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The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon and the Entrappings of Social Media

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Abstract: The escalation of the 'Anglophone Problem' into an armed conflict in Cameroon coincided with the surge in the use of social media among the Cameroonian youth. Indeed, the advent and use or misuse of the social media within the context of the crisis has significantly shaped public opinion regarding the rights and justice system in the country. It can be argued from participant observation that the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon has been manifested in two fronts, namely, the physical battle ground (conflict playing out within the concerned region but also with a nationwide impact) and social media front. This research aims at assessing how the usage of social media has influenced the Anglophone Crisis. Through questionnaires, interviews and review of online media clippings, with interpretation guided by ethnography, the research shows that the Cameroon populace is entrapped by a thriving social media landscape. Through social media, the narratives of the Anglophone Crisis were shaped and spread. I have assessed the tendency for fake news and manipulations, but also the effectiveness of social media in holding warring parties accountable. In the context of Cameroon, social media seems to have taken over the functions of the state communication agency in the urban and rural areas. This is more so because a plurality of the polarity rely on social media information rather than the main media outlets. The study contributes to emerging literature particularly in Cameroon where a paucity of research on popular (in) justices in Africa promulgated through social media and illegal punitive practice is observed.

Keywords: Armed groups, Cameroon Anglophone Crisis, fake news, misinformation, social media

Introduction

The position of Cameroon on the African map and its endowed resources makes the country very unique. Cameroon is, indeed, Africa in miniature, and a microcosm of the African continent (Vakunta 2006). Cameroon is the most heterogeneous state in Africa - a real cultural mosaic due to its geography, history, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural identities (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997). From the perspective of tourism, its potentials are enormous especially when one considers its desert, forests, water bodies, undulating landscapes or cultural diversity waiting to be harnessed. If these physical and cultural attractions are properly channelled, the country would become an enviable touristic hub. Pictures and videos of these natural features abound on social media for advertisement of touristic destinations for leisure, business ventures or meeting venues. Many countries in the world like Kenya, Tanzania, Ecuador and Australia. boost their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from income generated through their natural environment. Through the use of social media which enhances the flow of information, that the impact of political unrest (Bogale 2020; Harrington 2021 and Njoya et al. 2022) or social (health) crisis like the COVID 19 pandemic on this peoples' industry is more apparent than before (Lagos et al. 2021; Škare et al. 2021). When we talk about social media, we are referring to the social networks on the web portals designed for users to interact, share information and socialise.

Cameroon found itself at the crossroads having to manage the use of social media during socio-political unrest (The Anglophone Crisis) which began in October 2016 (till date) and the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2019. Since the outbreak of the Anglophone Crisis, it has been difficult for stakeholders especially the government to reconcile the sharp differences arising largely from linguistic identities and the systems of governance which are colonial inheritances (Awanda et al. 2020). Inadvertently, a combination of circumstances has resulted in dependence on social media for information and updates on the crisis. Social media has been able to churn out information on the crisis and call for global attention on the growing atrocities committed by both warring factions. Indeed, in their study on the use of #MyAnglophoneCrisisStory on Twitter, now X, Lee et al. (2022, 1) "support the idea that even short tweets can have a significant impact and signals the need for more attention and research on this overlooked conflict". The popularity, manifestations and dynamism of the Anglophone Crisis has been largely enhanced by social media which, arguably came to fill the gap

that was created by the perceived crackdown and government control on traditional media outlets. Due to the perceived negative influence of social media in fuelling the crisis, the Cameroon government shutdown internet services in the affected North West and South West Regions on 17 January 2017 reportedly following protests against the marginalisation of Anglophone Cameroonian's cultural and linguistic rights (Ngange 2019). This article explores the fundamental role played by social media in the on-going Anglophone Crisis. The findings have policy implications on the harnessing of the immense power of social media in nation building.

Background of the Anglophone Crisis

Many authors (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997; 2003; 2019; Pelican 2022) have written on this subject but for the sake of situating it, a brief background is herein presented. Cameroon can be said to have a fourfold colonial experiences. Historically, Cameroon witnessed the presence of the Portuguese as traders and explorers and was later colonised by the Germans. Britain and France came to Cameroon as mandated powers under the supervision of the League of Nations after the First World War. The French controlled four-fifths of the territory while the British administered one-fifth of the territory. The region under British influence included a long stretch near the eastern Nigerian border that the British referred to as Northern and Southern Cameroons. French Cameroon became autonomous and gained its independence on 01 January 1960 with the name Republic of Cameroon. The British Southern Cameroons (present-day Northwest and Southwest Regions) remained part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria until independence on 01 October 1961 when through a UN-imposed plebiscite (on February 11, 1961) there was the Union between the two Cameroons (East and Southern). This decided their fate and the country became known as the Federal Republic of Cameroon (Agwanda et al. 2020). The circumstances surrounding this plebiscite and its aftermath are well illustrated by Konings (2005). The fact that Southern Cameroons was never given the option to become an independent state lingered on especially with the discontentment from the dominant role of the Francophones who did not respect the tenets of the Federal state.

These frustrations eventually gave birth to the Anglophone Secession Movement championed by the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC) whose objective was to see that the government in place respect the federal nature of the state for peaceful co-existence. The situation was heightened when the name of the country was reverted

back to 'the Republic of Cameroon' in 1984 by President Paul Biya. Considering that this was the name of the former French-administered part of Cameroon when it gained independence, the inference in the former British administered (Anglophone) Cameroon was that it has been assimilated into the Francophone Republic. The non-respect of the Anglophone common law system and Anglo-Saxon system of education culminated in the lawyers and teachers' strike in October 2016 and November 2016 respectively. In attempting to address the crisis, a consortium of the different trade unions involved was formed for dialogue with the state, but this was in turn unilaterally banned by the state and its leaders arrested. This generated a vacuum that was capitalised on by separatist movements with leadership both within, and especially among the Anglophone Cameroon diaspora. The situation rapidly degenerated into an armed conflict between the state of Cameroon and Non-State Armed Groups in the Anglophone regions. Thus, strike actions by lawyers and teachers stemming from discontentment and frustrations due to the non-respect of the Federal state degenerated to the so-called 'Anglophone Crisis' in the North west and South west Regions of the country, now infamously referred to as 'Ground Zero'.

Agwanda et al. (2020) partly look at this crisis through a linguistic lens. They see it as the failure of the government to reconcile the sharp differences coined around linguistic identities inherited from the former colonial powers (English and French). They go further to state that the crisis could be seen as stemming from the frustrations by a large section of the Anglophone Cameroon regarding their sociocultural, political and economic marginalisation by the hegemonic Francophone-dominated government of Cameroon. This has affected every fabric of the country.

Since the start of this crisis, the English-speaking regions (North west and South west) of Cameroon have been in the national news headlines as well as occupying a prominent space on social media with minute-by-minute news about strike actions, arrests, ghost-towns, torture, burnings of houses and destruction of property as well as extra judicial killings. In the South west Region and Kumba in particular where the author was resident, we got updated mostly through social media. Social media platforms especially WhatsApp and Facebook became, and still are, the major source of information as national news agencies like radio and television were not 'snappy' or became selective in relaying news items from that region due to government control on these media outlets. This was further amplified by actors in the diaspora who claimed

leadership control of the crisis and spread information albeit unverified. Before the state traditional media (radio and television) could report on any news item about the crisis, social media platforms had already reported it; social media proved to be especially adept at spreading news on the atrocities caused by both warring parties. The role of the traditional media was therefore reduced to either debunking, modifying or confirming what had already been broadcast by social media.

The anonymity and speed of disseminating information on social media make it challenging to verify facts, leading to the entrapment of users in a scenario where only one-sided or exaggerated narratives predominate. This entrapment can radicalise individuals, deepen mistrust between the Anglophone and Francophone communities, and hinder efforts towards dialogue and conflict resolution. This resonates with what Shing et al. (2024, 41) report, 'journalists must play critical roles in mitigating the negative effects of social media and social networking sites on their profession by verifying information, especially breaking news information to be sure it is credible before dissemination'.

Moreover, the global nature of social media allows the crisis to be framed in ways that attract international interventions, which can complicate the internal dynamics of the conflict. The research problem, therefore, lies in understanding how social media's dual role as a platform for mobilisation and a conduit for misinformation impacts the Anglophone crisis. Specifically, the study seeks to explore the extent to which social media contributes to the entrapment of conflict narratives, the spread of misinformation, and the escalation of violence, as well as its influence on both domestic and international perceptions of the crisis.

This research therefore assesses the paradoxical role of social media in the Anglophone Crises in Cameroon, and shows that it has been both a tool for empowerment and a mechanism for entrapment. As a tool for entrapment, it has complicated the conflict's dynamics and potential resolution.

Materials and methods

Study site

The study was carried out in Kumba, a commercial and administrative hub in the South West Region of Cameroon. Kumba can be considered a junction town, receiving traffic from the Ekok-Mamfe-Nguti axis (National Road 8) on the one hand, Mundemba-Ekondo-Titi-Mbonge-Ekombe axis (National Road 16) on the other and linking these to

the Ediki-Muyuka-Buea axis (National Road 8). As the headquarters of Meme Division, Kumba became a theatre of warring activities between state and non-state armed groups, and the highways became operational military zones, with civilians caught in the cross-fire.

Population and sample size

As of 2019, the population of Meme Division was estimated at 466,331 inhabitants. According to Krejcir and Morgan (1970), the expected sample size for a broadbased survey of this population should be about 383 respondents. The sample was obtained in two stages based on the study design. Initially, a broadbased survey was done (Stage 1), to identify those respondents who are comfortable with sharing deeper insights into certain subjects related to the Anglophome Crisis. This statum of respondents was then interviewed further (Stage 2). Considering both the research approach (Ethnography), data collection tools (interview) and the sensitivity of the subject within an active conflict zone, the effective sample size for the first stage of the study was 80 respondents. The demographic characteristics of this sample are presented on Table 1. A majority of the respondents were aged 31 to 40 years old (52.5%), male (58.8%), married (66.25%) and had attained university education (58.75%).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Parameter	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Age group			
<30	4	5	5
31-40	42	52.5	57.5
41-50	23	28.75	86.25
51-60	11	13.75	100
Total	80	100	
Gender			
Male	47	58.8	58.8
Female	33	41.2	100
Total	80	100	
Marital Status			
Married	53	66.25	66.25
Single	27	33.75	100
Total	80	100	
Level of Education			
University	47	58.75	58.75
High School	33	41.25	100

Total	583	100

For in-depth interviews, 08 respondents were interviewed on different subjects as presented on Table 2.

Table 2. Sample characteristics for respondents interviewed

SN	Pseudonym	Profession	Submissions transcribed	Theme covered
1	Nancy	University teacher	1	Personal encounters
2	John	University teacher	1	Personal encounters
3	Claudius	Student	1	Personal encounters
4	Charles	Fashion designer	1	Fake News
5	Timothy	Taxi driver	1	Fake News
6	Micheal	Policeman	1	Psychological effects
7	Titus	Business man	2	Psychological effects
8	Ivo	Teacher	1	Fake News

The third stage of the research included desktop study of social media postings especially on the theme of human rights abuse reporting.

Research approach, data collection and analysis

The research approach was a mixed method research. Data was collected through questionnaires (Stage 1), interviews (Stage 2) and Desktop research of social media clipings (Stage 3). The first stage of the study involved administration of structured questionnaires to a sample of eighty respondents. Based on the expressed willingness to proceed further, ten respondents were identified from this sample and interviewed on specific themes during the second stage of the study. The questions centered on social media and potential for manipulation, face-to-face/personal ordeals, and fake news. For presentation, the responses were transcribed as submitted, and inferences drawn therefrom. For the third stage of the study, a desktop search of the Google platform was conducted, to determine trends and intensity of social media traffic on key issues related to the crises, especially human rights abuse monitoring and reporting. Content analysis was aided by ethnography, the researchers' own lived experiences during the crisis.

Results

Perceptions of the respondents on the Anglophone Crisis and participation in the research

All respondents (eighty) interviewed at the first phase of the work were aware of the on-going Anglophone Crisis (Table 3). A majority (78.75%) have had direct encounters with

either the state or the non-state armed groups during this crisis. These encounters were mostly at roadblocks (set up by non-state armed groups) or control posts (set up by state security services) (65.08%) during travelling. A majority (65%) of the respondents have also had indirect encounters with the different sides to the conflict. These took the form of anonymous phone calls (63.46%), abduction of family members (13.46%) or social media posts (13.46%). Of the 80 respondents, only eleven (13.75%) agreed to share further details of these encounters, and 08 of these were subsequently interviewed. The rest refused to participate further, mainly due to fear of retribution (56.52 %).

Table 3. Respondents' perceptions on the Anglophone Crisis and participation in the research

Theme	Options	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Are you aware of the on-going socio-political and armed conflict in the North West and South West regions of the Country?				
	Yes	80	100	100
	No	0	0	100
	Total	80	100	
Have you had direct (face-to-face**) encounters with the combatants from either side during this conflict**				
	Yes	63	78.75	78.75
	No	17	21.25	100
	Total	80	100	
If yes, how				
	At roadblocks and control posts while travelling	41	65.08	65.08
	In my house	11	17.46	82.54
	In work place	3	4.76	87.3
	Randomly in town	8	12.70	100
	Total	63	100	
Have you had indirect encounters with the combatants from either side				
	Yes	52	65	65
	No	28	35	100
	Total	80	100	
If yes, how				
	Through anonymous cell phone calls	33	63.46	63.46
	Through messengers	5	9.62	73.08
	Abduction of family members	7	13.46	86.54
	Through social media posts	7	13.46	100

Total	52	100	
Are you willing to share details of these encounters?			
Yes	11	13.75	13.75
No	69	86.25	100
Total	80	100	
If no, explain your reasons			
Not inspired	5	7.25	7.25
Afraid of retribution	39	56.52	63.77
Do not have time	6	8.70	100
No reason	19	27.53	
Total	69		

These results reflect the pervasive nature of the crisis and its impacts on the inhabitants. Personal encounters were inevitable especially if one had to travel, because both state and non-state armed groups used the highways as staging grounds. At present, between the towns of Kumba and Buea, a distance of 84 Km, there are seven permanent, and between three to five 'clandestine' control posts set up by state security services. At the peak of this crisis in the South West Region, it was common the meet about the same number of control posts sporadically set up by the non-state armed groups. This made personal encounters almost inevitable. Indirect encounters increased with the increase in abductions/arrests perpetuated by actors on both sides of the conflict. That most respondents refused to be interviewed reflects the ongoing fear of retribution even at this stage of the conflict.

The peculiarity of social media in ensuring accountability in the Anglophone Crisis

Social media in the Cameroonian context

Social media refers to the social networks on the web portals designed for users to interact, exchange information and socialize that have spread in recent years. The connections created by these tools allow the creation of social networks that unite users through knowledge, work relationships and family ties. In recent times, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp Instagram, TikTok, SnapChat and LinkedIn have stood out as the most widely used social networks. Social media should not be seen primarily as the platforms upon which people post, but rather as the contents that are posted on these platforms. Contents vary considerably from country to country and from, region to region, which is why a comparative study is necessary. The way in which we describe social media in one place should not be understood as a general description of social

media. It should always be seen within defined contexts. Social media is today a place where people socialise, not just a means of communication (Miller et al. 2016, 1-2). As propounded by Miller (2012), social media has become a viable intangible culture because of its 'socialness' which if glossed over its full meaning will not be grasped nor appreciated (Tegomoh 2022).

Social media and the Anglophone Crisis

From the onset of the crisis, it was clear that social media would play a vital role in (mis) communication. Since the State-controlled media outlets in the country, the antagonists immediately bypassed this through the use of Facebook and WhatsApp platforms. Boycotts, ghost towns, state and non-state armed groups' military exploits were all disseminated on platforms like WhatsApp and especially, Facebook. Social media news outfits were rapidly built and running, for example Bareta News (multiple iterations), Amba News Line, Stateless HoHa, ABC Ambazonia and Ambazonia Communication Network. Within days, hitherto unknown or concealed terminology related to the Anglophone Crisis emerged: The name 'Ambazonia came to the fore to represent former British Southern Cameroons or the Anglophone regions; 'Lockdown' became known as a situation in which there is no inter urban movement; 'Ghost town', a term first widely used in the political context in Cameroon in the 1990s, was resurrected and refined to mean a situation in which no one is expected to leave their homes for the duration specified. Table 4 presents results of Google search on some key terms related to social media use during the crisis.

Table 4. Search results from Google search on social media use during the Anglophone Crisis

Search term	Number of results	Return time	Relevance of top 10 results
Facebook posts on ghost towns in Cameroon	236000	0.31 seconds	High
Facebook posts on Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium	12600	0.29 seconds	High
Facebook posts on Ambazonia generals	72900	0.48 seconds	High
Facebook post on Lockdowns in	36500	0.48 seconds	High

Ambazonia			
Facebook posts on military confrontations in Ambazonia	28200	0.36 seconds	High
Facebook posts on extrajudicial killings in Cameroon	55300	0.29 seconds	High
Facebook posts on villages burned in the Anglophone regions	56600	0.36 seconds	High

The outbreak of the Anglophone Crisis in 2016 coincided with the ubiquity in the use of social media especially in Africa. Before then, the dominant use of the internet mostly for research and emailing was highly limited to researchers as a result of the expensive nature of the internet bandwidth and their accompanying electronic gadgets such as desktops and laptops. Consequently, the population relied on news almost exclusively from mainstream media outlets. The advent of social media came with the introduction of the smartphone that was relatively cheaper and accessible especially to the urban population. Social media then became an "open and alternative source of information' especially where the conventional media failed to play their role of serving the public's interest first (Ngange and Mokondo 2019). Consequently, social media amplified by the ubiquitous use of the mobile phone technology and relatively cheap access to the internet has permitted the population to be able to create media contents on their own without relying on traditional and professional journalists. This brings the notion of citizen journalism propounded by Oh Yeon-ho (2000) in South Korea to the fore. Citizen journalism is a situation where people who are not trained to communicate and do not bother about what the basic ethics of communication are, go ahead to share content that should not go out as such. There is no gatekeeping as to what goes out. In the context of the Anglophone Crisis, gory pictures of people being decapitated, students stripped naked, killed combatants' bodies, some heavily mutilated and/or naked gruesomely displayed and other such sensitive contents were shared without as much as a warning for viewers' discretion.[1]

Despite the pre-existing conditions that led to the blossoming of social media in the Anglophone Crisis, it can be argued that the continuous reliance on this media by the

[1] For more details on the actors and types of violence perpetuated see Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD 2024) query response on the Anglophone Crisis.

majority of the population would have also been made possible by the heavy crackdown on journalists by the government which therefore did not only shrink the contents of the mainstream media but also made it uninteresting given the high censorship that is and was involved in it.

Furthermore, the pervasive use social media by the population stems from the fact that it has remained the main channel of communicating security dangers which are linked to arsons, killings, and possible improvised explosive device (IED) areas as well as periods of lockdowns/ghost towns by the various armed groups. For these armed groups, since their mainstream television channel (The Southern Cameroons Broadcasting Corporation - SCBC) which they have been using since 2017 in communicating is not widely viewed by the population for safety concerns, the use of social media as communication alternative for propaganda or other purposes has remained inevitable.

Social media has been instrumental in mobilising attention and action both within Cameroon and globally (Eluke 2020 on United States intervention, Moinina and Ngoh 2020 for Civil society and ACCORD 2024 for international organisations). Campaigns like #EndAnglophoneCrisis and #StopTheKillings have trended on social media, raising awareness about the severity of the situation. These campaigns often include graphic images, videos and personal stories that evoke strong emotional responses, prompting calls for accountability from civil society, international human rights organisations, and even foreign governments.

The transparency provided by social media has made it challenging for state and non-state actors to act with impunity. The ability of individuals to instantly share information means that abuses are more likely to be exposed and condemned publicly. This has led to a situation where even those in power are increasingly aware that their actions are being monitored, potentially deterring some from committing further violations.

Also, social media has also facilitated the formation of networks of international solidarity and support for the Anglophone Crisis. Diaspora communities, international NGOs and foreign sympathisers use these platforms to coordinate advocacy efforts, provide financial and material support, and lobby for international intervention. This global connectivity has bolstered local efforts to demand accountability, creating additional pressure on the Cameroonian government and other actors involved in the crisis (ACCORD 2024).

Face-to-face/personal ordeals

During the hay days of the crisis when there was a lot of confrontation between the regular military and the non-state armed groups - Amazonian fighters (locally known as the “Amba Boys”). The population in the high-risk zone (Ground Zero) could go for days without moving out of their houses or neighbourhood at best especially after heavy gun shelling. Yet, despite not physically present for such security reasons, this populace glued to their phones and stayed on social media for the latest updates on the situation on the ground. Through pictures, videos, audios and texts on social media, we came to know and be informed about different incidents and same means was used to check on loved ones. Smart/android phones became an essential targeted object during the armed conflict to disseminate information.

Travelling out of Kumba, which was/is considered one of the hotspots of the crisis was a herculean task. This could only be done for family or work when absolutely necessary through military convoys or public transport. Using private cars accompanied by military convoys soon became unpopular due to the numerous attacks on them. Private cars were almost out of question. The following scene reported by Nancy, a university teacher, would make this point explicit:

> On one occasion staff of a state university had gone for a meeting and decided to spend the weekend with friends and families. Six of us coincidentally met at a bus station (2 Anglophone and 4 Francophones) on the return trip to our duty post in Kumba. Each of us had verified through our own ‘reliable’ channels to ascertain that the roads were accessible. By this time in the conflict, most civil servants especially the Francophones and those with young children had relocated their families for security and educational purposes, to the safer Francophone zones. Shutdown or boycott of schools had been declared through various means on social media by the leaders of the Amazonian freedom fighters with the horrendous consequences of burning down property of, or outright killing of persons. Before travelling that morning, we had independently made inquiries if the roads were accessible. The matter of safety was another question since the roads in this region had become unpredictable and precarious. The journey from Douala went on well until we got to Banga Bakundu, 20 km from Kumba when someone shouted suddenly, in Pidgin English, ‘*na dem that*’ (There they are), referring to the Amazonian fighters. For the first time during this conflict, some of us came face to face with the Boys adorned with charms and amulets tied around

> their bodies and guns. With adrenaline pumping we all sat still praying not to be singled out either as a teacher or a francophone. At last! I was pulled out! Panick set in but who had the audacity to utter a word? Due to my strong build, dark colour and a very clean haircut, I was taken for military personnel (one of the categories of civil servants that was their target). My first reflex as I alighted from the bus was to throw my phone away into the nearby bushes which thankfully went unnoticed. During interrogation with guns pointed at me, one of the Boys called out the name of the main speaker and he happened to be from same ethnic group as myself. The conversation quickly switched to our mother tongue which dissipated the tension and the guns came down. Another colleague smartly started the process of throwing out banknotes from the car to the ground as their financial support to the 'Boys'. When this happened, all the passengers on board were then asked to hurry up with their support and leave the scene. The trip continued for a few kilometres before anyone had the courage to speak. Upon arrival at our destination drained by all sorts of emotions with heightened sense of fear and insecurity everyone hastened home, the only safe place, which in itself was relative.

A question that arises is why did the targeted staff, throw away his phone? For clarity, these face-to-face encounters are dangerous thanks again, to social media use; the groups we affiliate to and comments we post on them build a profile that can be interpreted to deduce ones' position on the crisis. The exploration of the phone would have exposed her true identity as a teacher, who were then also being targeted; it might have revealed her true opinions about the armed group and armed struggle in general, which might not have aligned with theirs, and this would have ultimately endangered her life. Lived experiences were not only dangerous when separatist fighters were encountered. The state armed groups as well, exploited social media use to identify, arrest or sometimes execute separatists or 'separatist sympathizers'. John, another University teacher this time recounts his experiences with state armed groups.

> On a routine trip to Buea for a Senate meeting, we were stopped at Ekona Control post. As was the norm, we had to file past scrutinising armed soldiers. The young people were particularly under severe scrutiny. One young man was identified and separated from the rest of us. While going through the gallery of his phone, the first video accessed was of the Ambazonia anthem 'Hail this land of

> Glory'. We could all hear the song as soon as it was played. Soldiers descended on this youth immediately. The beating was severe, then they chained him and whisked him off to Buea.

For personal safety, it had become customary for citizens to acquaint themselves with key information of the separatists. Names of the key 'Secretaries of state', the number of counties, and the anthem, call-outs (like 'Wata na Wata', 'Shake shake no dey') were circulated through social media. Subscribing to some separatist channels was a necessary way to get information on safety issues. Sometimes this knowledge made the difference between life and death during face to face encounters with separatists. However, as the state armed groups became aware of this, cell phones became a necessary source of information to identify so-called sympathisers, or sometimes members of the non-state armed groups. This was the reason why the youth mentioned above was targeted. Over time, civilians learned to 'clean' their cell phones before travelling.

In the razing of Bole village by state armed groups, social media provided irrefutable evidence of the perpetrators. Just as with the case of KwaKwa and Kaake villages, the state armed groups themselves filmed the acts and shared same on Facebook and WhatsApp platforms. This was corroborated by eyewitness testimonies. Bole, KwaKwa and Kaake are satellite villages surrounding Kumba, with Kumba as the main centre of their economic and administrative activity. Claudius was a student of the University of Buea campus in Kumba at the time, and was visiting family at Bole, when soldiers blocked the road and corralled all passengers to the village centre. He stated:

> I hid under the table and weighed my options. Both ends of the village were blocked. The only way out was to sit tight and watch. For some reason, the soldiers started setting fire to the houses. When they became exhausted, they could set no more fires so they started shooting randomly into the houses. Several bullets passed just centimetres above our heads as we crouched on the floor. Satisfied that they had left no survivors, the soldiers turned around and left. As I managed to leave Bole on that faithful day, I did not return for over two years.

This eyewitness testimony corroborated social media posts on the fire and burning of Bole village. Yet in the aftermath, government officials to the rank of Ministers, made significant efforts to discredit the reports, to the extent of photo-shopping to create alternative narratives.

Fake news and manipulations

While social media has enhanced accountability in the Anglophone Crisis, it is important to acknowledge the challenges. The spread of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda can sometimes overshadow accurate reporting, leading to confusion and mistrust. Additionally, the government's occasional crackdown on social media, including internet shutdowns, poses a significant barrier to the free flow of information and accountability efforts. Despite these challenges, the overall impact of social media in enhancing accountability remains significant, providing a platform for marginalised voices and making it more difficult for abuses to go unnoticed or unchallenged.

In the context of the current Anglophone Crisis, there were too many voices on social media that it had become so difficult to ascertain what was false/fake or true/credible. That is why everyone in the Anglophone regions consulted his/her phone each day before leaving home to be sure that lockdown had not been declared. This happened to be our main source of information. Respondent testimonies mentioned above indicate that before embarking on the trip each person verified information gotten via social media from their own independent source if it was okay to ply the roads. There were just too many stories on social media about what and when it was safe to travel. Safety became a relative term. Violence had escalated to serious armed conflict. Civilians were caught in between as they were being interrogated and targeted by both parties. It was a feat to get on the roads to and from 'ground zero' because the roads had become precarious, unpredictable and dangerous. First the roads had to be declared accessible by the 'Boys' for any car to get on them, otherwise it would be shot at or burnt. This was a challenging exercise as secessionist fighters were zoned and in factions (ACCORD, 2024:16). Note that by 2019 the government had taken the posture that everything was okay. That the situation on ground had been mastered and handled, yet people believed what social media presented to them and disbelieved the government rhetoric. To substantiate the phenomenon of fake news and manipulations, the following response from Charles and Timothy respectively are illustrative. Both are residents of Kumba. According to Charles, a fashion clothing vendor:

> In August 2024, one group of Ambazonia fighters called AGovC imposed a lockdown (period where movement is prohibited) from 9th September to 2nd October, while a different faction called IG Sako imposed a separate lockdown from 2nd to 9th September 2024. Yet another faction called ACN (Ambazonia

> Communication Network) called for celebrations on October 1st 2024! It was a herculean task to determine which of these directives was true, or who was being manipulated.

Another case highlighting fake news and manipulation can be drawn from the forced taxi colour change in Bamenda in 2024. Timothy, a taxi driver and resident of Kumba reported that:

> Earlier in 2024, a Facebook post attributed to the AgovC mandated blue and white colours for township taxis. It was immediately being enforced by its armed wing the ADF (Ambazonia Defense Forces). On June 23rd 2024, another Ambazonia Faction known as the IG of Chris Anu objected to this colour mandate, which was already resulting in destruction of lives and property. On June 26th in a Facebook video post, a self-proclaimed and well-known agent of the state of Cameroon known as Nkonda Titus or his nick name MKPD claimed that he was the actual author of this taxi colour mandate, which says he "he used to create confusion and hardship among the population, and to once again demonstrate his ability to manipulate the separatists.

In another case, the use of fake news to manipulate public perception was seen in the alleged killing of a General of the Cameroon Army. As reported by Ivo, another Kumba resident:

> In 2019, the non-state Armed group called the Red Dragons, posted videos and images of the killing of General Bouba Dobekro, of the National Armed Forces. The said General is still serving actively in the Cameroonian Army today.

The researcher corroborated this post, which still exists online. Indeed the PR warfare on social media was as vicious, if not more, than on the battle field. The Anglophone Crisis is not unique to other events happening in terms of spreading unverifiable information or deliberately distorting information. As Ngange and Mokondo (2019, 5) pointed out, concerns about the presence and spread of falsehood or fake news on social media have been expressed by both global politicians and technology leaders around the world citing as an example the 2016 presidential elections in the United States.

Psychosocial effects

The body has a way of building up defence mechanism during times of crisis for one to get along or cope with a situation. Amidst harassment, gunshots, kidnapping, blackmail and killing, trust had become questionable. Everyone was cautious and suspicious of

everyone else, since no one knew the affiliations of the other viz-a-viz the protagonists or whether someone is being monitored. For everyone living in Anglophone Cameroon, it was safety first and sorting safety was in itself burdensome. Fear of the unknown had gripped society and taunted/tainted everyday interactions. The institutions that are supposed to ensure some sense of security have failed and everyone is caught in a web of suspicion. To exemplify this the following testimony from Micheal, a Police Commissioner is illuminating:

> Early is the year 2020, two young boys of about 8 years old, flagged down a police patrol car in Kumba. When the car stopped, the boys begged for food, and told the police they had not eaten for two days. They were IDPs. Instead of solace, the boys were whisked off to detention. It took the intervention of the States Counsel for them to be released. He (the states counsel) then asked all those implicated in the matter, including himself, to contribute some money as seed capital for the boys' mother to start a small business. But the damage had been done. These boys would not trust the police again.

Thus, everyone is somehow responsible for their own safety and security. The stress levels are very high among the inhabitants of the Anglophone Cameroon. The quality of sleep is poor as one is constantly on alert since persons are constantly whisked away to unknown destinations by unknown persons. Till date the whereabout of so many persons remain unknown. Threatening messages on social media to individuals either being accused as 'sell-outs', 'blacklegs' or asking for money to support the 'struggle' are issues that affect mental health. Everyone is disturbed when one receives those unsettling calls or text messages that depict him completely and with one's location. The telephone or any message through social media has become a dreaded source of intimidation and fear. Many people do not receive calls or respond to messages from unknown numbers. Through teleguided calls many have fallen victims, paying huge ransom for their safety to unknown persons. Polymedia was and is still being used for blackmailing and making requests for ransoms. Two incidents that happened to Titus, a business man exemplify this:

> In December 2017, as I was working at my construction site at about 8 pm, my phone rang. A so-called Ambazonia General informed me that I am a sell-out and they were coming for my neck. Considering I was with my family in an isolated area, I had to negotiate and paid some money through mobile money. A few days

later, the same person called for more money. By then I had become a bit more courageous and told him outright I would not pay. My research had revealed that these were not separatist fighters but scammers usurping their name. Two days later, the actual separatist fighters stormed a neighbour's compound at night on motor bikes and whisked him off. During the raid, I was convinced that they had finally come for me. Not until they left did my heart stop racing. Since then I do not sleep deeply at night, and always wake up at the sound of motor bikes. In another instance, a neighbour recently had a malaise and called for help. It was midnight. Two motor bikes came with people on board to assist. At the sound of the approaching bikes, I jumped out of bed and turned off the lights. I mustered the courage to call my neighbour about half an hour later, who explained the purpose of the late night bike visit. But my blood pressure was already high, I had to take a second dose of my routine BP medications, which is not advised. The initial incident has left psychological scars that are hard to heal.

Social media's controversial contributions to human rights abuse reporting

The growing impression of press censorship over the years, the frequent arrests and detention of press men, the sudden and frequent disappearance of press people during news coverage, the regular threats on press people and even suspension and closure of some media outfits, led to a gradual decline in the preference for the traditional media. Moreover, the logistics and accessibility challenges undermined the ability of the traditional media in effectively reporting issues especially linked to human rights violations. This created a space which was quickly filled by social media, amplified by the proliferation of the mobile telephone technology (Ngange and Tchewo, 2017). This became evident in the outbreak of the Anglophone Crisis in which social media became a powerful agent of reporting human rights abuses committed by both warring factions. This enabled the population to report incidents including human rights violations as they happened. While some of these reporting, given their unprofessionalism led to fake news, misinformation and disinformation (for instance, social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube have been used especially by activists and other stakeholders to amplify violence), to a certain extent, it could be argued that social media equally led to increase in accountability especially for the human right abuses. Many of the human rights abuses that are believed to be reported and judged by the courts in the country have been sparked by social media reporting.

In this regard, Awanda et al. (2020) captures the critical role played by social media when they eschew that through this media outlet, “Anglophone Cameroonians both at home and abroad have used social media to advance political discussions regarding the conflict; discuss the historical contexts of the conflict; name different phases of the conflicts such as “the coffin revolution”; expose human rights violations and ongoing violence; call for international intervention; and, the government response to the conflict.” However, while social media has been instrumental more as a whistleblower to the human rights atrocities committed in the context of the Anglophone Crisis, it should be noted that the involvement of peripheral media actors has been without adherence to professional ethics and journalistic principles (Nounkeu 2020). The consequence of this has been the reporting of sensitive contents with untold consequences of mental health issues and negative shaping of public opinions on key political issues with the potential to amplify anger, violence and conflict. While the use of social media has been considered manipulative, it goes without saying that it has improved accountability especially in human rights abuses that would not have otherwise been reported by traditional media due to perceived traditional media crackdown and censorship.

Conclusion and policy implications

The Anglophone crises in Cameroon, rooted in historical grievances and cultural disparities between the Anglophone and Francophone regions, escalated into a prolonged conflict. The crisis has been characterised by violence, displacement, and human rights abuses. In recent years, social media has provided another front where this conflict is manifesting. These platforms serve as tools for both mobilisation and disinformation, significantly shaping the trajectory and perceptions of the crises.

The role of social media in the context of the ongoing Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon has continued to remain controversial. While it has served as a platform in conveying critical security information to the population, it has equally served as a propaganda platform for the conflict between Non-State Armed Groups and the Government forces in Cameroon. On the other hand, social media provides a voice to marginalised Anglophone communities, enabling them to mobilise support, share their narratives, and draw international attention to their plight. Activists and ordinary citizens alike use platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp to document human rights abuses, coordinate protests, and call for action. However, the same platforms also serve as a

fertile ground for the spread of misinformation, propaganda, and hate speech, which can exacerbate tensions and fuel violence.

This dominant role of social media in the crisis can be attributed to several factors critical of which is the crackdown on journalisms and the growing censorship of the press. This has made it difficult for mainstream media outlets such as radio, television and newspapers to accurately and extensive report about the crisis, making them unpopular to citizenry. In this regard, this study calls for the need to allow the constitutional rights of the media and journalism with regard to freedom of expression. Concurring with Shing, Ngange and Ndode (2024, 48-49), this will enhance citizen trust in mainstream journalism that will report on verified facts and dissuade them from relying on sensational and unprofessional journalism that characterises social media. This reliance on the mainstream media will help reduce the adverse psycho-social impacts of the crisis on the population. The population will equally be sensitised on the appropriate ways of posting and consulting social media as an important mechanism of getting safety concerns as well as raising awareness on possible awareness of the atrocities that might be committed by warring factions.

Social media as a physical tool, app, or software has been regarded as material culture and thus objectified because it is not a thing we can just gloss over as Miller 2012 pointed out. The discussions here bring out in very visible terms the (in)tangibility of material culture. Its 'meanings appear to be relatively simple, straightforward, essentially timeless and largely identical for any observer' (Miller 2012) when placed within a specific context. The Anglophone crisis has been taken as an apt example of how people often gloss over stuff rather than get into ‘the complexities of deciphering the rich symbolic meanings inherent in or imposed upon objects’ (Riggins 1994, 2). This case study concurs with Appadurai (1986) that things have a social life because they are in constant relation with people and context. When looking at the social media as such, they cease to be mere things, but rather they have multiple meanings and are culturally and socially interpreted. Contextualisation becomes very crucial as social interactions within specific spaces call for specific/different interpretations (Tegomoh 2022, 5-6).

These platforms remain central to our discussions since these are the primary units through which we think about and use social media. It is apparent that in each place every new social media platform is quickly adopted and adapted within its context. It becomes standardised around quite specific groups of users and implicitly understood

appropriate and inappropriate usage, though these will continue to change. Furthermore, differentiation of groups may occur within the same platform or by exploiting a contrast between platforms. If we use social media to socialise and communicate, then it is considered a thing which is immaterial/intangible by nature. We can therefore envisage two key scales. The first is the scale from the most private to the most public. The second is the scale from the smallest group to the largest groups. At one end of both of these scales we still see private dyadic conversation and at the other end we still see fully public broadcasting (Miller et al. 2016, 34). Families and friends created groups to keep in touch with their loved one as well staying abreast with the current happenings. The activists and government on their part actively used/is still using social media to propagate whatever message they want the population to consume.

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