

## Sensationalism in Journalism Practice: Analysis of Private and Public Print Media Coverage of Crisis Situations in Cameroon

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### Abstract

Newspapers in Cameroon are increasingly attempting to lure audience and increase readership amidst stiff competition. This competition for audience and the attempt to set the agenda for the public have made many media houses to implore controversial techniques of presentation of news such as sensitive and captivating headlines, shocking images, emotional headlines, rumours, obscenity and a reduced emphasis on verification. This research examines the Cameroon print media landscape and provides empirical evidence of the presence of sensationalism in the Cameroon press and more particularly during crisis situations. A content analysis of 'The Post Newspaper', 'The Guardian Post Newspaper', and 'Cameroon Tribune Newspaper' is done, based on the theoretical underpinnings of the Social Responsibility theory, which highlights media's obligations to the public. While the private press is more sensational, the public press, due to its status, tends to calm down things by using very mild tones and at times avoiding to report on controversial or crisis situations or paying less emphasis on them. The findings from 102 issues analysed reveal that the private press is notorious for using emotional headlines, rumours, imagery and very hard tone especially when it comes to criticising Government action during crisis situations. Some of the reasons which motivate sensationalism, like competition, financial gains and political leanings, have been revealed in the study. Thus, the research concludes that in addition to the many causes of sensationalism practices in journalism, the media is more likely to be sensational when it sympathises with a particular course during crisis situations. The major recommendation is that need exists for the Cameroon press to respect the basic canons of the profession (accuracy, fairness, balance and objectivity) in reporting, especially during crisis situations.

**Keywords:** Sensationalism; Journalism practice; Print media; Public media; Private media; Media coverage; Crisis Situations

### Introduction

The promulgation of Law No. 90-52 of 19 December 1990 relating to freedom of mass communications and association in Cameroon made way for several media houses to spring up. As of 2012, the then Minister of Communication, Issa Tchiroma Bakary, said Cameroon had close to 1000 newspapers, 100 radio and 15 TV stations [1]. The number will be more today, especially with newspapers, though most of them are seasonal or event-driven publications [2].

With competition going rife, especially in the print sector, media houses have adopted different strategies to attract and build a wider readership. One of these is captivating headlines and sometimes gross exaggeration (sensationalism).

Adams, cited in Wang and Cohen [3] notes that, sensationalism and human interest stories refer to news coverage of "crime, violence, natural disasters, accidents, and fires, along with amusing, heart-warming, shocking, or curious vignettes about people in the area." Jenkins [4] says sensationalism in the press is done by including and excluding certain facts, highlighting some parts and hiding others in a news story, suggesting a reading of events by the use of captioning of a particular photograph or a leading headline. Wang and Cohen (ibid) add that the "sensationalisation" of news, is centred on socially significant stories by "tabloid" news topics and the use of flamboyant production styles that overpower substantive information.

Historically speaking, sensationalism in journalism practice was first witnessed at the end of the nineteenth century, in what was referred to at the time as Yellow Journalism. Led by prominent newspaper owners in the USA like William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, journalism of the 1890s used drama, romance, and exaggeration to sell millions of newspapers [5].

Whatever the case, sensationalism in journalism practice undermines the basic canons of the profession (accuracy, objectivity, fairness and balance) and may prevent the public from being knowledgeable participants in policy discussions as well as provoke extremist tendencies. An appalling example is the promotion of genocidal impulses by Radio-Télévision Libres des Mille Collines (RTL) in Rwanda in 1994 [6]. Apart from this, Jackson (ibid) holds that, sensational headlines and inaccuracies in the media, have made the media to lose their credibility as a source of information.

The practice of sensationalism in the Cameroon press has been evoked by Nyamnjoh [7], Epule [8] and Ngange [9]. For instance, in his research on "The use of sensational front page headlines in the Cameroon press" Ngange notes that the Cameroon press makes great use of sensational headlines. Further findings of this research hold that the private press is more sensational as compared to the public press. In addition, private Anglophone press is more sensational as compared to the private Francophone press. Ngange's findings also revealed that, sensationalism was more present in political stories and took the form of the use of misleading words, and ironically newspaper editors use this practice to increase sales and make more money. Close to two decades after this research, the practice is seemingly increasing

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and the more disturbing issue is that during crisis situations where the press is expected to be responsible in crisis communication, instead outrageous headlines fill the newspaper stands. Some of the headlines mention things to happen in the nearest future; but with the passage of time, nothing happens and these assertions are often proven wrong. Others magnify incidents; for instance, at the heart of the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis, The Post No. 1800 of Friday March 03, 2017 had a headline titled on its front page "BACC Board to Organise 2017 GCE Exams<sup>1</sup>, Hire Examiners". This never happened. In the same line, The Median No. 234 of Monday May 15, 2017 titled its front page story as "Power Pass Order: Gendarmes and Police to Invigilate 2017 GCE". This too never happened. More recently, The Post No.01822 of Monday May 22, 2017 reported on a fire incident at the Cameroon GCE Board head office in Buea and titled it "Mysterious Fire Guts GCE Board Office". This same story was reported by other press with mild tones. For example, The Guardian Post No. 1178 Yaoundé of Monday May 22, 2017, titled it "Fire visits GCE board HQ, one office seriously touched". Reporting on the case of church leaders being dragged to court for shutting down the doors of their educational institutions (primary, secondary/high schools and Universities) during the crisis, the Eden Newspaper No. 1013 of Monday 24 April 2017 titled on its front page "The anti-Christ want to rub the clergy in mud". This headline clearly framed the complainant as the anti-Christ who in this case is the supposedly Government backed Consortium of Parents. The public print media (Cameroon Tribune), on its part, has been pro-Government, most often presenting contrary views as opposed to the private press.

This type of reporting as echoed by Njamnjoh [9] and Epule [8], affirmed by Shinbun [10] and re-affirmed by Jackson [5], does not only go against the canons of the profession but also make media houses to lose their credibility as sources of information. In order to avoid the concomitant effects of sensationalism, journalists are expected to follow certain professional standards. Goran [11], hold that truthfulness, fairness, accuracy, balance and neutrality are professional standards without which there is no quality journalism, and without ethics there is no professional journalism.

This research paper therefore, seeks to paint a picture of the practice of sensationalism in the Cameroon press during crisis situations, comparing the public press which is pro-Government and private press which has consistently proven to be against the Government, in two different crisis situations in Cameroon; the 2016 Eseka Train Accident which occurred on October 21, 2016 and resulted to the death of over 70 people, and the Cameroon Anglophone crisis which started in October 2016 till date and has been a topic of National and International debate. The paper attempts to answer the degree of sensationalism in the Cameroon press and to know between private and public press which is more sensational during crisis situations. Moreover, it is important to answer if the practice of sensationalism during crisis situations reflects the cultural and political background of the press.

## The Concept of Sensationalism

Journalists are often faced with the problem of handling sensitive issues or reporting on sensational events. Sensational events are different from the ordinary; they are odd, strange, bizarre, weird and very uncommon. Sensational events are different from sensational news. In the news item, the journalist chooses to be sensational. The concept itself is a noun derived from the verb to sensationalise. Harrap's

<sup>1</sup>Cameroon runs two subsystems of education (English and French). The Cameroon GCE Board runs the GCE exams for the English subsystem while the BACC Board runs Baccalaureate Exams for the French Subsystem

21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary defines sensationalism as "*the practice of or methods used in deliberately setting out to cause widespread excitement, intense interest or shock*". Going by this definition it is clear that the concept is totally different from the event, it is the act and depends solely on the journalist or media house and what they make out of a particular story. Thus, a journalist being the first gate keeper has to choose to be sensational or not.

Garts [12] see sensationalism as a practice of writing to entice, attract, stimulate, arouse, exaggerate and generally provoke an emotional response in readers. However explicit this definition seems to be, it is limited to written material and gives the impression that sensationalism is practiced only in the print sector. Wang and Cohen [3] note that sensationalism is also at the visual dimension including the layout, headline sizes, and use of pictorial material. In this same line, Ngange [9] posits that the Cameroon Press uses sensationalism in various forms: typefaces, words, colouring, and exclamation marks.

Sensationalism spreads across all the other conventional media and is even more visible in the new media today, which people use most often for activism. Graber cited in Kleemans [13] talks about sensationalism in TV news noting that the use of dramatic elements often reaches the level of sensationalism. It can also be noticed in the way the news is packaged. Uribe and Gunter [14] describe sensationalism as "*a characteristic of the news packaging process that places emphasis upon those elements that could provoke an effect on the human sensory system.*" Hendriks [15] equally views sensationalism as a theoretical concept that incorporates features of journalistic products capable of attracting the attention of the audience. Jenkins [4], on her part, notes that sensationalism in the press is done by including and excluding certain facts, highlighting some parts and hiding others in a news story, suggesting a reading of events by the use of captioning of a particular photograph or a leading headline.

Sensationalism takes many forms. In the print, it ranges from outrageous headlines to the selection of pictures, while in broadcasting the sound and images could also be put in question. De Regt [16] notes that sensational features can be subdivided into three categories: arousing content, tabloid packaging and vivid storytelling. Arousing content, drawn from Grabe et al. [17] and Hendriks-Vettehen et al. [18] involves presenting information with survival value. Examples include messages about crimes, violence, and disasters. Tabloid packaging deals more with the form, more likely seen in TV messages like high number of changes in the picture material or the adding of a loud sound. Vivid storytelling, on its part, is more recent and is derived from the Vividness Theory of Nisbett and Ross. It involves the presentation of vivid information and according to Hendriks-Vettehen et al. [18] cited in De Regt [16], the central idea of this theory is that vivid information is more attractive and able to hold the attention of the receiver.

Knight cited in Wang and Cohen [3] defines sensationalism both in terms of story content and formal features. He notes that the content consists of issues like sex, scandal, crime, or corruption, while formal features include fast editing pace, eyewitness camera perspective, zoom-in camera lens movements, re-enactment of news events, the use of music, and the tone of the reporter voice-over narration.

Whatever scholarly definition we get, it is important to retain the key issues surrounding the concept. It is an intentional act from the journalist or the editorial policy of a media house. It involves exaggeration, and as Garts and Bernstein [12] note, its objective is to entice, attract, stimulate, arouse and provoke emotional response.

It does not only dirty the minds of the readers, it also brings about antagonism in the press. The early initiators of the practice (Hearst and Pulitzer) were considered rivals and like Ladd [19] holds, the battle between these two displayed Yellow Journalism in its most rambunctious form.

### Origins and effects of sensationalism

People all over the world have for many decades depended and trusted the media for information and entertainment. Ladd [20] notes that in the past when media houses were few, journalists actually reported objectively. According to him media trust declined with the fragmentation of the media industry and increase in competition. With this fragmentation, media choices have greatly multiplied to include but not limited to political talk radio, cable news channels, Internet news and opinion sites, which offer a great variety of news styles, including more partisan and tabloid-oriented approaches.

While Ladd traces the origins of sensationalism from the expansion of the media industry, Jackson [5] traces the origin in the late nineteenth century citing particularly events surrounding the Spanish American Civil War. The author recounts the activities of William Hearst a media tycoon in the USA who was in favour of the war and used his newspaper to fuel the war through sensational writings. He is said to have published a stolen private letter from the Spanish minister to Washington which characterized the US president as weak. This letter led to the resignation of the Spanish minister in question and mounted pressure on the US president. He is noted to have told his reporter in the field who had reported that there was no evidence of war and requested for a recall to "*Please remain. You furnish the pictures; I'll furnish the war*" Cushing. This practice of Hearst was quickly joined by many media houses who were in support of the war in Cuba. The practice was later referred to as Yellow Journalism. This type of journalism seriously questioned the credibility of the media. Many factors explain the shift from objective journalism to yellow journalism. They range from competition among media houses to propagandist tendencies usually purported by particular groups of interest.

Media survival has been used to explain the reason for sensationalism in journalism practice. The understanding of media as financial institutions and that they must generate revenue means media have to compete among each other for sales and advertisement. The competition is even rife today with a greater threat in the new media. Brandenstein [21] talks of the closure of the Seattle Post Intelligencer Newspaper in 2009 after 148 years of existence as a print media to online media. This portrays the depth of the threat the new media poses. Faced with these competitions, media are exploiting different ways of survival. They turn to exploit the assumption that the public is short in attention span and shallow in interests and more interested in short and sensational snippets of information, than they are in accurate news Brandenstein (ibid).

Competition in the audio-visual sector also accounts for the continuous rise of sensationalism in journalism practice. Hjarvard [22] cited in Kleemans [13] studied sensationalism in Denmark in the 1990s and noted that the introduction of a second channel led to competition on the Danish television market. Few years after, the new channel, TV2, attracted more viewers and its success was due to sensational story content.

The need for change in a society propagated by particular groups of interests equally explains the use of sensationalism. Neuzil [23] cited in Brandenstein [21] notes that it was the highly dramatic nature of headlines that sparked public outrage in the 1800 and 1900 in the USA

and it was the precursor to change. According to Neuzil, many Media Elites and interest groups joined alliances and stimulated a change in American consciousness.

As earlier seen, media tycoons with particular interests, promote the practice of sensationalism to set the agenda or better still, support a course which they believe in. However, the biggest threat seems to come from the position the media finds itself today in the society. Going by Gatlung Model of the media (Market Pillar Capital), the media finds itself floating along market forces, the state and the civil society. When the media is being toasted as seen in this model, there is the likelihood that other forces may have a firm grip over the media and may use it to set their own agenda not necessarily following or respecting the norms of the profession. Cronkite cited in Brandenstein [21] notes that the market forces have had a grip on the media and the media turns to prioritise the needs of the advertisers and corporate interest and warns that this practice deteriorates the press and democracy itself.

The practice of sensationalism though generally perceived unprofessional, has been saluted by some authors. Dominik [24] holds that the practice has brought enthusiasm, energy and verve to the practice of journalism. He alludes this to the increase of competition between the two 'press lords' (Pulitzer and Hearst) in the nineteenth century and adds that yellow journalism improved and popularised the use of layout and display devices such as headlines, pictures, colour printing. Oguniji [25] affirms that headlines have helped to make modern newspapers attractive unlike early newspapers in England and USA with no headlines. Ladd [19] says the practice of Yellow Journalism increased the circulation of newspapers. The 'New York World' of Pulitzer moved from a circulation of 20,000 to 374,000 copies between 1883 and 1892; making it the first most profitable newspaper ever published.

Sensationalism is inextricably linked to politics. The political leanings of a newspaper affect its content seriously. The same point was re-echoed by Nyamnjoh [26] and Onouha [27]. This therefore, excludes non politicians from the newspaper information and accounts seriously for the low readership of our newspapers. Even sports which generally interest many people is usually reported with some political undertone in the Cameroon press (Kode, ibid). The adverse effects of sensationalism by Radio-Télévision Libres des Mille Collines (RTL) in Rwanda genocide in 1994 cannot be over emphasised.

## Theoretical Framework

### Social responsibility theory

This research finds its theoretical backings from the Social Responsibility theory of Fred Siebert, Theodore Patterson, and Wilbur Schramm [28]. The social responsibility theory is one of the four normative theories of the press by Siebert [28]. This theory is the midway between the extreme positions of authoritarian theory (media under complete Government control) and libertarian theory (with media under the control of Laissez-faire forces). The theory throws more emphasis on the media's obligations towards society. In order to better understand this theory, it is necessary to probe into circumstances surrounding its development. Middleton [29] traces it back to the report of the Commission on the Freedom of the Press known as the Hutchins Commissions. The Hutchins Commission's Project was requested in 1942 to investigate and set guidelines for a responsible press amidst concerns of threats on the first Amendment freedoms<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The First Amendment of the US constitution prohibits the making of any law infringing on freedom including freedom of speech, and freedom of the press

by the rise of totalitarian regimes. Headed by the then-president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins, this commission deliberated and came out with five guidelines for a socially responsible press in a report titled "A Free and Responsible Press" in 1947. Middleton [29] says the Commission recommended:

1. A truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning;
2. A forum for the exchange of comment and criticism;
3. The projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society;
4. The presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society; and
5. Full access to the day's intelligence.

Although these principles are not considered to have had a substantial impact on the media industry's development in subsequent years, it set a strong base for the actual development of the social responsibility theory later on in 1956. Middleton (ibid) notes that the authors, Siebert et al. [28] were clearly inspired by the Hutchins initiative.

The Social responsibility theory is the third of the four normative theories as presented by Siebert et al. [28] in their book *The Four Theories of the Press*. The theory emphasises on the media's responsibility to use its powerful position to ensure appropriate delivery of information to audiences and further suggest that if the media fails in carrying out this responsibility, it may be relevant to have a regulatory instance. Middleton [29] notes that in both the Hutchins Commission report and the theory put forth by Siebert et al. [28], "*the concept of public interest, albeit inexplicitly, lies at the heart of the definition of social responsibility*". The theory recognises the crucial role and/or influence the media has in shaping societal processes and calls upon the media to be socially responsible when executing this role. Some of the main tenets of the theory according McQuail [30] are:

- Media have important function to fulfil in society (support democratic political principles);
- Media are under obligation to fulfil their social functions (transmission of information and creation of a forum for different viewpoints);
- Independence of media emphasised in relation to their responsibility towards society; and
- Media should meet certain standards.

This theory states how the media ought to behave, and in our study of sensationalism, the media according to this theory, is expected to be responsible. From our literature it is an established fact that the press in Cameroon is sensational, contrary to the Social Responsible theory which requires the media to be more responsible especially in crisis situations. This study focuses on the fourth tenet of the theory mentioned above, which calls upon media to meet certain 'standards' in society. In order to understand the standards here, the study draws from Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's 2001 book titled: *The Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. Kovach and Rosentiel outline nine principles of journalism, which up to date widely set the standards of journalism practice. They include:

- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.

- Its first loyalty is to citizens.
- Its essence is a discipline of verification.
- Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
- It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
- It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
- It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
- Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

These principles will serve as our primary unit of measurement of the standards while seeking to establish the practice of sensationalism in the Cameroonian press during crisis situations.

## Methodology

The main method used in this research is content analysis. Many authors have attempted a definition of content analysis bringing out a clear and distinct understanding of the concept. According to Berelson [31], content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. Krippendorff [32] sees it as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context. Weber [33] adds that content analysis is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text. To Okigbo [34] it as an art not a science, that is, it is not like any routine experiment technique that can automatically produce results by being applied to any text or material at random. Content analysis therefore, calls for a fine sense of judgment.

Prasad [35] notes that, the method of content analysis conforms to three basic principles of scientific method. Objectivity: Which means that the analysis is pursued on the basis of explicit rules, which enable different researchers to obtain the same results from the same documents or messages. Systematic: The inclusion or exclusion of content is done according to some consistently applied rules where by the possibility of including only materials which support the researcher's ideas-is eliminated. Generalizability: The results obtained by the researcher can be applied to other similar situations.

This technic of data collection has been used in various disciplines such as social sciences, communications, psychology, political science, history, and language. Prasad (ibid) notes that it has been used broadly to understand a wide range of themes such as social change, cultural symbols, changing trends in the theoretical content of different disciplines, verification of authorship, changes in the mass media content, nature of news coverage of social issues or social problems such as atrocities against women, ascertaining trends in propaganda, election issues as reflected in the mass media content, etc.

Using this method, this paper focuses on the print media in Cameroon and a sample of three newspapers were selected for this study, 'The Post Newspaper' 'The Guardian Post Newspaper' and 'Cameroon Tribune Newspaper'. These papers have been purposely selected based on their readership and background. The Post Newspaper (bi-weekly) and The Guardian Post (daily) are all from the Private Anglophone Press while Cameroon Tribune is a bilingual daily and the lone public print media. The editions used for analysis were selected based on the periods which the crisis occurred. The papers were selected within the

period of the Ezeka Train Accident and the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis spanning from Oct 2016 to June 2017. Out of the 108 papers expected within this period, 102 were analysed for this study.

## Results and Discussions

### What is the degree of sensationalism in the Cameroon press during crisis situations?

The study reveals that the practice of sensationalism during crisis situation is relatively high in Cameroon (Table 1). Above shows that out of the three papers studied within a nine-month period, 54.7% had at least one sensational story. Some newspapers had up to four sensational headlines in a single edition. The Post Newspaper came first with over 85% sensational headlines, followed by The Guardian Post with 73.5% and Cameroon Tribune with 11.7%. This ties with the theoretical evidence which mentioned the private press as more sensational than the public press (Table 2).

The levels or forms of sensationalism used were identified as use of exaggerated typeface to throw more emphasis on an issue, hard words that could arouse emotions, colouring of words to lay more emphasis, exclamation and question mark in headlines. Out of the six forms identified, the most frequently used form of sensationalism was the use of words and tone that could arouse emotions or temper in crisis situations. The use of words made up 49.5% of sensational practices. The use of colouring was equally recurrent in the publications. Sometimes it appears as part of the design of the front page, but the notorious red colour on particular words in a headline is a cause for concern. In other cases, the entire headline is coloured, which certainly helps in the design of the front page but amplifies the message behind the headline especially when the words in the headlines are sensational. Colouring came second with 22%. The use of typeface was equally identified, making up to 13.5% of sensational practices. Other practices identified include the use of question marks 5.5% and the use of exclamation marks 4%. Others which do not fall in either of the categories identified made up 5.5% (Table 3).

Given that the two crisis situations under study are both politically and socially related, the study notes that sensationalism during crisis

situations is highly related to these two themes. However, a majority of the sensational stories were political and targeting particular groups of persons directly or indirectly involved in the crises such as the Government, opposition, teachers, lawyers, school authorities, religious authorities, parents and the general public as well as painting a negative image in most occasions. 80% of the sensational stories focused on political issues, while 11.5% and 5.5% focused on economic and social issues respectively.

The findings above paint a conspicuous picture of the practice of sensationalism in the Cameroonian press. It confirms the works of Nyamnjoh [7,26], Epule [8] and Ngange [9], who had earlier on identified this practice in Cameroon. However, the sad situation is that during crisis situations where the press is expected to be responsible, the practice seems to be on the rise. To an extent, the tone, the words, and other forms of sensationalism identified in this research have contributed to prolonging the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis for such a long period (2016 to 2019). Thus, instead of the media to play a mediation role, it has become more of an advocate for the course and given the public a reason to hold on to the crisis through its sensational headlines. This practice of sensationalism in Cameroon press as identified in the research goes against the basic cannons of the profession. In fact, the practice goes against the first three principles of truth, loyalty to citizens and verification as propounded by Kovach and Rosenstiel. The appearance of headlines like “BAC Board to Organise 2017 GCE Exams, Hire Examiners” and many other outrageous headlines, which have, with time been proven wrong, is clear evidence that the Cameroon private press acts largely on emotions and less emphasis is placed on verification.

### Between private and public press which is more sensational during crisis situations?

The tables above show that both the private and public press practice sensationalism. While the private press uses it frequently, the public press uses it sparingly. Table 4 shows that the public press was less sensational with just four sensational headlines and these four were found in four different editions. On the other hand, the private press made extensive use of sensational headlines, having up to 86 of

SN	Newspaper	Number of editions with sensational headlines	Percentage	Number of editions without sensational headlines	Percentage	Total
1	The Post Newspaper	23	85.2%	4	14.8%	27
2	Cameroon Tribune	4	11.7%	30	88.3%	34
3	The Guardian Post	25	73.5%	9	26.5%	34
	Total	52	54.7%	44	45.3%	95

Table 1: Degree of sensationalism in Cameroon Press.

SN	Newspaper	Level of sensationalism												Total
		Typeface	%	Words	%	Colouring	%	Exclamation mark	%	Question mark	%	Others	%	
1	The Post Newspaper	7	21%	16	48%	2	6%	2	6%	2	6%	4	12%	33
2	Cameroon Tribune	1	25%	2	50%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	4
3	The Guardian Post	2	5%	18	50%	13	36%	1	2.5%	2	5%	0	0%	36
	Total	10	13.5%	36	49.5%	16	22%	3	4%	4	5.5%	4	5.5%	73

Table 2: Levels /Forms of sensationalism.

SN	Newspaper	Political	%	Economic	%	Social	%	Other	%	Total
1	The Post Newspaper	18	66%	5	19%	2	7.5%	2	7.5%	27
2	Cameroon Tribune	3	100%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	3
3	The Guardian Post	23	92%	1	4%	1	4%	0	0.00%	25
	Total	44	80%	6	11.5%	3	5.5%	2	3.5%	55

Table 3: Category of sensationalism.

Number of sensational headlines in each edition											
Status	5&above	%	4	%	3	%	2	%	1	%	Total
Public	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.00%	4	100	4
Private	1	2%	4	8.3%	2	4.16%	11	22.91%	30	62.5%	48

Table 4: Degree of sensationalism between public and private press.

Level of sensationalism													
Status	Typeface	%	Words	%	Colouring	%	Exclamation mark	%	Question mark	%	Others	%	Total
Public	1	25%	2	50%	1	25%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4
Private	9	10.5%	34	39.5%	24	27.9%	3	3.48%	2	2.3%	4	4.65%	86

Table 5: Levels of sensationalism between public and private press.

them. Some Newspapers had more than four sensational headlines in an edition.

Table 5 gives details of how the private and public press made use of some elements of sensationalism such as typeface, words, colouring, exclamation marks and question marks. The private press was notorious in its use of typeface, words, tone, exclamation and question marks. The use of words accounted for 39.5% of the sensational headlines while colouring followed suit with 27.9%. The public press on its part, made use of colouring (25%) and use of words (50%). The latter was found to use a very mild tone in its reports on the crises. Perhaps the difference in the two could be explained by how much attention each sector paid on the crises. Of all the editions studied the public press had just 21 headlines on crisis situations featuring in barely half of the 34 editions under study. On the contrary, all editions of the private press carried at least one story on crisis situations and in some editions, all the front page headlines focused on crisis situations. This could explain why the public press had just four headlines with elements of sensationalism while the private press had 86 headlines with elements of sensationalism. The stance of the public press could be well understood because of its status. That notwithstanding, both sectors were found to be sensational with the practices largely slanted unto politics. It is also important to note that there were more stories on the Anglophone crisis than on the Ezeka train crash. Two reasons account for this. The papers chosen for the study were Anglophone papers covering a crisis which concerns them directly and which is ongoing, while the train crash occurred in a Francophone zone and the story lasted for a shorter period, relatively.

### Portrayal of stakeholders' action in crisis situations

This study also sought to find out how the media, both private and public, present personalities directly or indirectly involved in crisis situations. Findings show that most often the press took a negative angle in presenting those involved in the crisis such as lawyers, teachers, Government personalities, school authorities, student/pupils, parents and religious leaders. The private press was very hard on Government officials and Government actions, while the public press on its part was very soft and ignored some issues of the crises. The tendency of looking at issues from negative point of view explains why the private press is most often sensational.

### What accounts for sensationalism in the Cameroon press?

Sensationalism in journalism practice has been attributed to media ownership, competition, and individuals with particular interest [21-23]. These factors can be seen in the journalism landscape of Cameroon. As early as 2001, Ngange had noted that, one of the major reasons that accounts for sensationalism was competition and the quest to make more money. Most often, the papers use sensational headlines to capture the reader's attention over their other competitors. The

conclusions of the authors above are based on a general and normal situation and might not sufficiently provide empirical conclusion as to what accounts for sensationalism practice in crisis situations generally.

### Conclusion

This research, which focused on crisis situations looked at three newspapers, two from an Anglophone background and the private sector and one from the public sector. The results have shown that the private press organs under study were very sensational and negative towards many issues especially against Government actions. In their coverage of the crises, especially the Anglophone crisis, a huge part of their publications featured different stories on the crisis. This was the concern of the first research question and objective, to establish the degree of sensationalism in the press.

The research provides empirical evidence of the presence of sensationalism practice in the Cameroonian press and more particularly during crisis situations. While the private press is more sensational, the public press due to its status tends to calm down things by using a very mild tone and at times avoiding to report on the crisis situations. It was noted that while the private press in all the issues studied had at least one headline on crisis situation barely half of that number of the public press had headlines on crisis situation. This was the focus of the second research question and objective meant to know the more sensational press between the private and public media.

Due to the nature of the crises, the practice of sensationalism was more slanted to political issues. In addition to these findings, one of the major issues discovered in this study is that, the political and cultural leanings of a media house account for sensationalism during crisis situations. As in the case of the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis the paper concludes that when the press sympathises with a particular course, it is likely to be sensational. The paper therefore, concludes that, in addition to the different reasons above, one of the issues that can account for sensationalism is when the press sympathises with a particular course as can be seen in the Cameroon Anglophone crisis where the Anglophone newspapers were highly sensational. This nature of participant-advocacy of the press was the focus of the third research question and objective. There is therefore, an urgent need for the Cameroon Anglophone press in particular and the Cameroon media landscape in general to review their journalistic activities and adhere to the basic canons of the profession (accuracy, balance, fairness and objectivity).

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