Review Article

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the Use of Social Media in Armed Conflict: Case Study of the Anglophone Armed Conflict in Cameroon

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Abstract

Social media has profoundly impacted the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon, acting as both a catalyst and a complicating factor for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) compliance. Its rapid dissemination of information blurs the lines between combatants and civilians, complicating the application of core IHL principles such as distinction, proportionality, and precaution. Misinformation, propaganda, and hate speech proliferate online, fuelling violence, inciting IHL violations, and undermining humanitarian efforts. Both state and non-state actors exploit social media for recruitment, propaganda, and intelligence, often breaching IHL obligations. The digital environment also facilitates documentation of abuses, but uncontrolled sharing can lead to further violations, retaliation, and challenges in accountability. Thus, while social media offers opportunities for transparency and justice, it also presents significant risks, demanding constant adaptation of IHL to safeguard civilians and uphold humanitarian norms in the digital age.
Keywords: International Humanitarian Law (IHL), Social Media, Armed Conflict, Anglophone Conflict, Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has undeniably reshaped the landscape of armed conflict, extending its reach far beyond traditional battlefields into the pervasive digital realm. Social media platforms, once primarily tools for personal connection, have rapidly evolved into indispensable arenas where hostilities unfold, narratives are forged, and public perceptions are profoundly influenced. This transformative shift presents a complex and urgent challenge to International Humanitarian Law (IHL), the established body of rules designed, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict and protect those not, or no longer, participating in hostilities. The rapid, often unfiltered, dissemination of information online creates an intricate environment where the foundational principles of IHL such as distinction, proportionality, and precaution are continually tested, strained, and sometimes fundamentally undermined. Indeed, the speed, global reach, and inherent virality of content shared on platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) necessitate a critical re-evaluation of how international legal frameworks, largely forged in a pre-digital era, can effectively safeguard civilians and uphold humanitarian norms in modern warfare.

In this evolving paradigm, the protracted Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon stands as a stark contemporary case study, emblematic of the profound impact of social media on IHL compliance. What began in 2016 as peaceful grievances and protests against perceived linguistic and historical marginalization in Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest regions tragically escalated into a brutal armed confrontation between government forces and various non-state armed groups [1]. Within this volatile environment, social media has transcended its conventional role as a mere communication tool, becoming an indispensable, albeit double-edged, sword. It serves as a primary battleground for competing narratives, a key instrument for mobilization and recruitment, and paradoxically, a vital means for documenting atrocities. This pervasive digital dimension has intensified the conflict's complexity, contributing to cycles of radicalization, fuelling violence, and presenting unique dilemmas for all parties involved in adhering to their IHL obligations. This paper posits that social media

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[1]Pelican, M. (2022). *The Anglophone conflict in Cameroon – historical and political background* pp 1-34.

profoundly impacts the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon, acting as both a catalyst for violations and a significant complicating factor for IHL compliance, particularly in blurring the lines between combatants and civilians, proliferating harmful narratives, and demanding adaptive legal and practical responses.

The core principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution in IHL are designed to minimize human suffering by regulating the conduct of hostilities. Applying this theoretical framework, the specific context of the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon reveals the profound practical implications for IHL compliance. Both the Cameroonian state forces and the various non-state armed groups operating in the Northwest and Southwest regions have extensively leveraged social media, often with alarming consequences. Government entities utilize platforms for official communications, public diplomacy, and countering narratives, yet persistent allegations suggest the spread of dehumanizing content and misinformation aimed at delegitimizing separatist groups and their supporters, which can contribute to a climate conducive to violations. Conversely, non-state armed groups, often lacking traditional media infrastructure, rely heavily on social media for recruitment, fundraising, propaganda dissemination, and reporting on alleged abuses by opposing forces. While their right to communicate is generally acknowledged, their extensive use of social media for incitement to violence, glorification of attacks on civilians, and the systematic spread of disinformation aimed at causing fear or confusion among the civilian population constitutes a clear breach of their IHL obligations. The pervasive nature of hate speech online, often targeting specific ethnic or linguistic communities, has been particularly corrosive, eroding the protective fabric of IHL by normalizing violence against certain populations and making it easier for combatants to commit atrocities.

Crucially, the digital trail left by social media activities increasingly forms part of the evidentiary landscape for accountability. IHL establishes individual responsibility for war crimes and other serious violations, a principle that extends unequivocally to actions taken in the digital sphere. Commanders ordering or individuals committing IHL violations via social media such as sharing humiliating images of prisoners of war or inciting attacks on civilians can be held accountable under international criminal law. The challenging but growing capacity to trace digital footprints opens new avenues for prosecuting such individuals, even remote actors who are not physically present on the battlefield but actively participate in or incite violations through their online activities. National justice systems and international criminal courts are increasingly grappling with cases involving online evidence and incitement, underscoring the evolving legal landscape of digital accountability[2]. Understanding these dynamics is paramount not only for legal redress but also for mitigating harm, fostering accountability, and ultimately, striving for greater respect for IHL in the Anglophone conflict.

To comprehensively analyse these critical issues, this paper will proceed in two main parts. The first part will delve into International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Principles and the Use of social media in Armed Conflict, laying the theoretical groundwork by meticulously examining the core principles of IHL and critically assessing their enduring relevance and the unprecedented challenges they face in the digital sphere. It will also explore how various conflict actors' online conduct is undeniably bound by IHL (I). Subsequently, the second part will focus on The Impact of social media on International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Compliance in Cameroon's Anglophone Armed Conflict. This section will apply the theoretical framework to the specific context of the Anglophone crisis, exploring how social media serves as a dual-use tool for all parties, the pervasive challenge of misinformation and disinformation, the heightened risk of incitement to violence, and the critical issue of accountability for online actions within this particular conflict, highlighting specific examples where available and relevant (II). Through this structured analysis, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between technology and humanitarian law in contemporary internal armed conflicts.

I. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Principles and the Use of social media in armed Conflict

In contemporary armed conflicts, the digital realm has become an indispensable arena, profoundly influencing how hostilities unfold and how they are perceived. The Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon stands as a stark example, where social media isn't just a communication tool but an active participant, shaping narratives, mobilizing actors, and documenting events. This part delves into the critical interplay between established IHL principles and the dynamic, often chaotic, landscape of online communication during armed conflict. It explores the direct applicability of IHL to social media content, focusing on core tenets like distinction, proportionality, and precautions principles constantly tested by the speed and reach of digital information. Furthermore, this study will unpack the significant challenges and opportunities social media presents for upholding IHL, from the complexities of verifying content and ensuring accountability for online actions to the pervasive threat of misinformation and propaganda, while also considering the immense

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[2] International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) Appeals Chamber. (2001). Prosecutor v. Kordić & Čerkez, IT-95-14/2-A.

potential of social media as evidence for future justice and reconciliation efforts. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for mitigating harm, fostering accountability, and ultimately, striving for greater respect for IHL in the digital age.

A. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Principles in the Digital Age

The contemporary landscape of armed conflict is inextricably linked with the digital realm, transforming the operational environment and profoundly impacting the application of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). This encapsulates this crucial nexus, necessitating a detailed examination of how established IHL principles endure and adapt in the face of pervasive social media. This exploration will delve into the enduring relevance of core IHL principles within the social media sphere and then critically assess their applicability to the conduct of various conflict actors operating online.

1- The Enduring Relevance of Core IHL Principles in the Social Media Sphere

The ubiquity of social media has fundamentally reshaped the conduct of hostilities, introducing novel challenges to the consistent application of IHL. Despite these unprecedented complexities, the foundational principles of IHL remain the immutable bedrock governing conduct during armed conflict. The principle of distinction, a cornerstone of IHL, mandates that parties to a conflict must at all times differentiate between combatants and civilians, and between military objectives and civilian objects, ARTICLE 48 *Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions* states that '' *The Parties to the conflict shall at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives and accordingly shall direct their operations only against military objectives''* [3]

In the digital age, social media content significantly complicates the ability to uphold this imperative. Imagery, statements, and even personal profiles disseminated online can blur these critical lines, making it exceedingly difficult to ascertain legitimate targets from protected individuals or objects [4] . For example, a civilian might inadvertently or intentionally post content that creates the perception of association with an armed group, or an armed group might strategically embed itself within civilian digital networks to evade targeting. Challenges are particularly pronounced in definitively identifying combatant status versus non-combatant status online, especially when individuals utilize pseudonyms or engage in online activities that mimic those of combatants without actively being members of an armed force. The burgeoning phenomenon of "citizen journalism" and the widespread sharing of amateur footage further complicate matters, as it can be challenging to discern whether individuals are directly participating in hostilities[5], which would result in the temporary loss of their civilian protection. The accuracy and reliability of information gleaned from social media are paramount here; misinterpreting digital cues can lead to erroneous identification and potentially unlawful attacks on protected persons.

Closely related is the principle of proportionality which prohibits attacks expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated. Article 51(5)(b) of Additional Protocol I (1977) to the Geneva Conventions, prohibits attacks expected to cause incidental civilian harm that would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated[6].

Social media intelligence offers both potential benefits and significant risks in assessing proportionality. On one hand, real-time, crowd-sourced information regarding civilian presence in a specific area, disseminated through platforms like Twitter or Facebook, could theoretically be integrated into military decision-making processes to minimize civilian harm. For instance, reports of civilians sheltering in a particular building could prompt a reassessment of a planned strike. However, the reliability, timeliness, and verifiable nature of such information are critically important. Acting on unverified or outdated social media intelligence carries grave risks of error and potential IHL violations [7] . Furthermore, the very act of inciting violence or causing civilian harm through social media content itself is a

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[3] International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions*, Article 48 (1987).

[4] NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence. (2018). Social media and armed conflict. NATO CCDCOE. Retrieved from https://ccdcoe.org/uploads/2018/10/Art-07-The-Social-Side-of-Cyber-Power.-Social-Media-and-Cyber-Operations.pdf.

[5] Boothby, W. H. (2010). "And for such time as": The time dimension to direct participation in hostilities. *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics, 42*(3), 741–768.

[6] International Committee of the Red Cross. (1977). *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), Article 51(5)(b)*. This article states: *"An attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated, is prohibited."*

[7] Boehnert, J. (2019). Social media intelligence: The national security–privacy nexus. South African Journal of Military Studies, 47(1), 1-22.

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proportional concern. The widespread dissemination of inflammatory rhetoric or false accusations online can incite retaliatory attacks that are disproportionate to any perceived military advantage, ultimately leading to exacerbated civilian suffering. Commanders must exercise extreme prudence when utilizing social media data for targeting decisions, ensuring robust verification procedures are in place to prevent any breaches of IHL.

Another important principle is the principle of precaution which oblige parties to an armed conflict to take all feasible precautions in attack to avoid, and in any event to minimize, incidental civilian casualties and damage to civilian objects, Article 57 of Additional Protocol I (1977) to the Geneva Conventions establishes the *principle of precaution in attack*, which requires parties to an armed conflict to take all feasible measures to avoid or minimize incidental harm to civilians and civilian objects during military operations[8].

In the digital age, this imperative extends to measures aimed at preventing the dissemination of content that could endanger civilians or compromise their safety. For example, armed groups might inadvertently or deliberately post information online that inadvertently exposes the location of civilians, humanitarian aid convoys, or protected medical facilities. Conversely, government entities might release information that, while seemingly innocuous, could be exploited by adversaries to inflict harm upon civilians. The responsibility to rigorously verify any information obtained online before acting upon it is paramount. This includes a critical assessment of source credibility, cross-referencing information with other reliable sources, and maintaining a high degree of skepticism towards manipulated or unconfirmed content. Moreover, exercising precaution might involve actively monitoring one's own social media channels to ensure that no information is being disseminated that could inadvertently lead to IHL violations by either side, emphasizing a proactive approach to digital conduct.

A clear and unequivocal application of IHL rules, often reinforced by international human rights law, is the stringent prohibition of incitement to commit war crimes or violence against civilians or protected persons. Social media platforms, with their unparalleled capacity for rapid and widespread dissemination, have regrettably become fertile ground for such incitement [9]. Posts containing overt hate speech against specific ethnic groups, explicit calls for summary executions, or the glorification of atrocities directly contravene fundamental IHL norms. This encompasses not only explicit calls to violence but also more insidious forms of dehumanization that can pave the way for widespread atrocities. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, for instance, explicitly lists "directly inciting the commission of genocide" as a punishable offense[10]. The inherent challenge lies in monitoring the vast volume of digital content and effectively holding individuals and groups accountable for online incitement, particularly across diverse geographical boundaries and numerous social media platforms.

Respecting these IHL principles by various actors provides extensive protection for persons hors de combat, those who are no longer participating in hostilities, such as captured combatants, the wounded, and the sick [11]. Regrettably, social media can be nefariously misused to identify, mock, or threaten such individuals, thereby flagrantly violating their IHL protections. Examples include the sharing of graphic images or videos depicting captured fighters being humiliated, paraded, or subjected to various forms of abuse. Such acts not only constitute a profound violation of the dignity of these individuals but can also amount to grave breaches and war crimes. The Geneva Conventions explicitly forbid the humiliating and degrading treatment of prisoners of war and other protected persons[12]. The instantaneous nature of social media dissemination means that such violations can be broadcast globally before any mitigating action can be taken, compounding the harm to the victims and potentially inciting further abuses.

2- Applicability of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to Social Media Conduct by Conflict Actors

The digital engagement of various actors in armed conflicts unequivocally brings their online conduct directly under the purview of IHL. Whether state armies or non-state armed groups, their actions in the digital sphere must rigorously comply with the established laws of war. Government forces, as parties to

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[8] International Committee of the Red Cross. (1977). *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), Article 57: Precautions in attack.*

[9] Hakim, N. (2020). How social media companies could be complicit in incitement to genocide. Chicago Journal of International Law, 21(1), 83–117.

[10] International Criminal Court. (2002). Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Art. 25(3)(e)).

[11] Article 40 of Additional Protocol I prohibits ordering that there shall be no survivors (the rule of quarter) and

ensures that persons hors de combat—those who are out of the fight due to surrender, wounds, or capture—must be protected and treated humanely. This provision is fundamental in safeguarding captured combatants, the wounded, and the sick from attack or mistreatment during armed conflict.

[12] International Committee of the Red Cross. (1949). *Geneva Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Article 13: Humane treatment.*

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international treaties and ultimately responsible for upholding IHL, bear specific obligations regarding their official communications, propaganda, and intelligence gathering on social media. Their online activities must strictly adhere to IHL principles, meaning official government social media accounts cannot be used to incite violence, spread hate speech, or disseminate misinformation that could lead to IHL violations. Any intelligence garnered through social media must be treated with the utmost caution and verified through multiple, credible sources before being utilized for military operations, thereby ensuring strict compliance with the principles of distinction and proportionality[13]. Furthermore, state actors are obligated to provide comprehensive training to their personnel on the IHL implications of social media use, preventing unauthorized or unlawful sharing of information that could jeopardize military operations or, more critically, the safety of civilians[14]. Their digital conduct also profoundly influences domestic and international public perception and legitimacy.

While not signatories to international treaties in the same manner as states, Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) are undeniably bound by IHL, particularly customary international humanitarian law and Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions[15]. This binding nature extends directly to their use of social media. NSAGs frequently leverage social media for recruitment, fundraising, propaganda dissemination, and reporting on alleged abuses by opposing forces. While their right to communicate is generally acknowledged, this freedom does not confer a license for actions that violate IHL. Their use of social media for incitement to violence, the glorification of attacks on civilians, or the systematic spread of disinformation aimed at causing fear or confusion among the civilian population constitutes a clear breach of their IHL obligations[16]. The inherent challenge lies in enforcing these obligations against actors who often operate outside traditional state structures and may not fully recognize the authority of international law.

Critically, IHL also establishes individual responsibility for war crimes and other serious violations. This principle is undeniably extended to individuals who commit, order, or incite IHL violations through social media. Commanders, fighters, and even supporters who actively participate in or facilitate such violations online can be held accountable under international criminal law. For instance, a commander who orders the sharing of humiliating images of prisoners of war on social media could be held responsible for ill-treatment and grave breaches. Similarly, an individual who uses social media to incite mass violence against a protected group could face charges for complicity in or direct commission of war crimes, or even genocide. The increasing capacity to trace digital footprints, though often challenging, opens new avenues for prosecuting such individuals. The International criminal courts and national justice systems are increasingly grappling with cases involving online evidence and incitement, underscoring the evolving legal landscape of digital accountability[17].

In sum, the digital age presents a complex and evolving frontier for International Humanitarian Law. While its core principles remain steadfast, their application in the fast-paced, interconnected world of social media demands constant re-evaluation and adaptation. Ensuring respect for distinction, proportionality, precaution, and prohibiting incitement and mistreatment in the online sphere is not merely a technical challenge but a fundamental imperative for safeguarding humanity in armed conflicts. The accountability of all conflict actors, whether states, NSAGs, or individuals, for their digital conduct is crucial for upholding the integrity of IHL in this new and challenging environment.

B- The Interplay of Social Media and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Obligations in Armed Conflict

The rapid proliferation and ubiquitous nature of social media platforms have fundamentally altered the landscape of armed conflict in the 21st century. No longer confined to traditional battlefields, hostilities now extend into the digital realm, presenting both unprecedented opportunities and profound challenges for the application and enforcement of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). This section delves into the intricate interplay between social media and IHL obligations, exploring how digital platforms serve as a dual-use tool, the pervasive challenge of misinformation and disinformation, the heightened risk of incitement to violence, and the critical issue of accountability for online actions during armed conflict.

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[13] International Law Commission. (2001). Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, with Commentaries. (For the general principle of State Responsibility).

[14] Ibid.

[15] Henckaerts, J. M., & Doswald-Beck, L. (2005). Customary International Humanitarian Law: Volume I: Rules. Cambridge University Press.

[16] International Committee of the Red Cross. (1949). Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949. Common Article 3.

[17] International Criminal Court (ICC). (2016). Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo. Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Rome Statute.

1- Social Media as a Dual-Use Tool: Facilitating Communication, Information Dissemination, and Intelligence Gathering for Armed Actors

Social media's inherent design as a rapid, accessible, and wide-reaching communication medium has transformed it into a powerful dual-use tool for all parties to an armed conflict. For state armed forces, it provides avenues for official communication, public diplomacy, and strategic messaging. Governments can use platforms like X (formerly Twitter) or Facebook to announce military operations, counter enemy narratives, reassure the civilian population, and project an image of legitimacy and control. This allows for near real-time information dissemination, which can be crucial in managing public perception and maintaining morale both domestically and internationally[18]. For example, during counter-insurgency operations, official military accounts might share updates on humanitarian aid delivery or efforts to restore stability, aiming to win the "hearts and minds" of the local population.

Non-state armed groups (NSAGs), often lacking traditional media infrastructure, have found social media to be an indispensable tool for their operational and strategic goals. Platforms like Telegram, YouTube, and various encrypted messaging apps facilitate communication among dispersed fighters, enabling coordination of attacks, sharing of tactical intelligence, and even remote training. Beyond direct operational use, NSAGs heavily rely on social media for propaganda dissemination, recruitment, and fundraising. They can broadcast their ideology, glorify their actions, depict alleged enemy atrocities, and directly appeal for financial support from sympathizers across the globe[19]. The low cost and high reach of these platforms enable them to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, directly reaching a global audience and potentially influencing public opinion and recruitment drives in distant countries.

Beyond communication and propaganda, social media has emerged as a significant source for intelligence gathering, often referred to as Open-Source Intelligence[20]. Both state and non-state actors actively monitor public social media profiles, posts, images, and videos to glean valuable information. This can include tracking troop movements, identifying key individuals, assessing public sentiment, locating potential targets, or even identifying vulnerabilities in enemy infrastructure. Geospatial tagging on photos, background details in videos, or even subtle linguistic cues can inadvertently reveal critical intelligence. While Open-Source Intelligence can provide valuable insights for military planning and humanitarian response, its uncritical use carries significant risks. The vast amount of data, coupled with the potential for manipulation, necessitates rigorous verification to ensure accuracy and prevent erroneous decisions that could violate IHL.

2- The Challenges and Accountability of Social Media in Armed Conflict

The widespread adoption of social media has fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of armed conflicts, presenting both opportunities and profound challenges for the application of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). These platforms, by their very design, offer rapid, accessible, and wide-reaching communication, making them a powerful dual-use tool for all parties involved in hostilities.

One of the most insidious challenges posed by the proliferation of social media in armed conflict is the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information spread unintentionally, while disinformation is deliberately fabricated and disseminated to deceive. Both can have catastrophic consequences for the application of IHL, particularly impacting the principles of distinction and proportionality. False narratives propagated online can profoundly impact the principle of distinction—the obligation to differentiate between combatants and civilians, and between military objectives and civilian objects. Disinformation campaigns might falsely accuse civilians of direct participation in hostilities, thereby stripping them of their protected status and potentially making them legitimate targets in the eyes of an attacker. For instance, fabricated videos or images showing alleged civilian support for an armed group could lead to a broader interpretation of a civilian area as a legitimate military objective[21]. Conversely, disinformation might falsely portray military objectives as civilian objects (e.g., claiming a military barracks is a school) to deter attacks or provoke outrage when it is targeted. Such deliberate deception undermines the very foundation of civilian protection and can lead to unlawful attacks. The sheer volume and speed of information, often unverified and highly emotional, make it exceptionally difficult for decision-makers in the fog of war to accurately distinguish between combatants and civilians, or between military and civilian property. This creates a significant risk of

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[18] Brunstetter, D., & Braun, C. (2019). Social media and armed conflict: The new battlefield for hearts and minds. Journal of Strategic Communication, 13(2), 123–140.

[19] Conway, M. (2017). Determining the role of the internet in violent extremism and terrorism: Six suggestions for progressing research. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 40(1), 77-98.

[20] Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) refers to the practice of collecting, analysing, and disseminating information that is legally and ethically gathered from publicly available sources. Its primary goal is to transform this accessible data into actionable intelligence, providing valuable insights for various purposes.

[21] Katz, E. (2021). Liar's war: Protecting civilians from disinformation during armed conflict. International Review of the Red Cross, 102(914), 659–682.

inadvertent IHL violations based on flawed digital intelligence. The spread of false narratives also directly impacts the principle of proportionality. This principle requires that the anticipated military advantage from an attack must not be excessive in relation to the expected incidental civilian harm. Misinformation can distort the assessment of proportionality in several ways. For example, disinformation could exaggerate the military advantage of an attack or downplay the presence of civilians or the expected civilian harm. If military commanders rely on faulty intelligence, perhaps intentionally manipulated through social media, they might miscalculate the civilian casualties and damage, leading to a disproportionate attack. Furthermore, false narratives can incite public outrage or political pressure, potentially influencing military decisions to undertake operations that carry a high risk to civilians in pursuit of perceived, but perhaps exaggerated, military gains. The psychological manipulation inherent in disinformation campaigns can erode the trust between combatants and the civilian population, making it harder to implement IHL protections and exacerbating the risks to those caught in the conflict.

Social media's capacity for rapid dissemination to a vast, often anonymous, audience creates a heightened risk of incitement to violence and hate speech, which stands in direct conflict with fundamental IHL prohibitions. IHL, along with international human rights law, explicitly prohibits acts that incite war crimes, genocide, or violence against protected persons or groups. This includes both overt calls to violence and more subtle forms of dehumanization that can pave the way for atrocities. In armed conflicts, social media platforms are frequently exploited to spread messages that demonize opposing groups, often based on ethnic, religious, or political affiliation. These messages can be highly inflammatory, leading to calls for retaliation, discrimination, and violence against civilians associated with the "enemy" side. For example, during the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, both state and non-state actors have been accused of using social media to spread divisive content, often targeting specific communities and instigating hostility[22]. This direct incitement can translate into real-world violence, leading to mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing, or other grave IHL violations. The speed at which such messages can go viral makes it incredibly difficult for authorities or platform moderators to intervene before significant harm is done.

Beyond direct incitement, social media is used to disseminate hate speech, which contributes to a climate of fear, distrust, and dehumanization. While not always directly calling for violence, hate speech operates by eroding the protective fabric of IHL by undermining the inherent dignity of individuals and groups. It can normalize violence against certain populations, making it easier for combatants to commit atrocities and for the wider population to accept or ignore such actions. This erosion of humanitarian principles is particularly dangerous in internal armed conflicts where communities often live in close proximity, and historical grievances can be easily reignited by online rhetoric. The lack of effective moderation and the anonymity afforded by some platforms further exacerbate this risk, making it challenging to hold perpetrators accountable.

The question of accountability for online actions during armed conflict is a complex but crucial aspect of applying IHL in the digital age. As social media becomes integrated into the operational conduct of hostilities, examining whether individuals, including those operating remotely, and states can be held responsible under IHL for violations committed or incited through these platforms becomes paramount. IHL, particularly through international criminal law, establishes individual criminal responsibility for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide[23]. This principle is unequivocally extended to actions taken in the digital sphere. Commanders who order their subordinates to commit IHL violations via social media (e.g., sharing humiliating images of prisoners of war or inciting attacks on civilians) can be held accountable under principles of command responsibility. Similarly, individual fighters who directly commit or facilitate IHL violations through their social media posts (e.g., posting graphic content of atrocities they committed, or engaging in direct incitement) can be prosecuted for war crimes. The challenge intensifies with "remote" actors, such as diaspora members or online propagandists who, while not physically present on the battlefield, actively participate in or incite IHL violations through their digital activities. If their online actions meet the threshold for direct participation in hostilities (by causing harm or directly supporting military operations to the extent of losing civilian protection) or constitute incitement to commit crimes within the jurisdiction of international criminal courts, they could face prosecution. The increasing capacity to trace digital footprints, even if challenging due to encryption and jurisdictional complexities, opens new avenues for gathering evidence and prosecuting such individuals. The International Criminal Court (ICC) and national justice systems are indeed grappling with cases involving online evidence and incitement, underscoring the

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[22] Ngange, K. L., & Mokondo, M. S. (2019). Understanding social media's role in propagating falsehood in conflict situations: Case of the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis. Studies in Media and Communication, 7(2), 55–66.

[23] The general principle of individual criminal responsibility for war crimes is enshrined in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. See Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, U.N. Doc. A/CONF.183/9 (July 17, 1998), Article 25. Command responsibility is articulated in Article 28.

evolving legal landscape of digital accountability [24] . Recent jurisprudence is gradually clarifying the evidentiary value and legal implications of social media content in war crimes prosecutions. States bear primary responsibility for ensuring respect for IHL by their armed forces and other organs. This responsibility extends to their official communications, propaganda, and intelligence gathering on social media. If official government social media accounts are used to commit IHL violations such as inciting violence, spreading hate speech against protected groups, or disseminating misinformation that directly leads to unlawful attacks, the state itself can be held responsible for internationally wrongful acts. States are also obligated to investigate alleged IHL violations committed by their forces, including those facilitated or committed via social media, and to prosecute those responsible. Failure to do so can lead to state responsibility for the actions of its agents. The challenge here often lies in attribution, especially when state-sponsored troll farms or proxy actors are involved in spreading disinformation. However, the obligation of due diligence requires states to take feasible measures to prevent and suppress such violations, even when committed by non-state actors operating within their jurisdiction or by their agents.

In sum, the integration of social media into modern armed conflict presents a complex web of opportunities and challenges for IHL. While these platforms can be used for legitimate purposes like information dissemination, their dual-use nature means they are also potent instruments for spreading misinformation, inciting violence, and undermining the very principles designed to protect civilians. Ensuring accountability for online actions whether by state actors, non-state armed groups (NSAGs), or individuals is crucial for upholding the integrity of IHL in the digital age. This requires continuous adaptation of legal frameworks, enhanced cooperation among states, and robust efforts by technology companies to moderate harmful content while respecting freedom of expression.

II- The Impact of Social Media on International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Compliance in Cameroon's Anglophone Armed Conflict

The Anglophone Armed Conflict in Cameroon represents a protracted humanitarian crisis, characterized by widespread violence, displacement, and allegations of severe human rights abuses. As this conflict has unfolded, social media platforms have emerged as a pervasive and often unfiltered arena, fundamentally altering the dynamics of information dissemination, public perception, and even the conduct of hostilities. Far from being neutral tools, platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) have become central to both the compliance with and violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) by all parties

involved – from government forces and various separatist groups to diaspora networks and affected civilians. This digital dimension has intensified the conflict's complexity, fuelling cycles of radicalization and violence while simultaneously providing new means for documenting abuses. The pervasive use of social media thus poses significant challenges and opportunities for compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL), influencing how the conflict is conducted, perceived, and potentially resolved. Understanding the impact of social media on IHL adherence in Cameroon's Anglophone crisis is essential to addressing the humanitarian consequences and advancing peace efforts

A- Context of the Anglophone Conflict and Digital Engagement

The Anglophone Armed Conflict in Cameroon stands as a stark example of a modern conflict deeply intertwined with the digital realm. What began as peaceful protests against perceived marginalization has escalated into a brutal struggle, devastating the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country. In this volatile environment, social media platforms have transcended their conventional roles, becoming critical battlegrounds for narratives, recruitment, and the documentation, or obfuscation of atrocities. Understanding the intricate relationship between the conflict and its digital dimension is crucial for grasping its complexities and implications for International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

This section will first provide a concise summary of the conflict's historical background and its classification under IHL, laying the groundwork for analysing the legal obligations of all parties. Subsequently, it will delve into the multifaceted role of digital technologies in fuelling and amplifying the conflict, examining how they have become indispensable tools for information dissemination, propaganda, mobilization, and even the indirect financing of hostilities.

1- Overview of the Conflict's Background and Its Categorization Under International Humanitarian Law

The Anglophone Armed Conflict in Cameroon, frequently termed the "Ambazonia Crisis," represents a tragic contemporary conflict with deep historical roots, leading to widespread violence and a profound humanitarian crisis, particularly in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country. The genesis of this complex conflict lies in the post-colonial arrangement of 1961, when the formerly British-administered Southern Cameroons federated with the already independent, predominantly French-speaking

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[24] American Bar Association. (2019, May 28). Trial observation report: Cameroon vs. Paul Chouta. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/human_rights/reports/trial-observation-report-cameroon-vs-paul-chouta/

Republic of Cameroon[25]. This federation was intended to be a partnership that respected the distinct colonial legacies of both entities, including their divergent legal, educational, and administrative systems. However, over the subsequent decades, a persistent process of centralization and what many Anglophones perceived as "Francophonization" systematically eroded the federal structure and marginalized Anglophone identity. Key milestones in this erosion included the abolition of the federal system in 1972, replacing it with a unitary state, and the subsequent renaming of the country from the "United Republic of Cameroon" back to the "Republic of Cameroon" in 1984, moves seen by many Anglophones as symbolic of their diminishing status and eventual assimilation[26].

These historical grievances fostered a pervasive sense of marginalization, discrimination, and neglect among the Anglophone population. The current armed conflict ignited in late 2016, stemming from a series of peaceful protests by Anglophone lawyers and teachers. These professional groups initially demanded reforms to protect their common law legal system and Anglo-Saxon educational traditions from perceived encroachment by Francophone practices [27]. The Cameroonian government's response to these protests was largely characterized by heavy-handed tactics, including arbitrary arrests, prolonged internet shutdowns, and the use of force against demonstrators. This forceful suppression tragically escalated the situation, transforming initial demands for autonomy and federalism into widespread calls for outright secession. In October 2017, separatist leaders unilaterally declared the independence of a new state they called "Ambazonia," marking a critical turning point towards armed confrontation[28].

From late 2017 onwards, the situation rapidly degenerated from civil unrest into a full-scale armed conflict. Various separatist militias, operating under diverse names such as the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF), Ambazonia Restoration Forces, and numerous local self-defence groups, emerged to actively confront the Cameroonian state security forces, including the Cameroon Armed Forces and the Gendarmerie. The conflict is characterized by intense, often asymmetric, warfare, involving guerrilla tactics by non-state armed groups and counter-insurgency operations by government forces. Both state and non-state actors have been widely accused of committing severe violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detentions, sexual violence, and widespread destruction of homes and property, leading to massive internal displacement and a dire humanitarian crisis.

Under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon is unequivocally categorized as a Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC) [29]. This categorization is of paramount importance as it determines the specific body of international law that governs the conduct of hostilities by all parties involved. A NIAC is generally identified by two key criteria: the intensity of the armed violence and the organization of the parties to the conflict[30].

Firstly, regarding the intensity of violence, the conflict in Cameroon has consistently demonstrated a sufficient level of protracted armed violence between government forces and organized armed groups. This is evidenced by the frequency, duration, and scale of clashes, the types of weapons deployed by both sides (ranging from firearms to improvised explosive devices), the escalating number of casualties among combatants and civilians, and the massive internal displacement of over 700,000 people, alongside thousands of refugees in neighbouring Nigeria. These factors clearly indicate a sustained armed confrontation rather than isolated acts of violence or internal disturbances[31].

Secondly, concerning the organization of the parties, while the Cameroonian armed forces are a conventional state actor with a clear command structure, the various separatist armed groups, despite their sometimes fragmented and fluid nature, have demonstrated a sufficient degree of organization to be considered parties to a NIAC under IHL. This organization is evidenced by the existence of discernible chains of command (even if decentralized), the ability to plan and carry out coordinated military operations, the

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[25] International Crisis Group (ICG), "Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to a Dialogue," Africa Report N°269, June 2019, pp. 1-5.

[26] Awasom, N. F. (2003). The Anglophone Problem in Cameroon: A Critical Analysis. Journal of Third World Studies, 20(1), 129–140.

[27] Amnesty International. (2019). A Turn for the Worse: Violence and human rights abuses in Cameroon's Anglophone regions (Report AFR 17/9980/2019). p. 7.

[28] International Crisis Group. (2019, June). Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to a Dialogue (Africa Report N°269). p. 9.

[29] Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC) refers to armed conflict taking place within the territory of a single state, involving either regular governmental armed forces and non-state armed groups, or between such groups themselves, which reaches a certain threshold of intensity and organization. In the context of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), NIACs are primarily governed by Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and relevant customary rules.

[30] International Committee of the Red Cross. (2008, March). How is the term 'armed conflict' defined under international humanitarian law?.

[31] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2023, December). Cameroon: Northwest and Southwest Crisis – Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024.

establishment of some form of presence or control over certain territories (even if temporary), and a degree of internal discipline within their ranks. While the precise level of organization may vary among different separatist factions, their collective and sustained capacity to conduct hostilities against state forces meets the threshold for IHL applicability[32].

As a Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC), the conflict is primarily governed by Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and relevant principles of customary international humanitarian law applicable to non-international armed conflicts. Common Article 3, often referred to as a "mini-convention," mandates fundamental protections for persons not taking an active part in hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause. It prohibits violence to life and person (including murder, mutilation, cruel treatment, and torture), the taking of hostages, outrages upon personal dignity, and the passing of sentences and carrying out of executions without due process. It also obliges parties to collect and care for the wounded and sick[33]. Beyond Common Article 3, other IHL rules applicable to NIACs under customary international law include the principles of distinction (requiring parties to distinguish between combatants and civilians, and between military objectives and civilian objects), proportionality (prohibiting attacks that may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, or damage to civilian objects which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated), and precautions in attack (requiring parties to take all feasible precautions to avoid or minimize civilian harm). This legal categorization forms the indispensable benchmark for assessing compliance with IHL and adjudicating alleged violations by all parties embroiled in the Anglophone Conflict.

2- The Role of Digital Technologies in Fuelling and Amplifying the Conflict

The Anglophone Armed Conflict in Cameroon has tragically demonstrated how digital technologies, particularly social media, have become more than mere communication tools; they are active participants in fuelling and amplifying the conflict's devastating reach and intensity. This pervasive digital engagement has reshaped battlegrounds, influenced perceptions, and presented profound challenges for peace and human

rights. One of the most significant ways digital technologies contribute to the conflict is through the rampant spread of propaganda and misinformation. Platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp are central to this informational warfare, where both sides meticulously craft and disseminate narratives to rally support and demonize opponents[34]. The Cameroonian government, for instance, frequently uses state-owned media platforms and official social media accounts to publish statements that portray separatist fighters as "terrorists" and "criminals," emphasizing their violent acts and downplaying or denying reports of abuses committed by state forces. A notable example occurred following reports of alleged atrocities by military personnel; government channels would swiftly issue counter-narratives, often without independent verification, seeking to control public opinion and maintain its image of legitimacy both domestically and internationally. These efforts aim to justify military operations and reinforce the perception of separatists as an existential threat to national unity.

Conversely, separatist groups and their expansive diaspora networks heavily rely on these same platforms to propagate their own version of events. They frequently share graphic images and videos, purportedly showing abuses committed by government forces, aimed at eliciting outrage and sympathy for the "Ambazonian cause." For example, numerous videos have circulated on Facebook, WhatsApp groups and YouTube channels depicting burnt villages, alleged civilian casualties, and acts of violence attributed to government soldiers. While some of these visuals undoubtedly reflect genuine suffering, their authenticity and context are often difficult to verify, contributing to a "fog of war"[35] online. Human Rights Watch has documented instances where both sides have disseminated images and videos to inflame tensions and push their respective agendas, highlighting how difficult it is for the public to discern truth from manipulation[36]. This proliferation of unverified content, often emotionally charged, is particularly impactful in a region where traditional media access is limited and media literacy might be low, making populations highly susceptible to biased narratives that further entrench divisions.

Beyond propaganda, digital platforms have proven critically effective for recruitment and mobilization efforts by separatist armed groups. Social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, serves as a

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[32] Henckaerts, J.-M., & Doswald-Beck, L. (2005). Customary International Humanitarian Law, Volume I: Rules. Cambridge University Press. (See Rule 1, pp. 3-10).

[33] Ibid.

[34] Cheo, V. N., & Yenika, B. H. (2019). Understanding Social Media's Role in Propagating Falsehood in Conflict Situations: Case of the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis. Studies in Media and Communication, 7(2), 1–13.

[35] The term "fog of war" refers to the uncertainty and confusion experienced during military operations and armed conflict. It encapsulates the inherent lack of complete and accurate information that commanders and individual combatants face on the battlefield.

[36] Irwin, Z. (2022, October). Parallel Wars: The Power of Social Media in Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis. Pulitzer Centre.

direct conduit for attracting new fighters and coordinating ground activities. Appeals for young men to "join the struggle" or "defend Ambazonia" are common, often accompanied by videos glorifying combat, showcasing weapons, or celebrating perceived victories. These online calls leverage a sense of shared identity, grievance, and community, enticing disaffected youth to join armed groups. For instance, messages circulate widely on private WhatsApp groups, encouraging individuals to participate in "ghost town" operations (lockdowns imposed by separatists) or to join specific armed factions. These encrypted messaging applications provide a relatively secure environment for operational planning, allowing commanders to coordinate movements, disseminate instructions, and communicate with fighters, largely evading state surveillance. The ability to coordinate rapidly and discreetly via platforms like Telegram has enabled a more agile and persistent insurgency, making it harder for authorities to predict or counter their actions effectively.

Furthermore, online fundraising has become a vital, if controversial, lifeline for various actors. Separatist groups and their robust diaspora networks have masterfully leveraged digital platforms to solicit financial contributions. Through crowdfunding campaigns on platforms like GoFundMe (though these are often shut down once identified) and direct appeals shared on social media; significant funds are raised globally for "the Ambazonian cause." Examples include specific initiatives like "Adopt a Freedom Fighter" or "Feed the Nchang Shoe Boys," which explicitly call for monthly donations to support armed individuals or groups. While these funds are often justified as supporting humanitarian needs or the "liberation struggle," they can, and often do, contribute to the procurement of arms, supplies, and operational logistics for armed groups, directly fuelling the conflict. This global reach of digital fundraising allows the conflict to transcend national borders, drawing financial support from sympathetic individuals worldwide. Conversely, humanitarian organizations also utilize social media extensively for legitimate fundraising, highlighting urgent needs, and mobilizing support for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other affected civilians within the Anglophone regions. The dual-use nature of these fundraising mechanisms underscores the intricate ways digital finance plays a role in sustaining both conflict and humanitarian response[37].

Moreover, digital technologies have inadvertently, or sometimes intentionally, led to the identification and targeting of individuals. The pervasive sharing of information online, even seemingly innocuous details like geo-tagged photos, can expose individuals to risk. There have been instances where social media posts

by civilians documenting atrocities or expressing dissent have reportedly led to their identification and subsequent arrest or harassment by security forces. Conversely, separatist groups have also been accused of "doxing" or threatening individuals perceived as collaborators with the government or those who speak out against the armed groups. The public nature of social media means that information, once shared, can be used for purposes unintended by the original poster, potentially leading to reprisals or targeted violence against victims, witnesses, or even aid workers. This creates a climate of fear and self-censorship, where individuals are hesitant to document or speak out about events online, impacting the flow of critical information and accountability efforts.

In essence, the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon is not merely happening with digital technologies; it is, in many ways, through them. The strategic and often unconstrained use of social media for propaganda, misinformation, recruitment, fundraising, and even the indirect targeting of individuals has fundamentally amplified the conflict's intensity and prolonged its devastating impact. While these platforms also offer vital avenues for documentation and awareness-raising, their role in fuelling the conflict underscores the urgent need for a nuanced understanding of their pervasive influence and the ethical dilemmas they pose in contemporary armed conflicts.

B- The Influence of social media on IHL Compliance in the anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon

Social media's influence on International Humanitarian Law (IHL) compliance in the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon is multifaceted, acting as both a platform for the dissemination of violations and a tool for advocacy and accountability. The conflict, which began in 2016, has seen both government forces and separatist groups engage in serious abuses, and social media has been central to how these events are perceived, documented, and responded to.

1- Amplification of IHL Violations and Non-Compliance in anglophone Cameroon

The armed conflict in Anglophone Cameroon has been significantly exacerbated by the amplification of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) violations and non-compliance, largely through the pervasive spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms. This digital dimension of the conflict has created a complex and challenging environment for upholding humanitarian principles and protecting civilians.

One of the most detrimental aspects is the widespread incitement to violence and hate speech.

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[37] European Commission. (2025, April 25). Cameroon, https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/africa/cameroon_en.

Social media platforms have become conduits for messages that relentlessly demonize the opposing side whether government forces or separatist fighters. These messages often encourage direct attacks on civilians perceived to be aligned with the adversary and, disturbingly, glorify acts of brutality carried out against them. This constant barrage of dehumanizing rhetoric fuels deep-seated animosity between communities, making it more likely that IHL violations, such as indiscriminate attacks or targeting of civilians, will occur. Moreover, it fosters an environment where such egregious acts are less likely to be condemned internally by those who consume and are influenced by these narratives, creating a dangerous cycle of impunity. The ease of sharing and the viral nature of social media content mean that these divisive messages can reach a vast audience in the Anglophone regions and beyond, further entrenching divisions and making reconciliation a distant prospect.

Furthermore, the conflict is plagued by the circulation of fabricated atrocities and propaganda. Unverified or deliberately doctored images and videos, often purporting to show horrific acts committed by one side or the other, are widely disseminated. The primary objective of such content is to provoke outrage among sympathizers, justify retaliatory actions, and systematically undermine trust in any objective reporting. This makes it incredibly difficult for individuals, humanitarian organizations, and even international bodies to ascertain the truth of alleged IHL breaches. When the reality of events is obscured by manufactured narratives, genuine violations risk going unaddressed, and appropriate humanitarian or legal responses are hindered. This deliberate obfuscation of facts complicates efforts to hold perpetrators accountable and provide assistance to genuine victims, thereby eroding the very foundations of IHL enforcement.

The exaggeration of casualties and damage is another common tactic employed in the Anglophone crisis. Inflated figures regarding deaths, injuries, and property destruction are frequently used by both government and separatist sympathizers to garner sympathy from the international community or rally support from their respective bases. These figures are often presented without factual basis or proper verification. This practice significantly complicates efforts to accurately assess the true humanitarian impact of the conflict. For aid organizations, obtaining reliable data on the number of displaced persons, the injured, or those in need of assistance becomes a monumental

challenge. Without accurate information, the effective planning and delivery of humanitarian aid, which is guided by IHL principles, are severely hampered, and accountability for specific acts of violence becomes even more elusive.

While the documentation and dissemination of violations can serve a crucial role in advocating for justice, its uncontrolled spread on social media in the Anglophone regions often leads to negative consequences. A particularly concerning outcome is public shaming and retaliation. Images or videos of captured combatants, dead bodies, or alleged acts of torture are frequently shared online, sometimes with identifying details. This digital exposure can lead to public humiliation for the individuals involved, further violence against them if they are in captivity, or even revenge attacks against their communities[38]. Rather than promoting adherence to IHL, which emphasizes the humane treatment of all persons, such dissemination often escalates the conflict by fuelling cycles of retribution and undermining any possibility of restraint or de-escalation.

The online environment has also become a fertile ground for online radicalization and recruitment. Armed groups operating in Anglophone Cameroon actively exploit social media platforms to recruit new fighters, including alarming reports of child soldiers. They achieve this by presenting a romanticized or grossly distorted view of the conflict, often glorifying violence and portraying combatants as heroes fighting for a just cause. This digital recruitment bypasses traditional community oversight and makes vulnerable individuals, particularly disillusioned youth, susceptible to joining armed factions, further prolonging the conflict and exposing them to grave IHL violations[39].

Finally, the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media directly hinders humanitarian operations in the Anglophone regions. Impartial aid organizations, striving to provide assistance based solely on need, often find their work undermined by false narratives that accuse them of bias, espionage, or even supporting one side of the conflict. These accusations, often amplified online, can endanger humanitarian workers on the ground, leading to threats, harassment, or even attacks. Consequently, this misinformation restricts aid organizations' access to populations in dire need, directly affecting the provision of life-saving assistance as mandated by IHL principles. When trust in humanitarian actors is eroded, the most

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[38] Under IHL, captured combatants (prisoners of war) and other detained persons are protected from public curiosity and humiliation, sharing images or videos that expose them to public ridicule or abuse is a violation. See Article 13 of the Third Geneva Convention.

[39] The recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 in armed conflicts is a war crime under the Rome

Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict also prohibits the compulsory recruitment of persons under 18.

vulnerable populations suffer the most, as essential services like food, medicine, and shelter become difficult to deliver effectively and safely.

1- Facilitation of IHL Awareness, Documentation, and Accountability:

In the context of the armed conflict in Anglophone Cameroon, despite the pervasive challenges of misinformation, social media platforms have concurrently emerged as vital tools for the facilitation of IHL awareness, documentation, and accountability. These digital spaces have empowered various actors to shed light on violations and advocate for humanitarian principles, offering a counter-narrative to the conflict's destructive online trends.

A significant positive development has been the rise of citizen journalism [40] and evidence collection within the Anglophone regions. Amidst the ongoing hostilities, ordinary citizens, often at immense personal risk, have actively utilized their mobile phones and social media accounts to document events as they unfold on the ground. This includes recording real-time footage of alleged abuses by both state security forces and non-state armed groups, such as videos purportedly showing extrajudicial killings, burning of homes, or the mistreatment of civilians. Testimonies from survivors of attacks, displaced persons, or those who have witnessed violations are frequently shared across platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and even TikTok. This grassroots documentation provides crucial, often unvarnished, evidence that might otherwise be suppressed by official channels or remain unseen by the wider world due to restricted access for traditional journalists and human rights monitors. For example, numerous videos circulated online have depicted alleged abuses during military operations, leading to calls for investigation by human rights groups. Similarly, images and testimonies from victims of separatist violence, including abductions or attacks on schools, have been shared to highlight their plight.

Social media has also become an indispensable medium for advocacy and awareness campaigns concerning IHL principles relevant to the Anglophone crisis. Human rights organizations, both local and international, as well as civil society groups, frequently leverage platforms to raise awareness of fundamental IHL principles among the public, combatants, and policymakers. Through engaging infographics, short explainer videos in English and Pidgin, and accessible written posts, they educate audiences on concepts like the principle of distinction reminding all parties that civilians must not be targeted and civilian property must be protected. They also highlight proportionality, underscoring that any military action must not cause excessive harm to civilians. Campaigns routinely emphasize the absolute protection due to healthcare workers, educational facilities, and internally displaced persons. Furthermore, these platforms are crucial for highlighting civilian suffering. The rapid sharing of stories and images depicting the dire humanitarian consequences of the conflict – such as the thousands of internally displaced persons living in precarious conditions, the burning of villages, or the impact on children's education consistently draws international attention to the immense human cost. This constant visibility is vital in pressing all parties to the conflict to adhere to IHL and ensure safe humanitarian access. For instance, images of burnt-down houses in villages like Bali or Batibo, or stories of children unable to attend school due to insecurity, have frequently gone viral, galvanizing international concern. Beyond awareness, social media facilitates mobilization for accountability. Online campaigns, petitions, and trending hashtags (e.g., #EndAnglophoneCrisis, #CameroonBloodshed) are frequently employed to demand investigations into alleged IHL violations by both government forces and armed separatists. These online movements pressure national and international bodies to hold perpetrators accountable and advocate for justice for victims. Organizations like #defyhatenow have specifically engaged in the Cameroonian context, actively working to counter hate speech and promote peacebuilding narratives online, attempting to mitigate the divisive rhetoric often seen [41].

Moreover, social media serves as vital communication channels for protection and assistance within the Anglophone regions. In certain instances, social media has been used for the crucial dissemination of safety information to civilians trapped in conflict zones. This includes sharing warnings about areas experiencing active fighting, advising on safer routes for evacuation, or providing information on the locations of humanitarian assistance points, such as where food aid is being distributed or where medical services are available in areas with limited infrastructure. This rapid dissemination of information can be life-saving for populations facing immediate danger. Additionally, social media can act as informal reporting mechanisms. Individuals caught in a violation or witnessing one can use platforms like WhatsApp groups or direct messages to report incidents directly to human rights organizations or monitoring bodies, such as the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) or Amnesty

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[40] Citizen journalism, in this context, refers to non-professional individuals recording and disseminating information about events through social media platforms, often with personal mobile devices. This has been particularly prevalent in the Anglophone crisis due to limited access for professional journalists.

[41] #defyhatenow is an initiative that works to identify and counter hate speech, disinformation, and incitement to violence on social media platforms, with specific programs addressing conflicts like that in Cameroon.

International. While not always a formal legal channel[42], this immediate relay of information can potentially expedite responses, trigger further investigations, and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the IHL and human rights situation on the ground.

Finally, in a context where traditional media in Cameroon may be perceived as biased or is often restricted, social media offers a crucial alternative space for countering state-controlled narratives. It provides an avenue for diverse narratives and information to circulate freely, challenging official government accounts of the conflict and fostering a broader, more nuanced public discourse about the conflict and its humanitarian impact. For example, while state media might focus on reporting only on separatist violence, social media allows for the sharing of experiences of alleged state abuses, providing a more balanced, albeit often contentious, information landscape. This open exchange of information helps to prevent the monopolization of information by any single party, exposes propaganda, and encourages critical thinking among the populace, thereby contributing to a more informed citizenry capable of demanding greater accountability and adherence to IHL.

CONCLUSION

The integration of social media into the fabric of modern armed conflicts, exemplified by the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, underscores both its transformative potential and its profound challenges for International Humanitarian Law (IHL). While these digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for documentation, awareness, and accountability—empowering civilians, human rights organizations, and even combatants to shed light on violations, they simultaneously serve as fertile ground for misinformation, incitement, and the erosion of humanitarian principles. The rapid dissemination of content blurs the lines of distinction, complicates proportionality assessments, and strains the capacity of legal and military actors to uphold their obligations. In the context of Cameroon's conflict, social media has become a double-edged sword: a tool for advocacy and evidence collection on one hand, and a catalyst for violence, disinformation, and violations on the other. Its pervasive influence necessitates continuous adaptation of IHL to address the realities of digital warfare, emphasizing the importance of digital literacy, robust content moderation, and international cooperation to hold perpetrators accountable.

Ultimately, safeguarding humanitarian norms in the digital age requires a concerted effort among states, non-state actors, technology companies, and the international community. By enhancing legal frameworks, promoting responsible use of social media, and leveraging technology for justice and accountability, it is possible to harness the positive aspects of social media while mitigating its risks striving to protect civilians, uphold human dignity, and ensure that the principles of IHL remain effective amidst the evolving landscape of contemporary conflict.

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[42] The Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) is a non-governmental organization based in Buea, Cameroon, that actively documents human rights violations and advocates for justice in the Anglophone regions.