



Wazema Radio

Mapping the Ethiopian Media



Wazema Radio

Wazema Radio is an online radio founded by exiled Ethiopian journalists in 2014. The administrative and editorial sections of Wazema are based in Sweden and the United States.

Editorial team members and contributors are in Ethiopia and across East Africa, Europe and North America. Our major radio programs are in Amharic and Afaan Oromoo, the two widely spoken languages in Ethiopia. The Briefing Papers, however, are in English.

Mapping the Ethiopian Media

This Briefing Paper/Report is part of our effort to explore, understand and invite informed discussions on the current status of the Ethiopian media landscape. The media in Ethiopia is shaped by years of government repression, lack of support and changing regional and global environment. A sober and strategic dialogue is needed to strengthen the media despite the challenges. We hope this briefing, with all its limitations, will provoke discussion and inspire further investigation. A follow-up report that profiles media houses in Ethiopia will be available in the future.

Mapping the Ethiopian Media, May 2018 Wazema Radio

We thank all who supported our work all along.

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Introduction

For the ruling party, it can be an enemy of the state; for the public, a trove of information; and for journalists, a livelihood. The Ethiopian press is both depended on and much maligned.

As it is understudied, defining the Ethiopian private media is tricky. Some research portrays it as unprofessional, non-institutionalized, unethical, and full of tabloid-style content. Others see it as a gutsy survivor. But both outlooks lack the insider view, and hopefully this study will fill that gap.

There are no official databases documenting the media environment as Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA), the regulator, rarely updates its statistics. Therefore, mapping the contemporary independent print media is a key task of this project.

Arguably, no country has had journalists flee like Ethiopia. In the last two decades, hundreds left, and their absence led to empty newsstands. A dozen years ago, 400 publications used to circulate, but that number has shrunk significantly.

Some journalists who were brave enough to remain in the country have endured years of torment because of their resistance. A few turned into activist-journalists, others decided to join opposition parties and ended up as politicians. Due to a hostile environment, the contemporary press is cautious and enervated.

The ongoing collapse of the print media is the most worrying trend in almost three decades of history of the press. This research is an initial attempt to map the debris of the Ethiopian media.

Background

Since the overthrow of a military socialist regime in 1991, the private media in Ethiopia has had a volatile and precarious existence. This has increasingly been due to the authorities' heavy-handed approach.

For a little more than a decade, the press flourished and no subject was off-limits. The urban population grabbed the opportunity to quench its thirst for uncensored information of all kinds after a 17-year hiatus under the Derg military regime. There were even some pornographic magazines published that were shut down after outcry from a socially conservative society.

But that trend sharply deteriorated following a controversial election in May 2005. The government blamed journalists for colluding with the opposition and “anti-peace forces”. Many wound up in prison or fled the country and the most vibrant newspapers ceased to publish.

The government then made a bleak situation worse through the enactment of a draconian anti-terrorism proclamation. Despite international condemnation, the government has not hesitated to deploy it to stifle popular publications.

Some roles of the media are to hold elected officials accountable, ensure elections are free, fair and frequent, and give citizens access to alternative sources of information. For these things to take root, the journalist has to be free to gather information wherever it is available. Citizens then should be provided easy access to the media to help them make an informed decision.

Unfortunately, even though Ethiopia is Africa's second-most populous nation with over 100 million people, most of whom are young adults, there are now only a few weekly Amharic and English language newspapers and magazines. None of them are daily, or broadsheet, and they are full of opinion pieces; partly because they struggle to access news material.

The newspapers are only 16 to 24 pages, their reach is limited to the capital, Addis Ababa, while a handful of major cities receive them a couple of days after publication. The number of copies distributed each week is also low. The only biweekly, Ethiopian Reporter, has a maximum circulation of 10,000. Newspaper prices are also discouraging for the majority of the population. Addis Admass, for instance, costs 10 Ethiopian birr (\$0.35). Instead of buying, most people rent them for a few minutes. At Arat Kilo, a popular downtown area, it is common to see people huddled with their faces buried under their newspapers, while others, who cannot afford even the rental fee, try and sneak a look at the headlines.

Executive Summary

The private press has been struggling to survive and the road ahead is full of challenges.

One of the tactics the government uses to weaken the press is to starve them of crucial income by discouraging government agencies from advertising. Some businesses are also afraid to advertise in media perceived as critical of the government, and have been threatened by intelligence operatives for doing so.

At state-owned Berhanena Selam, the largest and oldest printing press, and the only one that is able to do quality printing, publishers face many obstacles. These include censorship, printing delays, and pages in the wrong order. If an overly sensitive piece of news slips through, the entire edition has on occasions been confiscated, as happened to the defunct Addis Neger.

There are also some private printing houses but their quality and reliability is inadequate. Content will be censored here as well and, if something controversial is published, the owner could be in trouble. Some of them also give unrealistic schedules such as asking for the newspaper to be ready for printing on Tuesday for publication on Saturday.

On top of the printing problems, some papers operate with limited staff members to the extent that they are jokily referred to as a “one-man show”.

The other challenge comes from the public. Some people are not interested in reading the surviving publications because they consider them cowed by the government. They are viewed as merely trying to stay afloat, cautiously watching which way the wind blows, and avoiding being critical on important political issues, while increasingly focusing on entertainment.

Government communication officials are reluctant to provide information to the private press that could be controversial and instead rely on government channels and some government-affiliated media. Some people also do not trust the private media. They say they fabricate stories, publish rumors, use too many anonymous sources, and sensationalize issues. Some are even derided for scavenging articles from Facebook without checking their veracity.

In some respects, political polarization is matched in the media: government outlets try to depict the country as heavenly, and parts of the private press strive to show it as hellish. Diaspora-based media are unabashedly apocalyptic and avoid any positive coverage.

Radio and television licenses are only issued to individuals and groups that are trusted by the government. Radio is highly regarded by the government due to its reach in rural areas where around four-fifths of the population lives. Meanwhile in cities and towns, the emergence of satellite dishes has dramatically reduced residents’ reliance on radio and the state-owned Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC).

Even though there are one or two famous stands, like the one in Arat Kilo, most newspaper sales are done through sellers on the street, or when they go into cafes, restaurants, bars and markets. Some including the English language newspaper are sold in supermarkets and hotels. The distributors have been known to boycott a newspaper if it is seen as favoring the government. Unsold newspapers are returned to the publishers.

In recent years, the government has blocked online media that criticize its agenda. From time to time, Ethio Telecom has disregarded the fact that the Internet is an important part of daily life by shutting it down

altogether. As we composed this concept paper, the government surprised the satellite media owners, which are considered to be free from government control, by requesting that they reregister their licenses with EBA.

It is arguable that these measures have derailed Ethiopia's democratization process. The recent unrest is symptomatic of public frustration. The way forward should be for all concerned parties to work together to regain the public's trust. Freeing the press is a fundamental first step.

The harassment of journalists over the last decade was a signpost for today's Ethiopia. Once resilient and robust, the print media is fading. Currently, not more than three Amharic newspapers hit the newsstand every week, with not a single daily. Their aggregate weekly circulation is only 22,000-35,000.

The Ethiopian Media Council and journalists' association have turned into phantom organizations. Some research shows that more practicing Ethiopia-focused journalists live outside of the country than at home.

So, what went wrong?

Objectives

The study focuses on three core areas:

- Profiling the existing press
- Tracking defunct and exiled media
- Assessing the media landscape

Methodology

For the purpose of this survey, secondary data was used. Official data from the EBA is compared with data from the media. Desk research was conducted to understand the trends and peculiarities of the private media.

One-on-one discussions with media owners, EBA officials and visits to newsrooms were undertaken to enrich the qualitative account. Content was reviewed to understand and support the primary data.

A five-page questionnaire was dispatched to 10 magazines and six newspapers, which is close to the total number of independent print media functioning in the country. Only Addis Fortune, Capital, Weyeyet and Medical, did not respond,

This research has excluded regional periodicals for logistical reasons. However, the researcher reviewed two independent Tigrigna periodicals, Weraina and Sergen, talked to their editors, and a summary is included.

Mapping the Media

The Death of Newspapers

At the advent of the new media, the demise of newspaper was predicted by scholars. Contrary to these predictions, in some parts of the world where the press is nascent and democracy young, the traditional media is not only surviving, but thriving. In those places, new media has complemented traditional media.

But in Ethiopia, online news has not pushed the traditional media aside. Instead, it is slowly fading away by itself. Internally, it suffers from a lack of professionalism, vision, and financial stability. Externally, a semi-authoritarian government that is averse to critical coverage is suffocating the few outlets that still exist. This is true for independent voices on most platforms.

The early years of this government were the heyday of the Ethiopian press with countless political, entertainment, and religious newspapers and magazines published in various languages. In 2006, the Population Media Center said that 430 newspapers and 130 magazines were on the market from 1993 to 2005. But once the government started to see them as a political threat, they were quickly almost entirely eliminated. The number has shrunk to six private newspapers (three Amharic and three English) and a little over 10 magazines.

Some of the magazines were founded and run by people with no journalism experience. Seasoned professionals only came onto the scene when it was too late. By then, the public was too exposed to publications that were mostly filled with prejudice, exaggeration, and gossip, so it was challenging for more objective media to penetrate the market. When they attempted to be balanced in their reporting they were branded as “Woyane Press”, which is a colloquial term for the TPLF, and shunned by the public. Meanwhile, the government treated critical media almost as enemies of the state.

A visit to a newsstand in Addis Ababa will shock anyone who cares for freedom of expression. There are no publications on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, while Wednesday is the lucky day of the week as it showcases The Reporter and Sendek newspapers, which have a combined print-run of a little over 5,000. Saturday brings Addis Admas and the English version of The Reporter with a few more fringe entertainment-focused magazines. The two popular English newspapers Fortune and Capital come out every Sunday, along with the Amharic Reporter.

There is something of a dilemma for remaining media with a small readership: if they publish critical content to regain readers and public trust, they may arouse official anger. Often, therefore, they resort to filling their skimpy pages with government and business news, entertainment, and opinion pieces from prominent Diaspora figures. Addis Admass is an example of a newspaper that has softened its content in this way over time.

While some outlets are adapting to digital media, most still target an audience that is more comfortable reading a physical newspaper. Some magazines do not even have a decent webpage as they do not think it is worth the investment, or say they do not have the technical expertise. Our survey responses indicated the idea of making money through online subscriptions is an outlandish idea to magazine owners. A few irregularly put content on their Facebook page long after the print copies are released, although some use a personal rather than a company profile.

Unusually, half of the magazines publish content bootlegged from online media and sell it to the offline audience. Publishers confessed that they republish controversial digital content without the authors' consent. The reason given is that developing original content is expensive.

The exception to this is Addis Fortune, which is the only newspaper with an e-subscription model in Ethiopia. It is also the only English newspaper that has developed an Android app for readers. A few others like Sendek and both versions of The Reporter make all their content accessible through their websites, including PDF versions of the newspapers.

Those offline see an online presence as unnecessary. Others say they do not want to waste limited financial resources on developing webpages that won't generate revenue, while they are disinclined to invest as they expect to lose their publishing licenses soon.

The lack of alternative printing press is another headache. Delays at printing presses reduce their chance of getting regular advertisers, who then complain when tenders and recruitment advertisements are published late. In the last two years, Sunday newspapers routinely were not published on that day. Berhanena Selam frequently offers excuses for the delays, such as printing machine maintenance.

With regard to entertainment-focused magazines, advertisers shun them for being suspicious of their contents and their sustainability. Due to staff shortages, and to supplement their meagre salaries, journalists and editors in some organizations dedicate some of their time for typing, looking for advertisers, taking photos, assisting with the design and other extra jobs.

With the exception of a couple of newspapers, almost all private print media make small profits.

Contributors for magazines and newspapers are often underpaid. A regular contributor to the weekly Addis Admass said that he earns 350 birr (\$12) per article:

"Sometimes if less advertisers show up, I could be told that there is no money at all. That often makes me very angry. On such moments, I always promise to myself to stop contributing. But then I resume. I don't know why. Where else can I go? What else can I do? I love writing."

Many magazines do not try and adhere to high standards of journalism ethics and professionalism. Most of them are produced by two or three people with perhaps double the marketing staff. This results in a last-minute rush to fill pages, often with news, opinion, and rumors translated from the web.

Most of the magazines go to underground printing press in search of the lowest price. But these presses have no capacity to deliver on time. To publish a 32-page black and white, full color cover magazine, 3 to 6 days is demanded. By the time the magazines are out on the market, the reader will get nothing but stale news and analysis they could have read a week ago online.

The print press in general does not muster the energy, time, or money to travel outside of Addis Ababa to report from the scene of events.

They might do it during elections, though, and big meetings if there are per diems available. Sometimes they will take the reports of the international media and publish them without attribution.

In most newsrooms, there are no formal office hours Writing is done elsewhere, in some cases with the help of the simulant, khat, and is compiled at the office only at the eleventh hour. With a few exceptions, most of

the press practice armchair journalism. They might quote the international media for a story that happened a mile away from their office.

With no definitive vision, they are published more to fund the owner's lifestyle. Some dishonorable fashion magazines go to the extent of enticing models through the promise of appearing on the cover. Other editors and journalists enjoy attending embassy cocktail parties, but, rather than networking, their main aim seems to be getting the attention of senior embassy staff in order to try and secure their visas

A fashion-lifestyle magazine editor confessed his editorial team gives positive coverage to potential advertisers like hotel resorts, beer factories, newly released movies, or to private banks for strategic reasons. After the free advertorial, they send the marketing team, sometimes comprising of journalists or even the editor-in-chief, to talk to targeted business. In some cases, executives fall into the trap and say that, as they were very happy about the coverage, they will take a three-month advertisement contract.

Magazines of this sort sometimes might even desperately put a mini corner ad of their personal barber for a free haircut. If a monthly magazine failed to bring in enough advertisers in time, it may temporarily suspend its publication and could not get back to the market until the expected numbers of advertisements are secured.

On the other hand, the few magazines affiliated with the government publish stories that make their bosses happy. In return, they obtain direct or indirect support through formal advertisements or illicit payments. They are allegedly funded by government development organizations, security agencies, or wealthy people who support the government. But because they are not read by the general public, they eventually find it hard to survive. And once the readership spots them as partisan, they may suffer a boycott.

A reporter from Ethio-Channel, a defunct partisan newspaper, confessed that there were times where sellers refused to carry the newspaper. A monthly magazine started with generous funding from the Metals and Engineering Corporation suffered the same fate two years ago.

The role of the 12 government-run journalism schools throughout the country is minimal in terms of producing efficient journalists who are equipped with the requisite skills. Some question their importance given the current relative absence of press freedom and the limited number of media houses.

The Ministry of Education lobbies the colleges to teach students developmental journalism concepts instead of the principles of liberal journalism. Thousands of students graduate from these schools every year. The trend is that the Government Communication Affairs Office selects students who graduate with distinction and offer them political indoctrination sessions for at least once a month. Many from journalism schools therefore end up as government communication officials who serve a public relations rather than journalism function.

Homogenous Radio and Apolitical Television

Ethiopians were denied more than a single state television broadcaster for over five decades. Broadcast media has been under the tighter grip of the government until recently. When the government finally decided to loosen its grip, it invited political allies first, even though 40 companies applied for licenses. Even among those they trusted, they licensed only a few closely vetted groups and individuals known for their compliance and affiliation to the ruling party.

Up until October 2016, nine TV companies which echoed the state propaganda machine, but with regional name and representation, have been in operation. Since, EBA has licensed three others: Fana Broadcasting, Walta Information Center, and Dimtse Weyane. Companies affiliated with EPRDF parties own all three. Local news on the state and pro-government media is full of developmental stories about the progress of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam or road and housing projects.

There are also dozens of community radios and regional FM stations up and running. But their number by no means guarantees a diversity of voices. There are also TV stations with second-country license, like Kana, Noah, JTV, LTV, Ethiopian Broadcasting Service (EBS), and Ethiopian News Network (ENN). But they do not discuss politics and, if they did, the government might close their representative office in the Addis, and revoke their agents' licenses.

Since illiteracy is still common, radio is as key source of information for people both in cities and rural areas. It's partly for this reason that the print press enjoys more freedom than radio.

The availability of mobile phones with FM receivers has dramatically increased listenership and therefore government concern. One of the most popular radio stations is the privately owned Sheger FM, which is also broadcast online.

However, there is not much political news, so many Ethiopians still tune their shortwaves into international stations like the Voice of America's Amharic, Affan Oromo and Tigrigna services; and the Deutsche Welle Amharic service from Bonn. The new entrant is BBC radio in the three languages mentioned above.

FM radio

The spread of commercial FM radios is commendable for a society that was limited to one national radio station for decades. In the past 10 years, 43 community radio stations have been launched. Universities such as Jimma use them for health and educational purposes. Mekelle University was also granted a license from EBA recently. Ethiopian Civil Service University, Addis Ababa University, Haramaya and Hawasa Universities also run community radios.

Commercial stations are concentrated in Addis Ababa. While three of them are government-owned, the rest are private. But they either are affiliated to the EPRDF like Zami or avoid politics like Sheger.

While the stations focus on music and entertainment, they do raise social and economic issues and hold public phone-ins, but politics is out of their reach. This leads to homogeneity of content that makes it feel like there is only one station on multiple frequencies.

There are exceptions, though. In the past two years, during the unrest in Oromia region, Zami and Abay stations air bold and unprecedented discussions. Other positive examples were Zami FM's Yegazetegnoch Kib Terepeza, Abay FM's phone-in and Sheger FM's Sheger Cafe.

Private Television

After being stuck for decades with ETV, later rebranded EBC, when satellite channels arrived, many viewers flocked to them.

EBC responded by adding two channels, and started showing more sports and entertainment programs, but those who could afford satellite receivers never looked back.

It was then that the government started issuing private TV licenses. Many saw the move as repackaging developmental propaganda through freshly branded shows on channels controlled by political loyalists. Like the radio stations, the new channels largely avoid political discussions, or align with the official view.

A lack of research on audiences makes analysis difficult. But it is possible to say that the most-watched private television stations is Kana, which shows foreign soap operas after dubbing them into the local language. The station has no Ethiopian license, but runs content anyway through satellites. The second most popular is probably EBS, which has an assortment of entertainment programs.

The private TV and Radio stations prefer entertainment over politics or socio-economic issues. Their coverage of sports of all kinds, especially English and Ethiopian football, is particularly excessive.

Many people still watch EBC's primetime evening news program for important local information, although most coverage is similar to a government public relations service.

The regional broadcasters, which either lease from EBC or own their own channels, are similar. But they offer only a slight variation in terms of format and content.

Recently, though, Amhara and Oromia regional broadcasters deviated from this norm by including critical coverage. This is very unlikely to have been approved by the central government and was seen as part of the political power game between the four parties of the EPRDF coalition.

During disturbances in Amhara, the most senior cleric of the Orthodox Church in the region was on the Amhara public broadcaster admonishing authorities for aggression against demonstrators. Another example is that when Oromo opposition leader, Bekele Gerba, was released from prison, he delivered a speech to a packed stadium in Adama city in Oromia, the regional state television, Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN), provided coverage. OBN has been seen as particularly independent in recent years, which is in line with the relatively high level of resistance to the federal government displayed by the Oromo people.

In the same unprecedented manner, when a famous Oromo singer, Hachalu Hundessa, was performing his politically charged songs in front of thousands at the Millennium Hall in the capital, OBN broadcast it live. These exceptions indicate that Ethiopia is at a critical juncture where competing voices may in the future be represented by a more diverse public media.

State media journalists have little freedom and practice considerable self-censorship. A case in point is Biruk Endale who was forced to resign following a controversial interview with pop star, Tewodros Kassahun, who is known as Teddy Afro. When EBC produced a program about the dissident musician, the scheduled broadcast was cancelled due to political sensitivities. When he got another media job, the new companies had to dismiss him after alleged threats from officials.

Such restrictions get tighter in Tigray where regional state television and radio programs are a different story. In the first place, they are tightly controlled by the regional party, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Almost all journalists are members of the party, or pledge their allegiance to it. Entertainment programs show guns and tanks and frequently remind people about the 17-year struggle to oust the military Derg regime, even though that victory was almost three decades ago.

Journalists in the region have not been allowed to air content about a lack of good governance, or water shortages. However, even in Tigray, this is changing. Now, journalists can air the people's voices as long as they balance their content with a government response.

Satellite television stations can be classified into three groups: those granted licenses by the government, such as Fana Broadcasting Corporate; entertainment-focused outlets like Kana that are licensed outside the country; and opposition media channels that broadcast from Europe and U.S.. The latter are mostly affiliated with exiled political parties that the government tags as terrorist organizations. Their content is overtly political and their end goal is regime change.

The main ones are Oromia Media Network (OMN) and Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and the government frequently tries to jam their broadcasts. During the current and previous State of Emergency, the government outlawed watching these stations.

For the second group, a new regulation is about to be introduced that will force companies to get licensed locally. But it will be difficult for them to register locally since their shareholders are foreigners and the sector bans foreign ownership.

A senior EBA official said the ruling party is concerned about the flourishing satellite media that is not under state control. He vehemently opposed the existence of these "unlawful" stations and accused them of intruding on the "information sovereignty" of the state.

EBA has started discussions with legislators on how to streamline regulation of satellite television. Until then, "fruitful and willful discussions" are underway with owners of satellite TV station who secured their license from a second country, according to an EBA official.

The government, in collaboration with the country's Information Network Security Agency (INSA) and Metals and Engineering Corporation (MeTEC), is working to produce a receiver that will give it a total controlling mechanism. The idea is to rent satellite space from an international corporation and have all channels broadcast only via the new system. The government is aiming to realize this in less than two years.

The Exiled Media

With growing Internet access, the Exiled Media is getting a larger audience in Ethiopia, as they are the first choice for those seeking alternative voices. They discuss key political issues and give extended coverage to issues that the local media might skip. Their reporters work covertly inside the country and they are assisted by people in the government with an ambition to see change.

Being outside government control gives them freedom and allows them to avoid self-censorship. They receive donor money and don't have to worry about subscription fees. This also means they do not have to resort to sensational information for the sake of attracting a larger audience to maximize their income.

Many owners were journalists in Ethiopia before they fled. They know the ins and outs of the nation's politics and how the government works. They left their country mostly because of government coercion and pressure. This has enabled them to report on matters of public interest in a more balanced way and in return keep the public's trust back home.

Unlike journalists from the Diaspora Media, their journalists have a recent memory of their nation and so a better understanding of the local context. But, as time goes by, their content has got more partisan and more detached from the reality on the ground.

Sometimes the exiled media even scoop the local press on key events. But this does not mean that it is always easy for the Exiled Media to get information from the country. In fact, since their reporters work with no legal registration, they even find it difficult to get basic information and verify leaks. It is because of this that the Exiled Media tends to focus on opinion and analysis rather than hard news.

The reputation of the journalists for being critical and professional and being persecuted by the government means their audience trusts them. Addis Standard, 7-Kilo, Re'eyot Internet Radio, and Wazema Radio and some blogs come under this classification. However, 7-Kilo magazine only produced one issue.

The Diaspora Media

Diaspora Media are those founded by Ethiopians who left the country a long time ago. They try to subvert and counter state propaganda and depict a bleak picture of what is happening in the country. As they are driven by opposition parties they can turn a blind eye to some glaring realities and are known for violating basic standards of journalism. Their focus is on reporting events that will agitate the public for insurrection.

The government therefore works hard to block them. The way the Diaspora Media gets information from Ethiopia is not well understood. But they have free telephone lines for local listeners and viewers to air their grievances.

The journalists seem to have an intense hate towards the government and seem willing to do almost anything to cause a stir. Reporters in the Diaspora Media are mostly activist-journalists who are determined to topple the government.

Online media

Digital media in Ethiopia is in its infancy. The connection is slow and frequent power cuts contribute to the unavailability of connection from time to time, even in the capital. The Internet is monopolized by the state-owned Ethio Telecom.

The government considers telecoms a cash cow and that, coupled with its ability to control the flow of information, means there is no way they will open it up for market competition in the foreseeable future.

It is expensive and sometimes a luxury for the majority in small towns to use Internet cafes. Instead many people tend to use their mobile data, which is relatively costly as well. People stand outside hotels or step into lobbies to download content for later use.

There are no exact figures on what percentage of the population can access the Internet. However, mobile subscription is surging and is said to have reached 50 million people, which would be the largest in Africa, surpassing Nigeria.

A lack of knowledge about how to record events, how to edit, and how to upload them have discouraged local media from active engagement. But some computer and digital media literate young people in cities are trying to take advantage by setting up websites and online video channels, like DireTube, to disseminate unverified texts, photos and videos.

Amateurish channels, mostly content aggregators, are mushrooming, which has led to the dissemination of fake news. Unfortunately, there is a large segment of the population who believe whatever is posted on social media is true. This tendency, in the long-term, undoubtedly hurts the perception of online media.

The unprecedented penetration of mobile telephones has played a great part in enabling people to access digital content. These devices are mostly imported from China and are available at a cheap price, which has led to a fast diffusion.

Websites set-up by media savvy youth are too cautious to discuss politics as long as they are based in the country, even if there exists no legal framework that can license or regulate online media ownership.

At its introduction, the Internet promised to free groups and individuals promoting democracy from threats and censorship. However, activists and politicians instead have been thrown into jail just for expressing their opinion on social media.

But the Internet has also paved the way for citizen journalists. On balance, the Internet has probably advanced a culture of open discussion. Blogging, in its strict sense, however, has not taken off and there are not many popular bloggers, except the Zone9 collective who became well-known after the government detained some of the members, leading to an international outcry.

Ultimately, this is the era of the Internet. The state could block it for a time, but it will not dismantle it altogether.

The Legal Landscape

Many of the policies, laws and regulations devised after the 2005 general election have been very drastic and made media work difficult and risky. There are no signs of a relaxation and the recent State of Emergency declarations further constrain the independent media.

The constitution, which was ratified in 1995, was described by many as very liberal. Article 29, for instance, states that people have “the right to hold opinions without interference”, the right to seek, receive and share information using any media they want, that the press shall not be censored and should access any information that will be of an interest to the general public with a prerogative of special protection.

Unfortunately, all the policies, laws and regulations that came about later contravened these privileges. Journalists and editors’ cases were dealt with by criminal law when civil law would have been enough.

The most stifling of all the proclamations is the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation which succeeded in silencing dissent by equating journalistic activities to terrorism. That sent prominent blogger and writer Eskinder Nega (sentenced to 18 years in jail, released recently after serving six years) and the fierce Journalist

Temesgen Desalegn to the infamous Maekelawi investigation center. This delivered a chilling warning to other journalists working in the country.

The international community's uproar did little to deter the state from persecuting journalists and activists by using the proclamation. One of the articles is the Encouragement of Terrorism, which states:

Whosoever publishes or causes the publication of a statement that is likely to be understood by some or all of the members of the public to whom it is published as a direct or indirect encouragement or other inducement to them to the commission or preparation or instigation of an act of terrorism stipulated under Article 3 of this Proclamation is punishable with rigorous imprisonment from 10 to 20 years.

Ironically, the Government was the first to complain about a lack of professionalism in the independent media when it was clear that it was the ones denying it the opportunity to develop. The introduction of such draconian laws is only one example.

To start with, media houses have to endure many bureaucratic hurdles to get licensed; the officers who send them away time and again usually claim that they are simply following rules and regulations. Vetting the stance and background of media owners take months, sometimes years. On the other hand, the state can be lenient towards transgressions by some outlets for a reciprocal silence on political matters. For instance, media cannot allow advertisements space to exceed their editorial content, but this can be waived as a quid pro quo for an agreement not to cover political issues.

Conclusion

The future of the Ethiopian press is hanging by a thread.

The weekly magazines are at an all-time low in terms of quality and content and have dwindled to less than 10. There are only three Amharic and three English weeklies. And there are no dailies for a population that is double that of neighboring Kenya, which enjoys at least 10 dailies and dozens of weeklies.

In a nutshell, the nascent print media of Ethiopia is in danger of a complete collapse. This is not the effect of the digital tsunami; it is primarily because of unprofessionalism and authoritarianism.

Undoubtedly, the spread of mobile telephones and the Internet further endangers their existence. The price of newspapers and magazines has increased to 13 birr on average, which is expensive for many. That is partly why some readers prefer to rent for a few minutes. The more subtle reason for scanning rather than buying is disregard and distrust for the publications.

The political environment is not conducive to allowing the public to enjoy a number of high quality media products. Private newspapers, magazines, radios and television stations tread very carefully. But the public's hunger for a courageous press that gives informed analysis and accurate news is more evident than at any other time. That is why nearly every household installs satellite dishes to watch alternative media based outside of the country. Those are the only dissidents discussing hardcore political issues with no fear of harmful ramifications.

Internet penetration is low, but surging. If the government liberalizes the telecoms sector in the near future, the flow of information could generate active citizens that will demand more freedom. However, the repression of recent years has followed Internet-based protest movement, leading to heavy censorship. But it is not as easy as shutting down the traditional media.

Growing as an Internet society is inevitable. Our time has little room for vertical content distribution running from government to people. Instead, horizontal communication and media consumption is the custom of the day.

Opening up the political space for democracy and diversity of ideas is a one-way road Ethiopia must follow. Therefore, while the future might be gloomy for the traditional media, which is now staggering, that is not the case for the new media.

Clarifications/Corrections:

- *On Page 13, Addis Standard is categorized under the Exiled Media in this briefing. However, we are informed by the magazine that it's still registered and operating in Ethiopia legally, and the shift from print to online precipitated due to financial reasons.*
- *The section highlights The Diaspora Media is very brief and focus on the shortcoming of the Diaspora Media. It was an oversight from our side not to mention some of the positive aspects of the Diaspora Media, especially to their respective communities.*
- *Media outlets mentioned in this briefing paper are very few. The author picked those mentioned only to show a case in point. This paper is not intended to list all media outlets.*