

## Cameroon: Media Freedom at the Crossroads

Seraphin Kamdem <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4482-9764>

Senior Teaching Fellow, School of Oriental and African Studies

In the globalised world of the 21st century, characterised by fast changing socio-political environments, mobility, and technological advances, the Cameroonian journalist is caught between the need for social relevance, a role in helping positive social change and the maintenance of professional standards.

Talk of media freedom in post-colonial Cameroon raises the question: Freedom from what or whom? Who or what restricts or represses freedom of expression for the journalist?

From independence Cameroonian journalists were essentially rooted in their jobs and careers as civil servants. Joining the profession was generally not due to an inner call to find the truth against all odds and to share that truth with the public. The entry route into the profession was based on a state-controlled and highly selective entrance examination into the Advanced School of Mass Communication (ASMAC). Students graduated as civil servants—with a career set for life in public and state-owned media outlets, namely the National Radio Service, and the main national newspaper, *Cameroon Tribune*. There were a number of state-owned news agencies where some journalists could also be posted, but all the main media institutions were owned and controlled by the government. The journalist was more or less a mouthpiece for *mass communication*, or in other words, the state propaganda.

Most of the information that a journalist could share with the public was produced by the state apparatuses and was systematically controlled and duly censored, under the government pretence of maintaining national unity, social peace, and public order. From the mid-1960s until the mid-1980s, Cameroon was essentially a single party country. There was no room for dissent. To express any deviation from the state-controlled public information was downright dangerous. The 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s did not see any significant form of media freedom nor protests—nor, for that matter, was there any critical analysis of the information available through the public media. The majority of Cameroonians were informed by either the state-controlled *Radio Nationale* with its national and provincial stations, or the all-powerful state-owned national newspaper *Cameroon Tribune*.

In the mid-1980s, with the advent of plural politics and the arrival of television, the media landscape started changing. The international economic recession dealt a blow to public finances and consequently to funding of government institutions and programmes. The desire for more public accountability led to the emergence of stronger civil society organisations, and brought a steady growth of private media institutions. This included mainly private newspapers and FM radio stations that gave new opportunities and outlets for free expression, as well as channels that provided alternative, freer and more reliable

news. The drastic changes taking place within the printed press, along with the emergence of independent private newspapers, contributed significantly to a new popular consciousness characterised by critical views on public issues and a more challenging approach to information made available to Cameroonians.

With the growth of cable TV and the mushrooming of satellite dishes and channels in the 1990s, the private media gained strength, and the media landscape in Cameroon changed more radically than ever.

By the 2000s, not only had the roles and perceptions of journalists changed, but the actors in the sector had also altered a great deal: the career civil servants working for state-owned media institutions were no longer the only voices heard or the only writers read in the press. Even the young television sector had already witnessed the steady growth of private television channels that contributed to the majority of Cameroonians—mainly in the cities—becoming fully connected to international media outlets. From the 1990s through the 2000s, there was a heated climate of political dissent, accompanied by social protests. Socio-political movements—some of them led or informed by the private media, became a tool to question the status quo and ask for political change and reforms. The private media thus helped significantly in the fight for a change of political regime in Cameroon.

Today, in spite of these positive changes, burning questions remain regarding the challenges to media freedom in Cameroon. Is the seemingly chaotic and unreliable local media what the average Cameroonian needs or wants? Is the information available to Cameroonians today useful and relevant to daily life?

It is worth pointing out first the technological challenges: the Cameroonian journalist needs to adapt and adjust to a fast changing environment where ICT tools, social media and mobile phones have become the main channels for communication and sharing information. Another challenge is what can be referred to as ‘information *sourcing*’: Where do Cameroonian journalists take their information from? How ethical is the journalists’ sourcing or production of information? And how reliable are their sources? Such questions must be asked and properly answered.

Another challenge to Cameroonian journalists is the rampant and poisonous sub-culture of ‘information to order’. There is a questionable practice where journalists produce information pieces for the radio, private television stations, or local newspapers, on the specific requests of powerful clients or constituency groups. These information pieces are generally directly motivated by financial and material gains to the journalists in question. In other words, this is not information directly connected to investigate events. On the contrary, there is a significant amount of news that tends to be ideologically and/or politically motivated, where journalists become a tool to spread sometimes biased or unfounded rumours, or fake news to essentially benefit paying clients.

It is still not an easy journey for many Cameroonian journalists to move from a historical role as a functionary—that is a civil servant working for the government and state institutions—to become a neutral investigator, investigating events, collecting objective information and making it available to the public.

The media in Cameroon today, are at a crossroads. There is at once a struggle for survival, a quest for meaning and social relevance, and a struggle for professional efficiency. Most media institutions and professionals are not financially stable or viable, and as such, they tend to focus on those journalistic activities that will bring them some direct financial revenues. The journalist may therefore push moral considerations aside in the process of

producing “news.” The old system of job security and financial stability through working as a civil servant for the state institution is almost gone today, as even those journalists graduating from ASMAC are not automatically recruited into stable jobs—as was the case in the past. The booming private sector is often characterised by a corporate culture: money making and greed are rife, and dictate the order of the day in terms of information selection, the topics to cover, and the editorial lines to be taken. The social role, importance, and public accountability of the media professionals become problematic. Most local media persons or institutions are never seen as neutral, objective, or trustworthy.

The advent of ‘fake news’, social media that is full of hoaxes and scams, the lack of coherent organisation, and a quasi-absence of information sharing among the media outlets result in a disconnect between the local media and the population, and between what is happening in the world and local events in Cameroon. Another disconnect exists between what is discussed and portrayed in the media and the issues that ordinary Cameroonians face daily. The major stories from the international arena, news about international events—such as political scoops, natural catastrophes, sports, celebrities, etc. is readily available in Cameroon. Local news and intra-national information, actually important to Cameroonians, are lost, misrepresented or under-represented, in not just the international but also the local Cameroonian media.