

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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*What's Next*  
**The Code for Success**  
By Festus Iyora

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➔ Sharon Okpoe (left), 17, takes a class with Girls Coding, an after-school program run by Pearls Africa Foundation, in Lagos, Nigeria.

and driving more investor-readers to fund even more journalism. “We’ll be accountable to our readers alone, and stand or fall according to their judgment,” Bustillos says.

The platform will also encourage media literacy. Its so-called Credibility Indicators—visual cues within each article—will detail what did or did not go into the publication of a given story: original reporting, sources cited, documents, and so on. “We believe that creating an ecosystem dedicated to ethical journalism, where we verifiably prove to a broader citizenry that the contents and the people who are producing the content on this platform are actually doing so in an ethical, accurate manner, creates a different value association with the experience,” says Civil CEO Matthew Iles.

Iles recruited Bustillos, former *Gawker* and *Deadspin* editor Tom Scocca, and other veteran journalists to launch a network of nonprofit news sites on Civil. He wants the newsrooms to restore coverage for local, international, policy, and investigative journalism—areas that have declined under economic pressure in the last 20 years but that can have high social impact. Funds from Civil will launch newsrooms such as *Popula*; Scocca’s *Hmm Daily*, focused on social and political commentary; and *The Sludge*, dedicated to investigative muckraking to expose the dark influence of money on politics. Former DNAInfo journalists have teamed up to launch the local news site Block Club Chicago, with additional funding from a hugely successful

local journalism campaign on Kickstarter.

“Civil has a good chance to be one of the first blockchain-based projects that transcends the speculation and gold-rush fever that currently rules in crypto-land,” says Geoff McCabe, co-founder and CEO of the Divi Project, a nonprofit committed to educating the public on cryptocurrency. He worries, however, that Civil runs the risk of people “gaming” the system: selling likes, upvotes, and comments to generate money.

Iles plans to prevent this by encouraging readers to challenge what they see as unethical reporting that falls outside the organization’s constitution. The community then takes a vote, with the winning party earning CVL tokens for catching bad actors. An independent third-party council over which The Civil Media Company holds no control will address appeals.

Cryptocurrencies still face a mass adoption problem. Readers can pay for what they read in any currency; only those who want to support and contest reporting and participate in the voting system will have to buy into CVL. Both the Civil news platform and CVL crypto-coin will be based on the Ethereum network’s open-software program, which McCabe describes as expensive and frequently choked with traffic. Updates later this year may alleviate these problems.

Despite these hurdles, McCabe says that Civil has made strides to thrive: “Blockchain enthusiasts like me who have been inspired by the potential of this technology are rooting for Civil to succeed.” ■



## EDUCATION

# The Code For Success

BY FESTUS IYORAH

**S**haron Okpoe wasn’t born with a silver spoon or nurtured to become an engineer, a lawyer, or a doctor.

The tall 17-year-old girl with a friendly face is from Lagos, Nigeria—specifically its infamous Makoko slum, where shacks built on stilts sit above dark, pungent water. Her father is a fisherman, and her mother ekes out a living selling roasted fish. In Makoko, teenagers—especially girls like Okpoe—have few career choices or opportunities for advancement.

In Nigeria’s schools, boys outnumber girls two to one and in some states three to one, according to Unicef. Girls who manage to attend high school tend to wind up either an apprentice of a trade or pregnant. High rates of child marriage are another barrier to girls’ entry into the workforce: 17 percent of girls are married before they turn 15, and 43 percent before 18, per Unicef.

But Okpoe is redefining her future at Girls Coding, a

free after-school and weekend program run by Pearls Africa Foundation, a nonprofit based in Yaba, Nigeria’s Silicon Valley. In Nigeria, coding education is often limited to men, boys, and a few girls whose parents or relatives are financially comfortable and motivated enough to enable girls to participate. Girls Coding seeks to turn this around by reaching out to underprivileged girls from slums, orphanages, and correctional homes, and those displaced by conflicts with the militant group Boko Haram.

During trainings after school, each Saturday, and every day during school vacations, girls between the ages of 10 and 17 learn how to code in HTML, CSS, and Scratch, a click-and-drag game-development platform. The organization has training centers in four Nigerian states.

Abisoye Ajayi-Akinfolarin founded Pearls Africa Foundation in 2012 after leaving her job at an IT audit firm to dedicate herself to advancing the opportunities of Nigerian girls. She launched its Girls Coding program in November 2015 based on her own experience as a Nigerian woman with a successful tech career. She wanted to close the gender gap in Nigeria’s

## WHAT'S NEXT

**FESTUS IYORAH** is a Nigerian freelance journalist covering global health, conflicts, social innovation, technology, and development.

tech industry and provide vulnerable Nigerian girls a path to a better life. Alongside three full-time staff and 15 volunteers, she has since trained more than 200 girls in programming, user-interface design, and animation. (The foundation also offers girls vocational training in bead making, baking, and fashion design, as well as health-care assistance and mentoring.)

Okpoe began the program after Ajayi-Akinfolarin visited the Makoko slum to identify vulnerable girls who attend government schools. “In school, they teach us only theories about computers, but when I came here, they taught me both theories and practical skills for free,”

Okpoe said during one of the coding classes in Yaba, located near her community.

The program is paying off for the students in many ways, Ajayi-Akinfolarin says. “The way they think has changed, due to the critical-thinking skills the world of computer programming gives them.” Their mind-sets have changed, and they now believe “in a future of economic independence.” Through Pearls Africa Foundation’s Ladies Lab—an innovation hub that brings together middle-class female professionals with postsecondary female students—six girls have been placed in internships at IT companies.

The program is helping girls learn and aspire to greater things, says Esohe Osinoiki, a communications consultant by profession who volunteers at Girls Coding in Lagos. Without the program, she says, “some of them may have gotten pregnant, dropped out of school, or simply have gotten lost in all the wrongs around them. But now they have dreams and are working towards achieving them.”

After three years of learning the nuts and bolts of programming, Okpoe is now building an e-commerce website where Lagosians can order fresh fish directly from fishermen in her community. She hopes to bring

in enough profit to help the fishermen buy larger canoes and fishing nets.

On a recent visit to a training class, one group of girls in school uniforms focused on a computer programming exercise while others, including Okpoe, worked to develop their individual projects.

Okpoe sees herself succeeding in a career in tech. “I hope to pursue and achieve all my dreams,” she says. “I also look forward to finishing my website this year by the grace of God.” She wants to study computer science in college next year and dreams of earning a master’s degree at Harvard University. ■



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