Rapid Assessment of Ethiopian Media during the Transition Period

Mulatu Alemayehu Moges (December 2019)

I. Introduction

The purpose of the rapid assessment was to form a basis for discussions among main stakeholders of the media and the politics that might have an interest to what roles the media is playing during the transition in Ethiopia. As it has been known, after many challenges for more than two decades, the Ethiopian media are now relatively in a good freedom and open system. This is happening in connection with the coming of Dr. Abiy Ahmed to power in 2018 April. Soon after his appointment, he promised to bring changes in the country. One of the changes that he promised was to make the media free. Laws that can be described draconian, for example the Anti-terrorism Law and Mass media and Access to Information Proclamation are now under revision. Media policy is also under discussion. New Media Council to promote self-regulation has started functioning. Accountability of the public media sectors is now shifted from executive body to the parliament. All these initiatives have been done in this very short period. However, the question on how far the media is playing their roles, for instance, in promoting peace and reconciliation, and democratization has not been assessed scientifically. Hence, the rapid assessment was initiated to critically look at the role of media during transition and trigger discussion among key media stakeholders and the government.

The study was conducted with a view to answering the following major research questions.

- To what extent the Ethiopian media are playing their expected role in a democratic transitions
• What are the major issues that are getting coverage on the Ethiopian media during transition period?
• How the Ethiopian media are pluralistic
• What kind of interventions are carried out by the government to support the media in the country so as to play a positive role in promoting a democratic transition

To answer these research questions and assess the media roles in democratic processes, one has to look at the media system of the country. In the politically transformed country, media system can be assessed in five different elements.

• Pattern of government regulation (intervention of the state in the media)
• Patterns of ownership
• Pattern of media circulation/expansion
• Pattern of program content
• Pattern of the professionalism

How these elements can constitute to the transition, consolidation of, political democracy in the country and how these system affect politics and its system in the current situation are very important issues that are also the center of this discussion.

II. Methodological approach
To answer the above mentioned research questions and discuss the Ethiopian media system, both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied. While a research team composed of six researchers, they collected relevant data to assess the media development in the country based on the UNESCO indicators. In this study, around 120 journalists, editors, media managers, main media stakeholders were interviewed. Some legal and working documents were also reviewed. Some of the questions or elements, for instance the first and the second elements could be answered. All these data were purely qualitative.

However, the rapid assessment, which was carried out recently, was purely quantitative. It is because this approach will help the study to collect relatively large data and bring out some generalizable result.
The study focused on four languages, i.e. Amharic, Oromiffa, English, and Tigrigna. These languages are widely spoken and used in the current political debates in the country. Also, contents produced by these four languages can be described as center for political discussion and decision. In fact, it can also be noted that those contents produced in those languages are easily accessible to do the research within very short period of time.

The assessment addresses both mainstream media (Television, and newspapers) and online digital media (facebook, and youtube). The results were separately analyzed as mainstream and online media outlets.

1. **What Was Assessed**

Taking the mainstream media, the study focused on news, news analysis and editorials (commentaries). This is because, first these genres are immediately dealing with current affairs. They are also powerful in terms of sending the message and attracting the large audiences. Besides, major political issues including political controversies and conflicts in the country have been reported in those genres. They also attract large audience.

Regarding the online media, all posts made by the selected media during the sample period were included. However, since the online media posts have many issues, only those issues, which have politics and political implications, are treated here.

2. **Sampling period**

The sampling period is three months - between 1st September 2019 to 30 Nov 30, 2019. This period is purposively selected believing that there have been many incidences that can indicate the role of media both in positive and negative aspects, including:

- There were many events, including the cultural celebration of the UNESCO registered ‘irreecha’ and ‘Meskal’ in the month of September (Politics were surrounding on where and how these events could be celebrated).
- OMN owner and General Manger—Jawar Mohamed’s social media post and the subsequent violence that resulted in the killing of more than 87 people, was happened in this period.
In his parliamentary deliberation, Prime-minister Abiy Ahmed succinctly blamed/warned media firms that incite hatred in Ethiopia.

• A new political party- called Ethiopia Prosperous Party, was established by vanishing the former ruling EPRDF.

• A referendum in Sidama also carried out, resulting the creation of additional regional state. Campaigns could be one of the causes of the expansion of hate speech.

In selecting each story or production, a systematic sample selection method was applied. For instance, the Ethiopian Herald, English medium newspaper, is a daily newspaper while the Reporter is a weekly edition. To have a representative sample, one edition from every week edition of The Ethiopian Herald was considered for the reviews. So, the editions that consist of editorial, news and news analysis pages were included from each sampled newspapers.

3. Data collection process
Six research assistants were hired, and trained to collect data and code. The coders were trained for two days what to code and how to code. In such process, pilot tests were done and some points were improved on the coding book. Then intercoder reliability among the coders was measured, and a satisfactory result, which is 0.87, was found.

III. Major study findings

I. Pattern of government regulation
This part focused on both positive and negative interventions of the state in terms of policy and legal aspect that can regulate the media system of the country after the coming of PM Abiy. Four major points have been identified as the fundamental interventions of the state both positive and negative.

The first one is the government consideration of the media as a democratic constituency. From experience, the Ethiopian media and the state had a negative relationship. The research data indicated that the current government system considers the media as democratic -actor. As a result of that, media such as Ethiopian Satellite Radio and
Television (ESAT) and Oromo Media Network (OMN)), which were considered as fighter for freedom and labeled as anti-government by the then administration, have been invited by the current leadership to freely operate in the country. Also, more than 260 websites have been unblocked. From this aspect, the current government has taken positive measures to strengthen the Ethiopian media system.

Secondly, the Abiy government has put in measures to opening up the media space limit the role of the executive on state media. For instance, the accountability of regulator the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA), and the public media such as Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), Ethiopian Press Agency (EPA), and Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation(EBC) shift from executive to the legislator. The aforementioned institutions were first accountable to the prime minister, but now, they are directly under the Ethiopian parliament.

Thirdly, the Ethiopian government has established technical committee to revise some of the laws that have been draconian and repressive to the Ethiopian media. For instance, The Anti-Terrorism law which were used to jail many journalists and political activists in the past decade, is now under revision. Following the endorsement of this law in 2009, many journalists were taken to jail, left their country or quit their jobs by shutting down their newspapers. In a similar manner, the 2008 media law- Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation is also now under revision. This law, though it has so many important articles, there were some articles, which have claw back clauses. Particularly, some of the articles related to access to information were not that much supportive to the Ethiopian media’s right to access to public information held by public bodies. It gives undue power to the public body to deny access to the media.-In addition, a departure from the past period, the current government has also shown interests that the country shall have a media policy.

The fourth one is the limited support of the government in media infrastructure investments. . The empirical evidence showed that there has not been incentives that encourage the media organizations or companies to import media equipment with minimal or zero tax unlike other sectors that have privileges of tax relives for new investments. . In other terms, the duty free scheme of the country does not include
media facilities. As a result, media firms pay much amount of tax similar to those for example alcoholic drinks that are discouraged to be imported.

Lack of institutionalizing the circulation of the print media outlet is also another weakness identified by the study. This has limited the expansion and effective circulation of the newspapers and magazines.

II. Pattern of media ownership
The other element that is used to assess the media system is the diversity in the media ownership. In the current media ownership in Ethiopia, three types of ownership is identified. These are public media, which are owned by the regional and federal governments or states, commercial media and community media. Licensing the latter two media tiers started since 2007. Though it is relatively a recent phenomenon to have community and commercial media, the media diversity in Ethiopia is somehow promising.

III. Pattern of media circulation/expansion.
In the previous section, it was mentioned that the type of media ownership has been promising. However, these premises may not be absolutely true when we look at the number of media distribution.

A data collected from the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority indicated that currently 20 privately owned newspapers and magazines are under circulation. In a similar manner, 23 newspapers and magazines owned by the federal and regional states are circulating information for their audiences on various languages.

Regarding the electronic media, there are 29 television (both privately and State owned) and 72 radio channels including regional, federal and community radio stations in the country. In fact, there are many media organizations, for instance Fana Broadcasting Corporation, that have expansion channels and relay channels in the regions that can serve the local communities on various languages.

While the number of media outlets (electronics and print) in Ethiopia has been increasing, these expansions may not be described as satisfactory. This is because
comparing the number of media with the total population in the country, the vested interest of the people to use the media and the current demand of the media to play a democratic role, the number of media is minimal. Also, being the media are urban centered and using limited number of local languages, the media may not be that diverse.

IV. Pattern of program contents
The pattern of the program content mainly focuses on what major contents have been produced during the sampling period of the study. For this particular study, the results of the research are presented in terms of issues covered, the sources of the stories, gender diversity and the coverage of minorities.

- Diversity of sources
The sources of the stories were classified into ten taking their contribution in the political sphere of the country during the political transition. These are individuals, politicians from the ruling party, politicians from the opposition parties, journalists’ voice, government official at the federal and regional offices, civil societies, academicians, representatives from business firms, religious and cultural leaders, activists, artists, and others. How these sources were quoted in the stories both in the mainstream and online media were analyzed quantitatively.

As can be seen in the tables below (Table 1, and 2), there have been clear differences in the speaker of the sources. While individual citizens in the mainstream media got a larger voice, activists’ voices were dominantly heard in the online media. What is unique in this study is the shift from government sources to individual sources. The Ethiopian mainstream media have been described as a place where top government officials dominate the agenda. However, currently, that trend has been changed. Individuals got larger voices in the mainstream media, which can be described as a promising state in Ethiopian.
Table 1 - diversity of sources in the mainstream media

When it comes to online media, activists and journalists or blogger are taking the largest share. Unlike the mainstream media, the online media is not that much a place for the politician from the ruling party to express their ideas.

In both platforms, civil society, academicians, religious leaders and cultural leaders who do have large contribution in the case of peace and reconciliation as well as an alternative sources do not have large shares.
In short, while individuals and government officials’ voice have been heard in the mainstream media, activists, and bloggers' voices are in the online media. This indicates that the activists are playing a significant role in setting agendas and leading the political debates in the online media. In a similar manner, unlike other period, individuals have taken some roles in expressing their ideas, which might be one of the reflections of the diversity of voices in the mainstream media.

Though this is one of the major findings in the current media trends in reporting issues, it is not that much appreciated in terms of the plurality of views. This is explained in terms of how diverse voices have been included in a single story. Looking at how plurality views were reflected in the stories of the mainstream media, a lesser number of stories were found that included diverse sources. As can be seen in figure one, only

Table 2- diversity of sources in the online media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Number of Stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>an individual</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a politician from the ruling party</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a politician from opposition party</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a journalist/blogger</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a representative from Business firms</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an academic</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a religious leader</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activist</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an artist</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
18% of the stories were reported by including diverse views. The majority of the stories, which share 54% of the total news reported in the sampling period, were a single idea. This is to mean that an idea that reflects a single political, religious, ethnic groups or ideology was reported in the Ethiopian media.

Figure 1- plurality of views in the mainstream media stories

A similar result was found in the online media. Particularly, as can be seen on table 3, a single ideology (political, ethnic, groups, or religions) has taken the lion share during the sampling period.
One most important finding was found on the mainstream media in Ethiopia. During the sampling period of the study, the privately owned media were found to be lesser in entertaining diverse voices in the stories. While the government media attempted to give diverse voice, the private one are not somewhat largely opened for diverse ideologies.

Table 3- plurality of views in the online media

Table 4- diverse views government Vs private media
Taking the diverse views in the Ethiopian media both in the mainstream and online media, it is difficult to say pluralistic views have been reflecting in them. This indicates that the audiences are not getting a pluralistic view in a single media.

Another important element in this discussion is where the speakers are from. As sampled media are mainly in four languages (Amharic, Oromiffa, Tigrigna, and English) speakers where the former three languages are largely spoken taken a relative advantage on the sources. In fact, the majority of the speakers are from the federal government and the capital. This is nothing surprising that the city is the center of politics and other major activities. Also, since the Ethiopian media are dominantly urban-centered, most speakers are recruited from those areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tigray</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addis Ababa</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dire Dawa</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNPP</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afar</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalie</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benishangul</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambella</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hararie</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal level</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign level</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eth Diaspora</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5- Where are the speakers from in the mainstream media

The above data indicate two major points. The first one is the Ethiopian media are somehow becoming negligent to report issues of the other regions. In other terms, the
media do not collect information from the other regions and present their audiences about the other parts of the country. This is a point where the “Us” and “them” category begins. It is because diverse issues of the societies are not retrieved from diverse groups of societies. The second one is the Ethiopian media continues to be urban-centered. Issues of the rural areas may not be the focus of the media.

- **Gender diversity**

Research in Ethiopia commonly found that gender (male and female) have not been proportionally represented in the Ethiopian media. The same results have been found in this study.

Firstly, the qualitative data indicated that Ethiopian have not paid attention in prioritizing gender both in hiring and appointing female journalists in the fields of journalism and media leadership. Though unlike another period, a couple of women journalists are leading the media institutes, considering the current interests of the government is paying attention to women, the need to give attention to them, there are still few in number.

What makes things worse to worst is the number of women who left their jobs is higher than men journalists.

Regarding how their voices have been heard in the media has also shown similar results. The quantitative data indicated that women voices in the mainstream media in Ethiopia is still dominated by men. As can be seen in figure 3, the Ethiopian journalists approached only 203 women to report major issues of the country.
The result of the online media is more serious. The online media writers approached less than five females to be quotes.

Table 6 - gender diversity on the online media

Figure 2 - gender diversity in the mainstream media
While females share a proportional number of the population, being victims of the socio-politics of the country, their issues have not been brought to the media. This might be due to the problem of journalists in understanding issues of gender and lack of attempting to make their reports gender inclusive. Also, it might be the overall socio-cultural problem of the country that put their influence on women not to approach the media.

In relation to assisting minorities, for instance, people who are not able to speak/listen to, except one media, the rest do not provide support to those people to understand and get information.

- **Issues covered**

The research team first identified issues into six. These are politics, social, economic, conflicts and instability, peace and reconciliation and others. These classifications are made by taking what issues could be the center for discussion or report to the media during the political transition.

The data indicated that the selected mainstream media are more interested in reporting politics. Economic and social issues took the second and the third shares. While Conflict and instability have taken relatively proportional coverage, the peace and reconciliation issues were taken very least coverage.
Here the study wants to focus on the issues of conflict and instability as well as the peace and reconciliation issues. It is quite clear that the country has been vulnerable to various conflicts across the country. It is fair to say that the Ethiopian mainstream media have been paying some attention to the cases of conflicts and instabilities. However, it is wise to look at how the issues of conflict and instability were reported with the purpose of minimizing hostility and bring peace in the country. How many of the conflicts stories were reported to bring peace could be the focus for the media that attempt to bring peace. One of the points that academicians focus on in identifying how the media play a positive role of not, the first issue is when was the case reported in the media (proactive or reactive). As can be seen in Table 7 below, most of the conflict cases were reported after the conflicts were happening, what it is called reactive. According to the peace journalism theory, reactive reporting is not that much
recommendable, as it has not brought solution. Instead, such reporting only plays a role in informing the public what was happening in their areas.

![Bar chart](image)

**Table 7**-proactive Vs reactive reporting of conflict cases on the mainstream media

The second point that can help all stakeholders to identify media positive role in the conflict reporting is how the story is reported; how does a story encourage peace or conflicts. Table 8 clear shows that close to 30% of the stories were in line with encouraging conflicts in many ways. While 60% of them are trying to bring peace.

![Bar chart](image)

**Table 8**-a report encouraging peace or conflict

One of the unique finding of the rapid assessment is the interest of the selected Ethiopian media in reporting issues of peace and reconciliation. Figure 3 above showed that only four % of the stories focused on peace and reconciliation. This is something unique. First, there have been many conflicts in the country that should be dealt in line
with peace building. As one of the role of the media during political transition is playing a role in bring peace. With this understanding the media are expected to report issues of peace process and reconciliation that were happening in the country. However, the media paid minimal attention.

IV. Pattern of professionalism

This is explained in line with three important points. First, how the Ethiopian media are free from internal and external influences. The qualitative data indicate that most of the media particularly government-owned media are still under certain pressure for interference from their owners, and external bodies. Journalists in the Ethiopian media have been commonly complaining about the pressure of the government and its security. However, though these trends somehow loosen, the journalists are facing various pressures from the other groups. Most journalists confirm that though the government pressures to report issues are relatively decreased, individual or groups (formal and informal) have violated the journalists’ editorial decision making.

Secondly, the journalists association in the country cannot be described as strong that ensures the professional rights of the journalist. Some of the associations are still struggling for survival. In such a situation the media power to maintaining its integrity becomes in question. As a result of that activists are taking advantage of setting the agenda of the public and political wings. Currently, many journalists and media organizations are somehow happy with the establishment of the Media Council, which has around 50 members.

Third, poor reporting of stories challenges the profession. For instance, the lack of balanced reports is a common problem in the Ethiopian media. As mentioned above, most of the stories have been reported from one source which surely does not reflect others' views. This is the other cause that the Ethiopian media to be more sensational, exaggerating reports and being divided “us” and “them”. These lead the media to be the source of hate speech. From the data collected in the sample media, 35 stories consist of clear hate words.
The availability of hate words in the online media is too the extremes. One-six of the sampled stories consisted of clear hate word in the post (table 10).

Table 9- hate words in the mainstream media

Table 10- extent of hate words on the online media

As a matter of fact, hate word could be highly spread out during transition and conflicts.

The fourth point is the media tendency of serving the large public. The data indicated that the media in the country could be described as they are serving their community. Regional media can serve to the regional audiences. This is a good thing. However, most of them have been found to be more of interested to serve only their society, which is currently bounded in ethnic lines. Most of the media have shown ethnic tendency.
For instance, figure 4 shows that most stories were found more antagonistic to the ruling party and the other ethnic groups. It is not that much unique that antagonistic ideas have been forwarded to the ruling party as it is policy makers and implementer. What frustrating is the tendency toward the ethnic line.

![Figure 4: Political Engagement - Offensive/Against](image)

**Figure 4- political engagement -offensive/against**

Taking the overall result of the media in Ethiopia, it can be describe in a very extremism polarization. Previously, it was only two polarizations in the Ethiopian media (pro government and pro opposition parties). However, these polarizations are now increased into four. The two added are ethnic interest (those attached to certain ethnic interests only) and unionism (those promote unity with less on diversity). The following graph clearly reflects the Ethiopian media.
The study shows that the Ethiopian media are playing limited roles in addressing the needs of their intended community. Their scope and focus areas both in terms of issues and place are limited that could bring some untended difference among the Ethiopian community. Also, though the Ethiopian media have now relatively enjoyed freedom from the state, most of the media and their content cannot be described as plural in their views. Limited issues, limited views, and limited groups’ ideologies are taking the highest share in the Ethiopian media. Besides, the media are somehow more interested in covering conflicts and instability than peace and reconciliation. This may show that the media peace-building role in the country, which is under transition, is so minimal. Currently, the media are seemingly easily vulnerable to hate speech and in a wide extremisms. In such media context, the role of media in the upcoming election may not be supportive unless all stakeholders including the state play a positive engagement with the media.