

## **How Congolese understand hate speech and what factors feed that behavior ?**

On February 12th, 2021; a meeting was held to celebrate World Safer Internet Day by the YALI network in collaboration with other civil society structures active on digital issues, on the campus numérique francophone of Kinshasa in the DR Congo.

I took part to the event as a blogger and searcher in digital law and security issues of the online media HABARI DRC, alongside Mr Kevin Mukendi, Secretary General of the Internet Society Community (ISOC DRC), Ms Priscille Tapatondele, Vice-President from the NGO The Bythiah Project.

In front of an audience of ten people (health context required it), the event had two highlights:

- Online hate speech and the phenomenon of sextapes
- Exchange with participants on their perceptions of hate speech and how they influence behaviors in cyberspace.

The debate revealed manipulative mechanisms used by trolls to convey disinformation with the aim of obtaining financial or political gain.

Operation Mbata ya Mukolo in Congo Brazzaville in 2014, which saw the radicalization of online exchanges between the inhabitants of the two Congos; the Haine na Haine (N na N) concept and its impact on the rise of tribalism and conspiracy theories targeting response teams against Covid, thereby reinforcing the doubt and mistrust of the population were also discussed.

It was the fact that hate speech and disinformation became widespread on the eve of the latest elections of 2018, that the government routinely cut the internet and censored social media. Counterproductive measures which only radicalized a part of public opinion and fed hate speech (through secessionism and tribalism) in Congolese cyberspace.

## **2. Interactions with participants**

### *1. Freedom of expression online*

Participants discussed the right to freedom of expression online and asked whether criticism of the actions of the Covid19 response team was likely to constitute hate speech and a handicap if analyzed by future employers.

### *2. Faulty communication*

Opacity in the management of communication around the response to Covid19 and the lack of interaction with popular audiovisual communication platforms, encouraged the spread of rumors and false information according to participants, rendering respect for barrier gestures inefficient.

Strikes by response personnel accusing late payments and abuses committed by the police, in conjunction with rumors, heightened mistrust of the public against health authorities.

From this, hate speech targeting Dr. Muyembe, national coordinator of the response to Covid19, accused of wanting to declare many cases of Covid to impose a vaccine, have rocketed from everywhere on social networks. Despite the Doctor's denial, the lack of sufficient communication support against the anti-vaccine campaign led by opponents of Dr. Muyembe crystallized tensions.

### **3. Participants' expectations**

From all these exchanges, the following emerged:

- Strengthening of public awareness through popular media channels
- Use of web influencers with whom Internet users have great sympathy
- Popularization of the rules of good conduct online
- Establishment of online speech detection and reporting hate speech to avoid them to spread.

The rise of hate speech conveyed through social media is increasing in the DRC. For having claimed secession and threatened the ethnic group of President Tshisekedi during a mass which video circulated on social media, the former president of the electoral commission, pastor Ngoy Mulunda, had been arrested and [jailed](#) to three years behind bars. Other prominent figures of the political landscape got also either arrested or prosecuted for inciting to violence against targeted groups due their ethnicity in the wave of political tensions resulting from the collapse of the coalition that emerged from the latest elections.

There is a serious need in educating influencers to make a distinction between freedom of speech and hate crime in order to avoid biases and fuel the pyramid of hate where [examples](#) of escalation to violence have already been documented.