

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

*Focus on freedom of expression and association online*



*This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.*

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## CÔTE D'IVOIRE

INTERNET-ENABLED CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT  
DURING THE 2010 ELECTIONS



[nnenna.org](http://nnenna.org)

Nnenna Nwakanma  
[www.nnenna.org](http://www.nnenna.org)

### Introduction

At the start of its independence in 1960, Côte d'Ivoire was ruled by Félix Houphouët-Boigny, in a manner described as “authoritarian and paternal”. In the 33 years of his rule, Côte d'Ivoire enjoyed relative economic and social stability as well as growth, with its economic capital, Abidjan, becoming what is known as the “Paris of Africa”. On his death in 1993, Houphouët-Boigny was succeeded by Aimé Henri Konan Bédié, who was ousted from power by a military coup on Christmas Eve in 1999. General Robert Guei, the head of the military junta, managed to organise a presidential election, albeit amid civil crisis, which saw Laurent Gbagbo come into power in 2000. However, it would be another decade before elections would be held again, sparking civil unrest.

### 2010, the long-awaited elections and the “ivoire-info-techpreneurs”

The 2010 presidential elections were five years overdue. Several postponements had ended up galvanising ordinary citizens into civil action. In Côte d'Ivoire, presidential elections are the first in a series of elections. They are followed by legislative, regional and finally, municipal elections. The presidential elections are carried by a simple majority – by a candidate winning 50% of all valid votes plus one. In the case of no clear winner, a second round is organised as a run-off for the two candidates with the highest number of votes.

The government had coupled voter registration with a national identification process. This meant that a maximum number of voters were expected. At the end of the initial phase of registration, 5,784,490 voters were cleared for the process. Another feature of the elections was the number of presidential hopefuls. There were fourteen in all, including a woman, a comedian, a human rights activist and a farmer. The state-run national broadcaster indicated that each of the candidates was going to “face the nation” for 90 minutes and answer questions. A face-to-face live debate was also scheduled for the two run-off candidates.

Voter mobilisation moved from the streets online. Gbagbo launched a much-hyped website. His major challenger, Allasane Dramane Ouattara, launched his too, which was radio and TV enabled. Then followed the YouTube channels, the Facebook groups and the Twitter accounts, with politicians maximising the potential of online media interventions.

### *Wonzomai, the Ivorian version of Ushahidi*

Wonzomai – meaning “witness” in Beté, the major language in the western part of the country – was the first internet-enabled citizen engagement initiative dealing with election issues.<sup>1</sup> It allowed individuals to report diverse incidents, from traffic conditions, fraud and security, to voting conditions, as well as to share official government information. Citizens could call, text, send email or use the Twitter hashtag to report incidents, which were then mapped.

### *#CIV2010 – Côte d'Ivoire online*

In the middle of October 2010, immediately after the launch of Wonzomai, the Twitter hash tag #CIV2010 was launched. Its aim was to engage citizens on Twitter on all election issues. #CIV2010 allowed voters to track candidates, post pictures, analyse TV debates, campaign for votes, report issues and much more. #CIV2010 users chose not to obey the government injunction to not publish the first round of election results, since the injunction specifically focused on national and foreign media in Côte d'Ivoire. As a result, many of the #CIV2010 users felt they were not obliged to respect this.

The first leg of the presidential elections went relatively well and was declared peaceful across the world. This gave more impetus to the “ivoire-info-techpreneurs”. They started meeting regularly on Friday evenings for drinks, forging friendships and comradeship. Then came the famous presidential face-to-face debate between Gbagbo and Ouattara. Once the debate was officially set for Thursday 25 November, the web went into a frenzy. It was going to be the first debate of its kind – the very first – in the recent history of the nation. The capacity of the live web stream of the national broadcaster was

<sup>1</sup> [www.wonzomai.com](http://www.wonzomai.com)

increased to cater for more viewers. Those three hours were going to see the most viewers in the history of Ivorian TV.

### *Shocker!*

About ten hours before the debate, the online platform was shut down. Viewers were required to pay a monthly or quarterly subscription for access. #CIV2010 took up the issue. Citizens pay for public TV already and, by law, access to the state broadcaster could not be restricted online. Especially not on such a day! The TV officials said they were not aware of the changes and that the board of the broadcaster had not been informed. In three hours, the ivoire-info-techpreneurs were able to track down the fraudster responsible for the shutdown. He was an employee of the broadcaster's web solutions provider. They reported his acts, informing the national broadcasting authority and the office of the prime minister. The national TV channel came back online for free after four hours of intense internet-enabled activism!

The debate lasted three hours and nine minutes. Every word was live-tweeted. Every question, every gesture. #CIV2010 users were doing direct translation of the presidential candidates' comments straight into English – in the same way the official results of the first round of presidential elections were live-tweeted. Beginning from the Thursday of the live debate to the time of this report, #CIV2010 has been in the Top 10 Trending Twitter Topics in the French language.

### *When crises set in*

After waiting for run-off results for three sleepless nights, ivoire-info-techpreneurs knew danger was ahead. And the crises certainly came. The Independent Electoral Commission announced Allasane Dramane Ouattara winner of the polls. The Constitutional Council overrode the results of the Commission and gave victory to incumbent president Gbagbo. Each “president” held to his victory, formed a cabinet, and was intent on exercising power. The international community aligned itself with the Electoral Commission and held the challenger as victorious.

By this time #CIV2010 had established itself as the “other country” – a cyber country that offered a parallel expression of people's rights and needs. All stakeholders were using the hashtag. The two presidential camps were there, their propaganda too. Violence erupted. As clashes raged on the streets of Abidjan, details could be read on Twitter minutes after events unfolded. Photos, numbers, reports, eye-witness accounts! The international media was shut down, and Twitter became the “official” media platform for Côte d'Ivoire.

### *Managing the humanitarian crises*

With the outbreak of post-electoral violence, citizen mobilisation took a different turn. While information battles were raging on #CIV2010, the need for humanitarian aid and support loomed large. Private vehicles had been snatched by armed combatants, banks had closed their doors, cash flow was meagre and medication for the sick was dwindling. Then came the curfew, which started at midnight and only ended at six in the morning. There was an unprecedented breakdown of the social system. As if all of that was not enough, mobile phone text messaging (SMS) services went down too. Movement was limited, phone calls down to the minimum, hunger was everywhere and the number of people hospitalised increased. At this time, gas stations had closed, shops too. Some hospitals ran out of medication, public transport was non-existent and heavy gunfire could be heard even before the curfew started!

The ivoire-info-techpreneurs decided to use the Wonzomai solidarity platform and weave in a kind of internet-enabled emergency centre. Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), the Red Cross, and the United Nations were the only international organisations offering help in the country at the time. The solution to this was the CIVSOCIAL project.<sup>2</sup> The project consisted of six different hubs:

- A call centre in Accra, staffed by volunteers
- #CIVSOCIAL and #CIVAUTO hashtags on Twitter
- A website with a fundraising component<sup>3</sup>
- A Facebook group
- A Blackberry group
- A Skype group

All of the above functioned 24/7. Emergency messages poured in. In the first days, cases were mainly from wounded people who needed care, sick people who needed medication, pregnant women who needed attention, and families who needed food. Since many people did not have airtime to make calls and SMS services were down, they would “flash call” the centre, which would call the number back. #CIVSOCIAL would then forward the message to all of the six gateways listed above. Once a solution was found, it was relayed to the person in need.

A quick list of resources was drawn up: pharmacies, available medication, clinics that could receive patients, UN vehicles that could transport people, medical personnel willing to do consultations, points where food could be bought, etc. Patients and doctors met via remote conferencing using the call centre

<sup>2</sup> [civsocal.akendewa.org](http://civsocal.akendewa.org)

<sup>3</sup> [www.gofundme.com/civsocal](http://www.gofundme.com/civsocal)

in Accra. A husband helped his pregnant wife deliver her baby relying on a doctor's instructions via a conference call! At the height of the crises, the mobile telecommunication companies joined #CIVSOCIAL, donating airtime to allow for basic calls. Internet service providers also joined the effort, offering two weeks of free internet access to allow #CIVSOCIAL to continue its work. International media helped, publishing interviews and calling for donations. In less than 72 hours, the project raised well over USD 4,000.

### *The war on PayPal*

At a time when #CIVSOCIAL had peaked, another drama reared its head. PayPal France would not release the donated money. One of the ivoire-info-techpreneurs, whose PayPal France account was used as an emergency measure, was told that in France you cannot use a personal account to receive a public donation. The information was shared with the Skype "situation room" and, in one sitting, the #CIVSOCIAL group decided to take the war to PayPal. A formal online petition was launched and in less than 24 hours over 1,000 signatures were received in support, each signature triggering a tweet! Bloggers followed, and the international media were happy to report on the crisis. PayPal reacted swiftly and the funds were cleared. The ivoire-info-techpreneur actually received a hand-written note and a digital photo frame from PayPal as a peace offering!

At the time of this report, the daily sound of gunfire has died down considerably: one camp has apparently won the war and the country is now picking up the pieces. Nonetheless, stolen cars have yet to be returned and #CIVAUTO is still functional, and being used to track the stolen cars and to deal with other vehicle-related issues, such as those that were abandoned. The call centre has been discontinued, and the ivoire-info-techpreneurs are now using #CIVNEXT to track and monitor the next steps after the crises, while #CIV2010 still remains as an information and political propaganda platform.

### **Moving forward: Lessons, trends and conclusions**

#### *Citizen mobilisation on Twitter has earned respect*

Undoubtedly, the huge mobilisation of citizens on Facebook and Twitter has earned respect for the citizens themselves. At one point in time, even the G8 countries had officials posted to follow #CIV2010. Official communications from France, China, the European Union and the United States on Côte d'Ivoire were all posted on Twitter using the #CIV2010 hash tag. Recently, Prime Minister Soro Guillaume, after asking his

advisor Alain Logbognon to engage citizens on Twitter and on #CIV2010, signed up himself as @Boghota and has held serious discussions with citizens on Twitter.

#### *Online humanitarian actions are translating to concrete offline activities*

The number of offline cases solved by internet-enabled mobilisation before, during and after the Côte d'Ivoire crises is significant. Lives were saved. People in France donated clothing and medication through #CIVSOCIAL which was then flown down to Abidjan. Recently, a blood donation drive was also organised in support of the wounded in the war.

#### *Concerted coordinated action to (re)claim rights*

It was of particular interest to note that citizen internet-enabled mobilisation is a realisation of the coordinated power of the people. The case of PayPal was one in which the ivoire-info-techpreneurs felt that "this is a war we can win, so we must fight it," with striking success.

#### *Increase in web activism and greater use of social media*

Before #CIV2010, web activism and social media were more or less a domain for the ivoire-info-techpreneurs. But the crises have given rise to increased web engagement with greater use of social media, particularly Twitter. With the realisation of the power of social media and networks, the country has learned that these platforms can become real citizen hubs and are critical for policy makers, businesses and governance.

As Côte d'Ivoire rises from the destruction brought on by war, its citizens are looking forward to a new and a better country. The internet will enable them to monitor governance, keep engaged and mobilise for or against causes in the future. Twitter and Facebook have proved powerful, and ordinary citizens have shown capacity.

### **Action steps**

- Use informal face-to-face meetings to strategise, and to plan a tech hub for the country.
- Use Twitter and Facebook as platforms for citizens to keep watch over policies and promises made by the government.
- Promote increased citizen reporting on the legislative and municipal elections in 2011.
- Generate interest in social media amongst the new political leaders. At the moment, Alain Logbognon is the new minister of youth, employment and civic service. He sets time aside to interact on Twitter. The aim is to have more ministers do the same. ■

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

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**GISWATCH 2011** is the fifth in a series of yearly reports that critically cover the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

**GISWATCH** is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

**GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH**

2011 Report

[www.GISWatch.org](http://www.GISWatch.org)

