

Strengthening Mass Media Access for Persons with Visual Impairment during the Cameroon Anglophone Conflict: Critical Evaluation of Current Measures and Future Directions

Princely Kesah

Department of International Relations and Conflict Resolution, University of Buea, Cameroon

ORCID Account Number: 0000-0001-6040-2552

Abstract: In the conflict-affected Anglophone Regions of Cameroon, persons with visual impairments (PVI) face significant challenges accessing crucial safety-related information due to an "information blackout" from social and traditional media. This exacerbates their vulnerability, leading to life-threatening consequences. Despite legal mandates, a gap persists between policy and practice, making media accessibility a humanitarian imperative. This paper, which is part of a broader study, examines the critical need for media organizations to adopt a proactive and intentional approach to increase content access for PVI. Through a cross-sectional qualitative study involving 20 PVI and 11 media professionals from the North West and South West Regions, the findings reveal that measures adopted to improve media access for PVI have been limited and inadequate, marked by training and awareness gaps, and insufficient inclusive reporting and collaboration. While some initiatives like smartphone usage training exist, a systemic lack of policy implementation and collaboration between media houses and Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) remains. The study emphasizes the need for widespread training, government policies mandating media accessibility, and increased collaboration to ensure PVI's right to information and safety during the Anglophone Conflict.

Keywords: Media Accessibility, Persons Living with Visual Impairment, Anglophone Conflict, Cameroon.



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Introduction

In the conflict-ridden Anglophone Regions of Cameroon, social media serves as a primary vehicle for disseminating information, including war propaganda (Ngange&Moki, 2019). The critical problem is that persons with visual impairments are unable to access this crucial safety-related information from either social or traditional media platforms. This information blackout

significantly exacerbates their vulnerability amidst the violent conflict, compounding existing physical and attitudinal barriers.

This lack of access has severe, life-threatening consequences for the visually impaired community, leading to harrowing experiences such as exposure to crossfire, torture, and abduction. The kidnapping and brutalization of Nuhu Bello in April 2024, a blind student teacher at the Higher Teachers Training College of the University of Bamenda, whose parents had to pay a ransom of 1.500. 000 FCFA underscores the grave dangers stemming from this information deprivation (Kesah and Njukang, 2024).

Despite legal mandates requiring accessible media, such as the UN's 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Cameroon's 2010 disability Protection and Promotion law, visually impaired individuals remain cut off. Information access is acknowledged as a human right, yet this group faces a huge constrain accessing mass media. Although inclusive digital technologies are available globally, their application to solve this issue in Anglophone Cameroon is lacking. Therefore, addressing this gap in mass media access is imperative to ensure the safety, inclusion, and rights of visually impaired persons during the Anglophone Conflict.

The influence of mass media in the 21st century is pervasive and profound. With advancements in technology, media platforms have become the primary conduits through which individuals receive information, form opinions, and engage with the world. People depend on the media for current news, for a sense of what is and is not important, and for communication on politics, culture, and vital public information. In this capacity, the media is trusted as an authority for news, education, and entertainment (Cunnigham, 2016). This power to shape lives and public discourse confers a significant responsibility, particularly when serving vulnerable populations in times of crisis.

In the conflict-ridden Anglophone regions of Cameroon, this responsibility is brought into sharp focus. The ongoing conflict has made access to timely and accurate information a matter of life and death. However, for persons with visual impairments, this access is severely limited, creating an information blackout that exacerbates their vulnerability. While global and national legal frameworks, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), mandate that media content be accessible, the reality on the ground for blind and partially sighted individuals in these regions is one of profound exclusion. The conflict relies heavily on social media for propaganda and information dissemination (Ngange&Moki, 2019), yet these platforms, along with traditional media, often remain inaccessible to those who cannot see.

This paper examines the critical need for a proactive and intentional approach from the media to increase access to content for persons with visual impairments amidst the Anglophone crisis. It moves beyond simply identifying the problem of inaccessibility to exploring the practical, technological, and policy-driven strategies that media organizations can adopt. By analyzing the intersection of media responsibility, disability rights, and the unique exigencies of a conflict zone, this paper argues that ensuring media accessibility is not merely a matter of compliance but a fundamental humanitarian imperative. The media's role must evolve from that of a passive observer to an active agent of inclusion, ensuring that the right to information—and by extension, the right to safety—is upheld for all. The paper is built on one research question; What Measures have been Adopted to Improve Mass Media Access for Persons with Visual Impairment during the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon? And one objective; To evaluate Measures that have been Adopted to Improve Mass Media Access for Persons with Visual Impairment during the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon.

The Framework of Rights: Global Mandates and National Commitments

The struggle for media accessibility for persons with visual impairments is grounded in a robust framework of international and national law that recognizes access to information as a human right. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD),

adopted in 2006 and ratified by Cameroon through Decree No.2021/751, represents a critical normative shift, reconceptualizing disability through a rights-based model rather than a medical or charitable one.

Article 11 of the convention is particularly salient in the context of the Anglophone Conflict, as it expressly stipulates that states must take "all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters" (UNCRPD, 2006). Access to information is the bedrock of such protection, as it enables individuals to make informed decisions to safeguard their lives.

Furthermore, the UNCRPD obligates signatory nations to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise their right to freedom of expression and opinion, "including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice." This includes promoting access to information in accessible formats and technologies. By ratifying the convention, Cameroon committed to addressing the legislative and societal barriers that prevent the full inclusion of its citizens with disabilities.

Complementing this international mandate is Cameroon's own domestic legal framework. The cornerstone of this is Law No. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 on the Protection and Promotion of Persons with Disabilities. This law explicitly addresses the right to access infrastructure, housing, transport, and, critically, communication. It states that visually-impaired persons have the right to access means of communication and information, particularly through audiovisual equipment, telecommunications, and various media. The law outlines specific measures to realize this access, including:

1. Labelling in Braille and large print on consumer products.
2. Sensitization about the language of the white cane.
3. Sign language interpretation of television programs and spots.
4. Full and quality subtitling on television and all audio-visual works.

The law classifies disability into four categories: physical, sensory (including blind and partially sighted), mental, and multiple disabilities. This comprehensive approach aims to safeguard the welfare of all persons with disabilities, who are often vulnerable to discrimination. The Ministry of Social Affairs is the primary state agency tasked with promoting these rights.

Despite these strong legal foundations, a significant gap persists between policy and practice. The proliferation of inclusive digital technologies globally has not translated into consistent access for visually impaired individuals in Anglophone Cameroon. The ongoing conflict has not only highlighted this gap but has widened it, making the implementation of these legal protections more urgent than ever. The media, as the primary purveyor of information, stands at the critical juncture between these legal mandates and their real-world application.

Media's Dual Role: Shaping Perceptions and Granting Access

The mass media's relationship with the disability community has historically been complex and often problematic. For decades, the focus of academic and advocacy efforts was on the *representation* of people with disabilities. Scholars have noted that media portrayals play a significant role in reflecting and shaping public attitudes and values pertaining to disability (Happer and Philo, 2013; Gold and Auslander, 1999). Too often, these portrayals fall into what disability advocates call the "pity/heroism trap," where individuals with disabilities are depicted either as tragic figures to be pitied or as superhuman inspirations for overcoming their condition (Penas, 2007). This narrative reinforces stereotypes and fails to recognize people with disabilities as equal, multifaceted members of society. The language used often positions disability as an

abnormality or an illness, further entrenching stigma. However, while challenging negative stereotypes is a crucial long-term goal, the immediate, life-or-death context of the Anglophone Conflict demands a fundamental shift in focus from *representation* to *accessibility*. As Kumwenda (2020) points out, much of the emphasis has been on media representation rather than on the accessibility of content in formats friendly to people with visual impairments. In a conflict zone, the ability to access information about curfews, active fighting, safe zones, and humanitarian aid is not an academic concern—it is a prerequisite for survival.

Stadler's (2006, 2007) tripartite framework—analyzing media content, technologies, and policies—offers a useful heuristic for deconstructing this failure. The absence of accessible content, the technological determinism of inaccessible platforms, and the lack of inclusive internal policies converge to transform the media from a potential lifeline into another structural barrier in an already hostile environment. For media organizations operating in or reporting on the Anglophone regions, all three aspects require urgent attention. The content of their reporting must include information specifically relevant to the safety of vulnerable groups. The technologies they use must be built on principles of universal design. And their internal policies must prioritize accessibility as a core tenet of their journalistic mission. The inability to access information, a primary consequence of visual impairment (Binns, Bunce & Dickinson, 2011), must be met with an intentional and systemic response from media organizations, lest they become complicit in the marginalization they claim to document.

The Anglophone Conflict: A Magnifier of Vulnerability and Information Deprivation

The Anglophone Conflict which began as a socio-political crisis in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon in 2016 has escalated into a brutal armed conflict, leading to widespread displacement, violence, and the collapse of essential services. For the general population, the situation is dire. For persons with disabilities, and particularly those with visual impairments, the crisis creates additional layers of extreme vulnerability. They are among the most marginalized and at-risk populations, often abandoned when communities flee and left with little to no access to food, water, or medical assistance (Thomas, 2018).

The conflict environment exacerbates the pre-existing challenges faced by the visually impaired. Displacement separates them from vital support networks and familiar environments, which are crucial for navigation and daily functioning. Heightened insecurity and infrastructural damage impede access to assistive technologies and essential services, further marginalizing this population. In this chaotic landscape, information is the most critical tool for survival.

The Anglophone conflict is, in many ways, a media-driven war. Social media platforms are the primary channels for disseminating information, organizing actions, and spreading propaganda from both state and non-state actors (Ngange&Moki, 2019). This digital reliance places visually impaired individuals at a severe disadvantage. When a news report is shared as an image of text without a description, or a video is posted without narration or context, it is rendered useless to someone using a screen reader. This lack of information accessibility has direct, harrowing consequences.

This information blackout is a direct violation of their human rights as enshrined in the UNCRPD and Cameroonian law. The persistent difficulty in accessing mass media in Anglophone Cameroon for visually impaired individuals is not an inconvenience; it is a pressing issue of safety and survival. The media, therefore, has an ethical and legal obligation to address this gap.

A Media-Led Approach to Navigating the Crisis

Addressing this critical failure requires a paradigm shift within media organizations, moving from a passive model of information dissemination to an active model of communicative justice centered on intentional inclusivity. This necessitates a multi-pronged approach that embeds

accessibility into the very DNA of journalistic practice. A foundational step involves a deep and systemic embrace of accessible technology and the principles of universal design. Websites and mobile applications must be engineered for seamless compatibility with screen-reading software, incorporating fundamental practices such as alternative text for all images, logical heading structures, high-contrast design, and full keyboard navigability. This technological commitment must be paired with a content strategy that prioritizes an audio-first approach for critical information, distributing key reports and safety announcements as podcasts or simple audio files via prevalent platforms like WhatsApp. Furthermore, all video content must be augmented with descriptive narration that elucidates key visual information, thereby ensuring feature parity for non-visual consumers.

Beyond technological retrofitting, media organizations must fundamentally adapt their content and engagement strategies. This involves the creation of dedicated, easily discoverable segments—whether a daily radio bulletin, a podcast, or a specific web portal—that provide clear, concise, and actionable safety information tailored to the cognitive and practical needs of those navigating the world without sight. Such information must detail curfews, road closures, and the location of humanitarian services with unambiguous clarity. Crucially, this process cannot be undertaken in a vacuum. Authentic, sustained collaboration with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in the Anglophone regions is imperative. These organizations possess the invaluable lived experience and contextual knowledge required to co-create content that is not only accessible but also relevant and effective. In a region where digital infrastructure is fragile, this strategy must also leverage low-tech solutions, recognizing the enduring power of radio and other traditional broadcast media to reach the most isolated individuals with specially designed programs featuring slow, clear narration and strategic repetition of vital information.

Finally, these technological and content-based initiatives must be undergirded by robust internal policies that institutionalize accessibility as a non-negotiable tenet of journalistic excellence. Every media organization should develop and enforce an internal accessibility charter, making inclusive design a core workflow requirement and a key performance indicator, rather than a peripheral consideration. This structural commitment must be complemented by comprehensive training for all staff, from journalists and editors to web developers and social media managers. Such training must cover not only the technical aspects of creating accessible content but also the ethical principles of disability rights, fostering a culture of respect and understanding that permeates the entire organization. Only through such a holistic and deeply integrated approach can media outlets begin to fulfill their duty to serve the entire public.

Review of Literature.

The ongoing conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon has precipitated a severe humanitarian crisis, creating profound challenges for the civilian population. Within this volatile environment, persons with visual impairments (PVI) face a compounded vulnerability. Access to timely, accurate information becomes a matter of survival, yet this demographic is frequently excluded from mainstream communication channels. The mass media, as the primary conduit for public information, holds a significant responsibility to ensure its content is accessible to all citizens, irrespective of physical ability. However, in the crucible of conflict, this responsibility is often unmet, creating a dangerous information vacuum for the most vulnerable.

This review explores the critical intersection of conflict, disability, and media access. It specifically examines the approaches, or lack thereof, employed by the media to provide accessible content to persons with visual impairment within Cameroon's conflict-affected North West and South West regions.

The Anglophone Conflict: A Crucible for Vulnerability

The Anglophone conflict is deeply rooted in Cameroon's colonial history. After World War I, the former German colony was partitioned between Britain and France. In 1961, the British-administered Southern Cameroons voted to reunify with the French-administered La République du Cameroun, forming a federal state. However, this federal structure was dissolved in 1972 in favour of a unitary state, a move that many Anglophones felt began a process of political and cultural marginalisation (Konings&Nyamnjoh, 1997).

Decades of perceived grievances over the erosion of their legal, educational, and economic systems culminated in late 2016, when lawyers and teachers led peaceful protests. The state's harsh crackdown on these demonstrations catalysed the conflict, leading to the emergence of armed separatist groups demanding independence for a new state they call "Ambazonia" (Crisis Group, 2019). Since 2017, the conflict has escalated into a brutal civil war characterised by extreme violence from both state security forces and non-state armed groups.

The ramifications for the civilian population have been catastrophic. The conflict has resulted in thousands of deaths, widespread human rights abuses, and the displacement of over 900,000 people as internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 60,000 as refugees in neighbouring Nigeria (Bang & Balgah, 2022). This has created a complex emergency, crippling essential services and infrastructure. For persons with visual impairments, the general chaos of conflict creates specific and intensified dangers. As Barnes and Mercer (2010) argue, disability is a social construct shaped by environmental barriers. In the Anglophone crisis, these barriers have been magnified exponentially.

Frequent internet shutdowns imposed by the government to disrupt separatist communication have severed a vital link to the outside world, disproportionately affecting PVIIs who could otherwise use assistive technologies to access information (Cheo & Yenika, 2022). The destruction of infrastructure disrupts the distribution of all forms of media, while displacement severs PVIIs from their established social support networks and can lead to the loss of essential assistive devices. In this context, the need for accessible information is not an abstract right but a fundamental prerequisite for safety and survival.

The Information Lifeline: Media's Role and Responsibility in Crisis

The Social Responsibility Theory of the press posits that the media have a fundamental duty to serve the public interest by providing accurate, fair, and comprehensive information, enabling citizens to participate in a democracy (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956). This theory places a moral and ethical onus on media institutions to be accountable to all segments of society, including the vulnerable and voiceless. In a conflict situation, this responsibility intensifies. Access to information on security threats, safe zones, evacuation routes, and the availability of humanitarian aid becomes a lifeline.

However, the application of this theory in the context of the Anglophone crisis reveals a significant failure. A UNPRD (2022) report on disability rights in Cameroon highlights a systemic disregard for accessibility in public information, noting that "OPDs [Organisations of Persons with Disabilities] consulted complained about the non-publication of very important legislation and information in braille" and the near-total absence of interpreters for the deaf on public television (p. 22). This indicates that even before the conflict, the framework for inclusive communication was profoundly weak. The crisis has only exacerbated this pre-existing exclusion.

Persons with visual impairment in the Anglophone regions face a unique set of challenges in accessing mass media, which can be categorised into several overlapping domains;

1. Inaccessible Formats and Content:

The primary barrier is the format of the media itself. Television news, newspapers, and online articles are overwhelmingly visual. Conflict reporting heavily relies on maps to show territorial

control, photographs of events, and text-based updates that are inaccessible without screen-reading technology. As Ghosh and Roy (2020) found in their study of conflict situations, the simple lack of alternative formats like audio description for video content or Braille for print materials effectively renders most mass media useless for PVI. Public service announcements and emergency alerts are rarely designed with accessibility in mind, leaving PVI at a severe disadvantage (Hearn, 2008).

2. The Digital and Technological Divide:

While assistive technologies like screen readers, text-to-speech software, and refreshable Braille displays exist, their availability and use in a conflict zone like Anglophone Cameroon are severely limited. Mji and Braathen (2014) noted that across Africa, barriers include the lack of affordable and accessible ICT devices and inadequate training. This is compounded by the conflict. Internet shutdowns make online access impossible, while power outages render devices useless. Furthermore, as Adeleke and Oyelade (2021) found in Nigeria, a lack of digital literacy programs tailored for PVI prevents them from effectively using the technologies that might be available.

3. Infrastructure Collapse and Logistical Hurdles:

The conflict has decimated infrastructure, making the physical distribution of any media format difficult. Newspapers may not reach remote or insecure areas. Radio, often the most accessible medium for PVI due to its audio nature, is also vulnerable. Broadcasts can be disrupted by power cuts, damage to transmission towers, or deliberate jamming. For the many PVI displaced into makeshift camps or host communities, access to even a simple radio receiver may be a luxury.

4. Attitudinal and Institutional Barriers:

There is often a profound lack of awareness among media personnel regarding the needs of persons with disabilities. In the high-stress environment of conflict reporting, accessibility is rarely a priority. As Evans (2017) notes in a systematic review, media portrayals often reinforce stereotypes of helplessness, rather than viewing persons with disabilities as an active audience with a right to information. This attitude translates into a lack of institutional will to invest in the resources and training necessary for inclusive broadcasting and publishing.

Navigating the Digital Realm: Social Media as a Double-Edged Sword

The Anglophone conflict has been dubbed a "WhatsApp war," highlighting the central role of social media in information and disinformation dissemination (Cheo & Yenika, 2022). Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have been used by all actors—the state, separatist groups, and the diaspora—to share news, document atrocities, mobilise support, and wage propaganda battles.

For PVI, these platforms present both opportunities and significant challenges. On one hand, features like ALT text for images on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), and the inherently audio-based nature of voice notes on WhatsApp, offer potential avenues for access. On the other hand, these tools are inconsistently used and often inadequate. Automated ALT text is frequently generic and unhelpful, and the responsibility falls on individual users to provide meaningful descriptions (RNIB, 2024).

The speed and nature of social media during the crisis create further barriers. The primary mode of communication is often visual—graphic videos and images shared without description, memes, and screenshots of text. This firehose of inaccessible content can leave PVI completely excluded from the real-time conversations shaping their reality. Moreover, the prevalence of misinformation and propaganda (Ngange&Moki, 2019) is a danger for everyone, but PVI may be less able to cross-reference visual cues or sources, potentially making them more vulnerable to manipulation. While social media has filled some information gaps left by traditional media,

especially during internet shutdowns (via diaspora connections), its default mode remains highly visual and largely inaccessible, making it a volatile and unreliable source for the visually impaired.

Media Approaches and Gaps in the Anglophone Conflict

The available literature strongly suggests that the media's approach to accessibility for PVI in the Anglophone Conflict has been passive and inadequate. There is little evidence of proactive measures by major media outlets in Cameroon to make their conflict reporting accessible. The challenges identified in studies from other African conflict zones—such as the lack of accessible formats, limited assistive technology, and inaccessible websites (Adeleke & Oyelade, 2021; Smith & Johnson, 2018)—are almost certainly mirrored, if not worsened, in the Cameroonian context.

The UNPRD (2022) report confirms a systemic failure at the national level, which logically extends to media practices during the crisis. The media landscape is polarised, with state-run outlets like CRTV often perceived as government mouthpieces, while private stations like Equinox TV are seen as more critical (Ngange et al., 2020). However, this polarisation is debated in terms of political content, not in terms of format accessibility. Neither side appears to have made the inclusion of persons with disabilities a central part of its broadcasting philosophy.

- **Promote Accessible Formats:** Media outlets must prioritise the creation of accessible content. For television, this means incorporating audio description for visual elements in news reports. For online media, it requires adherence to web accessibility standards (WCAG), providing descriptive ALT text for all images, and ensuring websites are navigable with screen readers. Radio broadcasts should be clear, descriptive, and cognisant that some listeners cannot see the events being described.
- **Leverage Technology for Inclusion:** Humanitarian and development actors should work to bridge the digital divide. This includes distributing solar-powered radios, providing affordable smartphones equipped with accessibility features, and, crucially, implementing digital literacy programs for PVI, as advocated by Hendricks and Naidoo (2020).

Methodology

The snowball and purposive sampling techniques were used for sampling. The choice of these techniques' hinges on a study by Lansky et al. (2007) where snowball was used to recruit men who have sex with men (MSM) for an HIV behavioural surveillance survey. The use of purposive sampling is justified by several key reasons, such as, it allows for targeted insights. Media professionals were purposively sampled because they form a key part of the research, building on the concept of mass media and assistive technologies. This method enabled the selection of participants who can offer detailed perspectives on the specific challenges and opportunities within this area. Secondly, purposive sampling facilitates diversity.

The first set of participants who consisted persons with visual impairments were selected on grounds that; they must have lived in in any part of Mezam and Fako divisions for at least three months, and the area must be deemed accessible for this study, must possess a disability card recognized by the State and must be a user of a mobility white cane. However, cognizant of the fact that the conflict has resulted to the destruction of properties including valuable documents, persons with visual impairment who might have been victims of such circumstances (who have lost their national disability card) and those who recently lost their vision and who are yet to possess the disability card were equally considered to participate in the study. Hence, these factors did not in any way limit the chances of such persons from participating in the study.

The last category of participants was selected on basis of; experience in media coverage or news pertaining to the Anglophone conflict and must be working or at least worked for a media institution recognized by the national media laws of Cameroon.

The choice of Mezam and Fako in the Northwest and Southwest regions is due to two reasons; on the one hand, the displacement of many persons with visual impairment from the more remote divisions given their relative stability and on the other hand, a high presence of multimedia organs and activities in the areas, described by Muluh (2017) and Ngange (2012) as media-rich zones in Cameroon. As such, these zones provide a comprehensive understanding of media occurrences, suitable for the study.

The data collection process lasted from August to September, 2024. Data was analysed following Colaizzi's (1978) seven steps of thematic analysis process.

Findings and Discussions

Socio-Demographic analysis

Two categories of participants took part in the study: 20 persons living with visual impairment and 11 media personnel. 10 participants living with visual impairments came from Mezam Division and 10 from Fako Division. For the media personnel category, 11 journalists were interviewed (7 in Mezam and 4 in Fako). Persons living with visual impairment who participated in the study were aged between 18 to 53 years (Mezam – 23 to 53; Fako – 18 to 30). 6 participants were female (Mezam – 2; Fako – 4) and 14 were male (Mezam – 8; Fako – 6). The participants were students, visually impaired inclusive advocates, a trader, an Organisation of Persons with Disabilities (OPD) leader, and a teacher. Three participants from Mezam developed visual impairment during the Anglophone conflict. Nine persons with visual impairment in Fako owned disability cards. The media personnel – Journalists' profiles who participated in the study included sex, type of media professional and media, and years of working experience: 3 female (Mezam – 2; Fako – 1) and 7 male (Mezam – 4; Fako- 3) journalists; years of working experience ranging from 2 to 20 years (Mezam - 5 to 20; Fako - 2 to 10 years).

The journalists represented all facets of the media. In Mezam, two multimedia journalists and station managers came from commercial radio stations, one faith-based radio, one digital journalist and media promoter, one multi-media journalist and Youtuber, one multi-media journalist and manager of a University training radio station; in Fako, one digital, one radio, one TV, and one Photojournalist.

Research Question

What measures have been adopted to improve mass media access for persons with visual impairment during the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon?

Assumption

Limited measures have been adopted to improve access to mass media for persons with visual impairment during the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon.

Measures adopted to improve access to mass media for persons with disabilities in the Anglophone Regions

The findings on measures adopted to improve access to mass media for persons with disabilities in the Anglophone Regions reveal that measures to improve media access for persons with visual impairment (PVI) in Anglophone Cameroon during the conflict have been limited and inadequate. The measures taken to enhance media accessibility are sporadic, with measures in the areas of: Training and Awareness Gaps, inclusive reporting and media accessibility, inclusive media and content needs, training and educational resources for visually impaired individuals, journalism and disability inclusion, advocacy, and collaboration. This general inadequacy points to a lack of systemic policy implementation, a common issue in disability rights advocacy discussed by Quinn and Degener (2002) in their background work for the UN CRPD.

This gap between need and provision can be analysed through Fraser's (2005) framework of social justice, which calls for both "redistribution" and "recognition."

- **Redistribution:** This involves the equitable distribution of material resources. The initiatives to provide smartphones to women with visual impairments and the training on how to use them are clear examples of redistribution. They address the economic barriers that prevent access to essential technology. However, the study shows these efforts are limited and not widespread.
- **Recognition:** This involves challenging and changing cultural patterns of interpretation and communication that devalue certain groups. The calls for training journalists in inclusive reporting, changing media managers' attitudes, and making accessibility a government policy are demands for recognition. They aim to dismantle the ableist assumptions embedded in media practices.

The study suggests that while small-scale redistribution efforts exist, the larger struggle for recognition has seen little progress. The lack of collaboration between media houses and Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) is a major obstacle. This stands in contrast to the principle of "Nothing About Us Without Us," which, as Charlton (2000) argues, is fundamental to the disability rights movement and essential for creating effective, relevant policies. The suggestion to create MOUs between DPOs and journalism associations is a concrete step towards achieving this kind of collaborative recognition.

Training and Awareness Gaps

Awareness of existing initiatives and the need for skill acquisition are two things that could be of significant value in times of crisis, especially amongst the visually impaired in the conflict-torn Anglophone regions of Cameroon. Insecurity affects information sharing, especially in conflict regions. Visual impairment leads to challenges in accessing media content, as producers often overlook the needs of visually impaired individuals. Some participants disclosed not being aware of any initiatives adopted to improve access of persons with visual impairment to media content: "I doubt there are any measures that have been taken specifically to respond to the needs of persons with visual impairment during this conflict. If there are, I would really love to know." (PV1019F), "I don't think anything sustainable has been done Nothing." (MP07F); other visually impaired individuals mentioned being aware of available training programs for smartphone usage, to improve their ability to effectively use technology for accessing information, besides other initiatives carried out by the Cameroon Baptist Convention and Presbyterian Church in Cameroon working to improve access through humanitarian inclusive action initiatives, recognizing the increasing number of disabled persons due to crises.

Yes I will certainly highlight the fact that the Cameroon Baptist Convention has been able to from time to time organise a training for journalist on inclusive reporting. The mass media however is a wide world where many journalists and individuals reports and such capacity building is crucial and should be often. **PV104M.**

Personally, I have received a smart phone usage training not from an institution but from a friend. I so much appreciate the fact that where he trained me and ended, I have been able to try some other options and improve my skills on using the smart phone. I have heard that some organisations have carried out smart phone trainings but am yet to ever benefit. **PV104M.**

Increased education of media persons on inclusive media practices, training of persons with visual impairment on tech and assistive tools and the provision of more open source programs to enhance media access were seen as further measures to improve media access for PVI's.

The lack of image descriptions in online articles excludes the visually impaired trader from fully understanding the content, as she cannot see the images.

How the responsibility incorporate needs of PVI's. No they do not take my needs in to consideration. Their online articles hardly meets my needs because they do not explain images. Additional information journalists with visual impairment should ensure they lead in the mission of making information both online and offline more accessible. **PV107M**

While some participants were aware of training programs on smartphone usage, which aimed to enhance digital access, others highlighted a lack of awareness regarding any initiatives. The study found a lack of awareness among PVI's regarding initiatives aimed at improving media access. For instance, PV1019F stated, "I doubt there are any measures that have been taken specifically to respond to the needs of persons with visual impairment during this conflict. If there are, I would really love to know." Similarly, MP07F commented, "I don't think anything sustainable has been done Nothing." This information asymmetry itself is a barrier, as highlighted by Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal (2007) in "Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation," where awareness of resources is a precursor to their use.

However, some initiatives by organizations like the Cameroon Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon were mentioned, focusing on inclusive reporting training for journalists and smartphone usage training for PVI's (PV104M). PV104M, who benefited from a friend's smartphone training, emphasized its importance: "Personally, I have received a smartphone usage training...I have been able to try some other options and improve my skills on using the smartphone." The lack of image descriptions was also highlighted by PV107M, a visually impaired trader, who stated, "Their online articles hardly meet my needs because they do not explain images."

The finding on a lack of awareness and commitment among media professionals regarding disability inclusion creates new areas of focus as it adds to existing knowledge, something which Mji and Braathen (2014) did not adequately explore. This gap is significant, as Livingstone (2004) argues that media literacy (for both producers and consumers) is crucial for meaningful participation in a media-saturated society.

Inclusive Reporting and Media Accessibility Needs

There is a need for government policies that mandate media accessibility, ensuring that all media outlets are required to provide inclusive content for visually impaired individuals.

Steps and measures to inspire media accessibility. Making mass media accessible should be a government policy which should then trickle down to different private schools, media organs and other institutions. When it becomes policy, it becomes binding on every citizen. **PV104M**

There is a need for journalists to be trained in inclusive reporting practices to ensure that crucial information is communicated effectively to blind individuals.

I like to add that whenever there is pressing information, the media should lay much emphases so that blind people too could get it because we hardly really are considered when crucial information is being passed and this is detrimental to us living in a conflict affected area. journalists should not assume that because information has been passed out, blind persons got it. **PV103M**

There is a strong expectation for media to fulfill their responsibility by providing reliable information that accommodates the needs of persons with disabilities.

We expect the media to provide reliable information to everybody...By fulfilling its responsibilities, all of us use the information they provide. **PV1019F**

Participants express a desire for media to take further steps to improve accessibility for individuals with visual impairments, especially during conflicts, indicating a gap in current practices.

Media professionals had varied inputs on measures to improve access to media contents for visually impaired persons, some were aware of initiatives carried out by their media organs to promote accessibility while others were not.

MP04M, who did not know of any such initiative said he takes personal initiatives. “ It is also a big challenge having them around me because am still thinking on possible steps to improve media accessibility at a general level because some of these visually impaired journalists open up to me that my work inspired them to become journalists and that increased my passion to fight for media inclusion for them ”

Positive examples demonstrate the potential of inclusive practices. The 2018 soldier rescue story and 2020 palm wine bar incident (where soldiers shared drinks after verifying a patron's blindness) became widely circulated hope narratives. As MP04M observed, "some visually impaired journalists...are coping and helping me improve content accessibility" - evidenced by these stories' propagation through radio talk shows and social media audio descriptions.

Persons living with visual impairment generally hold that current media practices often overlook their requirements. A participant, PV102M said:

I don't think the media capture our needs because information is hardly inclusive. I Strongly recommend that more workshops be organised to train journalists on how to make their information coverage more accessible. I also think more policies and laws on mass media accessibility be put in place to guide journalists to reports inclusively.

Comparatively, PV101M, thinks the level of visually impaired persons' access to media content would only attain a plausible measure when it is equated to the experiences of persons with sight. For “ so long as many blind people still are not able to get information same as sighted people, I would say eh needs of most of us are not incorporated in the media role to society. ”

Conversely, PV1018F thinks that “increased education of media persons on inclusive media practices, training of persons with visual impairment on tech and assistive tools, provision of more open source programs that can level the media access” are necessary to foster inclusivity.

The desire for technology and accessibility improvement is equally shared by 4 other participants (PV1012F, PV1017F, PV1011F, PV1020F). These participants desire more inclusive technology that caters to their specific needs and enhances their independence, with interactive features for content engagement. In all, they desire more inclusive technology that can assist them in daily tasks and improve their quality of life.

On Inclusive Media and Content Needs, PVIs expressed a desire for more inclusive media that caters to their specific needs, including the use of descriptive language for images and videos, as well as the provision of Braille materials and audio content. PV102M emphasized the need for government policies mandating media accessibility, stating, "Making mass media accessible should be a government policy which should then trickle down to different private schools, media organs and other institutions." This call for policy intervention aligns with the principles of Universal Design, championed by Mace (1985), which advocates for designing products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. The need for journalists to be trained in inclusive reporting was stressed by PV103M: "journalists should not assume that because information has been passed out, blind persons got it." There's a strong expectation for media to provide reliable, accommodating information (PV1019F). Media professionals like MP04M also expressed a desire to improve accessibility, inspired by visually impaired journalists.

PV102M further stated, "I don't think the media capture our needs because information is hardly inclusive. I strongly recommend that more workshops be organised to train journalists on how to make their information coverage more accessible." PV101M believes true access is achieved "so

long as many blind people still are not able to get information same as sighted people." PV1018F called for "Increased education of media persons on inclusive media practices, training of persons with visual impairment on tech and assistive tools, provision of more open source programs that can level the media access." This desire for more inclusive and interactive technology was shared by PV1012F, PV1017F, PV1011F, and PV1020F. The demand for user-centric design and co-creation with PWDs in developing accessible solutions is a strong theme in contemporary HCI (Human-Computer Interaction) research, as seen in the work of Pal (2017) on ICTD (ICT for Development).

Training and Educational Resources for Visually Impaired Individuals

As part of measures to improve access to media content for persons with visual impairment in the conflict-torn Anglophone regions of Cameroon, initiatives such as training on smartphone usage have been adopted. Describing how the training has been, this participant noted that "It was very important because it helped me to know how to access information. Just knowing how to use a smart phone has really helped me to get information. " **PV101M**. On her part, a trader equally benefited from smartphone training, which has improved her ability to source information online, particularly on Facebook. PV107M explains that she "...benefited from the smart phone project where I learned how to use a phone and above all how to use social media. The knowledge gathered from the training has helped me to be able to source information about the crisis online especially on Facebook. "

Training on smartphone usage has been crucial for visually impaired individuals to access information, indicating a strong desire for more educational resources. And women, often seen as most vulnerable during conflicts tend to benefit more as this participant disclosed.

I benefit from the training quite much and women particularly who were seen to be most vulnerable received smart phones at the end of the training. Everyone could not have the phones because of their limited number and so only women benefited.**PV105M**.

Though the smart phone initiative proved beneficial, need exists for more widespread access to smartphones and internet resources to enhance their information access as participant PV105 corroborates on further steps to ensuring improved access to media content: "I think many more blind persons do not know how to use the smart phone and computer. And strongly recommends that such projects be promoted so many of us can have access to the internet and by extension to a wide variety of mass media options ".

Media professional participants equally stressed on the need for training for media practitioners to improve media accessibility for persons with visual impairment as media organizations often create content without considering the needs of PVI, primarily due to a lack of training and skills among staff - " Training. Some media organs are creating content without PVI in mind. Not because they don't want to but because they lack the skills. " **MP011F**. A strong need for capacity-building training for journalists to improve their skills in inclusive reporting for PVIs is further expressed by another participant:

I strongly recommend that more capacity building training be organised for journalists to augment their skills on inclusive reporting while journalists too should embark on self-learning to see how they contribute in addressing the information acquisition gap among PVIs. **MP05M**.

Training and Educational Resources for Visually Impaired Individuals was seen as a necessary area for intervention. The provision of training on smartphone usage has been identified as a crucial step in improving media access for PVIs. PV101M stated, "It was very important because it helped me to know how to access information. Just knowing how to use a smart phone has really helped me to get information." PV107M, a trader, also benefited: "The knowledge gathered from the training has helped me to be able to source information about the crisis online especially

on Facebook." PV105M noted that women particularly benefited from such trainings, sometimes receiving smartphones, and strongly recommended promoting such projects for wider internet access. The focus on training aligns with Seale's (2014) work on "E-learning and Disability in Higher Education," which, while focused on a different context, underscores the importance of skills development for digital inclusion.

Media professionals also see the need for training practitioners. MP011F observed, "Some media organs are creating content without PVI in mind. Not because they don't want to but because they lack the skills." MP05M strongly recommended "more capacity building training be organised for journalists to augment their skills on inclusive reporting."

Journalism and Disability Inclusion

Still, proposing further steps to improve media access, PV107M expressed a need for journalists to be trained in disability inclusion reporting to better cater to the needs of visually impaired individuals. " Journalists should be trained on disability inclusion reporting and they should strive to explain images used in stories online. This will help blind readers like myself to access the information independently." Another participant added that, " journalists should all be drilled on the realities of the challenges faced by persons with visual impairment in accessing mass media content and given the adequate skills to help these persons navigate through these challenges ." **PV1010M.** This points to a significant lack of awareness among journalists regarding the challenges faced by persons with visual impairment in accessing mass media content, which hinders effective communication and inclusivity. The participant further adds that media houses are not currently collaborating with associations of persons with visual impairment, which limits the production of accessible content tailored to their needs: "The media houses can partner with associations of persons with visual impairment and also tech experts in digital inclusivity so that they can gradually be able to produce more accessible content ".

Media professionals on their part look at the significant gap in media accessibility for persons with disabilities, as one which could be addressed by government policies mandating disability programs in all media outlets as this participant (MP06M) puts it:

If the government can make it a policy that every media organ must run disability programs, then it would go a long way to address this mass media accessibility gap. It would bring homogeneity because when every media organ start saying the same thing over and over, it becomes part of the people and much success would be recorded and quicker.

Equally, the study emphasizes the need for journalists to be trained in disability inclusion reporting to better cater to the needs of PVI. PV107M stated, "Journalists should be trained on disability inclusion reporting and they should strive to explain images used in stories online. This will help blind readers like myself to access the information independently." PV1010M added that journalists "should all be drilled on the realities of the challenges faced by persons with visual impairment...and given the adequate skills." This participant also pointed out the lack of collaboration between media houses and PVI associations, which limits accessible content production. MP06M suggested a government policy: "If the government can make it a policy that every media organ must run disability programs, then it would go a long way to address this mass media accessibility gap." The call for specialized training for journalists echoes recommendations by organizations like the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), which advocates for ethical and inclusive reporting practices.

Advocacy and Collaboration

Advocacy and collaborative measures to improve media access for persons with visual impairment have been generally lacking in the North West and South West regions during the Anglophone conflict. Media professionals report either not having such initiatives at their media

organs or doing very little in this regard (MP05M). There is a need for more collaboration between media organizations and associations of persons with disabilities to enhance media accessibility as this media professional states: "Instead of having relationships with the media fraternity as a whole, it would be better if structures of PVI's have one-on-one deals with specific media organs " **MP03M**. An example of such a collaboration could be with existing journalism associations as a participant, MP01M suggests:

...Creating a partnership or MOU with media associations. For instance, the main organisation of the blind could enter an MOU with the Cameroon Association of English Speaking Journalists. I think it would help journalists to better acquaint themselves with reporting inclusively. This would ensure access to a variety of media contents.

The current media landscape lacks sufficient initiatives to enhance accessibility for visually impaired individuals, particularly in providing Braille publications and inclusive content. There is a lack of collaboration with organizations representing PVI's, which could enhance information accessibility and advocacy efforts.

I do not really think I have come across any but I have met journalists with visual impairment who despite the many challenges are coping and helping me improve my content accessibility. That is why it would be my joy to have newspapers in Braille so that they too can have a wide variety of news sources. **MP04M**.

Though the efforts could be seen as lacking, advocacy efforts are being made to improve access to information for PVI's, the media industry is currently providing free access to content for disabled individuals, which is a positive step towards inclusivity as this participant notes: "The main measure I know of media in the Northwest is that contents of disabled people is void of any financial charge. We don't bill them. We air their programs and cover their activities without taxing them. " **MP01M**.

Notwithstanding, a media professional thinks, financial constraints limit the effectiveness of these initiatives. "To be honest, we do not have the financial resources to build our capacity and make information more accessible. We also talk directly with policy makers to make a way to see how PVI's can access information published on social media, bill boards and on websites. " **MP05M**.

Similarly, MP05M explained that despite discussions on mass media accessibility for PVI's, implementation remains a persistent challenge, indicating a gap between awareness and action. " I think I have actually attended many meetings in which much was said about mass media accessibility but as you know our system, much is always said but implementation is always the problem. "

Advocacy and collaboration measures have been generally lacking. Media professionals reported few such initiatives (MP05M). MP03M suggested, "Instead of having relationships with the media fraternity as a whole, it would be better if structures of PVI's have one-on-one deals with specific media organs." MP01M proposed partnerships, such as an MOU between blind organizations and journalist associations like the Cameroon Association of English Speaking Journalists, to improve inclusive reporting. The importance of such cross-sector collaboration leads to numerous advantages (Kanter, 1994).

MP04M noted a lack of initiatives like Braille publications but mentioned meeting visually impaired journalists who help improve content accessibility. A positive step mentioned by MP01M is that "contents of disabled people is void of any financial charge" by media in the Northwest. However, financial constraints limit the effectiveness of broader initiatives (MP05M), and despite discussions on accessibility, implementation remains a challenge (MP05M). The critical role of Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) in advocacy and policy change is a

cornerstone of the disability rights movement, encapsulated in the motto "Nothing About Us Without Us" (Charlton, 2000).

The study's identification of initiatives like disability inclusion programs and collaborations between media organizations and disability organizations resonates with findings from Mji and Braathen (2014), who stressed the importance of partnerships between stakeholders to promote inclusive practices.

However, the overall sentiment suggests that these efforts are not widespread or sufficient to meet the needs of the visually impaired community during the conflict. The lack of government policies mandating media accessibility and the absence of widespread collaboration between media organizations and PVI associations further hinder progress in this area.

Conclusion

Media accessibility for persons living with visual impairment has been found to be inadequate according to accounts from both PVI's and media professionals in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon during the Anglophone conflict that started in 2016.

The findings shed light on the responsibilities of media organisations. The study emphasises the right of all members of society, including PVIs, to access information. This places a clear responsibility on media organizations to create content that is inherently inclusive and takes into account the unique needs of visually impaired individuals. In addition, the research highlights the role of media in advocacy. The media organisation cited in this study is actively engaging in advocacy efforts aimed at encouraging community leaders to demonstrate greater sensitivity towards the needs of PVIs, particularly during times of unrest.

Indicatively, some measures have been taken to improve media access, such as training programs on smartphone usage and initiatives by specific organizations to promote inclusive reporting. However, it also highlights the overall inadequacy of these measures and the lack of awareness among PVIs about existing initiatives. The discussion emphasizes the need for more widespread training, government policies mandating disability inclusion in media, and increased collaboration between media organizations and PVI groups.

Recommendations:

1. Media Professionals should organise workshops and training sessions to educate journalists and content creators on inclusive reporting practices, including the use of descriptive language for images and videos.
2. Persons Living with Visual Impairment should be offered training programs to equip them with the skills and knowledge to effectively use assistive technologies and navigate digital media platforms.
3. Furthermore, media outlets should prioritise the dissemination of crucial information that caters to the needs of visually impaired persons, ensuring they are not overlooked in critical situations.
4. Social media and Online Platforms are encouraged to enforce the use of image descriptions and captions on social media and other online platforms to make visual content accessible to PVIs.
5. Advocate for government policies that mandate media accessibility for PVIs, including the provision of Braille materials and audio content.
6. Financial Assistance: Explore funding options to provide assistive technologies and internet resources to PVIs who cannot afford them.

7. Furthermore, creating a national media accessibility guide that incorporates input from visually impaired individuals is essential for ensuring that media content is inclusive and accessible. This guide should outline best practices for content creation, including the use of alternative text, audio descriptions, and inclusive language. By involving persons with disabilities in the development of this guide, media organizations can better understand their needs and create content that truly serves all audiences.
8. Foster collaboration between media organizations and associations representing PVI to ensure their needs and perspectives are incorporated into media content and delivery.

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