



**FAKE NEWS AND RUMORS ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN CAMEROON'S 2018
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: ANALYZING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN
THE POST-TRUTH ERA**

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ABSTRACT: *The rise of social media networks and their increasingly significant role in democratic life, epitomized by uprisings like the Arab Spring (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013), have revived hopes for democratization from below and the lively participation of the general population to produce dynamic system change. However, while social media allows for increased political awareness, it often inadvertently supports disseminating fake news and rumors that interfere with political reality. This article examines the most popular fake news stories, and rumors circulated during the 2018 presidential election in Cameroon through social media analytics. This research showcases the importance of homophily and echoes chambers in disseminating information on different political digital networks in Cameroon, revealing how fake news spread quickly during the campaign. Nevertheless, this research also shows that while specific fake news stories and rumors were not deemed plausible by the general public, they nevertheless shaped public perceptions and succeeded in maintaining the ruling party's political dominance, underscoring the profound impact of misinformation on public opinion and political control.*

KEYWORDS: Fake News, Rumors, Homophily, Echo Chambers, Digital Networks, Social Media Analytics, Cameroon, Elections.



INTRODUCTION

The Context

While many anthropological studies show that electoral practices were quite widespread in some traditional African societies (Gluckman, 2006), elections in contemporary Africa are proven to be more controversial than in other parts of the world (Makulilo & Henry, 2017; Bleck & Van de Walle, 2019). Moving beyond debates on the process itself, elections remain a critical barometer for gauging both the nature of a regime and the quality of political life in a country. For years, the analysis of African politics has been dominated by transitology, a methodological approach that aims to produce a rational assessment of the standard deviation between the actual situation of African regimes and democratic ideals (Dufy & Thiriot, 2013)¹. As such, one of the central ideas that has permeated the study of politics on the continent is that for democracy to prevail, the narrative of political events should be enshrined in truth. This emphasis on the importance of truth in political narratives invokes a sense of justice and integrity in the audience, highlighting the gravity of the issue. It underscores the need for truth in political narratives, a value crucial for maintaining political communication's integrity. According to the French thinker, Michel Foucault, in a 1977 interview, every society has its own system of truth, including its general politics of truth. This system encompasses the types of discourse considered accurate and allowed to function, the mechanisms and institutions that determine true and false statements, the authorization of these determinations, the methods and processes valued in the pursuit of truth, and the status of those responsible for determining what is considered accurate (Bhattarai, 2020). The post-truth era is a social dynamic where emotions and the feeling of "truth" take precedence over factual analysis and rational methods in political discourse (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019).

The rise of social media and its subsequent impact on democratic life, particularly during key political moments in recent history like the Arab Springs (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013), have revived hopes for democratization from below and the positive participation of the general population in order to produce dynamic system change. Nevertheless, while social media allows for increased political awareness, it also often inadvertently supports the dissemination of fake news and rumors that interfere with political reality. This troubling dimension associated with social media, particularly its impact in Africa, has received increasing attention from scholars (Garbe et al., 2023; Fombad, 2022; Wasseman, 2020; Mare et al., 2019) because the practice is increasing.²

¹ See works from Schmitter P., Guilhot N., and "From Transition to Consolidation. Extending the Concept of Democratization and the Practice of Democracy", in Dobry M. (dir.), *Democratic and Capitalist Transitions in Eastern Europe. Lessons for the Social Sciences*, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 2000, p. 131-146.

² According to Samba Dialimpa-Badji, editor of the French-language version of *Africacheck*, an organization that verifies facts and information, fake news is increasingly present in Africa, particularly during election periods. This was the case in Kenya in 2017, Cameroon in 2018, and even Nigeria and Senegal in 2019. His interview on this subject can be found at the link: <http://www.rfi.fr/emission/emission/20190223-fake-news-afrique-pays-connectes-phenomene-ampleur> page accessed on February 22, 2019. Mwendu Maweu (2019) offers a quite interesting overview on the impact of Fake news in the 2017 Kenyans General Elections for example.



The Issue

This article analyzes the role and impact of rumors and fake news during Cameroon's presidential election in October 2018. At the time, Cameroon was ranked 105th among the world's democracies by the Economist Intelligence Unit with a score of 3.61, which places it in the category of authoritarian regimes³. On the eve of the presidential election, the country was led by President Paul Biya. In 2018, after 36 consecutive years in power and at 85, Biya began his seventh term of office for seven years. His political party, the Cameroonian People Democratic Movement (CPDM), is at the helm of all elected institutions. Since the return of multiparty politics in Cameroon in 1990, the ruling party has not lost an election and has the particularity of improving its score during each election. Nevertheless, most knowledgeable observers remain hopeful that social media could influence the political sphere and future elections. Thus, this research seeks to answer the following question: In the context of a political decision, are tactics like fake news, rumors, and smear campaigns persuasive enough to reverse the curve of democratic choice? Since political issues on the African continent and in Cameroon, in particular, are often seen through the prism of the organizational effectiveness of the elections (Long, 2013), it can be difficult to assess the outcome of an election using a single factor. However, this article contributes to the growing analysis of the political climate in Cameroon by focusing on discursive elements and the assessment of the persuasion logic based on the fake news and rumors disseminated during the presidential elections in 2018 Cameroon, hence increasing the understanding of the reality of the political discourse in that country.

In order to address our primary research objective, this article will first present the theoretical framework and appropriate methodological approach required for such research. The first section outlines the nature of rumors and fake news, the dynamics of their evolution in social media, and the methods adopted to analyze them better. Then, the analytical corpus, composed of a list of rumors and fake news, will be examined. These fake news stories and rumors were selected based on their influence as assessed through social media analytics. The following section then focuses on the role and responsibilities of the main actors in disseminating these stories and, above all, the attempt to impact public opinion. The last section highlights the structural limits of the influence of fake news.

I- Social Media: Reinventing Tools for Spreading Rumors and Fake News

This section outlines the specificity of commonly used terms like fake news, rumors, and social media to better define these concepts before examining their instrumentalization in the 2018 elections.

Social media platforms can be broadly defined as applications that allow users to create, manipulate, and disseminate content with as much real-time interaction as possible (McCay-Peet & Quand-Haase, 2017). Social media networks have blurred Spatio-temporal boundaries by shaping information's ubiquity through increased multi-sharing and enhanced one-to-many data exchange. These new channels for disseminating information have also changed how journalists work by increasing the challenges associated with credibility when processing information (Pathak, 2018). According to the online newspaper *Afrique Libre*, social media

³ This organization uses 60 different criteria to classify countries into four types: full democracies, imperfect democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes.



dominated news about Cameroon's presidential election. Further complicating matters is that "social media" is a catchall phrase used to refer to many applications. For this research, however, our analysis focuses mainly on Facebook pages and forums since it is the most used social media network in Cameroon.⁴

Undoubtedly, the Internet has transformed the media landscape, creating a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional ecosystem for those who wish to spread fake news (Latzko-Toth, 2018). Like the term "social media," "fake news" has become omnipresent in popular and political culture and has increasingly taken a polysemic turn. Most recently, fake news has acquired a particular appeal in the political arena with the election of Donald J. Trump, who has engaged in a rhetorical war that has branded the media as proponents of fake news (Farkas & Schou, 2018; 2020). However, fake news also seems to be an invention of the economic world. The term "fake news" was first popularized by Canadian journalist, Craig Silverman (2016), and can be defined as false or misleading information that is presented as accurate with the stated intention of misleading recipients (Gelfert, 2018; Tandoc Jr et al., 2018). For years, companies have been manufacturing and even promoting fake news by funding research that produces counterfeit data on the impact of cigarettes on cancer rates or the dangers of sugar for the human body, amongst others (Rabin-Havt, 2016).

Since manipulating information is often associated with concrete attempts to undermine democracy (Morgan, 2018), the intention is a significant factor that must be considered when examining fake news. In other words, a clear distinction must be made between deception through ignorance (misinformation) and intentional deception (disinformation) (Kumar & Shah, 2018; Cooke, 2018). It is the latter aspect that interests us here. One would think that the vague, undeveloped, or simply implausible nature of certain information posed as the news would raise the average Internet user's suspicions. However, research shows that people are incredibly gullible when faced with fake news (Kumar et al., 2016). For example, some studies relying on the analysis of psychological factors that reinforce fake news dynamics demonstrate that people perceive an information source is reliable if others also perceive it as credible. This type of influence drives those who intend to manipulate data to create bot accounts, which spread the source across social networks and reinforce the false impression that this seemingly credible information is being widely disseminated (Shao et al., 2017). This situation is amplified in a context where information is distributed with little detail provided on sources. The other key aspect to understanding the spread of fake news is the frequency heuristic, which shows that people will naturally be sympathetic to information they frequently hear, even when it is fake (Del Vicario et al., 2016). Social media also seems to have exacerbated this vulnerability, meaning that false information may substantially influence elections more than actual news (Silverman, 2016). Moreover, François-Bernard Huyghe (2018) posits that fake news stems from a reappropriation of information by receivers who choose versions of reality that conform to their prejudices.

On the other hand, rumors are unconfirmed social facts that spread on a large scale in a short time. DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) define rumors as unverified and instrumentally relevant

⁴ Statistics show that Facebook is by far the most used social media platform in Cameroon with 91.66% of users. However, the network use dropped in October 2018 (the month of the presidential election) to 85.46% while it was almost 91% in September 2018 and reached this level again in November 2018. These statistics can be found at the following link: <http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/cameroon> page consulted on 12 February 2019.



information circulating in contexts of ambiguity, danger, or potential threat. They help people make sense of and manage risk. Usually, they spark pressure, anxiety, and panic (Zhao & Wang, 2013) to the point of even spreading fears of a negative outcome (Sustein, 2014). Rumors are pieces of information that lack a structure of evidence adapted to rational standards (Fine & Ellis, 2010). Thus, the strength of the rumor (R) varies according to the importance (I) for a person of the subject concerned, multiplied by the ambiguity (A) of the available information according to the following equation: $R = I \times A$ (Allport & Postman, 1974). The content of data with personal implications, as well as the strength of the social ties that bind the broadcaster and the capacity of its dissemination on social media, are essential to ensure a rumor's credibility (Oh et al., 2013). There are two distinct categories of rumors: False Rumors (FR) and True Rumors (TR). False Rumors are created to deceive and are based on inaccurate or misrepresented information, often with specific motives in mind. On the other hand, True Rumors represent genuine social facts. The decision-making process in disseminating information revolves around evaluating the message's consistency and coherence, the information source's credibility, and the message's general acceptability within a specific context (Jahanbakhsh-Nagadeh et al., 2023). According to Kapferer (1987), rumors are the oldest form of media in the world. He developed a typology of political rumors that we will use in this study. Another factor worth considering is that this phenomenon that used to rely on word of mouth to propagate has quickly been adapted to new technologies. Rumors now instrumentalize communication protocols called gossip algorithms to disseminate information through social media and file-sharing applications (Bellet et al., 2020). While these terms are sometimes used imprecisely and interchangeably in popular culture and discourse, clarifying the differences between these concepts is essential to rationally assess the spread of fake news and rumors in a context such as Cameroon's 2018 presidential election.

II- Information Analysis

Challenges in detecting disinformation fall into two categories: a) content challenges and b) user challenges (Shu et al., 2020). In many cases, disinformation content is highly sensationalized and written with extreme feelings, usually to reach the reader, prompting them to interact more with the message (Aïmeur et al., 2023). Thus, messages containing manufactured content often become "viral" and "trend" on social media (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This is compounded by the low cost of creating sources of disinformation and the ease of using software-controlled social media bots to help spread disinformation (Shao et al., 2017). From a user perspective, social media users are sensitive to and often unaware of misinformation (Sharma et al., 2019). In order to assess the attempts made by journalists and ordinary Internet users to instrumentalize fake news and rumors through social media during Cameroon's presidential elections, different methodological approaches must be combined to provide a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon. The following analysis draws on several methods to examine both the modes of propagation and the attempt to influence the argumentation structure. Using at least two methods allows for a more developed and accurate analysis of a particular social phenomenon (Caillaud & Flick, 2016). As such, we will analyze the network used to spread fake news to identify the objective of persuasion.

As mentioned, this article will focus on Facebook usage since it is the most popular social media network and tool used to disseminate political information in Cameroon. The analysis of social ties is a field that has grown in importance from the perspective of establishing the sociology of information and communication techniques (Dagiral & Martin, 2017). More precisely, a social network is a social structure composed of individuals (or organizations)



called "nodes," linked by one or more specific types of interdependence, such as friendship, kinship, common interest, financial exchange, aversion, sexuality, or relationships of belief, knowledge or prestige (Huisman & Van Duijn, 2005). Within the context of our research, this type of analysis highlights Facebook's capability to influence a population since the nodes identified broadly are also indicators of the fluidity associated with a particular actor's social capital.

Understanding social networks' sociological reality is essential because they resemble circles where individuals take refuge to create and maintain their own ties. This type of analysis enables researchers to identify better who is communicating with whom and how information and ideology circulate. These links are further elucidated by exploring the concept of homophily, which refers to the idea that network members often share the same sociological and ideological characteristics (Fincham, 2019; Himelboim et al., 2016; Himelboim et al., 2017; Himelboim et al., 2018; Himelboim et al., 2019)⁵. Homophily also steers this analysis toward the echo chamber concept in social media (Brummette et al., 2018). The echo chamber refers to how opinions in the network are polarized and self-reinforcing (Törnberg, 2018; Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021) and how Internet users often isolate themselves in the universes of a shared imagination (Huyghe, 2018; Cookson et al., 2023).

The analysis of networks allows us to produce a mapping of conversations on a subject with the distinction of network types based on their division, density, and direction (Smith et al., 2014). Two types of network analysis merit further discussion: complete network analysis and ego network analysis (ENA). The complete network analysis goes through the assessment of the centrality. Understanding a node's centrality measures its prominence or structural importance in a network. A high centrality score may indicate power, influence, control, or status. Identifying the most 'central' node allows information to be disseminated more quickly into a network, halting epidemics, protecting a network from breakdowns, and identifying suspected terrorists, among other things. Network visualization measures a series of centrality measurements to identify the most influential nodes in a social network. The ENA evaluates the nodes that configure the relationships between actors in the network. It reveals the radius of operation, the diameter of the node, its centrality, proximity, and the interaction between two (betweenness). Therefore, this exercise gauges the scope and the capacity of information circulating on this network to influence others. We can thus determine the nature of the network based on the typology of Smith et al. (2014), who use the Clauset-Newmann-Moore clustering algorithm to detect the types of social media networks that can be identified when a discussion is about politics: polarized networks (1) are made up of two large groups having a dense conversation within them but with few links. This shows that users have different sources of information. This contrasts with tight networks (2) where discussions are characterized by highly interconnected people with a few isolated participants. Brand clusters (3) emerge when popular products, services, or topics are discussed. The comments of many disconnected participants are then recorded. In this context, people relay messages, but there is no actual exchange of ideas. In community networks (4), some topics will allow for the development of small groups with their influencers, audiences, and sources of information. The broadcast network (5) provides a network of commentaries on the latest news and is characterized by the repetition of analyses from well-known experts or media feeds. This underlines that people can

⁵ Homophily is particularly observable in WhatsApp messaging groups since the same messages are often circulated from several people demonstrating that they rely on the same sources and even, with a few exceptions, the same circle of friends.



still set the agenda and get conversations off the networks. Moreover, finally, the support network (6) analyses discourse to identify and respond to complaints from product or service users.

In the context of our research, network analysis first determines that the spread of rumors and fake news in social media is not a generic fact but rather a function of the configuration of the channel used to transmit the information. It also aligns with our research question, which aims to gauge the influence of fake news or rumors during a significant political event like the presidential election in Cameroon. Once the network analysis is done, consideration should be given to how fake news and rumors were propagated in these networks (Ye & Wu, 2010). Traditionally, the spread of rumors or fake news has been viewed through the prism of epidemiological models, akin to an infectious disease that spreads from one person to another (network to network, cluster to cluster, node to node, individual to individual) using the susceptible-infected-healed approach (Pei et al., 2015; Xia, 2015). Thus, the main actors in the spread dynamics can be divided into three groups: the ignorant, the propagators, and the stiflers (Bernard & Pietrus, 2024). The different links between propagators and others can be made in three ways: Infection probabilities refer to a situation where an ignorant person can turn into a propagator when in contact with a propagator (this is an apparent relationship of influence). Immune probability occurs when a propagator becomes a stifler due to an exchange with another propagator or a stifler. Finally, the probability of decay occurs when the propagator spontaneously stops spreading information because he has lost interest or forgotten to disseminate the topic in question (Change et al., 2013). Beyond epidemiological approaches, some holistic models rely on three phases: dissemination, acceptance, and updating of information. This model has the advantage of highlighting essential aspects in the propagation process, such as information representation, memory capacity, and information salience, along with probabilities of acceptance and distortion (Wang et al., 2017). These combined approaches allow us to assess better how fake news and rumors spread online during the 2018 presidential campaign in Cameroon.

The last methodological element worth addressing relates to the content of the information or rumor. This research will draw upon the two main methods used for analyzing social media content (Sobkowicz et al., 2012):

- Natural language processing is the analysis of implicit representations and meanings based on a vector of texts and meanings, identifying the degrees of positive or negative opinions of the documents.
- The semantic web approach allows for detecting explicit representations of the domain based on semantic annotations that trace the text ontology of keywords or tags.

These two approaches make it possible to detect social media opinions and establish links with real-life events (Thewall et al., 2011). Detection is carried out by evaluating the objective pursued by the opinion (Maynard & Bontcheva, 2016). For each text being analyzed, an idea can be represented by rhetorical aspects, concepts mentioned, and keywords (Sobkowicz et al., 2012). Finally, sentiment analysis is the element crucial to the evaluation of online content. This approach allows for more precise content analysis, combining facts as they emerge from texts and emotional expressions. Analyzing feelings on social media allows a researcher to understand them through the dichotomy between normative and informative elements that produce an opinion formation. In the treatment of opinion, the normative factors are related to



the person's socialization, his or her rank within the group, and the acquisition of values through the accumulation of information. This aspect is seen as relatively stable and difficult to change because of exposure to social media content. The informative element is related to the object of the exchange. Social media users are more likely to be flexible in this respect and, therefore, adopt or at least accept a viewpoint different from the one they had (or not) before the social media interaction (Sobkowicz et al., 2012). Therefore, the analysis of feelings in social media combines psychological and sociological approaches to understand the constitutive elements of an individual's behavior and, above all, his attitude in a group. Sentiment analysis brings together the parts of the language that help determine the structure of the expression and are essential indicators of subjectivity, irony, or polarization. The paralinguistic elements correspond to the semiological aspects that, in the context of social media, involve emoticons, standard abbreviations such as LOL ("laughing out loud"), onomatopoeic expressions, font or stylistic choices (bold, italics, etc.), word length, capital letters, and keywords (Fersini, 2017). Therefore, the concepts introduced in this section provide a multi-faceted set of tools for analyzing the selected body of literature.

III- Fake News and Rumors during Cameroon's 2018 Presidential Elections

Major political events like national elections provide the ideal context for narrative weaving, particularly the spread of rumors. Indeed, politics is also a space where the collective imagination is primed to speculate and hypothesize when considering differing opinions and assessing the decisions made by leaders (Aldrin, 2010). In Cameroon, rumors are almost always political because they symbolize a crystallization of social discontent or represent alternative versions of conventional claims and protests (Enguéguélé, 1998). Unsurprisingly, according to many analysts, the news cycle covering Cameroon's presidential election was dominated by fake news and rumors from start to finish. The campaign officially started with fake news about the seminar organized by Facebook representatives at the invitation of the Cameroonian government to "combat fake news" in the run-up to the presidential election⁶. The election concluded with headlines referring to bogus international observers. Seven people appeared before the national and international media, claiming to belong to the highly renowned global NGO Transparency International and stating that the elections went well. Transparency International later denied that they were part of their organization, which made headlines worldwide.⁷ On the narrative level, the fake news and rumors during the presidential election are denunciations. They thus represent the collective expression of a transfer of aggressiveness (Aldrin, 2010). Social media was inundated by fake news and rumors related to

⁶ Read the article from the Voice of America (VOA) Africa section available at the following link: <https://www.voafrique.com/a/facebook-discute-des-fake-news-avec-les-autorit%C3%A9s-au-cameroun/4520343.html>

⁷ See RFI on October 11, 2018, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20181011-cameroun-polemique-pretendus-observateurs-lors-presidentielle>, see, France 24 Television on the following link: <https://www.france24.com/fr/20181011-cameroun-transparency-internationale-faux-observateurs-oif-louise-mushikiwabo-ethiopie-eryt>, the Magazine Jeune Afrique from October 10th, 2018 under the following link: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/643017/politique/presidentielle-au-cameroun-polemique-autour-de-faux-observateurs-de-transparency-international/> and lastly the Voice of America on the same day under the following link: <https://www.voafrique.com/a/election-au-cameroun-des-faux-observateurs-%C3%A9lectoraux-kamto-demande-une-enqu%C3%AAte/4607771.html>, all these webpages have been accessed on October 14th, 2020.



the presidential election, so for our research, we have limited the scope of our analysis to those stories that received the most attention online.

- **Voting Organization**

One rumor circulated on social media was illustrated by a table featuring a list of candidates approved by the organizing structure Elections Cameroon (ELECAM). This organization was created by presidential decree and consists of members who are mainly appointed by the President of the Republic, who is himself a candidate and is responsible for the preparation and material organization of electoral and referendum operations under the authority of the Electoral Council. ELECAM has repeatedly been the victim of fake news. First, a falsified list of candidates circulated, and then, false information about the organization of the elections also appeared. A video spread on social media networks, including Facebook, in the form of a tutorial claiming that the election results could be sent online through a platform called Electra. ELECAM was also the victim of fake news regarding a ban on mobile phones in polling stations. Besides, there were mathematical errors in the total voter count attributed to ELECAM. While this news may appear anonymous, it certainly impacts voter perceptions and turnout. In this respect, the high abstention rate observed is primarily due to the violence in the English-speaking parts of the country, where very few voters turned out at the polls⁸. However, one cannot rule out the resurgence of a certain cynicism perpetuated by a feeling that the dice were loaded in advance. It would appear that fake news about ELECAM's lack of impartiality confirmed widespread fears that may have discouraged many undecided voters. This was further amplified by the fact that the organization does not have an excellent track record or a good reputation among the general public. These rumors about ELECAM received just over 9,000 impressions⁹ on various networks.

The rest of the fake news items fit perfectly with Kapferer's (1987) taxonomy of political rumors.

- **Politicians and the Occult**

On September 27th, 2018, one of the oldest newspapers in the country, *Le Messager*, published that social media was abuzz with news that opposition member Cabral Libii, a candidate in the presidential election, was a Masonic lodge member. Maurice Kamto, also part of the opposition, was similarly identified as a member of the esoteric sect. These rumors received over 8,600 impressions on Facebook.

- **Secret Deals and Big Money**

Another theme that became widespread during the presidential election was those surrounding arrangements made between opposing politicians declared during the day, which would be carried out secretly against the population's best interests. First, a private letter outlining the tacit agreements supposedly made between the ruling CPDM party and Cabral Libii, the Universe Party candidate, went viral on Facebook at the very beginning of the campaign.

⁸ Read the article by the television channel France24: <https://www.france24.com/fr/20181007-presidentielle-cameroun-abstention-violences-biya> page assessed on 12 January 2019

⁹ On social media analytics, there are two key metrics: impressions and reach. Impressions are the total number of people your content is visible to (Kordzadeh & Young, 2022). Reach refers to the number of people who choose to see and engage with your content through likes, comments, or shares.



Nevertheless, the fake news that made the most headlines was the famous rallying of candidate Serge Espoir Matomba to then-candidate, Maurice Kamto. This news story can also be linked to the business of big money, another theme in Kapferer's taxonomy. In the circulated images, Kamto can speak with a group of people for a few minutes before getting into his car. He then takes a wad of cash that he gives to a person later identified as Serge Matomba, also a candidate for election. In a coordinated manner, a mere two days before the election, the news stating that Matomba had joined the camp of candidate Kamto then arrived on Facebook. It was followed almost immediately by an announcement on the national public television station Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) that Serge Matomba supported the outgoing President Paul Biya instead. He denied this a few hours later, accusing the state-owned media of manipulation. In the end, he did not rally to either candidate.

This fake news story accumulated more than 19,000 impressions in the networks analysed. It provides an excellent example of what Kumar and Shah (2018) call "disinformation" in that the story demonstrates a deliberate intention to deceive. It must be noted that the media announces news stories, yet journalists are often in contact with each other and have the contact information of the people involved. However, they never conducted due diligence or checked the veracity of the information. It also falls right into the dynamic that Jahanbakhsh-Nagadeh et al. (2023) describe as the powerful spread of rumor by combining both the importance of the situation (election watch) and of the people involved (candidates who are newsworthy and the center of attention). The ambiguousness of the situation in question further exacerbates the problem. No one seemed to understand what was going on. Drone images gave a bird's eye view of the meeting between Kamto and Matomba, but on the other hand, the timing of the supposed last-minute rallies further complicated matters.

The false news story about an upcoming announcement of an agreement between Joshua N. Osih, the candidate of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the largest official opposition party, and the civilian cabinet of the presidency of the republic acting on behalf of the outgoing President, also falls into this category. The rumor was spread on social media by activist Paul Chouta and journalist Boris Bertolt, among others. It was then broadcast on live television by Paul Éric Kingué, the campaign manager of another opposition candidate, all of whom are reported to support the candidate, Kamto. This fake news emerged from a political war between the opposition parties and, above all, from a recurring theme in the Cameroonian political landscape: the manipulation and corruption of the Cameroonian opposition by the regime in power during electoral campaigns (Socpa, 2000). This story had more than 4,500 impressions in the different networks analyzed, with Facebook having a prominent 87% (n=3915) of those impressions.

● **Sexual Deviance**

On October 3, 2018, a mere four days before the election, a video went viral on social media. Professor Messanga Nyamding, a well-known Cameroonian television personality and teacher of international relations, accused Maurice Kamto of homosexuality and pedophilia. He even claimed to have video evidence. These comments were made on the prime-time television channel, Afrique Média, and the story quickly spread through social and traditional media. This story features a recurring theme in the Cameroonian public arena, identified as list journalism (Tcheuyap, 2014). In January 2006, some newspapers published a list of republican personalities who were allegedly homosexual, as this sexual orientation is still punishable under the Cameroonian penal code. Some individuals on the list filed libel suits against these



media outlets, while others preferred to ignore the articles not to fuel these rumors (Abega, 2007). However, public speculation has only increased as people wait to find out which elites are also on the lists and who was omitted. Professor Messanga Nyamding's statement is thus timely as it reinforced the belief that the "guilty" parties would be identified. According to researchers, the homosexual issue had merely been instrumentalized by list journalists who position themselves in a public space that is oversaturated by competition (Awondo, 2012).

To better understand the impact of fake news related to the primary opponent's supposed homosexuality during the presidential election, one must understand the social context of this issue. In Cameroon, the popular masses are reputed to be homophobic. Indeed, rumor has it that homosexual practice (most often against one will) is the obligatory channel of access to the most prominent posts in most public and private administrations. It is, moreover, common knowledge (without tangible proof) that this practice is the primary method of selecting candidates for the country's telephone companies, breweries, or gambling companies. The homophobic attitude is thus the expression of dual anger against the deprivation of dignity for those heterosexuals who would be forced to practice it without having identified themselves as such, but also the deprivation of employment opportunities for those who believe that their professional ambitions are restricted as a result. Messanga Nyamding's revelation is thus an attempt to instrumentalize voters' twofold anger. It aims to emphasize their difference from the potential government representative. This news story had a cumulative total of more than 20,800 impressions in the networks analysed.

● **Political Doublespeak**

On September 24, 2018, the online information portal www.camerounweb.com revealed that life was hanging in the balance for Marcel Niat Njifenji, President of the Senate and the country's second most important political figure. This information was shared at a rapid pace on Facebook and WhatsApp but distorted in the process, leading to misinformation. Social media cited the Group Inter-patronal du Cameroun (GICAM), the country's leading employers' organization, as the source of this information. GICAM's executive secretary, Alain-Blaise Batongue, later denied this in a statement issued on September 27. Indeed, the fake news reported in some newspapers is part of Cameroonian political consciousness and is directly aimed at the President of the Republic. The news story seemed to indicate that if a close collaborator of the President could die at 83 years old, then President Biya, who is already 85 years old and seeking a seventh term of office, could face a similar fate. This rumor falls into the category of doublespeak because it is mainly the result of the dissemination of information at the top of the state. Of course, the story broke when the President of the Senate was nevertheless evacuated to France for health reasons. His office or any official network had not made this fact public, leaving room for speculation. More than 10,000 impressions of this information were made on major social networks.

The other rumor that quickly circulated concerned the wife of Maurice Kamto, the primary challenger of the outgoing President, who participated in the latter's meeting in Maroua in the far north of the country. Indeed, the wife of Maurice Kamto, Suzanne Julie Fantchom Wega, a career diplomat and Minister Plenipotentiary, was appointed on November 7, 2017, to one of the highest positions in the ministerial department, that of Inspector General at the Ministry of External Relations. This appointment contributed to increased recognition of the duplicity associated with the political class, which claimed to fight the regime while secretly making deals and plundering the wealth of the general population. The lack of sincerity amongst



opponents has become a regular theme in Cameroonian politics, particularly as many people have difficulty understanding how Wega has come to occupy such a high rank in the civil service.

This rumor also draws on two overlapping popular ideas: First, the public service is the property of the ruling power. Public service has been politicized; so many believe it is the country's leading political party (Nlep, 1986). The politicization of civil servants is a significant feature of Cameroonian political culture, whereas in most democracies, these figures are supposed to be neutral (Zé, 2007). In short, her high administrative rank is suspicious, particularly since her husband opposes the regime. Secondly, the role of gender issues in the country also gives credence to this rumor, particularly when considering the role assigned to women in Cameroonian politics (Sindjoun, 2000). It is not easy in the collective imagination to see a woman in control of her career and existing outside of the destiny assigned to her by her husband. More than 8,000 impressions were made of this news story.

One of the most remarkable fake news stories that merits consideration is that of the counterfeit observers. The day after the elections, on October 8, 2018, the state television station CRTV presented seven international observers officially sent by the well-known non-governmental organization (NGO) Transparency International. They claimed to have noted positive aspects of the election's organization. For one of the observers, Raphael Kalfon, the elections were reportedly conducted in a very calm atmosphere. For another so-called observer, Amanda Benziki, the elections took place in complete freedom. However, a mere few hours later, the lawyer, Charles Nguini, President of Transparency International for Cameroon, denied that these observers were members of the NGO. Both national and international media (France 24, Radio France International, and TV5 Monde) jumped on the story, which was already making a buzz on social media with an accumulation of more than 68,000 impressions in the networks analyzed.

This sampling of the fake news stories and rumors circulate most during the presidential election. Nevertheless, they provide a basis for analyzing social media channels that allow these stories and rumors to be transmitted or challenged.

IV- The Main Cameroonian Political Networks Online

By consulting the link www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/cameroon, the public figures with the most followers in Cameroon include internationally renowned footballers like Samuel Eto'o and Samuel Umtiti, as well as famous singers like Charlotte Dipanda and Lady Ponce. With regards to politics, the pages with the most followers are:

- President Paul Biya (incumbent in the October 2018 election) has over 860,000 followers. This page presents the news of the President of the Republic. International consultants like Patricia Balme and Stéphane Fouks, amongst others, use this page to shape the image of the President¹.
- Cabral Libii's official page, dedicated to glorifying the presidential candidate, has just over 207,000 members. The candidate's team manages the page to promote his image and

¹ Read the article published on this subject on the information portal Cameroon web: <https://www.camerounweb.com/CameroonHomePage/NewsArchive/Pr-sidentielle-2018-Paul-Biya-s-attache-les-services-d-une-sorciere-francaise-430234#> page consulted on 21 January 2019.



respond to the numerous attacks he faces. The team also uses this page to encourage young people to register on electoral lists massively. It also echoes other pages, such as 11 million voters.

- Mathias Éric Owona Nguini's page has about 146,000 members. The political science professor from the University of Yaoundé II has established his reputation by being repeatedly featured on political television programs and giving countless interviews. During the electoral campaign, he garnered many supporters because he criticized the regime. However, his turnaround, followed in particular by his support for the humanitarian work of First Lady Chantal Biya, brought him a Lucifer-like fate where he fell from his pedestal of glory and is now the victim of repeated criticism on the web from those who supported him when he decried the regime. He was exceptionally active online during the electoral campaign and, in particular, virulently against Maurice Kamto.

- The Facebook page of the group *Le Cameroun c'est le Cameroun* (LCCLC) has nearly 200,000 members. It is an exchange forum founded by Mathieu Youbi, a cultural promoter from Yaoundé. Cameroonians animate it in the diaspora. It has the peculiarity of having hyperactive members whose information and interventions often transcend the forum's framework to appear in the media. Mathieu Youbi is committed to the service of the Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon (CRM) and supported Maurice Kamto.

- The *Cameroun est formidable vivons seulement* (LCFVS) group page has over 76,000 members. It is a platform for discussion and exchange that responds to the LCCLC. The page is animated, among other things, by Daniel Abate Abate, who, on television, presents himself as a fervent supporter of President Paul Biya and, therefore, an active member of his party, the CPDM.

- Maurice Kamto's official page has a little more than 75,000 members. This is the page of the CRM candidate who has an incorporated television program and a team dedicated to investigating rumors to provide accurate information.

- Boris Bertolt, a journalist who defines himself as the fourth estate, has nearly 65,000 followers. He was based in Great Britain for several years and used the name of the well-known German writer as an alias. The page promoter presents himself as a whistleblower who has played a critical role in several denunciations. His nickname of Fourth Estate refers to his role as a journalist and implies an objective approach to the treatment of information. During the last election, he was a well-known supporter of the CRM candidate, Maurice Kamto.

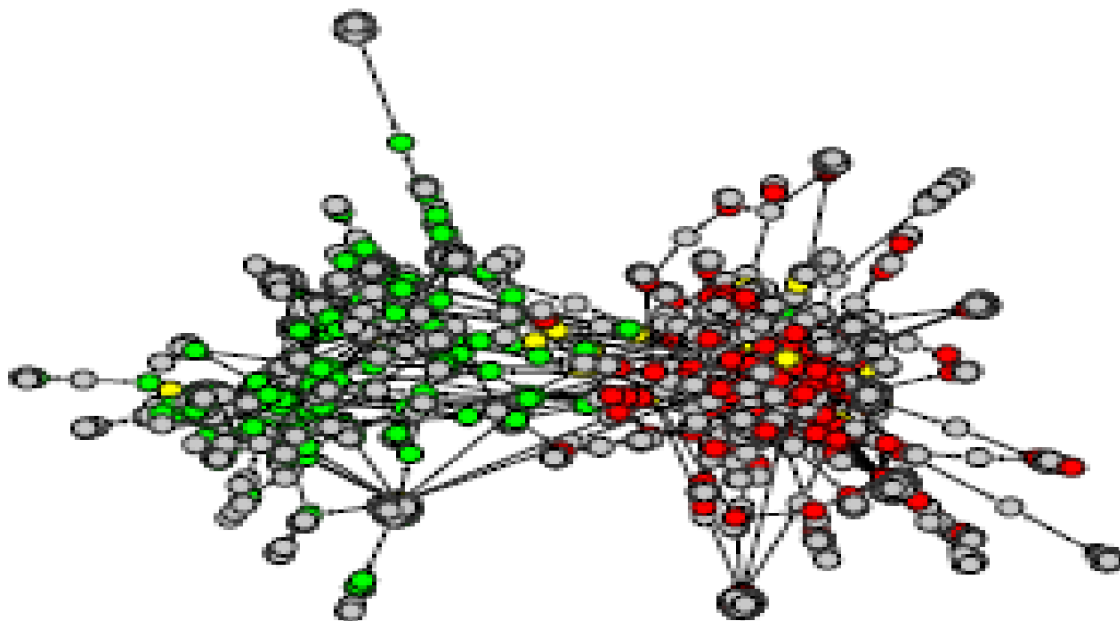
- Paul Chouta's Facebook page calls itself the High-Speed Train (TGV) of news and is followed by more than 42,000 people. The promoter presents himself as a human rights activist and whistleblower. The media often pick up Chouta's publications. The police often arrest him and he has established a solid reputation by issuing several alerts denouncing civil service and political mismanagement.

Concretely, the network structure of the identified pages is analyzed through three open-source social network analysis software programs, namely Gelphi, Netlytic, and Node XL. The main difficulty in interpreting these networks is that to combat fake news, since April 4, 2018, Facebook's API no longer provides commentators' names, making it challenging to analyze the network. In order to follow the evolution of leading news stories, we also used the www.whopostedwhat.com application, a Facebook keyword search generator. This allows

users to search for publications on Facebook containing a keyword, either on a specific date or for a date range.

An analysis of the news evolution in these networks reveals some significant trends. Regardless of the news above, some pages (LCCLC, Mathias Owona Nguini, Cabral Libii Officiel, ...) feature two large clusters and thus function as polarized networks. There are indeed discussions within these two clusters, but the analysis shows that it is as if they never meet. The connecting nodes between them are limited. Nevertheless, more importantly, there is often a phenomenon of isolation when individuals in one of the clusters cross a line. For example, with fake news such as the death of the Senate leader, the fake observers, or Kamto's wife, for some of these clusters, the conversations ended with an official denial. Similar phenomena can be observed on the same networks with different clusters. Some network stakeholders also relied on existing information to propose a different interpretation. This entrenches the echo-chamber phenomenon in forums such as LCCLC, Cabral Libii Officiel, LCFVS, and Paul Chouta, where people tend to reinforce their opinions and beliefs (Garimella et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021).

Figure 1: Diagram of discussions on LCCLC network regarding the fake news story about Kamto's wife

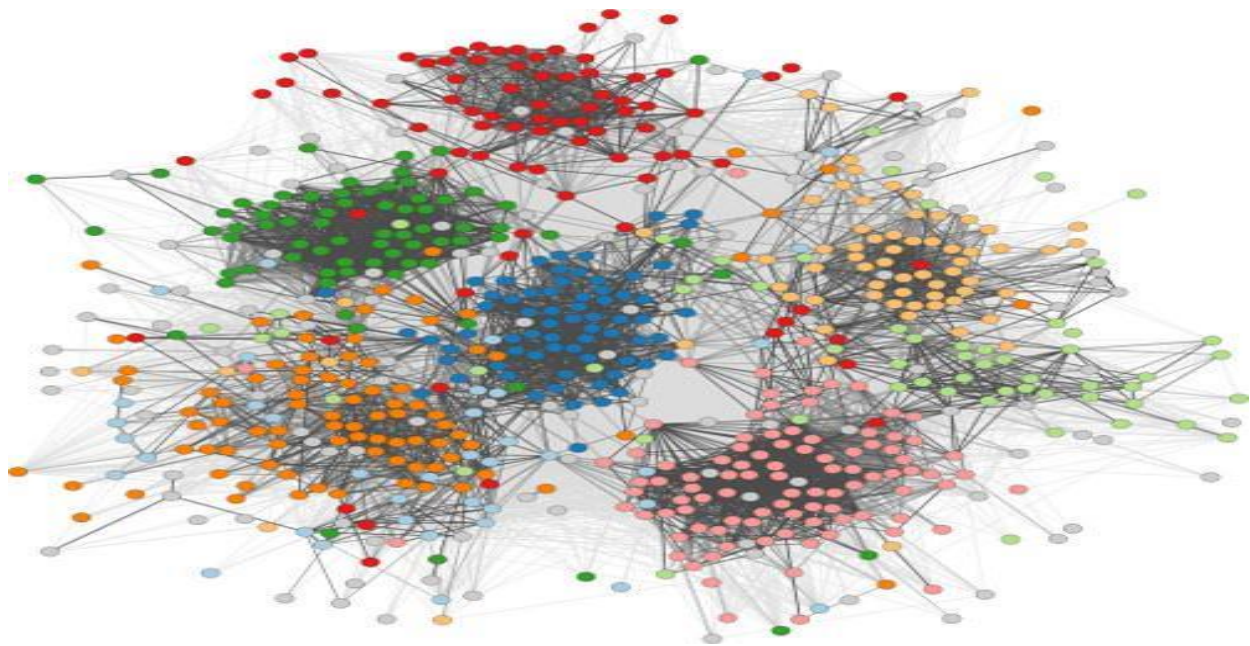


Caption: The cluster with the green nodes represents generally favorable views of the fake news story, while the red nodes show views contrary to the rumor. The red clusters feature much tighter signaling and a reasonably high degree of homophily. The yellow knots wish to be perceived as neutral, primarily through the use of euphemisms (verbal or paralanguage). Grey knots contribute to the conversation without having a clear position. Their questions and opinions rekindle and revive the more stubborn members.



While a subject can thus be addressed several times, this does not mean that an exchange of ideas necessarily takes place because the two clusters that make up the divergent poles choose to ignore each other. This is the case for pages such as those by Professor Mathias Owona Nguini of the group LCFVS (rumor about Kamto's wife, fake news from observers). In these cases, the contradictory comments posted did not receive responses. The analysis shows that the managers of these pages continued to discuss the issue with those who agreed or encouraged them. Research has shown that these types of attitudes eventually silence the expression of public opinion online (Nekmat & Gonzenbach, 2013; Porten-Chen & Eilders, 2015). Indeed, we find rumors such as Cabral Libii's cult membership which had two distinct audiences on the pages of Professor Owona Nguini and Boris Bertolt, as well as the LCCLC and LCFVS groups. Depending on whether a favorable opinion has already been expressed towards the candidate, the news is criticized, and an attempt is made to demonstrate the coarseness of the false information. If the public had previously expressed skepticism towards the candidate, as on Paul Chouta's page, one tries to show that the fears were well-founded and that there is no smoke without fire. This underlines the limits of the influence of rumors and fake news in social media, at least as far as this presidential election is concerned, and demonstrates the homophily of members of different groups and people interacting online. This is most visible on the pages of journalist Boris Bertolt, activist Paul Chouta, and the LCFVS group. Agreement marks, signs of approval, and self-identification markers such as *like* and expressions such as *me too*, as well as *so do I*, or *I entirely agree* are found in the majority of the processing of information that meets with the permission of the group members. Thus, networks such as journalist Boris Bertolt and activist Paul Chouta are openly favourable to the opposition candidate. When unfavourable information appears, it is ignored, rejected, and even vilified. The analysis of feelings also shows significant approval of Boris Bertolt's videos and live Facebook feeds addressing rumors like the death of the Senate President and the story about Kamto's wife. Expressing feelings of restraint among people with contrary opinions on these networks is also noteworthy. This can be seen on President Biya's network, where comments on the rumored death of the Senate President were full of euphemisms and expressions of regret about the lack of respect for authorities and elders. Moreover, concerning fake news, President Biya's network functions as a community network. Each small group has its topic and influencers. Indeed, in the same network, people are talking about different issues.

Figure 2: President Biya's network on the rumored death of the Senate President



Caption: In this community network, we also see that the conversations spread in different directions. Part of the rumor about the presumed death of the Senate President, represented by the pink bunch, refers to the loincloth sold on International Women's Day. The red cluster refers to violence in English-speaking areas; the light green cluster deals with issues of corruption in the country and, in this case, the hands-on operation called Sparrow Hawk undertaken by the Biya regime; the dark green cluster deals with tribalism, and the blue cluster deals with the rumor of the death of the Senate Speaker.

The conversations' dispersed nature can be attributed to the large number of people interacting in the space. Even though these topics are more or less related to the original topic, as exchanges tend to get out of hand and go in many directions, this phenomenon is depicted by the high rate of clustering during discussions.

Of course, when assessing the spread of fake news and rumors, the particularities associated with the Cameroonian population's intersubjectivity must be considered. Two features helped to underpin the rumors surrounding the political leaders' membership in a sect. The first discursive element centers on the idea that power is held by an elite sect that runs the country purely for the benefit of its members. Secondly, in Cameroon, success is often criminalized amongst the general population. There is a widespread belief that to excel in any given field, cults must co-opt an individual. This situation signals a rupture between the ruling classes and the plebeians in what Girardet (1990) calls a phenomenon of non-identification. The classic pattern in Cameroonian society consists of excelling at school and earning a job that opens the door to class mobility, thus earning respect from one's peers (Manga, 2013). This articulation is undermined by the reality that unemployment among young graduates in Cameroon is very high. In a country where the average age of the most senior executives is 77, seeing a young person under 40, like Cabral Libii, aspire to the highest position provokes suspicions that



hidden forces must be at play. This is a recurrent theme in Cameroon's collective imagination (Ateba Eyene, 2012).

Self-censorship and even a particular fear of reprisals are perceptible when analyzing the sentiment surrounding the rumor about Cabral Libii's membership in a sect. This can be found both on his group's page, that of the LCFVS, and that of Professor Mathias Éric Owona Nguni. For instance, there is an abundance of the use of contradictory expressions such as "I come in peace," "I am just passing by," and "without comments, I am just asking." The deep reasons for this fear are even more palpable when we isolate the verb "block" in these networks. It comes back several thousand times in almost all the networks studied, either as a threat (as in "I am going to block you"), or as a complaint ("I have been blocked"). In the analysis of networks, this corresponds to what Manuel Castells (2011) has called networked power, which indicates a situation of inequality between actors within the same network. Therefore, we can more clearly see the social character of the network with links driven by many emotions (Huisman & Van Duijn, 2005). Networks such as Paul Chouta, LCFVS, Boris Bertolt, and Owona Nguni have collectively blocked more than a thousand people, only considering the campaign's period. The people blocked were at fault for expressing contrary opinions or uttering threats.

It then becomes clear that, first of all, any contradictory opinion is rejected. In other words, among the groups studied, there is a systematic refusal of cognitive dissonance. This aspect corresponds to one of the six techniques of persuasion used on social media networks like Facebook: provocation and retaliation (Weiksner et al., 2008). It is also consistent with the search for users and rewards for those who go online, mainly to satisfy the need for social recognition, personal identity (confirmation by others of one's self-image), and recreation (Mehrad & Tajer, 2016). This situation makes it even more challenging to convince by manipulating facts. Regarding propagation, the analysis shows that every fake news or rumor during the presidential election has its audience and actors. Numerous ignorant people present themselves as such. They can be recognized above all by the use of rhetoric that is meant to be neutral: *I am tabling this here, I am saying this, but I am not saying anything, hmmm*, followed by the use of question marks or emoticons that attenuate their comments, adding a sense of questioning, dismay, or reticence.

As for the propagators, they are often recruited among the influencers of the networks we have analyzed. The same people can be blockers when a news item does not suit them. For example, Boris Bertolt propagated Cabral Libii's sect membership information while he blocked information about Kamto's wife. This role is even more apparent between the LCCLC and LCFVS groups. Indeed, each spreads fake news that helps and blocks fake news that does not serve its purpose. For this reason, rumors and fake news sometimes seem interchangeable because rumors during the election campaign were handled by social media actors who willingly presented themselves as journalists since they practiced this profession (Boris Bertolt), but also by actors who formatted the information in such a way as to make it look like journalistic articles (Paul Chouta). This has become a common tactic in the post-truth era (Mccomiskey, 2017) and is one of the main arguments for building credibility in social media (Li & Suh, 2015).

Nevertheless, the editorial style betrays authors and fails to convince those who listen or read them unless they are predisposed to believe the story. The detection of opinion in online fake news during this campaign suggests the excessive use of adjectives and hyperbole. The



“classic” journalist knows the difference between showing and telling in writing. After all, journalists generally clearly separate facts, feelings, and opinions. This separation is achieved mainly through parsimoniously using elements that can provoke emotions, such as adjectives and adverbs (Grevisse, 2014). This precaution was shattered by ‘journalists’ who turned rumors into fake news during the presidential election of October 2018. By adopting a journalistic style, the promoters of Facebook pages also exposed themselves to the profession's ethical requirements. The race for the scoop must, in a way, be done according to the rules of the art. There always seems to be little time for source criticism on social media¹, which is a crucial element of proper journalism practice. This is the famous debate between virality and veracity (Posetti, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This article examines the various efforts by different actors to influence the Cameroonian presidential election's outcome in October 2018 through rumors and fake news through social and mainstream media. Through an analysis of the most influential networks during the campaign, particularly Facebook pages and groups, our research suggests that there was indeed an attempt to influence. The configuration of these networks (homophily), their dynamics (the echo chamber), and an inappropriate journalistic style did not always produce a plausible argument. Instead, this research reveals that the spread of fake news during the presidential election was particularly successful in diverting attention away from more crucial campaign issues like the state's future, the role of federalism, the Anglophone crisis, youth unemployment, and insecurity. Although these fake news stories often failed to change opinions drastically, they ultimately shaped public perceptions and the national imagination, sometimes insidiously.

Furthermore, this analysis, though focusing on Cameroon, could be used to examine other contexts surrounding major political events, such as assessing former President Jair Bolsonaro's use of WhatsApp groups in Brazil or the use of X and Truth networks by former American president, Donald Trump.

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¹ For example, points 1, 5, 6 and, above all, 8 of the Munich Charter, which governs the practice of journalism, are violated in the dissemination of online information.



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