

The evolution of political blogging in French-speaking Sub-Saharan Africa

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Political blogging in French-speaking sub-Saharan countries is a neglected area of research. The Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung therefore decided to investigate the conditions under which francophone blogging exists in Africa. The political and social situation of French-speaking countries in sub-Saharan Africa differs from Anglophone Africa, which has been widely researched.

- The outcomes show that political blogging in Francophone Africa is quite a recent phenomenon.
- Most bloggers are journalists and use their blogs to practice writing and/or report affairs they can't cover in the mainstream media.
- A blog is therefore a tool for the publication of content to inform the users of developments in the political and social spheres of their country. It is a platform for freedom of expression.
- Blogging can be a way to earn a living, especially when combined with social media.

The emergence of blogging

Brief history of blogging

The word "blog" comes from the two words "web" (internet) and "log" (logbook). Before becoming a means of expression for the public, blogs were more like online diaries, like the first blog "Links.net", created by college student Justin Hall in 1994, which he called his personal homepage.

The rise of blogging goes back to 1997-1999. It is the American Jorn Barger who is credited with starting the first blog "Robot Wisdom" in December 1997. He called it a "weblog" or "a daily running log of the best webpages I visit". In 1999, the digital media journalist Scott Rosenberg described the "phenomenon known as weblog [as] one of the fastest-growing and most fertile creative areas on the Web today."¹ Blogging reached the mainstream in the mid-2000s, especially in the United States. A study revealed that in 2005 approximately 32 million American were reading

¹ Ignacio Siles (Forthcoming), *The rise of blogging: Articulation as a dynamic of technological stabilization* (News Media & Society. Published article available at: http://isiles.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Siles_NMS_2012_web.pdf)

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blogs. From 2006 new platforms appeared for bloggers such as *Wordpress*, one of the most famous blog creation and management tools nowadays.

[In France it is the platform *Skyblog*, created in 2002, that brought blogging to the mainstream. After a few years the platform was already hosting 30 million blogs².](#)

[Around this time traditional media also started to take blogs into consideration by hiring bloggers to add content to their websites or even creating their own blogs.](#)

Today in 2017, more than 440 million blogs exist all around the world³.

Blogging in Africa

Around 2005, when blogging became a mainstream phenomenon in the United States and soon in Europe, it was only beginning in Africa. A few factors explain this. The first one is access to the internet. In the mid-2000s, blogging was almost only for expatriates and diaspora students based outside the continent. The cost of internet access was very high, as explained by blogger Didier Malak: “Internet is very expensive in my country (Democratic Republic of the Congo, DRC)”. Only the development of internet and technological infrastructures enabled the expansion of an African blogging sphere. And this development is unequal depending on the areas.⁴ Malak believes that “Anglophone bloggers (...) benefit (...) from very advanced digital infrastructures”⁵ and that this has enabled them to develop an Anglophone blogosphere quicker than bloggers in Francophone Africa.

Today, access to the internet remains low in Africa with only 38% of sub-Saharan Africans being able to get online. By comparison, in the OECD countries 80% of the population has internet access.⁶ Most internet users in Africa are young and part of the middle class.

However, the rapid expansion of the mobile devices market now enables many Africans to go online easily. Young Africans, especially the Millennials use their phones to go online and get information, including accessing blogs.

² Rebecca Maurice, « Racontez-moi l’histoire du blog ! », *Écrire pour le Web* (2015). Published article available at : <http://www.ecrirepourleweb.com/histoire-du-blog/>

³ Mediakix team, « How many blogs are there in the world », Mediakix (2017). Published article available at : <http://mediakix.com/2017/09/how-many-blogs-are-there-in-the-world/#gs.HBFHdza>

⁴ Abossé Aku-Kpakpo, Study on international Internet connectivity in sub-Saharan Africa (2013), Regulatory and Market Environment Division. Published article available at: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regulatory-Market/Documents/IIC_Africa_Final-en.pdf

⁵ Translation: “ Les blogeurs Anglophones (...) beneficent (...) d’infrastructures numeriques tres avancees.”

⁶ Lesego Otlhabanye, “Blogging – a new frontier for African millennials”, *World Economic Forum* (2017). Published article available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/05/blogging-a-new-frontier-for-african-millennials/>

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“The growing consciousness of being African has lessened people’s inhibitions. Blogging has given a voice to many Africans who otherwise would not have been heard and given content to an audience that has been searching for it.”⁷

In francophone African countries

It is the platform *Skyblog*, created in 2002, that enabled the development of blogging in France. Because the platform was a French-speaking website, it had an echo in Francophone countries. According to Senegalese blogger Oumy Regina Sambou, blogging appeared in French-speaking Africa a little bit after the creation of *Skyblog*. The development of blogging nevertheless varies according to country.

Most of the bloggers canvassed started their blog quite recently. The longest-serving blogger interviewed created his blog in 2009. The phenomenon of blogging in Francophone countries appeared mainly after 2010 and became popular very recently. But as blogger Luc Kouade from Côte d’Ivoire explains it: “jobs related to the web are not really in vogue” in sub-Saharan French-speaking countries nowadays.

Why blogging?

Political blogging

The bloggers interviewed all have different reasons, although some overlap. They describe themselves as the new positive actors of Africa in the words of blogger Alexandrine Holognon. They also are very interested in new technologies. Most of them say that blogging is a way of having more freedom of expression. For Blogger Didier Malak, his blog is “the only free space of expression and criticism of the government of his country, the DRC” that he has. Blogger Oumy Regina Sambou from Senegal also evokes the freedom of expression thanks to blogs. Alexandrine Holognon from Burkina Faso and Will Cleas Nlemvo from DRC wanted to talk about politics in their countries and share their vision of society.

Political bloggers have a very important role in African countries. They are “spreading information and diversity of opinion on current affairs, politics, civil rights, rule of law, constitutionalism and a whole range of governance issues”⁸. The blogosphere is indeed a new space for free expression. And the resolve to write about subjects that concern them and are neglected by traditional media is visible on the blogs of the few bloggers interviewed. If you visit the blog of Didier Malak or Alex-

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Masake Anthony, “Political Blogging: How Africa’s fragile Democracies are shaping citizen voices”, *Masakeonline* (2017). Published article available at: <https://masakeonline.wordpress.com/2017/07/25/political-blogging-how-africas-fragile-democracies-are-shaping-citizen-voices/>

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andrine Holognon, your eyes are attracted to the titles and pictures associated with their articles. The bloggers want to express themselves and attract the reader.

Blogger Luc Kouade explains that he feels responsible for the political development of his country, Côte d'Ivoire. Political bloggers are engaged in the political and social evolutions of their countries. For blogger Alexandrine Holognon, writing about politics is writing about things that happen in her daily life and the lives of her fellow citizens in Burkina Faso. Writing about politics and social issues is a way of connecting with her readers. Didier Malak from DRC is interested in politics because it is "the cause of disorders" in his country. His fellow citizen and blogger Will Cleas Nlemvo writes about politics on his blog because his country has been going through "a chronic political crisis since its independence in 1960" and because "traditional media like television or the radio can't talk about the heart of the problem for fear of censorship". His blog is for him an efficient way to tell the world and the citizens of DRC what happens in his country. It is a platform for freedom of expression when he can't freely speak about some problems in traditional media and be critical.

Another reason for the development of this new way of expression is that some users, mostly the young audience, feel that mainstream media cannot or do not fulfill their role as a critical pillar for democracy. Citizens use the internet to seek the information they can't find anywhere else and to express themselves. The rapid growth of internet distribution in the region is also a factor that explains the rise of blogging in Africa.

Blogging and microblogging are becoming real alternatives to traditional media with quality content published by well-informed bloggers. On the blogs of Didier Malak and Luc Kouade, the information is well organized in several categories and it is easy for the reader to seek anything quickly. These categories include geographic areas and specific themes. Both bloggers write about their countries but also culture, media and society. The structure of their blogs prove how well informed they are and how well organized they are to spread news. In times of political uncertainty, such as the 2008 turmoil of the post-election violence in Kenya, bloggers were almost the only source of information.

"Across the continent, the blogosphere has emerged as the major source of news, especially when the mainstream media is restricted, gagged or shutdown. Prominent bloggers are increasingly becoming influential agenda setters capable of influencing media coverage."⁹

But who are the political bloggers?

To answer this question, an analysis was made of the profiles of 50 Francophone political bloggers. The basis of this analysis is the international French platform Mondoblog. It was co-created by Cédric Kalonji, one of the first bloggers from Cen-

⁹ Ibid.

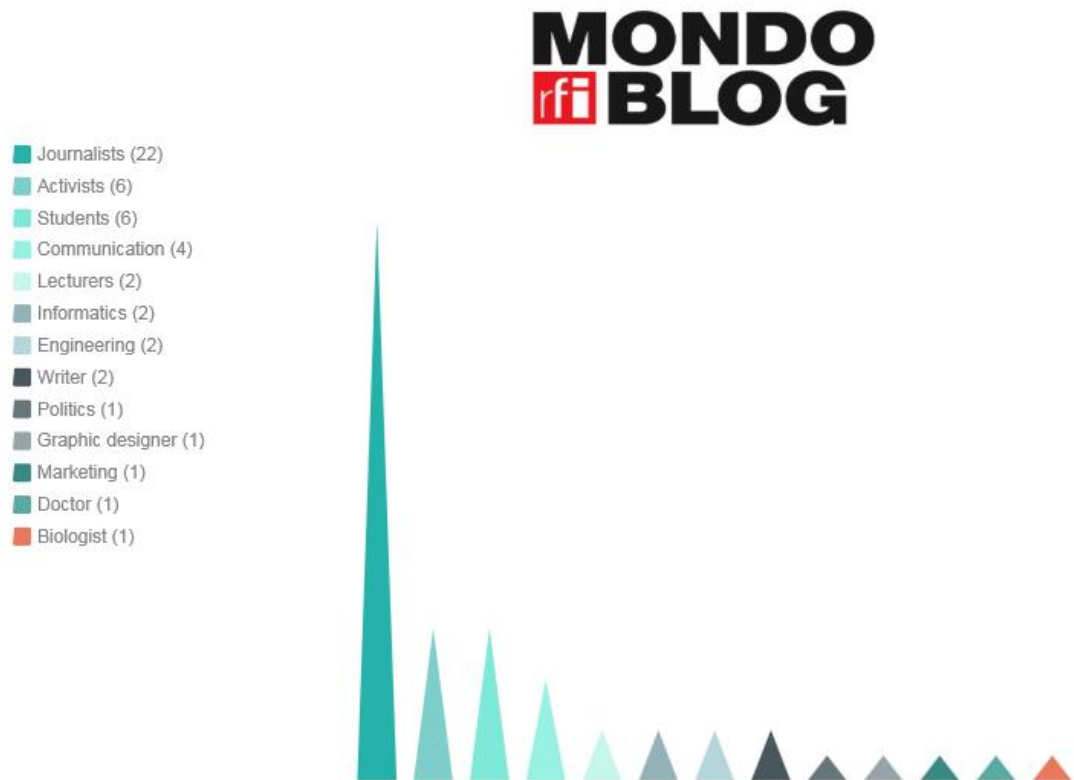
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tral Africa (DRC) and the French journalist Philippe Couve. Its aim is to promote a dynamic French-language international blogosphere. Mondoblog works in partnership with French public radio service RFI (Radio France International), which broadcasts across the world. “L’Atelier des médias”, a team that is part of RFI, is now leading Mondoblog. The graphic below shows the result of the analysis:



The graphic reveals that the majority of Francophone political bloggers are journalists. The blogosphere is also pretty young with a lot of students writing blogs. But it is also important to note the diversity of the bloggers’ activities. Among the few bloggers interviewed for this project Didier Malak and Luc Kouade are journalists, Oumy Reina Sambou and Alexandrine are radio hosts and journalists, Will Cleas Nlemvo works in the field of Information and communication and Jean Hubert Bondo is a journalist, radio host and president of an NGO called “Médias Verts”.

Following the descriptions of bloggers in their own blogs, it is also essential to note that bloggers have occupations other than blogging only. The following question can therefore be asked:

Can you make a living with a blog? If yes, how?

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The interviewed Francophone bloggers said that there is the possibility of earning a living from blogs, although it is very difficult.

Examples of successful French-speaking bloggers are Edith Brou in Côte d'Ivoire and Cheick Fall in Senegal. With 106K and 48,6K followers on Twitter respectively¹⁰, the two bloggers are very influential in sub-Saharan Africa and have a very wide audience.

According to blogger Malak, making a living from your blog is hard but possible. You need to use your blog to “bounce off your preferred field or area of expertise”.

Also, blogger Alexandrine Holognon explains that the more famous your blog is, the more people you attract and with them come advertisers. Through advertising, you can earn money.

Blogger Will Cleas Nlemvo agrees and explains that it is possible to earn a living thanks to your blog, but it depends on the format of the blog. If you have a lot of room for advertisements, you can earn a lot thanks to big companies' adverts. On the blog of Edith Brou for example, several adverts are visible. The companies that advertise on her blog are currently Daily Motion, Air France and American Express.

But attracting readers is not easy and this leads to questions on how bloggers attract an audience and who is the audience of political and social blogs?

The audience

Finding out about the audience of blogs isn't that simple. For blogger Luc Kouade, it is easy to attract readers when a blog post is shared on social media such as Facebook, but other social media such as Twitter are not well-known by Francophone Africans and therefore the audience mainly consists of professionals and foreigners especially from western countries.

Social media such as Facebook are very popular among the Millennials and therefore attract a young audience to the blogs. However, this young group seems more attracted to subjects such as showbiz rather than politics and social issues, according to Kouade. Blogger Oumy Regina Sambou thinks that a topic like cuisine is more popular among readers than politics.

But it is certain that social media provides the key to attracting a wider audience as it enables bloggers to share the content, especially among a dynamic young population, says Sambou. Social media is also very useful for building a network. Blogger and web journalist Will Cleas Nlemvo always shares his new articles on Facebook and Twitter and it enables him to grow his audience gradually. If Facebook attracts

¹⁰ Edith Brou: <https://twitter.com/edithbrou?lang=de>
Cheikh Fall: <https://twitter.com/cypher007?lang=de>

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a young audience, Twitter is a way to attract colleagues of the bloggers and professionals in general.

According to the DRC's Malak, there is no Francophone blogosphere, but national blogospheres exist, an example from DRC is the blogging platform *Habari RDC* (<https://habairdc.net/>).

Senegal's Oumy Regina Sambou, feels a Francophone blogosphere exists in Western Africa "between Ouaga and Abidjan" and is well-represented in sub-Saharan Africa by the platform *Africtivistes* ([http://www.africtivistes.org/!](http://www.africtivistes.org/)).

Alexandrine Holognon describes the platform *Mondoblog* as the only real blogosphere for French-speaking bloggers in Africa. Nevertheless, even if it was created by a blogger from Congo, the international network features bloggers from all around the world and not only Africa.

Conclusion: The future of blogging in Francophone Africa

As was described in the introduction, very little research has been conducted on Francophone bloggers in sub-Saharan Africa, compared to Anglophone blogging. And this lack of research shows the division between the French and English blogosphere.

However it isn't clear if a Francophone blogosphere even exists in sub-Saharan Africa. According to the bloggers interviewed, national blogospheres exist in French-speaking countries, however they do not cross borders.

Another problem that this report raises is that in the end, bloggers may be just like the traditional media they criticize, not regarding the content of their posts but regarding their lack of ability to communicate with each other in the region to make their voices stronger and build a real community of bloggers in sub-Saharan Africa.

The content of the blogs however differs from traditional media. The bloggers interviewed made it clear that their blog were platforms for freedom of expression. Posting articles enables them to talk about political and social topics neglected by mainstream media. The bloggers want to share their vision and feel responsible for the development of their countries. They feel that if they don't do it, no one will. The new generation working with technologies want to play a bigger role in decision-making and politics in their communities and countries. Blogging is a tool to achieve their goals.

Political bloggers in Francophone Africa show their interest in politics because they believe that they can change the future of their countries if they can influence politics. They also believe that the citizens of their countries share their interests and want to be able to inform themselves with alternative media. Blogging in French-speaking Africa is also a way of connecting people with each other.

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Political bloggers also come from different backgrounds. Even if the majority of them are journalists, anyone with an interest in politics and society can start a blog. And today, blogging is becoming a profession. Bloggers can earn a living with their blogs. The difference between the Francophone and Anglophone blogosphere is nevertheless still important.

In order to intertwine these spheres, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Media Programme has been organizing seminars to bring bloggers from all over Africa together. By doing so, KAS tries to raise the awareness in the Francophone blogosphere and build links between French-speaking bloggers in sub-Saharan Africa but also between Francophone and Anglophone bloggers. The key example is the international platform for political blogging #Africablogging (www.africablogging.org) that brings Francophone and Anglophone together not only online but also during an annual gathering.

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