-1118 of December 19, 2024. Its employees are civil servants paid by the State of Côte d'Ivoire. In 2003, the agency's online version was launched: aip.ci.

2.1.6. Abidjan.net, a pioneer in the digital world

Abidjan.net is one of the leading digital news outlets and distributors in Côte d'Ivoire. The website was launched in 1998 to provide the diaspora with local news. It is a private initiative that is funded by advertising and institutional partnerships.

2.2. Traditional Media's Plummeting Audience

The traditional media outlets at the center of this study have all undergone a transformation in how they operate (Richard 2022). In 2015, there were about 100 newspapers in Côte d'Ivoire, according to the CNP (ibid.). However, the decline in sales is palpable. The example of *Fraternité Matin* is telling. That year, the daily delivered 225,097 copies and sold 151,716 copies in April and May. During the second quarter of 2016, it sold 124,246 copies. For many years, the pro-government daily has had a print run of 20,000 copies, according to the colophon of Fraternité Matin No. 17,171 dated Saturday and Sunday, March 20, 2022, and No. 18,521 dated Monday, October 5, 2026. However, the then-President of the ANP, Samba Koné, revealed that all Ivorian newspapers combined sell fewer than 20,000 copies. "(…) the 20 daily newspapers available at newsstands in Côte d'Ivoire have a 'cumulative daily circulation of barely 15,000 copies, despite meager resources'" (APA News, 2022). This statement reveals that the number of unsold copies of Fraternité Matin and other newspapers is very high. The President of the ANP acknowledges that: "The cumulative revenue of the daily press in Côte d'Ivoire fell from 6 billion CFA francs to less than 2 billion CFA francs between 2011 and 2021 a 70% drop over ten years." (ibid.)

Consequently, in an effort to close the significant budget deficit, the Association of Newspaper Publishers of Côte d'Ivoire (GEPCI) is raising newspaper prices. The price has increased from 200 to 300 FCFA as of April 2, 2014, while the price of weekly newspapers has risen from 300 to 500 FCFA.

In 2010, daily newspaper sales fell from 23,089,559 to 10,159,617 in 2015. Weekly newspaper sales fell from 3,656,044 to 1,525,132. "The decline averages 3,000,000 year over year for daily newspapers. But it was in the range of 4,500,000 between 2012 and 2013." (Ibitowa, op. cit., p. 130). The same trend is evident for weekly newspapers. There are multiple reasons for this decline:

> *"The Ivorian media market, particularly the print media sector, operates within an unfavorable sociocultural context and faces competition from numerous interactive, less expensive, and significantly more user-friendly information platforms (blogs, chat rooms, forums, social media) in terms of immediacy and variety of content. (...) Users, particularly young people, are engaging with information technologies on an increasingly regular basis. In 2015, 87% of the population aged 15 and older owned a smartphone. This is despite an illiteracy rate of 55% according to INS statistics (op. cit., p. 123).*

2.3.An Analysis of the Mixed Prospects for Digital Media

2.3.1. A Mixed Reception from Digital Media

In 2000, there were nearly 20,000 Internet users, a figure that rose to 300,000 three years later. In 2012, the number of users stood at nearly 2 million. At the beginning of 2013, there were approximately 125,000 ADSL subscribers. (op. cit., p. 40). This explains why all traditional media outlets have a digital presence. It is common for several traditional media outlets from the same group to focus on a single digital platform. "This shift has become inevitable for everyone," explains Mr. A.W., of L'Intelligent in Abidjan.

However, having an online presence does not necessarily mean a large audience. In this regard, audience figures which can be gauged by the number of visits (website traffic), subscribers, shares, and so on vary from one platform to another. Some media outlets are seeing rising audiences, while others are experiencing declining ones.

> *"I'll admit that the media in Côte d'Ivoire are barely surviving. You know, when traditional media began shifting to the Internet, we thought we'd quickly recoup the money we were losing in direct sales of print newspapers. But it didn't take long for us to*

realize we were wrong. That's not the case. Our readers don't automatically find us on our websites. In the early 2000s, they did. Today, that's no longer the case. Even the model of direct online and print subscriptions is facing difficulties," says a professional journalist from Fraternité Matin.

His explanation echoes that of X. P., a former loyal reader of *Fraternité Matin* and a now-defunct opposition newspaper, *Le Courrier d'Abidjan*.

"I used to buy my copy of Fraternité Matin regularly from street vendors shouting out their wares. These days, you don't see them anymore. I also used to buy Le Courrier d'Abidjan. I liked the analyses and reports in that paper. Politics wears us out. I've given it all up. I used to prefer browsing the headlines online and on abidjan.net. These days, that doesn't really appeal to me anymore. I've distanced myself from all of that. With my Facebook, I have all of that right there. Besides, even the journalists aren't really telling us anything new," says Mr. K., who is in his sixties.

This information points to a media crisis caused by several factors, including less appealing content according to the reader quoted above the sociopolitical context, and the public's changing media consumption habits. People prefer to get their news from social media, which they find more comprehensive and less stressful than professional media outlets. The following data, recorded on October 5, 2026, confirms this. For example, on the professional news site abidjan.net, there were 82 shares on October 6, 2026, at 12:17 a.m. for the article: "Ivory Coast: 9 People Killed in a Traffic Accident on the Northern Highway (Fire Department)." As for social media platforms such as Facebook, Life TV has a total of approximately 3,000,000 followers (www.lifeplayci-tv.orange)

2.3.2. A Digital Media Economy in Flux

Competition from digital social media platforms which tend to absorb or serve as an extension of digital media is forcing media executives and publishers to adapt and rethink the business model for managing their outlets.

As for public media, the challenge is less pronounced. Outlets such as Fraternité Matin and fratmat.info, the RTI group with its various television and radio stations as well as rti.ci, and the AIP news agency with aip.ci have a more or less stable business model. These outlets rely heavily on government subsidies, sales, and traditional advertising, with little sponsorship. However, "the advertising market is shrinking," reveals an AIP official.

Today, private newspapers such as Abidjan's *L'Intelligent* have reevaluated their approach. Aware of the increasingly low revenue from commercial advertising and newsstand sales, on the one hand, and the high cost of printing, on the other, the newspaper has developed several partnerships. In addition to its online presence, it has expanded into web TV. "We're innovating quickly despite limited financial resources," says Mr. A.

The primarily digital media outlet, abidjan.net, has also reinvented its business model. The platform, which conducts direct sales, is increasing its advertising and selling ad space. It maintains a presence on social media and even monetizes its content, according to its executives. "abidjan.net has a solid model. It has evolved from a publisher to a strategic player in the knowledge sector," said R. K.

2.3.3. When Social Media Competes With and Extends Digital Media

The example of abidjan.net is telling. In this case, the media outlet increases its visibility by publishing articles on its Facebook or YouTube page. Moreover, the competition is, paradoxically, clear. Ten people surveyed, including Mr. Komenan, acknowledge that they are increasingly turning to social media to access news from home and abroad. These platforms are increasingly becoming the go-to choice for Internet users. "Personally, I prefer to go straight to Facebook. You can find almost all the information there. That's what interests us," explains P.T., another respondent. Another respondent adds, "You get the hottest news on social media. But there are times when we still go check things on certain websites," admits T.K. R. K. of abidjan.net confirms this when he explains that they post news on abidjan.net's Facebook pages and other social media platforms. He reveals that the content posted by abidjan.net on its social media pages is very often viewed more frequently than the website itself. This shows that the habits and attitudes of media consumers have changed. The analysis showed that there are many reasons for the decline of the media in Côte d'Ivoire. Ms. Y. A. explains the reasons for this decline. "Readers' economic difficulties, distribution and management problems, as well as a loss of trust and poor content, are the reasons that lead readers like us to seek information elsewhere," she notes. Indeed, in Côte d'Ivoire, the morning ritual of reading a printed newspaper is all but a thing of the past. This decline in readership is, in fact, a reflection of a multitude of interconnected challenges.

The economic reality is harsh. Faced with the high cost of living, the print newspaper has become a luxury for many Ivorians generally adults who love print media who are forced to forgo this pleasure in favor of meeting basic needs. Compounding this decline in purchasing power are clear

structural flaws: an aging distribution network and internal management problems that undermine publishers' financial viability. Moreover, the crisis is one of identity. The content offered sometimes struggles to keep pace with the immediacy of digital media, leading to a gradual decline in public confidence in the neutrality and added value of the information provided.

3. Discussion

Online media's direct audiences did not skyrocket immediately after their launch. This situation has exacerbated the already evident crisis undermining traditional media. In fact, online media outlets often generate more views and thus reach a larger audience on social media than on their own websites. For example, Internet users prefer to visit abidjan.net not on the website itself but rather on its Facebook and LinkedIn pages. In other words, the audience isn't actually disappearing it's simply shifting. News professionals must therefore be aware of this and rethink their programming and how they distribute their reports… The platformization of professional media is thus a real phenomenon.

Trédan and Gestin (2023, p. 114) have also demonstrated this. They speak of a "generational shift in the way information is consumed." According to them, there has been a sharp decline in the reading of print newspapers, especially among younger people. This, according to these researchers, is the real crux of the matter. According to them, only 4% of 18- to 25-year-olds read the print edition of a regional daily newspaper in France, compared to 67% of those aged 75 and older. Yet online news remains written content. This reality explains the increased platformization of political articles and debates, according to Lyubareva Inna et al. (2021). Researchers are updating the latest trends in journalism with the goal of satisfying consumers and winning them back. For them, everything is on Facebook.

> *"If you want to get information, you have to be part of very local groups. There are small communities on Facebook in many towns. In fact, what has changed is that organizations are now communicating via Facebook. For some of them, they hardly need us anymore," laments a regional journalist quoted by Lyubareva Inna et al. (ibid.).*

In Côte d'Ivoire, given the media's generally difficult situation, the website pressecotedivoire.ci has offered readers the option of a subscription or purchasing individual articles in PDF format at a discounted price (Hamani & N'Gongo, 2024), in PDF format at a discounted price. H (Hamani & N'Gongo, 2024). They report that "Media executives had counted on website advertising to generate enough revenue to cover their expenses, but in reality, this goal seems difficult to achieve."

For Ivorian researcher-journalist Cyrille Nahin (2021), the verdict is final: mobile apps are killing professional journalism. He cites AI-based news apps such as Opera News, Scooper, and More News as the culprits.

Limits and Conclusion

Admittedly, it is difficult to find large-scale audience studies and comprehensive reports on up-to-date sales figures for media outlets in Côte d'Ivoire. However, the data obtained are sufficient to conduct analyses on this topic. Thus, the study revealed a shift toward platform-based models among professional news websites. The survey also showed that, as consumer habits have changed, media executives are in the process of revising their business models. Increasingly, they are distributing news on Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms. This indicates that online media outlets, designed to fill the gaps and address the shortcomings of traditional media, are also facing difficulties. The time has therefore come to reinvent new paradigms and business models intended to revitalize traditional and digital media in crisis.

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