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## **Media, citizenship and security: Towards the construction of a new Congolese political narrative?**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyses the fundamental role of the media in shaping the public sphere and fostering citizenship in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, highlighting their importance in a context marked by chronic insecurity, the presence of armed groups and foreign interference. It demonstrates that the media, beyond their role in providing information and entertainment, serve as vehicles for political socialisation, collective resilience and democratic legitimisation. Despite being subjected to pressure, manipulation and censorship, they remain key actors in fostering national cohesion, denouncing violence and promoting peace. The study concludes that democratic consolidation in the DRC cannot be separated from security issues, and that only free, credible and responsible media can contribute to the emergence of a new political imagination that brings together democracy, security and responsible citizenship.

**Keywords:** Media, citizenship, security, socialisation and political imagination.

### **Introduction**

In contemporary societies, the media play a fundamental role in shaping the public sphere, forming opinions and consolidating civic practices. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), this role is all the more crucial given that the country is marked by a tumultuous political history, fragile democratic transitions and persistent insecurity linked to the presence of armed groups and foreign armies.

Indeed, the democratic process that began in the 1990s opened up the public sphere to unprecedented media pluralism, but this is unfolding in an environment where violence and instability undermine citizenship and national cohesion. In this context, it is necessary to examine how the media contribute to the formation of a Congolese citizen embodying a new political vision, capable of transcending ethnic divisions and security-related traumas to participate in the construction of a democratic and sovereign state.

To this end, one question deserves to be asked: How can the media in the DRC, faced with the challenges of insecurity linked to armed groups and foreign interference, contribute to the formation of democratic citizenship and the construction of a new political imagination based on peace, participation and collective responsibility?

In this regard, we argue that despite political and security pressures, the Congolese media are essential vehicles for political socialisation and collective resilience. By disseminating information, denouncing violence and promoting democratic and civic values, they contribute to the consolidation of democracy and the emergence of a Congolese political imagination that combines democracy and security.

## Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative approach centred on the interpretation of media discourse, representations and practices, with the aim of understanding the role of the media in the formation of citizenship and the emergence of a new political imagination in the DRC.

During the data collection and analysis phase, we used:

- Documentary analysis: which enabled us to identify historical and legal developments in the media since 1990.
- Indirect observation: which enabled us to examine media campaigns and their effects on citizens' behaviour.
- Semi-structured interviews: which enabled us to gather accounts and perceptions regarding the role of the media in the development of citizenship.
- Thematic content analysis: which involved identifying recurring themes (citizenship, democracy, (in)security, independence, participation).
- Discourse analysis: studying the representations conveyed by the media and their impact on public opinion.
- Triangulation: cross-referencing data from the media, legal texts and testimonies to strengthen validity.

To address this situation, apart from the introduction and conclusion, three points are discussed in turn: first, the conceptual framework; second, the relationship between the media, political socialisation and security issues; and finally, the challenges and prospects for the construction of a new political imagination.

## I. Conceptual clarification

To facilitate the grasp and understanding of this study, we believe it is useful to provide some background on the concepts of media, citizenship and socialisation to dispel any confusion.

### I.1. Media

The term 'media', derived from the contraction of the English phrase '*mass media*', refers to all the means by which information is transmitted or exchanged between individuals or groups of individuals. The media are not merely technical channels: they fulfil essential social and cultural functions. They inform and educate, instruct and cultivate, but also entertain, thereby contributing to the construction of knowledge, opinions and the collective imagination. Their role extends beyond immediate communication: they play a part in shaping democratic and cultural life.

The diversity of the media reflects the plurality of human needs in terms of communication. Radio remains a tool for immediacy and local relevance; television combines image and sound to create a powerful capacity for persuasion; whilst the print media retains its value as a source of analysis and reference. Added to these traditional forms are digital media, online media and social media, which are revolutionising the ways in which information is produced and consumed. The Internet, as a global infrastructure, forms the foundation upon which all these forms are built and connected, offering unprecedented interactivity and transforming the public into active participants in communication.

### I.2. Citizenship

The concept of citizenship is closely linked to that of the citizen. Derived from the Latin *civitas*, meaning city or state, a citizen is first and foremost a member of a political community. In its modern sense, it refers not merely to a resident, but to an individual recognised by the state as having rights and duties, participating in public life and contributing to the political organisation.

Today, citizenship is defined by the enjoyment of civil and political rights (voting, freedom of association, freedom of expression, eligibility for office) but also by the fulfilment of obligations towards the state. This conception has gained strength in Africa following the fall of authoritarian regimes, marking the transition to democratic systems where the involvement of individuals in national life is essential.

Citizenship does not reduce the individual to a mere subject to authority, but regards them as a political actor equal to others.

It establishes a reciprocal relationship between the state and its citizens: the state guarantees fundamental freedoms, whilst citizens exercise their responsibilities. This dynamic fosters political participation, an essential condition for the proper functioning of democracy.

In societies such as the DRC, citizenship plays a crucial role in overcoming ethnic and tribal divisions. Without a shared national consciousness, cohesion remains limited to local communities, undermining the country's unity and development. Citizenship thus appears as a bulwark against divisions and a driving force for democratic consolidation, by strengthening the sense of belonging to the nation.

### **I.3. Socialisation**

The concept of socialisation encompasses a variety of definitions, which are often complementary. For the purposes of this study, we have selected certain definitions due to their relevance and consistency with the very essence of the phenomenon. We highlight the approaches of Léon Moulin, Darmon Muriel and François Momindo Wetshingolo.

For Léon Moulin, socialisation is above all a socio-cultural process through which society leads individuals to internalise its norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes and languages. Once socialised, the individual acts and thinks spontaneously in accordance with the social rules instilled in them, whilst feeling that they are doing so freely. This definition highlights the power of acculturation: society shapes the behaviours and representations of its members, thereby ensuring the reproduction and stability of the social order. Cot and Mounier, following the same line of reasoning, emphasise the need for a lasting set of shared patterns of thought and action to ensure social cohesion. Moulin's contribution is therefore to demonstrate that socialisation is a mechanism of profound influence, which shapes individuals' thoughts and behaviours.

Darmon Muriel, for her part, complements this view by emphasising the formative and structuring nature of socialisation. She defines it as the set of processes through which the individual is 'formed', 'shaped', 'moulded' and 'conditioned' by the global and local society in which they live. The individual learns, incorporates and integrates ways of thinking and acting that are socially situated. This approach highlights the practical and everyday dimension of socialisation: it is not merely a transmission of abstract values, but a concrete shaping of attitudes and behaviours. Darmon's contribution is therefore to emphasise the role of socialisation in identity construction and in the learning of social practices.

François Momindo Wetshingolo offers an interpretation adapted to the African and Congolese context. For him, socialisation is a particular form of popular, civic and lifelong education. It aims to shape the attitudes, beliefs and representations of a people, in order to build socially accepted knowledge, skills and social behaviour. From this perspective, socialisation becomes a process of citizenship education, indispensable in societies marked by authoritarian regimes or by the absence of a democratic consensus. It is both the reproduction and reconstruction of social identities, explaining, for example, the emergence of the concept of 'new citizenship' in the DRC. Momindo Wetshingolo's contribution is therefore to link socialisation to civic education and democratic consolidation.

The definitions provided by Léon Moulin, Darmon Muriel and François Momindo Wetshingolo, although formulated in different contexts, converge on one essential point: socialisation is a comprehensive process that shapes the individual and ensures social cohesion and c. Léon Moulin emphasises the internalisation of norms and values, Darmon Muriel the concrete shaping of behaviour, and Momindo Wetshingolo the civic and educational dimension.

In the context of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, these approaches take on particular significance. The country's political history, marked by colonisation, authoritarianism and repeated crises, has undermined the development of a shared sense of citizenship. Socialisation thus emerges as an indispensable lever for rebuilding social bonds, instilling civic values and fostering the emergence of a shared political culture. The media, as agents of socialisation, play a central role here: they disseminate norms, raise public awareness and contribute to the internalisation of civic values.

## **II. Media, political socialisation and security issues in the DRC**

### **II.1. The role and place of the media in a democratic society**

The media are not merely conduits of information; they constitute the 'nervous system of socialisation'. They enable citizens to inform themselves, form opinions and participate in the political process. Democracy rests on citizens' ability to access diverse and reliable information.

According to Herman and Chomsky, the media instil values and beliefs in the masses that facilitate their social integration. The media play a dominant role in the social and political life of countries, and an even more decisive role in societies undergoing change. Nowadays, the media are not merely a

'medium' for exchanging messages, but the nervous system of socialisation. They are like the molecular cell of the socio-political experience. They enable individuals connected through the media to form a collective identity and construct a shared history.

This particular dimension of the media in politics within African states, and especially in the DRC, stems from its role as a conduit for information. It goes without saying that information catalyses, amplifies, impacts and mobilises, but it also explains, classifies, simplifies and justifies. It lies at the heart of every process of social and political transformation, particularly in the context of democratisation.

Viewed in this light, the media act as intermediaries fulfilling three major roles: informing, entertaining and shaping public opinion. The information they disseminate may be of a public or private nature. What matters is that this information is of general interest. It is within this framework that it is generally asserted that the media play a role as a service of general interest. Through their work of informing, the media also educate, entertain, inform and raise awareness of the democratic values that characterise the functioning of modern states, including the obligation of authorities at all levels of responsibility to be accountable to the public for the manner in which they govern public affairs with a view to serving the public interest.

## **II.2. The media and the democratic process in the DRC**

After 32 years of dictatorship and a painful struggle that led to the liberalisation of the Congolese public sphere in 1990, the Congolese media, primarily the print media, served as an effective ally in the struggle for democratisation led by both political and social actors.

In this regard, it is worth noting, following Jean-Marie MUTAMBA MAKOMBO, that the contribution is immeasurable in the struggle for the political change that has taken place in the Congo. The media have played an undeniable political role, through the provision of information, raising awareness, prevention, exposing wrongdoing and shaping public opinion. This represents a contribution that is both civil society-driven and independent, generally taking the form of editorials expressing the personal views of newspaper editors.

Indeed, this assertion is corroborated by Marie Soleil Frère, who informs us that from 1990 onwards, the liberalisation of political life led to media pluralism, and the print media then experienced remarkable growth. Thus, newspapers very quickly divided into what was known as the 'pro-regime'

press, close to Mobutu (Elima, Le Soft), and the so-called 'radical opposition' press (Le Potentiel, Le Phare, Le Palmarès, La Tempête des Tropiques, etc.). New private newspapers emerged within the sphere of influence of individuals and political parties. This situation was generally detrimental to the development of a quality press.

With regard to the Congolese media, our investigations show that, with the exception of the efforts of certain media outlets in the struggle for the establishment of democracy and the advent of the rule of law, such as: Radio Okapi, Radio Elikya, Radio Top Congo FM, Télé 50, Canal Numérique TV, La Tempête des Tropiques newspaper, Le Grognon newspaper, Le Potentiel, etc., the basic concepts of participatory democracy (access, participation and self-management) struggle to be applied across the various Congolese media outlets depending on their political leanings: the pro-government press, the opposition press and the independent press.

From this perspective, the more the media are funded by a particular group, the more they praise that group and demonstrate loyalty to its ideologies. Broadcasters operate under constant pressure. The information disseminated thus merges with the discourse of those in power. The press then becomes nothing more than a mere mouthpiece for official institutions and politicians of all stripes.

## **II.3. Media, armed groups and foreign armies: between pressure and resilience**

The media landscape in the Democratic Republic of the Congo cannot be understood without reference to the security context, marked by the presence of local armed groups and foreign armies. These actors, often involved in protracted conflicts, exert a direct influence on political and social life, undermining national cohesion and fuelling a culture of fear and mistrust. The media, as conduits of information and agents of socialisation, thus find themselves at the heart of a dual process: that of denouncing violence and promoting peace, but also that of resisting pressure and manipulation.

On the one hand, the media are exposed to constant threats: intimidation, censorship, and exploitation by armed groups or political actors linked to foreign powers. In some regions, the information disseminated is controlled or biased, turning the media into instruments of propaganda and conduits for war rhetoric. This situation undermines their independence and credibility, whilst limiting their ability to fully fulfil their public service role. On the other hand, the Congolese media have demonstrated remarkable resilience. By reporting on abuses, denouncing violence and giving visibility to local

peace initiatives, they contribute to the building of a national consciousness and to citizen mobilisation against insecurity. Media campaigns on national cohesion, the fight against armed violence or raising awareness of human rights have helped to strengthen collective resilience and promote a political vision based on peace and sovereignty.

Thus, the media in the DRC operate in a constant state of tension between pressure and resilience. They are both vulnerable to manipulation by armed groups and foreign armies, yet also bearers of a mission of resistance and civic reconstruction. Their role goes beyond the mere dissemination of information: they become agents of symbolic security, capable of transforming fear into critical awareness and contributing to the emergence of a citizenry committed to the defence of democracy and national integrity.

#### **II.4. Media, civic education and security challenges in the DRC**

For Herman and Chomsky, the media constitute one of the main agents of socialisation in the consolidation of the democratic state. They point out that ‘the mass media are a system for communicating symbols and messages to the widest possible audience, whose function is to entertain, inform and instil values, beliefs and codes of conduct that promote social integration’. Thus, the press plays a central socio-political role: it connects the masses to the public authorities and contributes to the stabilisation of the political system, provided that this socialisation is rooted in democratic and state values.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this function takes on a particular dimension. The media are not merely vehicles for citizenship and political education; they are also key players in a context marked by recurring security conflicts: armed clashes in the east, communal tensions, electoral violence, and urban insecurity. In this context, the press can be both a tool for peace and an instrument of manipulation. It helps to strengthen citizenship by giving Congolese people the means to participate in public debate and to hold leaders to account, but it can also exacerbate divisions when it relays partisan rhetoric or hate speech.

Congolese history illustrates this ambivalence: under the Second Republic, the media served to consolidate the MPR’s patriarchal system, whereas today, platforms such as Radio Okapi and Top Congo FM play a vital role in national cohesion and raising awareness of security issues, notably by broadcasting messages to prevent violence, providing information on armed groups, and promoting a culture of peace. In a country where citizens’ safety is constantly under

threat, the press is becoming a strategic tool for social resilience.

Public perception confirms this influence: in Kinshasa, the expression ‘Ya solo po balakisi yango na télévision’ (‘it’s true because they showed it on the television’) reflects the trust placed in the media as a source of truth. This credibility confers a major responsibility upon them: to steer public opinion towards civic behaviour, but also towards attitudes of vigilance and prevention in the face of security threats. Media campaigns on respecting the national currency or on the fight against Covid-19 show that the media can rapidly transform social practices. In the same way, they can help instil collective security reflexes, promote peaceful coexistence and strengthen communities’ resilience in the face of crises.

#### **III. Towards a new Congolese political imaginary**

Democratic consolidation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo cannot be envisaged independently of security challenges. Democracy is based on citizen participation, transparency and accountability, but these principles cannot flourish in an environment marked by chronic insecurity, the presence of armed groups and the interference of foreign armies. Responsible citizenship, understood as the conscious exercise of rights and duties, requires a stable institutional framework and collective security that guarantees territorial integrity and the protection of the population.

In this context, the media play a pivotal role in linking these three dimensions. On the one hand, they promote democracy by disseminating pluralistic information, stimulating public debate and strengthening a culture of accountability. On the other hand, it contributes to symbolic and social security by exposing violence, raising public awareness of peace issues and promoting local initiatives for social cohesion. In this way, it helps foster responsible citizenship by instilling values of tolerance, solidarity and respect for institutions, whilst encouraging vigilance against manipulation and propaganda.

Worse still, the interconnection between democracy, security and responsible citizenship is a prerequisite for the emergence of a new Congolese political vision. Democracy without security remains fragile and vulnerable to authoritarian abuses or armed violence; security without democracy risks turning into militarisation and repression; citizenship without collective responsibility is reduced to mere individual demands. Only a balanced interplay of these three dimensions, supported by free and credible media, can enable the building of a stable, sovereign and democratic Congolese society.

## Conclusion

In the democratic process in the DRC, it is impossible to separate the role of the media from security issues. Since the liberalisation of the public sphere in 1990, the emergence of a pluralistic press has taken place against a backdrop marked by the persistent presence of local armed groups and foreign armies. These actors, often involved in protracted conflicts, directly influence political and social life. By reporting on violence, abuses and peace negotiations, the media become instruments for raising awareness and mobilising citizens. However, they are also exposed to pressure, intimidation and manipulation from these armed groups, which undermines their independence and credibility. The role of the media in the DRC is therefore not limited to democratisation: it includes a mission of symbolic security, by helping to expose violence and build a national consciousness in the face of internal and external threats.

In this context, civic education through the media takes on a particular significance. In a country where insecurity is fuelled by the proliferation of armed groups and the interference of foreign armies, media campaigns on peace, national cohesion and the fight against armed violence contribute to political socialisation. They aim to instil in citizens the values of tolerance, non-violence and national solidarity. The media thus become agents of collective resilience, helping people to overcome fear and mobilise for peace. However, their role is ambivalent: some media outlets, under political or military influence, may fuel propaganda, exacerbate ethnic divisions or legitimise armed groups. Citizen education through the media therefore requires increased vigilance and institutional regulation to prevent information from becoming an instrument of psychological warfare.

Thus, the construction of a new Congolese political imagination cannot ignore the security dimension. Decades of armed conflict have shaped a political culture marked by mistrust, fear and individual survival. To move beyond this legacy, the media must contribute to a narrative based on peace, collective security and national sovereignty. This involves promoting civic values that include the defence of territorial integrity, the fight against foreign interference and the condemnation of armed violence. By disseminating narratives of peace, highlighting local community security initiatives and denouncing abuses, the media play a part in rebuilding a responsible and engaged citizenry. The Congolese political vision of tomorrow must therefore combine democracy and security: a citizen who is critical and responsible, yet also aware of the challenges of national defence and regional stability.

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