

AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE ANGLOPHONE CRISIS: EFFECTS ON ESCALATION AND DE-ESCALATION

By

Victor NGU CHEO, Ph.D.

The University of Bamenda

vncheo@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The four-year long Anglophone crisis is far from ending. Against a backdrop of unsuccessful military and attempted political solutions by the Cameroon government, assessing the role of the media in propagating, perpetuating or mitigating the crisis is of utmost importance at this point in time. Adopting Equinoxe TV and CRTV, purposively, owing to their extensive coverage and reach, this paper seeks to find out the extent to which media coverage has either accentuated or attenuated the Anglophone Crisis. Employing the agenda setting theory and a descriptive quantitative survey method, the questionnaire is used to elicit data from television viewers. Some of the major findings reveal a polarization of CRTV and Equinoxe on certain salient issues. For instance, the majority of respondents are of the opinion that the nature and orientation of CRTV's reports have contributed to the escalation rather than de-escalation of the Anglophone Crisis. Also, CRTV to a large extent, blames the separatists for the Anglophone crisis. These are in stark contrast with the opinion audience hold about Equinoxe. They see Equinoxe's coverage as geared towards de-escalating the crisis of which it attributes the responsibility to the government. The respect for professional ethics is also an issue of great concern as it was revealed that though both TV channels demonstrate a certain degree of objectivity and balance in reporting the crisis, CRTV owing to their editorial policy does not report issues that seem to give the government a negative impact. Hence there are hiatuses in their reports as there are lesser updates and follow-up. The paper therefore advocates impartiality, balance, objectivity in crisis reporting but above all the social responsibility of the media in building peace and social cohesion in the light of peace journalism.

Keywords: *Media, Coverage, Anglophone Crisis, Effects*

INTRODUCTION

There has been an unprecedented wave of insurgent attacks across Africa in the past decade, from groups like Al-Shabaab and more recently Boko Haram that have resulted in countless deaths, displacements and untold human suffering. Cameroon hitherto, considered an island of peace in the Central African sub-region has since 2014 been the object of deadly attacks by the Northern Nigerian indigenous Islamist sect, Boko Haram. As a result of the conflict in

Cameroon, around 240,000 people in the Far North region fled their homes between 2014 till date (2020). Similarly, the over half a century-old Anglophone problem has degenerated into an armed conflict with separatist fighters demanding secession from La Republique du Cameroun. This has led to the arrest of civil society activists, journalists, trade unionists and teachers some of whom have faced trial before the military courts.

The concept of the Anglophone problem is incontrovertibly rooted in the country's colonial history (Ngoh, 1988). Evidently, as Konnings & Nyamnjoh, (2000) have argued, there was no consensus among Anglophone leaders about reunification with French Cameroon in 1961 as many Anglophones had desired a third option of establishing an independent state of Southern Cameroons like their counterparts of East Cameroon. Consequently, they have always wanted to secede from Cameroon since 1972. The United Nations and Great Britain did not admit the third option (Konnings & Nyamnjoh, 1997). Since then, some movements like the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) have always publicly advocated for secession and have always attempted to hoist a flag other than the Cameroon flag on 1st October every year (Fonchingong, 2013). The pent-up grievances of marginalization exacerbated by poor governance, corruption and the continuous attempt to obliterate the Anglophone educational and judicial heritage has culminated in the Anglophone Crisis (2016-2020).

1. Problem Statement

Coverage of the Anglophone Crisis has become a staple on most media channels in Cameroon. Though the crisis concerns principally the two English speaking regions of Cameroon; the North West and South West, it is in effect a national crisis as the socio-economic consequences are felt in all the eight Francophone regions in Cameroon as well as a threat to national unity as the Separatist fighters are insisting on secession from La Republique du Cameroun. The Cameroon government has employed frantic political and military strategies thus far in an attempt to keep the country united. At the center of purveying information about the activities of the belligerent factions is the media. In this regard, and mindful of the potential of the media in agenda setting, there is need to check, the nature, extent and orientation of coverage in other that rather than mitigate the crisis the media is not accentuating it. There are some accusations and counter accusations as to how the state-owned media and those of private ownership report the Anglophone crisis. The principles, ethics and deontological practices of media reporting in general and conflict reporting in particular put a premium on fairness, balance, impartiality, objectivity, precision and neutrality in journalism reporting. This work assesses the audience perception of the audio-visual media reporting of the crisis. It also seeks to verify the extent to which the television reporting may tend to escalate or de-escalate the conflict. Furthermore, the paper attempts to ascertain how free the Media have been in the coverage of the crisis in a bid to understand the context under which the Media in Cameroon operate. In addressing these issues, the paper seeks to provide answers to the following questions: what is the nature of coverage of the Anglophone crisis? To what

extent have the media adhered to the journalistic principles of reporting the crisis? Has Media coverage contributed in escalating or de-escalating the crisis?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Crisis reporting is the process of giving detailed account of the situation through messages, texts, or photographs. Reporting on crisis constitutes one of the most challenging tasks to perform. Adesina (2009) states that reporting on terrorism presents a number of dilemmas and paradoxes to journalists whose responsibility is to inform the public objectively, fairly and accurately. Faced with the Anglophone crisis, the Cameroon media is confronted with practising the kind of reporting that does not result in escalating the conflict, but rather containing, and even resolving it. In this regard, conflict reporting is shaped by the language used by news producers. It is underlined that the language that is used in reports should not only impact on the way audiences will come to understanding a conflict, but also on the way in which they will view the media. If audiences pick up that the use of language is sensational or imprecise, there is a fair chance that this will impact on the credibility and ability of the report to play a negative role in the conflict. Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) offer some advice regarding the choice of words in reporting on conflict. They suggest that journalists should: avoid adjectives such as 'vicious', 'brutal', 'cruel' and 'barbaric'. These will always place the journalist in a position where he or she is seen to be siding with one party over another. Journalists should rather provide the facts at their disposal and let the audience reach their own conclusions. Furthermore, labels like 'terrorist', 'extremist' or 'fanatic' should be avoided. Using these terms places the journalists in a camp and shows bias. All of these terms suggest that the people being referred to are not rational actors, and that their views are representative of a fringe minority. This is by no means always the case. Avoid victimizing language like 'devastated', 'defenseless' and 'pathetic'. In all, it means using language effectively by news producers during reporting.

History records occasions where the media has been used as a destructive weapon to fundamental human rights. Adolf Hitler used the media to create hatred for Jews (Thompson, 2007). Rwanda's Radio Television Libre des Milles Collines (RTL), urged listeners "to kill Tutsis" or what it called, the "cockroaches" (Des Forges, 1999). In the Balkans, broadcasters polarized local communities to the point where, violence became an acceptable tool for addressing grievances (Thompson, 2007). The media may also incite violence through manipulative, negative presentation of facts that create the impression that the situation is worsening. This type of reporting more often than not provides a justification for people or groups to take decisive action, including violence (Frohardt & Temin, 2003). Both local and international media in Rwanda failed to report on the impact of the conflict as early as 1990. Local media ignored to report on massacres of political dissidents and those suspected to be Tutsi sympathizers (Des Forges, 1999). The role of the media in the Rwandan genocide was in great disrepute of the legal and moral principles of Journalism and human rights. By instigating a genocide

campaign, the media turned into a dangerous weapon. Its international counterparts failed to monitor escalating killings and rather pictured the crisis as a civil strife between the Tutsi and Hutus. Similar characteristics are portrayed in coverage of the Darfur conflict in Southern Sudan. Since 2003, local Arab media have passively dealt with atrocities committed in Sudan. The conflict in Darfur has been framed as an “Arab war”, a line quickly adopted by the local media. This kind of reporting is vague and only worsens the conflicts. A number of journalists were accused of taking part in the killings in Rwanda. Authorities used RTLM and Radio Rwanda broadcasters to spur and direct killings where Tutsis were hiding (Kamilindi, 2007).

Thompson (2007) has argued that media spurs conflict in society by making derogatory remarks based on ethnic differences, race, colour, and sex. In Rwanda like the Balkans, media messages were designed to sharpen ethnic and political sensitivities. Thompson, writing on the Yugoslavian war notes that the media was saturated with intensified propaganda to mobilize the population and make war thinkable, let alone inevitable (Thompson, 2007). On his part, Ong’onda (2016) carried out a linguistic analysis of newspaper headlines on terrorism in Kenya. The aim of her study was to identify and explain how the Al-Shabaab were portrayed and represented through language used in the headlines of newspapers by reporters. She employed the Systemic Functional Linguistics and adopted the framework of transitivity analysis, which identified ideational meanings realized through grammatical choices. Newspaper discourse was chosen to describe the phenomenon. The analysis located different perspectives expressed by grammatical choices in the newspaper headlines. The findings revealed that the grammatical choices in newspaper reports played a role to covertly express the writers’ perspectives towards a terrorist group, which affected the readers’ opinion-making processes. The findings equally revealed that news reports helped in shaping and sustaining the opinions of the powerful elements, groups, and countries in the international community. These opinions were then passed off as the natural or the inevitable reality.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper has adopted the agenda-setting theory associated with McCombs and Shaw (1972). It explains the strong media effects, closely linked to the ability of the media to reproduce social and cultural aspects of society through the publication of information. The theory suggests that the media affects the scope of public thinking. If applied to the Anglophone Crisis, we find that through daily reporting over time, issues (agenda) covered in the media are transformed to public agendas. By generating discussions on peace-building, journalists and policy makers can collectively shape the public agenda to more constructive dialogues. Contrary, to a general assumption that the media has power to directly inject behaviours and attitudes in the minds of people, the theory rather suggests that the media affects the scope of their thinking. This argument is also reflected in Bernard Cohen’s 1963 statement that “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but

it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about” (Cohen 1963 cited from Rogers & Dearing, 1996). In essence, through daily reporting over time, the media agenda becomes the public agenda. Agenda-setting operates under two assumptions; Firstly, the media does not reflect reality, they filter and shape it. Secondly, media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues (McQuail & Windhal, 2011). The agenda-setting theory has been challenged for portraying the public as a passive receiver. In this regard this paper argues that the media does not passively relay information from sources; they select or reject it according to the reality of the day, or the particular slant of the media house. In the absence of effective guidelines on conflict sensitive journalism, practitioners are likely to infuse their own biases in news commentaries. However, Dearing & Rogers (1996) posit that audiences are actively engaged in dominant societal discourses at any particular moment. They argue that the media helps to reinforce ideas and contexts in which information is perceived.

4. Methodology

This paper has adopted the quantitative survey design to elicit data from two cosmopolitan cities in Cameroon; Yaounde and Bamenda with estimated population sizes of 3.842.031 and 372.718 inhabitants, respectively (Ntoban & Fogwe, 2019). The two cities were purposively chosen because of their socio-political significance. Yaounde is the political capital and seat of the ruling Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) Party that has led the country for over three decades now, while Bamenda is home to the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) and one of the epicenters of the Anglophone crisis. The choice of the two cities, therefore, provide a fair representation of diverse political views. There is also the cultural factor that warranted the selection of the two cities. Yaounde is predominantly French-speaking while Bamenda is English-speaking and both fairly represent the multicultural and bilingual nature of the country. Overall, the choice of the two cities offers a balance in the data collected and provides a fair representation and understanding of media use and political knowledge from socio-politically and culturally diverse settings. Meanwhile, the 150 respondents were recruited through a stratified random sampling. The instruments for data collection designed for this study is the questionnaire whereas the quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis, presentation and discussion of findings were used.

5. Discussion of Findings

This section is dedicated to the presentation and discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions and in conjunction with the objectives. The first question seeks to assess the nature and orientation of coverage of the Anglophone Crisis by both Equinoxe and CRTV. In this regard, an aggregate of 89.3% of the respondents (49.7% strongly agree while 39.6% agree) are of the opinion that Equinoxe is very much preoccupied with the issues of highlighting human rights concerns as opposed to CRTV which they aggregately

rated at 34.9% (18.1% strongly agree and 16.8% agree). Highlighting human rights issues, particularly, human rights abuse is a form of agenda-setting for either a quick resolution of the crisis or an appeal to a stop to such abuses.

As to which of the two television stations is regular on reporting the crisis, the respondents once more rated Equinox as more regular than CRTV as reflected in table 1 below. In fact, 83.2% of the respondents strongly agreed that Equinox TV reports regularly on the Anglophone Crisis as opposed to only 2.0% for CRTV. The impact of regular reporting is that viewers are abreast and updated with the latest news. This enables them to make informed decisions and draw logical conclusion.

Table 1: Regularity of Coverage of the Anglophone Crisis

	EQUINOXE		CRTV	
	F	%	F	%
Strongly Agree	124	82.2	3	2.0
Agree	8	5.2	2	1.3
Neither agree/disagree	0	0	9	6.0
Strongly Disagree	0	0	5	3.4
Disagree	17	11.4	130	87.2
Total	149	100	149	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2020

On the issue of who is responsible for the sustained nature of the crisis, the majority of the respondents, 77.2% strongly agreed that the reports of Equinox blame the government for the crisis as indicated in table 2 below.

Table 2: Blaming the Government for the Crisis

	EQUINOXE		CRTV	
	F	%	F	%
Strongly Agree	115	77.2	9	6
Agree	12	8	5	3.4
Neither agree/disagree	0	0	6	4.0
Strongly Disagree	0	0	7	4.7
Disagree	22	14.8	122	81.9
Total	149	100%	149	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2020

On the other hand, the reverse is true of CRTV reports where 74.5% of the respondents strongly agree that CRTV rather blames the separatists for being responsible for the crisis as indicated by Table 3 below. Hence Equinox and CRTV are polarized on the issue of who is to blame for the crises. The reason for this polarization could best be explained by the editorial policies of the two media houses which is reflective of their individual stance.

Table 3: Blaming the Separatists fighters

	EQUINOXE	CRTV
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	F	%	F	%
Strongly Agree	3	2.0	111	74.5
Agree	2	1.3	23	15.4
Neither agree/disagree	9	6.0	0	0
Strongly Disagree	20	13.4	0	0
Disagree	115	77.2	15	10.1
Total	149	100	149	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2020

With respect to propaganda and lies about the crisis, 81.9% of the respondents strongly agree that there is a lot of propaganda and lies on CRTV about the crisis as compared to only 2.0% who hold the same opinion of Equinox. This is clearly indicated in the table below.

Table 4: Perception on Propaganda and lies about the Crisis on the Media

	EQUINOXE		CRTV	
	F	%	F	%
Strongly Agree	3	2.0	122	81.9
Agree	4	2.7	9	6.0
Neither agree/disagree	9	6.0	0	0
Strongly Disagree	5	3.4	1	.7
Disagree	128	85.9	17	11.4
Total	149	100	149	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2020

As regards the second question which deals with the extent of professionalism and respect of media ethics in the coverage of the Anglophone Crisis by both Equinox and CRTV, a number of indicators were put forth as a barometer for audience ratings in this perspective.; balance, objectivity, fairness, bias, follow up in order that the audience may draw logical conclusion.

On the issue of balanced reporting, 39.6% of the respondents say Equinox TV is *extremely balanced* in the coverage of the crisis. Comparatively, just 5.4% think that CRTV is moderately balanced in their coverage of the crisis. On the aggregate, respondents are of the opinion that CRTV (about 98%) balanced against 8% for Equinox in the way they cover and report the Anglophone crisis. There is a general sense of acceptance amongst respondents that Equinox TV is more balanced in their reporting of the crisis than the CRTV. The comprehensive finding is seen in the table below.

Table 5: Media Balance in the Coverage of the Anglophone Crisis

	EQUINOXE		CRTV	
	F	%	F	%
Strongly Agree	6	4.0	137	91.9
Agree	30	20.1	4	2.7
Neither agree/disagree	35	23.5	8	5.4
Strongly Disagree	19	12.8	0	0
Disagree	59	39.6	0	0
Total	149	100	149	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2020

On the criterion of Objectivity, the audience ratings as presented on the table below clearly indicate that none of the respondents think CRTV is *extremely objective* in its coverage of the crisis. Only 5.4% and 28.2% are of the opinion that CRTV is *very objective* and *moderately objective* respectively in its coverage of the crisis. As for Equinoxe TV, the respondents rather think the channel has demonstrated some higher level of objectivity in its coverage of the Anglophone crisis. 10.7%, 18.1% and 59.1% of respondents say Equinoxe TV has been *extremely objective*, *very objective* and *moderately objective* respectively in its coverage of the crisis.

Table 6: Objectivity in the Coverage of the Anglophone Crisis

	EQUINOXE		CRTV	
	F	%	F	%
Strongly Agree	3	2.0	27	18.1
Agree	15	10.1	72	48.3
Neither agree/disagree	88	59.1	42	28.2
Strongly Disagree	27	18.1	8	5.4
Disagree	16	10.7	0	0
Total	149	100	149	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2020

Another issue which was raised in the line with professionalism and respect of media ethics is follow-up of latest developments and updating the audience. In this light, there is a general consensus amongst all the respondents that Equinoxe TV has been following updates as far as coverage of the crisis is concerned. This is evident as 83.2% of the respondents say they *often* follow up on updates while 16.8% say they *always* follow up. On the other hand, 78.5% of the respondents indicated that CRTV *never* follows up on updates of the crisis. This group of respondents is supported by 13.2% others who say CRTV *rarely* follows up. Just 5.4%, 0.7% and 2% respondents say CRTV *sometimes*, *often* and *always* respectively, follows up on updates of the crisis.

Table 7: Coverage of Crisis Updates

	EQUINOXE	CRTV
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	F	%	F	%
Strongly Agree	0	0	117	78.5
Agree	0	0	20	13.4
Neither agree/disagree	0	0	8	5.4
Strongly Disagree	124	83.2	1	0.7
Disagree	25	16.8	3	2.0
Total	149	100	149	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2020

The last issue of professionalism and respect of media ethics raised in this study is that of biased reporting. The result obtained from a comparative analysis is presented on the composite frequency table below.

Table 8: Biased Reporting in the Coverage of the Anglophone Crisis

	EQUINOXE		CRTV	
	F	%	F	%
Strongly Agree	0	0	1	.7
Agree	142	95.3	14	9.4
Neither agree/disagree	3	2.0	16	10.7
Strongly Disagree	2	1.3	0	0
Disagree	2	1.3	118	79.2
Total	149	100%	149	100%

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2020

According to the results on table 8, it is clear that CRTV, as stated by the respondents is more biased in their reporting of the crisis as opposed to Equinox TV. This is evident by the fact that the majority of the respondents 79.2% noted that CRTV is *always* biased in its reporting of the crisis. This group of respondents is even supported by 10.7% others who say the biased reporting is *sometimes*, while 9.4% say it is *rarely*. Only 0.7% of the respondent are of the opinion that CRTV is *never* biased in their reporting of the Anglophone crisis. Comparatively, with respect to data captured on biased reporting of the crisis by Equinox, the majority of the respondents 95.3% say Equinox is *rarely* biased in reporting the crisis. 2% others say they *sometimes*, while 1.3% others noted that they always.

Based on the above data captured on the various sets of issues raised on this subject, there is a clear evidence that with respect to content and at varying degrees, CRTV and Equinox have been highlighting human rights issues, from the beginning of the crisis, regular in coverage of the crisis, blaming the government and or the separatist fighters for the crisis as well as providing propaganda and lies about the crisis. Meanwhile on the level of professionalism and respect of media ethics, still at varying degrees it was noted that both Equinox TV and CRTV journalists had some

liberty to cover and report the crisis. However, there were varying extents of balance, objectivity and bias, as well as follow-up of updates in their coverage of the Anglophone crisis.

As concerns the third question which is whether media coverage has contributed to the escalation or de-escalation of the crisis, the answer is very clear according to the results obtained and presented on table 9 below.

Table 9: Orientation of Media Reporting

	EQUINOXE		CRTV	
	F	%	F	%
To de-escalate the crisis	137	91.9	20	13.4
Escalate the crisis	12	8.9	129	86.6
Total	149	100.0	149	100.0

Source: Author's fieldwork 2020

With regard to Equinoxe TV, 137(91.9%) of the respondents said the nature of the Anglophone crisis reporting is to de-escalate the crisis. Only a negligible number 12(8.1%) of respondents said Equinoxe TV reporting is oriented towards escalation of the crisis. On the other hand, 20(13.4%) of the respondents hold that the nature of the crisis reporting by CRTV is to de-escalate it while 129(86.6%) opined that CRTV's coverage of the crisis is geared towards escalating it.

Conclusion

This paper was informed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) agenda-setting theory, on how the Media can influence policy through shaping public opinions. The findings and analysis sought to address issues revolving on how CRTV and Equinoxe have been covering the ongoing Anglophone crisis. More specifically, the paper presents an analysis of the orientation of their coverage from an audience perspective and an assessment of whether or not the orientation of coverage has contributed in escalating or de-escalating the crisis.

Generally, the analysis indicates a clear evidence that with respect to content and at varying degrees, CRTV and Equinoxe have been highlighting human rights issues, from the beginning of the crisis. However, the respondents (89.3%) are of the opinion that Equinoxe is more preoccupied with the issue of human rights as opposed to 34.9% who hold similar opinion for CRTV. The study also found out that at varying degrees, there is regularity in the coverage of the crisis by both Equinoxe and CRTV. However, going by the audience assessment, it was revealed that Equinoxe does more regular coverage on the Anglophone Crisis than CRTV and provides audience with updates as well.

With regard to the media attributing blame as per who is responsible for the crisis, the respondents were polarized with respect to the two TV channels. They observed that CRTV, a pro-government channel principally blames the separatists for the crisis while Equinoxe, a privately-owned Channel blames the government for the

crisis as well as the fact that the government does a lot of propaganda and lies telling about the crisis.

On the issue of professionalism and respect of media ethics, the respondents, while observing that both media organs are pitching their coverage on the principles of balance, objectivity and unbiased reporting, they also noted that Equinoxe turn to respect these values more than CRTV. The same holds true for follow-up and reporting of updates. This by extension, can be explained by the individual editorial policy of both media houses. Also, the source of funding is contributory to the nature and orientation of reporting the Anglophone crisis. The saying goes that he who pays the piper dictates the tune. This is very true of CRTV which is funded by the State. There is therefore, total need for media autonomy, independence and complete press freedom in order that the media can truly assume its role as the fourth estate of the realm.

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