

WhatsApp in Sierra Leone: Burning Bridges or Building Them ?

Abstract

The text messaging application WhatsApp has been heavily criticized for acting as a vehicle for the spread of misinformation and unsubstantiated rumour, leading, in some parts of the world, to violence and even death. But the closed nature of WhatsApp groups has presented a structural problem as a subject for credible social science research. A collaborative project between the Universities of Bedfordshire (UK) and Sierra Leone has tracked messaging in an experimental student WhatsApp group using critical discourse analysis in order to generate a deeper understanding of discursive influences in a fragile society. It asks whether the affordance of a WhatsApp group necessarily amplifies offline polarizations and explores routes to consensuality in a divided post-conflict state. It concludes that more robust interventions by group administrators could foster free speech while avoiding the need for intrusive regulation from outside agencies.

Key words – social media; discourse; rumours; WhatsApp; ethno-regional; divisive

INTRODUCTION

“During Ebola, the fatality rate was very high and most people who were referred to health facilities did not come back home. That’s when rumours started as people believed there was something going on at healthcare facilities, and that healthcare workers were killing people to get money. People in these villages do not have radio reception so they rely on information from friends and their communities, in these conditions rumours can spread easily.”

(Tamba Magnus Aruna, Health Promotion Manager for Medecins Sans Frontieres in Gorama Mende and Wandor quoted at <https://allafrica.com/stories/202006230648.html> (Accessed September 25 2020)

An emergent truth of the social media age is that, whether a society is ‘advanced’ or ‘developing’, information received online from a trusted friend or family member is more likely to be believed than the word of the ‘authorities’. The genius of WhatsApp is that members of a group already have a common bond, whether of kinship, geography, church, trade or political affiliation, and thus information passing between them is less likely to be subjected to the level of scepticism afforded to a pronouncement from the government or other official agency. That said, it is worth stating at the outset that the premise of this article – based on a small research study – is not to stigmatize social media for exploiting the credulousness or ill intentions of its users, although there is plenty of recent social science evidence to support that approach – cf. a University of Warwick study implicating Facebook in fanning anti-refugee sentiment in Germany (Muller and Schwarz 2018) and a 2020 study published in the *British Journal of Criminology* (Vol 60 1) analysing anti-black and anti-Muslim attacks through social media posts (Williams et al).

Instead, the research question posed by this study is : does the affordance of a WhatsApp group allow for a degree of consensuality in a divided post-conflict state and how might that be fostered ? As Dwyer and Molony illustrate in their ground-breaking edited study of the impact of social media in nine African countries, *Social Media & Politics in Africa* (2019), the picture on the continent lends itself to a more nuanced interpretation than many commentators would have us believe. Undoubtedly, in some states existing power structures and dominant narratives have been reinforced. While in others, WhatsApp, in common with other social media platforms, has expanded political participation and allowed elites to be challenged through more effective civil society advocacy. As Hitchen et al conclude in their study of Nigeria's 2019 elections, 'WhatsApp is used to both spread disinformation and to counter it' (2019:6).

In Sierra Leone, WhatsApp has been a mixed blessing. A few days before the country went to the polls in March 2018, a false rumour started on WhatsApp that UN peacekeepers were about to be deployed to maintain order. In a country still searching for stability after one of Africa's most vicious civil wars in the 1990s, this 'news' held obvious potential dangers if widely believed and it caused the Inspector-General of Police to issue a formal denial by press release (Hitchen 2018). Yet, smaller parties and new voters have been energised through the networking of WhatsApp groups. So, it seems prudent to eschew a deductive approach to any research study and go where the evidence leads.

The chapter by Dwyer, Hitchen and Molony, 'Between Excitement and Scepticism' in *Social Media and Politics in Africa* takes an in-depth look at the use of WhatsApp in the 2018 elections in Sierra Leone. It concludes :

The centrality of WhatsApp to the elections in Sierra Leone as well as to everyday communication [...] raises the importance of understanding the hugely popular social media platform as a serious research site (2019:124/5).

This project takes up that challenge. Whereas Dwyer et al were researching in the particularly febrile context of an election, this study examines 'quotidian' interactions on WhatsApp to discover what they might reveal about the health of a fragile post-conflict society. If the Internet is a space for anomie (*pace* Durkheim), it is partly because people use 'cognitive heuristics' rather than any form of systematic processing to assess the credibility of information (Metzger, Flanigin and Medders, 2010). Added to that is the rise of what Sunstein (2015) calls 'partyism', partisans supporting their party or group, despite changing circumstances, evidence of bad faith or duplicity amongst its leaders and advocates. This, in turn, is a potential incentive for those in power to act confrontationally rather than co-operate (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015).

Tying together these conceptual strands, the purpose of this study is to critically analyse the discursive responses of members of a WhatsApp group when faced with two current divisive social/political issues, in other words, to assess whether members of a 'mixed group', ie. representing different/opposing party affiliations, normatively engage in a discourse which, when thematically coded, either accentuates or narrows the gap between viewpoints. It also interrogates the role of the group administrator as a moderator of abusive discourse and potential promoter of a bridge- building ethos.

The practical obstacles to researching WhatsApp – which will be explored in detail later on – explain why this group, consisting of communications students at the University of Sierra

Leone, is an experimental one, established for the purpose of this study. The wider objective is to promote opportunities for peacebuilding, in the spirit of those critical discourse analysts who 'also want to speak to and, perhaps, intervene in social or political issues, problems, and controversies in the world. They want to apply their work to the world in some fashion.' (Gee 2014 :9).

In February 2018, the annual report published by two global digital agencies, *We Are Social and Hootsuite*, calculated that in 2017-18, the number of active users of social media in Africa grew by 12%. In numbers, this amounts to 191 million across the continent. (Source : <https://digitalreport.wearesocial.com>). In Sierra Leone, usage has risen by 32% (*We Are Social* 2018 : 131). The technology of WhatsApp makes it a particularly good fit for the demography and socio-economic profile of Sierra Leone. Other than in the capital and larger urban centres such as Makeni, Kenema and Bo, internet connectivity is erratic, but WhatsApp's innate features enable users to communicate, whether through text, photos or video, as soon as the signal returns, and at no cost. It doesn't require a smart phone to work. And where literacy levels are low, it is straightforward to send an audio message or an emoticon (Vogt 2020).

Thus it is easy to appreciate WhatsApp's efficacy as a communication tool. But there is more to it than that. There is a widespread perception that WhatsApp is a better guarantor of personal security and privacy than, say, Facebook. Messages sent via WhatsApp are encrypted end-to-end and all data is stored on the device from which it is sent or received, not on servers. For those wary of entering the public bazaar of posting on Facebook or Twitter, it is the apparent confidentiality offered by WhatsApp which is its distinctive appeal :

While freely sharing information over the Internet is common to many social networks, and other public messaging services, such as Twitter, exist, the *private* [author's emphasis] nature of the WhatsApp network makes it rather unique (Rosenfeld et al 2018 :4).

Of course, if WhatsApp was genuinely *private*, rather than having at least one foot in the Habermasian public sphere, it would not be of such enduring interest to social scientists as they seek to understand its influence on group behaviour. In cases where it has been held responsible for provoking violence, including vigilantism (particularly in India) it is the fact that news is not filtered by algorithms that generates a sense amongst users that the information is unmediated and coming from a friend or trusted source and therefore much more likely to be believed.

As focus group responses reported by Dwyer et al ('Between Excitement and Scepticism : 108) make clear, citizens see advantages in using WhatsApp over Facebook, which requires the uploading of a profile, with a name and date of birth. And that has significance in Sierra Leone where identity is at the core of much political and social dissensus. A Facebook profile is a reliable indicator of a host of telling affiliations. For example, the popular name, Massaquoi, denotes someone as a Mende (originating from Pujehun in the south-east), while the name, Bangura, is presumed to be that of a Themne, originating in the north even if living in a different part of the country. And from those 'clues', party loyalties can be assumed. The bedrock support of the All People's Congress is in the north and west, where the majority population is Themne, and to a smaller extent, Limba. While from the late 1960s onwards, the Mende of the south and east have traditionally supported the Sierra Leone Peoples Party.

Sierra Leone and the Exploitation of Ethno-Regionalism

Sierra Leone exhibits many of the pathologies which define African electoral systems – foremost among them, neo-patrimonialism, with the politician as a substitute father-figure (Lindberg 2003; Shatzberg 2001). For Abu Bakarr Bah, the roots of ‘state decay’ and the causes of the civil war of the 1990s can be found in manifestations of power which :

Too often {..} is used to accumulate wealth and violate the right of citizens and exercised in ways that are destructive to national development (2011:203).

There are many problematic elements of the Sierra Leonean polity which can be explored through the prism of corruption which is why this issue is central to the research design of this study. Bah also identifies civic discrimination against non-native groups such as the Lebanese (denied citizenship because they are not of ‘Negro African descent’) as an economic fissure in society and I shall return to that later in the article. There have been three elections since the formal end of the conflict in 2002 (2008, 2013 and 2018) in which there has been a peaceful transfer of power from one party to another, leading to the system being described as ‘an evolving Sierra Leonean rather than specifically liberal type of democracy’ (Conteh and Harris 2014 : 2). But ethno-regionalism as a political reality was well established even before the civil war (Kandeh 1992) and was further entrenched during the war and its aftermath, with militia groups such as the Kamajors enjoying strong support from the Mende population of the south and east but vilified by the Themne and Limba of the north (Binneh-Kamara and Silverman 2016). This ethnic factionalism and normative patterns of voting along ethno-regional lines, not unique to Sierra Leone of course, is an ideal incubator for violence. And, according to analysis by Oxford University’s Reuters Institute, it explains why false information sometimes provokes a visceral response (www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/overview-key-findings-2018/).

It can be observed in West Africa that there is no straightforward correlation between the level of Internet penetration in a country and the degree of social/political activity. In Sierra Leone, a 2015 survey by BBC Media Action found that just under 2% of respondents reported using WhatsApp and Internet coverage generally was around 16% (Wittels and Maybanks, 2016). Yet, even in 2015, some had already identified WhatsApp as a troublesome vector for disinformation. One was the newspaper columnist, Alpha Rashid Jalloh, in an opinion piece for the *Patriotic Vanguard*, headed ‘Evil use of WhatsApp in Sierra Leone’ :

Many people have become victims of the mischievous use of this app and do not have a means of seeking redress. In a country where people have become so belligerent and malevolent, the first option of destroying someone is through WhatsApp with concocted versions of stories or just merely cooking up something about the person. <http://www.thepatrioticvanguard.com/evil-use-of-whatsapp-in-sierra-leone>

What Jalloh had spotted relatively early was the amplification effect of WhatsApp. It is true that, even in 2020, the Internet is not the dominant means of communication in Sierra Leone, and moreover, usage tends to be concentrated in Freetown. However, the capital is where a third of voters cast their ballots and from where much information starts its journey through the national arteries of political and social discourse. Thus the offline world has a potent synergistic relationship with the online one. Popular radio station such as Radio Democracy stream shows on Facebook, allowing listeners to tune in on their phones and offer live feedback through WhatsApp. Similarly, newspaper stories – which, for reasons of low literacy rates and circulation problems, have relatively few readers – appear as screenshots on mobile phones and are enthusiastically shared by WhatsApp groups:

Stories that may initially circulate on social media frequently cross into the offline world. Through word of mouth, telephone conversations or calls to popular radio shows, rumours that originate on WhatsApp can reach far wider and harder-to-measure audiences (Hitchen : 2018)

Interviews with civil society representatives for this study illustrate the point that in a country where tiny sparks of discontent can fan a much wider conflagration, social media is highly combustible. Sallieu Kamara represents the Network Movement for Justice and Development:

There are so many ways to achieve apparent ‘authenticity’ – by manipulating photos, faking signatures, using false logos which look genuine and so on A few days ago [we were talking in July 2019], a video was all over social media purportedly showing a serious gun attack in Kenema on northerners living there. It looked very much like a riot in progress. I called contacts in Kenema and asked what was going on and they said ‘nothing, it’s all quiet here’. It turned out to be pictures from another country entirely and an incident which took place several years ago. And the purpose seems to have been to inflame tension and possibly provoke revenge attacks.¹

Kelvin Lewis, editor of a leading newspaper, *Awoko*, substantiates Dwyer et al’s conclusion that WhatsApp played a sometimes disruptive role during the 2018 election :

One example was a post which first appeared on WhatsApp, suggesting that President Trump was supporting one of the candidates. The message even had the logo of the US embassy on it for ‘authenticity’. Of course, it was false and had to be disavowed by the embassy but, by that stage, it had reached hundreds of thousands of people and was widely believed.²

Methodology and Research Design

The methodological foundation for this study is Symbolic Interactionism, (SI, the name coined by Herbert Blumer,1969), once a key framework of social action theory and enjoying a re-emergence as an interpreter of social media practice. Its central tenet is that people do not react to the reality of events per se but rather to their own social interpretation of them (West and Turner, 2010). Applied to social media discourse, hatred or contempt for an individual politician or an entire ethnic group is thus often a reaction to the perspectives and wilful conceptualizations of others woven over time into a cultural narrative. An offshoot of SI, ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), the study of how social reality is constructed, has also been useful in developing the argument.

As Tim Highfield observes, analysing social media is ‘messy and confusing-data can be easy to obtain but their significance can be unclear’ (2016). This research design is in the tradition of Discursive Psychology (Edwards and Potter 1992), the gathering of naturalistic data from an experimental group for qualitative analysis. As stated earlier, researching WhatsApp poses particular problems because it is an encrypted platform. Hence the need to create a group where all members were comfortable with their messages being the source material for an academic study. The primary source of data on which this article is based is an interchange of texts between second-year Communications students at the University of Sierra Leone, Fourah Bay College.

Why this student group? The author has had a fruitful decade-long relationship with the University of Sierra Leone since 2010, when he began supervising a media graduate doing a PhD. Moreover, Fourah Bay College, the oldest university in West Africa, founded in 1827, has long played a seminal role in the public life of Sierra Leone, with many of its alumni occupying posts in government, the law and media. However, understanding social media is not currently part of the Mass Communications curriculum so there was a pedagogical value

to the project. Before the group was formed, the author conducted a number of semi-structured interviews to try to scope out civil society engagement with WhatsApp in Sierra Leone. It is not claimed that the interviewees were representative of society at large. They are literate, involved in some way with public life, many politically active and all of them members of multiple WhatsApp groups. Some of their observations will appear later in this article but it is worth making the point that a consistent assertion was that WhatsApp was firmly embedded in the nation's cultural, social and political life.

With this in mind, the author conducted a seminar of Fourah Bay students to gauge attitudes to WhatsApp as a discursive tool and as a barometer of social/political opinion, before the Politics & Media Group was formally established in July 2019. The purpose of the research was explained to a full second-year class and no pressure was placed on anyone to sign up, nor, indeed, any incentive offered to do so. Fifty-seven students, 42 men and 15 women, signed consent forms agreeing that all messages sent between members of the group could be accessed for research on condition that, on publication, the names of the senders were anonymized. A show of hands confirmed that support for the two main parties was distributed throughout the group, with neither party having an overwhelming preponderance of adherents. An administrator was chosen to 'moderate' and to send monthly batches of material to the author for thematic content analysis.

A review of the literature on Sierra Leone indicates that discursive attitudes towards corruption is the 'golden thread' which ties together the research questions with the group responses. Corruption can be interpreted as the manipulation of political hegemony by unfair means and/or the Marxian concept of exploitation of the masses. In Sierra Leone 'economic relations raise questions about the same moral imperatives of fairness, equity and honest work that Marx underscores in his discourse on power in capitalist societies' (Bah 2011: 203). Hence, feelings about groups such as the Lebanese, often envied as commercially successful but, as non-citizens, situated outside the ethno-regional paradigm, provides a subsidiary thematic element to this study. For Mohammed Sillah :

.....the question is : did the Lebanese attain this economic power through hard work and honesty alone ? Those Sierra Leoneans who have transacted business with the Lebanese have accused them of certain economic malpractice (Sillah 2016 : 11).

These are issues which can be illuminated by a Symbolic Interactionist reading of social media discourse. The second theme, gender inequality and misogyny, draws a line from the role of women in the civil war to peacebuilding, described as 'the single greatest opportunity to redress gender inequalities' (Klot 2007: 2). These themes were embodied in four discussion topics, framed as questions, and this article is based on responses sent between August and November 2019.

Data Collection and Analysis

The first subject chosen for discussion by the Politics & Media WhatsApp group was the controversial decision in January 2019 by the governing Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) to set up three Commissions of Inquiry (COI) into alleged corruption committed under the previous All People's Congress (APC) government which lost power in 2018. The question was framed as follows :

Q1 Are the corruption commissions a legitimate effort to recover stolen state funds or a witch-hunt against APC ministers ?

The wording seemingly presented a binary choice. But this is a discussion forum not a questionnaire and it was open to participants to look beyond the party/ethno regional tramlines to comment on an issue which everyone acknowledges has plagued the country for generations, whichever party has been in power.

The group began discussing the question on August 14, 2019 and continued until September 2. The number of messages, which includes forwarding of blogs and newspaper opinion columns, was 261. The number of different individuals contributing was 31, about three-fifths of the group membership. It was instructive that, despite warnings from the administrator to keep the debate civil and appropriate to an academic forum, tempers became frayed sporadically. It should be pointed out that the tone of the discussion was also coloured by reports of an attack by unnamed assailants – widely thought to be associated with the government – on a polling station in Freetown. A typical group exchange took place on August 30.

J

Why was the current minister of lands not call up for question by the COI and a host of crooks and thugs under the big tok PAOPA³ government.....these thieves were appointed shortly my bro after the PAOPA assume office....it clearly shows a witch hut [sic] to attack north-western politicians.

DF

The COI is good for the country but it must be done fairly.....the APC will follow the same steps the SLPP COI is using.

J

Stop hiding bro, u are a sympathizer... it would be better for them [ie.the COI) and the PAOPA thugs, the citizens of this country will woke them all up come 2023 [when the next presidential election takes place].

HB

One can tell your mood by your write-up, sir. You can't argue constructively in such mood bro.

S

J, I think you will be able to critically attack issues the moment you calm yourself down and start looking at issues from a broad perspective.....So chill !

(August 31)

J

It sickening seeing colleagues applauding the wrongs and evils of this current dispensation.

M

J, as a journalist, you should learn to be objective but your submission is a case study of whether objectivity can be achieved.

That message is interesting because it indicates that the Mass Comms course has been dealing with the (contentious) issue of objectivity and that the commenter has grasped the wider aim

of the research project which is to persuade people to think outside of their ethno-regional silos. Despite projects run by donor-funded charities such as Search for Common Ground, and the promotion, in some quarters, of the discipline of ‘peace journalism’, seeing the other side of an argument or political position is, not surprisingly, problematic in a divided society.

On September 2, a revealing exchange was prompted by a (somewhat fanciful) post from C suggesting that the two rival parties of government should disband and be replaced by a single party ‘answerable to the people’.

This APC and SLPP party phenomenon politics had ruined this country. Over the period, it had been manifested that government officials placed in authority are loyal to their parties rather than the state.

M

By disbanding the two major parties will not solve the problem. In my view, the solution is we should stop practising tribalism and regionalism and think Sierra Leone.

A

But sir, you seemed one -sided. Are you a Southerner ?

M

You see the problem with you people ?You are now calling me names. Anyway, I’m out and I will not partake in this discussion again.

On September 9, the group was presented with a further question related to corruption. This was prompted by a controversial (and unprecedented) decision by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) to name and shame a school principal and his teachers accused of exam malpractices, such as selling higher grades and condoning cheating by pupils. The discussion continued until September 28, with other education-related issues, unconnected to corruption, also intruding at times. There were 236 messages in this thread, with 30 individuals participating.

Q.2 In a country where the police are known to solicit bribes from car drivers with impunity, do you think the ACC’s action was fair and reasonable ?

MT

The President should take drastic actions against the entire ACC team by sacking them because they want to create war in this peaceful [sic] Nation. Long Live Teachers !

JF

If those subjected to public displays were tried and found guilty by a competent judge, then I support such an action to publicly humiliate them.However, if they are just accused persons and not been tried, then I condemn it.

The response from JGK is telling, in that it shows how discourse which appears – to the outside observer – to be reasonable and moderate can quickly shade into hyperbole.

JGK

Your words are profoundly right...in that context, most of the senior management in the public sector could be culpable of 'incompetency corruption'. The ACC's dramatic action...could have shaky legal grounds but it has patriotic-survival-love ingredients in it...The exam malpractice worsened over the past 10 years [and] is like injecting poison into the society. It can be said that the perversion of our educational system is WORSE than the Rwanda 1994 GENOCIDE.

Responses to Q2 were interrupted by the news that the president, Julius Maada Bio, had unexpectedly invited his defeated predecessor to a face-to-face meeting at the state house. This led to a flurry of opinions on the respective merits of the two political parties :

(September 12)

A

The move [to meet] is inflammatory and untimely. Taking into consideration the amount of violence carry out against the APC since the new 'direction' [ie. Bio] assumed office.....many will think the new 'direction' has something to conceal.

JK

If you are saying that the meeting is untimely, then when is the appropriate time for them to meet ?.....This is not a juntar (sic) regime when dissenting views are muzzled.

(September 19)

M (forwarding a blog by MS)

The State House meeting is an 'orchestrated charade'. The APC will not, or will never, change its stance of non-cooperation if the ruling SLPP continues with its systematic sackings of north-westerners, harassments and intimidations of citizens perceived to be supporters of the APC and if the SLPP still continue with its supremacist agenda aimed at the annihilation of the APC.

These exchanges reflect a recurrent theme of ethno-regional suspicions around corruption, which invariably erupt at elections, both national and local, and which, for example, led to allegations in the pro-APC media before the 2013 poll that the SLPP candidate, Julius Maada Bio (now the president) had benefited financially from the sale of Sierra Leonean passports to Hong Kong nationals (Conteh and Harris 2014 : 8).

The relationship between corruption and civic discrimination was explored in the third question discussed by the group. This was on attitudes to the Lebanese and was stimulated by publication of a widely discussed article in the online *Patriotic Vanguard* which attributed many of Sierra Leone's dire economic problems to the influential Lebanese community whose entrepreneurial talents are often decried for taking out more than they put in to the country's finances.

Q3. Is it fair to blame many of Sierra Leone's economic problems on the Lebanese or are they being used as a scapegoat ?

This thread ran from October 14 to November 9 (including a week's break). There were 154 messages exchanged amongst 18 active participants.

(October 14)

S

If they (ie. Lebanese) know you're a government official and they need your service, they'll punch you with huge amount of money (bribery) in order to pave their way. One may perceived that it's the very Lebanese that popularized corruption in our society. These outrageous corrupt practices and embezzlement of our economy by Lebanese must be terminated [.....]

(October 15)

MS

They will just woke up in the morning and hoard the goods to create artificial scarcity. Apart from that, most of them are also drug dealers. They amass huge wealth and send it overseas leaving us moaning in agony.

M

If I have my power, I will deport all Lebanese people back to wherever (*sic*) they come from.....

E

Hmm, what a hypocrite world we are living ! People hate to see foreigners make it in their own country but they want to travel and make it into another person's country. God help us.

P

How many Sierra Leonean businesses can you account for that has been in existence for more than 50 years ??? Very few. That's not because of the Lebanese people...that's because of our leaders and because Sierra Leoneans are very lazy....the only thing we like to do is blaming others for our downfall.

Unnamed

U think u are smart, ehn ? I will soon slap you. Can't you have regard for your ancestors ?

It is interesting to note an omission in these exchanges about the Lebanese. They did not deal with the constitutional issue of denial of citizenship which has been played out in both the national and international media at times over recent years. Instead, they mirrored the binary division which has marked the ethno-regional partisanship of Sierra Leone by pitting the black African against the non-native outsider.

The second thematic discussion topic, on women's equality, was prompted by a presidential decision in February 2019 to declare a State of Emergency over sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination (since revoked and replaced by tougher laws). This led, in September 2019, to an increase in the maximum penalty for rape and penetration of a child from 15 years to life. The law can be seen in the wider context of an SLPP pledge to address

discrimination by having women fill thirty per cent of government posts and thirty per cent of parliamentary seats. Its applicability to social media was underlined by Mariama Khai Fornah, a programme manager at BBC Media Action and member of 'about 15' WhatsApp groups :

Some men display blatant misogyny when women dare to express views in a group. Strong women, like me, shrug it off but some women are frightened away. I think some form of regulation is needed because there are a lot of people with malicious intent on WhatsApp.⁴

Q4. Why are women being discriminated against politically and socially in Sierra Leone ?

The discussion ran from September 30 to October 14, with 98 messages sent and 25 people participating.

(September 30)

Unnamed

Some may have their views but I believe that women isolation from politics is a mindset. They just think that politics is a male fight....maybe they are not too comfortable to be titled or called politicians. [...] the high rate of illiteracy mostly surrounds women. As often they say, Women Education Ends In Kitchen.

(October 1)

Unnamed

This issue of discrimination starts right in the homes.[...]We're not allowed to be bold or decisive right from when we're babies, when you're bold they say you're growing up to be rude or arrogant.

(October 2)

F

I think the majority of Sierra Leone women lack the courage to engage in political battles. What they do instead is to wait after every election to cry for appointment into public offices. You will never see them during election coming out in support of their fellow female candidates.

(October 14)

Unnamed

Why do you think God put them (ie.women) second to us[...] I don't support 50/50 campaign but rather 70/30. If you ask me why, I would tell you because women are women. If only u know what I mean !

J

It high time we change these cultural beliefs and mindset that have hold us as a country aback by saying they should only be seen as supportive to men.

Between August and November 2019, 749 messages were passed between members of the WhatsApp group. Some were direct responses to comments made and opinions shared. Some were forwarded posts/blogs either from other groups or extracts of columns from newspapers. Some messages exceeded a hundred words. Others were a single line or, in one or two instances, a single word. And some eschewed words entirely in favour of an emoji.

Using an inductive approach, the coding of this material can best be described as *in vivo* :

This means that the codes are terms taken directly from the data, representing living language and they may include slang and metaphor (Rivas 2011:372).

The Research Question which has propelled this study can be seen as a ‘stress test’ of WhatsApp’s properties, with two themes weighed against each other : confrontation/division versus consensuality. Much of the discourse in the exchanges above - terms such as ‘crooks’, ‘thugs’, ‘thieves’, ‘witch hunt’, ‘wrongs’, ‘evils’ – conforms to what Gerlinde Mautner calls a ‘negative semantic load’ (2008: 38). In other words, whether in support of, or opposed to, a proposition embedded in the question, the language tends to be confrontational. A good example is MT accusing the Anti- Corruption Commission of ‘wanting to create war’. An ingredient in this mix is undoubtedly ethno-regionalism, expressed by the pointed question in one of the exchanges ‘Are you a Southerner ?’ But expressions of divisiveness invariably prompt instances of emollience, such as appeals to ‘argue constructively’ and to ‘calm yourself down and start looking at issues from a broad perspective’. This spirit of bridge building can be seen in the Sept 2 discussion prompted by C’s suggestion that the two rival parties of government should disband and be replaced by a single party ‘answerable to the people’, followed by M’s attack on ‘tribalism and regionalism’. And HB reminds his classmates that, as students, they should base their responses on reason rather than passion :

What I’m saying sir is that we shouldn’t jump to conclusions [...] We are scholars. We shouldn’t learn to be saying things like the ordinary man down there.

The Administrator A later commented :

For obvious reasons, some group members presented their arguments based on party lines. Notwithstanding, a good number of members took neutral angles on issues of national interest and presented their arguments objectively.⁵

A tendency towards hyperbole has long been evident in political and media discourse in Sierra Leone (as in many divided societies) and the assertion by JGK that educational corruption ‘is WORSE than the Rwanda 1994 GENOCIDE’, is a clear illustration of the offline and online worlds mirroring each other. As is the prejudice shown against the Lebanese, exemplified by MS’s accusation that most are ‘drug dealers’ and S’s claim that the

Lebanese have ‘popularized corruption’ in the country. The comment from P, that Sierra Leoneans were ‘very lazy’ and like ‘blaming others for our downfall’ was a rare piece of self-reflection and elicited the harsh rebuff ‘U think you are smart, eh ? I will soon slap you.’ The discussion on female inequality attracted fewer exchanges – perhaps because women were in a distinct minority in the group – but perhaps contained some of the deepest social insights, such as the observations that women ‘just think that politics is a male fight’ and ‘when you’re bold, they say you’re growing up to be rude or arrogant’.

Many of the strong opinions expressed were in response to forwarded blogs or newspaper columns. In Q1, for example, only 20 out of 261 messages were forwarded from elsewhere but they stimulated roughly sixty per cent of the discussion. Many of the triggers for argument/debate were strongly opinionated newspaper articles, highlighting the convergence between the online and offline worlds, with the prejudices and partisan cheer leading of the one reflected in the other.

For example, Sunstein’s ‘partyism’ found a literal echo in a message posted by MK in relation to **Q1**. ‘To an extent, we’ve lost our sense of nationalism and patriotism but we focus on “partism”, tribalism and sectionalism rather than the progress of our country’. Perhaps wishing to underline this point, M forwarded a post from the commentator, MS, part of which accuses the SLPP of pursuing a ‘supremacist’ agenda with its ‘systematic sackings of north-westerners’.

However, amongst the messages, there are some – admittedly a minority – which indicate that partisanship can conceal a more nuanced acknowledgement of Sierra Leone’s binary dilemma. D forwarded this blog :

The other day, I heard an opinionated fool saying that the main objective of the Bio administration is to exterminate the APC from the political map of Sierra Leone. Well, for those who hold this view, I have news for you: If the APC dies today; the SLPP will have to die also. This is so because each cannot survive without the other. So, the more the SLPP realises that it will have to share the political space with the APC the better it will be for peace and national cohesion in the country.

The majority of Mende and Themne supporters of the two parties probably wouldn’t agree with this prognosis but it might find favour with the Krios (around 2% of the population) who tend to divide their votes between the parties. Here too the online and offline worlds converge. One of the civil society interviewees for this study, Joshua Nicol, a Mass Comms lecturer at the university, reported that a Krio WhatsApp group, of which he is a member, was riven with conflict during the election as advocates of the SLPP clashed with those of the APC.

The second part of the research question underpinning this study was : how might a greater degree of consensuality be fostered in a WhatsApp group ? One answer might lie in the role of the Administrator. Conscious that this project was conceived as a media awareness raising exercise, A intervenes at various points to remind the group of the purpose and of their obligations. At the outset, he offers this guidance:

You should realize that this group is created to research on social media and how people use it to spread false and authentic news. I expect colleagues to behave like intellectuals, please.

He’s not afraid to chide contributors when comments become personal :

You can disagree with someone but pls do it in a polite manner that'll not spark chaos. Everyone has rights to his/her opinions.

And equally important, he is quick to offer encouragement, usually accompanied by a cheery thumbs up emoji :

Brilliant arguments from our intellectual bros, pls keep your points coming in respectable manner just like what has been exhibited by our learned colleagues. These two communicators have demonstrated high level of intelligence and maturity. 🙌

Conclusion

The methodological challenges in researching WhatsApp made it necessary to set up a group whose members knew that the purpose was to subject their discourse to scrutiny. In addition, the Administrator cautioned them to observe 'civilized' constraints. Yes, despite these self-evident limitations, it is clear that many of the exchanges were uninhibited and free flowing, with no signs that the students were exercising any self-censorship.

Of course, a WhatsApp group is not an isolated organism but is linked to a whole nexus of other groups. Mariama Khai Fornah, of BBC Media Action, who admitted to belonging to about 15 groups, receives a constant plethora of information, some of which she deletes without even having the time to read it. The other side of the coin, according to Mustapha Sesay of the Independent Media Commission, which has a regulatory role (but not over social media) is that even educated people share information without reading it, 'attracted only by the headline without digging down into the full story' ⁶

The members of the Politics and Media Group, established for this study, were necessarily of a similar age so it might be unwise to extrapolate to the general population about the link between age and WhatsApp use. Some research (in Nigeria - <https://qz.com/africa/1688521/whatsapp-increases-the-spread-of-fake-news-among-older-nigerians/>) has suggested that older people are more likely to forward information – without checking veracity - than the young. But given that the median age in Sierra Leone is 19.4 (<https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/sierra-leone-population>) the WhatsApp behaviour of older people doesn't seem to be of great significance in terms of social and political impact.

What makes it difficult to form definitive judgments about WhatsApp is that evidence is seldom clear-cut. One motivation for this study was the level of vituperative discourse to be found on social media during the 2018 election, some of it intended to demonize opponents and generate fear. Nevertheless, Tonya Musa, an academic who did his PhD on social media in Sierra Leone, argues that both WhatsApp and Facebook helped mitigate the potential for violence :

There was a slim margin of victory for the SLPP, which in previous elections, has created a fraught atmosphere. But in 2018, because WhatsApp kept people abreast of developments during the campaign and as the results came in from polling stations, there was less shock at the outcome.⁷

The discourse examined for this study seems to confirm other research that the fissures to be found in offline society are replicated on social media, and although no-one crossed a line and had to be ejected (Mariama Khai Fornah, as a group administrator, says she has had to do this more than once to obstructive members) it suggests that a tightly-administered WhatsApp group can be a bracing corrective to personalised attacks, intimidation and so on. The Administrator, A, reflecting on the project, said :

Sometimes, argument can become hot among group members because some members don't like their opinions to be criticized and when that happened, there'll be fire on the mountain, unless the group Admin intervenes to quell down tempers.

The well-known journalist, Umaru Fofana, is a robust co-administrator of one of the country's most respected WhatsApp groups, whose members include lawyers, academics, media people and other professionals. This is his assessment :

You shouldn't be wary of expressing strong views but let's not make unsubstantiated allegations. I haven't had to ask anyone to leave my group because if someone posts an allegation which the facts don't support, someone else will correct it.⁸

The problematic question of regulation of social media has occupied minds in Sierra Leone since well before the 2018 election. Sallieu Kamara said the APC government considered drafting legislation but feared a political backlash and being accused of 'state capture'. Some of those who support statutory regulation believe that the Independent Media Commission should be the body to do it but the IMC's Mustapha Sesay has reservations :

The IMC is one of the most poorly funded of all government bodies. Its monitoring unit consists of just three staff ! So, it's not equipped to take on this extra role. A more acceptable option is that an entirely new body would have to be established to regulate social media.

Another option, favoured by some, is a form of co-regulation, with the burden shared between civil society and the state. But the ngo/media sector in Sierra Leone is famously strong willed and unlikely to form a harmonious partnership with whichever party is in power. And since there is a sizeable slice of opinion opposed to any form of regulation, it seems probable that hopes for reining in some of the worst excesses of WhatsApp use rest with a concerted media literacy campaign. This research study being a contribution towards that end.

Like many other ventures in the extraordinary year 2020, this project has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The intention of the final phase was to place the findings before a symposium involving representatives of society beyond the academy – ie. politicians, media and interested ngos – because, ultimately, the acid test of change will be the quality of discourse in the next presidential election, scheduled for 2023. Travel restrictions and national lockdowns have meant that the symposium has been placed on hold.

But in the meantime – perhaps ironically - the Covid-19 crisis, which has caused so much disruption, has also put to the test some of the affordances of WhatsApp, as a 'person- to-person' communication platform. The first global health crisis in the age of social media has been described as the world's first 'infodemic'. In response, the World Health Organisation negotiated a partnership with the platform (and its owner, Facebook) to provide its two billion userbase with direct access to reliable, well-sourced information and to discredit pernicious myths such as that hand dryers can kill the virus or that spraying one's body with alcohol or chlorine can be an effective deterrent <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/coronavirus-whatsapp-who-free-app-a9427651.html>

Interestingly, West Africa's Ebola crisis of 2014 provided a useful precedent for such an initiative. In October of that year, the BBC World Service launched a public information service on WhatsApp to combat myth and misinformation in the region about the outbreak. Messages, using both images and audio, were sent out three times a day and had the advantage of not consuming large amounts of data (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-29573964>). This was the first time anywhere that a news organisation had used WhatsApp to cover a global health emergency.

Versions of the service were created in local languages and BBC Media Action's Sierra Leone WhatsApp channel had more than 15,000 subscribers by the end of 2015. There is always a risk with social media that inaccurate information and rumours get shared. However, this is also a benefit: careful monitoring can track popular myths and ensure they are addressed across the communication response (Wilkinson, S).

<http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/practicebriefings/ebola-lessons-learned.pdf>

It was a small step in tackling a grave health crisis which imperilled hundreds of thousands across West Africa and showed that the benefits of WhatsApp should not be buried beneath the weight of strident criticism. The modest research study on which this article is based, has been motivated by the belief that there is nothing inevitable about social media in divided societies being seen as a tool for enlarging those divisions and that a WhatsApp group with a robust, interventionist Administrator at the helm can help build bridges rather than burn them.

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1 Interview:Sallieu Kamara, Freetown, July 3,2019

2 Interview : Kelvin Lewis, Freetown, July 1, 2019

3 PAOPA is a widely used slang term for the current SLPP administration

4 Interview, Freetown, July 3, 2019

5 Email interview with A, September 13, 2019

6 Interview with Mustapha Sesay, Freetown, July 4,2019

7 Interview with Tonya Musa, Freetown, July 2, 2019

8 Interview with Umaru Fofana, Freetown, July 3, 2019