RedFame

Understanding Social Media's Role in Propagating Falsehood in Conflict Situations: Case of the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis

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Abstract

Social media have been welcomed as important tools that contribute to satisfying the daily information needs of citizens in today's global society. To many, they serve as an open and alternative source of information especially where the conventional media fail to play their role of serving the public's interest first. Notwithstanding, there have been serious and legitimate concerns about the spread of fake news over social media especially during the 2016 US presidential elections (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This coincided with the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis (CAC) in which the Cameroon government blamed social media users for spreading false information about the crisis to the extent that government shut down the Internet in the two affected Anglophone regions of the country for 93 days in 2017. This article therefore, examines the content of information (graphics, audios, videos, texts) posted on two widely used social media platforms (WhatsApp and Facebook) during the Anglophone Crisis, in order to understand how falsehood is propagated especially during crisis situations. A qualitative approach to analyse data of falsehood during the crisis was used and three major ways were identified through which falsehood was propagated. Principally, social media activists used computer software to distort pictures and superimpose content that depict the messages they wanted to pass across. They also spread rumours using texts, audio clips and distorted videos. The conclusion is that social media have been awash with falsehood in the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis. The major recommendation therefore, is that users of social media should make efforts to verify the authenticity of information obtained from such media before consuming and disseminating to others. The December 2014 Law on Terrorism in Cameroon treats such offences seriously and defaulters are severely punished with heavy jail sentences and fines.

Keywords: Social media, propagation, falsehood, Cameroon Anglophone Crisis, WhatsApp and Facebook

1. Introduction

The media as one of the most important institutions of modern society are witnessing dramatic transformation. The advent of the Internet, the rapid growth of mobile technology and the move towards digital convergence have greatly altered the norms of information researching, gathering, processing and dissemination (Ngange & Tchewo, 2017). With the use of digital equipment, ordinary individuals (citizen journalists) have hijacked the role of conventional journalists by spontaneously reporting news of crisis and other forms of disaster, especially when they happen to be present on the scene, through social media platforms (Allan, 2013).

The excitement to tell the story first has witnessed the non-respect of the norms and basic elements of a profession which demands its practitioners (journalists) to be committed to reporting the truth and the essence of verifying their facts before publication. While presenting speed as an additional pressure in the digital age, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001, p. 59) argue that "speed is almost always the enemy of accuracy" that journalists face in the news gathering and dissemination process. They further explain that this pressure is a setback against truth and accuracy and that it increases the likelihood for rumour and misinformation to be transmitted through such an opened network media environment. Bal and Baruh (2015) also share the opinion that the need for immediacy increases the likelihood of spreading false information more quickly on social media.

The social media, especially WhatsApp and Facebook, became major sources for receiving and transmitting information during the 2016 to 2019 crisis rocking the two Anglophone Regions of Cameroon. A greater proportion, especially of

the youthful population, depended on these platforms for information when the crisis went violent from November 21, 2016. The social media became saturated with information in texts, graphics, audios and videos purported to be updates surrounding the crisis as it unfolded. It did not take long after the crisis erupted for the Cameroon government authorities to point accusing fingers on advocates of the Anglophones problem in Cameroon and journalists for the publication of misleading and unverified information especially on social media, which stirred and provoked sentiments in favour of the crisis. The accusations were followed by the complete shutdown of the Internet in the two Anglophone Regions of Cameroon on January 17 to April, 20, 2017 (93 days). The Rambler newspaper edition of Wednesday, January 18, 2017 had on page three a meeting between the President of the National Communication Council, NCC, Mr. Peter Essoka and journalists in Bamenda. Mr. Essoka cautioned journalists to avoid social media propaganda and on the need to draw lines between factual and fictional writing. It is on this background that this paper content analyses social media platforms in other to understand the propagation of falsehood in such mediums. The objectives are to establish scientific evidence on how falsehood was manifested on social media content during the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis (2016-2017 lap) and to give an understanding of how this was propagated. To understand how information was distorted and lies were spread, the researchers focused on one main questions: *how was falsehood manifested and propagated on social media during the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis?*

Brief background to the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis

The history of Cameroon is complex. The country was annexed by the Germans in 1884 (Fanso, 2003) and was later divided into two parts in 1916 when the Germans lost the First World War. 20% was under British control and 80% under the French as mandated territories by the League of Nations. Fanso (ibid) claims that the Anglo-French partition of Cameroon in 1916 created separate nationalist aspirations and movements in the two territories. After gaining independence in 1960 (for French Cameroon) and 1961 (for English Cameroon by joining the French part), Fanso (2003) adds that it soon became obvious that the cultural, social and political divides between the two linguistic groups were more fundamental and more difficult to bridge than the initial aspirations of the nationalists whose aims were to establish a united and independent Cameroon. The Federal Constitution arrived at in 1961 by the fathers of reunification kept the two linguistic groups distinct with the people of each community firmly attached to their colonial cultural heritage in terms of education, judiciary, politics and other social aspects.

Notwithstanding, Konings and Nyamnjoh (2003) report that even under the Federal Constitution, the English speaking parts (Anglophones) complained of being marginalised by their French speaking (Francophones) counterparts. The first president of Cameroon, Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960-1982), succeeded to kill the spirit of multiparty politics practiced in English Cameroon in 1966 after convincing leaders of political parties in both French (East) and English (West) Cameroon into a one-party system and created the Cameroon National Union, CNU, (Mbu, 2006). The Cameroon Federation (of West and East Cameroon) survived till May 20, 1972 when the country became a United Republic and later The Republic of Cameroon in 1984 through a Presidential Decree (Ngalim, 2014 and Echu, 2004).

The dismantling of federalism by Ahidjo in 1972 is believed to have been the major setback which exposed the marginalisation of Anglophone Cameroonians. Nkwi (2004) holds that the replacement of federalism with a unitary state in 1972 brought a systematic erosion of Anglo-Saxon institutions and traditions that were established in West Cameroon. Wuteh (2014) adds that Article 1 sub 3 of the constitution of the Republic of Cameroon that provides for English and French as official languages of the country (as a measure to promote and guarantee bilingualism) has been violated due to political bad faith. Wuteh further points out that article 59 in the constitution which states that "...the revised constitution shall be published in French and English, the French being the authentic version" gives English an inferior status.

Anglophone Cameroonians have, on several occasions, made calls for the return to federalism as a solution to check their marginalisation. Such calls have always been rejected. For example it was reported in Cameroon Post N[o] 104 of April 2-9, 1992 that the Anglophones' proposal for Federalism was rejected during a meeting of members at the Constitution Drafting Technical Committee in 1992. Cameroon Post N[o] 157 of April 7, 1993 also carried a cover story on the All Anglophone Conference that was held in Buea where the Anglophones demanded the recreation of the state of West Cameroon.

Before the crisis rocking the two Anglophone Regions of Cameroon went out of control in November 2016, Common Law lawyers (of English extraction) from the two regions had expressed their frustration to the government in what they termed "marginalisation" of Anglophones in the publication of the OHADA Laws, especially the "Green Book." In a newspaper article published in The Post No. 01763, October 03, 2016, the lawyers claimed to have forwarded numerous complaints to the OHADA Secretariat in Yaounde on the need to have the law translated to English but that the government maintained silence and instead kept circulating the French version. They claimed this act undermined the constitution that prescribes the bilingual and also the bi-jural nature of Cameroon.

Teachers from the English part later joined the striking lawyers on November 21, 2016; thereby, paralysing the Anglophone sub-system of education in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon from basic to higher education. This day was marked by heavy confrontations between protesters and security officers especially in the streets of the North West Regional capital, Bamenda. News concerning the crisis went viral on social media provoking sentiments. Many individuals without basic knowledge on journalism practice started sharing news contents that were consumed by the masses with few of them questioning the authenticity of the information. This only led to the escalation of the crisis which later on (in 2017) metamorphosed into an arms struggle between separatists who now call for a complete independence of Anglophone Cameroon (the Ambazonia State) and government military forces fighting to maintain the unity and peace of the country. In the process, over 2,000 people have died, 200,000 internally displaced and 50, 000 as refugees in neighbouring Nigeria (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Defining citizen journalism and social media

Definitions of citizen journalism are varied, but the central idea surrounding the concept is that individuals without professional training in the practice of journalism use modern technological tools to create and distribute media content globally using web, especially social media. However, from historical perspectives by Gillmor (2004), it should be noted that citizen journalism had existed even before the birth of the global web. Scholarly definitions of citizen journalism have focused on identifying the norms of journalistic practices and what is expected of a journalist (Borger, van Hoof, Meijer, and Sanders, 2013). Notwithstanding, it is difficult to explicate this concept without mentioning social media.

Bal and Baruh (2015) define citizen journalism as a journalistic practice of citizens using the social (new) media to construct reality. Goode (2009) refers to citizen journalism as the production and sharing of media content (photos and videos) on social media by ordinary individuals on an eyewitness account. Noor (2013), on his part, defines citizen journalism as the participation of people in journalistic activities by way of capturing and circulating news globally, using modern communication technologies.

The practice of citizen journalism on social media can also be viewed as a new kind of alternative media described in Gillmor (2004). Gillmor explains that alternative media in contemporary times have gone beyond and above Net blogs. He refers to a project created by anti-globalisation activists in 1999 who gathered material from variety of sources to cover the Seattle World Trade Organisation meetings in ways conventional media would not by equipping people on the streets to capture images of police officers mishandling protesters.

Still within the scope of defining citizen journalism, Mishra and Krishnaswami (2015) hold the view that it is a practice involving non-professionals taking active role in the process of processing and disseminating news and information. They add that citizen journalism is also known as public participatory journalism or democratic journalism, which should not be confused with civic journalism, practiced by professional journalists. According to Mishra and Krishnaswami (ibid) citizen journalists are basically made up of "the audience, viewers or readers, who too want to contribute to their stories and concerns in the society they live." Literature from selected journal articles sited in Borger, M., van Hoof, A., Meijer I. C. and Sanders J. (2013) confirm that the word citizen journalism is used interchangeable with terms such as, participatory journalism, user-generated content, grassroots journalism, collaborative journalism, networked journalism and interactive journalism. However, Lindner, Connell and Meyer (2015) have noted a growing professionalization within the field of citizen journalism especially as they found current or former professional journalists as contributors on many citizen journalism online platforms.

In these definitions sited above and others not cited here, it is observed that most scholars consider citizen journalism as an act involving non-professionals playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information.

A brief history of citizen journalism and activism

Citizen journalists are individuals who create and transmit information through social media platforms. They usually do not have a formal training in journalism. Notwithstanding, communication scholars are yet to settle on exactly what to be considered citizen journalism as well as when the phenomenon actually originated. The definition has witnessed lots of controversies even as technology continues to evolve. However, Waltz (2005) holds that the practise of this form of journalism was initially considered as alternative media. Waltz (ibid) further explained that a better definition was put forward by Clemencia Rodriguez who described it as 'citizen media' since it includes a production means "characterised by open access and volunteerism, goals involving social change, and not-for-profit orientation" (p, 3).

Moyo (2015) holds that new online journalism practices referred to as 'grassroots' journalism entered the journalism landscape at the advent of the Internet especially around the early 1990s. However, from a presentation on a brief history of alternative and activist media in Waltz (2005, pp. 13) it can be argued that citizen journalism has existed right

at the birth of printing press in Europe in the mid-15th Century. According to Waltz's explanation, there was the spread of radical press through flyers to counter information on newspapers that provided information to serve the hereditary aristocracy and their loyal employees.

Gillmor (2004), on his part, traces the origins of citizen journalism to the 17th and 18th century in Europe and USA, where pamphleteers took great personal risk to publish their writings. Gillmor (ibid) goes further to site Thomas Pain as one early pamphleteer whose writings about rebellion, liberty and government inspired many in the late 18th century in the USA. Jurrat (2011) says what makes citizen journalism more powerful in contemporary times is the aspect of speed, low cost and global reach facilitated by various Internet platforms taking local issues, those in power would prefer to ignore, to the national and international news agendas. He continues that citizen journalism came to international prominence when for the first time people could follow eye witness reports posted on the web in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Pentagon, USA. According to her, the term "citizen journalist" was used for the first time when photos and videos of the 2004 Asian tsunami were uploaded on personal blogs of tourists and later used on television and in print media. Subsequently, people affected during the 2005 London bombings sent their images and personal accounts or stories to mass media houses. As a result, many news outlets now encourage their audiences to upload pictures and information via their websites, or have created dedicated citizen journalism sites. This is in recognition of the fact that trained media correspondents cannot always be present and on time, in all news making situations. Citizens journalists have therefore, been integrated in the news gathering and dissemination model. In Zimbabwe, for instance, such a model is referred to as the "Layer model" where citizen journalists send in breaking stories for media houses to follow up, treat and disseminate in strict respect of the canons of the profession. It is one way to check the excesses from citizen journalists yet encouraging their participation in the journalism process as *pro-sumers* (a hybrid of producers and consumers) of media content (Kovach & Rosentiel, 2001).

Debates on the impact of citizen journalism and social media on society

Technological development has given audiences the opportunity to create media content on their own, which they finally share using social media. Though this practice is being hailed for creating a forum for the unheard voices and unseen images, others have contested the impact it has on society as a whole. Barnes (2012) holds that debates surrounding this concept are likely to become more intense especially among media professionals and scholars who have interest in this field of study. On a positive note, citizen journalists through social media have been the eyes and ears of civil societies and international organisations as well as other big media organisations that have interest in protecting the plights of the distressed (Adams, 2013). People have watched first hand images on breaking news stories acknowledged on CNN and BBC especially during crisis from different parts of the world forwarded by citizen journalists. This has led to interventions from national and international bodies to give assistances to members of such communities.

Mpofu (2015) argues that the Ndembele speaking people of Zimbabwe who have been excluded from mainstream power and economic activities have used the cyber space to create platforms to make their voices heard on issues considered to be a taboo in a regime they considered as oppressive. This has helped them to overcome dominant pressure and restrictions in the public sphere and have been able to debate on issues of a genocide they suffered without fear. From another positive perspective, Morisett (2004) holds that media technologies (and by implication social media) have become tools for political surveillance as government officials and individuals are now subjected to a state of consciousness knowing that their actions are permanently visible to the world.   Being the eyes and ears of the world, citizen journalists can provide instant accounts through whatever means (photographs, audios, videos and/or texts) of anything that happens in society and publish to the entire world through social media within seconds. Whitaker (1999) had envisaged developments in digital technologies as a signal to the end of privacy. Today, citizen journalists are using social media platforms for surveillance and checking on both government officials and members of the public. They use smart phones to record and transmit events instantly to the entire world through apps like Whatsapp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

Despite the numerous advantages social media provides, some scholars have criticised the practice of citizen journalism for undermining the principles of the profession. One of these criticisms is the high potential for the dissemination of falsehood (described today as fake news), lies and fabrications published online (Allcott & Gentzkow2017; Siegel, 2008). Jin, et al.'s (2014) analysis of tweets during the Ebola crisis reveal that lies, half-truths, and rumours can spread just like true news. McNeill and Briggs (2014) also argue that though the social media can be used for the rapid spread of useful information, it can also be used for the propagation of misinformation and dangerous ideas; hence, posing a question on the credibility of information found on social media. A critical scholar on citizen journalism, Keen (2007) describes citizen journalists as morally corrupt individuals who are destroying the moral backbone of modern society. Keen (ibid) continues to argue that citizen journalism undermines the public's sense of what is true and what is false by corrupting and confusing popular opinion about everything in life which violates the basic tenets of traditional

journalism. On his part, Culbertson (2012) sees the lack of background on basic skills of journalism practice (amateurish) as a source of bias and low quality in citizen journalism.

Siegel (2008) and Hudson and Temple (2010) also express concerns about the value of professional skills, training and ethical consideration of those involved in the practice of citizen journalism. In some cases, despites debates about the quality (good or bad) of photographs provided by citizen journalists, news organisations have published these photographs because of their newsworthiness. Paulussen and D'heer (2013) posit that displaying amateur images next to images of professional journalist may lead to tension. Mortensen's (2014) findings exposed the fact that professional photojournalists may detest citizen photojournalists and usually do not understand them accurately; but, concluded that this detest is a sense of professional threat they face from citizen photojournalists.

It is argued that the presence of social media now undermines the gatekeeping power of the legacy press by deinstitutionalizing it. Oliver (1992) says deinstitutionalization is the "erosion or discontinuity of an institutionalized organizational activity or practice." Through social media, citizen journalists now have new opportunities to challenge the traditional elite journalists by not only de-professionalising but also weakening and eroding their legitimacy role over news gathering, processing and dissemination (Kreiss and Brennen, 2015). While reviewing literature on attitudes and motivation toward participatory journalism and online practices, Mart ńez (2015) reveals that journalists still want to remain the main actors of news production processes in order to keep the values of the profession. Journalists however, accept and encourage the participation of audience online. Though popular expectations hold that a large number of citizen journalists are amateur reporters with no training, Lindner et al (2015) findings proved to be contrary. From a content analysis of 326 drawn from a sampling frame of 1958 English-language citizen journalism websites based in the United States, they found current or former professional journalists as contributors. Their results also indicated a growing professionalization within the field of citizen journalism.

Though social media platforms now provide an open system for more sources of unheard voices and unseen images (Waltz, 2005), Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) think it will be an exaggeration to imagine that more sources will simply mean more truth. From this argument one therefore, needs a critical mind when consuming information and news published on social media. As a way forward, Van der Haak, Parks and Castells (2012, p.29) advised that citizen journalism's 'tools and practices may offer possibilities of the new identity of the journalist'. They emphasise the need to reconsider "ethics which acknowledges the new sociological realities of networked practices, that sometimes converge or diverge with established mainstream norms in ways that remain crucially relevant to the main public functions of journalism; namely, to inform and educate."

Social media and the spread of falsehood

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 (Moore, n.d). Moore quoted Barack Obama in November 2016 saying that "if we are not serious about facts and what's true and what's not and particularly in an age of social media when so many people are getting their information in sound bites and from their phones, if we can't discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems". Moore goes further to state that German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, has expressed similar views on the subject of fake news. Finally, Moore (n.d) noted that even the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg who had first dismissed the idea that fake news influenced the 2016 presidential elections in the USA, later published a manifesto of 5,700 words acknowledging the role of social media in promoting fake news, and proposing ways in which Facebook can help deal with it. Silverman (2016) sited in Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) confirms that there were lots of falsehoods spread on social media during the US 2016 Presidential elections with the most popular fake news stories being widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories.

Apart from the 2016 US presidential elections, research on misinformation and the spread of falsehood on social media during the recent Ebola crisis in West Africa countries revealed several widespread rumours that circulated on Twitter (Jin et al, 2014). They noted that falsehood was in the form of lies, half-truths, and rumours.

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical frames were collectively used in this paper. Observing that activists often advocate for a cause especially during crisis, the researchers used *the gate keeping, agenda setting and the framing theories* as the theoretical foundation for this paper. One cannot undermine the power of these theories in times of crisis when opposing parties are involved in promoting their plights.

Gate-keeping theory, which is credited to Lewin (1943), describes the process of filtering information for dissemination via the different mass media. It holds that there are gatekeepers in media systems who decide which item to pass and which to reject. The explanation was focused on what takes place in institutional media systems. Some

scholars have maintained that the theory still remains relevant even with the emergence of the Internet; thus, calling for the theory to be considered at the forefront of communication research (Roberts, 2005; & Soroka, 2012). Looking at the present disposition of Internet activism, it is observed that the role of editorial gatekeeping has moved away from an elite group of media owners to the audience who now publish media content online without editing as long as it is consider newsworthy (Jurrat, 2012; Taylor &   Cokley, n.d). In advocacy journalism, gatekeepers could possibly screen information and only pass on items that would help others promote their views.

The **agenda setting theory** as propounded by McCombs and Shaw (1972, p. 176) explains that "in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position." They set the 'agenda' by determining the important issues and prioritising the issues more than others. Cohen (1963, p.3) argues that the press:

> "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. The world will look different to different people, depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper they read."

In line with media controlling information, the **framing theory** asserts that people use expectations of the social world to make sense of that social world. Framing studies look at media content and audience reception and the theory is considered to be second level agenda setting (Baran & Davis, 2010). Tettah and King (2011, p. 505) say "how an idea, issue or personality is presented (framed) in the media influences how people think about that issue or personality."

The nexus amongst these three theories is that stakeholders in the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis usually have their respective agendas which they pass across to the public in a framed manner (allowing, disallowing and even fabricating certain content) which suits their interests, in a process known as gatekeeping.

Methodology

A qualitative content analysis was adopted of information circulated on WhatsApp and Facebook from October, 2016 when the lawyers strike started to January 17, 2017 when the Internet was shut down in the two Anglophone regions by government as a way of curbing the massive and rampant dissemination of falsehood via social media. WhatsApp and Facebook were chosen because they are the most used social media during the crisis and the period chosen to study them was the height of propaganda seen in the forms of agenda setting and framing During this period, proponents of the Anglophone problem in Cameroon engaged in all forms of machinations to wipe up sentiments and galvanise different sectors of the population to join in their agenda and course of action. This paid off because the Anglophone Civil Society Consortium was born (grouping Anglophones of walks of life) and later different armed groups emerged, leading to what has now been termed, the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis. The content of the information circulated on these two social media platforms constituted the unit of analysis for the study. The research employed a qualitative description of some images (still and moving pictures) as well as texts and audio clips which were distributed in relation to the crisis, to gain understanding of how falsehood was propagated.   The content of the audio and video clips were transcribed and the pictures described to explain their nature. After a careful analysis of each of the identified samples, the researchers were able to come out with justifications to explain that these samples were falsehood that were propagated on social media during this crisis.

The researchers' understanding of falsehood messages was enhanced following their adoption of a second qualitative research method known as ethnography, with a participant observation approach as part of the field research. The researchers have lived (for over four decades now) in the society that was investigated and they equally received, shared and discussed the various messages analysed in this study. So, beyond the content of the messages, the researchers understood the underlying cultural and political motivations which account for the dissemination of falsehood. Reliability and validity of this study are ensured through the presentation of evidence to prove that these samples carried elements of falsehood

Findings and Analysis

Texts, audio, videos and pictures circulated on social media (WhatsApp and Facebook) regarding police manhandling of striking Common Law Lawyers in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon on October 10, 2016. The messages concerning the strike took another twist from November 21, 2016 when the Anglophone teachers from basic to higher education joined the strike. On this same date, some youths in Bamenda, capital of the North West Region of Cameroon, took to the streets and images of youths fleeing gunshots from men in uniform also went viral. Thereafter, information and images of the strikes were distributed in an alarming proportion, with most of them containing elements of falsehood. The veracity of some of the images (pictures and videos) and information that were circulated during this

period could hardly be ascertained. It is important to state that the aim of the researchers was not to disclaim the information regarding the crisis but to understand how some of the falsehoods were propagated. On this ground, we identified some of the wildest spread messages and images that had evidence of falsehood, as follows:

Table 1. Pictorial presentation of falsehood during the crisis

No.	Distorted pictures	Original picture/falsehood evidence
1.		
2.		
3.		

4.		A screenshot Tweet of US presidential candidate, during his campaign with the message photo shopped and a new one superimposed. Most of Donald Trump's Tweets have been analysed on major media like the CNN. This never came up in any of their analysis
5.		The picture on the left was published to claim that one of the police officers who shot at youth in Bamenda was killed. It turned out days later to be a picture of a policeman who visited a prophet of God for spiritual deliverance from demons. A careful look at the picture shows the hands of the prophet pointing at the policeman.

The table above presents some of the ways falsehood was manifested in picture form and texts on social media during the crisis. Using pictorial evidence, we gathered that activists used images they got from different sources and worked on them using computer software to distort the original information by superimposing their own messages.

On item No. 1 in Table 1 above, the original message on the banner was altered from: *"The Population of Bamenda SAY NO to ghost town" to "The Population of Bamenda SAY YES to ghost town! Free Southern Cameroons".* This was meant to give the impression that the population of Bamenda was out in their numbers to support the declaration of ghost towns, especially on Mondays (known as Kontri Sundays—a traditional holiday observed in parts of the North West Region of Cameroon). The ghost town is observed every Monday till date, May 2019, in the entire English speaking Cameroon. In the original message, the population rather came out to decry ghost town activities. Here, the activists decided to prevent the original message (gatekeeping) and rather set their own agenda by creating and superimposing their own message. In the same way, a sophisticated computer software was used to crop and superimpose the "Southern Cameroons" flag, on the original flag of a terrorist organisation (Boko Haram) on item No. 2, to give an impression to Anglophone Cameroonians that they had an army to defend them and by so doing, encouraged then to resist the government forces.

Similar acts were done on item No. 3 and 4, where a young man was superimposed on a picture stoning the presidential convoy and a Twit of Current US President Donald Trump promising to grant Southern Cameroons their independence, respectively. Understanding that pictures represent a thousand words, the activists employed the strategy of distorting pictures to propagate falsehood.

Table 2. Audio-visual analysis of Falsehood during the crisis

S/N	Nature of audio-visuals	Evidence of falsehood
1.	A 1 minute 24 seconds MP4 video of man dressed in black behind a white mask was released on December 8, 2016 claiming to be warning the President of Cameroon and his government to respond to Anglophone Cameroonians without which they will release sex videos relating to the president.	The government did not comply despite the warning and the supposed organisation did not release the sex videos and also did not strike as they warned.
2.	A 36 second recorded audio clip with background sound of a crowd singing and a voice of a young man saying *("...hear teachers singing and the population singing. It is bad, they have seized all our leaders' phones and they are forcing them to sign and people are even saying that, ehm ehhh...they should kill them before they sign...hear teachers signing in the background..").* This was circulated on WhatsApp in December 2016 and it provoked mob action leading to the burning of some state properties.	A 2 minute 25 seconds recorded audio clip was released in which one of the teacher's trade union leaders, Tassang Wilfred was disclaiming rumour that they were intimidated and arrested. He said *"there has been news going wild on social media that we were beaten, that our phones were seized; no such thing happened to us..."* A video was also released in which two top Anglophone opposition leaders, John Fru Ndi and Ben Muna who stormed the meeting ground in Bamenda (where negotiations were going on between government officials and trade unionists) after receiving fake news that the teachers were held at gun point to sign a document to call off the strike. They both said they found no such evidence
33 3.	A television report of 3 minutes 25 seconds was circulated during the first week of writing of the 2016/2017 General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations claiming that some students were writing for other students (impersonation) at the Government High School (GHS) Buea accommodation centre.	The report came from a candidate who attempted to fraud the exams in another session but was caught. Those who forwarded it did not know that the teachers and Chief of Centre interviewed in that centre in relation to the incident had been transfer to another school.

The data in table 2 above analysed some audio and video clips that were circulated during the crisis to understand how falsehood was propagated and had the following findings. In the video in item No. 1 in table 2, Anglophone activists used an existing terrorist video downloaded from one of a website, muted the original message and recorded theirs over the video. This technique was achieved most especially because the speaker in the video wore a mask and one could not appreciate if the sound was synchronised with the actions on his/her lips. In item 2, the activists recorded a false message and distributed through WhatsApp creating commotion in Bamenda in particular and the entire Anglophone regions in general. From the reaction that came from one of the leaders of the teachers' trade unions, Tassang Wilfred, and the TV reports where the opposition party leaders also reacted, it is evident that the recorded message contained blatant lies in a bid to provoke Anglophone Cameroonians to react against their government. The video of a candidate caught allegedly writing for another student during the 2016/2017 session was a means to sabotage the GCE examinations, since the activists had called for total school boycott throughout the Anglophone regions. The activists had insisted that no GCE will be written in the Anglophone Regions of Cameroon and were doing everything possible to sabotage the examination. The TV report happened to be a report relating to the previous GCE session in June of 2015/2016 when the crisis had not started. The teacher and Chief of Centre interviewed in the report had long been transferred from the school (GHS Buea).

Table 3. Textual Analysis of falsehood

1.	Messages were circulated of the dead of one of the detainees, Chief Justice Ayah Paul in Prison.	Newspapers later carried stories of him disclaiming his death. He is alive and well till date (May, 2019).
2.	Information was published on an activist's blog and later circulated on WhatsApp that the Mayor of Buea, Mr. Patrick Ekema Esunge, considered by the separatists as an enemy of Southern Cameroonians (due to his anti-ghost town stance) was inflicted with paralysis.	The Mayor reacted by releasing a video of himself in good health on social media. He is alive and well till date (May, 2019).

Some of the activists were specialised in publishing fake news concerning the crisis. A case in point is that of the purported death of Justice Ayah Paul Abine in item No. 1 in table 3 above. News was later published in newspapers where Justice Abine officially denounced information that was published on social media claiming he was dead. Also the information in item 2, table 3 above exposed the activists. After publishing information that the Mayor of Buea was paralysed and in a critical health situation, the Mayor came out that same night with videos showing he was in good health.

Generally, the findings of this study denote the spread of falsehood by activists in order to reinforce resistance on Anglophone Cameroonians against the government. These findings corroborate the results of research done by Ngange and Ndode (forthcoming) on the "Role of the Media in the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis." From the content analysis of leading Anglophone newspapers in the study, most of the banner headlines (65.3%) were anti-government and in most instances, the tone of the main article was found to be pro-crisis (47%) with the central theme for all stories on the Cameroon Anglophone crisis being resistance (63.3%) and to a lesser extent Peace and Conflict Transformation (36.7%). Also, in terms of the medium that played the most negative role during the crisis, evidence from a survey of journalists in the same study suggest that the Internet played the most negative role (70.2%) during the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis followed by radio and TV. This trend is confirmed in the widespread of negative messages that circulated on social media especially WhatsApp and Facebook, as discussed above.

The social media propaganda (dissemination of distorted, partisan and untrue information) has witnessed an interesting connection between fake news producers (mostly in the diaspora) and activists on the ground who distribute and reinforce the messages. The producers of fake content usually have their armed groups (eg Ambazonia Defence Force (ADF); Southern Cameroons Defence Force (SOCADEF), Red Dragons, etc) and their representatives (most of whom are their relatives and tribesmen) who are on the ground to relay and reinforce their propaganda. All of the spokespersons (fake news producers and propagators —Chris Anu, Tapang Ivo, Mark Bareta, Eric Tataw, Mimi Mefo, Nfor Hanson, Ebenezer Akwanga, Cho Ayaba, etc) are based in Europe and the USA. They produce and report mostly unverified information to Cameroonians on the ground, using their networks. Once the messages get to the networks, they spread like wild fire and with the speed of lightening fake news is disseminated to the nooks and crannies of Cameroon. The consumers usually do not have the means and capacity to verify the authenticity of such propaganda; thus, they forward the messages as received, in ignorance and acceptance of the content. However, content users are yet to denounce fake news even after discovering the truth. Two main reasons account for this: they are either unrepentant supporters of the Ambazonia course or are too embarrassed to openly denounce falsehood which they once accepted and shared.

Government has been making efforts to inform and educate its population on the dangers of fake news in the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis. The then Cameroon Minister of Communication, Issa Tchiroma Bakari organized regular press conferences to counter some of the visible false information circulated on the media, but this had little impact on the ground because State media (CRTV), which are the main media (radio and TV) used by government, have been suffering from credibility problems in the general public, due to their pro-government stance. The Minister had become an epitome of government propaganda, largely because of his position as *"Minister of Communication and Government Spokesman."* The general tendency is that once a government loses credibility then those who communicate on its behalf also lose credibility. However, the current Minister of Communication, Rene Emmanuel Sadi, has consistently and unequivocally stated government's version of unfolding events in a way that the public is gaining better understanding of the crisis and government's efforts to resolve it, nationally and internationally. The public's understanding of the crisis is equally enhanced by the numerous failed promises of the Anglophone separatists. For instance, the Anglophone public has waited, to no avail, for the fulfillment of the promises of an imminent UN Intervention for three years now; for the declaration of the Ambazonia State with international support and recognition; and for the Separatists in the diaspora to come to ground zero (battle grounds) to physically participate in the armed struggles. In the phase of these failed promises, the trend today is that some of the separatist fighters on the ground like "General" Kawa Yannick, have abandoned the armed struggle and have now joined government's effort to portray 'Ambazonia" as an illusion to the general public.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We cannot quantitatively estimate the amount of falsehood that was disseminated in the aftermath of what has been known as the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis. The government decried that extremists used the social media to propagate falsehood. The researchers, on our part, investigated in order to understand how falsehood was propagated and identified that computer software was used to superimpose messages on already existing pictures to set an agenda and galvanise local and international support for the Independence of Ambazonia (West Cameroon).

Recorded false messages using voice notes on WhatsApp and spreading old videos not related to the crisis were other means of creating and spreading falsehood during the crisis. The idea of the video of a student caught writing for another was to sabotage the session of the GCE which Anglophone activists described as "Political GCE." They saw no reason for others writing the exams when schools were not functioning in most parts of the English speaking regions of the country.

These findings are in line with the two major theories used for the theoretical framework of this study. That is, the gatekeeping theory which explains that there are gatekeepers in media systems who decide which item to pass across and which to reject. In advocacy journalism, the gatekeepers, in this case Anglophone activists, screened information using computer software to transmit only information that would help others share their views by superimposing their own messages on the messages of their opponents. This is the case of a picture of youth matching in Bamenda with placards to decry ghost towns distorted to represent youth matching to support ghost towns in Bamenda. The agenda setting theory was also evident in this study. From the distorted information that was transmitted, one can identify the efforts made by the activists to set an agenda for their Independence due to international support like the case of the Donald Trump's tweet.

Conclusively, the evidence gathered in this research gives an understanding of how and why information on social media should be consumed with prudence and disseminated only upon the verification of the content. Since there is no embedded technology in social media platforms to verify false information, the major recommendation is that users of social media should make efforts to verify whatever information they get from the various social media platforms. Anything short of this, places the consumer and producer of such content as an accomplice of the propagation of falsehood.

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