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# The ethnification of the Ethiopian media



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A research report

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# Acronyms

AAPO	All-Amhara People's Organization
APD	Amhara Democratic Party
AJA	Amhara Journalist Association
AMMA	Amhara Mass Media Agency (cf. ATV)
ASRAT	Amhara Satellite Radio and Television
ATV	Amhara Television (belongs to AMMA)
CARD	Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy
DW	Dimtsi Weyane Tigray
EBA	Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority
EBC	Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (belongs to ERTA)
EFFORT	Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray
EJA	Ethiopian Journalist Association
ENA	Ethiopian News Agency
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ERTA	Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency (cf. EBC)
ESAT	Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio
ETV	Ethiopian Television (now: EBC)
FBC	Fana Broadcasting Corporate
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OBN	Oromia Broadcasting Network (belongs to ORTO)
OBS	Oromia Broadcasting Service
OFC	Oromo Federalist Congress
OJA	Oromia Journalist Association
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OMN	Oromia Media Network
ORTO	Oromia Radio and Television Organization (cf. OBN)
PP	Prosperity Party
SNNPR	Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region
TJA	Tigray Journalist Association
TMMA	Tigray Mass Media Agency (cf. TTV)
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
TTV	Tigray Television (belongs to TMMA)
WJS	Worlds of Journalism Study

# Executive summary

This report looks into the issue of media and ethnicity in contemporary Ethiopia. As anyone can witness, there have been immense changes in the local media situation since Dr. Abiy Ahmed assumed leadership in April 2018. In just two years, the country has improved its ranking on Reporter Without Borders' Press Freedom Index by 51 places, which is the greatest leap of any country anytime – by far. There is a lot to celebrate. At the same time, the press situation in the country is deeply disconcerting. The reason for this is that the media landscape is as polarized as never before, and that parts of the media are being blamed for playing a pivotal role in the turbulence which have erupted in various parts of the country since 2019. The suspicion of many people is that the media are being exploited to propagate an ethnic agenda.

Towards this backdrop, the intention of the study is to examine the role of the media in ethnic tensions in contemporary Ethiopia. The methodology is twofold, combining in-depth interviews with framing analysis. For the interview part, we have met approximately 25 persons with key positions in all major parts of the media in the country. For the framing analysis, we have scrutinized the media coverage of eight crucial incidents between 2018 and 2020 in ten different media outlets.

We argue that the tendencies we're observing in the media can be described as an intensified ethnification process. By this we mean that ethnic belonging and identity politics are gaining significance as central

frames of reference in the current Ethiopian media discourse. Ethnicity is being employed as a key to interpret media messages, and it outlines a frame for classifying media channels and personalities. We identify two major frames, *annihilation* and *othering*, which are indicative of the tendency of journalists to align with their ethnic background. We also find that many media practitioners are deeply concerned about the developments. Research data point towards a more pluralistic media society in Ethiopia (albeit segmented pluralism), but also significantly more polarization. The polarization is fuelled by ethno-nationalistic media of different origin and ownership, vis-à-vis pan-Ethiopianist channels. The previous stronghold of the federal state media (EPRDF-supportive) has been overtaken by a fragmented state media structure with growing significance of regional mass media agencies. Journalists are beginning to form alliances along regional and ethnic fault lines, as illustrated by the launch of Amhara Journalists Association, Oromia Journalists Association, Tigray Journalists Association, and so forth. Journalists are highly inclined to use sources which support their own ideological interest, and avoid quoting sources from other ethnicities which could balance the story. When it comes to professional ideals, various channels practice a hybrid reporting style which blends acknowledged standards with an interventionist or activist agenda. We argue that ethnic and political agendas are at risk of being at odds with media professionalism.



# Research approach and methodology

*This research study consists of two main parts: an analysis of the media environment and an analysis of media content. Both parts make use of qualitative research methodologies.*

The analysis of the media environment is based on observations plus interviews with key actors in the local media. Approximately 25 in-depth interviews were conducted. 20 of the informants agreed to be named in this report, and are listed on page 15. A few more informants from different parts of the media sector (federal, regional and private) were interviewed on condition of anonymity. Those who appear with name are identified in the discussion only in cases where it has been explicitly agreed that they will be quoted. For the most part, the information in the report is not attributed to a specific person. This is to secure openness in the interview situation and to underline that the interpretation of the research data is entirely the responsibility of the researchers.

The interviews were mainly conducted in March 2020 (in Ethiopia), with follow-up interviews until November 2020 (online). Several of the informants were arrested in July 2020 following the unrest after the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa, and are still detained at the time of completion of this report (November 2020). The interviews with these informants were conducted prior to the recent turbulence.

The second part of the research consists of analysis of selected media stories published between 2018 and 2020. The methodology for this part is framing analysis. Altogether eight stories have been studied, each of which illustrates a particular perspective on ethnicity in the media debate. All the major broadcasting networks discussed in the first

part of the study are visited in the framing analysis, plus a few print publications. The methodological approach for the framing analysis is explained more in detail in the first part of that analysis.

Part one of the study is conducted by Terje Skjerdal, while part two is conducted by Mulatu Alemayehu. However, the two parts should be seen in conjunction. Together, they intend to give insights into the increasingly important role of ethnicity in the Ethiopian media configuration and in the country's media debate.

The report also includes an introductory discussion of 'Media and ethnicity in Ethiopia in historical perspective' which shows how some of the current tendencies have deeper roots in the history of the media in the country (p. 9). The review is primarily based on known literature, but it also contains extracts of research findings of ethnicity in Ethiopian newsrooms which have not been published before.

The study has needed to make various choices regarding which terminology to use, for example in relation to the term 'ethnic media', which is often seen in the current debate. Thus, the following section will contain a discussion of key terms.

## **The term 'ethnic media'**

The term 'ethnic media' is often used to refer to the newly established media channels with ethnic affiliation (such as Asrat TV and OMN), but the phrase can be misleading and might give the wrong connotations.



In the global research literature, ‘ethnic media’ is generally used to refer to a different type of media than some of the most vocal and popular outlets on Ethiopia’s media scene. ‘Ethnic media’ is a category which denotes media outlets targeting immigrant communities in societies where such groups stand out as a minority vis-à-vis the rest of the population (Deuze, 2006; Matsaganis et al., 2011). The term is mostly used to describe immigrant media cultures in the US and Western Europe, and has given birth to a distinct reporting style, ‘ethnic journalism’ (Yu, 2019). It is a rather blameless activity which comes out of the need to share information and maintain cultural cohesion among people who have settled in a foreign country. *Salon Ethiopia*, a bi-weekly newspaper published in Amharic for the Ethiopian community in Seattle, would thus qualify as ‘ethnic media’.

Diaspora media aimed at audiences back home, on the other hand, are of a different category and would not be regarded

as ethnic media. ESAT, for example, which was established as a diaspora channel with studios in Amsterdam, London and Washington DC, aspired to oppose the Ethiopian government’s official narratives through satellite broadcasts reaching local audiences back in Ethiopia and had global distribution. The station has never had the limited geographical outreach which is typically associated with ethnic media.

On this basis we prefer not to use ‘ethnic media’ to point to the current media channels operating in Ethiopia, even if they are clearly propagating ethnic interests. Preferred terms are descriptive phrases such as ‘ethnically-affiliated media’, ‘ethnically-based media’, and so forth.

### ‘State media’ vs. ‘public media’

Further on terminology, we use ‘state media’ instead of ‘public media’, even if the latter is the correct term to describe the official Ethiopian media according to existing media legislation<sup>1</sup>. This is because in the general

*The Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) is officially a public broadcaster, but in global research terms the company would more appropriately be defined as a state broadcaster. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)*

<sup>1</sup> Broadcasting Service Proclamation No. 533/2007

research literature, 'public media' points to channels which are not associated with particular political interests, while there is no doubt that the official media channels in Ethiopia, both on federal and regional level, have a special mandate to speak the interests of the government. Even though officially established companies such as Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) are less of a mouthpiece for the authorities than they used to be, they are still operating as an extension of the public administration and are led by persons who are government party-affiliated. The CEO of EBC is accountable to the Parliament.

A similar loyalty to the authorities are found in companies such as Fana Broadcasting Corporate and Walta Media and Communication Corporate, which both continue to back the communication strategy of the central government and the Prosperity Party (PP). At the same time, these companies are not formally governed by the Parliament or the cabinet through organizational structures, thereby earning a degree of independence, although perhaps in name only. They are therefore referred to as private channels, formally.

The Ethiopian legislation indeed does not operate with the term 'private', but refers to 'commercial' media (besides 'public' and 'community'<sup>2</sup>). We prefer to speak of 'private media' in this report, so as to emphasize that they are independent from the authorities in comparison with the state media. A term which could be considered for future usage, however, is 'non-state media'.

### **The term 'mainstream media'**

Lastly, it is necessary to address the term 'mainstream media', which seems to be increasingly used in Ethiopian media analysis. The term is used differently by different people and in different contexts. In the global literature, for the most part, the name tends to refer to widely distributed and common media outlets representing middle-of-the-road content, as opposed to alternative media which present a different perspective by challenging the majority view. However, on other occasions 'mainstream media' is employed rather as a generic term to signify a media platform other than online media (i.e. newspapers, radio and television). The latter usage is similar to 'legacy media', which is yet another increasingly appearing phrase (cf. 'traditional media').

'Mainstream media' can be confusing terminology because it is sometimes unclear whether it relates to content or technology, but even more importantly in this context, if it does denote a certain style of content, which is the most common understanding of the term globally, it would be debatable which type of media represents the average consumption in Ethiopia. Is it moderate outlets such as *Reporter* and Sheger FM? Large channels such as EBC and Fana, although they are state-affiliated? Because of this, and due to the transitional situation which the country is in, we avoid the use of 'mainstream media' in this study, unless it is clear from the context what it refers to. We generally prefer to label different media genres by descriptive terms.

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<sup>2</sup> Broadcasting Service Proclamation No. 533/2007



# Media and ethnicity in Ethiopia in historical perspective

By Terje Skjerdal

*When reviewing the current developments in the Ethiopian society, one could easily get the impression that ethnicity has become the new mainspring of the media. The matter of the fact is, however, that ethnicity has always been an undercurrent in Ethiopian media and journalism.*

Throughout the different regimes, ethnic interests have played an important role as a motivator for daily reporting, and the media have been used by the authorities to propagate political as well as ethnic causes. This is only to be expected in a society where, ever since the first print publications came on the market in the early 1900s, media have been used for national and strategic purposes.

During the Ethiopian Empire, Haile Selassie treated the media as a mouthpiece for Ethiopian unity based on Amhara supremacy. This was reflected in for example the language policy of the media, which meant that Amharic became widely dominant both in the print and broadcasting media. Foreign languages, however, were never a threat to the empire and have a long history in various print publications (such as English, French and Swahili).

By 1970, Ethiopian Radio served several local groups by offering programmes in Afar, Somali, Tigre and Tigrigna (Janas,

1991, p. 49; Smith, 2008, p. 219; MoI, 1969, p. 140). Notably, however, Oromiffa was banned from the official media for most of the imperial period (Fellman, 1992; Mekuria, 1997).

Indeed, the first time that the Oromos could listen to radio broadcasts in their own language was during the Italian occupation 1936–41, but the decision by the Fascists to use Oromo on Ethiopian Radio was reversed once the Emperor returned from exile<sup>3</sup>. In 1962, the ban on Oromo was challenged when Radio Mogadishu started broadcasting in Oromiffa from Somalia, targeting the Oromo population in Ethiopia. The programme, called Raadiyoo Afaan Qottu, became immensely popular, much to the distress of Haile Selassie. It has been claimed that the Emperor was so furious with the broadcasts that he arranged the assassination of the programme founder Ayub Abubakar in Mogadishu in 1965 (Gow, 2004, p. 310).

3 'Events in Oromo history during the reign of Haile Selassie I'. Available at: <http://www.gadaa.com/haile-selassie.html>

*Dimtse Woyane Tigray began as a resistance radio broadcasting from caves in the northern part of the country. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)*



This only led to further resistance from the Oromo population, and finally the regime gave in and allowed Oromo programming on a regional station, Harar Radio, in 1972.

### **Sustained discrimination during the Derg**

The Derg regime (1974–91) continued to view the media as a potential battleground for ethnic conflict. A one-language policy was enforced in the state media in favour of Amharic (Menychle, 2020). The use of other languages was seen as a vehicle for regional separatism, and Tigrigna in particular faded from the official media scene.

From remote caves in the Tigray region, however, clandestine radio broadcasts emerged, becoming a major instrument in the ef-

fort to build the Tigray resistance movement (i.e. Tigray People's Liberation Front, TPLF) (Amanuel G, 2019; Danial, 2019). The Derg had equal concerns for Oromo separatism.

Immediately after the fall of the Empire, the Oromo cultural resistance movement had great hopes for their people when Oromiffa was allowed on state radio, although it lasted only for a couple of years (Kuwee, 1998). In 1976, *Bariisaa*, the Oromo newspaper which still comes out on a weekly basis, was launched by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The publication was nationalized by the Derg the year after. Illustratively, whereas *Bariisaa* was initially printed with Latin script, the Derg forced it to use Amharic *fidels*, as writing Oromo with Latin letters was forbidden (Gow, 2004, p. 208; Ke-

bede, 2003, p. 479). The newspaper reverted to Latin script only after EPRDF's liberation in 1991.

### **The coming of EPRDF and introduction of regional programmes**

Post-1991, EPRDF's ethnic federalism philosophy was soon integrated in its media policy. Different regions and ethnic groups began to be acknowledged by the media, and over time several languages got their own slots on the national broadcaster. Oromo programmes commenced on Ethiopian Television (ETV) on 23 June 1992.

The introduction of programmes aimed at a certain ethnic group was not without controversy. Several ETV veterans were skeptical. "What do television broadcasts do for Oromo people whose majority of population are poor farmers with no access to television? Is it not a waste amidst the scarcity of ETV resources?" said one ETV employee (Kejela, 2009). Within ETV, there was shortage of technical personnel and producers who worked for the new regional language programmes.

For the government, however, it was a deliberate strategy in its regional empowerment package to introduce Oromo broadcasts, together with Tigrigna programmes. At this time (1990s), there were no regional media companies in Ethiopia, and the introduction of ethnic-based content occurred within the two monopolized state broadcasters in Addis Ababa, that is, Ethiopian Television and Ethiopian Radio.

During Meles Zenawi (r. 1991–2012) and well into the leadership of Hailemariam Desalegn (r. 2012–18), TPLF dominated the leadership positions in the federal state media. In terms of the production, however, the Amharic divisions and departments were more powerful – and even more so today (2020). Both Amhara and Tigray employees were associated with the government, particularly in ETV.

A restructuring process which started in the state broadcaster around 2009, however, divided the different language departments in a new manner and implicated that the Tigray and Oromo departments were relocated to regional mass media agencies in Mekelle and Adama, respectively. Some

Oromo journalists at the time expressed that the reorganizing was speculative and resulted in a weakening of Oromo interests in the state media (Skjerdal, 2013a, p. 198). Tigray interests, on the other hand, continued since many leadership positions were still filled by TPLF affiliates.

Among reporters, it was never doubted that Tigrayans were in power. This affected the everyday interaction in the newsroom. If a Tigrayan was passing by, it would effectively put an end to any discussion since it was as if a government representative entered the room.

The ethnic radar was actively in use by any employee in the organization. It implied that if a newcomer arrived in the newsroom, reporters and editors would, consciously or unconsciously, begin to detect the background of the new employee. It was common for reporters to assume that they would be supported by management persons of the same ethnicity on different occasions, for example if they applied for an educational sponsorship.

### **Downplaying ethno-political tensions**

For at least two decades, ETV and later EBC had a special role in promoting ethnic federalism and multiethnicity for the population. The narrative was told in an educative/advocacy frame (Senait, 2011). Potential problems with the ethno-political system were downplayed. The sources in news-oriented reports were chiefly government officials and supporters, as with most ETV reporting at the time.

Some of the private outlets allowed critical views on ethnic politics, although limited. Studies of the media framing of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Day – celebrated every year to commemorate the ratification of the Ethiopian Constitution on 8 December 1994 – illustrate this. While the state media portrayed the event as a day of celebration, the private weekly *Addis Admas* questioned the purpose of the day and proposed that it has a divisive role, jeopardizing unity among different people groups (Dessalegn, 2015; Hailu, 2015).

Journalists in the Ethiopian media, both state and private, have developed a fine jud-

**Journalists in the Ethiopian media, both state and private, have developed a fine judgement in relation to potentially sensitive content.**



## **Ethnicity is a strong predictor of political sympathy among Ethiopian journalists.**

gement in relation to potentially sensitive content. Stories dealing with religion and ethnicity require particularly careful treatment. Many such stories have not been run at all if they contain latent conflict.

Internal conflict, despite representing a continuous challenge for Ethiopian governments, has had minimal coverage in both state-owned and private newspapers. It has often been characterized by an annihilation frame, meaning that actors, events and explanations are simply absent in the coverage (Mulatu, 2017).

Although much of the marginalization process has occurred through self-censorship performed by individual journalists in the newsroom (Skjerdal, 2010), certain content has been entirely banned from treatment. This could include not just hard news coverage, but music and culture as well. By means of example, Ethiopian Radio prohibited the song 'Lalibela' by the artist Gosaye Tesfaye from being played on the station after complaints from the Hamina people (Gezahegn, 2007). The problem with the song was the description of a 'Lalibela' woman who wanders around early in the morning singing and begging, which is also a stereotypical portrayal of the Hamina. The depiction of a minority group as poor and deficient is where the trouble comes in.

Ethnic issues are therefore delicate not only in relation to the larger political conflicts of the country, but on minority and community level as well.

### **Withholding of ethnic identity among journalists**

Ethnic identity remains a sensitive issue for journalists, as for other groups in society. Many reporters and editors avoid expressing their identity, although their affiliation with a particular language department or other identifiers would unescapably attach them to a particular background.

In the Worlds of Journalism Study (Hantzsch et al., 2019), where 350 Ethiopian journalists were interviewed individually about their professional identity, only half (or more precisely 51.9%) agreed to expose their ethnic belonging. Another way to describe the response rate, of course, is that it was surprising that so many of the respon-

dents actually gave details about their ethnicity when they had the option to remain silent on the issue.

Among the proportion who did respond, 16 different ethnic groups were identified, of which three were vastly dominant: Oromo (31.3%), Amhara (20.7%) and Tigray (36.3%). All other groups had a representation of 3% or less. The figures should not be regarded as fully generalizable for the composition of Ethiopian journalists, as the sampling of media outlets (27 companies in total) were not entirely representative. For example, Oromia Mass Media Agency was included in the study while Amhara Mass Media Agency was not.

However, it is striking that about one-third of the respondents identified themselves as Tigray, while less than 10% of the interviews were conducted in the Tigray region (Mekelle). The clear indication is that the major media houses in Addis Ababa, not least EBC, still had a considerable proportion of employees hailing from Tigray at the time when the data collection was undertaken (2013 to 2015).

The Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS) also queried about political sympathies, which yielded some interesting though perhaps not surprising findings vis-à-vis ethnic background. The most strongly expressed pro-government stance (i.e. supporting EPRDF at the time) was found among Tigray journalists. Only 3.1% of the respondents in this group identified themselves as oppositional.

The opposite tendency was found among Oromo journalists, where a mere 12.8% signalled pro-government sympathies. Amhara journalists fell somewhere in-between, though very few expressed an anti-government sentiment. It should be added that most respondents regardless of ethnicity placed themselves in the middle of the spectrum when asked about political sympathies, meaning that they neither wanted to express a pro-government nor oppositional stance, perhaps to avoid any controversy.

What the WJS findings indicate, nevertheless, is that ethnicity is a strong predictor of political sympathy among Ethiopian journalists. In the Oromo journalism fraternity in particular, there seems to have been a critical



attitude towards the central government for long, both in privately-owned and state-run media houses (Skjerdal, 2017<sup>4</sup>).

### 'Non-ethnic' journalism students

That ethnicity is sensitive has also emerged in research conducted among journalism students. In 2015, 350 graduate and undergraduate journalism students from five universities (Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Mekelle, Jijjiga and Wollega) were surveyed about their professional aspirations, personal qualifications and so forth as part of the Journalism Students Across the Globe project.

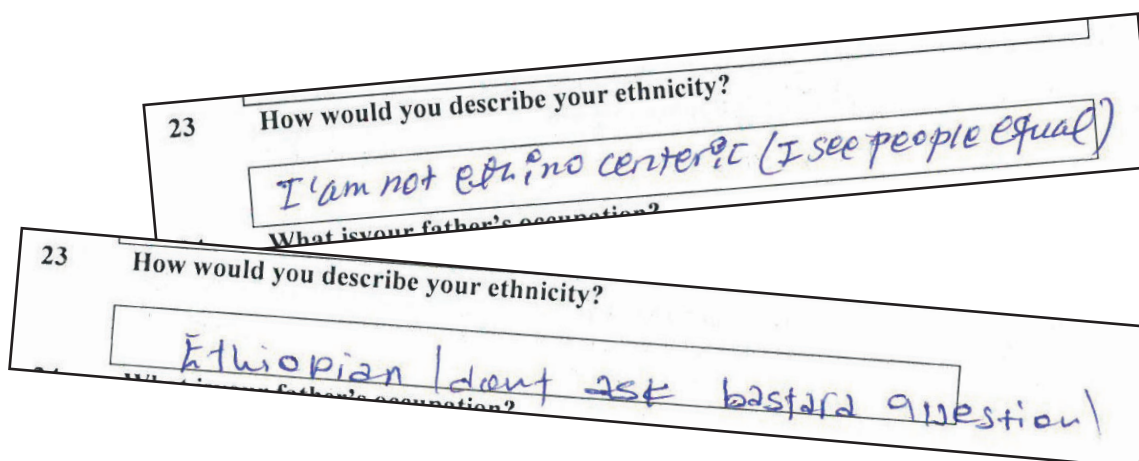
A number of the respondents were strongly offended by the question about ethnic belonging. Characteristic responses were, "I hate this question", "Is this necessary?" and "I don't care about my ethnicity" (see examples at the bottom of this page). A high number expressed a pan-Ethiopian identity ("There's no ethnicity, I'm Ethiopian"). There was also a higher proportion of the journalism students who informed of a dual ethnicity (identifying with two groups) than

among the practicing journalists in the previously mentioned survey.

It is difficult to tell from these surveys alone whether a unitarian identity is gaining ground among young people, but the high proportion of the journalism students who did not want to identify with a particular ethnicity is striking.

The question of possible impact of personal background in actual reporting is more difficult to settle, but the overall evidence points in the direction of a strong relation between identity and journalistic priorities, both in the global research and in assessments of local reporting practices. The Head of the Journalism programme at Addis Ababa University, Mekuria Mekasha, for one, observes that professional journalists have a tendency to report on their own people group positively, while other groups are covered more critically. The impact of own ethnicity is particularly perceptible in the coverage of conflict issues (Mekuria et al., 2018, p. 40).

4 The WJS data regarding ethnicity have not been published before.



Responses from a survey among Ethiopian journalism students in 2015.

Many of the students were offended when asked about their ethnicity.

1: "I am not ethno-centric (I see people equal)."

2: "Ethiopian (don't ask bastard questions)."

# Media and ethnicity during the current Ethiopian leadership

By Terje Skjerdal

*The media reforms after 2018 represent the most sweeping game-changer for the Ethiopian media since 1991. The ethnification processes which have taken place in the media alongside liberalization have received less attention.*

Outwardly, the public can today, for the first time in Ethiopia's media history, experience genuine media pluralism. This implies a realistic choice between different channels and voices, in which audiences are free to consume oppositional media without fear of reprisals. This contrasts the situation during the 2016 demonstrations in Oromia when TV watchers risked being detained in their homes if they tuned in to the wrong diaspora channels using satellite dishes. The following analysis will begin by describing such changes, felt by both audiences and media professionals, before turning to a deeper examination of the more challenging developments in the local media.

Internally, the most fundamental change for the media themselves is perhaps the removal of fear mechanisms in the newsroom. This has previously led to widespread self-censorship in both state-owned and private media (Skjerdal, 2010). Not only are the media now able to cover just about any topic, they are also free to invite and confront politicians who disagree with the station's perspective.

Overnight, public figures have been pushed to adopt an attitude of transparency and accountability which traditionally has been

unfamiliar in the Ethiopian media discourse. Even liberal-minded politicians struggle a little to get used to the new atmosphere. One of our informants from a state media channel tells about an incident where he challenged the Prime Minister to respond to the claim that there are two governments in Ethiopia; one in Addis Ababa and one in Tigray. Dr. Abiy was irritated by the question, but he gave an answer and the interview was broadcast. In the past, it is unlikely that an interview where the premier was visibly annoyed would have passed the editorial desk, if the question was at all asked in the first place.

Media houses still experience that government officials call them to have a say on editorial decisions, but while such a call in the past meant a one-way delivery of directives, these days editors are able to discuss the case with the officials. It is increasingly accepted that the editorial decision should rest with the media, not with a government office.

Another significant change is non-discriminatory treatment of private and state-owned media channels. More than 50 outlets are habitually invited to press conferences and they realize equal access to public information. The Freedom of the Mass Media

and Access to Information Proclamation (590/2008) is under revision, and so are all other laws related to journalism and media operations.

Representatives from all parts of the media sector emphasize that the liberalization of the media is a positive move. It is hard to find any editor or journalist who defend the previous government's more restrictive line on issues such as media licencing or withholding of information.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the liberalization of the Ethiopian media did not commence with Abiy Ahmed. Those who have followed Ethiopian media governance over time will have observed that the sector gradually has moved towards more independence and greater diversity. The allowing of private radios in

2007 was one such move; the scrapping of the old press law and introduction of a new media law with an accompanying access to information section in 2008 another. Notably, licencing of private TV stations began in 2017, a year before Abiy entered office.

The problem of the past, nevertheless, was that formal liberalization involved a large degree of informal interpretation. For example, a journalistic tool such as access to information was largely reserved for individuals with the right connections. Likewise, private broadcasting licences were kept for applicants close to the government (Skjerdal, 2013b).

Curiously, much media regulation enforced by the current Ethiopian leadership still depend on informal judgement. A number of laws related to media practice have been

## Informants

1. Girma Gutama .....	Oromia Media Network (OMN)
2. Tolera Fikru .....	Oromia Media Network (OMN)
3. Jawar Mohammed .....	Oromia Media Network (OMN)/Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC)
4. Belay Manaye .....	Asrat TV
5. Gera Getachew .....	Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT)
6. Eskinder Nega .....	<i>Ethiopis</i> /Balderas for True Democracy
7. Daniel Berhane .....	Horn Affairs
8. Gebrehiwot Tesfa .....	Dimtse Woyane Tigray (DWET)
9. Tibebu Belete .....	Ahadu Radio
10. Amare Aregawi .....	<i>The Reporter</i>
11. Tamrat G/giorgis .....	<i>Fortune</i>
12. Gashew Fentahun .....	Amhara Mass Media Agency (AMMA)
13. Zelalem Genemo .....	Southern Region Radio and Television Agency
14. Hagos Niguse .....	Tigray Mass Media Agency (TMMA)
15. Asfa Ahmed .....	Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC)
16. Ayele Addis .....	Amhara Journalist Association (AJA)
17. Tsegaw Tadesse .....	Tigray Journalist Association (TJA)
18. Nazif Jemal .....	Oromia Journalist Association (OJA)
19. Befekadu Hailu .....	Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD)
20. Atnafu Brhane .....	Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD)

*Various other informants were interviewed on condition of anonymity, representing different media channels in the capital city and the regions, both from the state-owned and privately owned media.*

*The research interviews were conducted between March and September 2020.*

**It is now common to describe media outlets primarily out of their ethnic sympathies.**

repealed, but they are yet to be replaced with new legislation. An awaited Mass Media Policy Bill was discussed by the Council of Ministers in August 2020, but it is uncertain when it will be authorized.

Many new media businesses in Ethiopia are therefore partially operating in a legal vacuum. Some of them are registered as commercial enterprises, but they lack proper broadcasting permission and must transmit programmes from abroad even if much of the content production is taking place in Ethiopia. Their formal legal position is therefore little different than it was during the previous government.

What makes a big difference, nevertheless, is that the current government has welcomed diaspora channels to the country and is not interested in clamping down on their activities. Behind this observation there is an important lesson in Ethiopian media governance, namely that the informal aspects still play an important role when defining the room for media freedom and permissible public deliberation. Hence, when describing the ‘homecoming’ of the diaspora media in 2018, an informant uses the expression, “Abiy allowed Jawar to return”, as if the fate of Jawar Mohammed’s media company was essentially a matter of personal judgement by the Prime Minister rather than the consequence of formal media liberalization. And perhaps, to a large extent, it was.

### **Intensified polarization**

One of the unsolicited secondary effects of the newborn media pluralism in 2018 is increased polarization between media outlets. It should be underlined that polarization is not a new phenomenon in Ethiopian media logics. In fact, it was one of the foremost characteristics of the media environment in the 1990s when radical print outlets with sympathies for the previous Derg regime challenged the government through rebel journalism. Strong polarization lasted at least until the watershed elections in 2005, making the Ethiopian media more divided than comparative media environments in East Africa (Stremlau, 2018).

However, the post-2018 polarization is of a different type and character than before. While previous dividing lines were descri-

bed in political terms, often following a private vs. state media axis, the new polarization is overwhelmingly informed by ethnic interest. It is now common to describe media outlets primarily out of their ethnic sympathies. This is most sharply pronounced in newly returned companies such as Oromia Media Network (OMN, Oromo-affiliated) and Amhara Satellite Radio and Television (ASRAT, Amhara-affiliated), but a number of other media institutions have similar commitments to one region or one specific ethnicity.

The state media are subject to a similar tendency. In the past, official media outlets were largely centralized and would represent the EPRDF coalition as a whole, but with the growth in regional mass media agencies, each company is now nurturing its own identity, resulting in increased polarization with agencies in other regions or with local companies carrying a different ethnic belonging. Ownership has become subordinate to ethnic commitment. For example, in the Tigray region, privately-owned Dimtsi Weyane Tigray joins forces with state-owned Tigray Mass Media Agency to counter the media from other regions.

The observed polarization is also of a different intensity than before. Veteran media personalities describe it as the fiercest polarization ever seen in the Ethiopian media landscape, spurred by an ‘amplification of the ethnic agenda’ (anonymous veteran journalist). And while the divergence between different media outlets is greater than before, it is also being played out at multiple levels. On the media type level, the different outlets gravitate towards activist types, moderate types, and loyalist types. On the political level, outlets polarize around ethno-nationalist versus pan-Ethiopian positions. On the ethnic level, media companies more openly than before express allegiance to an Oromo, Amharic, or Tigray identity and so forth.

An exemplar way to detect polarization is through a scrutiny of the different channels’ presentation of the same stories, as demonstrated by this study’s accompanying framing analysis (see the latter part of the report). On the most fundamental level, the choice of which stories to cover and which



ones to ignore (annihilate) is a sign of divergence between the channels. When the same events are covered, the choice of sources tends to make a significant difference, as do the selected narrative and the interpretation of events.

A focused study of crisis coverage in EBC vs. OMN is revealing. While EBC calls attention to stability, OMN brings provocations for mass rallying. While EBC forwards official sources, OMN allows their own reporters to speak. Where EBC seems to underestimate the cases and their consequences, OMN exaggerates. And, notably, the two channels never use the other channel as a source, according to the study (Endalkachew, 2018).

In this study, we found that in the few cases where journalists quote stories from other channels, they do it solely to show solidarity with people referred in the story or to show how a story reported in another media outlet is dangerous to their own ethnic group. In other words, identity politics appears to override professional obligations in the daily priorities in the media. The outcome is fragmentation in the media landscape, where different channels operate in the same environment but polarize in keeping with political and ethnic agendas.

### **Mounting hate speech**

Many – if not most – journalists and editors view hate speech as growing and a major problem for the Ethiopian media. The operational definition of hate speech here is described broadly, referring to advocacy of hatred against a group which constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence – although the demarcation between acceptable and unacceptable provocation depends on individual perspectives (Somerville, 2011). That hate speech prevails in the social media has been an established fact for long. What is new, according to media professionals, is that hate speech utterances and incitement to violence have moved to the mainstream media as well (i.e. the journalistically edited media). The type of hate speech the informants have in mind is particularly that which contains ethnic animosity.

One incident several informants mention was a live event broadcast by OMN on the

International Women's Day 8 March 2020. As part of the live transmission, the channel aired a statement by an Oromo woman who warned against interethnic marriage, calling for Oromo men to divorce their *habesha* (Amhara and Tigray) wives. The testimonial was viewed as a provocation to set different people groups up against each other. In fact, when asked about the incident, OMN agrees that the broadcasting of the statement was unfortunate and claims that the station would not have transmitted the incident if they knew it was coming (Girma Gutema, personal interview, 13 March 2020). Audiences, nevertheless, perceived the statement as a message not just coming from a woman who was given the chance to speak on a live transmission, but from OMN itself.

Studies indicate strong differences between the social media and the edited media when it comes to hate speech. Expressions of hatred and animosity are much more prevalent on social networking sites than in the professional media. This is evident in reports from other parts of the East African region (Dolan and Ferroggiaro, 2019; York, 2019), and is documented in research from Ethiopia as well. One study found that 95.4% of entries on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube contained hate speech utterances when the topic was ethnicity or religion (Mulugeta, 2019). The situation was different during the 2015 elections when there was found relatively little hate speech in the online debate. According to a study of election-related Facebook postings, only 0.4% of the statements could be classified as hate speech (Gagliardone et al., 2016). It should be emphasized that objective measures of hate speech are difficult, and results will to a large extent depend on choices made in the sampling as well as the defining criteria of what constitutes hate speech. However, based on observation over time and the overall research evidence, the indication is that online hate speech has increased.

The Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD), a local NGO, has documented a clear correlation between peaks of online hate speech and outburst of violence. One example is the use of the inflammatory term *neftegna* (derogatory for Amhara people) on Twitter, which peaked when

**Expressions of hatred and animosity are much more prevalent on social networking sites than in the professional media.**

**Much of the hate speech can be traced to online platforms at Western universities.**

violence occurred in October 2019 and July 2020 (figure 1). It is also found that locally posted hate speech decreases whenever the government activates Internet blockouts. This happened for example in early 2020, when the Internet was blocked in western Oromia, including Ambo University, where many of the protest voices came from.

According to CARD, most of the utterances which might be defined as hate speech originate in the diaspora. This they know because entries from netizens abroad typically lack context and are less connected with the actual events on the ground. Equally alarming, much of the hate speech can be traced to online platforms at Western universities, indicating that Ethiopian diaspora scholars and students are active posting inflammatory messages in different online media channels to influence the population back in Ethiopia. Local participants in the debate are more cautious (cf. Abrham, 2019; Meseret, 2020; Sileshie, 2014).

The use of legal action to curb hate speech is controversial. Some are of the opinion that ethnic hatred in the media has come to such an extent that it could be equated with Radio des Mille Collines’ role during the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and that action therefore needs to be taken (Ayele, 2020). Others propagate a more liberal stance and view intervention by authorities, such as the introduction of the Hate Speech and Disinfor-

mation Proclamation in February 2020, as an exacerbation of the problem (Téwodros, 2019).

Among journalists and editors consulted in this study, there are also different opinions. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, editors with an otherwise liberal track record call for more active engagement by the government when it comes to dealing with tendencies of extremism. They associate the current attitude of the government with incapability and powerlessness. “It is as if someone is stealing my car when the policeman is standing next to it, just watching,” one editor explains. Others view hate speech as a natural consequence of the new media policy regime where free media are allowed, and they see no rational way for intervention unless liberal principles are overruled.

Although hate speech is mainly associated with user-generated online content, it is also becoming a problem in the professional media, according to informants. The part of the media which is first singled out is the ‘ethno-nationalist’ media, but also regional mass media agencies are mentioned.

When referring to the ethno-nationalist media, mainly two channels are mentioned, OMN and Asrat Media. CARD, in its nuanced analysis of hate speech, would not fully agree that the two channels are comparable with the social media when it comes to ethnic provocation and incitement to violence.

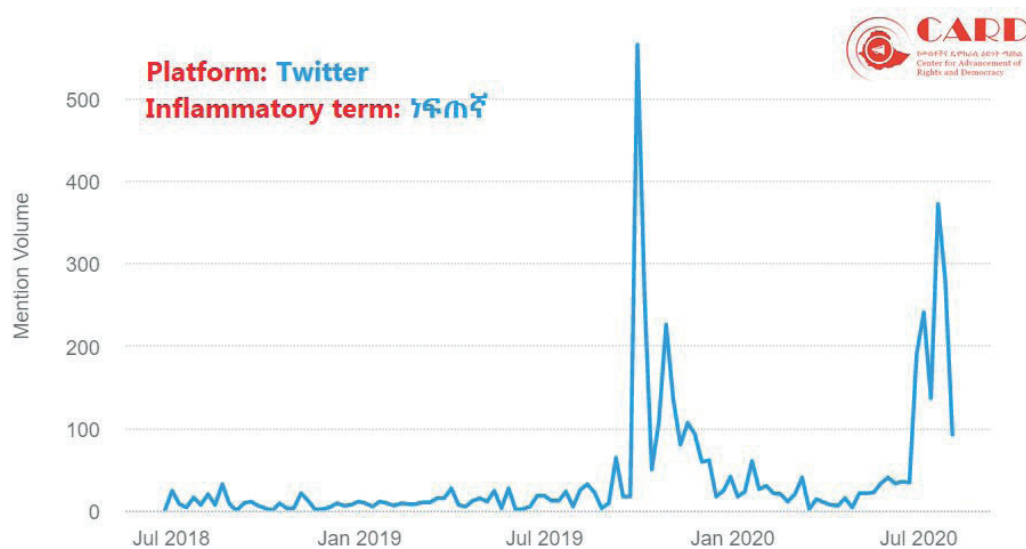


Figure 1: Occurrences of inflammatory terms on Twitter, July 2018 to July 2020. Source: Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy, CARD (used with permission).



According to the NGO, ethnically-motivated channels such as OMN know quite well how far they can go without overstepping the limit for acceptable speech. However, monitoring agencies suggest that the channels are constantly guilty of ‘indirect incitement’, in the sense that they let invited guests propagate a one-sided ethnic agenda which feeds activists and demonstrators with ideas which in turn escalate in the social media as an element of ‘outrage communication’ (Téwodros, 2020). Thus, fairly or unfairly, a few newcomers on the Ethiopian media scene are frequently blamed for the increased aggression observed in the professional part of the media. Who are they, and how do they perceive their own identity?

The following section will do a closer scrutiny of the most characteristic ethno-centric channels in three different directions: Oromo, Amhara and Tigray. OMN and Asrat Media represent Oromo and Amhara identity, respectively. They are both young media companies based in Addis Ababa and are to a certain extent staffed with returned diaspora activists. Dimtsi Weyane Tigray (DW), on the other hand, has a four-decade long history as a Tigray-affiliated media outlet, for many years based in Mekelle. Each

of these three companies pinpoints cases of ethno-nationalistic media polarization.

### **OMN and the influential role of Jawar Mohammed**

Oromia Media Network (OMN) began as a satellite TV station among the Oromo diaspora in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2014. The station is still registered as a charity in the US, since such an arrangement is not allowed in Ethiopia.

The financing of the station’s activities is somewhat opaque. It is clear that US audiences do fundraising activities for OMN. In Ethiopia, income is generated through advertising and sponsorship from banks and other sources, but the financing is demanding because businesses steer away from the station due to its anti-government reputation. The network has 41 employees in Addis Ababa, of whom 28 are journalists.

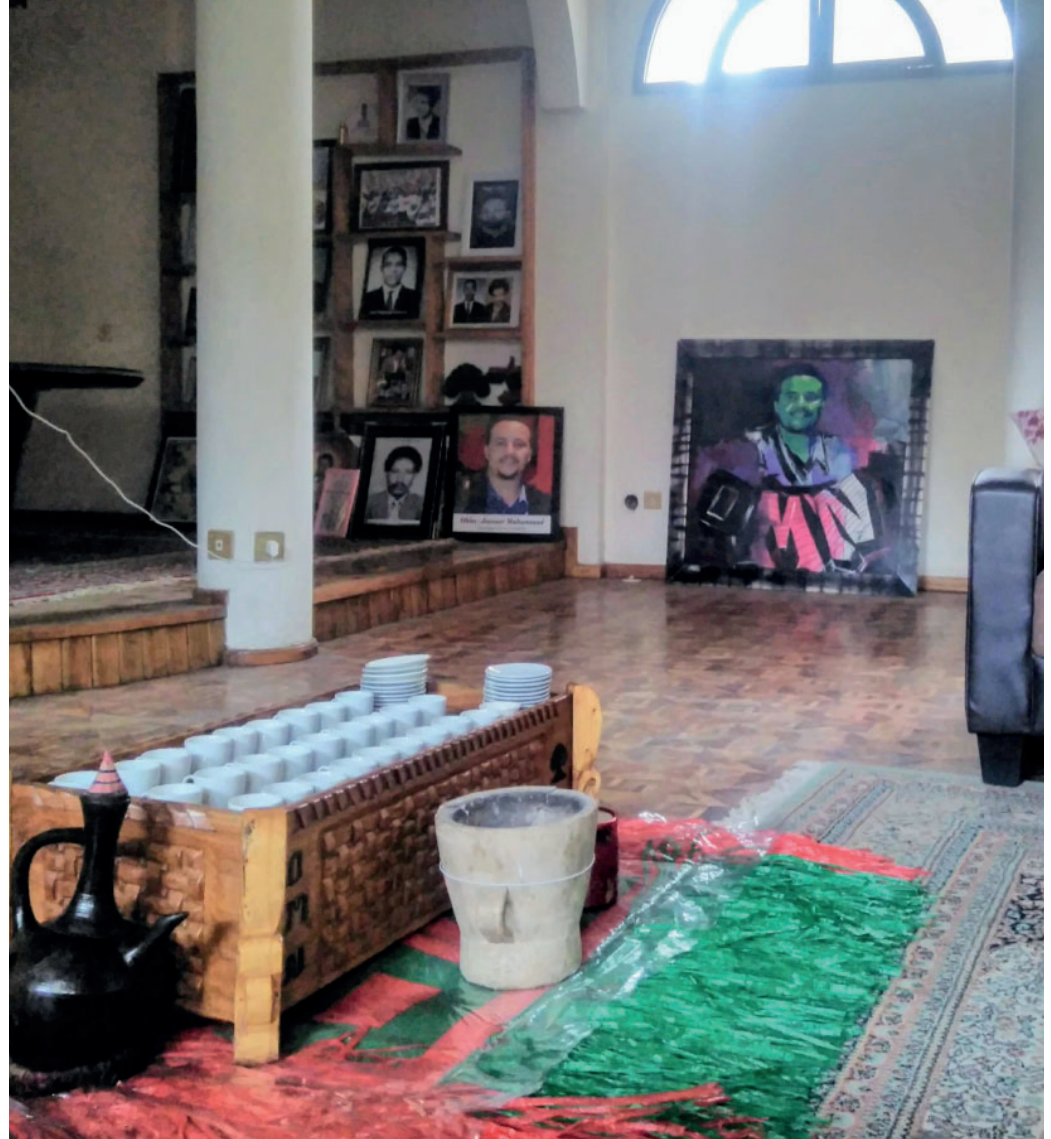
OMN has an outspoken aim to advocate for the Oromo people. The rationale for this, in the words of the station’s director, is that the Ethiopian media landscape is skewed and “eliminates a part of the country” in its coverage (Girma Gutema, personal interview, 13 March 2020). At the same time, OMN claims to provide a platform for different pe-

*Girma Gutema took over as Executive Director of OMN from Jawar Mohammed in 2020. Oromo nationalism is visible in his office by means of the OLF flag to the left and the flag of the Oromia regional state to the right. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)*





Above: OMN began as a 'struggle medium' in 2014, but now claims to take on a new profile. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)



Right: A painting in Jawar Mohammed's reception room portrays him as the personification of OMN. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)

**In Jawar's own words, OMN is more of a social movement than a media channel.**

ople groups, demonstrated by the fact that it broadcasts in seven different languages, allegedly more than any other comparable media channel. However, all languages except Amharic turn out to be confined to the Oromia region, or to SNNPR zones close to Oromia. The station's management estimates that 90% of its employees are Oromo.

Politically speaking, OMN supports 'multinational federalism', which for outsiders would seem similar to ethnic federalism, but the latter is a term that the station defies. The perspective contrasts unitarist and secessionist positions, which are the other two main political stances found in Oromo politics (Østebø and Tronvoll, 2020).

OMN played a key role in staging the *qeerroo* protests from 2016 onwards (Mulua-lem, 2019). The station utilized on-the-site reports from volunteers, who took on a role as citizen journalists. According to the station's founder Jawar Mohammed, the integration of media and politics is a key to OMN's success. The leadership of the station and the leadership of the movement were interwoven. The protesters benefited from media

coverage, while the station took advantage from the constant sharing of first-hand information about political developments and events. The integration of the social media in the communication strategy was crucial. Thus, in Jawar's own words, OMN is more of a social movement than a media channel.

Two years into the new government, OMN sees itself as entering a new role. While the station was established as an activist media channel, it now pretends to weaken its political linkages. Jawar has entered politics (Oromo Federalist Congress, OFC) and is no longer the company's director. He claims to be fully out of the media operation and only has an informal advisory function vis-à-vis OMN. However, it is revealing that when he talks about OMN's activities, it does not go long until he begins referring to 'we' instead of 'they'. So, in his own perception, he is still an integrated part of the media house's profile and engagement. Officially, he stepped down from the company in January 2020 when Girma Gutema took over as director.

That OMN is assuming a new role, is not



something that representatives from other media companies seem to discern. For them, OMN continues to be an activist channel for ethnic interests, as intense as ever. OMN's role during the death of Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020 and the subsequent turbulence served to confirm this perception. One week ahead of the killing, OMN aired an interview with the popular Oromo singer where he commented on a number of contentious political, ethnic and historical issues, besides being challenged on his alleged support for the Prime Minister (Endalkachew, 2020). The following days and weeks demonstrated the channel's proximity to Jawar as they followed his arrest and the battle over Hachalu's burial.

OMN is conscious about its political role. Jawar admits that they push their agenda "really aggressively", but within the confines of the law. The station's self-perception is informed by a liberal free speech mentality corresponding to American First Amendment principles. The mindset is easily at odds with an Ethiopian loyalist, nation-building reporting philosophy (Skjerdal, 2017).

When it comes to hate speech, OMN denies any allegation that it forwards ethnic hatred or engages in incitement to violence. Jawar claims that if he did post anything that came close to hate speech, "this country

would already be at fire". The problem, according to him, is that people confuse strong opinion with hate speech. His perspective on the matter is contested by various other actors in the media environment.

OMN has competitors on both regional and national levels. The regional competition is largely about audiences and finances, while the national competition is more about ideology and ethnic belonging. Within the Oromo population, a private diaspora-originated company like Oromia Broadcasting Service (OBS) represents a competitor for OMN in terms of income generation. However, the content of OBS is more entertainment-oriented than OMN and the two channels are not directly rivals on the news arena. The regional mass media agency OBN, on the other hand, is seen as a real competitor for OMN in terms of audience shares, as it represents a pro-government political stance. The most fierce competition for OMN on the national level is with channels of different ethnic belonging. Tigray-affiliated media are a defined enemy for OMN, as OMN and its political patron OFC advocate a narrative where Tigrayans since since 1991 have represented the 'hardliners' in Ethiopian politics, continuously threatening Oromo interests (Jawar, 2020). Similarly, nationalistic Amhara-aligned outlets are rivals for OMN.

### **Tigray-affiliated media are a defined enemy for OMN.**

*The popular Oromo artist Hachalu Hundessa (to the left) was interrogated by OMN's journalist Guyo Wariyo on political and ethnic issues one week before he was shot dead in Addis Ababa. (Capture from OMN 22 June 2020)*





*Belay Manaye is editor in Asrat TV. Asrat Media is expanding and moved to new offices in Addis Ababa in 2020. Belay was detained together with three other journalists from the station in July 2020, accused of incitement to communal violence. Belay is here photographed outside of Asrat Media's news building in March 2020. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)*

Discussed in the following section, Asrat Media has a special position in this regard.

### **Amhara ethno-nationalism and Asrat Media**

Asrat Media is in many ways the equivalent of OMN on the Amhara side. Like OMN, Asrat Media has an unconcealed intention to speak with an ethnic mandate. Its perception of the media situation in Ethiopia is that Amhara voices are neglected, and that the Amhara region and its people are falsely blamed for wrongdoings in the country, historically as well as today.

The acronym ASRAT literally stands for Amhara Satellite Radio and Television, but the name is double-barrelled and is usually spelled with small caps (Asrat), referring to Asrat Woldeyes, the personal doctor of Emperor Haile Selassie who later became professor of medicine at Addis Ababa University and who founded the All-Amhara People's Organization (AAPPO). Like the distinguished surgeon, Asrat Media aspires to be the voice of the voiceless – and the voiceless that Asrat Media pretends to speak on behalf of are the neglected Amhara.

Asrat Media is licensed as a public media company in Washington DC, but most of its staff work from Ethiopia. 12 journalists belong to the main office in Addis Ababa,

while there are smaller branches in Bahir Dar and Gonder (Amhara region). There are concrete plans to open two new branch offices. The expansion is currently at a standstill, since Asrat's activities have been temporarily scaled down after several of its key personnel were arrested in July 2020 in connection with political turmoil and are still in detention awaiting a court process (as of November 2020).

The production is only on television so far, transmitted through satellite, YouTube and Facebook. A radio channel is in the planning, pending licence from EBA. The intention of Asrat Media is to cover all of Ethiopia, although the Amhara region is its main focus. Language-wise, the station so far only broadcasts in Amharic, but it has an intention to start programmes in Afan Oromo and Tigrigna as well (plus English). The television production mainly consists of news (40 minutes per day) and documentaries. The channel will broaden its profile by including entertainment programmes in the near future.

One of Asrat Media's aims is to stand up for the Amhara people and expose injustice which other media channels neglect either on purpose or by design. The coverage of the abducted Amhara students in Western Oromia in December 2019 is a case in point.



The whereabouts of the students, at least 16 in number, are still unknown at the time of writing (November 2020), but in July 2020, the Federal High Court charged 17 members of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) for kidnapping the students<sup>5</sup>. Indicatively, the first channel to release the story about the disappearance of the students was Asrat Media. It followed up closely in the next weeks and months. Family members of the abducted students were interviewed, and government representatives were confronted. As revealed by the framing analysis later in this report, the federal state media and media channels with a different ethnic alignment were largely silent about the incident, or framed it quite differently than Asrat Media. OMN treated it primarily as a drama.

Media people and commentators generally portray Asrat Media as ethnically inclined and one-sided. They claim that invited guests in the channel are often ‘Amharic extremists’ who reiterate a similar narrative. The channel is found to create a narrative where the federal government is believed to secretly interfere with and destabilize the Amhara region (Daniel, 2020).

OMN claims that the difference between them and Asrat Media is that while OMN is open about its ethnic affiliation, Asrat Media beclouds their identity behind a ‘non-ethnic’ company name. An OMN representative condemns Asrat Media for being elite-oriented. Other informants suggest that the reason Asrat Media attracts support from businesses and people is that they, representing a group which has lost power to Oromo interests in the top leadership, feel increasingly under pressure in the current political landscape.

### **The realignment of Dimtsi Weyane Tigray**

Dimtsi Weyane Tigray (DW) has a different background than both OMN and Asrat Media, but the company is equally ethnic-based and is closely tied in with political interests. Established in 1979, the clandestine radio was first a joint initiative by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eri-

trean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) in the fight against the Derg. After ideological battle between the two insurgence groups, Voice of Woyane became a purely TPLF-driven radio in 1985 (Stremlau, 2012). Since 1992, when the radio station no longer was forced to do underground operations, DW has transmitted from Mekelle (Meseret, 2013).

DW’s commitment has consistently been towards Tigray, but its political role has changed throughout its four decades of existence, echoing the major turns in Ethiopian politics. In the 1980s it was a resistance radio; from 1991 to 2018 a pro-government radio; and since 2018 an emerging opposition radio, culminating with TPLF’s departure (or, in TPLF’s view, exclusion) from the government coalition in November 2019.

The long-lasting symbiosis between the media outlet and regional politics is underscored by the fact that several of TPLF’s current leadership figures were the ones who operated the radio during the struggle in the 1980s. The party’s chairman since 2017, Debretsion Gebremichael, led the team who initially set up the radio and served as Voice of Woyane’s technician during those years (Gagliardone, 2016).

The recent realignment of DW implies that the station has become a conduit for Tigray’s grievances vis-à-vis central Ethiopia. The media company’s loyalty to the federal government has eroded entirely. Illustratively, when Tigray went ahead and held regional elections in September 2020 against warnings from the federal government, DW covered the elections diligently. By contrast, Ethiopian Radio did not mention the event by a word on the election day, following instructions from the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority. Moreover, DW closed its Addis Ababa branch after the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa and the reporters were sent back to Mekelle.

What we make of this is that government-loyal media outlets which used to be in close partnership have chosen different directions and have been separated as a result of the political changes since 2018. The

**The recent realignment of DWET implies that the station has become a conduit for Tigray’s grievances vis-à-vis central Ethiopia.**

<sup>5</sup> ‘Ethiopian court charges 17 individuals for kidnapping Dembi Dolo university students’, Ezega News, 18 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/8024/Ethiopian-Court-Charges-17-individuals-for-Kidnapping-Dembi-Dolo-University-Students>



## The Tigray region has become more nationalistic, and so has its media.

Tigray region has become more nationalistic, and so has its media. (Further discussion of DW and Tigray media politics is provided later in the analysis.)

### Pan-Ethiopianism and ESAT

A number of other newcomers on the Ethiopian media scene, many of them returned diaspora channels, have come a little in the shadow in the debate surrounding the markedly ethno-nationalistic channels. The most prominent of these is arguably Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT), which since its inception in 2010 has been one of the most vocal networks in opposition to the Ethiopian government. It was banned by the authorities until 2018 as a result of its affiliation with Ginbot 7, a group which the Parliament had defined as a terrorist organization. The channel has been less willing to admit its association with Ginbot 7, but its closeness to leaders of the party such as Berhanu Nega is rather evident (Mesfin, 2019). Several journalists and managers in the media company have served in various capacities in the party. Illustratively, ESAT played a key role in the welcoming of Ginbot 7 back to Ethiopia on September 8, 2018<sup>6</sup>.

ESAT continues to be critical of the government, but its style has changed from when it was purely a diaspora channel. The

company still retains studios in Amsterdam, London and Washington DC, although most of its production now takes place in Ethiopia. The company has 23 staff members in its headquarters in Addis Ababa, half of whom are journalists.

ESAT has a large following in Ethiopia and is highly depending on its network of informants. The informants trust the channel to speak up against the authorities and for pan-Ethiopianism, although the new political line of Abiy Ahmed has made the channel relatively less sceptical to the government than when it reported from the diaspora. With a certain base in Amhara nationalism, ESAT has always used Amharic as its main language. However, the channel also uses Afaan Oromo and recently introduced Tigrigna in its news broadcasts, which perhaps testifies to its aspiration to become more all-inclusive.

### The resurrection of *Ethiopia*

Another example of a channel with Amhara roots and pan-Ethiopian sympathy is the weekly newspaper *Ethiopia*. The publication has a long and chequered history. It was first launched as a EPRDF-critical outlet by Eskinder Nega in 1993. Eskinder was later sentenced for support to terrorism (July 2012), but the newspaper was re-launched in a new

<sup>6</sup> 'ESAT patriotic Ginbot 7 welcome ceremony at Addis Ababa International Airport'. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPvSbU44gi0>

Deputy editor Gera Getachew in ESAT's news studio in Addis Ababa. The channel stands for pan-Ethiopianism and is regarded as less controversial today than when it was operated from the diaspora. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)



form after his release from prison in 2018. Today, Eskinder has entered politics as leader of Balderas for Genuine Democracy. He is still the owner of *Ethiopia*, but has pulled out of the daily news production. In July 2020, Eskinder was again arrested, this time for allegedly organizing youth protest groups in the aftermath of the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa.

The oscillating role of Eskinder Nega is indicative of the hybrid identity of many private actors in the local media market. They are committed to professional journalism, but they also propagate a political agenda. Eskinder's own response to this claim is that he sees no problem with the shifting roles. To the contrary, he regards the proximity between media and politics as fruitful for both parties.

Every time Eskinder is detained, however, it appears as somewhat unclear whether he is arrested in capacity of being a politician or a media practitioner. International press freedom bulletins habitually labels him journalist or editor, but local authorities prefer to see him as a political activist. Furthermore, in the local debate, it is hard for any renowned media personality like Eskinder Nega to escape ethnic labelling. In online discussions, he has been called both Oromophobic and anti-Tigrayan (Hewan, 2019). This, again, is symptomatic of the increased ethnic interpretation that we claim to observe in the Ethiopian mediatized debate.

### **The popularity of non-political channels**

When discussing private media outlets and the role of the returned diaspora, it should not be forgotten that much of the activity is non-political. A number of the TV companies which operate from Addis Ababa today, although they technically broadcast the content via satellite from foreign cities such as Dubai, focus on leisure and entertainment.

Ethiopian Broadcasting Service (EBS) is one of the largest companies of this kind. It broadcasts sports, comedies, cooking shows, church services, and so forth. Current affairs are part of an 'Africa Report' programme, but news is not a priority – in fact, disregarded. EBS aims to promote 'Ethiopian and African values' without favouring a particular region

or ethnicity.

The growth of such companies is not a result of the liberalized media policy that came with Abiy Ahmed. Reforms started already during Hailemariam Dessalegn, especially after 2017 when private TV broadcasting licences began to be issued (Busch, 2017). The commercial media market in Ethiopia is still growing, and this is a development far less contested than the proliferation of politically and ethnically based media.

### **Regionalization of Ethiopian journalism**

It is no longer enough to review media houses in Addis Ababa to grasp the currents in Ethiopian journalism. More and more of the journalistic production is taking place in the regions. This tendency has emerged over a number of years, little by little. The most important edifice in this regard is the regionally-owned 'mass media agencies', which are operated by the regional states and aimed at the local population. The vital activity of the mass media agencies are TV and radio broadcasts, but many of the agencies also publish print products on a weekly basis, often in different languages. It should be noted that the mass media agencies, although organized under the regional states, are not as such an arm of the public relations of the regional state. Each regional state also has its own information bureau within the state administration which takes care of public relations vis-à-vis its citizens, which might include its own periodicals (e.g. weekly newspapers). These should not be confused with the outlets produced by the mass media agencies. The regional mass media agencies has a journalistic mandate, although the ties to the regional state are perceptible in various ways.

All regions, including the city administrations of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, have their own mass media agency. Most agencies were established from 2005 onwards (Ward, 2011). In the first phase, they depended a lot on the federal media, especially Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency (ERTA, now EBA), for technical support and transmission. In recent years, however, the different regional agencies have invested substantially in their own equipment and terrestrial

**The oscillating role of Eskinder Nega is indicative of the hybrid identity of many private actors in the local media market.**

**In the past, EPRDF may perhaps have viewed the mass media agencies as regional extensions of the federal government's communication strategy, but this is no longer how the state media function in the country.**

transmitter stations. On top of that, many agencies also broadcast on satellite, both as a means to reach their own rural population and to give a service to audiences abroad. TV Oromia (also known as OBN), for example, utilizes six satellites to serve Oromos living in East and North Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North America, Australia and large parts of Asia (Busch, 2017, p. 46). The financing of the agencies mainly comes from the administration of the regional state, although each agency is perpetually encouraged to collect more of the funding by own means, i.e. through advertising.

The number of journalists working in the regional media is overwhelming. Many of the mass media agencies have several hundred journalists in their ranks. The largest, Oromia Radio and Television Organization (ORTO), employs 530 reporters and editors; Amhara Mass Media Agency has around 400; while the agencies of the Southern Region and Addis Ababa City Administration have around 300 journalists each (the total number of employees is around twice as much for each company). What this means is that the regional state media have surpassed the federal state media in terms of manpower. Their content production does not quite reach up to the expectations in relation to the number of journalists employed, but several of the agencies broadcast at least 16 hours per day on television and perhaps 24 hours on radio.

The use of languages varies a lot, with South Region Radio and TV Agency in the most extreme position, airing programmes in 49 languages each day (Fekede, 2019, p. 44). Only one other media company in Sub-Saharan Africa can boast a similar language diversity – a media business in Nigeria.

### **The regional media as an ally against the federal government**

The regional mass media agencies increasingly nurture a profile independent from that of the federal state media. They are conscious that their audience are people living in the regional state and, increasingly, people of their ethnicity residing in other parts of the country and abroad. As such, the regional mass media serve to bring cohesion

among specific ethnic cohorts, and their distinctiveness challenges a pan-Ethiopian agenda. Three of the agencies in particular – Oromia, Amhara and Tigray – are also highly conscious that they compete with the federal state media, both with regard to audiences and political narratives. Amhara Mass Media Agency (AMMA), for example, has a designated reporter who follows every move of Abiy Ahmed, aiming to break news about the PM and the government before EBC does so.

In 2016, AMMA opened its own branch in Addis Ababa, from where 'correspondents' will report back to Bahir Dar and the rest of the Amhara region about national issues. The Addis Ababa branch of AMMA views itself as a conduit for Amhara perspectives in the capital city, and they invite persons of their ethnicity, particularly politicians and other elites, to comment on important issues and to bring forth alternative solutions and reflections. This includes sources who may not necessarily agree with official government policy. For example, Eskinder Nega, leader of Balderas for Genuine Democracy, has been given ample time to speak about his political views. Occasionally, representatives of other ethnicities, like OLF leaders, are used as sources. Jawar Mohammed has been invited too, but he has so far not prioritized giving interviews to AMMA.

The coverage of AMMA, as for the other mass media agencies, is nevertheless clearly in favour of the respective regional government. This could also mean challenging the policy of the federal government. In the past, EPRDF may perhaps have viewed the mass media agencies as regional extensions of the federal government's communication strategy, but this is no longer how the state media function in the country. The regional media have developed their own identity, and their political commitment is first of all to the regional government. That said, when peace and stability are jeopardized, the regional mass media agencies have a history of turning loyal to the central government. During the Oromo protests that broke out in 2016 and the subsequent state of emergency periods, ORTO was faithful to the government and largely followed the line of EBC (Busch, 2017, p. 49). The latter does not





*Above: Amhara Mass Media Agency in Bahir Dar has highly advanced studios and a helicopter landing pad on its premises.*



*Left: The Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region Radio and Television Agency in Hawassa, popularly called South Radio and TV, produces content in no less than 49 languages every day.*

*Below: A reporter's vehicle parked outside of the headquarters of Ethiopian Somali Television (ESTV) in Jigjiga. ESTV is part of the Somali Regional State Mass Media Agency. (All photos by Terje Skjerdal)*





**In the regions, people view the mass media agency as an ally who speaks up for them against the federal government.**

necessarily represent the regional agency's primary volition; an element of felt coercion from the federal government could also have influenced the editorial line.

In the regions, people view the mass media agency as an ally who speaks up for them against the federal government. EBC, by contrast, is regarded as a mouthpiece of the government and habitually triggers anger by the local population on contentious issues. During the mass protests in the Amhara region in 2016, the state broadcaster became one of the targets. The message of the protest was 'Stop mass killing of Amhara people', but among the protesters one could also spot posters with the slogan 'Shame on ETV & FBC' (Fana Broadcasting Corporate). People in the area in the first place had difficulty with EBC's portrayal of the Welkait conflict, but as events unfolded, the allegedly biased coverage of the subsequent protests became a provocation in itself. Indeed, it went to the extent that EBC had to cancel reporting trips to Gonder because they were threatened by local citizens who warned them that they would be chased if they dare arrive. The regional broadcaster, however, was most welcome and covered the demonstrations on a day-to-day basis.

The place where regionalization of Ethiopian journalism has been most sharply pronounced since 2018, however, is in the northernmost part of the country, in Tigray. The circumstances in that region require a distinct treatment.

### **Consolidation of the Tigray-based media**

Amidst the attention given to the reconfiguration of the media landscape in the central parts of the country, the changes in the media situation in the far north could easily be disregarded. However, the development in the Tigray-affiliated media since 2018 quite markedly captures some of the major tendencies in local media governance. It also demonstrates how media, politics and ethnicity are deeply intertwined in the Ethiopian society.

Nearly three decades of TPLF dominance in the federal media were effectively terminated when the reformist government assumed office in 2018. It did not take long



*ETV (EBC) and FBC were targeted in the protests in Gonder in 2016.*

before the central media began to adopt a new political line where 'ethnic federalism' disappeared from the vocabulary and regional autonomy was modulated (cf. Svensson, 2019). Equally important, Tigray power was probed, which had been unheard of in the state media ever since EPRDF stepped in.

A major provocation came a few months into Abiy Ahmed's tenure, when EBC broadcast a documentary giving details about systematic torture commanded by security officers ('*Yefitih Sekoka*'/Agony of Justice'). Human Rights Watch characterized the documentary as 'refreshing' (Horne, 2018), but to TPLF and audiences in Mekelle, the hour-long programme was greatly disturbing, as it framed Tigray officials and the TPLF leadership as chief perpetrators (Amanuel Y, 2019). A few weeks earlier, EBC had exposed a largely Tigray-driven network involved in industry corruption.

At that juncture EBC lost its confidence among Tigray audiences, if not before. People and leaders in the region claimed that the perspective of the broadcaster was biased and that it had abandoned its peaceful intentions. According to Tigray informants in this study, people of the region today straightforwardly 'hate' EBC and have no interest in following the federal state media. The animosity towards the state media involves Fana and Walta as well, since these channels toe the line of the government, strengthened by the fact that they too chose to distribute the '*Yefitih Sekoka*' documentary.

The political processes during the first two years of Abiy Ahmed's rule have resulted in a full consolidation of the Tigray-based media. TPLF can no longer trust the federal media to speak for its interests, and is thus relegated to the region's own media.



One of the two largest media houses in the regional capital city Mekelle is Tigray Mass Media Agency (TMMA), although the institution actually has a rather modest structure compared with the mass media agencies in some of the other regions. The number of journalists is 175, and the total number of employees around 300. In contrast to some of the other regional agencies, TMMA does not have a print publication, and the online activity is minimal. The first radio studio was built only in 2020. However, the agency is preparing major investment, and the number of employees is expected to double in the coming years. Mekelle recently got its first decent printing press which makes publication and distribution of regional newspapers easier.

The revitalization of the Tigray-based media draws little distinction between the regional state media and outlets which officially are defined as commercial media. The major company on the commercial or private side is Dimtsi Weyane Tigray (DW), owned by the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT). It was born out of the anti-Derg struggle in the 1980s and is still popularly dubbed 'The voice of TPLF'. The company has many similarities with TMMA – it is based in Mekelle; it has a small branch office in Addis Ababa; it is operational in

broadcasting only; it produces content in 2-3 local languages in addition to Tigrigna and Amharic; and like TMMA, the company has around 175 journalists. And more important for this analysis: The two media houses have a nearly identical political profile. Both are generously informed by TPLF in source selection and reporting approach. The mission of the Tigray-based media, in their own words, is to balance the narratives flowing in from the federal government.

According to employees, DW enjoys relatively more freedom than TMMA when it comes to potentially uncover mismanagement in the regional administration and to do critical reporting. But the critical coverage is 'semi-investigative' at best (Eden, 2020). No one doubts that DW is politically affiliated, and it would be hard for the station to do negative coverage of TPLF, which they feel is the agenda of the federal media these days.

The ongoing consolidation of the Tigray media is a textbook example of political parallelism in the media sector. Political parallelism points to the extent to which the media in a society reflects political developments and the party landscape (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Previous research has detected high degrees of political parallelism in the Ethiopian media landscape

*Advisor to the President of the Tigray region, Getachew Reda, talking confidentially to DW about the armed conflict in Tigray on 14 November 2020. The interview was willingly transmitted by Tigray Television (TMMA) as well, testifying to the closeness between the two Mekelle-based media companies. The interview demonstrates the congruence between media and ethnicity in today's Ethiopia. It also reflects contemporary political realignment, as Getachew served as Minister for Government Communication Affairs during Hailemariam Desalegn. (Capture from DW 14 November 2020)*



**The current developments in Tigray are a manifestation of continued political parallelism where ethno-national commitment overrides ownership structures.**

during EPRDF in terms of ideological linkages (Menychle, 2017, 2019). The current developments in Tigray are a manifestation of continued political parallelism where ethno-national commitment overrides ownership structures.

The perception of both TMMA and DW journalists, and certainly journalists from most other media companies in the region would be of the same opinion, is that they need to join forces to counter an unsolicited new political line from what they describe as an 'anti-federalist' government. TMMA and DW do compete in the daily news production for audiences and attention, but the real match is taking place on another arena, and this is a game in which they play together on the same team against a perceived external enemy.

### **Emergence of regional journalists associations**

Another sign of the regionalization of Ethiopian journalism is the establishment of regional journalists associations. The first two unions were started in Amhara and Oromia in 2014, and their activities have intensified. By 2020 there are associations in progress in the Tigray and Somali regions as well. The

main rationale given for the initiatives is professional enhancement, but the need for unity along ethnic lines is quite perceptible.

To this end, it is striking that when the Oromia Journalists Association (OJA) was about to be established, founding members proposed to name the organization 'Oromo' Journalists Association, presumably because it would gather members of one specific ethnicity. Today the perception is that the organization represents media workers in the Oromia region, regardless of ethnicity. However, it is still a requirement for membership that members are competent in the Afaan Oromo language.

The largest of the regional organizations is the Amhara Journalists Association (AJA), which has 315 members, a hundred more than its counterpart in Oromia. Both associations are registered with the administration in their regional state.

The organizations arrange skills-oriented training sessions on topics such as agriculture, environment and conflict reporting. They also engage in more contentious activities like debates on human rights and democratic transition. In particular areas, it becomes clear that the organizations are advocates for specific regional interests. For

## **Reiterations of ethnic discourses in the international media**

While ethnicity has been a strong backdrop for much local media interaction, it has also proven to be important in the framing of Ethiopia induced by the international media. In a study which compared Al Jazeera Online's coverage with *The Ethiopian Herald* and *Reporter* in the first eight months after Abiy Ahmed came to power, it was found that Al Jazeera attached ethnic attribution ('Oromo') to the Prime Minister in all the sampled stories (N=13) (Natinael, 2019). By contrast, the two local outlets chose ethnic attribution in only one-fourth of the stories (N=62).

For *The Ethiopian Herald* and *Reporter*, attributions such as 'change agent', 'open-minded' and 'peacemaker' were far more important when describing Abiy Ahmed than his ethnic identity. To some extent, this is natural because the local media do not need to explain the Prime Minister's ethnic background in every news story. But equally important, being moderate channels, the two newspapers are careful not to overplay the ethnic narrative. For the international media on the other hand, ethnic tensions appear to be the major frame which can explain the challenges of contemporary Ethiopia.

This way, the current description of Ethiopia as a hotbed of internal dispute is adopted and reinforced by the global media as well.

example, one of the missions of the Tigray Journalists Association (TJA; not yet formally established) is to defend Tigray reporters who sense exclusion. On several occasions, media workers from the region have been hindered in their practice, like when journalists from Dimtsi Weyane Tigray and Tigray Television (TMMA) were denied access to a conference in Addis Ababa organized by the National Electoral Board. TJA interprets this as victimizing on ethnic grounds. Furthermore, the association registers that the federal media in the country show little interest in events taking place in Tigray. Right after Abiy came to power, the central media gave attention to the region and broadcasted interviews with TPLF leaders, but this is not happening anymore, according to TJA. The armed conflict which broke out in November 2020 effectively put an end to any positive coverage of Tigray by the federal state media.

The outcome of the felt exclusion by Tigray journalists is further cohesion among the region's media workers, and between the media and non-media environments, including the regional government, TPLF. Illustratively, when TPLF celebrated its 45th anniversary in February 2020, TJA was invited to observe the events through the region's Forum for Political Parties and Civil Society Organizations. This meant that the

association was not there primarily to report on the event, but as a supporter of regional and political interests alongside other participating organizations.

The regional journalists associations attracts members from both the private and the state media. OJA, for example, gathers journalists from media companies as diverse as EBC (the Oromo section) and OMN. This could indicate that members, at least to some extent, meet on professional rather than political grounds, but it could also denote a strong desire to foster a fellowship where the common denominator is regional and ethnic belonging. For OJA, one of its aim is to promote Afaan Oromo in the public discourse. Although spoken by the largest ethnic group in the country, Afaan Oromo has not been fully developed as a media language. This too is mentioned as one of the concerns by OJA.

The spread of regional associations comes at a time when national journalists associations have been idle for a number of years. The oldest of the associations, the Ethiopian Journalists Association (EJA), celebrated its 50th anniversary in March 2019, but only two members and the president showed up at the event<sup>7</sup>. As such, the developments of the professional associations compare with an overall trend in the Ethiopian media: The previously strong federal state organizations

**The Tigray Journalists Association registers that the federal media show little interest in events taking place in Tigray.**

7 'Understanding journalist associations in Ethiopia', Mersa Media Institute. Available at: <https://mersa-media.org/chapter-one/>



*The government-loyal Ethiopian Journalists Association is struggling while new regional associations are being formed. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)*





*EBC journalists feel that their private counterpart FBC is better resourced to meet the challenges of the new media situation. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)*

### **EBC chose to largely ignore the regional elections in Tigray in September 2020.**

are struggling, while the regional organizations are in a state of growth.

#### **A weakened position for the federal state media**

The federal media occupy a gradually shrinking position in the overall Ethiopian media environment. When referring to the federal state media, we include first and foremost Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), in addition to Ethiopian News Agency (ENA) and newspapers published by Ethiopian Press Agency (*Addis Zemen*, *al-Alem*, *Bariisaa* and *The Ethiopian Herald*). Around 2010, Ethiopian Radio and Ethiopian Television (since 2015: EBC) were the most consumed channels in both radio and television (Ward and Selam, 2011). Recent surveys indicate that private stations have three to four times as many listeners and viewers as the state-owned ones (Mekuria et al., 2018). The private stations are particularly popular in the urban areas, but they are increasingly reaching the rural population too.

EBC continues to stay close to the government, but has a somewhat freer posi-

tion than before. The broadcaster no longer censors stories or events on orders from the political leadership. However, its pro-government standpoint is perceptible. For example, echoing the government's attitude, EBC chose to largely ignore the regional elections in Tigray in September 2020. The channel portrays itself as fulfilling a moderate position in a polarized media environment. The state broadcaster still has different language departments (Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya, Somali, Afar and English), but its intention is to downplay rather than accentuate ethnic differences.

The general tendency, nevertheless, is that EBC is losing its previously dominant position in the Ethiopian media market. It loses to regional competitors and is not welcome in various regional cities on different occasions. It is subordinate to other government-affiliated media companies, in particular Fana Broadcasting Corporation, which is perceived by EBC employees as better equipped and more journalistically ambitious than the official state broadcaster. And, vis-à-vis Addis Ababa's new generation of



energetic media businesses, EBC is slow and outdated. Illustratively, the broadcaster currently does not even have a functioning website (November 2020).

### **Conclusion – floating professionalism and liberal dilemmas**

Recent political developments have led to significant changes in the Ethiopian media. Some of the changes could at first appear contradictory. While media policy is liberalized, the media environment itself has turned more polarized and fragmented. Actual reporting is characterized by contestation of narratives along ethnic lines. An ethno-nationalistic narrative emerging from a feeling of suppression and exclusion contrasts a unitarist narrative built on a conviction of a common Ethiopian identity. The different channels function as extensions of political positions, testifying to political parallelism in the Ethiopian media. Even more prevalent than political parallelism, one might suggest that the current Ethiopian media situation is characterized by *ethnic parallelism*. This is underscored by the fact that different media channels show commitment to a certain region or group of people. Many media houses and newsrooms emerge as professional monocultures where one identity or ethnicity is dominant over others.

Furthermore, the new media situation is characterized by floating professionalism. Several of the most famous media personalities in Ethiopia have an indeterminate relationship with the journalistic profession. They vacillate between different stances – between activist, political and journalistic roles. A number of these are ex-diaspora characters. Historically, it is well documented that many journalists who left the country went into exile because of political sympathies and antipathies (Skjerdal, 2011). They became part of a manifold constituency dubbed the ‘conflict-generated diaspora’ (Lyons, 2007). Some had sound journalistic aspirations (Solomon, 2019), while others exploited media opportunities abroad, taking up for example engagements in language departments in established media organizations such as Voice of America and Deutsche Welle, to nurture ethnic agendas in a freer environment. In the meanwhile, social media

channels grew exponentially and became a major site for advancing ethnic-based politics. As long as the Ethiopian online sphere was restricted, the local media market was relatively less influenced by the exchanges in the diaspora environments. This all changed in 2018, not only because of the unblocking of some 200 websites, but more importantly, because the diaspora was allowed to physically return to the homeland.

The media personalities who returned were not uniform. Some had a strong identity as professional media workers, others – a higher number – were activists who viewed the media as an instrument for political achievements. A media ‘mogul’ like Jawar Mohammed has never claimed to do professional journalism, but is still behind one of the most influential media ventures in Ethiopia today. Characteristically, OMN has built its following through the social media and in online channels where the differentiation between professionals and amateurs is de-emphasized. At the same time, some of the diaspora notables are among the strongest advocates of free speech and related liberal principles. A case in point, again, is Jawar Mohammed, who in the research interview for this study tells of an incident where OMN apparently had to educate Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority about the difference between defamation against a higher government official and a regular citizen. “They [EBA] were so fascinated that they came to our office to learn more about how to handle these issues,” Jawar claims. The details of the particular incident are not important here, but the episode illustrates how some of the diaspora returnees have internalized a rhetoric which resonates very well with globally recognized media freedom principles.

Liberal principles have, perhaps surprisingly, less to say about journalistic professionalism, apart from affirming elementary standards such as the denunciation of dangerous hate speech. A trained social media activist like Jawar Mohammed knows how far one can stretch provocative speech to avoid repercussions, hence appearing as a liberal-minded and professional communicator. In the current Ethiopian media sphere, some social media communicators appear

**Many newsrooms emerge as professional monocultures where one identity or ethnicity is dominant over others.**

**An emerging (semi-)liberal system, where stabilizing mechanisms are not in place, is a fertilizer for one-sided and radical expressions.**

as insiders to modern media logics, while traditional media professionals who call for responsible reporting and restraints are deemed illiberal and out-of-date. This poses a challenge to media regulators, self-accountability bodies and media assistance agencies alike, which all aim to foster a professional and responsible media environment, while at the same time realizing that calling for any measure which would be perceived as a restriction in the media sphere could easily be mistaken for a return to coercion and control. This is, perhaps, some of the reason for EBA's reluctance to speed up the licencing process and policy development. The Authority is entitled to follow up media liberalization to fulfil the Prime Minister ambitions, but if licences are issued and an applicant is left out, it would appear as if media liberalization is in reverse.

The liberal dilemma is further accentuated by the fact that a progressive policy does not restrict media activity on the basis of content orientation and advocacy alone. In other words, the circumstance that a media channel chooses to focus on one ethnicity and advocates for a specific region is not disqualifying according to liberal media philosophy, especially since pluralism is in itself an ideal. A functioning liberal media environment, however, requires balance between different channels and support mechanisms where self-accountability is key. The latter is not in place in Ethiopia, although a promising media council has been established (formally registered 2019); a code of conduct is formulated; and an editors' guild has been formed. Many questions remain unanswered towards genuine self-accountability, such as membership criteria, whether to open up for complaints from the public, and how to institute sanctions.

In the meanwhile, polarization among media channels is likely to grow stronger. Different developments point in this direction. One condition is the increase of conflict in the regions, of which the clashes in

Tigray is currently the foremost example. In a politically paralleled media society, the different channels are particularly alert when their own group is threatened. This results in a federal media faithfully defending the military intervention in Tigray, with backing from otherwise competing media institutions such as the regional media in the Amhara region and the Oromo-aligned media, though for a different set of reasons. On the other edge the Tigray-based media turn all the more loyal to TPLF and aggressive towards the federal government. The hostility was only further fuelled when the government decided to shut down all digital and telephone communication in the Tigray region in November 2020. For veterans in the Tigray media, the situation curiously resembles the conditions under which clandestine TPLF radio broadcasts emerged in the 1980s.

Another condition for increased polarization stems from the liberal media logics discussed above. An emerging (semi-)liberal system, where stabilizing mechanisms are not in place, is a fertilizer for one-sided and radical expressions. The different channels serve to aggravate each other, resulting in further polarization. A third condition for increased polarization is the steadily growing use of social media in Ethiopia, devoid of editorial guidelines and responsibility. Lastly, national elections, which are planned for May/June 2021, represent typical events which exacerbate ethnic differences (Stremlau and Price, 2009).

Along this argument, it should not come as a surprise if Ethiopia slides back on the next press freedom index, to be publicized in April 2021. The question is rather how long it will take before the local media will consolidate their activities as an industry not mirrored by hostility and divisionism. Central to this development is professional enhancement and a reliable self-accountability system.

# A framing analysis of stories in selected media channels

By Mulatu Alemayehu Moges

*This part of the report focuses on how ethnicity is used in media texts to promote or protect a certain ethnic group, political ideology or political narrative.*

Since the coming of EPRDF into power in 1991, ethnicity has been at the center of Ethiopian politics, government structures, and even the social system. Most of the Ethiopian political groups are divided ethnolinguistically and deal with issues in line with ethnic interests (Abbink, 2011; Bekalu, 2017; Dereje, 2018). However, the interplay between media discourse and ethnic identity in Ethiopia has not been comprehensively studied. Hence, it is relevant to assess how ethnicity shapes the media discourse about social and political issues. For this purpose, the study dominantly applies a qualitative framing analysis through textual analysis. Textual analysis can help scrutinizing the text for intertextual and presuppositions, and analyze media stories from the current context of the country (politically, historically and culturally) (Fürsich, 2009; McKee, 2003; Frey, Botan and Kreps, 2000). To show the overall trend of the media in dealing with cases of ethnicity, a simple quantitative data analysis is used.

By means of method, the study first purposely identified the most sensitive cases with political implications. The selected cases are believed to be at the center for differences among Ethiopian political groups and their affiliates. Scholars propose that studying media and ethnicity in a given co-

untry should focus on politics, politicians and their ideological differences. For instance, Van Dijk (1998, p. 264) emphasizes that the political ideology and the political discourse in a given country are processed through texts. The text cannot be produced without political ideology. According to Van Dijk, it is important to understand the perceived communication context of the text and the discourse (ideas) in the stories. It is therefore vital to put a lens on the texts/stories to assess the link between media and ethnicity in Ethiopia.

One can observe different opinions/stances and reflections based on people's political or ethnic affiliation when sensitive political and economic issues arise in the country. These differences and taking sides with respect to the aforementioned affiliations are reflected in the media which are used by political parties or groups to get across their stances and political ideologies to their supporters as well as their opponents. Along this line, Van Dijk (1998) underscores that ideological struggle in the media can be reflected during the rise of serious and controversial conflict cases. Thus, the study has purposely selected critical cases that recently happened in the country. Among the many cases that demonstrate ideological differences between political elites and



# The researched cases

**Abducted students:** in connection with the crises in universities in Amhara and Oromia regions, some 21 students, 17 of whom were female, of Dembi Dollo university (Oromia region) were reported missing in December 2019 while heading to their families. This created an outcry of the Amhara people who raised concerns about the whereabouts and security of the abducted students, all of whom were Amhara.

**Clashes between Gondar Amhara and Qimant:** The Qimant community resides in Central Gondar zone, Amhara region. By setting a committee, the community has raised a self-administration demand. Though self-administration was settled by a referendum in 2017, the situation has aggravated and people have lost their lives and property. It has also become one of the causes of the political dispute between the Tigray and Amhara regional states<sup>1</sup>. At the end of September 2019, a conflict arose between the Qimant and Amhara in Central Gondar.

**Welkait case:** This case is another cause for the rift between the Amhara and Tigray regional states. The Welkait Identity and Self-Administration Committee claims that the Welkait belong to the Amhara region, as people in the area are mainly Amhara. However, the Tigray regional state administers the area as one of its zones, claiming that the demographic composition is largely Tigray. Others maintain that Tigray dominance has been achieved through social engineering by depopulating the Amhara who originally lived there. The controversy over Welkait and its historical ownership is an ongoing tension between the Amhara and the Tigray regional states.

**Irreecha case:** Irreecha, which is a ritual ceremony of the Oromo community, has traditionally been celebrated in Bishoftu, 40 kilometers away from Addis Ababa. In 2019, it was celebrated in Addis Ababa for the first time in 150 years. The celebration and the accompanying speeches unearthed serious political differences.

**Jawar's message on Facebook:** In October 2019 the politician and activist Jawar Mohammed posted a text message on his Facebook page that called for support to take steps to protect what he claims is "a siege of the government security forces". Subsequent to his call for help, his supporters went out to the street and took action. The government confirmed that 87 people were killed in connection to his call, and the case was followed by heightened political disputes.

**June 22, 2019 assassinations:** This incident has been described as one of the most serious ones since Dr. Abiy Ahmed came to power. Four top officials, including the regional president of the Amhara region and the Chief of the Army as well as a retired general, were assassinated. The circumstances of the case are still not clear.

**Sidama self-administration:** Local youth describing themselves as 'Ejeto' went out to the street to claim Sidama as a regional state by demanding a referendum before the day 11.11.11 in the Ethiopian calendar (July 19, 2019). Unless the federal government conceded, the people said they would claim that Sidama is a regional state. As a result, people were killed, displaced and property was distracted.

**Establishment of the Prosperity Party:** In December 2019, the former EPRDF changed its structure, ideology, and included other regional parties as core members of the party. The restructuring has fueled many political controversies.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/12/16/violent-qemant-dispute-fueling-explosive-amhara-tigray-divide/>

activists, eight were chosen for analysis (see box).

All cases were covered and contemplated by different parts of the media, both in the social media and by the professional media. For the sake of research coherence, this study is limited to the established (professional) media. These channels, although some of them were established quite recently in Ethiopia, represent a continuation of the affiliations between media and politics in the country (Menychle, 2019). They operate under editorial decision-making principles and traditionally play a gate-keeping role in the public deliberation. To consider their ownership and target audience is therefore of great interest. The researcher is aware of the significant role of non-professional channels these days, but a comprehensive discussion of the wide range of such outlets in addition to the professional channels would run the danger of becoming superficial since the flows and logics of the social media are rather different from those of the professionally edited media. However, there is a growing body of research on the role of the social media in the Ethiopian setting which could complement the findings in this research (e.g. Skjerdal and Sintayehu, 2020; Téwodros, 2020).

For this framing analysis, media selection focused on two major media platforms: television channels and newspapers. Television is prioritized owing to the fact that it plays a dominant role in the Ethiopian political discourse. This is related to the current expansion of television in terms of ownership, number of channels and increase in program production. It is also a powerful

outlet which attracts many people. Today, sensitive political issues are narrated and discussed on television channels owned by diverse groups. The other medium which is studied is the newspaper. Though the number of newspapers published in the country is limited, they are influential and continue to set agendas in the public debate. Altogether ten broadcast and print media outlets were identified for analysis (see box below). These media outlets represent diversity in terms of language (Amharic, Oromiffa, and Tigrigna); they represent both regional and federal media outlets; they are both privately owned and state-owned; and they deal with diverse political inclinations in relation to ethnic identity. Most of the outlets have vibrant online editions too. Hence, although the studied content is derived from television broadcasts and print publications, most of the content is distributed online as well.

The last step in the sampling was to determine the stories. While each medium has a variety of genres, the focus here is news. News represents the interests of both sources, reporters and owners, and it has potentially high influence on audiences. The researcher reviewed what the selected media reported about the chosen cases during the period when the incidents occurred. The stories related to the identified cases which were reported during the chosen periods were purposively collected for review. In the search of the cases, 133 stories from the selected media outlets were reviewed: DW (19 stories); Tigray TV (9); Amhara TV (17); Asrat (26); OBN (10); OMN (12); EBC (11); *Addis Zemen* (12); *Ethiopsis* (8); and *Berera* (9). Since the study applies a qualitative ap-

## The studied media outlets

### Broadcast media

Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN)  
Oromo Media Network (OMN)  
Dimtse Weyane Tigray (DWET)  
Tigray TV (TTV, belongs to TMMA)  
Amhara TV (ATV, belongs to AMMA)  
Amhara Satellite Radio and Television (Asrat)  
Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC)

### Newspapers

*Addis Zemen*  
*Ethiopsis*  
*Berera*

proach and sampling is limited to specific incidents, the number of stories picked from each medium is not necessarily equal. The stories were traced out for the qualitative analysis. The unit of analysis was the story and its components (words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs and images).

### **Analytical approach**

This study is exploratory in nature. However, with an interest in showing the scope of the stories and their nature, the study includes brief quantitative information. The quantitative data include how many stories were reviewed, the size of the stories, placement, sources, and tone of the stories. These variables can help the readers get the overall picture of the stories analyzed in the study.

While the lead researcher, as well as two research assistants who are native speakers of Tigrigna and Afaan Oromo, used a tally method to see the comprehensive trends of media and ethnicity, the following major trends were identified. The first one regards the size of the stories. Among the 133 stories, 102 were lengthy, which is defined as either more than three minutes on television or more than 300 words in a newspaper. 15 stories were medium in size. They were between one minute and ten seconds to three minutes on television, and 150–300 words in the newspaper. The rest of the stories were short, i.e. less than one minute and ten seconds, or less than 150 words. By its nature, lengthy stories have the chance to deal with issues in detail. According to agenda-setting theory, media that report cases in length are likely to set an agenda for those particular cases (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

Similarly, placement of the stories is also an indication of the tendency of the media towards ethnicity or political identification. In the tally, stories were first classified into three categories according to placement. The first three stories in a broadcast were classified as prime; stories four to seven as medium; and the rest of the stories as 'normal'. For newspapers, stories were classified as front-page, inside pages, or back page. Of the total 133 stories, 93 were classified as prime stories, and 21 as medium stories. This indicates that the chosen media outlets give emphasis to stories with ethnic content.

Furthermore, the study investigated how sources have been used to report the selected cases. It was found that for the 133 stories, the selected media used a total of 145 sources of information. 101 of these were political party members (politicians and activists) and party leaders of the opposition and ruling party. Only five sources were university officials or experts, presented without a particular political affiliation. The rest of the sources (39) were other groups of people, such as university staff and students. In other words, the majority of the sources in the ethnic-based stories were political party members and political activists.

One important point that was also identified in the quantitative assessment is that the majority of the stories were reported from a single source. This follows from the fact that 145 sources were quoted to report 133 stories. Diverse ideas did not have much place. Obviously, the sources of the stories are a major determining element that can shape the story's message as well as its frame.

As noted earlier, the approach of this study is to analyze the text by using framing and othering theories. For instance, framing theory, which is vastly used in analyzing texts, could help the study in structuring the meaning of the text by taking into account sources, texts, audiences, and cultures, as framing can be produced in all these aspects (De Vreese, 2005). Also, framing is an understanding of the perceived reality of a text (Entman, 1993). Similarly, the theory of otherness (othering) is an important framework to assess the interplay of media and ethnicity. In the theory of otherness, one can focus on highlighting how the media play a role in the creation of otherness, which consists of two different groups – 'Us' vs. 'Them' (Staszak, 2008; Said, 1978). Using otherness as a backdrop could help the study to capitalize on how the media categorize ideas in a form of 'Us' and 'Them', how the media use sources to strengthen their ideas, and how meaning and identity are constructed.

In assessing the dichotomy of 'Us' and 'Them' and the overall framing of the stories posted in the sampled media outlets, the study looked at four important parts of the text. Entman (1993) proposes that where



framing is processed, the narration tends to focus on how the problem is reported, how the causes are identified, what moral judgement is given, and which solutions and remedies are suggested. These four framing approaches are important for the study by systematically discussing 'Us' and 'Them' in particular, and media and ethnicity in general. Also, the 'ideological square' of Van Dijk (1998) has been used to analyze the media texts in defining or categorizing 'Us' and 'Them'. The four elements of the ideological square are: express/emphasize information that is positive about 'Us'; express/emphasize that is negative about 'Them'; suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive about 'Them'; and, suppress/de-emphasize information that is negative about 'Us' (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 268).

## Data analysis

By using these conceptual tools, the analysis focuses on how ethnicity influences positive or negative framing of the stories in the media. As mentioned earlier, important and controversial cases were identified. These cases can be a departure point among political and ethnic groups in the country. Different media channels will have different ways of articulations. A thorough analysis of texts can help us understand how the media frame the cases in the current complex political and ethnic narratives. The study attempts to zoom in and out on these selected texts to look deeply into how the 'Us' and 'Them' dichotomies of ethnicity are reflected. By using these approaches, two major frames were inductively identified. These are annihilation and othering frames.

## I. ANNIHILATION FRAMING

The description annihilation frame<sup>8</sup> is adapted from symbolic annihilation theory which seeks to explain trends of undermining, underrepresentation and trivialization of objects, originally focusing on women (Tuchman, 1978). In this study, it is used to

show how the media isolate, hide and procrastinate to conceal either negative sides of its own ethnic group or positive achievements of another. Annihilation frames are expressed through different techniques, such as silence, blurring, slanting, charming, and non-ethnic motives.

### A. Silence (omission)

Silence is one of the techniques that the media can use to ignore important aspects of an ethnic or political group which is perceived as an enemy. Silence is also used to protect either its own ethnic group from criticism or ignore the other's positive achievements. Media such as OBN, DW and Tigray Television are examples of this in the case of the abducted Amhara students in Oromia. While action was taken in the Amhara region to put pressure on the government to work on the release of the abducted students, these media channels (OBN, DW and Tigray TV) did not report the case. Similarly, previewing its news channel, EBC was hesitant to report the case too.

One can argue that these media should not be criticized for not reporting this case since the news selection criteria might not meet the interest of a particular station. But the case is not a simple issue that can be easily ignored. As abduction of female students is a new experience in Ethiopia, it attracts both the national and the international media<sup>9</sup>. Both federal and regional media channels such as EBC, OBN, DW and Tigray TV were expected to report the case. However, they shied away from it.

For OBN in particular, one could argue that the case should have acquired better coverage. The abduction happened in the Oromia region which is the core area for OBN, meaning that it would be easy for its journalists to access the information. The case was sensitive and had humanitarian aspects, but OBN was hesitant to report on it.

Taking the above-mentioned reasons, there seems to be a deliberate silence on the

**While action was taken in the Amhara region to put pressure on the government to work on the release of the abducted students, OBN, DWET and Tigray TV did not report the case.**

8 This is not the first time to identify annihilation frames in the Ethiopian media discourse, cf. Mulatu A. Moges' (2017) study 'Why Silence: Internal Conflict Reporting in Ethiopian Newspapers'. For an example outside of Ethiopia, see Gavriely-Nuri and Balas (2010).

9 E.g. 'Growing outcry in Ethiopia over abducted university students', Associated Press, 27 January 2020. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/africa/growing-outcry-ethiopia-over-abducted-university-students>

**Media such as Asrat and Amhara Television, which are mostly reporting stories from Amhara, tend to report the case of Qimant in a blurring way.**

issue. The exclusion of the case to be aired on OBN, DW and Tigray Television can be reasoned out at least in two ways. First, OBN, which is a state-owned medium, may not have an interest in bringing forth an issue which could create a rift between ethnic groups (Amhara and Oromo). Journalists of OBN may ignore the case to minimize ethnic extremism. The second reason is directly related to ethnic entities. As the abducted students were originally from Amhara, the issue may not be a priority for OBN, DW, and Tigray TV.

Another case of silence was observed in some media channels in relation to the June 22, 2019 assassination of officials. For instance, DW and Tigray Television were not much interested in broadcasting the case of the killing of the Amhara regional officials in Bahir Dar. While giving much emphasis to the two top military officials originally from the Tigray region, a scrutiny of the two stations indicates that they did not pay tribute to the Amhara officials who were killed in the same incident. One can link the silence with the channels' ethnic affiliation.

The case of the Qimant conflict is another example of media silence. The clashes between Qimant and Amhara people in the first week of October 2019 in Central Gondar zone claimed the lives of many people on both sides. Journalistically speaking, the issue was definitely worth reporting. However, EBC was silent. As a national medium, it can be reasoned out that the station has many issues which can be more newsworthy for the channel than this one. Nevertheless, taking the sensitivity of the issue, and the number of people affected by this conflict, including the death toll, by any criteria, the case would be a priority for the station. Unlike other media, such as OMN, DW and Tigray Television, which arguably reported the case with exaggeration, EBC shied away. It may be reasoned that the station preferred to refrain from intervening in a complex ethnic case. As a result, the case was ignored by the station. The same was true for *Addis Zemen*. A review of stories in the state-run newspapers during this period does not

yield any stories related to the conflict between the Qimant and the Gondar Amhara people during the course of the incident.

Thus, silence, a known technique in annihilation framing, is detected in the selected media. It can serve to minimize criticism of the particular media's 'own' ethnic group, or to de-emphasize the positive aspects of others.

## **B. Blurring**

Unlike silence, blurring is a form of making the sensitive parts of an issue vague and instead deal with other aspects that are related to the main case. This is particularly done to define the cause and suggest a solution to the problem. For instance, blurring is observed in the case of Qimant. Media such as Asrat and Amhara Television, which are mostly reporting stories from the Amhara region, tend to report the case of the Qimant in a blurring way. A story reported on October 18, 2019<sup>10</sup> on Asrat television, and a story reported on October 22, 2019<sup>11</sup> on Amhara Television attempts to present the case of Qimant from a different angle. The former deals with the arrest of 32 suspected youth who were traveling to Humera, Tigray region. In the story, an official notes that these individuals who have more than one identification card were going to Humera, and police suspected them to be travelling to obtain military training by TPLF, a perceived enemy, to cripple the Amhara region, particularly Central Gondar zone. The second story deals with the arrest of cattle which were stolen by some groups during the conflict. By quoting a military officer who is in charge of security in the area, the story notes that people were in conflict in connection with the Qimant and the Amhara. But the story does not address the questions of where the conflict occurred, what the causes were, and what the consequences were. The story only focuses on the commitment of the security forces in protecting people's properties from theft.

In a similar manner, *Addis Zemen*, EBC, and Amhara Television did not mention the chaos in connection with the case of Jawar

10 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXy46m\\_tJ0M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXy46m_tJ0M)

11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fthxOqdvQ9A>

in October 2019, and the subsequent killings and destruction of property in the Oromia region. These media preferred to focus on the police report which was shallow and wanted to conceal the worst consequences of the incident. The police report describes the incident in a blurring manner. For instance, it was clear that roads were closed, and people were atrociously killed and beaten by the gangs who identify themselves as *qeerroo*, literally meaning ‘youth’. But the report did not focus on that crisis, except calling people to calm down.

The technique of blurring, as well as silencing, are used mainly to hide negative aspects of a story. This is, according to Van Dijk (1998), a technique employed by the media to suppress negative information of ‘Us’. The same is true for the sampled media in that they attempted to either conceal or oblique the negative sides of their own ethnic group. OBN, DW and Tigray Television in silencing the story of the abducted students, and Amhara Television and Asrat in blurring the Qimant case, as well as Ethiopian Television and Amhara Television in blurring the Jawar case are typically not hiding the negative sides of their own ethnic groups’ interest but also undermining the situation or the people of the other sides. In fact, in the case of EBC and *Addis Zemen*, the suppression may not be directly related to the dichotomy of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ based on ethnic identity. This can be related to either the interests of the media in maintaining the tension or fear of inciting further tension and conflict among the communities. Instead of dealing with the issues and bring solutions for the cases by identifying causes and conflict lines, the state media prefer to silence the circumstances (Mulatu, 2017).

### C. Deviating from the main issue (slanting)

A third technique within annihilation that has been observed in the Ethiopian media is the attempt to divert the main causes and consequences of the cases. The study finds various cases that can show the deviating interests of the media. A few examples from the selected media can serve as an illustration. In connection with the Welkait case, the story reported by DW and Tigray Television



has a tendency to slant the case to a different theme. By using sources who are politically affiliated with the party (TPLF), the stories maintain that the people in Welkait are purely Tigres and want to stay in the government structure of the Tigray regional state. It seems that the two media attempt to deviate the attention of the audiences by reporting political tension as fabricated. The stories report that the current tension in the area is not the interest of the Welkait people, but in the interest of the federal and the Amhara regional governments.

In a similar way, a story reported on October 20, 2019 on DW reflects a deviation from the main issue. While 87 people were confirmed dead and property was damaged in the Oromia regional state and stability in the capital was in question, DW resisted to report the whole scenario. Instead of reporting the devastating nature of the situation, which was claimed to be instigated by Jawar as he called support from his group (the *qeerroo*), the story used the incident to criticize the federal government as weak since it failed to protect its people and the system. To quote a sentence from the story reported on October 20, 2019, “youth in Addis Ababa and Oromia went out to demonstrate against Abiy’s government”. The reporting of the above two cases is an example of how the media tend to impose a different meaning of the issues. Instead of reporting the incidence as accurately as possible, the channels gave much attention to the political interest of their own ethnic group, directing criticism at the federal government in which their re-

*The Prime Minister’s Press Secretary Nigusu Tilahun is being interviewed by EBC on June 22, 2019 in relation to the assassination of the Amhara regional state president and other top officials in the Amhara region.*

**In connection with the Welkait case, the story reported by DWET and Tigray Television had a tendency to slant the case to a different theme.**





*A report on DWET showing how Mekelle University is a convenient place for students coming from other parts of the country.*

**DW and Tigray Television tend to portray the Tigray region as a heaven for all students from other regions by highlighting attractive events from the universities and the region.**

relationship cannot be described as smooth. The two media outlets (Tigray Television and DW) also did not pay attention to the crises of university students in the Amhara and Oromia regions. What is important here is to note how the media attempted to articulate the political narratives of the Tigray regional state through their reports. Some of their stories had a slant in the other direction. For instance, Tigray Television systematically reflected the interests of the regional state in relation to the then university crises in the country. To quote an extract from the story aired on October 30, 2019,

*The federal government is not working in ensuring peace and making the universities safe places for all students who are coming from the federal states.<sup>12</sup>*

This quote implies that this medium has extra interests. For instance, the phrase “all students who are coming from the federal states” was used to undermine the legitimate power of the current government in serving the federal structure. The regional state of Tigray frequently complains that Abiy’s government is tending to destroy or demolish the federal states that TPLF claims it has been fighting for a longer period. Such kinds of political interests were reflected in the story. One cannot deny that the media often reflect the political interest of the owners. What makes this reporting un-

sual, however, is that while ignoring cases of the students’ crises in the universities in the Amhara and Oromo regions, the station (Tigray Television) pays more attention to the political interests of the regional state, which is under the rule of TPLF. Though the crises were happening far from the regional state, the media can report the stories as if they were new incidents, consisted of plenty of cases, and had human interest.

EBC and *Addis Zemen* also used slanting techniques in the case of the assassination of the officials in the Amhara region in June 2019. The two media channels reported the cases as a coup d’état. But the incidents did not fulfil the criteria of a coup, as many commented. The two media however presented the cases in a slant manner to shift the political tension in the region as well as in the federal state. This is because the two outlets are state-owned and are supposed to focus on the interests of the state.

In summary, the slanting technique is used by the media channels to send politically motivated messages that can favour their own ethnic group. Instead of dealing with the cases, identifying the true causes and consequence of the incidents, the media tend to report to meet the political interest of the ethnic group they serve.

**D. Charming interest**

Another important technique used in the annihilation frame is charming the other. This is observed as a form of deviation from the main case but used to show how the groups are smart and best for others. The charming interest of the media can be observed for example in the case of students’ crises in the universities. It is clear that universities in the country, particularly in the Amhara and Oromia regions, have been in crisis. The teaching-learning process has not been smooth, and students have not been at peace. These cases were reported by parts of the media. DW and Tigray Television, however, gave a different dimension. They did not report the whole crisis, and tended to portray the Tigray region as a heaven for all students from other regions by highlighting attractive events from the universities and

<sup>12</sup> All translations are made by the lead researcher and research assistants.

the region. For instance, Tigray Television reported about Axum University students who visited tourist attractions in the area. A similar report on the same channel showed how students of Mekelle University were going to the field to help farmers in harvesting the crops.

DW reported a story with quite similar themes. On November 10, 2019, the channel reports a story about a fruitful discussion between religious leaders and elders of Raya and students of Raya University<sup>13</sup>. It appears to be a good attempt at a discussion with the students in the time of crisis. Another story shows how Tigray region is a welcoming place for studying by inviting students who come from other parts of the country<sup>14</sup>. The interviewed students say, “Mekelle is a peaceful place for the students. The town is not like we heard before we came here.” Although it is fair to report on those events, the airing comes while there is serious crisis at other universities in the Amhara and Oromia regions. The intention of the stories seems to be to show how the regional state is peaceful and working in bringing mutual understanding among the students in the university. It is arguably an attempt to charm others by portraying their own ethnic group as kindhearted.

The same channel (DW) appealed to charm when reporting TPLF’s 45 years of establishment at Welkait. By quoting officials from the regional state, the channel wanted to show how the regional ruling party pays much attention to the people of Welkait, and celebrating the day with “its people” is one of the signs. The story seemingly did not want to mention the clear cause of the political tension between Tigray and Amhara over Welkait.

More examples of reports that can show that “my ethnic group or region is best” might be derived from Asrat and Amhara Television. A story reported by Asrat on October 11, 2019<sup>15</sup>, for instance, claims that the Amhara region is the best place for all:



*Tigray born students placed in Deber-tabor University stated that since they know the honesty and hospitality of the Amhara people they dare to come here to study. Students noted that what they have heard and what they have been experiencing in the Amhara region are quite different.*

*DWET is still regarded as a strong affiliate of TPLF and covered the 45th anniversary of the party dully in February 2020. The screenshot above is from the celebrations in Welkait.*

Similarly, stories on Amhara Television show that universities inside the region are safe. For instance, one story reports how the Tigray students in Bahir Dar University are well treated in the university. The journalist interviews a couple of students who are originally from the Tigray region. The story quotes them as saying, “we are continuing our studies in a very smooth manner. We live in harmony with other students who come from different parts of the country”<sup>16</sup>. Another student says, “I think TPLF used this opportunity to divide the two peoples. We are now in a safe place where many people live together peacefully. In a dorm, we are eight and we live together peacefully and harmoniously”<sup>17</sup>. The two stations tend to not only counterbalance the warning of Tigray education bureau claiming that all universities in Amhara regional state are danger zones for the people who are coming from Tigray region but also want to show

13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lljzU1suu>

14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPXcqFCCHVc>

15 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZXOY1mVU58>

16 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjD5gSTOWNE>

17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONFNn4yAECK>

## The overall interest of Tigray Television, DWET, Asrat TV and Amhara Television is to give emphasis to their own ethnic group and region.

how the region is a place to live.

The overall interest of Tigray Television, DW, Asrat TV and Amhara Television is to give emphasis to their own ethnic group and region. Pan, Isakhan and Nwokora (2020, p. 58) describe such kinds of discursive narration to construct self-positives as “charm offence”. While there is a myriad of problems happening in their regions that should get attention, the studied media channels tend to focus on selected positive aspects of reality to show how they are attractive. This is on the other hand used in a way to undermine others. In such a positive self, the media tend to reflect only positive aspects of the affiliated region and their ethnic group in the political narratives.

### E. Non-ethnic motive

Another technique applied in the annihilation frame is the non-ethnic motive. This is a way that the media report the cases in a non-ethnic and non-contentious manner. In other terms, the media circumvent issues of ethnicity. For instance, EBC reported the case of Woldia University which claims the lives of two students (Oromo students) without siding to any group. The story reported on November 10, 2019<sup>18</sup> attempts to define the problem of the conflict as not known. It does not seem to relate the case as ethnically or politically motivated. The station interviews two officials in connection with the case: The Vice President of the university, and the Head of Regional Communication Affairs Office. The story was supported by up-sounds from the interviewed sources. For instance, the vice academic president says,

*Students were in a peaceful mood the whole day. All the students were busy fighting against the desert locust. There was nothing unique until I received the report of the violence. Two of ‘our students’ have now passed away. Police are investigating the cases.*

In another interview with the regional communication officer, the same idea is inserted in the story. None of the sources men-

tions the ethnic groups of the two students, but simply refer to ‘our students’. They describe the students as Ethiopians. The story tries to create a sense of nationality or oneness. In fact, since EBC is a national medium, it is not surprising that it frames stories in such a way by using words that can tone down the tensions among ethnic groups. One most important thing that should be appreciated here is that the station selected not only the right sources of the stories but also inserted ideas in the story that are neutral and non-violent.

Unlike other media, EBC shows an interest in playing a centrist role. For instance, in stating the consequence of the problem, the story does not refer to one ethnic group. The source, who is the head of the communication bureau of the Amhara regional state, says, “We lost two brothers, and the regional state expressed its sadness at the loss of the two students”. It is clear that the two students who were killed in the incident belong to the Oromo ethnic group. But the source does not want to mention the deceased students based on their identity. Rather, the source as well as the story tend to embrace them as part of their ethnic group and describe them as one. The source also denounces those who are try to give wrong perceptions of the case and incite further conflicts among students in the universities.

The other narrative that should be mentioned here is the solution suggested in the story. In the stories OMN and Asrat, as cases in point, are expected to present solutions on behalf of the ethnic group they serve. However, in EBC, the story indicates that the government and the police officers are working on investigating the case; the elders are also working in bringing reconciliation among the students who were in the conflict. The story does not side with one ethnic group.

In the case of the assassination of top military officers and leaders of the Amhara regional state, the story is reported in a non-ethnic approach by *Addis Zemen* and EBC. Except narrating the atrocity executed on those officials, the stories do not only link up the case as ethnically motivated but also



the deceased with their ethnic identities.

*Ethiopsis* in a report about the Sidama case in its edition on July 21, 2019 brings diverse ideas on the request of self-administration. The story describes the overall massive damages in Sidama zone in connection with not getting a response by 11.11.11 (19 July 2019), which was the day when Sidama was expected to be declared as a new regional state. The story seems neutral and balanced in describing the overall situation and damage. The story does not connect the case with ethnic identity. It focuses on the problem by describing what needs immediate attention by all concerned bodies. All stakeholders' ideas are reflected in the stories. Sources quoted in the story are not only appropriate but also stand out as neutral.

The same newspaper is found to be centralist by reporting all round information about the case of Jawar. On the story reported on November 3, 2019, *Ethiopsis* exposes detailed and diverse sources of information that support and are against the case. The newspaper thoroughly reports the case of Jawar and the subsequent violence in the Oromia region and the follow-up discussion carried out by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the then Minister of Defense Lemma Megersa in the region. The story seems to be fair in reporting the story and tries to counterbalance the tendency of reporting the case in a different way by other media.

In the case of the establishment of PP, some media, particularly the state-owned media, tend to reflect centrist views. Reports on Amhara Television, OBN, EBC and *Addis Zemen* show fair interest towards the establishment of the PP. They give much emphasis to the importance of the coming of PP for all the people and affiliated political parties who have been isolated for long.

In summing up the annihilation frame, the Ethiopian media tend to hide, slant, and blur the most important issues that could harm the image of their 'own' ethnic group. For the most part, the media attempt to surpass their weak sides or wrongdoings to show only the positive elements of the group they tend to serve. Also, the media have been undermining the pain of other ethnic groups.

## II. OTHERING FRAMES

This second type of frame is derived from the theory of othering. Unlike the previous frame, othering is more interested in giving emphasis for 'Us' as a victim for an incident. The media tend to purport that their own group ('Us') has been vulnerable as well as victims of a certain incident. This frame is also used to give emphasis to 'Them' as the cause of the problem. The frame uses various techniques to expose intent such as exposition, externalization (blaming others), symbolic attachment, victimization, and undermining others.

### A. Exposition

As the term indicates, exposition is a technique that a media channel uses to take certain information from another outlet to expose what the other ethnic group is doing wrong. In other terms, this technique is used to reveal how the other ethnic group and their media are fermenting triggering messages that go against another ethnic group. Sometimes, the stories are not directly fetched from the original sources of information, but rather taken from the interviews or posts in the other media that the sources favour. This can be explained with examples.

A story reported by DW on September 30, 2019<sup>19</sup> states that,

*Policy commissioner of the Amhara regional state, Abere Adamu, blames TPLF as a perpetrator of the recent crisis and the loss of human beings and properties in connection with the Qimant case in the Amhara region in the Central Gondar area. The third-party (TPLF) is responsible for all the loss and chaos in the Qimant area and the people. The regional force did nothing wrong except ensuring peace and stability in the area.*

This is the lead of the story that was reported by DW by extracting a quotation from an interview broadcasted on ESAT. One can say that DW systematically presented the story so as to show how the other group ('Them') was thinking towards its own group ('Us', i.e.

**The Ethiopian media tend to hide, slant, and blur the most important issues that could harm the image of their 'own' ethnic group.**

19 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfFfSrVDdTg>

**It seems that Amhara Television strategically wants to reveal how the Tigray regional state is doing something unpleasant to the Amhara people.**

the Tigray from the perspective of DW).

The story also tries to belittle the Amhara regional state by showing how it is not working to solve its internal problem by identifying the actual cause of the conflict. The report quotes an extract from the ESAT<sup>20</sup> interview with the Head of the Police Commission of the Amhara regional state, Abere Adamu, who says:

*This is the task of a terrorist group like TPLF. This group provides training for the group organized by the name of Qimant and armed them to dismantle the region. This is almost a proxy war of TPLF to destabilize the Amhara region.*

The quoted idea is not new. It is a widely known claim in the political row between the two political groups in the regions. However, the question here is why DW chooses to quote ESAT and Abere Adamu. Also, in the story, the journalist explicitly uses words that label the Amhara regional force as ruthless by saying, “Recent atrocity happened in Gondar – the Qimant people is the worst in Ethiopia”. Furthermore, the story demands the Amhara Policy Force to take responsibility for all loss of people and destruction of property of the Qimant people. The reporter articulates these strong statements without quoting any source. The overall impression is that one group is portrayed as evil.

There are also other examples of media channels which use quotations from non-affiliated media to expose other ethnic groups. For example, on October 20, 2019, Amhara Television aired criticism of the Tigray Education Bureau Head who gave an interview to DW and Tigray Television. Like DW above, which quoted a story from ESAT, Amhara Television took this story from DW and Tigray Television, which have a different agenda than Amhara Television. The lead of the story goes as such<sup>21</sup>:

*Students of Bahir Dar University and dwellers of the city denounce the Tigray government’s decision on not sending*

*students to universities in the Amhara region as it is an attempt to dissociate the two peoples [Tigray and Amhara], and it is not a welcoming idea by all. The Tigray people should understand that such a decision of the regional government is a strategy to pose conflict and distance its people with fellow brother Amhara.*

It here seems that Amhara Television strategically wants to reveal how the Tigray regional state does something unpleasant to the Amhara people. The story also extracts a quote from an interview of a Tigray Regional State Education Bureau Head:

*The regional government of Tigray will not send freshman [first year students] students who are placed in universities in the Amhara regional state. We also notified the federal government to give a new placement for all students of Tigray who are assigned in the Amhara region. This is our stand.*

The story pretends to expose misdeeds by the regional government of Tigray and their media, particularly towards the Amhara ethnic group.

A newspaper, *Ethiopia*, reports a story which has a similar tone. On July 11, 2019, the newspaper ran a story about Irreecha (an Oromo festival) by quoting a statement of a top official from Oromia in a press briefing to OBN. The lead of the story is, “SHEMELES ABDISSA, president of Oromia regional state, wants to give political meaning to Irreecha celebration in Addis Ababa”. The news story articulates that the Oromia regional government is using the celebration of Irreecha as a mechanism to ensure and strengthen the political interests of his government in the quest of Addis Ababa to Oromia. The story also emphasizes that such a celebration is like adding fuel to the fire as the issue of Addis Ababa is a hot political topic.

The same newspaper is found to blame *qeerroo* for the killing of a large number of people in Oromia based on their ethnic iden-

20 There is a common perception that ESAT favours the Amhara and Ethiopianization, up against the interest of TPLF and DW.

21 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONFNn4yAEck>

tity and religious denomination (November 3, 2019). The story attempts to show that the violence and inhuman actions taken against other ethnic groups living for long in the region have been motivated by the Oromia regional state, *qeerroo*, and their leader Jawar Mohammed. Unlike OBN, OMN, AMMA, EBC and *Addis Zemen, Ethiopia* is direct in identifying the causes and problems of the crisis in Oromia.

In recapping, the Ethiopian media show a clear tendency to reveal antagonistic ideas of their perceived enemies ('Us') through monitoring the media favoring the other ('Them'). The stories are presented and framed in a way to expose a clear stand of other groups ('Them'), and to show how they are the real enemies of their own group ('Us'). This technique shows plainly how ethnicity is played out in the media by means of emphasizing the negative intents and actions of others. A similar result is observed in the quantitative data. Most of the stories tend to reveal bad experiences with other ethnic or political groups. From the 133 stories, 109 were purely reported to expose how others attempt to attack their own group either physically or politically. 101 of the stories exposed how their own ethnic or political group could be at risk. In other terms, the stories tend to narrate their groups as victims of the incidents, which will be presented in the next section.

## **B. Symbolic attachment (tactical alliance/solidarity)**

A second technique observed in the othering frame (Us and Them dichotomy) is symbolic attachment. This technique is used to show how the selected media tend to interlink with ethnic groups either in emphasizing or de-emphasizing their interest in reporting cases of other ethnic groups. A good example of this technique is the case of the Qimant in the Amhara regional state. As noted, the quest for self-administration of the Qimant in the Amhara region has been the cause for the death of many people in the area and at the center of the political tension not only in the Amhara regional state but also in the federal government. An incident that happened at the end of September

2019 can be a good example. In just one day, four consecutive long stories about the Qimant crisis were reported by DW in its news broadcast. Intensive reporting about this case in Amhara Television may not be that surprising. Reports with an ardent interest, highly exaggerated tone and overemphasized themes that can send negative messages towards Amhara by DW and Tigray Television, however, can be interpreted in a different way. It shows an attachment of the media (DW and Tigray Television) with the Qimant people who have demanded self-administration in the Amhara region. As can be seen in the stories reported on September 30, 2019, the Tigray's political group and the Qimant ethnic clan have a good attachment though they are neither geographically nor linguistically the same.

In a news hour, four different long stories were reported about the case of Qimant. One of the stories is about Qimant students demanding immediate action by all concerned bodies. The news goes as such:

*Mekelle University students belonging to the Qimant ethnic group call to all the people and organizations who have concern on humanities to protect the Qimant people from torture and harassment triggered by the Amhara government.*

Several issues could be raised in relation to the fact that Tigray affiliated media showed such concern in reporting the case of Qimant. Firstly, it is a question why the lead story is framed in such a way that it accuses the Amhara regional state. Secondly, one is curious to know why the Qimant students at Mekelle University approached only the Tigray media. And finally, one could question why ethnically Qimant students who study in other universities of the country did not approach media organizations to complain about the case. The indication is that the coverage contains a secondary agenda and that there exists an extended relationship between the media in the Tigray region and the Qimant people. There are claims that DW is mostly serving the Tigray political elites, specifically TPLF. As can be

**From the 133 stories, 109 were purely reported to expose how others attempt to attack their own group either physically or politically.**





*Amhara TV gave attention to the case of the abducted students at Dembi Dollo University in the Oromia region and referred to them as ‘our students’.*

**OMN, DWET and Tigray Television were found to be the main supporters of the Sidama self-regional administration quest.**

seen in the recent political narratives, TPLF and the ADP are in different political blocs<sup>22</sup>. They have recently been in a political row<sup>23</sup>. Some writers (e.g. Semir, 2019) note that the clash in the Qimant area is a proxy war between the Tigray (led by TPLF) and Amhara states (led by ADP). This might be one of the reasons that DW pays much attention to the case of Qimant. In this particular story, one can arguably see that the media in Tigray are seizing a kind of position that fits with the interests of the political elites of its region, particularly the ruling party, TPLF, to meet the interests of its ethnic group. Hence, the station frames the story to portray the Qimant people as the victims of the ‘atrocious attack’ of the Amhara police force.

The attachment between the media (DW and Tigray Television) and the ethnic group (Qimant) is also reflected in other ways. DW seemingly reports the case of Qimant to expose the malfeasance of the Amhara regional government in particular, and its people in general. The close collaboration between TPLF and Qimant comes out as a tactical alliance which also can be used by the affiliated media to send negative messages that can undermine the Amhara regional state and the ruling party ADP, as they are not having an amicable relationship with

TPLF.

Such kinds of strategic alliance with different people who do not directly belong to their ethnic group can be observed elsewhere as well. For instance, OMN, DW and Tigray Television were found to be the main supporters of the Sidama self-regional administration demand. Also telling is DW and Tigray Television’s attitude towards Jawar’s call for action in Oromia and the subsequent violence in the region. Tigray Television reported the case of Jawar as a weak administrative strategy of the federal government, which is both showing the station’s political stance against the federal Abiy government and an expression of symbolic solidarity with Jawar who is a political figure with a large following in the Oromia region<sup>24</sup> and a strong opponent of the federal government.

In short, symbolic attachment is employed by different channels to show some sense of belonging to a certain ethnic group to attack the common opponents (the third party). As the saying goes, ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’.

**C. Victimization (exaggeration)**

Victimization is a technique used by the media to give more sense and meaning to their ethnic group. This approach is reflected in the studied content. For example, compared with other media outlets, a story reported on Amhara Television on February 6, 2020<sup>25</sup> shows a great interest in the case of the 21 abducted students in Dembi Dollo University in Oromia regional state. The station brought attention to demonstrations held in most parts of the region. In fact, as the abducted students belonged to the Amhara ethnic group, the people of this regional state feel the pain more than the other regional states. The story shows how the Amhara people are out crying due to its students being abducted by unknown people in Oromia. To quote from the story, “Amhara students are still becoming victims of the conspiracy of the ethnic politics in the country”.

22 ‘APD says ‘TPLF is trying to exploit the current situation to cover years of crimes’’, Borkena, 11 July 2019. Available at: <https://borkena.com/2019/07/11/adp-says-tplf-is-trying-to-exploit-the-current-situation-to-cover-years-of-crime/>

23 ‘Regional power grab attempt causes rare discord in Ethiopia coalition’, Dawit Endeshaw, 12 July 2019. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics-idUSKCN1U725Z>

24 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwBH8RXLqSo>

25 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J\\_1L8ISXPQs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_1L8ISXPQs)

The story describes the Amhara people as the prime victims of the pressure by the unidentified groups. The story quotes demonstrators who criticize the regional party, which was “ADP continues to be obedient and subservient to the governing system”. In stating the solution for the problem, the story underlines that unity and solidarity among Amhara people could help to bring immediate action for the release of ‘our students’. Most of the sources for this story were demonstrators who staged out to the street to demand the release of the abducted Amhara students. One important thing that should be emphasized here is that unlike the other media aired in other regions, this medium tends to use the phrase ‘our students’. Two extremes are observed. On the one end, as discussed earlier, some media outlets, particularly DW, Tigray TV, OBN and OMN, which refrained from reporting about the abducted students in the Oromia region. On the other end, channels such as Asrat and Amhara Television, which gave a thorough report. Even some reports criticized both the regional and federal governments for their weak measures to free the abducted students. The story was also used as a sign of all the intrigue happening on Amhara people by the “federal government as well as the Oromia regional state”.

The ethnic tendencies were reflected in three forms. The first one as noted, the abduction of Amhara students in Oromia was articulated in a way that was triggered to attack the Amhara ethnic group. The second angle is that there has been a clear difference between the Oromo and Amhara people in the current political discourse. According to the report, the Amhara–Oromo differences were reflected not only by abducting Amhara students but also the Oromia regional state and its people had not yet denounced the case which has been happening in its area. Thirdly, due to the crises in many universities in the country, Amhara students have been targeted by means of killings and harassment, and many of them are already expelled from the Oromia region. The stories connect many problems happening in the Oromia region that target students, parti-

cularly Amhara people living in the region. To quote, “so far many attacks targeting the Amhara ethnic group have been happening both inside and outside of the universities in the region by Oromo gangs in the region”.

The other medium observed to give high emphasis to the ethnic group it serves is Asrat TV. The station focuses on the interests of the Amhara ethnic group. The following quote from a story reported on Asrat on November 13, 2019<sup>26</sup> is illustrative:

*Soon after the death of two Oromo students in Woldia University while students were watching a football match on TV, Amhara students in several Oromia universities are facing direct attacks and the situation is not good for the Amhara people. While three Amhara students in Meda Welabu University were admitted to the hospital following an attack on them, one student in Dembi Dollo University was killed. Students say that they stay there with fear and stress.*

From the extracted lead story, one can understand that the story was reported in favour of Amhara students in universities in the Oromia regional state. This does not mean that the problems were not happening in the mentioned universities. However, in looking at the narration of the problems in the universities, the story paid much attention to the Amhara students. In defining the causes for the continuous tension and conflicts in Oromia Universities and attack on Amhara students, the medium gives names for those who have caused the problem as they appear to deliberately incite conflict directed at the Amhara ethnic group. The story not only favours one ethnic group, but also identifies certain groups, particularly political groups, which strive to create conflict among students in line with ethnic identity and religious denomination.

Among many other reasons that have been reflected in the two media channels (AMMA and Asrat) in connection with the abduction and displacement of the Amhara people in the Oromia regions, is the claimed

**Some media outlets, particularly DWET, Tigray TV, OBN and OMN, refrained from reporting about the abducted students.**

26 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmEX45Afer0>

**OMN did not consult sources from the Amhara region or university officials who could balance and tell their version as to what went wrong.**

hate of the Oromo people towards the Amhara society. Whatever the narrative in the stories, the two channels, particularly Asrat, seem to have a clear agenda set to reveal all atrocities targeting the Amhara people. This is one form of the ideological square that gives much emphasis on the negativity of them by others so as to refer to the second group as the cause of the problem.

After the death of two Oromo students in Woldia University in November 2019, higher education institutions in the Amhara and Oromia regions were not in a peaceful situation. Death and displacement of university students were frequently reported. Quite different frames were found in the stories reported by OBN (to some extent), OMN, Asrat and AMMA (to some extent). As giving 'Us' a high priority, OBN and OMN were the first in describing the situation as desperate for the Oromo ethnic group. OMN, for instance, reported a story by quoting the political leader Jawar Mohammed<sup>27</sup>.

*Jawar warns the government to protect 'all Oromo students' who are enrolled in universities in the Amhara region. He amplified that the situation of Oromo students in the universities are fearful and leading their lives at risk.*

In this extracted lead of the story of OMN, one can understand that there have been some forms of isolation of one group from the others and describe it as a victim of the case. In addition, the story uses phrases such as "our people" and "our students", which typically refer to students of the Oromo ethnic group. It is emphasized that students of this particular group need protection. The story gives much attention to one ethnic group, namely Oromo students, by alienating others. The story does not deal with all students or students as Ethiopian citizens.

In another story on the same day, Oromo students from Mekedela Amba, Debretabor and Woldia universities express their concern about the situation, which they describe as terrible. All the sources are students who belong to the Oromo ethnic group. The story narrates that the problem in Woldia

University and the subsequent crisis in the universities in the Amhara regional state is provoked to target the Oromo community.

The other important point that should be discussed here is how the story of OMN suggests a solution to the problem. The story does not point out possible solutions that could solve this particular problem and bring sustainable peace and reconciliation among the ethnic groups in the universities in the country. Instead, the story states that Oromo students should leave the universities and come back 'home'. In fact, the channel here suffers from a source problem. The story does not consult sources from the Amhara region or university officials who could balance and tell their version as to what went wrong. Beyond the interests of the sources, the story applies the term 'home', referring to the Oromia region. Such kinds of descriptions tend to delineate each regional state or ethnic group. Also, it is clearly depicted that the Amhara region is not a home for them (the Oromo students). In addition, the story quotes the students' point of view that the 'Oromia government should take measures to solve the problem while the problem is happening in the Amhara regional state'. In the 'Us' and 'Them' dichotomy, while all universities are under the mandate of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, stories assume much responsibility on the regional government to deal with the problem, which is not its mandate. The ethnic inclination of the media is underscored by the fact that the journalists did not interview officials and other neutral sources, either the regional government of the Amhara or the federal government. The stories get stuck with emphasizing the problem and hammering the cause, and do not come up with a solution involving diverse voices from all concerned people. As one of the manifestations of 'Us', OMN only interviewed Oromo students.

One important trait that OMN, OBN (to some extent), Asrat and Amhara TV (to some extent) share is that they do not report the cases that happen in their areas (Oromia and Amhara, respectively). While they give much emphasis on the 'worst situation'

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzBgMyRbfx>



in the universities, the media, for instance, Asrat in the Amhara region and OBN and OMN in the Oromia region, do not reveal what went wrong in their respective regions, and they are hesitant to report the main cause of the problem and the exact happenings in the universities in each region. Their intent is to emphasize their ethnic group as a victim of the crisis.

The victimization technique can also be found in newspapers. In its edition on November 30, 2019, *Berera* published a detailed analysis of the Jawar case supported by pictures. The story describes Jawar as a perpetrator in the recent killings of Amhara and other people living in the Oromia region. The story bluntly claims that such kinds of incidents should be likened to the Interahamwe of Rwanda (i.e. the Hutu paramilitary organization). The allusion is that people are killed because of their ethnic and religious identity. The newspaper categorizes one side as the perpetrator (the Oromo) and the other as the victim (mostly Amhara).

#### **D. Blaming the other (externalization)**

The blame technique is used in stories to push away the cause of the incident, which perhaps is caused by the group alligned to the media in question. This can also be used to label specific groups as the cause of a problem. It is a deliberate approach to accuse a group (ethnic or political) as a cause of the crisis. A few stories from the selected media can serve as examples.

A story on Amhara Television on October 6, 2019<sup>28</sup> reported the arrest of 53 well trained and armed infiltrated soldiers who were sent to attack the Amhara region. In the story, political and ethnic issues are reflected. For instance, by quoting a regional police officer, the story highlights that the current quest and armed struggle of certain groups in the Qimant area are not in the genuine interest of the Qimant people. All the conflicts and political tension in the Central Gondar zone are described as deliberately instigated by external groups with the aim of violating peace and stability in the Amhara regional state. The following extract is

typical:

*‘THNeG’ (the Amharic version of TPLF) has been fiercely working against the Amhara and other ethnic groups not to be peaceful and stable. It is still working on realizing its negative and false narratives towards Amhara. Currently, THNeG recruits the youth to train and support the illegal committee of Qimant so as to attack the Amhara people and affect its regional development and stability.*

This extract can show not only the difference in political ideology and the ethnic tension in the region (Amhara vs. Tigray and Amhara vs. Qimant), but also how the cause of the conflict is defined. Firstly, the story describes the armed groups as ‘musketeers’ that simply attack people or the regional government without good political grounds. The groups are directly linked with the neighboring Tigray regional state which is described as the main cause of the conflict in the Amhara region. The news on Amhara Television claims that,

*It is an attempt to create instability in the region, which ultimately affects the current development activities (sesame products will be harvested in this area) of the people in the area.*

The cause of the conflicts and the overall tension in the Central Gondar zone of Amhara regions are not explicitly narrated in the story. Instead of dealing with the political interests of the Qimant group, the story blames others (*THNeG*) in organizing and sending militants into the Amhara region. The TPLF group is labeled as traitors and the mastermind of all the chaos in the Amhara regional state, particularly in the Qimant administrative area.

The *Berera* newspaper reflects a similar trend of externalizing the causes of the conflicts in the Amhara region and its people to the third party. A story reported on November 30, 2019 blames TPLF not only for the case of Qimant but also for other incidents in Oromia. For instance, the atrocities that

**Asrat in the Amhara region and OBN and OMN in the Oromia region do not reveal what went wrong in their respective regions.**

28 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXJXK2-fb8U>



Facsimile of *Ethiopia* from October 2019, showing the loyalty of Oromo young men (*qeerroo*) to Jawar Mohammed.

happened in the Oromia region on the Amhara ethnic group is an intrigue plotted by the TPLF, according to the newspaper. The story goes:

*“TPLF is an intrigue maker that instigates clashes between Amhara and Oromo people. TPLF was successful particularly in sending negative and false messages that not only demonize the Amhara people but also motivate the Oromo youth to be against the Amhara people.”*

Another example of blaming the other occurred on DW Television on October 1, 2019<sup>29</sup> in a lengthy story about the case of Qimant and Gondar. As noted earlier, DW presents the Amhara regional state in general and the people of Gondar in particular as the main cause of the problem in the area. Generally speaking, the channel tends to accuse the Amhara region.

In short, externalization is one of the techniques used in the Ethiopian media to refer to other ethnic groups perceived as enemies as a cause for the problem occurring in the country or some particular place. The purpose of the media is not only to send negative messages to other ethnic groups but also to alienate that group from the others who have a good relationship. The media tend to frame cases in a way to free its ethn-

ic group (‘Us’) from blame by attributing all causes to the other ethnic group (‘Them’).

### E. Undermining others

While blaming the other is a used in the media (our media) to criticize the other ethnic group (them) for either the cause or the problem of the cases that have brought devastating impact on their own ethnic group (us), undermining the others is a technique applied to ignore others’ good values because of their ethnic differences. As the name indicates, undermining others is intentionally disregarding someone’s positive activities or initiatives. This can be, for instance, using some terms, phrases or ideas (themes) in the story. This can be illustrated by a few examples from the stories. For instance, in the above-mentioned story, used to examine the blaming technique, the name ‘*THNeG*’ was applied to describe TPLF. In itself, there is nothing wrong about the name. However, the Amharic abbreviation has a negative connotation on the audiences. The story seems to use the abbreviation ‘*THNeG*’ to undermine all the values and power of TPLF. In a similar view, *Ethiopia* in its edition on October 26, 2019 wrote a headline that can give a different meaning of a person’s name. It reads ‘Ja-war’ to connect the person in question – Jawar, an activist and later politician of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) – as a source of war. Thus, the story blames Jawar for the atrocity in the country, particularly for the conflict that claimed the lives of 87 people in the Oromia region in October 2019.

The return of the Irreecha celebrations to Addis Ababa in 2019 also triggers reflection on ethnic elements. The stories reported on OBN and OMN assert that the Oromo ethnic group has become a winner over the group whom they call *neftegna*, which literally means armed group. While it is a religious or cultural celebration, the media use words as well as tone to undermine other political and ethnic groups. Similar reports were observed in the media in connection with the call of Jawar. The stories reported on OMN on October 23, 2019 frequently used the word *neftegna* and the phrase ‘Down, down,

**Generally speaking, DW tends to accuse the Amhara region.**

*neftegna*’ which has a negative connotation for the Amhara ruling group.

All in all, most of the selected media in the study were found to use labelling to show either hate towards the group or to undermine the role of the group. According to Van Dijk (1998), using terms can bring bias in the interpretations of the word.

The undermining technique has been used in the selected media in the case of the establishment of the Prosperity Party (PP). In fact, unlike other issues, the case of PP is not clearly and directly used to describe a certain ethnicity. Stories reflect elements of ethnicity through political differences among political parties and regions. The difference among the political groups toward PP emanates from their perception and political ideology toward ethnicity and federalism.

Looking at the selected stories reported by Tigray TV, DW and OMN, they come out as negative on the establishment of PP. For instance, a story reported on OMN on February 8, 2020<sup>30</sup> explicitly rejects the coming of PP. By quoting Jawar Mohammed, the story tries to undermine the initiatives of PP. His argument is that PP has forgotten “those who have been fighting for change” in the country. That is to emphasize the role of the Oromo youth (*qeerroo*), who were struggling for change but may not benefit from the new party. Also, the media criticize that the party promotes a centrist ideology while the Oromo people are against it. From this story one can understand that the issue of PP has a direct link to both ethnicity and political ideology, i.e. OMN rejects PP as it does not favor only the Oromo people.

DW and Tigray Television raised similar concerns. For instance, a story reported by DW<sup>31</sup> tries to undermine PP by emphasizing the negative aspects of the coming of the party. According to the story, the current political power of the PP can put direct pressure on all other parties which have been struggling to ensure federalism in the country. Though it does not explicitly say so, the

story tends to send a message that groups established based on ethnicity will be highly affected by the coming of PP. The channel also criticizes the incumbent leaders who have been using PP to maintain their power and sustain their existence in the leadership. The extreme negative tendency towards the PP is also reflected in the story by including a quoting from a source – “How a lemon and milk can go together” – just to indicate that the TPLF (as an ethnic entity) will never merge with the PP (as a unified group).

Both OMN, DW and Tigray Television frame their stories in such a way that they undermine the initiatives of the PP as a coalition that will be against all the federal states that focus on ethno-linguistics. This seems to be the idea of the political leaders of TPLF and Oromo political elites who are ‘against’ the current leadership of Abiy. One should closely look at how these two groups are not in favour of the PP. The main reason can be the fear that PP will exclude their ethnic group from participating in political activities<sup>32</sup>. The other unrevealed reason is that the centralist point of view is always considered as the idea of Amhara people, where the TPLF and Oromo political elites are mostly in opposition. The media channels from Tigray and Oromo have been criticizing the PP as a cause for the unilateral government, which is governed by Abiy Ahmed, originally from former ODP. Thus, three media channels frequently send negative messages to undermine the initiative of the establishment of the new party.

Unlike the above-mentioned media, the sampled state media show quite different angles to the establishment of PP. The stories reported on OBN, EBC, Amhara Television and *Addis Zemen* describe the coming of the new party as a positive intervention in the current political sphere. Amhara Television, for instance, reported on December 3, 2019 with a lead story<sup>33</sup> that “PP will resolve the problem of Amhara people who have been living across the country”. The story emphasizes that unlike other periods (the last 28

**Most of the media in the study were found to use labelling to show either hate towards the group or to undermine the role of the group.**

30 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQ\\_bLw6lhPM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQ_bLw6lhPM)

31 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JjuX5OFurw&t=1420s>

32 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/08/ethiopia-will-explode-if-abiy-ahmed-doesnt-move-beyond-ethnic-based-politics/>

33 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rZSdf7ELyw>



**It is found a clear polarization of the media in describing groups as 'Us' and 'Them' based on their ethnic affiliation.**

years), the coming of PP is a hope to bring the best solutions for the Amharic speaking people who have been living in many parts of the country and who have faced myriads of problems in the last 28 years. To quote, "It will ensure freedom of expression, freedom of movement and freedom of access property, able to work". A similar frame was reported on December 18, 2019<sup>34</sup>, noting the current merger of all parties which were excluded for the last 28 years in political, economic, and other decisive decisions and powers in the country. The story articulates that the establishment of PP is a timely and important action that will resolve the complex problem of the country.

Amhara Television has reported frequently about the importance of the party (PP) not only including other groups but also ensuring fundamental rights such as freedom of movement and freedom of working by moving from one region to the other. However, the stories reported on OMN, Tigray and DW are quite different. As mentioned above, they have a strong stance against the establishment of PP. In this case, one can see the ethnic elements on the difference and the interest of the media either undermining or supporting the new party. Since the Amhara affiliated media ardently support the establishment of the PP, opposing channels such as OMN, DW and Tigray Television, which favour the Oromo and Tigray elites who have a clear opposition to the Amhara people, have undermined the coming of PP. So, in the establishment of PP, there has been a clear contestation of ethnic identity and groups among the political parties and the media they control.

### **Conclusion**

A thorough textual analysis of the stories and a brief numerical analysis in the selected media in this study show that the Ethiopian media tend to take ethnicity at the center of their reporting. The overall investigation of such reporting either intentionally or unintentionally favour their own ethnic group and undermine the other, which is perceived as an enemy. It is found a clear polarization of the media in describing groups as

'Us' and 'Them' based on their ethnic affiliation. The polarization of the media based on political differences (private media for opposition parties, state-owned media for the ruling party), has been the nature of the Ethiopian media for a longer period. However, this polarization based on ethnicity is a new phenomenon in the country.

This study argues that such kinds of a clear and massive difference of and extended interests of the media towards their ethnic groups can be reasoned out into five major points. The first one is related to the current open political system that gives the political parties to organize and serve a particular ethnic group. As can be seen, the majority of the Ethiopian political parties are organized to address issues of a particular ethnic group. Taking such nature of party establishment and vested interest to address a certain ethnic group has brought a direct impact on the media. The study reasons that the current political leaders and activists, as well as regional state officials, believe that they could not get strong support from their ethnic group unless they amplify ethnic issues in their affiliated media. In most cases, politicians are seemingly interested in sending messages to their supporters through the media, which can describe issues that happened in their groups or their areas as a deliberate threat or an attempt directed to their ethnic groups. This ultimately helps the leaders to show how committed they are to serve their ethnic groups. This is perhaps an easy way for politicians in motivating and mobilizing the ethnic group they belong to. It is quite similar to the idea of Sotiropoulou (2002) who did research on the former Yugoslavia media. The author mentions that "ethnicity played an important role in the issue, as the political elites took advantage of the symbolic power that ethnicity has to offer and used it as a tool for pursuing territorial, political, and economic objectives" (Sotiropoulou, 2002, p. 1). From the overall analysis of the study, one can see a clear interest of political elites of each ethnic group in Ethiopia tend to use their ethnicity as an instrument to further strengthen their power and meet their interest.

Secondly, ethnicity and the media in the current context can also be narrated in the political positioning of the political parties, regional states, and their ethnic groups. The overall findings of the study tend to lead us to state that the media and their discourse on ethnicity emanate from three major pillars of the Ethiopian political narratives among the political elites and their ethnicity. Oromo as a current winner and in power want to exploit the situation for its ethnic group. The struggles of political elites and the media seemingly stem from maintaining the political power of the group, insisting that not enough is done for the Oromo by the government. The Tigray (TPLF) come out as losers and struggling to get back to power. The Amhara appear as victims and targets for all threats. As can be seen from the political narratives and the analyzed stories, these ethnic groups are portrayed as victims of the current political positioning. In these particular pillars, the media, which are particularly ethnic centered, have brought the agenda that particularly favour their ethnic groups and undermine others. As a result, they tend to play a negative role in reinforcing dissociation and hate among the Ethiopian community. This has been reflected in most of the studied media. The media are inclined to behave in a way that meets the interests of ethnic politics in the country. This might be the reason that most of the sampled media feature the selected cases in line with the inter-ethnic political differences in the country.

The third argument of the study concerns the media structure and media ownership. Since the current media, for instance the regional state media, are structured under the regional governments which are demarcated by languages, the political narratives of the regional states determine the media content and their frames. Also, the selected commercial media are implicitly initiated to meet the interests of some ethnic groups so as not only to enhance cohesion among the people in the same ethnic group but also to sustain their media business. As a result of these, unlike another period, one can vividly see the political narratives of each ethnic group in the media which ultimate-

ly diminish their amicable relationship with or among the ethnic groups in the country. As argued by scholars, the media can influence the public not only by choosing the slant of a particular report but also merely by choosing what to report (Gerber, Karlan and Bergan, 2009). That is what is typically observed in the Ethiopian media. Unless the story meets the interest of the ethnic group of the owners, there is less probability of getting covered. So the media system can also be another factor that motivates the media to focus on the ethnic issues in the country.

The fourth argument focuses on the journalists' level of professionalism. This argument stems not only from the framing analysis itself, but takes the media context into account as well. Unlike previous periods, most of the media have the chance to hire graduates from universities. However, the journalists could not show their skills in reporting those sensitive cases selected for this study. Most of the reports analysed here give priority to their own ethnic group. As a result, the professional integrity of journalism in the current ethnic sensitive media is almost ignored. Also, the values of journalism, for instance serving the public and reporting accurately, have been overlooked. As a result, fundamental ethics of the journalism profession, like minimizing harm and giving priority to humanity, appear to be in question in Ethiopia.

The last argument of this framing analysis relies on the interests of the media in approaching sources who only favor their political agenda. A close look at the stories, except for a few, shows that they use sources that identify with their ethnic group. As presented earlier, most of the sources are political parties or activists who support their own group. From this, one can argue that since the media serve certain ethnic groups, they may confine to certain sources that belong to the same ethnic group. Representing professional media, journalists should go further in searching for information to make the story complete and balanced. In the analyzed stories, journalists did not succeed in including diverse information from different sources.

**The media tend to play a negative role in reinforcing dissociation and hate in the Ethiopian community.**

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*Master control room, Amhara Television, Bahir Dar. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)*



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