



Ethnicity as journalism paradigm: Polarization and political parallelism of Ethiopian news in transition

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the 2018 liberalization of journalistic freedoms in Ethiopia, new waves of political unrest and a re-tightened grip on the media have emerged. A key feature in this context is the increasing reference to ethnic contrasts reflecting regional differences. While Ethiopia is a unique country in the African context in the sense of never having been colonized (with the exception of a brief period of Italian occupation), features of the contemporary media situation are also of general validity in understanding political realities in other African countries. This paper explores the concept of 'journalism paradigms' in that regard, with the follow-up question of how an understanding of journalism paradigms founded on ethnic boundaries might also contribute toward a more distinctly 'African' journalism research framework.

Keywords: journalism paradigms, news narrative, ethnicity, polarization, transition, Ethiopia, Africa

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen substantial changes in the political landscape in Ethiopia, reflecting a conflict-laden past as well as being a reminder of future unpredictability. Media systems, journalism and how journalists perceive their role in society are part of that reflection, as well. With the coming of Abiy Ahmed as prime minister in 2018, more freedom came to the Ethiopian news media. Public sphere interest groups quickly engaged in mobilizing a variety of new informational platforms and online media. Incarcerated journalists were freed. Censorship in public discourse was lessened (CPJ, 2019; Dahir, 2018; Repucci, 2019; RSF, 2019; Taye, 2017). When the prime minister received the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize and travelled to Oslo, Norway, to receive it with international news focused on him, little was known of the domestic turmoil that was to come a year later. During the course of the civil war that began in 2020, newly obtained media freedoms were again pulled back. Latent ethnic tensions were fired up (Hirsi, 2020), and ethnic identities and cleavages began to play a more pronounced role in Ethiopian news reporting.

Background Study of News in Ethiopia

The journalistic *ethos* is classically defined as adherence to the norm of objectivity (Bennett, 2004), binding journalists together through common identity as "unbiased tellers of society's going on" (Berkowitz, 2000, p. 127). Brought out of "Western" social science, perspectives such as these offer a means of extending the case of Ethiopia into the wider sociology of African journalism. Studies in Africa have pinpointed failures of global journalism studies in not considering African realities such as peoples' attitude and orientation to communal values (Kasoma, 1996; Nyamnjoh, 2010a, 2010b). In response to Hallin and Mancini (2004), features such as classifications of 'high', 'low', 'strong', 'weak' are difficult to apply as the measurements have different

magnitude and volume in settings other than the ones most often applied in the Western social science context (Mabweazara, 2018; Shaw, 2018; Voltmer, 2008). In Ethiopia's case, journalism paradigm is what binds journalistic routines, values and identity together even in difference such as ethnicization (Dessie et al., 2022).

How Ethiopia as a country might move past legacies of authoritarianism and the role of journalism in that context, is an issue already receiving considerable attention (Endalkachew, 2018). Ethnic tension is not new to Ethiopian politics. Neither is it unfamiliar in the journalistic practice of the country (Mesenbet, 2016; Meseret, 2013; Skjerdal, 2012). Ethiopia has traditionally adhered to a strict control over public expression and media plurality (Woldegiorgis, 2015), as has been the case in many other African countries.

There is a long-standing debate over what could constitute a distinct African journalism research framework and tradition (Amin et al., 2000; Kasoma, 1996; Wasserman, 2011a). Debates concerning "de-Westernizing" communication research have been on the agenda a long time (Nyamnjoh, 2010a; Wasserman, 2011b), but are taking on new vigour with recent debates about decolonisation of Eurocentric epistemologies (Mano, 2021; Mano & Milton, 2021). Fragmentation, polarization and intensification of public dissent discourse caused by new media technologies in the past few decades both generally and in particular in Ethiopia, contribute to rethink journalism theories (Mano & Milton, 2021).

As far as geopolitical analysis is concerned, one might also question the notion of "Africa" as a meaningful concept. The continent is wide, replete with contrasts (Chiumbu & Iqani, 2019). The paradox of attempting to develop a tradition of journalism and communication research in and for Africa that seeks to define its 'otherness' from 'Western social science' by applying concepts and theories from it (Maggio, 2007; Sharpe & Spivak, 2003; Spivak, 2012).

The Question of Ethnicity in Contemporary Ethiopian Journalism

Present day Ethiopia has about 110 million inhabitants, living on a landmass of over 1.1 million square kilometers. It is a country where more than 80 languages are spoken. Among the widely spoken languages are *Amharic*, *Afaan Oromoo* and *Tigrigna*. The political arena and population share of the nation is also dominated by these three ethnic communities combined, accounting roughly for 68% of the inhabitants (Ado et al., 2021; Kasse & Woldemariam, 2022; Zegeye & Ganta, 2022).

Within this context, Ethiopia has a legacy of tight media control and limited public expressions (Dirbaba & O'Donnell, 2016; Zewde & Pausewang, 2002). In the last decade, a transition from an authoritarian media control towards more freedom of expression (Genetu & Tegegne, 2019; Tadege, 2020) has occurred. A cursory review of Ethiopia in the news in recent years confirms this evaluation (RSF, 2020). In 2015, BBC reporter Andre Harding (2015) reported fear of imprisonment amongst Ethiopian journalists. In March 2021, Voice of America reported the release of several journalists with ties to both international news media and the Tigray region in Northern Ethiopia (VOA, 2021). The political "thaw" set in motion in 2018 has been covered in such international platforms as *The Conversation* (cf. Gedamu, 2020), *Open Democracy* (cf. Lefort, 2020) and others.

Since April 2018, Ethiopia is once again in a significant political transition, marked by an unprecedented mushrooming and vibrance of media both in diversity and quantity. As a clear departure from previous trends, the content and ownership of most of these new media establishments is based on claims to ethnic affiliation (Skjerdal & Mulatu, 2021). Another feature is the rapid change in the post-2018 news media eco system. In fact, the acceleration of opening and closing of new media outlets is in and of itself a point to analyze. Production of news in journalism is a 'social construction' of a 'world view' as an outcome of collaboration between journalists and sources (Molotch & Lester, 1974). There is also an enquiry that pertains to the social construction of ethnically based "world views" and to what extent these 'world views' get articulated increasingly as foundational frames (Andsager, 2000; Skjerdal & Mulatu, 2021). These enquiries contribute to overall understanding of ethnicization of journalism as paradigm in Ethiopia.

2018: Legacies of Control – Emergent Freedoms of Expression

Studies point to the emergence and expansion of ethnically affiliated media outlets in Ethiopia after the 2018 reform (Dessie et al., 2022; Melkamu, 2020). Clearly, there is a new pattern of a news media transformation that places high emphasis on ethnic identity and editorial purpose. One of the prominent media claiming to work for the Amhara ethnic community was for a time ASRAT (Amhara Satellite Radio and

Television). Established a few months after the political reform by a group of individuals that champion Amhara nationalism mainly from abroad, ASRAT defined its brand as a defender of Amhara rights, deploying various social media to reach out, Facebook and YouTube being the principal ones. On its YouTube homepage ASRAT stated an intention to promote the history, identity and culture of the Amhara people as one of its objectives (ASRAT, 2018). ASRAT suspended its operation from Ethiopia in June 2020. There have, since then, been conflicting reports concerning the closure. Following ASRAT Media one might want to explore more critically how new media outlets come and go, making strategic use of global online platforms.

Among other noteworthy references, the Oromo Media Network (OMN) (2020) has played a like-minded role for the Oromo community. Operating from abroad, OMN started its operation in March of 2014 as the first Oromo affiliated satellite television station, headquartered in Minnesota, USA, home of the largest Oromo community in the western world. Following the 2018 political reform OMN and most of its journalists returned back to Ethiopia, making Addis Ababa their headquarters (ENA, 2018; Lemke & Endalk, 2016). The station is known for advocating Oromo causes which is officially announced by its executives (Skjerdal & Mulatu, 2021) and indicated in its company profile (OMN, n.d.). Though launched as an activist media outlet abroad, OMN began to claim a more profession-oriented identity. The Oromo activist, Jawar Mohammed, founder and head of OMN until December 2019, gave up his executive role at the station when he joined one of the opposition political parties, the Oromo Federalist Congress. Following the assassination of the popular Oromo singer Hachalu Hundesa on 29 June 2020, the office of the media was searched by the police and some of its journalists were detained (CPJ, 2020). OMN then suspended its production and transmission from Ethiopia. The media has continued its transmission from abroad via social media channels and became accessible through satellite connectivity lately.

Furthermore, Dimtsi Weyane (2021) has been an opposition voice for about four decades until the early 1990s. During its relatively long history, Dimtsi Weyane has taken different roles based on the political journey of the nation and the interest of its owners. Starting as a militant, oppositional radio station, it developed over time into a pro-government media until the 2018 political transition, where Dimtsi Weyane assumed a new role opposing the current regime at national level, advocating the interest of the Tigray community and in particular the political elites who lost power. Currently the Dimtsi Woyane is working as a vocal and official mouthpiece of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) led regional government in its war against the federal government of Ethiopia since November 2020.

Ethnic tension, the state and federalist regionalism

The April 2018 political reform in Ethiopia introduced a new level of liberalization to the Ethiopian media (CPJ, 2019; Tufa & Dejene, 2022). One result standing out, is the emergence and proliferation of ethnic-based media outlets, as discussed above.

The groundwork that paved the way for the budding of ethnic-based media outlets was in fact laid in the early 1990s when the country adopted an ethnic federal form of government (Abbink, 2011). The political history of the land is dominated by monarchical rule until 1974 where a revolution instilled military rule overthrowing the last king of Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Selassie I (reign 1930-1974). This new military regime lasted for nearly two decades (the regime was centralist administratively) until an armed rebel group took power in May 1991 ending a long bloody war between the military government and the rebels. The rebel group introduced a new form of government organizing the country under ethnic federal states based on language. This move among others created federated regional states with claimed autonomy of self-administration which would later include the running of media in the regional languages. Following a series of mass protests, the country again experienced political reform with a leadership change in April 2018.

Following the 2018 political reform and as a clear departure from previous trends, the content and ownership of media establishments became increasingly ethnic based. A higher degree of administrative and editorial independence in the already functional regional media outlets, resulted in a championing of ethnic issues in news reporting (Behailu et al., 2022; Dessie et al., 2022; Skjerdal & Mulatu, 2021). These media establishments have previously been known for working under the control and guidance of the national government organ known as the Ministry of Information (MOI) and later Government Communication Affairs Office (GCAO).

A trend following the April 2018 reform was the emergence of new private media outlets claiming loyalties to respective ethnic communities. Consequently, the post-2018 period can be characterized as a period where we see the mushrooming of media outlets catering to a new mix of ethnic and regional allegiances, added by an increased number of private media initiatives also following ethnic lines and boundaries (Breines, 2020; Kiflu et al., 2022; Skjerdal & Mulatu, 2021). The fact of this post-2018 change ought to be understood in light of the Ethiopian media system and legacy of curbing the freedom of political parties. In Ethiopia it is therefore close to impossible to detect formal relations between political parties and the media other than the ruling party and its media affiliates (Manning, 2010). On top of this there is also a provision in the Ethiopian legal system that bans media ownership by political parties and religious organizations (Broadcasting Services Proclamation No: 533/2007, 2007). The exception is the media outlets that are owned and financed by the ruling party and that are considered pro-government channels – like *Fana Broadcasting Corporation* and *Walata Information Center* (Kiflu et al., 2022; Skjerdal & Mulatu, 2021).

This suggests a more hidden relationship between the media and political parties, affecting the formation of journalism paradigms. Historically, there has also been strong polarization between the government and private media (Skjerdal, 2012). There are not that many studies conducted on this kind of media-politics relations or ‘parallelisms’ in Ethiopia, to refer to a concept central to Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) work on comparative political cultures (Menychle Meseret, 2019; Mesfin, 2019). However, there is ample evidence to document that the Ethiopian media exhibit significant connection between media outlets and political parties (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). In the context of non-western settings such as Ethiopia, “religious, ethnic and regional identities but also clientelistic loyalties play a much more important role” (Voltmer, 2012, p. 229). The fact that media in Africa have biases and partisanship tendencies along lines of political parties, ideologies, but also belongings based on ethnicity, regional and cultural affiliation is also well documented (Nyamnjoh, 2010c). In Ethiopia, indications of partisanship and affiliation of media outlets with political establishments such as government and political parties as well as ethnic groups have been proved by studies (Adamu, 2020; Skjerdal & Mulatu, 2021; Téwodros, 2020; Zerai & Alemu, 2018).

Hallin and Mancini (2004) suggest that political parallelism might be expressed on a systems level of governance and organizational relations, as well as an ideological continuum of left to right, liberal to conservative. When political parallelism is in play, what constitutes parallel lines are ideologies that cling to East vs. West, North vs. South, or Right vs. Left. In the ‘West’, conflicts along ‘right or left’ and ‘liberal or conservative’ lines reflect not only the ideology but a clearly articulated bargaining mechanisms, networks, negotiations or positions (Voltmer, 2012, p. 229). Polarization based on religion and ethnic identity represents a different type of political rivalry, with different dynamics and different outcomes.

Ethnicity as Journalism Paradigm

A shift in journalistic self-perception is an aspect of a quite deep paradigm change and in contemporary Ethiopia also a reminder of the parallels between political and journalistic developments (Hallin & Mancini, 2011). Noted developments of an “ethnification” of Ethiopian journalism (Skjerdal & Mulatu, 2021) corroborates that same parallelism and deep shift. Accordingly, this study investigates that parallel on two levels: 1) The extent to which an application of the concept of “journalism paradigms” elicits contemporary political dynamics in Ethiopia, and 2) whether the notion of shifting journalism paradigms opens for new perspectives on African journalism research beyond Ethiopia.

The idea of journalism paradigms is not new, but neither has it been utilized to its full potential in journalism research. Much like *scientific* paradigms, as discussed by Kuhn (2012), *journalism paradigms* can be said to reflect tacit agreements on relevance, as well as tensions and contradictions inherent to matching factual data with general and theoretical assumptions (Boyd-Barrett et al., 1977; Seymour-Ure, 1974). Chan and Lee (1989) deployed such perspectives on journalism paradigms in times of political transition in their studies of news reporting in the Hong Kong press during the period leading up to the 1997 transfer of the British Crown Colony to mainland China. The argument to use “paradigm” in journalism studies is to include other major influences such as ethnicity that shape journalism culture, production of news and other media products as well as journalism as profession.

Following in this tradition, it is noted that a journalism paradigm bears resemblance to the term “news frame” in its various definitions (Cacciatore et al., 2016; Entman, 1993, 2007, 2008). Often referred back to

original formulations by Goffman (1974), Gamson et al. (1992), Jameson (1976) and numerous others have deployed the idea of news framing as a means of understanding both news selection and the value systems behind them. However, by following Kuhn (2012) a step further, the idea of journalism paradigm contention also addresses the *competition or tension aspect between competing frames*. When paradigms cease to explain what they purport to explain, alternative ways of explanation emerges, reflecting other ways of interpreting facts and rendering a story. According to Kuhn, 'normal' science explanation gives in to 'revolutionary' explanation, shifting the focus, and after time becoming the 'new normal'. Empirical realities confounding the previous explanatory framework now find its 'normal' place. There is a clear relevance of this sort of thinking to understanding news and conflict reporting in contemporary Ethiopia where regional and federalist governance is challenged by ethnic identities running deep and with potential to escalate tensions. As such, journalistic knowledge, much like scientific knowledge, grows through revision and 'agonism' (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006; Mouffe, 2005).

Thinking in terms of journalism paradigms from a Kuhn-inspired perspective adds the dimension that journalism paradigms change and realign based on both manifest and latent understandings, tacit assumptions, observations of 'goodness of fit' as well as hegemonic competition amongst alternative explanations. This holds true both in terms of paradigmatic dimensions in news content and stories, as well as in scholarly approaches toward the study of them. In times when the explanatory contradictions are too obvious to ignore, paradigms come under pressure and subsequently give way to *new and more competitive understandings*. Such is clearly the case in contemporary journalism practice and research in Ethiopia. Understanding the 'ethnification' of Ethiopian news in this perspective clears the ground for an understanding in which the 'ethnic' can be understood in terms of hegemony-competitive processes of vying for position and power, more generally. It would allow for an understanding also of the latent, underlying and not the least the un-articulated 'scripts' of ethnicity understood as an aspect of 'discourses' (Ogbebor, 2020; Wodak, 1989).

Methodology and Data Analysis

The analysis below centres on both structural and narrative conditions of the post-2018 Ethiopian case. In order to create such a context, the data gathered for this study reflects on the one hand contemporary African media research publications, as well as media reports, speeches and public announcements by Ethiopian political stakeholders. A thorough analysis of these documents provides the foundation for this paper whereas interviews provide particular information needed to document pivotal moments.

In addition to this, observation of media outlets trying to disregard whole or certain parts of a news event to tarnish the image of the other perceived enemy ethnic group or positively portray the image of the ethnic group they associate with has been made during the time of research to provide overall background information on the situation.

The study starts with a discussion of ethnicity and freedom of expression that triggered or undermined journalism practice in Ethiopia amid continuous political change. This is done based on an examination of media practice in Ethiopia through a review of media contents, legislations and reflection from practicing journalists.

In addition to this, observation of media outlets trying to disregard whole or certain parts of a news event to tarnish the image of the other perceived enemy ethnic group or positively portray the image of the ethnic group they associate with has been made during the time of research. Two of the three media firms discussed here, *ASRAT* and *OMN*, are run through fundraising targeting local audiences and diasporas of ethnic relevance. The third-*Dimtsi Woyane* on the other hand is financed and run by the Tigray regional government (Lemke & Endalk, 2016; Skjerdal & Mulatu, 2021). These are but some indicators that might be factored into what is clearly an aspect of ethnic interests shaping journalistic paradigms both in terms of content and in terms of social relations. The article then proceeds to the notion of journalism paradigms by relating to current journalism practices that are characterized by political and ethnic partisanship.

The data in this article are partly supplemented by semi-structured interviews which have been planned during 2021 and executed in an online setting through one-to-one online interviews. Recruiting participants has been a challenge because of the ongoing intimidation and jailing of journalists and an ongoing ethnic conflict in Ethiopia which affects journalists' routines and trust in researchers. This challenge was addressed

using established contacts from the researcher's prior experience as a journalist. This led to a sample selection which employed "snowball effect" sampling where identification of one journalist enables to enter the network of journalists further by invitation. Thus, there is trust employed in both researcher and journalist in the context of provision of information. The interviews were conducted during a period of pandemic restrictions which added challenges in data collection and provided a difficult context for interviewees. Seven reporters and editors from private and government media outlets as well as an international correspondent based in Ethiopia were interviewed. Only two of the participants are female.

Table 1. Profile of interviewees

Position	Employment	Ownership	Gender
Reporter	Government	Public media/government	Male
Reporter	Private	private	Female
Editor	Private/owner	private	Female
Editor	Private	private	Male
Editor	Government	Commercial/government	Male
Editor	Government	Public media/government	Male
International correspond.	Freelancer	International	Male

Analysis Strategy

Our analysis centers on both structural and narrative conditions of the post-2018 Ethiopian case. The 'structural' refers to the political economy of Ethiopian news journalism, reflecting material conditions and vested interests which is found in policy and academic research distillation throughout years of research on Ethiopia. At the same time, narrative analysis is conducted in interviews with editors and journalists to look at their perception of reality in pivotal moments in media history of Ethiopia in political transition which manifests itself as 'journalistic paradigm'. 'Narrative' is referred to as the content of news as well as the storytelling, frames, angles, emphasis, and de-emphasis. These concepts were discussed with interviewees in the framework of their work vis-à-vis political developments in both political landscape and effects on the media environment.

FINDINGS

Frames, Narratives, and Journalism Paradigms

In Ethiopia the last three decades have witnessed the rise and consolidation of political parties with strong ethnic grounds. The addition and consolidation of ethnic-based media outlets in the public discourse after 2018 implies on the one hand a convergence or divergence of the ideologies of political and ethnic group agendas with the evolving media outlets. On the other hand, it also suggests that in times of institutional vacuum and uncertainty, more deeply entrenched belief systems 'territorialize' and 'expand', acquire urgency, re-define political doctrines.

Therefore, identifying the main ideological divisions among political parties and the media's handling of these issues would suggest a deeper concern with discourses of ethnicity. As can be seen from recent cases, there are practices of **omission of /silence** about newsworthy stories by certain channels if the story has a negative implication to the ethnic community they identify with or if it has positive portrayals of an opposing ethnic group. Media outlets try to disregard whole or certain parts of a news event to tarnish the image of the other perceived enemy ethnic group or positively portray the image of the ethnic group they associate with. An editor-in-chief of a weekly newspaper which has been in circulation for the last 21 years admits that since 2018 situations are forcing the media to think more in terms of ethnic lines when assigning reporter for getting access to sources and resources:

"Previously it was all about thinking who among my reporters has a good command of a certain local language and reporting competence to talk to informants for working on a story in a certain region. Now I have to think and check how a reporter's first and last name sounds before sending him/her to a certain region. We have cases where our journalists have been detained and harassed by security personnel labelling them as spies upon checking their names. The reasons were because their names indicate an ethnic group labelled as 'enemy'. There is high degree of

fragmentation in this country which is directly affecting our job as journalists.” (Editor-in-Chief, interview, November 2021)

A reporter working for a private radio station remembers being picked up by security forces among a pool of journalists on location for not speaking the language in that area.

“I was there assigned to report on an event and suddenly they started checking our identity cards. Looking at the details on the card he asked me whether I speak the language. I said no and he asked me to leave immediately, or he will consider me as having another mission than reporting in his region.” (Reporter, interview, September 2021)

Furthermore, there have for instance been series of killings and displacements of ethnic *Amharas* living out of their regions especially in the Oromia regional state. Overall, the Amhara affiliated media give voices to the victims of violence in the Oromia regional state (Examples - Amhara TV, Menelik TV and Ashara Media). Victims with Amhara ethnic background being interviewed and taken as reliable sources by these media outlets have been seen. On the other hand, the Oromo affiliated media use the voices of officials and their press statements – not the victims’ voices – when reporting about the violence in their region against the Amharas (Examples- OBN, OMN, Kello Media). Our paradigm analysis also detects a system of deviating or slanting when the Oromo affiliated media ignore the victims’ voices and only use statements by officials of the regional state that blame a splinter group for the atrocities. More generally this falls under ‘symbolic annihilation’, as the means by which cultural production and the popular media represent a particular group (Klein & Shiffman, 2006).

In connection with this issue, there have been consecutive days of demonstrations in the Amhara region and abroad by the *Amhara* diaspora (late April 2021) protesting the killings of the ethnic *Amharas*. This was reported by the Amhara affiliated media as prime-time news including live transmissions with extended coverage on interview shows. Media belonging to the non-Amhara ethnic communities paid no or less attention to it. Some channels (such as *Kello* Media and *OMN*) featured stories referring to a placard carried by the protesters during the demonstrations that reads - ኢሮሙማ ደው-ደም- which literally means “Down with *Oromummaa*¹ “. While keeping silent on the motive of the demonstration, these media channels blamed the message and the carriers of the placard as sources of future conflicts. In their stories they did not reveal what has happened in their regional state against the Amharas.

Another case is the violence in the North *Shoa* zone of the Amhara regional state: This is a clash that took place in March and April of 2021 between the *Amhara* and the *Oromo* communities living in the special Oromia zone which then took the lives of 300 people. When we look at the first phase of the conflict in March that has seen more Oromo casualties than the *Amharas*, Oromia affiliated channels reported the event as an aggression by the security forces of the Amhara Regional state against the *Oromos* in the Amhara regional state within their designated special administrative zone. While the Oromo affiliated media outlets² report it as an aggression and even a genocide by the Amhara region’s security forces, the ones with Amhara affiliation reported it just as a conflict between the members of the two ethnic groups. During the second phase of the clashes there were more ethnic Amharas who were killed and displaced. Here again we see the Amhara affiliated outlets focusing on the issue while the Oromo ones downplay it. Some of the Amhara affiliated media were very bold and specific by portraying it as an attack orchestrated by the Oromia regional state.

A *third case* is the investigative report of 17 February 2021 by *Wazema* Radio uncovering the Ministry of Defense’s decision to move all its financial dealings to the Oromia Cooperative Bank leaving its age-old client Commercial Bank of Ethiopia (CBE). The CBE is a federal state-owned financial institution which is believed to have no ethnic affiliation. *Wazema* is an online radio run by exile journalists since 2014 (so far no declared ethnic allegiance) and now on air on an FM station inside Ethiopia following the 2018 political reform. The

¹ The term ‘*Oromummaa*’ is defined differently by various scholars of Oromo history and culture. This excerpt from one of the sources puts it as “having a basic form of *Oromummaa* means to manifest *Oromoness* by practicing some aspects of Oromo culture, language, belief systems, values, norms, customs, and traditions.” (Jalata, 2007)

² There is a difference within the media belonging to the Oromo ethnic group. Some of them such as the OBN which is owned by the regional government reported it as an attack by the Amharas against the minority Oromos. On the other hand, outlets such as the *OMN* and *Kello Media* refer to it as an act of ethnic cleansing by the Amhara regional state.

point here is not the news of the shifting of the bank but on how the other media outlets took up the issue. It needs to be noted here that higher ranking officials of the ministry of defense including the prime minister who is the commander-in-chief of the army belong to the Oromo ethnic group. Hence the non-Oromo affiliated channels were fast enough to take up the issue and air while the ones with Oromo affiliations kept silent about it until the Ministry of Defense came out with a statement denying the news report³.

Fourth, the war in Tigray: The war between the Ethiopian federal government and the regional state of Tigray broke out in November 2020. Regarding media coverage, those under the ownership of the central government, including the regional media outlets, were reporting from the perspective of the federal government calling it a mission for the prevalence of rule of law in the region. The ones owned by the Tigray regional state and those media houses inclining to the Tigray ethnic group were covering it as an invasion (Abbink, 2021). It is understandable that each side is trying to portray the opposing group negatively in this situation of conventional war. One is portraying it using a 'war justification frame' while the other is giving the stories a 'humanitarian frame.'

The inauguration of the new headquarters of the Information Network Security Agency built at a cost of 2.1 billion Ethiopian Birr by the prime minister can be referred as another showcase (FBC, 2021). Amhara affiliated media outlets reported the event as a paradox mentioning that the government is not acting on the death of Amharas in the preceding weeks but inaugurates a building for a security apparatus that is not preventing the purge of an ethnic group. Oromo affiliated media on the other hand did not mention the death of the Amharas while covering the inauguration. OBN in particular gave the inauguration of the buildings a wider and live coverage.

Paradigms in Transition – Journalism and Journalism Research

African media research reflects on the one hand common theories, concepts and methodological approaches that are found also in the journalism research literature world-wide. On the other hand, the same literature embodies attempts at originating a distinctly 'African perspective' (Benson, 2015; Curran & Sparks, 1991; Waisbord, 2015). As concerns journalism research centring on Ethiopia, 'transition' might be a key issue. In situations with emergent democracy-building stalled by more authoritarian political traditions, one would want to explore variations in media theories and concepts capable of looking beyond dichotomies like free/not free or democracy/not democracy. The current political drama unfolding in Ethiopia would seem to suggest that rather than speaking of transition, one might observe a past repeating itself.

What happened in the early 1990s was the collapse of a military regime and the advancement of rebel groups that are united under the name Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) to the political leadership (Arban, 2019). This period began with the design and ratification of the constitution of the land, which to this date became a source of controversy among the political elites. The constitution allows political parties to be formed along ethnic lines and advocates ethnicized federal regional states. Some consider it as the source of conflict and political havoc (Milkiyas & Metaferia, 2005; Taye, 2017), while others hail it as a cornerstone for the unprecedented respect of the rights of the various ethnic communities in the country (Agegnehu & Dibu, 2015; Alene & Worku, 2017; Beken, 2012, 2015; Yohannes, 2017).

A freelance journalist who formerly worked as a wire service journalist for 15 years says he observes a huge difference between the polarization of media during the pre and post 2018 period. According to this journalist the former polarization used to be anchored by the private media institutions or government-owned outlets. Now he says the journalists working in the mainstream media which are supposed to be thinking along professional practices feel that they are there as individuals to defend the interest of their ethnic bases.

I know of a case where two broadcast editors working for one station fighting over the lining up of stories. In front of a group of journalists, they were justifying priority based on non-journalistic measurements. This is a national broadcaster and supposed to be guided by at least non-ethnic dimensions. What I understood that time was that these individuals were innocently convinced that they were there to work for the benefit of their ethnic bases like parliamentarians are doing in the

³ Source: <https://borkena.com/2021/02/19/ethiopian-defense-force-vows-to-take-wazema-radio-to-court-over-false-report/>

House of Peoples Representatives or the political parties all of which are ethnic based. This is an obvious reflection of what is going on in the political sector (Freelance editor, interview, October 2021).

There is evidence locating these historical counterpoints as the root of regional ethnic conflicts that began just two years into the start of the new leadership. Based on a historical assessment of the media (Meseret, 2013; Pausewang et al., 2002; Zewde & Pausewang, 2002), we learn that periods of transition are characterized by liberalization of media and speech only to be followed by restrictive measures that affect the independence, diversity and plurality of the media for the entire tenure of the new regime until another round of political reform comes. During the heydays of the ethnic-based media channels, there were numerous instances where higher government officials, opposition politicians and civic organization leaders blamed the media for stirring the various conflicts, for spreading messages of hatred and reprisal among audiences (ENA, 2019; Ethio News, 2019; Oluka, 2021).

An executive producer of an online media platform with over 85,000 subscribers and 2.5 million current viewer status describes the current media situation as a 'scary one' as a journalist. She admits the fact that there has never been a long period of genuine media freedom in Ethiopia's media history following political changes but says recent developments have made journalists targets of abuse from various actors.

Before the leadership change of 2018 we [journalists] were desperately looking for a miracle to defend us from the abuse of the government. Now we are facing scores of abuses from groups and individuals who are claiming to be defenders of certain ethnic and regional interests. And the role of the government is to pretend as if nothing is happening. The government is busy telling the world that there is freedom of the press while deliberately handing over its traditional job of intimidation to these non-state actors (Executive producer, interview, August 2021).

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to answer two questions: 1) The extent to which the idea of journalism paradigm construction and reconstruction are relevant to the study of contemporary Ethiopian political transitions, and 2) whether it adds anything significant to African journalism research approaches. It was noted how such paradigm analysis adds a particular element to news framing and news frame analysis through a key insight from Kuhn: The interplay of the 'normal' or 'routine' with the realities of disruption or what Kuhn would label 'revolutionary'. As in science paradigms, journalism paradigms exist in patterns of tension and claim to both relevance and explanatory power. They also exist within structural boundaries, in so far as journalism is an organized social institution.

When established ways of explaining phenomena no longer are viable, alternatives emerge. When censorship is lifted or takes on new forms, globalized communications technologies now also offer new means of allegiance-building where diasporas can interact more directly in respective home regions and ethnic eco systems.

In the context of Ethiopia and in a wider African context terms such as 'state', 'party' and 'government' have different functions and meanings from what they do in 'the West'.

Factors particular to Ethiopia, such as the impact of the federalist regionalism mode of government, could be further analyzed as a key feature in this tension and contention of paradigms. Addressing the tensions and transitions between competing journalism paradigms not only opens new ways of appraising political change in Ethiopia and interlinks or parallels in the country's media ecosystem. It also serves to document how the structural aspect of journalism paradigm changes and tension is reflected in the narrative aspects of what is being reported. The underlying political dynamic of ethnic tension is not something running parallel to contemporary political organization so much as running prior to it, latent and with unpredictable disruptive power.

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