

# SMS Can Never Replace WhatsApp: Internet Disruption, Social Media and Reflections on Connectivity/Sociality in Buea, Cameroon

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## **Abstract**

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have had soothing effects on social relationships over the last two decades: friends and families can easily locate and socialize with one another through smartphones, mobile phones, and the internet. Considering that the smartphone and social media are deeply embedded in users' lives, how do they socialize online when the internet is disrupted? This article is theoretically informed by literature on connectivity and media infrastructure and the empirical data draws from in-depth narrative interviews, participation, and observation, looking at accounts of online sociality in a context where the government of Cameroon shut down the internet in the Anglophone part of the country in 2017. The research participants living in the non-internet space described themselves as people relegated to the margins of the modern world. Furthermore, the article reveals the ingenuity of those research participants who got online by traveling to the Francophone side of Cameroon.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Smartphone, Internet Disruption, Sociality, Cameroon



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**Short bio**

*Primus M. Tazanu* is a senior guest researcher at the Centre of African Studies, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. He also teaches anthropology at the University of Buea, Cameroon. Primus holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Freiburg, Germany. His research focuses on social practices and the production of meanings through media technologies: new/social media and sociality/governance, media and Pentecostalism, and media and racism. Dr Tazanu has been a guest lecturer at the universities of Basel, and Freiburg, as well as a post-doctoral fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa.

**Disciplinary field**

Anthropology and media studies

## Introduction

“SMS can never replace WhatsApp!” exclaimed one of my research participants, when detailing the social and sensory effects of social media. He was describing the interactivity of social media, comparing it with the SMS – the only phone-based messaging system available to users during the internet shutdown in the Anglophone part of Cameroon in early 2017. Since 2008, I have researched the significance of the mobile phone and internet in Cameroonian social relationships. Claiming that ICT has had soothing effects on these relationships is a way of capturing the feelings of relief of friends and families who can easily keep in touch, as well as know fairly well what goes on in the lives of their partners, thanks to new media technologies. The sensory qualities of these media also allow the interlocutors to express their emotions. Back in 2009 when I first conducted fieldwork in Cameroon, a claim that SMS can never replace WhatsApp could simply have read: letter-writing can never replace hearing someone’s voice over the phone. By these assertions, users mean they embrace newer platforms of mediated interaction and, in turn, consider them more superior than the earlier ones. They may even see the older technologies as less important or unnecessary. In the wake of internet disconnection in Cameroon in 2017, those who had depended heavily on social media – Facebook and WhatsApp – resorted to using SMS to stay in touch with friends and families within Cameroon. Maintaining transnational ties became expensive and difficult. To many social media users, staying in touch through SMS was a return to a technology they rarely still used for sociality in 2017.

Research on internet disruptions in Africa mainly focuses on formal politics, elections, election periods, and human right abuses (Marchant and Stremlau 2020; Dwyer and Molony 2019; Mare 2018; Rydzak et al. 2020; Honwana 2013). Moving away from this political focus, my interest is in what happens

to sociality in the event of such interferences. By sociality, I mean human “frequent, intense, and highly structured interaction, using complex communication systems” (Enfield and Levinson 2020, 3). It is an intersubjective social interaction essential to social life in both face-to-face and mediated communication. Internet shutdown disrupts users’ mediated sociality since it disconnects them from people and information. What kinds of online sociality emerge from such shutdowns from the perspective of research participants in the affected areas? How do they navigate online relationships without the internet? What does it mean to be disconnected from the internet in an era where being linked up online has become part of their daily life? Furthermore, what did the participants do with social media before the shutdown? I argue that participants’ unmet expectations of sociality inform their accounts of digital disconnection resulting from internet shutdown. My overall intention is to contribute to research on sociality in the digital era by demonstrating users’ appropriation, perceptions, and expectations from digital media in a context where the government shuts down the internet. Narratives focusing on the state’s attempt to control the internet in this digital epoch is another core trajectory that runs through this work.

Furthermore, in this article, I partly respond to Couldry and Hepp’s (2017) questions about living in a world of ‘deep mediatization’, but with a focus on what it means to be disconnected in this era. In *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, Couldry and Hepp use the term ‘deep mediatization’ to describe not only the changes induced by media but, importantly, the way that these technologies are deeply-entrenched in the societies and cultures where they exist (Couldry and Hepp 2017, 53), providing users with a sense of reality. Their core argument is that contemporary social life, for a large part, is constructed through the media and that the lives of those connected to the internet are more intense when mediated. This argument counters the Durkheim-

ian view which sees face-to-face encounters as crucial to establishing and fostering social relationships. Additionally, unlike Kaun et al.'s (2014) experimental study on purposeful disconnection/internet abstention, my enquiry investigates unwilling disconnection, that is, a context where people are disconnected from the internet without their consent. Considering that internet interception is all too common in some countries, research on deep mediatization and sociality would be enriched if these shutdowns are investigated just as much as what it means to be connected in what Hepp describes as a 'media-saturated society' (Hepp et al. 2010, 223; see also Couldry 2015).

Beyond this introduction, the article is organized in the following order: online socialities during internet shutdowns in Africa, the methodology, and the analysis, where it is claimed that SMS can never replace social media in Cameroon. This section is further divided in to three subsections: informants' narrative of disruption and the struggle to stay connected, social media and interrupted sociality, and lastly, informants' reevaluations of social bonds following the internet shutdown. These are followed by the conclusion.

### **Online socialities during internet shutdowns in Africa**

Cameroon's complex history that led to the internet disruption is beyond the scope of this article. A short version of the history is that a British and a French colony came together to form Cameroon in 1961; over the years, the Anglophone minority has complained of socioeconomic and political marginalization. This complaint took an unexpected turn in late 2016 when the Anglophones took to the streets in mass protests, ignoring the consequences of protesting against the Francophonization of their judicial and educational system (Fonchingong 2013; Doho 2020). The authorities deployed the police to quell the revolt. Images of the confrontations and brutalized civilians

circulated online, infuriating Anglophones and their sympathizers worldwide. To prevent further circulation of such images and information about the war that eventually broke out, the government completely shut down the internet in the troubled region from January to April 2017.

Cameroon's internet interference is just one of the many examples of what has become a regular practice in some African countries. Studies indicate that purposeful internet shutdowns are carried out by governments in Africa (Mare 2020; Rydzak et al. 2010; Parks and Thompson 2020; Marchant and Stremlau 2020; Freyburg and Garbe 2018). Their motives for shutting down the internet are usually political – concern over national security (Togo in 2017), to prevent post-election violence (Niger in 2021, Uganda in 2016 and 2021), to curb the spread of misinformation (Benin in 2019 and Cameroon in 2017), to forestall hate speech (Democratic Republic of Congo in 2017), to avert riots and terrorist attacks, to maintain integrity of elections, etc. (Marchant and Stremlau 2020; Dwyer and Molony 2019; Mare 2018; Gopaldas 2019; Rydzak et al. 2020; Honwana 2013). This narrative is contested by observers and activists who accuse these governments – often authoritarian – of using these justifications to clamp down on political opposition and critical voices (Marchant and Stremlau 2020, 4331). According to Rydzak et al. (2020, 4266), by the end of June 2019, 26 of the 54 African countries had willfully disrupted the internet in practices ranging from complete internet seizures to bandwidth throttling (where data traffic is restricted or slowed down), blocking of selected content, shutting down websites and social media (for example, in Chad since 2016), imposing social media taxes (in countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda), and disciplinary measures against bloggers, as is the case in Tanzania (see also Gopaldas 2019).

Marchant and Stremlau (2020) have coined the term 'spectrum of shutdowns' to

capture the various dimensions of internet disruption in Africa. Included in this spectrum are the frequency of the disruption, its duration, depth (targeted content), breadth (number of affected people and the geographic area), and speed (from slowdown to total blackout) (Marchant and Stremlau 2020, 4334–4337). Some of these disruptions last for a couple of hours while others last for months. In Cameroon, the Anglophone part of the country was targeted with a complete internet seizure that lasted for three months, from January to April 2017. Internet throttling continued for many months thereafter.

These internet shutdowns in Africa have severe consequences for democracy and society at large. The unexpected tampering with the network in fact challenges the view of the internet as a tool that provides “new communication and information channels resistant to state control because of its decentralization” (Freyburg and Garbe 2018, 3896). This euphoria about the internet generally benefitting democracy often underestimates the power of the governments to disrupt the connections. Some authors have described the disconnections as ‘digital dictatorship’ (Gopaldas 2019) and ‘digital authoritarianism’ (Mare 2020), which is a way of capturing the extent to which governments try to monitor citizens, constrict information, and frustrate citizens’ participation in democracy. Furthermore, these digital authoritarian disruptions are fixed in space and time in that one can see the socioeconomic and political effects of the shutdown in the period before and after the interruptions.

One of these effects is on social relationships. For this reason, I turn to the literature on connectivity and media infrastructure; it sheds light on the intricate ways in which people embed new media in their lives. Broadly speaking, one could look at connectivity from two angles: the technological standpoint, which is to say, the technical possibilities, and secondly, the agency of the users. Connectivity in this digital era is for the most part underpinned by the liveness of mediated experiences. In

fact, my research on mediated relationships so far has revolved around liveness – what Couldry describes as “simultaneous transmission and reception” (2004, 355) – and actors’ sensory expectations through their digital media identities. Liveness describes “experiences of immediacy” and a “strong sense of the now” (Ytreberg 2009, 478). It constructs a sense of co-presence for people who interact through their new/social media identities. Furthermore, these digital identities provide an ‘access point’ (Batson-Savage 2007, 242) for social media and internet users. How they relate to others and the media practices they engage in depends on their expectations of the platform they choose, an observation Gershon (2010) refers to as ‘media ideologies’ (I will come back to this later).

This suggests that when studying sociality on the media it could be rewarding to go beyond the technological possibilities and look at the agency of the users. Couldry captures the agency of the connected user succinctly when he sees connectivity as “the multiple ways in which diverse sets of agents are linked up by particular actions” (Couldry 2014, 125). What is important in this quote is the “particular actions”. This phrase emphasizes the agency of media users and, more importantly, the ends to which they deploy the media. To question what people do with these media leaves multiple avenues for exploring the implications of actors’ media-related practices. Later in the article, we will learn that it is mainly what people could do (or could no longer do) with social media platforms that led them to conclude that WhatsApp is better than SMS. These platforms were so entrenched in the ‘inconsequential’, ‘trivial’ (Arminen 2007, 431), and ‘invisible’ (Deuze 2011, 140) aspects of their lives that they could not easily figure out alternative ways to replace the intense connectivity and sociality during the internet seizure.

## Methodology

The fieldwork for this article lasted for two months (early April to late May 2017), but I draw significantly on my thirteen years of research in Buea, the regional capital of the South West Region. It is a rapidly expanding city, nicknamed Silicon Mountain because of the many internet-related startups and the growing number of developers. The city has a good communication and transportation infrastructure. By early April 2017, the internet had been frozen in Buea for two and a half months and my research focus was on how people lived without the internet. To access the internet, some people in Buea traveled 46km to the small Francophone town of Bekoko, located on the outskirts of Douala. However, immediately after the blackout in mid-January 2017, they did not need to travel this far to get online. In the first week of the shutdown, users could still access the internet in some parts of Anglophone Cameroon, such as the Missellele plantations, along the highway linking Buea and Douala. Missellele is about 18km from Buea. Realizing that people were flocking here to get online, the government blotted out the internet in this locality as well. They resorted to shifting the physical space of the internet so that by February 2017 people in Buea had to cross the physical boundary into the Francophone zone before accessing the internet. To get online, some of the research participants in this study traveled to the so-called internet refugee camp erected in the Francophone village of Bonako.<sup>1</sup>

Since the internet was associated with rebellion in the Anglophone region, users had concluded it was illegal to go online, to the extent that those who traveled to the Francophone zone to use internet deleted the content of their smartphones before returning to Buea. Talking about the internet was thus a sensitive topic and I was extremely cautious about

mentioning the disruption when I met people. Even though there was pent-up anger and disappointment, people generally did not talk about the internet shutdown openly. Because of this public silence, I chose to recruit the participants from my circle of family and friends, including people who have participated in my research over the years. 21 people (12 females and 9 males) ranging from the ages of 22 to 37 participated in the research. The majority of them were university students and graduates. No interviews were conducted in public space. This was unlike my previous fieldwork, where I socialized with people in cybercafés and telephone call centres. The internet shutdown meant cybercafés and international telephone call centres did not function anymore. Neither was there the usual flashy atmosphere of the smartphone, a technology that had been very visible in the public sphere since 2012. Without the internet, smartphone users rarely spent time staring at their phone screens. Neither did they regularly check for social media messages on their devices when they were in the public, which in a way demonstrated a low expectation of mediated sociality. So, what narrative of sociality emerged from this scenario of an absent internet?

## Internet Shutdown, Connectivity, and Sociality

The three sub-sections in this analysis highlight research participants' disappointment about living in a non-internet space, their accounts of sociality and their resilient quest to stay abreast with the rest of the world. Moreover, the internet disconnection provided some of these participants the opportunity to assess their social ties with partners, as revealed in accounts of distanciation. Combined, these sub-sections capture the research participants' assertion that the SMS can never replace social media. Prior to the internet becoming privately available on the smartphone, Cameroonians generally perceived and appropri-

<sup>1</sup> Sama Tanya: Silicon Mountain Seeks Internet Refuge at Bonako (<https://www.afrohustler.com/bonako-internet-refugee-camp/>) (accessed 27/10/2020).

ated the internet for transnational relationships and transactions. By the same token, the mobile phone primarily mediated local relationships, with calls being the most valued form of interaction (Tazanu 2012, 2015). The SMS was popular among those who could read and write. Smartphone internet has dramatically transformed the online world in Cameroon and over the past eight years, users no longer perceive the internet primarily in terms of transnational linkages. During the internet shutdown, a 500 Franc unlimited SMS service offered by mobile phone providers was very cheap for an average internet user in Cameroon. According to the research participants, this very affordable SMS option could not substitute for social media (and the internet). This opinion allows for critical examination of the role that social media and the internet play in their lives.

***Internet disruption: Narratives of disjuncture and the struggle to stay connected***

I interpret internet disruption in this digital age as an arbitrary amputation of users' identities, their 'access point' (Batson-Savage 2007, 242) into both the online and offline worlds. By mid-April 2017, the internet/social media identities of internet users in Buea were severely disrupted, to the point that some research participants, frustrated by their inability to readily access their online identities, invoked pre-modern images to describe their detachment from the rest of the world. Recounting how he felt when the government disconnected the internet, Denis, a twenty-five old medical student at the University of Buea quipped:

At first, it was as if one was living in a primitive world, cut off from the rest of the world. It was like living in the Dark Ages. We just did not know what was going on. We are very dependent on the

internet and it was just unimaginable that the government can, in an instant, deprive us access to people and information. It has become part of us, and we should be surprised and be angry when disconnected in an instant. This is what we could never have imagined. It was hard. But as the months passed by, it became normal.

How Denis describes people's adjustment to the non-internet space is profound. Invoking the Dark Ages to describe internet interruption paints the severity of living in an unconnected world, leading one to unpack the implications of such disconnection in an age of deep mediatization. For example, the narrative of the 'primitive' non-internet space is understandably couched in the idea of progress, which associates the internet with advancement (Kaun et al. 2014). To understand the effects of the shutdown, one must consider what it means to be absent in a world where others are using the internet to shape their future. How do these actors perceive their world and what is their sense of reality? One can capture it this way: they who live without the internet basically lose sight of the world to come. But they want to live, according to Mark Deuze, "in, rather than with, media", that is, living "a media life" (Deuze 2011, 138). Time, according to the participants, is the one important dimension in this equation: to live in a society without internet basically means living in a time that they consider to be pre-modern and backward.

All this relates to the internet being a future-oriented technology; people connect forward, not backwards. By default, internet shutdown erases the present moment; it stops the usual flow of life. It shrinks possibilities in an era where these internet users' lives are not limited to defined localities; through the internet, they think and act beyond their immediate space, as conveyed in the worry that they are deprived of access to people and information. In other words, their world is complete only when they are online, which represents mo-

dernity. It would be a totally different question if these actors were not aware of how useful the internet is or if they had not used the internet before. The fact of the matter is that they were aware of their online deprivation with the passage of time.

Katrien Pype's (2019) work on electronic disruption in Kinshasa offers an interesting reading on how people evaluate and experience time in an age of new media technologies. She reveals that disruptions in digital time leave people in Kinshasa feeling they live in an unsynchronized time, accusing the government of not allowing them to experience temporality with the rest of the world. Their time stops and they do not share a 'temporal framework' (Birth 2008, 4) with the world that is moving ahead. Birth is talking here about intersubjective time in communication, whereby interlocutors are mutually aware of what is going on. A recurring theme in the accounts of being cut off is the expectation of simultaneity in electronic modernity. Couldry and Hepp (2017, 101–102) have similarly noted that with internet disconnection, the time measurement of the social world is frozen because time involves relations of synchronicity across space. By this they mean that the internet and social media operate in accordance with time, reinforce our awareness of passing time, and inform our sense of being connected to others and events (see also Poell 2019). Hence, when Denis says they are "cut off from the rest of the world", he is echoing the idea that their orientation to this world is not synchronized.

This awareness of the disjuncture between them and the rest of the world provoked among the participants a narrative of lagging behind. Martin, for instance, shared his experiences with me a few days before the state restored the internet. The 24-year-old university student concluded that the internet disconnection "favours other students around the world. We cannot compete with them because they are constantly informed about the things that go on in the world. Before the disconnection, we relied very much on the internet for infor-

mation. It is not the case anymore." Martin saw the internet as a game changer and rightly so – those who are on it have better options to live well since they are more informed of the changing times. He asked, rather provocatively, "Do you think we can ever catch up with them?" Internet disconnection, which freezes people's linking-up time, does indeed provoke perceptions of marginality; people lower their expectations in relation to those who are online. Martin, like all participants, recognized the internet as a pathway to the centre of the world, the locus of human activities. Because they had used the internet before, to be absent from this sphere was abnormal and left them uninformed, as when Denis says he "did not know what was going on." They knew many events were unfolding on the internet, but they had no way of knowing what these events were.

Some research participants worked hard to circumvent the situation by traveling to the Francophone zone where they could access internet. It is worth noting that the internet seizure in the Anglophone part of the country was not followed by restrictions on people's movement. Martin and Denis, even while they were forced to live a life comparable to the Dark Ages, defied the odds and traveled to Douala to check their emails, use social media, and download articles and other material needed for their studies. While online in Douala, they did only what was necessary, unlike before the disruption. Counter to the government, who wanted them to be more local, these actors lived their lives by electronically connecting to people who were not necessarily in the same locality. They simply refused to accept their marginality. Though they lived in an internet-deprived space, they still saw themselves as people whose expectations – though diminished – were still in line with those who connect to others through the internet. Above all else, these actors bemoaned the disruption to their everyday interactions mediated by social media, which is why most participants singled out WhatsApp, the most popular platform.



***Internet disruption: social media and interrupted sociality***

To further flesh out participants' feelings of exclusion, I will venture beyond the internet to examine social media in greater detail. Social media apps on the smartphone allow for mediated sociality in unprecedented ways. First, these apps are very visual (Borgerson and Miller 2016, 525) and provide users with a medley of sensorial appeals – they see and read the written text, they hear voices, voice notes and watch videos, they make video calls and, in some cases, the vibration on the smartphone replicates a sense of touch. Social media platforms are, in fact, mediators rather than intermediaries; they shape the performance of social acts rather than merely facilitating them (Van Dijck 2013; see also Van Dijck and Poell 2013; Fuchs 2018). Van Dijck (2013, 29) observed almost a decade ago that social media platforms programme their software to appear friendly to the users; the software translates users' social acts into computer language and vice versa. To this must be added the aspect of interactivity. Over the years the friendliness of social media platforms' software has become deeper and better, allowing users to perform manifold forms of self-representations online (see Förster 2018; Gilbert 2019; Sinanan 2016; Pink et al. 2019). WhatsApp's audio and video calls, as well as the swipe to reply introduced on android systems in 2018, are examples of the friendliness of social media. Such innovations augment the experience of mediated interaction.

With regard to the more concrete matter of sociality, what did the participants do with social media before the shutdown? Although my study did not look at specific relationships, when participants compared social media platforms with SMS, the overall performance of the media in generally maintaining social ties emerged as the central point. Using WhatsApp and Facebook to sustain relationships was described as more real than the SMS. Sinanan (2016, 79) has similarly reported that people

in Trinidad classify social media when using the platforms to maintain family relationships, with Skype "equated with truth" because through the video call they can evaluate if their loved one is fine (see also Pink et al. 2019). This interesting finding is a dimension of media ideologies. Gershon (2010) coined the concept of media ideologies to capture how people understand the communicative possibilities, the material limitations of the specific channel, and how a channel impacts on users' understanding of the message. Media ideologies allow people to be more precise in what they say, as well as to shape how people are imagined and addressed (Gershon 2010, 283–284, 287).<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, in evaluating the truth about sociality, the media ideology is that seeing people and talking to them on video – involving the senses of sight and hearing – makes the interaction more real than, say, a text message or a phone conversation. In relation to my findings, the media ideology is also about the actors coming to conclusions about which media is more fitting after comparing the different media options. I did not ask deeper questions concerning the performance of specific social media platforms, but an expression that SMS can never replace WhatsApp primarily suggests that partners can better contextualize their interaction when they communicate on social media. For Vivian, a 27-year-old secondary school teacher, it is the details deduced from a WhatsApp chat that make the SMS less preferable for sociality:

The SMS can never replace WhatsApp.  
When you send a chat to someone you

<sup>2</sup> There many other media ideologies (gender, generation, economic status, etc.) governing these relationships. For example, senders always take into consideration the illiteracy status of the receiver before sending an SMS or chat on social media. Other media ideologies are governed by the availability of network, the type and state of users' phones, the emotional state of the interlocutors, their physical location, etc. Another example: some people use WhatsApp just to transmit voice notes to those who can neither read nor write.

see if the person has received it. You can also prepare to continue the chat if she replies. But with SMS, even if you get a delivery report you can never know if the person is with her phone. People can also say they did not receive the SMS or that their screen is broken. You can never tell.

Vivian was talking about social interactivity on WhatsApp (the same could be said of Facebook) when compared with the SMS. She outlined the uncertainties involving SMS interaction. You can never be sure if the addressee has received the message. As the sender has a way of verifying that the message was delivered and read (or listened to), it may sound dishonest if someone denies that s/he did not see a WhatsApp or Facebook message. I am talking of an ideal situation here since it is also possible for users to stay invisible or to configure their settings so that you do not see when they read messages. Most people generally allow their read status to be visible to the sender. This can be described as a media ideology of co-awareness.

Still in line with the sensory qualities of social media and how they convey a deeper sense of realness to social actors (when compared to the SMS), it is worth spelling out some specific qualities of these media. For example, WhatsApp and Facebook chats are considered more interactive and conversational: the sender's message is tilted to the right and that of the receiver to the left side of the screen with each interlocutor's text having a different coloration; the various emoji convey or reinforce messages; there are possibilities to make voice/video calls and audio notes; users can send photos and videos, make groups and conference calls, change or look at profile photos, do status updates, swipe to reply to specific messages, etc. At other times the actors engage in mundane practices like looking at the Facebook photos of friends and WhatsApp status updates, or checking when a friend or family member was last online. Interestingly, this feature of the social media

(online status), the participants responded, offered them the chance to check (and spy) on friends and family without necessarily interacting with these partners (see also Lee 2013, 281); it was just enough for them to see that these partners were still active online.

Important in all this, they said, is the necessity to stay connected to intimate others, to keep track of friends and family members even without any direct communication. Just knowing that someone was online not many hours or days ago is reassuring. This normally does not raise an alarm but if they realize that someone, especially an intimate family member or friend living abroad, has not been online for some time, they would get concerned. In this circumstance they ask friends or family members if they have information about the person whose status shows s/he has been absent online for some time. Similarly, they may directly call someone in Cameroon when they realize s/he has not been online for a while. The internet shutdown made it impossible to use social media to keep an eye on family and friends. This was especially the case with those living overseas who could not – as mentioned earlier – be contacted through the cheap SMS option available for national sociality. Secondly, it was expensive to call abroad directly from their phones. During the internet disruption, direct calls became the main means through which people could maintain transnational ties from Buea. Another option of connecting with the diaspora, as seen in the case of Martin and Denis, was to travel to the Francophone side of the country to get online. Only a few relationships were sustained through this difficult method, as seen in the last part of this article.

With the internet seizure, the communication gains accrued through social media in the few years preceding 2017 dissipated. The research participants could no longer benefit from cheap calls on social media and the possibility to interact frequently with partners. As with Sinanan's (2016) study cited above, but not in connection with the truthfulness of

sociality, the participants in my study had developed greater intimacy on social media platforms through video calls and voice notes in their own languages (see also Staudacher and Kaiser-Grolimund 2016). They also shared humour, memes, news, etc. With the smartphone, they took and shared photos instantly, intensifying intimacy in the relationships (Hjorth and Hendry 2015; Watkins et al. 2012)<sup>3</sup>. How intense the interaction was depended on specific social bonds. The internet disruption erased these gains and the participants lost the ability to represent their world. As a matter of fact, because of the internet shutdown, participants such Alice (she will come up in the next section) was no longer interested in taking photos anymore. Her point was that the mobile internet on the smartphone motivates individuals to snap and share photos online (see Förster 2018; Gilbert 2019). She would want to share these images, to “let friends know where you are and also for them to comment on the photos. I enjoy sending provocative food photos online. We know those abroad miss home and sometimes we provoke them by posting those dishes that would make them think about what they are missing.” Not only did these forms of teasing interaction cease instantly with the shutdown, people also narrated stories of abandonment, a theme that comes up in the next sub-section.

### ***Internet disruption and the reevaluation of social bonds: real friends versus social media friends***

Soon after the government shut down the internet, activists framed internet access as a human right, using the twitter hashtag #Bring-BackOurInternet to index the disruption.

<sup>3</sup> See the work of Dong-Hoo Lee (2013) and Juliet Gilbert (2019) for people using smartphones and social media to foster intimacy through photo-sharing. Gilbert particularly talks about youths in urban Nigeria representing themselves on social media by uploading photos directly from their smartphones.

Despite these online protests and phone calls to their offices, the service providers, unable to explain why they had blotted out the internet in the said area, went completely silent. They broke their silence immediately the government ordered them to restore the networks. As a way of placating customers, the Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN) sent out this message on April 23<sup>th</sup> 2017: “Y’ello! INTERNET IS FREE for you while in NW & SW [the two Anglophone provinces], enjoy it now. Take your 4G SIM and enjoy Amazing Gigs on the fastest network.” Together with other service providers, MTN engaged in compensatory practices, providing free internet and SMS services to customers in the affected zone. People greeted the internet restoration euphorically and one could hear echoes of football fan-like noise effusing from all around Buea. The rumour flew around that data would be free until the end of May 2017. Free internet lasted for just over a week and a half; on 24<sup>th</sup> April, I received an SMS from Orange-Cameroon which read “Internet is back in your hands! Enjoy free internet every day in NW & SW till May 2<sup>nd</sup>. Browse without limit.”

Despite these enticements, the internet seizure – and the impossibility of sustaining ties through social media – had already injured some relationships. This damage is understandable in that social media had already been embraced as a standard platform to mediate ties (see also Miller 2019). Social media plays huge roles in relationships in ways that may not be very obvious. For instance, there is research confirming that online spaces could be more engaging, to the extent that certain conversations and practices just stay online (Hallett and Barber 2014; Shumar and Madison 2013; Costa 2016). Following the shutdown, many research participants realized that most of their relationships that were exclusively maintained by social media had gone cold. Most of them became critical of these relationships. As such, people like Alice, a 35-year-old businesswoman, distinguished

“social media friends from the real ones”, concluding that it is not necessarily the friendship that motivates such friends to stay in touch as much as the cheapness of social media:

One can tell the difference between social media friends from the real ones. You know the internet is a cheap means of communicating and in its absence, we realise those who were real friends; I mean the ones that call you. You know there are those who communicate with you on WhatsApp only when they are bored or on break, meaning that they do not create time to get in touch with you. When these friends did not call me as expected, I realised that they were keeping in touch because of the cheap means of communication and also suspected that I was not a priority in their relationships.

Cheap and direct availability through social media tends to fuel narrative of, and what people expect in, friendship. Alice believed some friends socialize on social media – a cheap platform – only when they have nothing else to do. It is within this context that she and others distinguished ‘social media friends’ from the ‘real’ ones. Real friends, they said, would call you directly, unlike the social media friends who opportunistically rely on the internet. In Pype’s (2019) study on digital time in Kinshasa, mentioned earlier, people grade calls, with direct calls valued much more than those made through social media. It is a media ideology in which interlocutors compare the different media (Gershon 2010, 287) and conclude that if you value a relationship, you would pay for the cost of the call by using your airtime. Here is the logic: both partners pay for the cost of communicating in social media interaction, unlike with direct phone calls, where the caller bears the cost alone. This belief about direct phone calls being more valuable and that certain partners bore the cost of maintaining the ties during the internet disruption is embedded in Cameroonian mediated sociality, where the more

economically advantaged person is expected to maintain the relationships by paying for calls (Frei 2013; Tazanu 2015, 2018).

One cannot fully understand some of these anticipations about being called without having a glimpse at who and what some of these actors do on the internet aside from using social media. Let me turn to Alice once more. She talked to me after the internet reconnection. Alice owned a small clothing stall in a market in Buea. When not talking to clients or other sellers around her, she turned on WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger to keep in touch with her friends and customers – to whom she advertised her new arrivals and discounts. She regularly kept in touch with this dense network of friends and customers both in Cameroon and abroad. She had expected them to call her during the internet seizure. Only very few did, and these were those she classified as real friends. She pondered whether or not to block the fake friends just to demonstrate how irate she was that they did not keep in touch with her. Similarly, partly because the relationships had gone cold, interlocutors such as Vivian would, after the restoration of the internet, just “stare at them [online friends] and sometimes ignore to respond to their chats.” She asked rhetorically “Why should I reply to people who did not care about me when they could no longer see me on social media?” Transnational relationships were treated with greater contempt, understandably so, since they could not be maintained through the cheap SMS option that was available during the shutdown.

Among the many interesting trajectories of the unmet expectations of being called was this aspect of the research participants weaponizing their marginality. Many of them invoked their living in a non-internet space to prick the conscience of those they expected to keep in touch, as well as to demonstrate ignorance about certain events. After all, they lived in a non-internet space, unsynchronized with the rest of the world. It was even legitimate for people in Buea to stay uninformed or to not inform others about their lives. By this I mean

that a sort of blasé attitude characterized the way people went about their activities. To say that they did not know about this or that event was very much connected to the fact that they were not linked up on social media, thus emphasizing how deep the media platforms were rooted in their lives. A friend of mine retorted “We did not have internet!” when I coincidentally met him on the street in Buea and started talking about another friend’s Facebook post. How could he comment on a post he had not seen? My friend was overwhelmed with messages after the internet was restored. Similarly, those research participants who belonged to WhatsApp and Facebook groups found it difficult to catch up with the conversations that had taken place in their absence.

## Conclusion

Research on social media and internet disruption in Africa has disproportionately focused on politics. There has hardly been any attention to sociality in the event of these shutdowns. In this article, I have chronicled what it means to live with and without internet and social media in an era of deep mediatization. In the face of internet shutdown, research participants living

in an unconnected condition see themselves as being sanctioned and pushed to the margins of the modern world. To assess this marginality, I have revealed what the actors could no longer do in the non-internet spaces and the lengths to which some of them went in the struggle to get online. There are still many untold stories: people in Buea no longer got their medical reports through emails; some traveled to Yaounde (the capital city) to collect information that could have been sent to them via email; the internet refugee camps (mentioned earlier) were reportedly exploitative; most businesses that relied heavily on the internet closed down, people gave their passwords to friends to check their emails, etc. The findings in this article have implications for African studies. Many African countries are tampering with the internet in times of political upheaval and the popular trend among researchers has been to look at electoral politics and international relations. This article shows that it is also vital to look at the everyday online socialites and relationships of the media users in the event of internet shutdowns. By understanding their sensory and social experiences, and the ingenuity of their responses to shutdowns, we realize the much more complex politics of connection and disconnection in Africa.

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