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| **CABINET DU MINISTRE** | **MINISTER’S CABINET** |
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**PRESS CONFERENCE**

**A/S**

**Media excesses, misinformation, disrepute of government action and high-profile personalities in social media**

*(13 July 2020)*

**ADDRESS BY**

**THE MINISTRY OF POSTS AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS**

* **Your Excellency the Minister of Communication;**
* **Ladies and Gentlemen of the press,**

 Permit me first of all to thank the Minister of Communication for associating me with this press conference on a topic of capital importance, namely **media abuses, misinformation and the disrepute of government action and of high national and foreign personalities in social media**. In other words, we will describe this meeting with the press as being devoted to acts of cybercrime and cyber delinquency, the terminology used to refer to all criminal offences committed via computer networks, especially on the Internet, and which affect properties and persons.

 With regard specifically to the subject herewith, namely offences against persons in social media in Cameroon, it is appropriate first of all to dwell on the concept of "social media", highlighting the advantages and disadvantages, the abuses observed in Cameroon, before presenting the regulatory measures governing their use. We will conclude with the Government's actions to combat cybercrime perpetrated through social media in Cameroon.

1. **SOCIAL MEDIA, ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES**

Basically, a social media is a set of individuals or organisations linked by a group of online applications based on the philosophy and technology of the Net and enabling the creation, sharing and discussion of content generated and disseminated by users.

The origins of social media can be traced back to the forums, newsgroups and chat rooms that were introduced in the early days of the Internet. Several types of social media are used around the world, the most famous of which in Cameroon are WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube.

These media were created for a noble purpose, which is to convey and share more or less live information, but they also bring many abuses in our society.

Social media play an important role in our daily life. Actually, in today’s digital era, the role of social media in issuing and disseminating information and images in the public arena has become critical.

It is a free and easy way to communicate with friends, family, anywhere in the world instantly. On these media, you can share thoughts, messages, photos, and other videos with a simple click.

Nowadays, it is also a useful tool for daily work in Administrations, organisations and companies because it allows direct contact with employees and customers. Moreover, they constitute the most effective tools for advertisement.

 As a tool for monitoring publication or promotion, social media are becoming increasing important in the daily lives of media people, allowing them to measure the effectiveness of an article and to detect trends or produce new content.

 The use of social media is one of the most common activity of our contemporary young people, for both learning and leisure necessity.

Each evolution involves opportunities but also risks, whether for individuals, public and private organisations or the state and the society at large. All internet stakeholders can act in a beneficial and/or malicious, loyal and/or disloyal manner.

Thus, Even though several advantages could be derived from social media, the disadvantages and dangers resulting from them are as numerous as they are manifold. In social media, almost everything is virtual (friends, interactions, money, etc.). Only one thing is certain, the dangers are very real. We shall mention among others:

* **Addiction:** users spend several minutes or even hours on social media, causing repercussions on other activities of human life;
* **Exposure of privacy:** users tend to expose their lives on social media. For instance, their profiles are represented by photos of all kinds which are thus exposed in the public square ;
* **Loss of ownership of the data exchanged:** everything that is published on the wall or web page of their social media (photos, videos, writings, etc.), does not really belong to them after the click. This goes with a lot of consequences on your future life. Each user would therefore benefit from paying attention to what is put in these social media. *(After all, it is possible for an employer to do extensive research on an employee and come across old compromising photos dating several years back).*
* **Forgery:** It is possible to create fake profiles in order to impersonate someone else's personality or for any other reason. With social media, it's easy to cheat when creating an account. You can make up all the information and create a fake identity. This fake identity makes the person anonymous, hence causing several problems. *(In this case, one should be very careful because it is not easy to know who is behind the computer screen).*
* **Identity theft:** One of the dangers of social media is that it does not properly protect the confidentiality of your profile, because identity theft is very common. Therefore, you should restrict access to your profile only to your friends; otherwise cybercriminals will have access to all the information in the user's profile such as first and last names, address and phone number, as well as centres of interests, etc.
* **Harassment and Cyberbullying:** The information gathered through social media can lead to these crimes, which make many victims.
* **Misinformation :** social media are often used to convey false information often with harmful consequences on individuals or institutions.

In any case, the misuse of these social media unfortunately, constitutes a serious threat to individuals, companies and states because it damages properties and people.

Unfortunately, Cameroon is not spared by the surge of social media. As much as social media contribute to the development of digital economy, which is so dear to the President of the Republic, and to economic, social and cultural development, the malicious use of social media with an aim to misinform and distort reality, is likely to create psychosis in the public opinion and to disrupt social cohesion.

It jeopardizes national security, the economy, social cohesion, democracy, health, culture and our different lifestyles.

1. **MEDIA EXCESSES AND MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN CAMEROON**

Considering the current events in Cameroon, social media have become real tools for misinformation, intimidation, calls for hatred, murder and violence. This misinformation generally stems from individuals, whose aim is to damage the reputation of individuals or institutions of the Republic.

The political cycle opened since the presidential elections has been particularly significant with regard to the use of social media by citizens.

The period was also favourable to all sorts of manipulations, especially the dissemination of elements of uncertain and questionable veracity.

Upon observation, we are witnessing the magnification of a discourse of hatred and exclusion, sometimes using a vocabulary that calls for the division of Cameroonians on community, ethnic or tribal basis.

Simultaneously, there is a rise in intolerance and extremism on all sides.

For example, false information about the security crisis in some regions of the country is regularly disseminated, thus discrediting Cameroon in general and its army in particular.

Announcements are also made about the deaths of high-ranking personalities of the Republic.

The Facebook accounts of high-ranking personalities and those of institutions are frequently hacked, as well as the websites of some administrations. Fake accounts for high-ranking personalities are also created.

We have also recorded cases of misinformation about the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cameroon.

In short, we are now in the reign of "fake news" and "deep fake".

The use of social media has been dangerously misdirected, to the point that what appeared at first glance as a tremendous opportunity for digital democracy has become a threat to our living together.

1. **THE CAMEROONIAN APPROACH TO THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

In response to the resurgence of these aberrations, marked by a lack of respect for ethics, legal and technical offences, the Government, through the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, has put in place a set of coordinated strategies to prevent, monitor and punish criminal aberrations in the use of digital platforms.

 **III.1. At the legal and regulatory level**

Cameroon adopted in 2010, Law No. 2010/012 of 21 December 2010 relating to cybersecurity and cybercrime. This law governs the security framework of electronic communication networks and information systems, defines and sanctions breaches related to the use of information and communication technologies in general and social media in particular. It is aimed, inter alia, at:

* instilling confidence in electronic communication and information systems networks;
* protecting the basic rights of natural persons, especially the right to human dignity, honour and respect of privacy, as well as the legitimate interests of moral persons.

Article 78 states that:

* (1) Anyone who publishes or propagates, by means of electronic communications or an information system, news without being able to prove its veracity or justify that he or she had good reason to believe in the veracity of the said news shall be liable to six (06) months to two (02) years imprisonment term and a fine of 5,000,000 (five million) to 10,000,000 (ten million) CFA francs or to one of the two penalties only;
* (2) the penalties provided for in paragraph 1 above shall be doubled when the offence is committed with the aim of undermining public peace.

The Cameroon Criminal Procedure Code could also be applied to deal with certain offences committed in the use of social media, especially with regard to ...Sections 189 (copying of administrative documents), 300 (violation of correspondence), 310 (professional secrecy).

The Criminal Procedure Code provides for penalties/sanctions in these cases, i.e. for some cases of violation of public morals or infringement of state authority. The penalties/sanction are more stringent for offences committed by a civil servant in the performance of his or her duties.

**III.2. At the organisational level**

Several structures are involved in the fight against cybercrime in general and the abuses observed on social media.

* **The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications** is responsible for drawing up and monitoring the implementation of the national policy on the security of electronic communications networks and information systems.
* **The National Agency for Information and Communication Technologies (NAICT)**, which, in addition to being the Internet regulator, is responsible, among others, for regulating, controlling and monitoring activities related to the security of electronic communications networks and information systems. **To achieve these goals, NAICT has a CIRT (Centre for the Prevention and Response to Cyber Incidents) which monitors the use of the national cyberspace and conducts digital investigations in the event of cybercrimes observed on social media.**
* Digital investigations are also carried out by the judicial police officers of the **General Delegation for National Security (DGSN), the General Delegation for External Research (DGRE) and the State Secretariat for Defence (SED)** when they are referred to by victims.
* **The Ministry of Justice (MINJUSTICE)**is responsible for enforcing the law in order to curb crimes committed via social media;

**IV- THE ACTION OF THE CAMEROON GOVERNMENT AGAINST CRIMINAL ABERRATIONS IN SOCIAL MEDIA**

Considering the increasingly recurrent use of social media for depravity and radicalisation, and the disastrous consequences that result, the Government has embarked on a comprehensive programme to prevent, monitor, control and punish criminal abuses in the use of digital platforms.

The Government is working to ensure the safety of activities in our cyberspace, notably by combating cyber-delinquency, through widespread awareness-raising and actions from all stakeholders in society.

At the strategic level, a national cybersecurity policy document has been drawn up and aspects related to social media are addressed in this document.

At the operational level, a programme to promote the responsible use of social media has been under way for several years. Within this context, several actions have already been conducted. This include, among others:

* **Sensitisation operations**
* The sensitisation by SMS through mobile phone operators.
* The sensitisation of young people through ICT camps and other meetings.

These awareness operations are concretely targeted actions to inform the public on the criminal penalties incurred, in case of transmission or propagation of fake or misleading news through social media.

It should also be noted that NAICT carries out many awareness campaigns for Cameroonian Internet users and organises training workshops for key stakeholders. NAICT also supports public and private structures in the certification of their official accounts.

* Another action is **the promotion of better digital governance**, through the responsible use of social media by press men and women.

The purpose here is to provide them with the necessary tools to enable them communicate in a reasoned manner in social media. In this respect, because of its function in a democratic system, the press, which is exposed to these abuses on social media, should be provided with resources to resist these excesses of the social media.

It is against this backdrop that in November 2018, we organised a sensitisation, training and information seminar on the rational use of social media for journalists of the Cameroon section of the Union de la Presse Francophone.

The objective was to groom about forty press men and women on issues related to the use of social media and the contours of communication on community platforms, to popularise the regulations on communication on social media and to present the best practices to deal with abuses and threats, in order to establish the basis for a reasoned use of social media by the Cameroonian press.

In the same vein, we participated in May 2019, as a panelist, in the Conference on Government Communication in the Era of Social Media, organised by students of the Advanced School of Sciences and Techniques of Information and Communication.

The purpose of this conference was to raise awareness among communication students, for a responsible use of social media in the communication of public institutions.

We will not forget the support given by MINPOSTEL to the first Citizens' Days of the Press organised last year by the Association MédiaMédiations et Citoyenneté under the theme : “What journalism for what kind of citizenship ? ”

* **Furthermore, MINPOSTEL supports other competent administrations in the field of technical equipment.**

Thus, through the fund for digital security activities, MINPOSTEL funded the setting up of digital investigation laboratories at the DGSN and the National Advanced School of Engineering of Yaoundé.

1. **PROSPECTS.**

In the future, the actions already carried out above will have to be stepped up in view of the upsurge in cybercrime and other abuses through social media. We shall mention among others:

* **The amendment of the legislation in force, with the aim of dissuasive repression of acts perpetrated online and constituting incitement or violation of public order, social peace or the fundamental values of the Republic.** This amendment, which is already under way, is also intended to enhance the role and responsibility of electronic communications operators in monitoring and combating cybercrime.
* **The drafting of a charter for the protection of minors online** with the aim of better protecting minors who are victims of offences committed through social media;
* **The drafting of legislation on the protection of personal data ;**
* **The introduction of cybersecurity modules in school curricula;**
* The initiation of the ratification procedure of the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime which will enable Cameroon to strengthen its international cooperation in digital investigation.

In addition to the foregone, I would like to announce the launch in the upcoming days, **at the behest of the President of the Republic, of a vast national awareness campaign on the culture of cybersecurity and the responsible use of social media.**

Concretely, the purpose is to carry out awareness-raising activities throughout the national territory, geared at all target groups, namely : Administrations, companies, civil society, pupils and students, local populations, so that Cameroonians could adopt citizen and responsible behaviour in the use of these modern communication tools such as social media.

It is obvious that to carry out this campaign, we will need the collaboration of the press men and women that you are.

1. **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, it is important to remind Cameroonians of the harmful consequences of abuses in social media. The perpetrators of these abuses, which constitute acts of cybercrime, are liable to criminal sanctions.

The abuses and excesses observed today in social media in Cameroon constitute one of the toughest challenges to the Government.

While increasing awareness, the Government will take all its responsibilities in the fight against cybercrime.

**It should be noted that digital techniques and tools make it possible to gather a set of evidence for the identification of the author of any electronic communication.**

We should all understand that misinformation conveyed, unconsciously or deliberately, in social media can falter an entire life or an entire country.

 What is put online stays online, even when deleted.

Social media are an extraordinary instrument of communication. But they must be used responsibly, and to achieve this goal, each stakeholder must play his or her role fully.