

## Facebook and Fake News in the “Anglophone Crisis” in Cameroon

Christian Tatchou Nounkeu

To cite this article: Christian Tatchou Nounkeu (2020): Facebook and Fake News in the “Anglophone Crisis” in Cameroon, African Journalism Studies, DOI: [10.1080/23743670.2020.1812102](https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2020.1812102)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2020.1812102>



© 2020 The Author(s). Co-published by Unisa Press and Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

---



Published online: 22 Sep 2020.

---



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

---



Article views: 64

---



View related articles [↗](#)

---



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

---

# Facebook and Fake News in the “Anglophone Crisis” in Cameroon

Christian Tatchou Nounkeu

Department of Media and Communication Science, Mid Sweden University, Sweden

## ABSTRACT

Social media platforms are increasingly used by non-traditional journalists in sub-Saharan Africa for production and distribution of information. The involvement of these peripheral actors—for whom there is in reality no requirement that they adhere to professional ethics and journalistic principles—in the production and circulation of information is not without raising concerns about fake news and the quality of the information published via Facebook and Twitter accounts. This article assesses the information shared on Facebook about the anglophone crisis in Cameroon by individuals who present themselves as citizen journalists. Theoretically, we draw from the gatekeeping theory and the concept of fake news. Empirically, we use a mixed multi-method approach with both quantitative and qualitative methods. The period of analysis includes four weeks, from 15 August to 15 September 2018. The results prove that a large number of Facebook news stories lack important elements of verifiability and reliability.

## KEYWORDS

News reliability; fake news; Facebook; anglophone crisis; non-traditional actors in journalism; Mark Baretta; Cameroon

## Introduction

The spread of fake news via social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook over the last few years is increasingly raising concerns in sub-Saharan Africa countries (Wahutu 2019a). In Cameroon, for instance, it was spread in 2017 on Facebook by some citizen journalists who support the secession struggle in Cameroon that UNESCO had declared it will not recognize school certificates issued that year in the country. This is a consequence of the socio-political conflict which has been hitting the south-west and north-west regions since 2016 (Fannyuy 2017). This information was dismissed in a press release issued on 24 February 2017 by the UNESCO national commission in Cameroon (Betatinz 2017). Still on Facebook, it was circulated that the candidacy of Joshua Osih, Social Democratic Front (SDF) nominee to the 2018 presidential election in Cameroon, was rejected by the electoral commission because of his anglophone origins (Mwalimu 2018). In this case also it was all about fake news, as Joshua Osih was effectively among the nine who ran for president at the 7 October poll (Mefo 2018). These two above-mentioned cases are typical examples of several fake news stories propagated on Facebook by non-traditional

**CONTACT** Christian Tatchou Nounkeu  [christian.nounkeutatchou@miun.se](mailto:christian.nounkeutatchou@miun.se)

© 2020 The Author(s). Co-published by Unisa Press and Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

journalists in Cameroon with respect to the anglophone crisis (for more examples, see Ngange and Mokondo 2019).

In fact, the anglophone crisis refers to the conflict between separatists who call for a complete independence of the two anglophone regions of Cameroon and the government military forces fighting to maintain the unity and peace of the country (Ngange and Mokondo 2019). According to the 2020 Human Right Watch report on the anglophone crisis, over 3000 civilians and hundreds of security forces have been killed since it started in late 2016. The unrest in the two anglophone regions of Cameroon has also led to the displacement of over half a million people.

In reality, the phenomenon of fake news as it is experienced nowadays in Cameroon and worldwide rose to prominence since the Brexit referendum and Trump's 2016 campaign (Bennett and Livingston 2018). Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019: 109) argue that "in African journalism studies, pioneering work in South Africa has identified the use of social media platforms (e.g. Twitter) as tools to spread political misinformation." However, scholarship on fake news points to the fact that fake news might also emanate from mainstream media (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Carlson 2018; Wahutu 2019a).

When it comes to social media in particular, scholarly research has focused considerably on their affordability, which makes it possible for any individual to publish information and reach a mass audience (Shepherd and Shanade 2016; Hermida and Young 2019). However, studies focusing on the quality of information disseminated on social media by users in sub-Saharan Africa, especially those who claim to be citizen journalists, are very rare. There are, however, a few exceptions (see Shepherd and Shanade 2016; Ngange and Mokondo 2019).

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this article is to assess the news propagated via social media by sub-Saharan Africa citizen journalists who do not work for any news websites or mainstream media, but rather publish information exclusively on their own personal accounts. However, our study does not aim to bring up specific cases of news and prove whether or not they are fake. Rather, our empirical exploration intends to seriously interrogate the use of social media for journalistic purposes from a holistic perspective, with consideration to the fact that professional journalism ethics and principles do not obligatorily apply to social media (Shepherd and Shanade 2016). Nevertheless, we integrate that social media platforms require that information posted on their platforms should be accurate (Author 2019). Facebook, for instance, has a "war room" in Dublin to track down dubious news published on its platform.

We use as a case study the information about the anglophone crisis in Cameroon published on Facebook by Cameroonian citizen journalists. Some of the most prominent in terms of number of followers, as indicated on their Facebook pages we accessed 25 October 2019, include Tapang Ivo Tanku (6441 followers), Akoson Pauline Diale (28,626 followers), Capo Daniel (17,877 followers), Eric Tataw (3678 followers) and Mark Bareta (134,386 followers).

The following research questions will guide our investigation.

- (1) To what extent are the news published on Facebook by citizen journalists about the anglophone crisis in Cameroon reliable?
- (2) Which factors enhance/limit the publication of authentic/fabricated news on Facebook with regard to the anglophone crisis in Cameroon?
- (3) How does Facebook advance/limit the phenomenon of fake news?

## ***Social media and changing legitimacy in news journalism***

Scholars have suggested different terms to refer to non-traditional actors who practise journalism including interlopers (Eldridge 2018b), strangers (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018), peripheral (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018) and emergent actors (Eldridge 2018b). According to Eldridge (2018b: 858), interloper media refers to “a subset of digitally native media and journalistic actors who originate from outside the boundaries of the traditional journalistic field, but whose work nevertheless reflects the socio-informative functions, identities and roles of journalism”. Concretely, non-traditional journalists claim that they are driven by the ideology of serving a public good, through interpretative role and sense-making (Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch 2019).

In the same order of ideas, Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018) use the term “peripheral” to describe actors who exercise at the margins of the profession, while directly creating and distributing news. Again, Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch (2019: 21) add that peripheral journalists “strongly embrace journalistic ideals. They believe they are offering something functionally equivalent to journalism”. Nonetheless, many traditional journalists reject their claims to legitimacy and belonging to the field because of their unethical behaviours (Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch 2019). But not all peripheral journalists are concerned with ethical deviances. Consequently, those who respect the ethical norms in their work are embraced by traditional journalists (Carlson and Lewis 2015).

## **Social media posts: can this been seen as news journalism?**

Journalism is known as an organizational field with boundaries which help to identify what is news, who is a journalist and what circumscribes what journalism is (Hermida and Young 2019). When it comes to news, for instance, Kershner (2005) suggests that it is about the description of recent and significant events. For Jamieson and Campbell (1997), news refers to a new or deviant event which is presented in a dramatic manner. Ultimately, it is a journalism product (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007) expected to report the truth (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). However, Herman and Chomsky (2002) warn that news is a social construction, and therefore can be subjected to journalists’ idiosyncratic appreciations.

Nonetheless, the use of social media for production, distribution and consumption of information has challenged the traditional conceptualizations of news, journalism and journalist (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018; Singer 2019). In fact, non-traditional actors in journalism, especially citizen journalists, nowadays produce and distribute information and reach mass audiences (Wahutu 2019b). While some do it via their social media accounts (Tong 2015; Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018; Eldridge 2018b), others operate within classical formats such as blogging in mainstream media (Mare 2013).

That notwithstanding, scholars are not unanimous on whether social media posts should be seen as news. According to Tandoc (2019) and Laor and Galily (2020), “ordinary citizens” can effectively nowadays produce news through their social media accounts and personal digital platforms. Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch (2019), Wahutu (2019b) and Tandoc (2019) opine that even though citizen journalists do not fit into the traditional conceptions of journalist, it is nevertheless undeniable that they gather, process, research, report and publish news and information.

On the other hand, Mabweazara (2011) stresses that there are in principle no requirements for the information posted on social media by citizen journalists to follow the principles and ethics of professional journalism. The author clearly notes that scholars have argued that citizen journalism undermines journalism by enhancing unethical conduct and ignoring gatekeeping control. Moreover, Mabweazara (2011) evokes a “middle ground” scholarly approach, which considers that social media enhance collaborative reporting.

Altogether, Mare (2013) notes that there seems to be an agreement between scholars that social media have expanded the sphere of news production, distribution and consumption by enabling non-traditional journalists to influence the flow of information. A concrete example of this reality was the remarkable engagement of social media users in producing and sharing news during the Egyptian uprising (Mare 2013). In that order of ideas, Mabweazara (2011) opines that the introduction of mobile and social media in Zimbabwe has created another arena of news production besides that usual private and public mainstream media.

The interplay between social media and mainstream media is also evident when we consider that traditional media nowadays use social media as additional platforms for news distribution (see Hille and Bakker 2014; Ju, Jeong, and Chyi 2014; Paulussen and Harder 2014; Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015; Al-Rawi 2017; Carlson 2018). Most often than not, these professional journalists would publish their personal opinions on their Facebook pages, which might more or less diverge from their cold hard facts reporting in their traditional news outlets.

According to Robinson and DeSchanto (2011), citizen journalists particularly have been increasingly engaging in the production of news, thus disputing the exclusive connection between journalists and news. Wall (2015) adds that from blogs where they were usually operating, citizen journalists have enlarged their arenas of journalistic work on social media. Hermida (2011) points out that they now produce and distribute news to a mass audience, simply from a Facebook, Twitter or YouTube account. However, compared to Europe and the USA, citizen journalism is likely to be less popular in some sub-Saharan Africa countries like Cameroon where a high rate of illiteracy and difficulties in accessing the Internet are serious limiting factors (Nyamnjoh 2005). Nevertheless, social media are increasingly becoming important forces in other sub-Saharan Africa countries, such as Kenya (Nyabola 2018). According to Nyabola (2018), social media help tell stories further and faster without the barriers facing traditional media. In South Africa, social media and traditional media have converged to broaden the mediated public sphere within the framework of collaborative journalism practices (Mare 2013). In the same order of ideas, Moyo (2009) considers that the mainstream media and citizen journalists' social media journalism constitutes a parallel market of information. According to Moyo (2009), in many African countries, there coexist a mainstream media landscape and citizen journalists' blogs which offer to its public a significant amount of news. However, Paterson (2013) points out that most often than not, mainstream journalists in poorly resourced African newsrooms have the tendency of relaying citizen journalists' postings as news without verification.

Laor and Galily (2020) note that citizen journalists greatly emphasize autonomy and empowerment to adhere to established news values including public service and immediacy. However, the authors stress that contrarily to traditional journalists who consider

professional ethics and objectivity, citizen journalists tend to promote their personal opinions, ideologies and agendas.

## **A background of the anglophone problem in Cameroon**

Awasom (1998) argues that the colonial era between 1946 and 1961 paved the way for today's autonomist struggle. After France and Great Britain defeated Germany in World War I, Kamerun which was a German protectorate was shared among the winners. France was given 80% of the territory, while Britain got the remaining 20% which constituted the British Cameroons (Mbuagbo 2002). Years later, in 1960, the French Cameroon obtained its independence and federated in 1961 with the southern part of the British Cameroons. The Federal Republic of Cameroon was formed. This was the point of departure of the "anglophone problem" (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997). Subsequently, the federation was abandoned in 1972, and the country became a unitary state first named the United Republic of Cameroon, then later the Republic of Cameroon in 1984 (Mbuagbo 2002).

However, more than 40 years of administration unquestionably left a heritage of language and socio-political identity on populations settled in two different territories. Thus, having a unitary state with institutions integrating two different historical legacies is the challenge that has faced Cameroon (Kamé 2018). About the unitary state, Konings and Nyamnjoh (1997: 207) opine that

contrary to expectations, this did not provide for the equal partnership of both parties, let alone for the preservation of the cultural heritage and identity of each, but turned out to be merely a transition phase to the total integration of the anglophone region into a strongly centralized, unitary state. Gradually, this created an anglophone consciousness: the feeling of being "marginalized", "exploited", and even "assimilated" by the francophone dominated state and even by the francophone population as a whole.

The latest escalation in the decades-long problem started in 2016. First, the anglophone teachers and lawyers lunched a strike in the north-west and south-west regions to express their discontentment with the government's carelessness in considering the specificities of the Anglo-Saxon culture when developing policies for their respective professional fields (Amin 2018; Kamé 2018). Gradually, the malaise increased, with other segments of the anglophone community expressing concerns about what they perceived as marginalization in the country (Amin 2018). It should be noted that Cameroon is 80% French-speaking. From 2017, the crisis turned into an armed conflict, with some separatist groups taking up arms and confronting the military to request nothing less than the independence of the anglophone regions (Amin 2018).

## **The use of Facebook in the anglophone crisis**

Since 1997, the authoritarian regime of Yaoundé has increased oppression against critical anglophone activists in Cameroon, forcing many to find exile in foreign countries (Anyefru 2008). However, the development of information and communication technologies has enabled the silenced voices within Cameroon to keep on mobilizing support both in the country and in the diaspora, by communicating through various digital platforms

(Anyefru 2008). According to Anyefru (2008), the transformations in the media ecosystem and the political use of the Internet made it difficult for the Cameroonian government to control the political activists' communications. From 2016, the crisis escalated and increasingly became an armed conflict opposing the army to anglophone separatists. In this context, several citizen journalists engaged in producing and disseminating news about to the conflict on various social media platforms. While some of them are in support of the current form of the state, others strongly stand for the secessionist cause. A third category prefers a return to the federation of 1961.

In an attempt to stop the circulation of information on social media, the Cameroonian government shut down the Internet in the south-west and north-west regions (Africa News 2018; CNN 2018). The Internet blackout lasted for 280 days (Dahir 2018). That notwithstanding, after the restoration of the Internet, the "Southern Cameroons" leaders and political activists in exile continued to use digital platforms to mobilize the masses in the country, while the citizen journalists, also in exile, kept updating the local population and the diaspora with news of the battleground. Many Cameroonian citizen journalists prefer to use Facebook, which dominates the social media market share in Cameroon. According to the 2019 Internet World Stats report, about three million people in the country had a Facebook account by 31 December 2018.

### The concept of fake news

Several recent studies associate the term "fake news" with the spread of false information on social media under journalistic formats (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Bennett and Livingston 2018; Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). That is to say, the contemporary propensity of fake news cannot be separated from the development of a new media ecosystem characterized by new technologies of communication and the growing importance of social media (Moore and Tambini 2018; Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). It is also important to note that recent studies in many cases discuss the phenomenon of fake news in relation to election campaigning (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Ferrara 2017; Bennett and Livingston 2018). However, scholars suggest that fake news is also disseminated through mainstream media, especially in the United States and Europe (see Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Carlson 2018). One important aspect to consider about fake news is that the dissemination of the falsehoods is intentional (Bennett and Livingston 2018). In some cases, the motive behind the spread of fake news is financial gain through the advertising system operated by different online platforms. For others, it is all about advancing ideological and political agendas (Bennett and Livingston 2018).

The phenomenon of fake news is nothing new. For example, according to Ross and Rivers (2018), the circulation of dubious information as we experience it nowadays in our digital media context was known as "propaganda" in previous media ecologies. As a matter of fact, Guo and Vargo (2018) specify that propaganda was used in World War II to influence public opinion. Indeed, a large amount of scholarship has been dedicated to the conceptualization of "fake news". For example, it has been used in reference to satires. Satires are about comic elements in political affairs disseminated as political commentary (Ross and Rivers 2018). A prominent example of a satire program is *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Another scholarly definition connects fake news to parody, which is humour that, contrarily to satire, is not based on factual events or statements (Baym and

Jones 2013). Again, two other operationalizations of fake news that we might want to evoke include the presentation of advertising and press releases as genuine news media reports (Nelson and Park 2015) and false narratives created by intentionally doctored visual cues (Zubiaga and Ji 2014).

Finally, it is important to note that “misinformation” and “disinformation” are two concepts that are sometimes used in the same sense as “fake news”. However, there are differences in the meaning scholars attach to these terms. According to Ross and Rivers (2018), misinformation refers to the accidental sharing of false information, while disinformation is the wilful creation and spreading of information that is established to be fanciful. Yet, building on Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), Guo and Vargo (2018) argue that misinformation is information that deliberately contains inaccurate claims within its content or context.

Moreover, Bennett and Livingston (2018) suggest that the term “fake news” narrows the problem to isolated incidents of dishonesty, while the term “disinformation” describes a disturbance of the authentic information flow, resulting from systematic and strategic misleading, that may seem accurate to the consumers. This approach of Bennett and Livingston (2018) is shared by Ferrara (2017), who emphasizes that disinformation campaigns are systematic and coordinated by means of bots, the computer scripts disguised as human users which control social media accounts. That is why Bennett and Livingston (2018) use the term “disinformation order” which is a larger troublesome process, and definitely different from confined cases of fake news.

Bennett and Livingston (2018: 124) argue that caution should be observed

in adopting the term “fake news” that has become a popular media reference on grounds that it tends to frame the problem as isolated incidents of falsehood and confusion. By contrast disinformation invites looking at more systematic disruptions of authoritative information flows due to strategic deceptions that may appear very credible to those consuming them.

## **Social media: a fertile ground for the propagation of fake news**

Social media platforms are very much used for the circulation of fake news (Lazer et al. 2018). They are utilized in a consistent way to influence common belief (Ferrara 2017). Bennett and Livingston (2018) claim that this can be explained by the fact that the costs for producing content on social media are small, making them affordable to almost everyone. Consequently, fake news architects find it easier to develop small-scale strategies which can easily make profit. So, they are not concerned with constructing long-term stands for quality (Bennett and Livingston 2018). In addition, the characteristics of social media make it hard to assess the credibility of information (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018).

Furthermore, fake news prospers on social media because people are likely to share information that is in line with their political opinions, even if inaccurate. Nevertheless, research has proven that trust in information published on social media is lower than that of information disseminated by traditional outlets.

## **Gatekeeping theory**

Gatekeeping is the process by which the information is selected, events are covered, and news is disseminated by the mass media (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). Likewise, Snell-Hornby, Jettmarová, and Kaindl (1997) argue that gatekeeping is the process of controlling

how information is received and disseminated by communication channels. This task of filtering the information flow into and through the mass media is performed by gatekeepers, located at strategic areas or gates (Snell-Hornby, Jettmarová, and Kaindl 1997). According to Bruns (2005), it is possible to distinguish two main gates in the news production process in mass media, including one gate at the input stage through which news is allowed into the chain, and a gate at the output stage through which information emerges as news reports into the media outlet. Bruns (2005) further stresses that, while gatekeeping at the input level is often motivated by the willingness to offer a clear and important information to the public, the one at the output stage most often follows routines, political and commercial considerations of individual journalists and their employers. As a matter of fact, White (1950: 390), has proved “how highly subjective, how based on the gatekeeper’s own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations, the communication of ‘news’ really is”. On its part, Geiber (1964) emphasizes instead on factors external to the editor such as mechanical pressures in media organizations which guide the process of gatekeeping. For Breed (1955), gatekeeping points out to policies set by the publishers and which are kindly followed by reporters.

All the same, the advent of the Internet and particularly social media has imposed a reconsideration of the whole idea of how news is selected, processed and distributed. Indeed, with the introduction of the Internet, it is possible for anyone to become a publisher, since the web offers access to the communication channel to everyone and gives the opportunity to disseminate media content at a cheap cost (Bruns 2005), although this might not be totally true for many sub-Saharan Africa countries where the Internet is still not accessible to everyone (Nyamnjoh 2005), despite some remarkable improvements (Ndlela and Mano 2020). Anyway, Bro and Wallberg (2014) reveal that the introduction of social media has positioned friends, family members and relatives as the last gatekeepers to individuals they are familiar with in private or professional life, instead of professional news reporters, who work for news outlets and follow particular news values and ground rules. Again, Bro and Wallberg (2014) opine that this “new generation” of gatekeepers definitely have their own understanding of news values and which information they want to share in their social network. In that sense, “the rise and reach of social media have challenged editorial decisions about what to select and reject as news stories” (Bro and Wallberg 2014: 453).

Moreover, in the new media ecology characterized by the rise in prominence of online news production, Bruns (2005) evokes *gatematching* as an alternative approach to online news coverage which can complement or simply substitute the traditional gatekeeping practice in news media. The idea of gatematching builds on the opinion that the Internet with regard to its characteristics enables the bypassing of free dissemination of news through editorial and access restrictions (Bruns 2005). Also, Bruns (2005: 13) notes that

digital storage and transmission have massively expanded space and time available for media content, to a point where from the producer’s point of view bandwidth restrictions become irrelevant, while at the same time greater access to the means of media production has significantly enabled more users to become producers and publishers of media content.

Truly, the distribution of news on social media obeys dynamics which are different from those of print and broadcast media, and consequently the gates kept by news organizations have now been overcome (Bruns 2005).

## Method

This study uses a mixed multi-method approach with both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. In addition, we use ethnography with participant observation to understand examine the information the news published on Facebook about the Cameroon anglophone crisis by Cameroonian citizen journalists. We select for analysis Mark Baretta because he has the highest number of followers and therefore is expected to have the biggest impact in terms of audience reach. It should be noted that Mark Baretta also owns a news blog called *Baretanews*.

In addition to introducing himself on his Facebook page as a citizen journalist, Mark Baretta also states that he is “Southern Cameroon’s political activist” who supports the struggle for the recognition of the “Southern Cameroons” (Ambazonia) as an independent country. Since 2016 when the anglophone crisis started, Mark Baretta has been publishing regularly on his Facebook page straight news, opinion pieces and readers’ contributions, exclusively about the conflict. Furthermore, he conducts interviews, moderates debate panels and presents talk shows, all live from his Facebook page. More often than not, these events are interactive as followers are given the opportunity to call and share their viewpoints.

For this study, we will analyse only straight news stories. The selection was done manually from Mark Baretta’s Facebook page. Only stories of more than one paragraph were selected for analysis. Our unit of analysis is a single news story. The period of analysis includes four weeks, from 15 August 2018 to 15 September 2018. This period was chosen randomly, and there was nothing particular happening at that time. Therefore, we can argue that we picked for analysis news stories which were not influenced in tone and style by news-special circumstances. In total we selected 133 straight news stories.

In order to assess the news produced and disseminated on Facebook by Mark Baretta, we used a common approach which consists of “considering traditional journalistic standards as forming part of the core, and then using these traditional standards that have dominated journalism to evaluate non-traditional actors” (Tandoc 2019: 140). In fact, scholars in the field have suggested several aspects to consider when it comes to appreciating the reliability of news, including fairness, depth of the information, accuracy, objectivity, bias, completeness, believability, trustworthiness, expertise and dynamism, among others (see Infante 1980; Sundar 1996; Johnson and Kaye 1998, 2000; Flanagin and Metzger 2000; Kiousis 2001).

These scholarly suggestions have three dimensions in common, including accuracy, believability and trustworthiness. We operationalize “accuracy” by the presence/absence of factual information in the news, which provide clear indications about the space and time of a happening, as well as who/what was involved (Flanagin and Metzger 2000). With respect to “believability” we operationalized it by the presence/absence of visual cues which contribute to corroborate the news (Johnson and Kaye 2000). Concerning “trustworthiness” we operationalized it by the presence/absence of sources in the news story (Sundar 1996).

## Coding categories

A code book and code instructions were developed to guide the coding. The coding was carried out by two coders. The code sheet focused on capturing the type of sources used

in the news stories, the visual cues and the details about when and where the event happened. For coding the sources mentioned in the news stories, the coders could choose between (1) identified source, (2) anonymous source, and (3) no source mentioned. For coding the use of corroborative visual cues, the coders could choose between (1) actual picture of the event, (2) archive picture for illustration purpose, (3) actual video of the event, (4) archive video for illustration purpose, and (5) no visual cue. For coding the details of time and location, the coders had to answer yes or no to the following questions: (1) Is there indication in the story about when it happened? (2) Is there indication in the story about where it happened?

An intercoder reliability test was carried out before the final content analysis report on 10% of the total number of articles randomly selected. The intercoder reliability was calculated at 0.90 using Cohen's Kappa formula.

## Results

The results show that of 133 news stories, 79 did not contain any reference to the sources. This is problematic, as the attribution of sources is central to credibility in news journalism (Manning 2001). According to Manning (2001), it is all about transparency in the processes involved in the making of news. It ensures on the one hand that outputs of manipulative skills are not distributed to the audience, and on the other hand that the arguments or perspectives provided by the sources will not be misrepresented. Stories published without reference to sources might not reflect the ideal conception of citizen or participatory journalism which commends the collection of "information relevant to a citizen or a community and to objectively report on that information for dissemination to citizens, using any number of tools of transmission" (Tanya 2010: 269). As Grabe, Zhou, and Barnett (1999: 293) put it, "news-making begins with news sources".

This concern is also applicable to the 33 news stories in which it was mentioned that the information was provided by "sources who witnessed the events", but without either disclosing their identities, indicating why they were pertinent as sources, or labelling them as anonymous. We might want to believe that distance from the scene of events and the political inclination of the citizen journalist might be a determinant in this tendency for poor-quality information. However, as Wasserman (2020: 7) opines, "News—whether 'fake' or 'real'—should not be understood outside of its particular contexts of production and consumption" and information disseminated online might ultimately serve a "propaganda war fought via social media". For a healthy communication of information to readers, these considerations should be "at the heart" of journalistic work (Manning 2001: 1). If sources must be above all credible (Dunwoody and Ryan 1987), a story without transparent indications about sources is even more unreliable (Boeyink 1990).

Moreover, our data show that in 21 stories, it was clearly stated that the information was provided by anonymous sources. However, it was not indicated if those anonymous sources witnessed the events themselves, or they learned about them from other persons. All the same, there is hardly a consensus concerning the use of anonymous sources in news journalism. This is because anonymous source credibility per se is more of an assumption than a judgement to be made (Dunwoody and Ryan 1987), added to the fact that the norms surrounding the use of unnamed attributions became crystallized following the scandals that revolved around the practice from the 1980s to the 2000s

(Duffy 2014). This reality has prompted critics and controversies around the press abuses of anonymous sources (Boeyink 1990).

The problems of sourcing revealed by our results suggest some interrogations. Can this be a consequence of the fact that the citizen journalist is on exile and cannot by himself gather the information on the battle ground? Does this simply underline a lack of professionalism in news processing, or just a deliberate dissemination of personal opinions which should not be considered as news? In all cases, Shepherd and Shanade (2016) state that although professional journalism ethics need not apply to social media, it is nevertheless possible to control social media journalism through peer-to-peer monitoring and reprisals.

In addition, the results demonstrate that the news stories were largely not accompanied by any corroborating visual cue. In fact, out of 133 news stories, 90 had no picture or video at all. This result is very significant when we consider the importance of visual cues for consolidating accuracy in crisis news reporting. As Wasserman (2020: 5) puts it, this shows the “tendency for social media in particular to fuel unverified reports, rumours and dubious content because of the fact-checking mechanism or editorial filters”. In that sense, Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2013: 963) opine that,

in adhering to the norms of detached and objective reporting, journalistic claims to truth-telling are based on an asserted fidelity to the “real” world enabled by particular news practices—among which the journalistic presence (“being there”) together with the use of news images are key.

However, it is clear that the recent introduction of smartphones with photo-manipulation features has seriously undermined the established belief that pictures always depict reality. Journalistic norms about accuracy still rely on the image and video footage as evidentiary proof of bodily presence that corroborates texts (Andén-Papadopoulos 2013).

Furthermore, our results show that 93 news stories did not indicate either when or where the events happened. Moreover, 11 news stories were written without any details at all concerning both time and space. These findings raise concern about the veracity and verifiability of the news. Assuredly, news is understood as an account of events that influence people in a considerable manner (Richardson 2007). Therefore, its reliability is inevitably based on factual foundations such as indications of time and space which can be verified (Gaziano and McGrath 1986; Kioufis 2001). That is why Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) point out that information which is however conveyed, in whichever format and on whatever platform, without being fully supported by factual evidence might be associated with fake news.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to assess the news produced and published by citizen journalists on Facebook. Our content analysis of the news propagated by Mark Baretta with regard to the anglophone crisis in Cameroon demonstrated that the stories lacked basic elements of reliability and verifiability. As a matter of fact, the news stories hardly contained clear information about the sources, visual cues to corroborate the texts and factual details such as where and when the events covered happened. Indeed, Sundar

(1998) argues that an online story with quotes is largely higher in credibility than the same story without quotes. Therefore, we argue that the news published by Mark Baretta is questionable from the viewpoint of reliability. This conclusion inspires a couple of reflections.

First, it is important for effective and sincere journalistic work that citizen journalists report on issues they are in the position to witness themselves or verify the truthfulness of account sources. That is why Hermida (2011) and Jewitt (2009) insist that citizen journalists circulate on social media information, photos, narratives and videos about events they witness first-hand.

Furthermore, a journalist (citizen or mainstream) who supports one party in a conflict or a political dispute is likely to be influenced in his or her coverage by considerations other than the desire to provide an objective account to the public. It is in that sense that White (1950) talks about the vulnerability of news to journalists' preferences. And when, in addition, the citizen journalist also presents himself as a political activist, the risk of confusing the two roles is non-negligible. In reality, several studies have demonstrated that the creation and propagation of fake news is more often than not motivated either by financial profit or the objective of advancing political agendas (Bennett and Livingston 2018). Again, Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) mentioned that the fabrication of news stories has also been described as fake news by scholars in the field. In the same approach, Guo and Vargo (2018) connected this practice to propaganda. In addition, research has proven that non-partisan media outlets publishing balanced stories are more reliable than partisan media outlets publishing imbalanced information to favour one side or the other on a given problem (Fico, Richardson, and Edwards 2004).

Moreover, in contrast to traditional journalists, citizen journalists propagating news through their social media accounts are not subjected to gatekeeping processes involving different actors. In fact, a citizen journalist publishing news on his Facebook account, for example, is the only one to decide what to spread and what not to spread. Meanwhile, in the case of traditional media, it is possible to distinguish two main gates in the news production process, including one gate at the input stage through which news is allowed into the chain, and a gate at the output stage through which information emerges as news reports into the media outlet (Bruns 2005). In consideration to the above-mentioned argument, we might want to agree with Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) that social media paves the way for the dissemination of wrong information such as fake news.

Again, the affordability of social media and especially Facebook facilitates the spread of fake news or at least the circulation of very poor-quality news. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017: 211) opine that "social media platforms such as Facebook have a dramatically different structure than previous media technologies. Content can be relayed among users with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgement". In addition, Bennett and Livingston (2018) point out that the costs for producing content on social media are small, making them affordable to almost everyone. But care should be taken to not systematically generalize the Western experience. In sub-Saharan Africa, even though there is a remarkable rise in the use of smartphones and mobile Internet (Ndlela and Mano 2020), it is nevertheless clear that new information and communications technologies and the Internet are still not accessible to the large majority (Nyamnjoh 2005).

That said, this study is limited to news stories published on the Facebook page of a citizen journalist with regard to the anglophone crisis in Cameroon. Considering the

insufficiency of research focusing on non-traditional actors in journalism and the problem of fake news, future studies will be necessary to add to our knowledge. In the same order of ideas, more cross-national studies will be useful to capture how eventual differences/similarities can be connected to media systems or contexts.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## References

- Africa News. 2018. "Cameroon Government Sued over Internet Shutdown in Anglophone Regions". <https://www.africanews.com/2018/01/25/Cameroon-govt-sued-over-internet-shutdown-in-anglophone-regions/>.
- Al-Rawi, A. 2017. "News values on social media: news Organizations' Facebook use". *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 18 (7): 871–889.
- Allcott, H., and M. Gentzkow. 2017. "Social media and fake news in the 2016 election". *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31 (2): 211–236.
- Amin, J.A. 2018. "President Paul Biya and Cameroon's Anglophone crisis: now is the time for bold action". *History Faculty Publications* 142. [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst\\_fac\\_pub/142](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub/142).
- Anyefru, E. 2008. "Cyber-nationalism: the imagined Anglophone Cameroon community in cyberspace". *African Identities* 6 (3): 253–274.
- Andén-Papadopoulos, K., and M. Pantti. 2013. "Re-imagining Crisis Reporting: Professional Ideology of Journalists and Citizen Eyewitness Images". *Journalism* 14 (7): 960–977.
- Awasom, F.N. 1998. "Colonial background to the development of autonomist tendencies in Anglophone Cameroon, 1946–1961". *Journal of Third World Studies; Americus* 15 (1): 163–183.
- Baym, G., and J.P. Jones. 2013. *News Parody and Political Satire Across the Globe*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Benkler, Y., R. Faris, and H. Roberts. 2018. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, W.L., and S. Livingston. 2018. "The disinformation order: disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions". *European Journal of Communication* 33 (2): 122–139.
- Betatinz. 2017. "Unesco Releases New Statement Concerning Academic Year in Cameroon". <https://www.betatinz.com/2017/02/unesco-blank-school-year-cammeroon-html/>.
- Boeyink, D.E. 1990. "Anonymous sources in news stories: justifying exceptions and limiting abuses". *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 5 (4): 233–246.
- Breed, W. 1955. "Social control in the newsroom: a functional analysis". *Social Forces* 33 (4): 326–335.
- Bro, P., and F. Wallberg. 2014. "Digital gatekeeping: news media versus social media". *Digital Journalism* 2 (3): 446–454.
- Bruns, A. 2005. *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Carlson, M. 2018. "Facebook in the news: social media, journalism and public responsibility following the 2016 trending topics controversy". *Digital Journalism* 6 (1): 4–20.
- Carlson, M., and S.C. Lewis. 2015. *Boundaries of Journalism: Professionalism, Practices and Participation*. London: Routledge.
- CNN. 2018. "Cameroon Goes Offline After Anglophone Revolt". <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/03/Africa/internet-shutdown-cameroon/index.html>.
- Dahir, A.L. 2018. "African Countries Disrupt Internet Connectivity more than Anywhere Else". <https://qz.com/africa/1468491/africa-internet-shutdowns-grow-longer-in-cameroon>.
- Duffy, M.J. 2014. "Anonymous sources: a historical review of the norms surrounding their use". *American Journalism* 31 (2): 236–261.
- Dunwoody, S., and M. Ryan. 1987. "The credible scientific source". *Journalism Quarterly* 64 (1): 21–27.
- Eldridge II, S.A. 2018b. "'Thank god for deadspin': interlopers, metajournalistic commentary, and fake news through the lens of 'journalistic realization'". *New Media and Society* 21 (4): 856–878.

- Fannyuy, L. 2017. "Unesco Declares a Blank School Year in Cameroon". <https://ambaland.com/unesco-declares-a-blank-school-year-in-cameroon-but-minister-of-secondary-and-basic-educations-d/>.
- Ferrara, E. 2017. "Disinformation and social bots operations in the run up to the 2017 French presidential election". *First Monday* 22 (8). doi:10.5210/fm.v22i8.8005.
- Fico, F., J.D. Richardson, and S.M. Edwards. 2004. "Influence of story structure on perceived story bias and news organization credibility". *Mass Communication and Society* 7 (3): 301–318.
- Flanagin, A.J., and M.J. Metzger. 2000. "Perceptions of internet information credibility". *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 77 (3): 515–540.
- Gaziano, C., and K. McGrath. 1986. "Measuring the concept of credibility". *Journalism Quarterly* 63 (3): 451–462.
- Geiber, W. 1964. "News is What Newspapermen Make It". In *People, Society and Mass Communications*, edited by Lewis Anthony Dexter, and David Manning White. New York: Macmillan. 173–180.
- Grabe, M.E., S. Zhou, and B. Barnett. 1999. "Sourcing and reporting in news magazine programs: 60 minutes versus hard copy". *J and MC Quarterly* 76 (2): 293–311.
- Guo, L., and C. Vargo. 2018. "'Fake news' and emerging online media ecosystem: an integrated inter-media agenda-setting analysis of the 2016 U.S. presidential election". *Communication Research* 00 (0): 1–23.
- Herman, E., and N. Chomsky. 2002. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Knopf Doubleday.
- Hermida, A. 2011. "'Fluid Spaces, Fluid Journalism.' The Role of the 'Active Recipient' in Participatory Journalism". In *Participatory Journalism: Guardian Open Gates at Online Newspapers*, edited by B. Singer Jane, Domingo David, Ari Heinonen, Alfred Hermida, Steve Paulussen, Thorsten Quandt, Reich Zvi, and Vujnovic Marina. Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons. 177–191.
- Hermida, A., and M.L. Young. 2019. "From peripheral to integral? A digital-born journalism not for profit in a time of crises". *Media and Communication* 7 (4): 92–102.
- Hille, S., and P. Bakker. 2014. "Engaging the social news user: comments on news sites and Facebook". *Journalism Practice* 8 (5): 563–572.
- Holton, A., and V. Belair-Gagnon. 2018. "Strangers to the game? Interlopers, intralopers and shifting news production". *Media and Communication* 6 (4): 70–78.
- Infante, D.A. 1980. "The construct validity of semantic differential scales for the measurement of source credibility". *Communication Quarterly* 28 (2): 19–26.
- Jamieson, K.H., and K. Campbell. 1997. *The Interplay of Influence: News, Advertising, Politics and the Mass Media*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Jewitt, R. 2009. "The trouble with twittering: integrating social media into mainstream news". *International Journal of Media and Culture Politics* 5 (3): 233–246.
- Johnson, T.J., and B.K. Kaye. 1998. "Cruising is believing?: Comparing internet and traditional sources on media credibility measures". *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75 (2): 325–340.
- Johnson, T.J., and B.K. Kaye. 2000. "Using is believing: the influence of reliance on the credibility of online political information among politically interested internet users". *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 77 (4): 865–879.
- Ju, A., S.H. Jeong, and H.I. Chyi. 2014. "Will social media save newspapers? Examining the effectiveness of Facebook and Twitter as news platforms". *Journalism Practice* 8 (1): 1–17.
- Kamé, B.P. 2018. *The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon*. Paris: L' Harmattan.
- Kershner, J.W. 2005. *The Elements of News Writing*. Boston, MA: Pearson Allyn.
- Kiousis, S. 2001. "Public trust or mistrust? Perceptions of media credibility in the information age". *Mass Communication and Society* 4 (4): 381–403.
- Konings, P., and F.B. Nyamnjoh. 1997. "The Anglophone problem in Cameroon". *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 35 (2): 207–229.
- Kovach, B., and T. Rosenstiel. 2007. *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Laor, T., and Y. Galily. 2020. "Offline vs online: attitude and behaviour of journalists in social media era". *Technology in Society* 61: 1–9.

- Lazer, D.M., M.A. Baum, Y. Benkler, J.A. Berinsky, K.M. Greenhill, F. Menczer, J.M. Metzger, et al. 2018. "The science of fake news". *Science* 359 (6380): 1094–1096.
- Mabweazara, H.M. 2011. "Between the newsroom and the pub: the mobile phone in the dynamics of everyday mainstream journalism practice in Zimbabwe". *Journalism* 12 (6): 692–707.
- Manning, P. 2001. *News and News Sources: A Critical Approach*. London: SAGE.
- Mare, A. 2013. "A complicated but symbiotic affair: the relationship between mainstream media and social media in the coverage of social protests in Southern Africa". *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 34 (1): 83–98.
- Mbuagbo, O.T. 2002. "Cameroon: exploiting Anglophone identity in state deconstruction". *Social Identities* 8 (3): 431–438.
- Mefo, M.T. 2018. "Joshua Osih Writes After His Candidacy File was Validated by ElecCam Today". <https://www.facebook.com/MimiMefoTakoumbou/>
- Moore, M., and D. Tambini. 2018. *Digital Dominance: The Power of Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moyo, D. 2009. "Citizen journalism and the parallel market of information in Zimbabwe's 2008 elections". *Journalism Studies* 10 (4): 551–567.
- Mwalimu, M.K.P. 2018. "Joshua Osih and Akere Muna's Files Rejected by ElecCam Among Aspiring Oct 7 Presidential Candidates". <https://www.facebook.com/McMuaPaul/>
- Ndlela, M., and W. Mano. 2020. "The Changing Face of Election Campaigning in Africa". In *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 1*, edited by Martin Ndlela, and Wilston Mano. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 1–12.
- Nelson, M., and J. Park. 2015. "Publicity as covert marketing? The role of persuasion knowledge and ethical perceptions on beliefs and credibility in a video news release story". *Journal of Business Ethics* 130 (2): 327–341.
- Ngange, K.L., and M.S. Mokondo. 2019. "Understanding social media's role in propagating falsehood in conflict situations: case of the Cameroon Anglophone crisis". *Studies in Media and Communication* 7 (2): 55–67.
- Nyabola, N. 2018. *Digital Democracy, Analog Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya*. London: Zed Books.
- Nyamnjoh, F.B. 2005. *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Paterson, C. 2013. "Journalism and social media in the African context". *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 34 (1): 1–6.
- Paulussen, S., and R.A. Harder. 2014. "Social media references in newspapers: Facebook, Twitter and Youtube as sources in newspaper journalism". *Journalism Practice* 8 (5): 542–551.
- Richardson, B. 2007. *The Process of Writing News: From Information to Story*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Robinson, S., and C. DeSchano. 2011. "'Anyone can know': citizen journalism and the interpretative community of the mainstream press". *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 12 (8): 963–982.
- Ross, A.S., and D.J. Rivers. 2018. "Discursive deflection: accusation of 'fake news' and the spread of mis- and disinformation in the tweets of president Trump". *Social Media + Society* 4 (2): 1–12.
- Schapals, A.K., P. Maares, and F. Hanusch. 2019. "Working on the margins: comparative perspectives on the roles and motivations of peripheral actors in journalism". *Media and Communication* 7 (4): 19–30.
- Shepherd, M., and B.B. Shanade. 2016. "Citizen journalism and moral panics: a consideration of ethics in the 2015 South African xenophobic attacks". *African Journalism Studies* 37 (4): 115–136.
- Shoemaker, P.J., and T.P. Vos. 2009. *Gatekeeping Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Singer, J.B. 2019. "Populist post-modernism: when cultural critique of an enlightenment occupation goes viral". *Media and Communication* 7 (4): 133–137.
- Skogerbø, E., and A.H. Krumsvik. 2015. "Newspapers, Facebook and Twitter: intermedial agenda-setting in local election campaigns". *Journalism Practice* 9 (3): 350–366.
- Snell-Hornby, M., Z. Jettmarová, and K. Kaindl. 1997. *Translation as Intercultural Communication*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Sundar, S.S. 1996. "Do Quotes Affect Perception of Online News Stories?" Paper Presented to the Communication Technology and Policy Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Anaheim, Calif.
- Sundar, S.S. 1998. "Effect of source attribution on perception of online news stories". *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75 (1): 55–68.
- Tandoc Jr., E.C. 2019. "Journalism at the periphery". *Media and Communication* 7 (4): 138–143.
- Tandoc Jr., E.C., Z.W. Lim, and R. Ling. 2018. "Defining 'fake news': a typology of scholarly definitions". *Digital Journalism* 6 (2): 137–153.
- Tanya, B. 2010. "Digital journalism and online public spheres in South Africa". *Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research* 36 (2): 265–275.
- Tong, J. 2015. "Chinese journalists' views of user-generated content producers and journalism: a case study of the boundary work of journalism". *Asian Journal of Communication* 25 (6): 600–616.
- Wahutu, J.S. 2019a. "Fake news and journalistic 'rules of the game'". *African Journalism Studies* 40 (4): 13–26. doi:10.1080/23743670.2019.1628794.
- Wahutu, J.S. 2019b. "Prophets without honor: peripheral actors in Kenyan journalism". *Media and Communication* 7 (4): 127–132.
- Wall, M. 2015. "Citizen journalism: a retrospective on what we know, an agenda for what we don't". *Digital Journalism* 3 (6): 797–813.
- Wasserman, H., and D. Madrid-Morales. 2019. "An exploratory study of 'fake news' and media trust in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa". *African Journalism Studies* 40 (1): 107–123.
- White, D.M. 1950. "The 'gate keeper': a case study in the selection of news". *Journalism Quarterly* 27 (4): 383–390.
- Zubiaga, A., and H. Ji. 2014. "Tweet, but verify: epistemic study of information verification on Twitter". *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 4 (1): 163.