**UNE Presentation/ ‘Social Media in West Africa – ‘a continuation of conflict by other means’.**

**General Context**

The title of this paper (as above). Explain the von Clausewitz quote – ‘war is a continuation of diplomacy by other means’. And it’s to point up this connection between discourse and physical conflict. I began writing this presentation on Holocaust Memorial Day (Jan 27) and we all know that what ended up with gas chambers began with language which demonised & dehumanised Jews and other minorities in Europe. And again, we all know how social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and so on have become powerful vectors for hate speech and de-legitimising ‘the other.’

**Sierra Leone Context**

Over the last decade, I’ve had a close association as a researcher with **Sierra Leone**. And I’m sure you’re aware that in the 1990s, that country was embroiled in a vicious civil confict in which many atrocities were committed. Perhaps the most infamous act of violence was the deliberate amputation of arms, sometimes legs, by a rebel force, known as the RUF. Two decades on, SL remains a deeply polarised country. Only two significant political parties, the SLPP and the All Peoples Congress (APC) and two dominant ethnic groups, the Mende and the Temne. The Mende associated with South and East ; the Temne with the North. This, what I call ‘ethno-regionalism’ tends to infect every aspect of politics because each of the parties is seen to represent, and stand for, one of these ethno-regional blocs. It is a binary environment.

**3.00**

And in common with other divided societies, your name alone is a signifier of your identity**.** In Northern Ireland, if your first name is Billy, you’re Protestant. Similarly, in SL, if your surname is Kamara, you are identified as a Temne from the North. If it’s Massaquoi – these are both very common names - you’re a Mende from the South-East.

**WhatsApp**

So, that’s the political and cultural context. What role does social media play ? Well, anyone who’s worked in Africa will know that the mobile phone is king and when it comes to instant messaging, WhatsApp is hugely influential. In many parts of the world – India, Sri Lanka, Phillipines, Brazil etc – false information spread via WA has incited violence, vigilante action and created a host of social problems, such that Facebook – which owns the platform – has limited the number of people/groups to which messages can be forwarded, and the number of members of a group (165) and imposed other conditions on users.

In SL, there were a number of occasions during the 2018 presidential election when false information was deliberately spread via WA. As an example, a post widely disseminated said that President Trump was supporting one of the two candidates. It even carried the logo of the US embassy which was forced to deny the story. Another example, a video was shared of a riot taking place in a town, with the message that it was ethnically inspired violence. It was actually footage taken several years earlier and not even from Sierra Leone.

**6.00**

**The research project**

So, what is my research project ? Well, it’s to critically analyse an exchange of messages in a WhatsApp group. Now, the problem with researching WA is a technological one. As you know, it’s encrypted end -to -end. The messages remain on the devices from which they’re sent & received. They’re not publicly visible. So, in partnership with the Mass Comms dept at the University of SL, we set up a WA group, called ‘Politics & Media’ amongst a class of 2nd year students. Fifty-seven students have joined and signed consent forms, agreeing that all of the posts can be used for the research, as long as their names are anonymised. A group administrator was selected and he has been sending me the material via email on a monthly basis. I’m NOT a member of the group. I thought it would be more rigorous if I was ‘outside the circle’.

Before the group was established, April 2019, I carried out a number of scoping interviews with journalists, ngos, and media academics in SL to get a feel for how WA is being used in social/political discourse, how the various WA groups can overlap and so on. And what surprised me was that many of those I spoke to are members of at least half a dozen groups and sometimes more.

I also used the interviews to decide what themes our group should be asked to discuss. After all, you have to accept that this is an artificial project. The group didn’t emerge organically but has been set up specifically for research, and everyone in it is aware of that. We chose four core issues : ***ethno regionalism, corruption/malpractice, xenophobia, and*** ***misogyny.*** The themes were embodied in four discussion topics, framed as questions.

***Q1.*** The first one concerned the setting up of a Corruption Commission by the current govt. SL has been plagued by corruption and weak governance for decades. But the decision has polarised opinion. So we framed the question in this way ***: Is the Commission a genuine effort to recover funds stolen from the state – or a witch-hunt against ministers from the previous administration ?***

Framed in that way, the group was ostensibly faced with a binary choice of answer. But this wasn’t a questionnaire. It’s a discussion forum and it was open to group members to look beyond that to reflect the fact that corruption has been endemic under both parties and discuss how best to deal with it.

**9.30**

This message thread ran for 19 days and there were 261 separate responses from 31 different individuals (just over two thirds of the group membership). Despite a warning from the group administrator to keep the debate civil and appropriate to an academic forum, it quite quickly became partisan and rancorous. This is a typical exchange (from Aug 30) :

22.42 J

***Why was the current minister of lands not call up for question by the Commission, and a host of crooks and thugs under this big tok government…….it clearly shows a witch hunt [sic] to attack north-western politicians.***

A few minutes later, DF responds but clearly trying to pour oil on troubled waters and be even-handed.

22.56 DF

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

22.59 J

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

2300 HB

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

0036 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 shows that the Mass Comms course has been dealing with the issue of objectivity (and no time here to go into how contentious that notion is…). And it shows that the person who posted the comment understands the wider aim of the research project which is to get people to think outside of their ethno-regional silos. In a slightly later exchange, C writes :

***In my view, the solution is we should stop practising tribalism and regionalism and think Sierra Leone***.

Which immediately attracts this response from A :

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

**13.00**

I won’t go into much detail here about what methodology I’ve employed to examine the messages but on the whole, it’s **critical discourse analysis**. And it’s quite revealing that many of the exchanges have what Gerlinde Mautner calls a ***‘negative semantic load’***. In other words, whether comments are in support of, or opposed to, a proposition embedded in one of the questions, the language tends to be confrontational. And this simulates opinion which can quickly shade from reasonable or moderate to hyperbolic.This is one example, in a discussion about whether some teachers have been colluding in exam cheating and fraud. One of the group writes :

***The exam malpractice has worsened over the past ten years and is like injecting poison into the society. (***Well, that’s a perfectly defensible argument. Then he/she goes on : ***It can be said that perversion of our education system is WORSE than the Rwanda 1994 GENOCIDE.*** And for good measure, the words WORSE and GENOCIDE are written in capital letters.

**14.30**

**Conclusion**

This research project is not yet complete. I’m in the process of writing a journal article based on the findings and I’m going to send the draft to the group administrator and my collaborator, the head of the Mass Comms department for their input. I should add that the funding for the project has come from something called the ***Global Challenges Research Fund*** which is a pot of money distributed by the UK’s Department for Int.Devpt and is intended to foster partnership projects that benefit some of the poorest developing countries.

And the intention is to organise a public-facing symposium in Freetown in the autumn of this year so that we can get some kind of discussion going with wider civil society.

I’ll finish with the thought that, although I guess I’ve been focusing today mainly on the negative and the partisan, this isn’t the whole story and, amongst the messages, there are some – admittedly a minority – which show a more nuanced acknowledgement of Sierra Leone’s binary dilemma. And this one illustrates that. I’ll quote it in full :

***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.***

And I really can’t argue with that.

 ENDS.